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K-Dramas Resurrect Long-Buried Memories in Vietnam

Obsessed with South Korean dramas, Vietnamese youths are oblivious to the atrocities committed by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War. But their elders remember.

By Travis Vincent

Le Thi Thanh Ly from Quang Ngai city, in Vietnam's Quang Ngai province, has been working as an English-speaking tour guide for inbound tourists for the past seven years. Oftentimes, she takes tourists around her home city, where they admire the white sand crystal clear beaches of My Khe, the poetic Thien An mountain, and the inimitable Kon Chu Rang Nature Reserve. Ly was proud that she knew her city like the palm of her hand.

In late March 2022, Ly guided a senior South Korean couple visiting Vietnam from Seoul. She was elated to share with them her interest in South Korean TV dramas. The 27-year-old tour guide was stunned as they requested her to take them to the place in her province where the Binh Hoa village massacre occurred in 1966.

"I was born and raised here [in Quang Ngai] but did not know anything about it," said Ly, who admitted spending the next few days researching the event on the internet. "I feel really ashamed."

Ly asked some of her friends, only to find out that they were equally in the dark.

"I am sure that neither my grandparents or parents have ever told me about it," she said. "We have never heard that the South Koreans were involved in the anti-American war... I only knew about the massacres in My Lai, and nothing about the Binh Hoa village massacre in my hometown."

Ly was just one among many young Vietnamese admirers of Korean pop culture who have little or no knowledge of South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War – much less the war crimes committed by Korean soldiers during the war. In interviews with more than 30 Vietnamese college students and young professionals, these youth revealed that they were unaware of Korean perpetration of atrocities in the war. Even educated youths who grew up in provinces where rapes and killings were committed by Korean soldiers – such as Phu Yen, Binh Dinh, Quang Ngai, and Quang Binh – were unfamiliar with this dark history.

2022 marks the 30th year anniversary of the establishment of South Korea-Vietnam diplomatic relations, which are expected to be raised to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership from the current status of strategic cooperative partnership, established in 2009. While Korean soft power has been winning the hearts of Vietnamese youths, its image is tainted by unreconciled war-time injustices, which older generations have yet to forget.

Obsession With Korean Soldier Characters, Oblivious to Korean War Crimes

Between May and September 2021, Ho Chi Minh City was under complete lockdown as COVID-19 caseloads soared. As a result, Vietnamese soldiers were mobilized to support the delivery of necessities for the people. The images of soldiers taking care of citizens were popularly likened to that of Captain Ri, the caring North Korean elite army officer played by top

K-drama star Hyun Bin in the hit series “Crash Landing on You“ in 2020. The series was among the top 10 most searched TV dramas by Vietnamese netizens in the same year, according to Google Trends.

It was not the first time soldier characters from K-dramas enjoyed immense popularity in Vietnam. In 2016, the Korean drama “Descendants of the Sun” quickly became a mega-hit in Vietnam. The show depicts a romance involving South Korean soldiers deployed as peacekeepers in a fictional country. Then South Korean President Park Geun-hye spoke highly of the drama, saying it could inculcate patriotism into young people. A few months after its release, HTV 2, owned by the People’s Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, purchased its copyright and decided to air the series, known in Vietnamese as “*Hau due mat troi.*”

The decision met with an unprecedented online outcry in Vietnam, with many Vietnamese seniors calling for its boycott on social media. For many Vietnamese seniors, the series’ heroic depiction of South Korean peacekeepers in a fictional land stands in stark contrast to the actual brutalities committed in the central part of Vietnam by soldiers deployed by late President Park Chung-hee, father of Park Geun-hye.

Journalist Tran Quang Thi, a former reporter at Tuoi Tre, one of the most widely read media outlets in Vietnam, triggered the social media debate on the controversy surrounding “Descendants of the Sun.” In March 2016, he published an in-depth post on Facebook detailing the atrocities Korean soldiers committed as U.S. mercenaries in Vietnam, contrasting that history with the frenzy of Vietnamese youths over a series about modern-day Korean soldiers. The Facebook post was shared more than 87,000 times.

While not making any attempt to discourage young people from watching it, Thi took issue with a homegrown TV channel being a PR avenue for the series. In response to the outcry, the broadcast of the show was postponed for a few months.

Despite the controversy, the popularity of the series in Vietnam has not abated. Vietnamese fans of the fictional soldiers not only created related Facebook fan pages and groups, but also pasted their own images doctored by an app to make them appear in Korean military uniforms, following the trend of Vietnamese celebrities at the time. Furthermore, a Vietnamese remake of the “Descendants of the Sun” was approved and broadcast in 2018, though it was less popular in the country than the Korean original.

