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Critical Issues in US-Vietnam Relations

12 December 2018

Interview Questions/Transcription

Yoon Jae Man – my grandpa, 1st Lieutenant in the ROK army

Choi Dae Suk – my grandpa's friend, 1st Lieutenant in the ROK army

Q: For what reasons did you join the Vietnam War especially after the Korean War?

A: After the Korean War, Korea was split into two countries and South Korea was always on the verge of being invaded by North Korea and needed the U.S to stay at their base in S. Korea instead of being deployed to Vietnam to help. Also, the economy and financial state of S. Korea was rock bottom and most people were very poor. The Korean government basically forced all available men and soldiers to go to Vietnam and fight for a war that wasn't even ours.

Q: How did you feel when you were sent to fight in the Vietnam War?

A (CHOI): It was the year 1970 when I left my hometown of Busan to Vietnam on a ship and I remember all of the men onboard the ship started singing a song with lyrics pertaining to the act of saying goodbye or farewell as none of us knew if we were going to come back alive.

Q: How many soldiers were there?

A: There were ten times more American soldiers than Korean soldiers. Around 50,000 American soldiers to about 6,000 Korean soldiers. About 5,099 Korean soldiers killed and 10,022 wounded. In our base there were about 537 Korean soldiers from ROTC who stayed in Vietnam from 1965-1973.

Q: What do you call the war?

A: We used to call it either the 월남 (Wol-nam) war, which was how Koreans called Vietnam in Korean or the Indochina War, but now it is just called the Vietnam War

Q: When do you think about the war the most?

A (CHOI): I think about war the most when there is political instability in Korea because the whole reason they were sent to Vietnam was due to the aftermaths of the Korean War being divided into North and South and the U.S trying to pull their soldiers out to be deployed to Vietnam. This would've made S. Korea vulnerable and open to attacks by North Korea and so whenever there is news about North Korea or anything regarding the political stability of S. Korea, they remember the Vietnam War.

Q: What do you remember most about the war?

A (YOON): At 12AM, 7 members of the Vietcong guerilla invaded the base and first attacked the Korean soldier on guard before using dynamite and hand grenades to kill the soldiers. He remembers his fellow friend and soldier being killed by one of the hand grenades.

Q: Are there any memorials in Korea?

A: There are many memorandums and memorials regarding the Vietnam War in Korea. We visit the Seoul National Memorial a couple times over the course of a few months and visit our fellow fallen friends and soldiers. A memorandum was even made at the location where we trained men in fighting and Tae Kwon Do who would become soldiers eventually sent to Vietnam.

Q: Do you have any traumas or after effects from the war?

A (YOON): I am sensitive to loud noises, especially fireworks.

A (CHOI): The war is all about fortune. My whole troop had left the base where we were located in the Mekhong Delta River, which was the instruction area for our soldiers when they were ambushed by Vietcong spies who were hidden in the forest and eventually killed all my fellow soldiers. On this particular day, I was thirsty and stopped by an American shop to drink some Coca-Cola when I heard about this tragic event and was the only one who survived this attack.

Q: How would you describe the war in one phrase/word?

A (YOON): War is cruel suffering.

A (CHOI): "I don't want war, PEACE."

Q: Do you think S. Korea has been forgotten from the Vietnam War?

A (YOON): It has been over 40 years since the war and so it is inevitable that people are forgetting about it, especially the younger generations.

A (CHOI): It seems as if no one really understands the Vietnam War, especially since it has been taken out of school curriculums.

Q: How do you feel about S. Koreans risking their lives and not getting recognition?

A (YOON): We risked our lives for this war and it is upsetting because it makes me question what we fought for and regret fighting.

A (CHOI): I feel like through the Vietnam War, the art of Tae Kwon Do was spread throughout the world and opened this form of Korean martial arts to others. However, it is upsetting that South Korea has not been recognized as a major component in the war.

Q: Do you feel anything/remember the war when you hear fireworks?

A (YOON): When I see or hear fireworks, it feels as though I am back in war where rockets, dynamite, hand grenades, etc. flew through the air along with the enemy invading and the sound of bullets firing.

Q: What do you think of the Vietnam War Memorial without any names of the Korean soldiers who sacrificed their lives?

A (YOON): The fact that no names of the Korean soldiers who sacrificed their lives are not present on the memorial displays how the truth regarding South Korean soldiers and their efforts in the Vietnam War have been forgotten and also representative of the U.S's failure to reflect upon their mistakes during the war.

