

THE VIETNAM PIETA: SHAPING THE MEMORY OF SOUTH KOREA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE VIETNAM WAR

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Résumé de l'article

Conçue pour commémorer les victimes de l'intervention sud-coréenne dans la Guerre du Viêt Nam, la statue de la Pietà vietnamienne nous invite à interroger qui façonne la mémoire de ce pan négligé des hostilités. Le présent article analyse les acteurs impliqués dans ce processus conflictuel de part et d'autre de chaque pays, à commencer par les activistes sud-coréens à l'origine de la statue et du mouvement pour la reconnaissance des crimes de leur armée. Examinant le travail militant qu'ils ont mené depuis la fin des années 90, l'article soutient que ces activistes sont triplement situés dans le combat autour de la mémoire de l'intervention sud-coréenne au Vietnam. Ils occupent tout d'abord une position de privilège et de leadership vis-à-vis des victimes vietnamiennes des violences militaires sud-coréennes, soulevant la question des asymétries matérielles et politiques à l'oeuvre dans tout processus de construction mémorielle. Simultanément, ces mêmes activistes apparaissent dans une position de marginalité vis-à-vis du discours public dominant qu'Hanoï et Séoul entretiennent dans l'intérêt de leur partenariat économique. Enfin, la mémoire de la guerre oppose les militants sud-coréens à un autre groupe de leur société civile : les associations d'anciens combattants niant toute accusation de crimes. Cette mémoire ne fait donc pas l'objet d'une dispute bilatérale entre le Vietnam et la Corée du Sud mais bien plutôt d'un conflit au sein de ce dernier pays.



THE VIETNAM PIETA: SHAPING THE MEMORY OF SOUTH KOREA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE VIETNAM WAR

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ABSTRACT:

Conceived to commemorate the victims of South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War, the statue of the Vietnam Pieta invites us to question who shapes the memory of this neglected facet of the conflict. The present article analyzes the various actors involved in this contentious process in and across both countries, starting with the South Korean activists behind the statue's making and the movement for recognizing the crimes committed by their army. Examining these activists' advocacy work since the late 1990s, the article argues that they are triply situated in the fight over remembering South Korea's intervention in Vietnam. Truth advocates first appear in a position of privilege and leadership vis-à-vis Vietnamese victims of South Korean military wrongdoings, which raises the issue of the material and political asymmetries at stake in the construction of memory. Simultaneously, the same advocates occupy a position of marginality vis-à-vis the dominant public discourse held on the war by Hanoi and Seoul, whose common interest lies in deepening their mutually beneficial but unequal economic partnership. Thirdly, the memory of the conflict pits truth activists against another group within their own civil society: veterans' organizations aggressively denying all war crimes accusations. Ultimately, remembering the war is not the object of a bilateral dispute between the South Korean and Vietnamese states, but rather a site of domestic tensions within South Korea itself.

RÉSUMÉ :

Conçue pour commémorer les victimes de l'intervention sud-coréenne dans la Guerre du Viêt Nam, la statue de la Pietà vietnamienne nous invite à interroger qui façonne la mémoire de ce pan négligé des hostilités. Le présent article analyse les acteurs impliqués dans ce processus conflictuel de part et d'autre de chaque pays, à commencer par les activistes sud-coréens à l'origine de la statue et du mouvement pour la reconnaissance des crimes de leur armée. Examinant le travail militant qu'ils ont mené depuis la fin des années 90, l'article soutient que ces activistes sont triplement situés dans le combat autour de la mémoire de l'intervention sud-coréenne au Vietnam. Ils occupent tout d'abord une position de privilège et de leadership vis-à-vis des victimes vietnamiennes des violences militaires sud-coréennes, soulevant la question des asymétries matérielles et politiques à l'œuvre dans tout processus de construction mémorielle. Simultanément, ces mêmes activistes apparaissent dans une position de marginalité vis-à-vis du discours public dominant qu'Hanoï et Séoul entretiennent dans l'intérêt de leur partenariat économique. Enfin, la mémoire de la guerre oppose les militants sud-coréens à un autre groupe de leur société civile : les associations d'anciens combattants niant toute accusation de crimes. Cette mémoire ne fait donc pas l'objet d'une dispute bilatérale entre le Vietnam et la Corée du Sud mais bien plutôt d'un conflit au sein de ce dernier pays.

INTRODUCTION

The statue of the Vietnam Pieta represents a woman cradling in her arms a newborn child. Their eyes are closed, like those of the dead for whom the two figures stand. The lost lives to which the sculpture pays tribute are not the ones usually honoured in commemorations of the Vietnam War in the United States or of the American War in Vietnam, a conflict that both countries officially remember with different names on different dates.¹ The Vietnam Pieta took shape in a third nation largely forgotten as having been one of the belligerents: the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea). The extent of South Korea's participation in what it also terms the Vietnam War (*pet'ŭnam chŏnjaeng*) should not be minimized. Between 1963 and 1974, the ROK dispatched more than 300 000 troops to support the US-backed Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) in its fight against the Communist-controlled Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, or North Vietnam). This massive military deployment made the ROK the second-largest foreign force active on the ground, far ahead of the few other states that answered President Lyndon Johnson's call for "more flags" to join the American war effort in Vietnam (including Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand).² In exchange for its involvement, Seoul not only received from Washington security reassurances in the context of the Korean peninsula's own division into two ideologically antagonistic halves. The ROK also obtained vast economic gains in the form of direct payments and "a wide range of other assistance" that contributed to its fast-paced economic development.³

The so-called Miracle on the Han River is far from being the sole legacy of South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War. Its human cost is another one, wrought by the violence that ROK soldiers experienced and perpetrated at the same time. South Korean troops indeed shared with their allies, enemies, and the Vietnamese population at large the plight of being exposed to the herbicides sprayed by the US Army as a counterinsurgency weapon.⁴ While approximately 5 000 ROK servicemen died and 16 000 were injured in Vietnam, it is estimated that at least 50 000 of them were affected by dioxin-contaminated herbicides such as Agent Orange, whose health and environmental effects are still unfolding today.⁵ Yet the South Korean military not only endured but also inflicted suffering in the course of the conflict. Early on, its members were accused of serious violations of international humanitarian law or *jus in bello*, such as the principle of distinction between combatants and noncombatants according to which the latter cannot be deliberately targeted. These violations were perhaps first openly denounced at the International Tribunal for War Crimes in Vietnam, a civil-society body convened by Bertrand Russell and chaired by Jean-Paul Sartre twice in 1967 in Sweden and Denmark.⁶ It is now claimed that ROK soldiers carried out about eighty civilian massacres in which more than 9 000 Vietnamese were killed, including seventy-four in the villages of Phong Nhị and Phong Nhất as well as 135 in the village of Hà My.⁷

Conceived to commemorate and apologize for these crimes, the Vietnam Pieta invites us to question who shapes the memory of South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War. The present article analyzes the various actors involved in this contentious process in and across both countries, starting with the South Korean activists behind the statue's making and the movement for recognizing the crimes committed by their army. Examining the sculpture in light of these activists' advocacy work since the late 1990s, the article argues that they are triply situated in the fight over remembering South Korea's intervention in Vietnam. Advocates of addressing and redressing South Korean military wrongdoings first appear in a position of privilege and leadership vis-à-vis Vietnamese victims, which raises the issue of the material and political asymmetries at stake in the construction of memory. Initially mobilized in the name of truth and now of peace, the same advocates simultaneously occupy a position of marginality vis-à-vis the dominant public discourse held on the war by Hanoi and Seoul, whose common interest lies in deepening their mutually beneficial but unequal economic partnership. Thirdly, the memory of the conflict ultimately pits South Korean activists against another group within their own society: veterans' organizations aggressively denying all accusations of crimes. This struggle has led ex-combatants to remilitarize their presence in the public space since the turn of the twenty-first century. Far from being a monument to the collective memory of the war, the Vietnam Pieta thus embodies the fight of a segment of South Korean civil society to bring to light both a bilaterally neglected and domestically contested past.