The incident, however, has since triggered a heated public discussion in the mainstream media on South Korean participation in the Vietnam War, known in Vietnamese as the “Anti-American Imperialist Struggle.” The Vietnamese government has kept South Korea’s involvement low-profile, despite its annual celebration of military triumphs over American troops.

From Foe to Friend

As a steadfastly anti-communist country and ally of the United States, South Korea was an adversary of North Vietnam and on friendly terms with the South Vietnamese government. South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem paid an official visit to South Korea in 1957, at the invitation of the founder and first President of South Korea Syngman Rhee. The 1967 Constitution of South Vietnam was modeled upon that of South Korea.

Park Chung-hee sent about 300,000 troops to fight in Vietnam, mostly in the central regions of the country, in exchange for \$8 billion in the forms of U.S. grants, subsidies, loans,

technology transfers, and other preferential treatment. Of the seven countries that partook in the Vietnam War, South Korea was the second-largest contributor of troops. The “war of choice” lifted South Korea out of poverty and contributed to its “Miracle on the Han River,” the country’s rapid period of economic development. South Korea’s mercenary involvement in the war has been remembered in an oblique way: The phrase “danh Pac” in the Vietnamese language, literally meaning “Park fighters” or “fighting in the style of Park,” has become a colloquial term to indicate moonlighting in today’s context.

Vietnam embarked on its sweeping socioeconomic reforms in 1986 and expanded its foreign relations accordingly, while South Korea also normalized its ties with socialist countries starting in the early 1990s, following the fall of the Soviet Union. In 1992, the two countries officially established diplomatic relations. Since then, bilateral relations have been developed in all facets.

Cultural appeal is central to South Korean soft power in Asia in general and in Vietnam in particular. Since the drama “Stars in the Heart” was aired in 1998, South Korean dramas have accounted for 40 percent of the total series on Vietnamese TV. The entrance of South Korean soap operas also coincided with the media boom in Vietnam. On state-owned TV channels, Korean dramas have gradually replaced their Chinese counterparts as the dominant foreign TV staple.

In 2001, the two countries established a comprehensive cooperative partnership. In 2009, following South Korean President Lee Myung-bak’s visit to Vietnam, bilateral ties were upgraded to a strategic cooperative partnership. South Korea has become Vietnam’s one of key trading partners and one of its 20 strategic partners. Over the past decade, Vietnam has been the top recipient of South Korean investment and aid as well as its largest trading partner in ASEAN. Vietnam is also a key country within Seoul’s New Southern Policy with a view to cultivating and consolidating relations with South Asia and Southeast Asia. In 2021, Vietnam designated the Korean language as one of the core foreign languages taught at pre-university levels. The number of serious Korean learners of Vietnamese language has also been on the increase in recent years.

Silence by Both Sides

But the rapid growth in ties is based on a shaky foundation, as historical issues have been ignored. Vietnamese youths have not been adequately educated about the history of their country. Domestic media outlets have long been reporting Vietnamese students’ ebbing interest in studying history at school and generally poor performances in national history exams. The support for a boycott of “Descendants of the Sun” indicates public disenchantment with the omission of important historical issues on both history textbooks and mainstream media.

Nhan, a 63-year-old former army officer from Hanoi, taught his children about Korean soldiers in Vietnam in the past as he witnessed their fascination with Korean dramas and pop music.

“My children are addicted to Korean dramas, because the state TV has shown too many of them. They admire modern South Korea, yet they did not know that the fast rise of the country was partly thanks to the money paid by the American government for their dispatch of troops to Vietnam,” said Nhan.

“Every year, on every occasion of celebrating Vietnam’s victory over the Americans, I mentioned other countries’ participation as well, such as Australia, the Philippines and South Korea,” he added. “I do that because it is important, but is ignored.”

Long, a graduate student in media studies from Phu Yen, said the online outcry against “Descendants of the Sun” caught him and his friends by surprise.

“We did not know about our own history until a Korean drama evoked it,” said Long. “Vietnam is the victim, why should we become voiceless in this issue?”

Both the Vietnamese and South Korean governments are willing to prioritize economic cooperation and put this troubled historical legacy on the shelf. Most publications on diplomatic relations in Vietnamese language omit the close ties between South Korea and the South Vietnamese government.

For South Korea’s part, its atrocities during the Vietnam War [are not mentioned](#) in Korean textbooks, nor are they remembered in the permanent exhibitions on South Korean participation in the Vietnam War at the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History or the War Memorial of Korea. Some South Korean presidents have even praised the Korean participation in Vietnam.