Q: Do you think Korea's economic stability has a connection to the Vietnam War?

A (YOON): I think the Vietnam War greatly helped South Korea's economy because after the Korean War, most of Korea was poor and not well off. The U.S provided incentive and a big payoff to Korean soldiers that positively influenced Korea's economic stability.

A (CHOI): Some of the money that was given to South Korean soldiers who participated in the Vietnam War was utilized by the South Korean government to improve social conditions such as build roads or industries that significantly improved Korea's economic stability. However, it seems that those who do not really know about the Vietnam War as well as the younger generations don't seem to think this way.

Q: Have you visited Vietnam or do you want to go back to where you fought?

A (YOON): I have not had the chance, but I want to visit the places where I fought and see how they have changed throughout the years.

A (CHOI): I have visited Vietnam because I wanted to retrace my footsteps of the memories I have of war and continue to visit to pray that all the brave, fallen soldiers may rest in peace.

Abstract

What is the truth? It seems as though there are several truths and some of them are more honest than others, while others are select truths that can either inspire or deliberately mislead others. On most issues, multiple truths can influence how we perceive issues and understand events. We've heard multiple truths: stories of American soldiers and their families along with the stories of the Vietnamese armies and guerilla forces, as well as the Cambodian and Laos citizens. But we haven't heard of a main component in the Vietnam War: ROK or the South Korean Army who has also been reduced to a minor backdrop of an event that has been affected by organized forgetting through U.S imperialism and westernized depiction. I aim to establish the fact that Vietnam was not the only Southeast Asian country that was overshadowed by the U.S and uncover the ghost stories of the actual involvement the South Korean army had throughout the war. There are many sides to the Vietnam War and I think it is time for the South Korean truth to be revealed. Uncovering more truths of the Vietnam War led me to create an object that showed a different side to things. I wanted to create an object that presented the stark contrast on how one particular thing, in this case, fireworks could be perceived. On one hand, the fireworks on the Fourth of July is celebratory and a sign of pride due to the U.S acquiring freedom and democracy with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On the other hand, the sight or even just the sound of fireworks for my grandfather is a memory that he wishes to forget and a traumatizing trigger that reminds him of war-stricken times full of violence and death. The two realities and truths of both sides connects to my paper on uncovering multiple sides of a story as well as displays how differently one thing can be perceived.

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Multiple Truths

Usually the saying, “There are two sides to every story,” seems to be sufficient enough to understand or explain situations, but in this case, there seem to be multiple sides to this story with some truths even concealed or forgotten. The world is not as black and white as we would all like it to be and perspective dominates how things are perceived as well as relative to a person’s own value, experiences, or upbringings. People tend to choose sides and divide amongst themselves, which makes it harder for people to be willing to see things from other peoples’ perspectives. The main two stories that have been heavily associated with the Vietnam War have primarily been either from the American or Vietnamese perspective and through the object that I have created and the personal interview conducted, another truth has been revealed by a side that has not been covered enough: South Korea. Through the interview of my grandfather, Yoon Jae Man, who was a lieutenant of the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army and a Tae Kwon Do instructor for his fellow ROK soldiers as well as my grandfather’s friend, Choi Dae Suk, who also served in the Vietnam War as a lieutenant, some “truths” that have been told by the U.S media are retold through the seemingly invisible perspective of those who were in the ROK army. With the knowledge I had acquired from the interview, I created an object that connected to the themes of U.S dominance and westernization through organized forgetting, ghost stories, and the “gift” of freedom that the U.S attempts to bestow upon every country, as well as symbolism of the Vietnam War Memorial and its lack of representation on its walls.

My grandparents have always visited me from Korea over the summer and so I always remember spending the summer with them. Over the summer, I would remember spending the Fourth of July with my family, but my grandfather would always be at home or not celebrate with us. It was not until a few years ago that my mother had told me that my grandfather was

affected by the sound of fireworks, as he was a soldier in the Vietnam War and the sound was hauntingly reminiscent of bombs, bullets, and the enemy invading his base. The interview has opened my eyes to a different truth already revealed by the U.S media such as the amount of years the South Korean army stayed involved in the Vietnam War and how many South Korean soldiers actually died in the Vietnam War. The interview also revealed tragic truths such as why my grandfather joined the Vietnam War, especially after only 12 years after the Korean War that mired Korea with poverty, how he felt when he was sent to fight in a war that wasn't his, horrifying memories involving seeing his fellow soldiers get killed, as well as the trauma and after effects felt after the war that still continues to this day. It was also not until this interview that I was able to acquire the knowledge that my grandfather was a high-ranking lieutenant of the South Korean army as well as how involved South Korea actually was in the Vietnam War.