I. A UNIFYING MONUMENT TO THE DEAD: REACH AND LIMITS OF THE VIETNAM PIETA'S EMBRACE

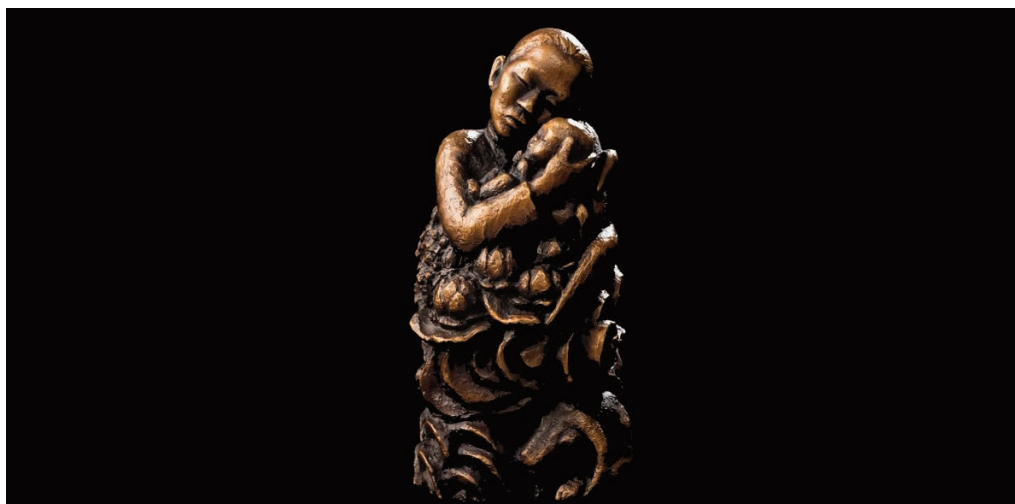


Photo caption: Small-sized version of the Vietnam Pieta by South Korean artists Kim Sŏ-kyŏng and Kim Un-sŏng. Photo: *The Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation*

While simplified, most of the motifs present on the full-scale sculpture can be discerned below the figures of the mother and her child (from top to bottom, plumeria and lotus flowers, curves of wind, waves, and clouds, as well as a water buffalo). Missing details include a butterfly on the shoulder of the female character.

1. From speaking “truth” to building “peace”

The Vietnam Pieta is a monument to war victims that strives to bring peace at a variety of levels: peace to the dead, Vietnamese civilians who perished at the hands of the South Korean Army, and peace among the living, not only across but also within national boundaries. The statue itself depicts an embrace between a mother and her newborn child, represented cheek to cheek and both with eyes closed. The scene is not explicitly one of lamentation or mourning as in the traditional religious iconography of the Pietà, in which the Virgin Mary holds the lifeless body of Jesus Christ. Here, the work of grief is left to those who are on the other side: on the side of viewers and, beyond, on the side of victimizers. As such, the sculpture belongs to and derives from the stream of efforts undertaken in South Korea since the turn of the twenty-first century to address and redress the wrongdoings committed below the seventeenth parallel by the ROK military.⁸ One of the latest initiatives pursuing such an end was the People’s Tribunal on War Crimes by South Korean Troops during the Vietnam War (*pet’ŭnam chŏnjaeng sigi han’guk kune ŭihan min’gain haksal chinsang kyumyŏngŭl wihan simin p’yŏnghwa pŏpjŏng*), gathered in Seoul from April 20 to 22, 2018.⁹ Fifty-one years separate the work of this civil-society body from that of its predecessor, the abovementioned Russell-Sartre Tribunal. The relation between the two, however, is hardly one of linear continuity given the public oblivion into which the crimes committed by South Korean forces fell for decades.

As underlined by historian Charles K. Armstrong, the “emergence of a more critical remembering of the Vietnam War first in fiction, then in film, in media investigations of official ROK government statements, and most recently in research by scholars from South Korea” was made possible only following the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule that the country underwent in the late 1980s.¹⁰ Even after regime change, it took more than ten years before revelations about the issue of the civilian massacres perpetrated by ROK soldiers surfaced in the progressive press. In May 1999, the magazine *Hankyoreh 21* began to publish a series of reports based on the fieldwork investigation of Ku Su-jŏng, a history PhD student turned *Hankyoreh 21* correspondent who not only consulted documentation from Vietnamese governmental sources but also conducted interviews with survivors from the five provinces where the South Korean military had operated. Later that year, *Hankyoreh 21* came to be at the forefront of a “Sorry, Vietnam” (*mianhaeyo pet’ŭnam*) campaign, which led President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) to apologize in 2001 for the “pain involuntarily inflicted to Vietnamese people by our participation in this unfortunate war.”¹¹ This has not proved enough for those calling for the full recognition of South Korea’s responsibility since 1999. Among them were the dozen of advocacy and human rights groups that in 2000 formed the Committee for Investigating the Truth about Civilian Massacres in Vietnam (*pet’ŭnam yangmin haksal chinsang kyumyŏng taech’aek wiwŏnhoe*), renamed that same year the Truth Committee on Civilian Massacres during the Vietnam War (*pet’ŭnam chŏnjaeng min’gain haksal chinsil wiwŏnhoe*). This non-governmental organization morphed in 2003 into the Committee to Promote the Establishment of a Peace

Museum (*p'yŏnghwa panmulgwan köllip ch'ujin wiwŏnhoe*) and in 2015 into the Committee to Promote the Establishment of a Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation (*hanbe p'yŏnghwa chaedan köllip ch'ujin wiwŏnhoe*).¹²

The Vietnam Pieta was commissioned by this last entity of South Korean artists and spouses Kim Sŏ-kyŏng and Kim Un-sŏng, renowned for another sculpture: the bronze Statue of the Girl (*sonyŏsang*) sitting in front of the Embassy of Japan in downtown Seoul, waiting since 2011 for an apology to the once young and now elderly victims of Japanese military sexual slavery during the Pacific War (1931–1945). Before it was also cast in bronze, a plaster version of the couple's Vietnam Pieta was unveiled in Seoul in April 2016, on the occasion of the forty-first anniversary of the fall of Saigon. The event also served to announce the coming into being of the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation (*hanbe p'yŏnghwa chaedan*), effective in the following months. Presided by Kang U-il, a Catholic bishop from the diocese of Cheju, the organization's board currently comprises pioneer activists of the movement to confront South Korea's war crimes in Vietnam, such as Ku Su-jŏng, the Foundation's executive director, and Ko Kyŏng-t'ae, a journalist from *Hankyoreh*.¹³ According to its current English presentation,

The Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in September 2016 ... to raise awareness of and redress Korean wrongdoing during the Vietnam War. The Foundation inherits and expands the efforts of the “Sorry, Vietnam” movement dated 1999. We strive not only to heal the pain from the Vietnam War, but also to become an international peace organization. Our activities include academic research; archival of important records; peace education; rehabilitation for victims; cultural exchange with Vietnam; and an annual event on the anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War (April 30th) in hopes of reconciliation and peace. We have also built a “Vietnam Pieta” in remembrance of countless mothers and babies who were victimized during the conflict—we are advocating to have the Pieta installed in Korea and Vietnam. The first “Vietnam Pieta” was installed on Jeju [Cheju] Island in April 2017 to commemorate the 42nd anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. We advocate for peace not only in Korea and Vietnam, but in broader East Asia and the world.¹⁴

The idiom of peace at the heart of the Foundation's name and self-description appears to serve several legitimizing functions. First, it strategically stresses “positive” and consensual outcomes over “negative” and controversial goals, discursively shifting the focus of the organization's mission from exposing violence to bringing about reconciliation. Such an idiom can be said to have supplanted that of truth emphasized in the wake of the “Sorry, Vietnam” campaign. As justified by the ultimate successor of the Committee for Investigating the Truth about Civilian Massacres in Vietnam originally established in 2000, the Foundation is now “taking a comprehensive approach to peace that not only searches for the truth of the Vietnam War, promotes apology and reconciliation, remembers the victims, and supports victimized areas, but also addresses

the trauma of Vietnam War veterans.”¹⁵ The entity thus defines itself through a double gesture of embrace, directed toward sufferers and ex-soldiers. Relatedly, it situates its advocacy work in the space of global civil society, seeking to transcend two embattled realms: domestic politics and foreign affairs. Its purpose and action are characterized as being unifying rather than divisive not only across state boundaries (between South Korea and Vietnam) but also beyond (regionally as well as internationally) and, perhaps more importantly, within (inside South Korean society). From this perspective, the Vietnam Pieta is more than a tribute to the memory of certain war victims; it is a monument to the Foundation’s vision of its role as promoting an inclusive way of remembering, supposed to bring together audiences separated by experience and geography.

