Abstract: Korean veterans set out on trips to the battlefields of the Vietnam War in search of the memory of their participation in the war. Recalling their experiences of the war in four decades, they prepare itineraries for their journey back to the former battlegrounds. The battlefield travel is a pilgrimage of experiencing history as well as ritual journey into memory and transnational leisure activity. This study is an ethnography which interprets narrations and discourses of the veterans’ personal and collective memories of the war experiences as reproduced in the old battlefields. The memories and discourses reflect major issues in Korean society over the participation in the Vietnam War as well as the conflict over the aftermath.

Keywords: War tourism, collective memory, Vietnam War, Korean veterans

Introduction

War tourism is recreational travel to active or former war zones for the purpose of sightseeing or historical study. War-tourists are attracted by the desire to experience the mass destruction and violence. In addition to escaping from daily routines and spending on leisure activity (Rojek 1993), war tourism also features a pursuit of authenticity (MacCannell 1976), social healing (Krippendorf 1987), and quasi-pilgrimage or ritual (Graburn 1989). Unlike ordinary tourism featuring safety and convenience (Wang 2004, p. 42), the itinerary of war tourism in search of old battlefields is similar to that of the religious pilgrimage of asceticism. To those who need to reconcile with the painful past, a trip to the former battleground may be an experience of catharsis, as if they are in the actual scenes of memory (Kennedy and Williams 2001; Schwenkel 2006, p. 4).
The narration of tourism interacts not only with official history but also with personal memory. This is even more so if the itinerary is based on the experiences and memories of participants. While personal memory is neither permanent nor complete, collective memory is a social product which is made and restructured while interacting with others’ concepts of the past (Halbwachs 1992). The problem is that collective memory as social memory in the official history can strongly influence the personal consciousness and discourses of tourists who are on the field trip. In war tourism, official history and personal memories interact, all mixed up with one another, and their boundaries are mingled (Kennedy and Williams 2001, p. 138). In this respect, there is room for controversy between those who see that the awareness of history at work in field trips is constantly restructured so that the past serves the present needs and those who view history as something resistant to such restructuring.

In Korea, the effort to produce public discourses on its participation in the Vietnam War based on experiences and memories of former veterans has not been activated. A few studies on war veterans’ experiences were recently published (Yun Chung-ro 2008; Lee Tae-joo 2008, 2009), but it is still rare to find records which contain their own voices. The effort to socialize their memories has stalled for over two decades since their withdrawal from the war. Those who actually experienced the battle at the risk of their lives have refrained from narrating and reproducing their diverse memories. Although the soldiers had stored the pain of the war in their mind and body, it was not until in the 1990s that talks of this pain began to emerge (Shim Ju-hyung 2003, p. 85-91). ¹

In this situation, Korean veterans set out on trips to the battlefields in search of the memory and nostalgia of their participation in the war. Tracing memories of four decades back, they make up itineraries and set out their pilgrimage to the battlefields. This study is an ethnography which interprets narrations and discourses of the veterans’ personal and collective memories of the “Wol-nam War” experiences as reproduced in time travel to the old battlefields. This study starts with the following questions. First, why and how do war veterans set out to travel to the battlefields? Second, how are their war experiences and memories narrated and reproduced during the field trip? Third, what are the relationships of this practice with official memory and discourses on participation in the Vietnam War?
Since 2007, I have visited the former battlefields several times where Korean soldiers had participated. In October 2008, I joined the trip to battlefields with war veterans, observed the battlefields and had a heart-to-heart talk with them. The essential part of this writing comes from the voices and memories of about 10 war veterans who reside in Ho Chi Minh City, including my two guides. Also, I analyzed the “N Cafe” homepage, which is a kind of a cyber travel agency operated by Korean veterans to serve battlefield trips, and major websites for war veterans. Tourism is similar to a cultural anthropology or tourism corresponds with it in many aspects (Stronza 2001, p. 264-p. 65). The anthropologist becomes a tourist during the field research on different cultures (Crick 1995). In the process of fieldwork, the anthropologist gets confused about his or her identity, has empathy with the story of the informant, or even has the experience of identifying him/herself with the study subjects. It was hard for me to avoid such experience when I joined the field trip according to the memory of former combatants. I could feel that I was sharing with war veterans the way of embodying their memory.  

Korean Veterans in Ho Chi Minh City and Battlefield Trips

The travel agency called N Cafe opened on January 29, 2007. Two veterans, H (born in 1946) and K (born in 1947), former soldiers of Maeng-ho and Baek-ma Divisions respectively operate the homepage while staying at the ‘Korean village’ on the Pham Van Hai street, Ho Chi Minh city. When I met them at the first time in October 2008, H said, in a cautious voice, “We can’t meet you if you think of the war soldiers as mercenaries or talk about civilian massacre.” When I said, “I came here to listen to your life stories,” K replied hesitantly that “it is a long story to tell” and began to talk about how he was dispatched to the war. Contrary to my concerns, they began to unravel the tangle of the story in just an hour which might have long been kept deep inside their heart.