The Diplomat contacted seven South Korean scholars on international relations from seven universities in South Korea, the U.K., the U.S., and Canada. None responded to requests for comments on the South Korean government’s silence on the Vietnam War.

The Unforgotten Legacy

Only in the 1990s did mentions of war crimes committed by South Korean troops during the Vietnam War first appear in South Korean media. According to Dr. Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon from the University of Alberta, memory of the Vietnam War remains disputed in South Korea. Under Park Chung-hee’s administration, discourse on the military intervention in Vietnam was inextricably linked with the deep-seated anti-communist sentiment among the Korean people. Korean fighters in Vietnam were credited with contributing to national prosperity as well as stopping the international spread of communism. South Korea even passed legislation in 2009 to honor South Korean war veterans of the Vietnam War – a move that met with rare but strong opposition from the Vietnamese government. Adding to the official discourse was the portrayal of the Vietnamese as “inhumane enemies” in Korean popular culture.

The South Korean government has never formally admitted to or apologized for massacres perpetrated in Vietnam, even though Korean civil society organizations and individuals, such as the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation, have made prominent attempts to atone for the past crimes. The South Korean government has made use of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) to provide aid to schools and hospitals in provinces that South Korean troops once occupied, yet Seoul has fallen short of declaring this aid to be compensation for past atrocities.

The Vietnam Veterans’ Association of Korea has dismissed allegations of atrocities as nothing but unavoidable consequences of armed encounters with Vietnamese guerrillas. Nevertheless, activists claim that Korean troops committed around 80 civilian massacres that killed around 9,000 civilians. In response, the grassroots campaign “Sorry, Vietnam” has gathered South Korean activists, journalists, and researchers who endeavor to counter the official memory of the war. Their work proved that the brutalities committed by Korean soldiers were

not incidental, but rather organized operations targeting unsuspecting children, women, and elders.

Nonetheless, some scholars have pointed out the drawback of the movement in South Korea, which boils down to the lack of interaction with any Vietnamese entity around this issue. In the eyes of critics, the desire for forgiveness was done not for the sake of the Vietnamese victims – whose input was not sought out – but for the Korean aggressors and their descendants to have peace of mind.

Another criticism holds that the movement is transactional in essence. The Korean public became more open to calls for South Korea to apologize to Vietnam in order to push Japan to apologize to Korean “comfort women,” forced laborers, and other victims of Japan’s colonial rule over the Korean Peninsula.

In 2008, Tran Dai Nhat, a writer from Phu Yen province, published a collection of autobiographical short stories titled “Broken Lives” (*Nhung manh doi luan lac*). Nhat’s father was a unknown South Korea soldier who raped her mother, making Nhat one of the tens of thousands of children of Vietnamese women allegedly raped by South Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War, known in Vietnamese as “*Lai Dai Han*.” Her book, which was published by Writers’ Association Publishing House, received widespread state media coverage.

Many Vietnamese victims of war-time atrocities – whoever the perpetrator – chose remain silent due to widespread social stigma. The London-based organization Justice for Lai Dai Han, of which Tran Dai Nhat serves as the honorary president, is the latest initiative to give voice to victims of sexual violence committed by Korean soldiers. In April 2020, Tran Thi Ngai, the mother of Tran Dai Nhat, became the first woman to sue the South Korean government for past crimes.

Yet for some youths, past Korean participation in the Vietnam War and a 21st century Korean drama about soldiers are two different stories. Whereas they understand the concerns of older Vietnamese, many youths believe K-dramas should not face barriers to being aired on TV.

For Mai, an incoming graduate student from Da Nang, it is unreasonable to “politicize and punish an artwork.”

“There are different ways of educating the young people on South Korean participation in the Vietnam war, but blocking a popular and meaningful TV drama is not one of them. It is an artwork, and not a historical documentary,” said Mai.

Hanh, a translator based in Hanoi, actually credits “Descendants of the Sun” and the outcry is provoked with awakening her to a historical legacy that she had not previously been aware of.

“Vietnam also had [historical] issues with the U.S., France, China, and Japan. If a ban could solve the problem, then we should ban all the series from those countries, and not just one Korean series. How come we have not called for any ban on American and Japanese movies that feature soldiers as well?” asked Hanh.

While it is important to move forward with partnership with South Korea, Vietnam should not keep young people clueless about historical injustices. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting.

“I do not regard South Korean soldiers only as perpetrators. They might be victims too. They might be injured. They did not come here of their own volition. They received orders to kill, otherwise they would have been killed by their leaders. Then, they might suffer from Agent

Orange,” said the tour guide Ly. During her research, she learned that more than 5,000 Korean soldiers lost their lives during the Vietnam War, while the total number of injured remains untold.

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