2. Symbolic motifs and cracks

While the discourse of peace has the vocation to speak to all audiences, several of them do not share the same language. The statue precisely offers the possibility to bypass this constraint, conveying a message of atonement not through words but by the sheer force of its presence. Even as it is aesthetically endowed with such power, the sculpture commissioned by the Foundation does not fully escape issues of denomination and translation. The Korean title of the Vietnam Pieta (*pet’ŭnam piet’a*) is similar to its English counterpart not only semantically but also homophonically, meaning and sounding the same in both languages. This title capitalizes on an existing iconographic genre that makes it easy for an internationalized audience—South Korean and otherwise—to identify the two figures imagined by Kim Sŏ-kyŏng and Kim Un-sŏng as being intimate with death. The association is primarily verbal rather than visual, taking place despite the fact that the statue itself is far from being a copy of the post-crucifixion scene of the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus Christ. By contrast, no corpse is explicitly exhibited in the Vietnam Pieta. On top of that, no trace is shown of the actual violence suffered by victims of civilian massacres, the sculpture commemorating their fate without putting it on display. The emotion etched on the faces of the two characters personifying these victims is one of calmness rather than pain. Peace, again, is the pattern that dominates.

It is noteworthy that the Vietnamese name conferred on the piece is devoid of any reference to the Christian Pietà, being known as the Last Lullaby (*lời ru cuối cùng*). The mother that the statue depicts is indeed embracing her child as though in the act of rocking him, and herself, to sleep. That this state is eternal for them is suggested in a variety of metaphorical ways. The female figure is visible only up to the bust, the rest of her body being engulfed in a mound on which are carved decorative and symbolic motives: first, a row of plumeria flowers also called frangipani, associated with immortality in Buddhism and with heavenly bliss by the two artists; below, lotuses and, at the very bottom, a water buffalo, national emblems of Vietnam traditionally denoting purity and happiness respectively; in the buffalo’s background, curves of wind, waves, and clouds signifying the afterworld; and, at the same level but on the other side, a bird and a fish embodying the free souls of the deceased. A butterfly is also discernible

on the shoulder of the young woman, standing for all the lives that were similarly taken in the course of the war.¹⁶ Despite appearances, the woman in question is not the only mother represented in the sculpture. As conceived by Kim Sŏ-kyŏng and Kim Un-sŏng, the collection of natural elements that support her manifests “the goddess of earth,” another maternal figure endowed with the power to embrace the tombless dead and lay them to rest.¹⁷ Introduced in the Korean text, these narrative details are removed from the short line describing the statue in English language, in all likelihood out of fear that they would not be culturally understood. Instead, the Vietnam Pieta is simply said to have been built “in remembrance of countless mothers and babies who were victimized during the conflict.”¹⁸ In the Korean version of the same sentence, the sculpture is literally meant to “comfort the spirits” of the war’s “sacrificed mothers and babies who died without a name,” being too young to receive one as is customary in Vietnam.¹⁹

The Vietnam Pieta or Last Lullaby is therefore a syncretistic homage. Displaying the statue in both countries has been the goal of the Seoul-based Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation from the beginning, but this ambition does not yet seem to have been fulfilled. While the sculpture was first installed on Cheju Island in South Korea in April 2017, the one donated to the museum of Da Nang, central Vietnam’s largest city, in October 2016 only partly succeeded to make the trip. Financial obstacles may not have been the only reason why a small-sized copy of the Vietnam Pieta was delivered to the museum instead of the statue’s full-scale bronze cast, which measures 150 cm in height and weighs the same in kilograms. Apart from the cost of transportation, which was supposed to be met by voluntary contributions, the Foundation was reportedly “restrained” in its plan by President Park Geun-hye (2013–2017), herself the daughter of General Park Chung-hee (1961–1979), under whose rule and initiative South Korean troops were sent to fight the National Liberation Front, or Việt Cộng.²⁰ To date, the ROK Ministry of Defence maintains that all the operations conducted in Vietnam were necessary in a context of guerrilla warfare that blurred the line of separation between combatants and noncombatants.²¹ As elaborated by anthropologist Heonik Kwon, both groups were indistinguishable for those who were conditioned to see real or potential enemies in everyone and everywhere:

The paid, uniformed, full-time professional soldiers did not accept the fact that people could fight without a uniform, as a villager rather than as a soldier. They did not understand the fact that, when these people fought, many of them fought simply to survive rather than to win. Because soldiers didn’t understand this complexity, they could have seen the woman clearing the bed, where her VC [Việt Cộng] husband slept, as VC, her children breaking coconut shells at the back of the house as VC, their house and their chickens and buffalos as VC, the tombs of their ancestors and the temple they worshipped as VC, and the entire world they lived in and relied on as entirely VC. Perhaps the soldiers couldn’t see otherwise, since for them the meat they ate, the house that sheltered them, the temple they worshipped, and the entire world they belonged to belonged to one single complex—the army.²²

The Vietnam Pieta is not exactly about restoring the complexity that soldiers could not see. It opposes to the vision of indiscriminate guilt to which the ROK Army continues to subscribe an image of absolute innocence under the traits of a mother and her infant. The statue thus tends to reduce those who were the victims of ROK troops' massacres and other war crimes, in particular leaving all adult males aside. It does so out of a choice between two forms of memorial inclusiveness, offering a way to remember that does not represent all victims in order to invite others to grieve. The statue thus appears as a monument designed to be unifying in the double sense of making uniform and united. It brings into relief two iconic figures meant not to divide but to reconcile those on the conflict's opposite sides, by having South Korea face the harmlessness of many of the lives its military claimed.

Although designed to be transnational, the Vietnam Pieta still lacks a place in the collective consciousness of both South Korea and Vietnam as illustrated by the problem of its display. Beyond the purported opposition of ex-president Park Geun-hye to the sculpture's dissemination, coming to terms with the responsibility of the ROK poses challenges that transcend domestic cleavages between conservative and progressive political forces. The installation of the piece on Cheju Island, at the St. Francis Peace Centre in Kangjŏng village known for being the site of a protest movement against the construction of a naval base, is a testament to the monument's counterhegemonic dimension as it commemorates victims of a conflict largely buried in South Korea's official history. Moreover, the fact that the small-sized copy donated to the museum of Da Nang is kept there without being exhibited points to the difficulties that recognizing the crimes of ROK soldiers entails in Vietnam itself.²³ The second part of this article consequently examines why Seoul and Hanoi have avoided confronting this shared past, which civil-society groups such as the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation are dedicated to addressing and redressing. The two countries' authorities' apparent convergence over putting behind the violence of South Korea's participation in the war is not only premised on their mutual interests but also on their unequal status and strength, an asymmetry that permeates the construction of memory in ways peace activists cannot escape.