K came to Vietnam when Baek-ma Division was first dispatched to the war in 1966. He participated in operations mostly near Tuy Hoa for two years. H was dispatched to Vietnam in late 1966. He served the army for three years while moving from Quy Nhon and Phu Yen province. K and H were at the scenes of fighting from 1967 to 1968 when the largest number of Korean soldiers were stationed during the Vietnam War. After leaving the army, K learned mechanical skills with his friend and has since worked as an auto mechanic.
to make a living. H returned to Korea in September 1969. After working at a factory for a few years, he worked as a construction worker in Saudi Arabia for six years, and moved about as a small trader in Senegal, Uruguay, and many other countries. He came to Ho Chi Minh City in the early 1990s, met and married a Vietnamese woman.

Despite the diversity in the lives of the war veterans I met in Pham Van Hai, they agreed in a voice that they’d never forgotten Vietnam even for a day. They said they recalled operations areas the most of all and “visited the places where they had suffered the greatest pain.” Suffering from the after effects of Agent Orange, they said, “We easily become friends and depend on each other when we meet in the places with the deepest sorrow and pain.” After eight years’ painful struggle against illness, K came back to Vietnam in 2002 when he was 55 years old. Although afflicted with asthma, cardiac arrhythmia and weak lungs, he wanted to have a trip to Vietnam before he died. So he got on an airplane with an oxygen tank.

When I landed at Saigon Airport and stayed at a hotel for five days, strangely enough, I no longer needed the oxygen tank. When I returned to Korea, I had difficulty breathing as soon as I arrived at the airport. I had to be in hospital so I packed and came back to Vietnam. I stayed here for 15 days again, but did not use the oxygen tank even once. It’s mysterious indeed. When I first came here people said I was like a corpse but now I become more like a human. It’s a miracle that I’ve lived for six years without an oxygen tank.

Not until 1994 had H realized that the pain he had suffered over 20 years was caused by defoliants.

From about 32 years old on, my legs hurt so much so that I wished to cut them off but thought the pain was because of too much work. At that time nobody knew about defoliants nor talked about them... I did not get better whatever treatment I received. I thought it was because of the deep pain and sorrow in my heart.
Since the early 1990’s, a growing number of war veterans began to return to Vietnam for a long-term stay. Some say the number is currently thousands of people and others say it is in the hundreds. Although war veterans associations and their branch organizations are formed, an exact number of the people is not known yet. Most gatherings of fellow soldiers were operated largely by a few enthusiastic members. Among the people I met in Pham Van Hai, there were not many former combatants. People known as ‘elders of the Korean village’ were mostly not former combat soldiers but civilians who belonged to the military services or who stayed for business during the war. Several of them had stayed in the long term without any particular employment. H was called “toothless Brave Tiger” due to his missing teeth caused by the after effects of Agent Orange. He introduced field trips to me, saying, “I have no regrets even if I die. I work hard because I found something to do in Vietnam.” To be a guide to the battlefields, K received tour guide training at a college in Ho Chi Minh City for a year and was learning the Vietnamese language as well.

Since Vietnam faced globalization and the market economy, war tourism has become continuously packaged. The ‘Anti-American liberation war’ particularly has become an essential icon of Vietnam’s tourism. In Vietnam, the symbols of war are preserved or reproduced, and reused for “national prosperity and development.” Tourists to Vietnam experience not only Vietnam’s “genuine tradition” and “romantic colonial heritage” but also the memory and history of the war as a reproduced “past without pain” (Kennedy and Williams 2001; Schwenkel 2006). Although foreign visitors to Vietnam are not all war tourists, they cannot easily avoid the scenes where the war is turned into images and commodities. In Vietnam, memories and narrations of war are much popularized.