The effects of organized forgetting and how the U.S won the Vietnam War in memory could be displayed through my lack of knowledge on the Vietnam War as well as how the U.S has given almost non-existent acknowledgment of South Korea's support in the war. Kathayra Um's "The "Vietnam War": What's in a Name?" establishes the fact that Southeast Asian countries including South Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, etc. that underwent overwhelming suppression through U.S imperialism "held no inherent value to the United States" and has been forgotten throughout American history (Um 136). In the interview, Since the United States pinpoints Vietnam in the name Vietnam War; public attention was focused merely on Vietnam and not on the participation of South Korea that was a key element on the shifting sands of the war. The ROK army carried American weapons, but remained insignificant, ignored by the American media and press, and eventually erased from people's memories. This may be the effects of the United State's organized forgetting of these events as the involvement of South Korean troops was a clandestine strategy by Lyndon Johnson to remove American soldiers on Vietnam soil. Therefore, most people today and mostly younger generations are not even aware that South Korea was involved in the Vietnam War as well as how much of an impact its participation had. Throughout the interview, my grandfather and his friend expressed their

frustration as to how it seems as though the memories and involvement of South Korea is being erased, as it is not included in school curriculums and slowly being forgotten through the generations.

The role of South Korea in the Vietnam War has turned into ghost stories where despite the ROK Army outnumbering U.S troops by 1972 and having more casualties than U.S soldiers, the risks taken have become nothing more than sacrifices that have not been honored or acknowledged. In the interview, my grandfather and his friend state their pent-up anger at the erasure of the involvement of the ROK army as well as their confusion as to why they were involved in a war they were not given recognition for. This connects to Yen Le-Espiritu's "Thirty Years AfterWARD: The Endings That Are Not Over," where tellers write with different forms of repressed memories leading to varying forgotten past events. The tellers of refugee and war stories are essentially writing ghost stories or writing "into being the seething presence of things that appear to be not there," as tellers write with different forms of repressed memories leading to varying forgotten past events (Le-Espiritu xix). For example, although the Vietnam War was so heavily chronicled, I was not aware that the U.S actually did not win the war as well as the existence of the ROK army who assisted the U.S, due to movies mainly only portraying U.S soldiers as the heroes. This is the effect of the ethics of remembering one's own as the Vietnamese chose to focus on remembering the lives lost during the war, the Americans chose to forget the Vietnamese while remembering the enemy, and both sides chose to erase the memories of the other Southeastern Asian countries involved. The two readings including *About Ghost Stories: The Vietnam War and "Rememoration,"* by Yen Le-Espiritu and *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Refugee Passages* by Mimi Thi Nguyen also tie into the broad idea of how U.S imperialism and domination of Vietnam was depicted as a blessing and gift "to a people deemed racially, culturally, and even morally inferior" (Le-Espiritu 1700). These acts of subordination were disguised as a lending hand "protecting the weak and dispensing justice" that molded the American public to act as "heroes" (Le-Espiritu 1700). Yen Le-Espiritu discusses how the lack of ghost stories and forgetting of the Vietnamese people led to a distorted image of

how other countries viewed Vietnam. This distortion can also contributed to the U.S's perspective on South Korea as South Korea was seen as victims throughout the Korean War and in need of the U.S's help throughout the years. Lastly, Le-Espiritu highlights the concept of "forgetting" once more that was also mentioned in the previous readings as "organized forgetting," which could be seen with the Vietnam War Memorial where the memorial forgets the South Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, etc. and only remembers the American veterans "as the primary victims of the war" (Le-Espiritu 1702. Mimi Thi Nguyen introduces the notion of the "gift of freedom" as a conceptualized idea of how liberal countries forcefully extend their gift of help to other countries. Nguyen also describes how the "gift of freedom" is not only just a lie, but also a ploy to increase feelings of gratitude and patriotism throughout America. Nguyen also states that "to give a gift" is to give life" and is a paradox and impossible aporia because according to Derrida, giving someone a gift "is to have a hold on him, as soon as he accepts the gift," which parallels to the control the U.S had over Vietnam (Nguyen 7). Therefore, the giver can never give without expecting repayment and the receiver is in a never-ending circle of subordination. In this case, the ROK army is the recipient of this "gift of freedom" and subjected to the gift's condition of violence and war. Nguyen also describes the "gift of freedom" as a way that the U.S has utilized racialization against South Korean soldiers in order to rationalize how they were subjected as merely a means to a violent end in the name of freedom. In the interview, my grandfather's friend states how most of the operations were taken upon by the U.S Army, but acted out by South Korean soldiers whose lives were deemed less significant than those of American soldiers.