II. THE ASYMMETRICAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY: SOUTH KOREA AND VIETNAM AS PARTNERS BUT NOT EQUALS

1. Asymmetrical material means

The Vietnam Pieta is not the sole monument to victims of South Korean wrongdoings that exists. Memorials have also been erected in a number of affected villages. At the site of the Phong Nhị and Phong Nhất Massacre, for instance, a pagoda-like structure houses a commemorative stone listing the names of the seventy-four residents who were killed on February 12, 1968. The youngest one was born that same year and had not yet received a given name, the mention *vô danh* (anonymous or nameless) being indicated in parentheses next to the newborn's patronym. In contrast to the substitutive act of representing the dead

encapsulated in the sculpture of the Vietnam Pieta, whose two figures stand for “countless mothers and babies who were victimized during the conflict,” walls of names allow to account for lost lives by identifying rather than personifying individuals. Not far from Phong Nhị and Phong Nhất, Hà My is another hamlet where a similar monument has been installed with 135 names inscribed. Their bearers were also fatally attacked by ROK troops in February 1968, the first lunar month of the year of the monkey during which the Tet Offensive started. Both memorials are among the sites to which the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation organizes visits as part of its “peace tour” (*p’yŏnghwa kihaeng*), a one-week trip that gathers twenty to thirty South Korean participants at least twice annually.²⁴ The one conducted from March 8 to 13, 2018, was planned to commemorate the victims of the massacres perpetrated by ROK soldiers fifty years earlier. Ceremonies were held in four villages where members of the package peace tour group paid their respects to both survivors and the dead. In addition, the Foundation encourages South Korean civil-society groups, schools, businesses, and private citizens to contribute to memorial services from afar by sending sympathy flowers and other gifts. It has also expressed the wish to place a statue of the Vietnam Pieta in the various localities where crimes were committed in order to make this homage lasting.

Activists from the ROK are thus engaged in shaping the collective recollection of the war through a variety of ways connecting South Korea and Vietnam. Although praiseworthy, these activities nonetheless raise the issue of the power dynamics at stake in the construction of public memory. As the cultural critic Viet Thanh Nguyen pointed out, “Memory, like war, is often asymmetrical.”²⁵ While South Koreans have the capacity to project their presence, influence, and remembrance in Vietnam, “that country does not have the power to remember itself in Korea.”²⁶ To Nguyen, a case in point of this imbalance is the monument to the sacrificed residents from the village of Hà My. Inaugurated in 2000, the commemorative stone and its accompanying building are both of recent and foreign origins, having been funded by an association of South Korean ex-combatants, the Welfare Foundation of Vietnam War Veterans (*wŏllam ch’amjŏn chŏnu pokjihoe*). As a result of this ascendancy, the statement incriminating Park Chung-hee’s troops initially carved on the back of the stone was made to disappear. In requesting its erasure, representatives from the ROK embassy in Hanoi found in local authorities understanding interlocutors. Repeating Vietnam’s official slogan since the 1992 normalization of its ties with South Korea, cadres of the Communist Party defended before reluctant villagers the need for “transcending the past without forgetting it.”²⁷ In the end, the controversial inscription was buried under a mosaic of marble lotus-flower motifs. The Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation’s activists and tourists who come to honour the victims of the Hà My Massacre therefore do so at a site that was sponsored by another category of South Korean memory entrepreneurs. Yet the former make the journey to recognize precisely what the latter prefer to hide: their responsibility in perpetrating civilian killings and other unlawful acts.

Importantly, the positionality of both groups is not only one of opposition and must consequently be defined along multiple dimensions. Peace activists' and war veterans' organizations have been in a relation of competition and even hostility since the turn of the twenty-first century. The current efforts of the Foundation to take into account "the trauma of Vietnam War veterans" can be interpreted as expressing its will and strategy to mitigate these tensions. Still, the Foundation and its predecessors have had to face even more potent countercurrents in their struggle to uncover the issue of civilian massacres: first, governmental resistance in Seoul and Hanoi to coming to terms with the matter; and, second, the public oblivion from which the war has been only marginally and selectively emerging in South Korean society, its treatment being mostly confined to literature and cinema—and "even then not in any abundance."²⁸ Veterans actually share with activists the plight of having been negatively impacted by official and popular neglect, particularly in the frame of their own fight to be compensated as victims of the conflict and of the defoliants massively used by the US military. As memory entrepreneurs operating transnationally, both groups are also in a similar situation in at least a double respect that the monument of Hà My illustrates: a situation of advantage vis-à-vis the Vietnamese actors with whom South Korean organizations interact owing to their various forms of capital, and a situation of marginality within the larger flow of existing exchanges between the two countries.

Peace activists and war veterans are not the only ones who can afford to cross national borders back and forth. To the millions of ROK visitors who annually travel to Vietnam, the participation of their nation in the war of the same name is at the periphery of any point of interest, both literally and metaphorically. Although Hà My is located between Da Nang, a major resort city, and Hội An, a top destination for its picturesque scenery and lantern decorations, "few of the tourists who come to these places would want to visit Hà My, if they even knew of it or could find the memorial. Whereas martyrs' cemeteries abut roads, the memorial at Hà My is placed far back, away from sight."²⁹ By and large, it is hardly more visible to Vietnamese eyes as it is to South Korean eyes. Except for those with direct knowledge of the ROK Army's killings, most visitors and locals are unaware not only of the monument's existence but also of the piece of history it represents. Neither state has tried to make it otherwise. Since the normalization of their diplomatic relations in the early 1990s, Hanoi and Seoul have stressed the necessity for their countries to look forward rather than backward. As declared by President Tran Duc Luong (1997–2006) in a 2004 interview given to the *Korea Times* and accessible on the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website,

It is true that in the later half the 20th century, Vietnam and the ROK had an unhappy history. Nevertheless, with the tradition of tolerance, humanity and peace and friendship, Vietnam's policy in dealing with issues left behind by history is to put aside the past, look forward to the future and cooperate for shared development. The ROK also shares the understanding that sincere and effective cooperation with Vietnam in addressing consequences of the war is a

matter of morality and a practical way to overcome the complex about the past. We highly appreciate [the] fact that the ROK's Government, mass organizations and individuals have carried out many activities aimed at and made concrete contributions to helping Vietnam's reconstruction and development efforts. In just over 10 years since the establishment of the diplomatic relations, Vietnam and the ROK have become each other's important partner.³⁰

At the time of this statement, South Korea was Vietnam's fourth largest commercial partner and the volume of their trade reached over \$3 billion. This number has skyrocketed since. Following the signing of a free trade agreement that came into effect in 2015, South Korea has superseded the United States as Vietnam's second largest trading partner, behind China, while Vietnam is South Korea's third export destination, after the markets of these two economic giants. Beyond these indicators, patterns of exchange reflect disparities in terms of development. On the occasion of the Vietnam-Korea Business Forum held in Hanoi in March 2018, ROK President Moon Jae-in (2017–present) and his then counterpart President Tran Dai Quang (2016–2018, a term that was interrupted by his premature death) announced a joint plan to raise bilateral trade to \$110 billion by 2020 while trying to reduce the deficit of Vietnam, which imports more from South Korea (primarily “electronic components, machinery, fabrics, and plastics”) than it exports (“mainly garments, cellphones, and seafood”).³¹ The cellphones in question are actually products from brands such as Samsung, whose components are imported from the ROK, assembled in Vietnam, and not only exported back but also locally consumed. Their ubiquitous presence is one sign among others, with construction businesses and television dramas, of “South Korea's domination of the Vietnamese market,” which is exerted not only through goods but also people: “Vietnamese men and women work in South Korean factories relocated to Vietnam, as they have also entered South Korea as migrant workers. Vietnamese women cater to South Korean sex tourists, and others come to Korea as immigrant wives of South Korean farmers.”³²

What Seoul and Hanoi describe as a “partnership” is first and foremost an unequal relationship between an advanced industrialized nation and an emerging economy. Ironically, the status achieved by the ROK as a result of its so-called Miracle on the Han River is not foreign to its role in the Vietnam War, the vast amount of benefits that the country received from the United States as a reward for its massive troop deployment having importantly served to finance the five-year economic plans successively launched by Park Chung-hee in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, the material need in all sorts of equipment arising from the conflict provided huge market opportunities to nascent domestic companies such as Hyundai, Daewoo, and Hanjin, in the same way that the Korean War had been a “gift from the gods” for Japan.³³

2. Asymmetrical political resources

The 2018 Business Forum was not Moon Jae-in's first official visit to Vietnam. In the months following the impeachment of Park Geun-hye in March 2017 and

his own election in May, Moon attended the Ho Chi Minh City-Kyōngju World Expo located in the former metropolis. In a video message aired during the event, the new South Korean president conceded that “South Korea has a debt of heart to Vietnam,” commenting immediately afterwards on how “the two countries have become most crucial economic partners and friends” despite their regrettable past.³⁴ Such an initiative was not entirely unprecedented. Three years after Kim Dae-jung’s 2001 apology for the “unintentional pain” caused by the ROK during the war, Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) had already evoked South Korea’s “debt of heart” while visiting Ho Chi Minh City. Moon, a progressive like his two predecessors, actually envisaged going further. As reported in the South Korean press, “President Moon originally intended to issue an official apology in a bilateral summit with the Vietnamese leader. However, his aides dissuaded him from doing so, in order to focus on the ‘future’ of bilateral ties.”³⁵ This calculation echoed Vietnamese authorities’ own preference for publicizing neither the declaration nor the history to which it vaguely alluded. As a matter of fact, “Moon’s video was broadcasted via Ho Chi Minh City TV on Nov. 11 [2017], but no Vietnamese media ran a story about it. Vietnamese viewers were unaware of the remark’s meaning which didn’t clarify what he was talking about.”³⁶ As commented by Ku Su-jōng, a founding member of the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation about the presidential message, “It’s a positive signal (in resolving past affairs), but still leaves much to be desired. It mirrors the reality of Korean society, which still lacks understanding of the Vietnam War ... A sincere apology should accompany recognition of the wrongdoings and taking responsibility.”³⁷

While critical civil-society voices such as Ku Su-jōng’s can express themselves in contemporary South Korea, albeit not entirely in freedom from threats, as will be examined in this article’s last part, the same is not true in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, where the Communist Party keeps a strong hold on the media. Besides economic development, politics therefore constitutes another source of asymmetry between the two countries, impacting which actors have not only the material means but also the liberty to shape the memory of the ROK’s role in the conflict. Here again, South Korean activists are at advantage vis-à-vis Vietnamese victims. Let us recall that Ku was the doctoral student turned *Hankyoreh* 21 correspondent who in the late 1990s contributed to exposing and documenting the crimes committed by the ROK Army. South Korea had by then undergone a double transition: regime change in 1987, following the successful democratization movement of the 1970s and 1980s that eventually forced authoritarian elites to institutionalize competitive elections and other reforms, and power alternation in 1997, with the election of former dissident Kim Dae-jung after a decade of presidential rule by members of the conservative camp. This double context has made it possible for the issue of civilian massacres to surface in the progressive press and to be embraced by the organizations and individuals who joined the “Sorry, Vietnam” campaign. The work of groups such as the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation can therefore be seen as a testament to the vibrancy of South Korean civil society.

By contrast, the freedoms of association and expression remain significantly restricted in Vietnam. Even if Seoul and Hanoi officially share a forward-looking approach to their wartime past, the extent to which debates can exist about it is not similar in the two countries. The war itself and the military victory of the North that enabled the 1975 reunification are expectedly at the heart of public discourse in the Socialist Republic. This discourse is geared toward a heroic rather than tragic way of remembering the conflict, a way that privileges combatants over civilians, members of the North Vietnamese Army and of the National Liberation Front who died fighting over those killed in other circumstances. The former are worth more than the latter in this state-sanctioned narrative and in the monuments where it is projected, such as the martyrs' cemeteries scattered all over the territory. All dead are not remembered equally, many being left to the realm of private or local memory with its complicated—and even ghostly—manifestations.³⁸ This relegation has largely been the fate to which victims of crimes committed by the ROK Army have been condemned, being commemorated at the periphery. In recent years, however, a possible shift has been detected in the media coverage of these targets of violence. As reported by *Hankyoreh*,

Between Sept. 11 and 17 [2016], Vietnamese daily newspaper *Tuoi Tre* ran seven stories about the testimony and activity of survivors of civilian massacres carried out by South Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War. It is unusual for an influential Vietnamese daily newspaper to cover the stories of survivors of the massacres. *Tuoi Tre*, which has the widest circulation in Vietnam, was the first newspaper in the country to cover the issue of civilian massacres after the story broke in the *Hankyoreh* 21, a South Korean weekly news magazine, in 1999 ... After the Vietnam War, which began in 1960 and lasted for 15 years, the Vietnamese government put the highest priority on national unity and reconciliation, under the slogan of shutting the door on the past and opening the door on the future. The civilian massacres by South Korean troops were also part of the past on which the door had to be shut. Since the Vietnamese government exerts a powerful control over the media, the series of articles by *Tuoi Tre* can be regarded as having occurred with the tacit consent of the government, thereby suggesting that the mood in the country is changing.³⁹

Yet the virtual absence of coverage dedicated by the Vietnamese press to Moon Jae-in's veiled apology in 2017 seems to suggest that change may not be so easily coming. To date, civilian killings and other wrongdoings do not constitute the subject of a bilateral conversation between the Republic of Korea and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, let alone of a dispute that remains unwanted by both states' political authorities in light of the mutual economic interests on which their unequal relationship is premised. Instead of opposing Seoul and Hanoi, the issue of what happened during the war and who its victims are has primarily pitted various segments of South Korean society against one another since the turn of the twenty-first century, as will be explored hereafter.

III. REMEMBERING SOUTH KOREA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE VIETNAM WAR: A PROTRACTED DOMESTIC FIGHT

1. Veterans' own struggle for victimhood recognition

Having come into being in 2016, the Vietnam Pieta and the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation were conceived taking stock of more than a decade and a half of confrontation between two categories of South Korean civil-society actors: the successive organizations that have sought since 1999 to expose and remedy the ROK Army's war crimes in Vietnam versus the associations representing ex-combatants who have consistently denounced these historical claims as lies. The design of the statue and of the Foundation arguably captures truth activists' efforts to deescalate this conflict without renouncing their objectives. As analyzed in this article's first part, their replacement of the language of truth by that of peace and their insistence on conceptualizing the latter in a way that takes into account the "trauma of Vietnam War veterans" can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile both groups. In its very iconography, the Vietnam Pieta does not strive to be confrontational. It does not expressly manifest the longing for justice felt by survivors and their supporters, an aspiration that fills the sculpture of the young girl embodying the fight of South Korean "comfort women" by staring, fists clenched, at the Embassy of Japan in Seoul. The Vietnam Pieta does not emit a gaze but is meant to receive a compassionate one. As a memorial, it invites viewers to mourn a mother and her child, both portrayed with closed eyes. The monument displays civilians' innocence rather than soldiers' violence. It does not openly lay the blame on the ROK Army, theoretically making it more acceptable for former servicemen to face the two figures and, by extension, the dead for whom they stand.