Lastly, the reading of *Tangled Memories The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* written by Marita Sturken describes the wall as a screen "for innumerable projections of memory and history (Sturken 45). In this case, the wall is not only a mirror that allows people to reflect on the war and projected on one's self, but also an object that hides something from view and covering something else. Sturken is referring to how the U.S has repackaged the Vietnam War narrative into one of America's deeply packed steeping of

nostalgia, healing, and forgiveness. Therefore, the memorial has become a central icon in the way the U.S public regards who should be remembered from the Vietnam War and how they should be remembered. Sturken states that the memorial has acted almost as a shrine for the American public and become a way for people to ask for forgiveness for those who had and are still suffering from the loss due to the war. This compares to how my grandfather and his friend visit the Seoul National Cemetery dedicated to those fallen in the Korean and Vietnam War. These memorials and memorandums act as a healing space for those affected by the war and provide not only a physical connection, but also an emotional connection, as it is “a place where veterans can speak to their dead friends, a place of contemplation, a place that specifically marks their identities” (Sturken 64). Therefore, veterans such as my grandfather and his friend unable to cope with the pain of the war or going through PTSD and unable to articulate what happened to them and their experiences of the Vietnam War utilize the memorial as a site where they can speak regarding the absence, loss, and marginalization that they went through, but also a place that allows them to reconstruct their identity in a different way. However, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has no space for the Southeastern Asian soldiers such as the ROK army or Vietnamese soldiers who fought alongside the American soldiers.

Through this knowledge, I created my object as a booklet that included a hidden side to the story. The American flag dominates the cover of the book that symbolizes the organized forgetting of all other members that participated in the Vietnam War and how the U.S has won the war in memory. The inside of the book presents the distinct scenes of families watching fireworks on the Fourth of July on the left hand side as well as soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War on the right hand side. The left hand side represents celebration, family, and life that is presented through the vibrancy of colors while the right hand side portrays a war-stricken landscape full of violence and death through the lack of color and usage of only the colors black, white, and red. The utilization of mainly the colors of black and white connect to how there was no gray space in the war and how my grandfather and his fellow soldiers withheld the motto of kill or be killed. Although the two scenes are stark contrasts, the two landscapes eerily bleed into

one another where colorful fireworks shine through the air on the left and “fireworks” as a result from the utilization of hand grenades, dynamite, and bullets shower soldiers in red and black explode on the right. The inclusion and focus on fireworks was due to my grandfather’s perspective on fireworks. When asked what he remembered most from the war, my grandfather answered with his memory where at 12AM, 7 members of the Vietcong guerilla invaded the base and utilized hand grenades to invade his base that also killed a fellow soldier. This is why I also included a child throwing a football and a soldier throwing a hand grenade on the right that shows the similarity in posture, but gap between the childhoods of U.S citizens and those in the ROK Army such as my grandfather who was only twenty-two years old at the time given a hand grenade instead of a football to throw. In the middle, a representation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial coincides on both pages where on the left, names and words representing the U.S are written and on the right, names and phrases related to South Korea are inscribed in Korean. I wanted to include this as a dedication to the soldiers in the ROK Army such as my grandfather and his friend who were not given recognition or the honor they deserved for their participation in the Vietnam War. This is also the reason why the first two inscriptions on the right side of the “memorial” are the names of my grandfather and my grandfather’s friend: Yoon Jae Man and Choi Dae Suk. In conclusion, the South Korean flag is seen on the last page to represent its truth that has been overshadowed and hidden by organized forgetting throughout U.S history and how often times when one side is looked at, the other side is overlooked and forgotten.

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