This absence of direct incrimination, however, may amount not only to a gesture of embrace made by activists toward veterans but also to a move of protection against their organizations. The year when the statue was unveiled and the Foundation established was indeed one of culminating tensions between the two camps. An event other than these two significantly took place in 2016: the filing of a lawsuit against Ku Su-jōng for "defamation through the publication of false information."⁴⁰ The plaintiff behind this action was the Vietnam Veterans Association of Korea (*taehanmin'guk wōllam chōnch'am chōnjahoe*, or VVAK) which, to substantiate its case, submitted files containing "virtually everything that Ku has done since 1999," when her fieldwork investigation about the civilian massacres committed south of the seventeenth parallel by ROK soldiers was released by the magazine *Hankyoreh 21*.⁴¹ Even as the prosecution eventually dropped the criminal charges against Ku Su-jōng, they illustrate the hostile and at times violent climate in which the Foundation and its predecessors have operated for nearly two decades. The revelations of *Hankyoreh 21* indeed marked a turning point not only for the formation of the awareness movement that led the "Sorry, Vietnam" campaign, and which continues to advocate for South Korean war crimes to be addressed and redressed. In response to the same revelations, veterans' organizations also undertook to mobilize themselves and counter

historical claims that they perceived as threats to their honour and interests. While collective action on their part was not new, a clear break can be identified as having taken place after the issue of civilian massacres surfaced in the press. This break took the form of a shift in the protest discourses, strategies, and bodies of South Korean ex-combatants, from victimization to remilitarization.

Throughout the decade before 1999, former servicemen had already been active in the public sphere. Outlawed following the military coup d'état of Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1987), himself a commander in Vietnam like his right-hand man and successor as president Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993), veterans' organizations emerged anew after South Korea's transition to democracy was set in motion in the late 1980s. The change of regime thus coincided with the resurgence of veterans' groups, including the Vietnam Veterans Association (*wŏllam ch'amjŏn chŏnuhoe*) initially established in 1967.⁴² Disbanded in 1980, it was reformed as the Korean Overseas Veterans Association (*taehan haeoe ch'amjŏn chŏnuhoe*) in 1991 and operates today as the Vietnam Veterans Association of Korea, mentioned above as the plaintiff in the defamation lawsuit against Ku Su-jŏng. In 1991 was also founded the Marine Corps Overseas Veterans Association (*haepyŏngdae haeoe ch'amjŏn chŏnuhoe*), within which was created a task force dedicated to the issue of ex-Vietnam War soldiers' exposure to dioxin-contaminated herbicides such as Agent Orange.⁴³ This cause would soon be embraced by an organization of its own, the Association of Veterans Sacrificed to Defoliants in Vietnam (*pet'ŭnam koyŏpche huŭsaengja chŏnuhoe*).

In 1992–1993, veterans exposed to herbicides mobilized themselves for the enactment of a law aimed at recognizing and compensating their health defects, including various types of presumptive diseases and cancers. As captured by the name of their association, the rhetoric and aesthetics of sacrifice were central to the protests that veterans staged, emphasizing the state's indifference to their ongoing agony after having made use of their lives to serve national interests. Examples of collective action in those years included street demonstrations such as the one held on November 17, 1992, in downtown Seoul, proclaiming on its main banner that veterans' only wish was to be buried among their peers at the National Cemetery and exhibiting at the head of the procession the disabled bodies of those most affected by the damaging health effects of defoliants.⁴⁴ Through the visual deployment of their infirmities (achieved not only by means of physical display but also in slogans such as “Just look at our state,” “I am a 40-year-old grandfather,” “Veterans are dying,” and “Are we no more than trash?”), ex-soldiers appear to have had—and to have tried to raise—awareness of their use as “necropolitical labor,” a concept employed by scholar Jin-kyung Lee to describe forms of productivity premised on the possibility of death.⁴⁵ In her words,

The majority of those who volunteered for Vietnam service came from a rural peasant background, drawn to the economic advantages of service in Vietnam, which was financed by the United States. Given the impoverished conditions of the South Korean working-class men who were already conscripts during the

'60s and early '70s, the prospect of “eating American food, wearing American underwear, getting paid in dollars” and making additional income by dealing in U.S. commodities on the black market was a sufficiently attractive incentive. Militarized masculinity became an instrument of socioeconomic mobility for those working-class young men who viewed Vietnam as an economic opportunity ... Under such circumstances, the South Korean government never had trouble filling the quota for Vietnam duty. South Korean soldiers in Vietnam were working-class domestic surrogates for their urban middle-class counterparts—they were military labor commodities, exported by the South Korean state, which performed the role of a contractual labor broker.⁴⁶

In the end, the state was the one to reap the fruits of South Korean military labour as most Vietnam War servicemen did not really enrich themselves and many of them instead ruined their health. This dimension of their exploitation was highlighted on September 26, 1992, when several hundreds of veterans occupied the Kyōngbu Expressway connecting Seoul to Pusan in order to call for the passage of special legislation tackling their condition. Seen as the embodiment of South Korea's economic miracle, the expressway was built between 1968 and 1970 with the “blood” shed by soldiers in Vietnam according to a common trope circulating among the concerned individuals.⁴⁷ By occupying a portion of this symbolic space, protest participants thus projected in it the experience of their disposability as agents of South Korea's modernization. In so doing, however, they called into question not so much the desirability of industrialization under Park Chung-hee as the injustice of their sacrifice in the absence of proper remedy.

The abovementioned instances of collective action were not the only initiatives promoted by the Association of Veterans Sacrificed to Defoliants in Vietnam to foster the cause of its members in the early 1990s. In 1992, the organization also paid visits to the rival candidates of the coming December presidential election.⁴⁸ The enactment of special legislation was endorsed as a campaign promise by Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) and fulfilled after his coming into office. The Act to Support Vietnam Veterans Suffering from the Direct and Alleged Aftereffects of Exposure to Defoliants (*wōllam ch'amjōn koyōpche huyu ūijūng hwanja chiwōn tūnge kwanhan pōmnyul*) was consequently adopted on March 10, 1993, but as early as 1994 mobilization resumed to expand the law only recognizing ten direct and eleven alleged aftereffects of defoliants. Around the same time, efforts were undertaken by South Korean veterans to obtain compensation before the US legal system like their American, Australian, and New Zealander counterparts.⁴⁹ Class actions were introduced under the aegis of the renamed Association of Veterans Victims of Defoliants in Vietnam (*pet'ūnam koyōpche p'ihaeja chōnuhoe*), today known as the Korean Disabled Veterans' Association by Agent Orange in Vietnam War (*taehan min'guk koyōpche chōnuhoe*, or KAOVA). By 2000, however, all of these attempts had been dismissed by US courts.⁵⁰

2. A double denial of violence

The lack of success met by South Korean Vietnam War veterans' legal mobilization in the United States was not the only challenge that the turn of the twenty-first century brought them. The publication in the magazine *Hankyoreh* 21 of a series of reports about the civilian massacres committed by ROK soldiers south of the seventeenth parallel was another. In response to the latter, veterans' organizations profoundly altered the protest discourses, strategies, and physical representations of their members, enacting a transformation that I characterize as a shift from victimization to remilitarization. Shedding the image of weakness projected in the public space in the 1990s, ex-combatants undertook to physically fight for restoring their "honour" on June 27, 2000. That day, a couple of thousand former servicemen in Vietnam, dressed in full military uniforms, surrounded and invaded the headquarters of *Hankyoreh*, ransacking the newspaper's offices to denounce the articles published in its magazine.⁵¹ Honour, however, was not the only thing that veterans feared to lose because of the reporting. At the time of the raid, veterans also claimed that *Hankyoreh*'s negative coverage risked jeopardizing their chances of being recognized as victims in ongoing court proceedings.⁵²

Anticipating their failure to gain compensation before US judges, South Korean veterans exposed to defoliants and their representative association had indeed turned to their own legal system by the millennium's change. In 1999, more than 16 000 ex-soldiers filed collective lawsuits before the Seoul Central District Court against American companies such as Monsanto and Dow Chemical, a case that was still pending as revelations concerning civilian massacres began surfacing. Whether influenced by them or not, a decision in favour of military herbicides' manufacturers was rendered in 2002.⁵³ Four years later, the Seoul High Court ruled in favour of the plaintiffs, granting compensation to almost 7 000 veterans suffering from eleven illnesses.⁵⁴ In 2013, however, the Supreme Court of Korea rendered its decision to partially but momentarily overturn the Seoul High Court's judgment, granting compensation to only thirty-nine veterans suffering from chloracne, the sole disease for which the Supreme Court recognized the existence of a causal relationship between its manifestation and exposure to dioxin-contaminated defoliants.⁵⁵

In the course of litigation and in accordance with the remilitarization of their protest discourses and strategies, veterans' groups such as the Korean Disabled Veterans' Association by Agent Orange in Vietnam War adopted the new tactic of staging demonstrations in front of court buildings. In spite of this forceful display, ex-combatants have largely failed to be judicially recognized and repaired as victims of the conflict. In the meantime, their organizations have continued to counter the extension of such a status to targets of war crimes. In 2015, for instance, the KAOVA disrupted the Seoul visit of two Vietnamese civilian-massacre survivors invited by the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation's predecessor: Nguyen Thi Thanh and Nguyen Tan Lan. Labeling the latter a Việt Cộng member, the KAOVA opposed the event as an "act against the nation by

subversives who are distorting history.”⁵⁶ Such a phenomenon should not be interpreted as simply illustrating the resilience of the Cold War mentality commonly attributed to South Korean veterans of the Vietnam War. As a matter of fact, ex-combatants affected by defoliants appear to have engaged both in a relationship of competition and alliance with Vietnamese victims. While still actively and even violently denying the commission of unlawful military acts, in 2004 the KAOVA established a sisterhood partnership with the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (*Hội Nạn nhân chất độc da cam/dioxin Việt Nam*, or VAVA), whose scope includes representing the interests of former enemies of the ROK Army.⁵⁷

In their protracted struggle to be recognized as victims of the war, veterans have allied with Vietnamese actors sharing the same cause while militating against South Korean activists whose historical claims are perceived as threats. The two issues of the wrongs experienced and performed by ROK soldiers thus appear deeply intertwined in the way the Vietnam War has been—or, on the contrary, has failed to be—addressed and redressed for the past thirty years in South Korean society. While the obstacles met by the KAOVA’s members—first abroad and then at home—in their campaign to be judicially compensated for their suffering have encouraged them to strategically cooperate with the VAVA, these obstacles have also led veterans to counter the extension of the status of victims to survivors of their own abuses. As a result, veterans’ struggle for victimhood recognition can be said to have paradoxically resulted in a double denial: that of the violence not only endured but also committed by ROK soldiers in Vietnam. Since its establishment in 2016, the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation has precisely aimed at taking into account this twofold violence, promoting a definition of peace that embraces both targets and perpetrators of civilian massacres. Such an initiative is not mere lip service given the ties that activists have forged with individual veterans who have agreed to testify about their own crimes.⁵⁸

Rather than laying the blame on the military and its members, the Foundation actually emphasizes the responsibility held by the South Korean state and the duty of its leaders to unequivocally apologize to Vietnam. Its work to that end is perhaps most openly supported by another civil-society group seeking the same but in a different context: the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (*han’guk chōngsindae munje taech’aek hyōpūihoe*). The Council’s involvement with the issue of the ROK Army’s violence appears to date back to 2003, when two former “comfort women,” Mun Myōng-kūm and Kim Ok-ju, made a donation to the Committee to Promote the Establishment of a Peace Museum, the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation’s forerunner. In 2015, the Committee cooperated with the Council through its Butterfly Fund (*nabi kikūm*) to document not only South Korea’s civilian massacres but also sexual crimes in Vietnam, holding an exhibition in Seoul on the premises of the Council.⁵⁹ The collaboration between the two organizations extends to the genealogy of the Vietnam Pieta, crafted by the artists who built the Statue of the Girl symbolizing the fight of the Japanese Army’s sex slaves to obtain justice. In 2015, one of the sculptors, Kim Sō-kyōng, travelled to Vietnam thanks to the Butterfly Fund.⁶⁰

The two monuments interestingly exemplify the solidarity that exists between the missions of the Council and the Foundation in the eyes of activists, but not in those of the rest of South Korean society. While the Statue of the Girl and, more broadly, the demand for a final apology from Japan occupy a central place in domestic and bilateral debates about the colonial past, the Vietnam Pieta and the battle for remembering the victims of the ROK's participation in a historically less distant conflict are still situated on the margins. The two sculptures evidently occupy different loci in public memory, not only metaphorically but also physically: while the former is visibly present in downtown Seoul, the latter has only been installed off the mainland, on Cheju Island, and remains to be brought out of the shadows abroad, at the museum of Da Nang.

CONCLUSION

In his search for what would be a “just memory” of the Vietnam War, Viet Thanh Nguyen is careful not to conflate “just” and “inclusive,” as total inclusion can never be achieved. Instead, “a just memory says that ethically recalling our own is not enough to work through the past, and neither is the less common phenomenon of ethically recalling others. Both ethical approaches are needed, as well as an ethical relationship to forgetting, since forgetting is inevitable.”⁶¹ The statue of the Vietnam Pieta deserves recognition for manifesting the “less common” ethics of remembrance that Nguyen evokes. As a memorial to the victims of South Korea's participation in the war in question, the sculpture commemorates other dead than the ROK's own—its 5 000 soldiers who did not return home. Those it honours are the more numerous Vietnamese civilians who perished at the hands of the South Korean military in unlawful killings. Their personification under the traits of a mother and her infant arguably erases some of these victims, but such exclusion may be premised on what can be called “an ethical relationship to forgetting.” To the South Korean activists who have been advocating since 1999 for their government to address and redress the war crimes perpetrated by its army in Vietnam, all the lives lost in massacres were unjustly taken. Yet, representing archetypes of innocence serves to bring into relief the very thing that the ROK military and veterans' organizations still refuse to face: that violence was indiscriminate. The Vietnam Pieta is an invitation rather than a condemnation to confront such past, which not only veterans' organizations but also authorities in Seoul and Hanoi are not inclined to look at. The act of memory that it performs is therefore directed against the “injustice of forgetting” that prevails in both countries.⁶² Even though the Vietnam Pieta is far from recalling all the dead that resulted from South Korea's participation in the war—not only because its two figures do not stand for all civilians but also because noncivilians are considered, by contrast, as “real” enemies not worth mourning—and even though it embodies the asymmetries that go into the construction of memory, having been conceived by activists in a position of material and political advantage vis-à-vis victims, the gesture of embrace that the statue expresses and extends can be seen as a rare attempt toward a just way of recollecting this neglected facet of the conflict.

NOTES

- ¹ The Socialist Republic of Vietnam celebrates the end of the war and reunification on April 30, the date Saigon was captured by the North Vietnamese Army and the National Liberation Front in 1975. In the United States, March 29 has been designated as National Vietnam War Veterans' Day, marking the withdrawal of troops in 1973.
- ² Blackburn, Robert M., *Mercenaries and Lyndon Johnson's "More Flags": The Hiring of Korean, Filipino, and Thai Soldiers in the Vietnam War*, Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 1994.
- ³ *New York Times*, "Korea's Vietnam Troops Cost U.S. \$1 Billion," September 13, 1970. The same figure is advanced by Charles K. Armstrong, according to whom South Korea's "war-related income in the form of direct aid, military assistance, procurements, and soldiers' salaries amounted to over \$1 billion." See Armstrong, Charles K., "America's Korea, Korea's Vietnam," *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2001, p. 533.
- ⁴ Nearly 50 million litres of Agent Orange were sprayed in Vietnam, the total quantity of military herbicides used exceeding 75 million litres. Some of them, such as Agent Blue and Agent White, did not contain dioxin, while concentration levels of dioxin greatly varied in others, such as Agent Purple, Agent Pink, or Agent Green, which were used before Agent Orange was manufactured. See Stelman, Jeanne M. et al., "The Extent and Patterns of Usage of Agent Orange and Other Herbicides in Vietnam," *Nature*, vol. 422, 2003, p. 681-687.
- ⁵ Website of the Korean Disabled Veterans Association by Agent Orange in Vietnam War, available at: <http://www.kaova.or.kr/document/AO/AO07.php> (in Korean, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ⁶ International Tribunal for War Crimes in Vietnam, *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal, Stockholm, Copenhagen*, New York, Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, 1968. For an early account of the ROK participation, see also Baldwin, Frank et al., *America's Rented Troops: South Koreans in Vietnam*, Philadelphia, American Friends Service Committee, 1976.
- ⁷ *Hankyoreh*, "South Korea Coming to Confront Vietnam War Civilian Massacres," October 30, 2016. For case studies of the said massacres, see Kwon, Heonik, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006 and Ko, Kyöng-t'ae, *1968-yönl 2-wöl 12-il: Pet'unam p'ungni/p'ungnöt haksal kürido segye*, Seoul, Han'györe Ch'ulpan, 2015.
- ⁸ The seventeenth parallel refers to the demarcation line established as a result of the 1954 Geneva Conference to divide North and South Vietnam.
- ⁹ As part of its findings, the Tribunal confirmed the estimation that ROK troops committed about eighty civilian massacres in which approximately 9 000 Vietnamese were killed. See the website of the People's Tribunal on War Crimes by South Korean Troops during the Vietnam War, available at: <https://blog.naver.com/tribunal4peace> (in Korean, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ¹⁰ Armstrong, Charles K., "Korea's Vietnam War: Out of the Silence," in *transPOP: Korea Vietnam Remix*, exhibition catalogue, 2008, p. 41, available at: <http://www.yongsoonmin.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/YSM-CATALOG-transPOP.pdf> (last consulted on March 26, 2019).
- ¹¹ *Korea JoongAng Daily*, "Looking Forward, Not Back," August 28, 2001 (in Korean and in English; the translation from the Korean is my own).
- ¹² Website of the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation, available at: <http://kovietpeace.org/p/page14> (in Korean, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, available at: <http://kovietpeace.org/c/17/23> (in Korean, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, available at: <http://kovietpeace.org/p/page09> (in English, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, available at: <http://www.kovietpeace.org/c/6/33> (in Korean, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, available at: <http://kovietpeace.org/p/page09> (in English, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, available at: <http://kovietpeace.org/p/page08> (in Korean, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ²⁰ *Korea Times*, “Sculptor to Make Symbol of Vietnam Massacres,” June 21, 2016.
- ²¹ Ch’oe, Yong-ho, *Han ’gwŏnŭro ingnŭn pet ’ŭnam chŏnjaeng kwa han ’gukkun*, Seoul, Institute for Military History of the Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea, 2004, p. 432.
- ²² Kwon, *After the Massacre*, *op. cit.*, p. 58-59.
- ²³ I conducted a personal visit to the museum of Da Nang in March 2017. An informant confirmed that the statue was present but not exhibited at the museum in March 2019.
- ²⁴ Website of the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation, available at: <http://kovietpeace.org/c/6/7> (in Korean, last consulted on March 12, 2019).
- ²⁵ Nguyen, Viet Thanh, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2017, p. 153.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Kwon, *After the Massacre*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- ²⁸ Breuker, Remco, “Korea’s Forgotten War: Appropriating and Subverting the Vietnam War in Korean Popular Imaginings,” *Korean Histories*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, p. 38.
- ²⁹ Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
- ³⁰ Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “President Tran Duc Luong’s Interview with The Korea Times,” October 4, 2004, available at: http://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/cs_doingoai/pbld/ns041111171903 (last consulted on March 19, 2019).
- ³¹ *Reuters*, “Vietnam, South Korea agree to do \$100 billion in bilateral trade by 2020,” March 23, 2018.
- ³² Lee, Jin-kyung, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010, p. 77-78.
- ³³ Armstrong, “America’s Korea, Korea’s Vietnam,” *op. cit.*, p. 533.
- ³⁴ *Korea Times*, “Moon’s Apology Ignored in Vietnam,” November 15, 2017.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ These manifestations include that of “politically engendered ghosts” as explored by anthropologist Heonik Kwon. See Kwon, Heonik, “The Ghosts of War and the Spirit of Cosmopolitanism,” *History of Religions*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2008, p. 30 and Kwon, Heonik, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- ³⁹ *Hankyoreh*, “In Vietnam, a Rare Discussion of South Korean Soldiers’ Wartime Civilian Massacres,” September 23, 2016.
- ⁴⁰ *Hankyoreh*, “South Korea Coming to Confront Vietnam War Civilian Massacres,” *op. cit.*
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² Website of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Korea, available at: <http://vvak.kr/bbs/page.php?hid=history> (in Korean, last consulted on March 19, 2019).
- ⁴³ Website of the Korean Disabled Veterans Association by Agent Orange in Vietnam War, available at: <http://www.kaova.or.kr/document/about/about03.php> (in Korean, last consulted on March 19, 2019).
- ⁴⁴ My analysis is based on photographs of the protest from the daily newspaper *Kyunghyang Shinmun* accessed through the online archive of the Korea Democracy Foundation (documents 00721402 and 00736904).
- ⁴⁵ Lee, *Service Economies*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- ⁴⁷ Yun, Ch’ung-no, *Pet ’ŭnam chŏnjaengŭi han ’guk sahoesa*, Seoul, P’urŭn Yŏksa, 2015, p. 314.
- ⁴⁸ Website of the Korean Disabled Veterans Association by Agent Orange in Vietnam War, available at: <http://www.kaova.or.kr/document/about/about03.php> (in Korean, last consulted on March 19, 2019).
- ⁴⁹ Class action lawsuits filed by American, Australian, and New Zealander ex-soldiers against the companies, such as Dow Chemical and Monsanto, that produced Agent Orange and other

herbicides began in the late 1970s, leading to their initial compensation in 1984 through the negotiation of a settlement rather than the adjudication of a trial. South Korean veterans were excluded from this process as the military government of Chun Doo-hwan did not allow them to take part in it, altogether dismissing the existence of potential victims of defoliants among the troops that had served in Vietnam.

⁵⁰ *Chung et al v. Dow Chemical Company et al*, Docket no. 1:95-cv-00445 (E.D.N.Y. Jan. 31, 1995); *Kwan v. United States*, 84 F. Supp. 2d 613 (E.D.Pa. Feb 11, 2000).

⁵¹ *Hankyoreh* 21, “Pet’ūnamjōn kongp’o ch’ehōm!,” no. 316, July 30, 2000.

⁵² *Korea JoongAng Daily*, “Invasion of Press Kick in the Face of Democracy,” June 28, 2000.

⁵³ Seoul Central District Court, 1999Ka-Hab84123, May 23, 2002.

⁵⁴ Seoul High Court, 2002Na32662, January 26, 2006. The illnesses in question were non-Hodgkin lymphoma, soft-tissue sarcomas, chloracne, porphyria cutanea tarda, Hodgkin’s disease, lung cancer, larynx cancer, tracheal cancer, multiple myeloma, prostate cancer, and type-2 diabetes.

⁵⁵ Supreme Court of Korea, 2006Da17539, July 12, 2013.

⁵⁶ *Hankyoreh*, “Vietnam Veterans Force Cancellation of Victims Event in Seoul,” April 7, 2015.

⁵⁷ Website of the Korean Disabled Veterans Association by Agent Orange in Vietnam War, available at: http://www.kaova.or.kr/document/info/info03.php?id=10&cpage=24&sval=&sc_kind= (in Korean, last consulted on March 19, 2019). KAOVA and VAVA’s joint activities have included honorary visits, meetings aimed at defining a common policy vis-à-vis the United States, as well as the provision of financial and material help by the South Korean side.

⁵⁸ One of the veterans who have testified about war crimes is retired lieutenant colonel Kim Ki-tae. See *Hankyoreh*, “The South Korean Vietnam War Experience,” July 8, 2013.

⁵⁹ I visited the exhibition during fieldwork research in Seoul in the fall of 2015.

⁶⁰ *Hankyoreh*, “‘Vietnam Pieta’ Statues to Memorialize Civilian Victims Killed by ROK in Vietnam War,” January 16, 2016.

⁶¹ Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 68.