Korea has been vying for second place with the United States after China in the number of inbound visitors to Vietnam by nationality since 2005. However, trips to the battlefields for Koreans are not developed as regular tour packages in Vietnam. Of the 13 historic sites of war that the Vietnamese government designated and developed as national historic sites, there is no site in which Korean soldiers directly participated (VNAT, n.a). In the early 1990s, a few Korean travel agencies developed programs to the battlefields but closed their business because they were unpopular. Although more than 325,000 Korean young people participated in the war, about 200,000 still suffer from the wounds of the war, and war-related tourism has not become popular in Korea (Choi 2009, p. 282-283).
The homepage of N Café posted that, “We, war veterans living in Vietnam, will restore the charm of your travel and past memories as freely as the wind.” It introduces Vietnam’s tourist attractions and commercializes the Vietnam War as can be seen in many other overseas travel guidebooks: “the country that has overcome the wounds of the war and moves on toward the future,” “nostalgia for the colonial period,” and “touching experience for superb natural heritage,” and so on. It also offers various package tours, including Ho Chi Minh city for three days and South and Central Vietnam for five or six days. However, N Café focuses on visiting undeveloped battlefields and military posts of the past. N Café’s trips to battlefields have been made about 20 times up to the end of 2009. In most cases, four to six fellow soldiers joined the trips and in four cases the war veterans accompanied their wives. In two cases, they came all alone but there was no case where they accompanied their children. Tourists to battlefields through N Café were about 100 people in the past three years.

Table 1. An itinerary for ‘Field Trips for Vietnam War Veterans’ of N Café

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 1</td>
<td>HCMC</td>
<td>War memorial museum, History museum, ROK Headquarters in Vietnam, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 2</td>
<td>Da Nang Hoi An</td>
<td>Cham Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Cheong-ryong</em> Division operations areas and move to Quy Nhon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 3</td>
<td>Quy Nhon Song Khau Tuy Hoa</td>
<td>Korea-Vietnam Culture Center (Currently, Binh Dinh provincial museum), Former auditorium at <em>Maeng-ho</em> Division, Phuc Tan Middle School built by the <em>Maeng-ho</em> Division <em>Maeng-ho</em> 26 Regiment (<em>Haesanjin</em> unit), The 1st <em>Cheong-ryong</em> Division, the <em>Baek-ma</em> 28th regiment, <em>Sipjaseong</em> Division 1st support team, The 209th mobile surgical hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 4</td>
<td>Nha Trang Ninh Hoa Cam Ranh Nha Trang</td>
<td><em>Baek-ma</em> Division post War entry monument for the <em>Baek-ma</em> Division, etc. <em>Baek-ma</em> 30th regiment post Korean troops field headquarters and the <em>Sipjaseong</em> Division</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Day 5 | HCMC | Underground Viet Cong Headquarters in the Cu Chi tunnel  
|      |      | HCMC downtown sightseeing  
|      |      | Dinner show on the cruise in the Saigon river, move to the airport |
| Day 6 | HCMC | Depart Ho Chi Minh City |

Source: N Café homepage, Accessed 30 November 2009

Although N Café has a regular itinerary as set forth in (Table 1), it usually offers a ‘free-style trip’ for veterans at the request of the participants. N Café stresses that free travel is “a way of enjoying life”.

About 40 years have already passed and now is the time to look back on the past. I miss the land of Vietnam where I set my foot, so I want to visit the land. Travel is a way of enjoying life… Even if you come alone, we will give you a guide by motorcycle wherever you want to visit. We can stop if we don’t want to go farther and we can come back if we are tired. We offer you free and genuine travel (2007-1-29, “We welcome all of you!”).

N Café operators recommend that war veterans form a group for each former division. Their trips to battlefields cost more than other popular package tours. Because the war sites are located in remote areas, the transport cost is high too. Some veterans had to give up the trip not just because the cost was high but because they could not find fellow soldiers to go with. Here is a story of a war veteran who went on the trip, all by himself, to “the site of a narrow escape from death” in 42 years.

We were paratroops... I missed those days and tried hard to find fellow soldiers. With difficulty, I was able to contact my platoon leader and four comrades in arms. I asked them to go with me but no one agreed to. I’d have no regret if I visit Vietnam even once again. So, I got on a plane without further thinking (15 April 2008, “To Vietnam”, G).
War veterans commented that there were no package tours to the battlefields of the Korean troops fundamentally because of the Korean government's ambiguous attitude or Korean people’s negative perceptions of the participation in the war. Some veterans asserted that Koreans did not take any interest in these trips because they did not respect Korean soldiers dispatched to Vietnam. P (born in 1938), who returned to Vietnam in 1990 and currently runs a restaurant, said, “In the United States, war veterans are treated as heroes. In France, a lot of young people visit war sites as the country continues to teach them history although defeated in the war.” Y (born in 1945), a former driving soldier, said he envied foreign veterans visiting war museums with their children and grandchildren.

Their comments reflect facts. In the United States, the Vietnam War has long become commercialized and consumed (Rowe and Berg 1991; Alneng 2002; Schwenkel 2006). After the U.S restored diplomatic relationships with Vietnam two decades after the war, American veterans began to actively travel to the former battlefields. Even in over five decades after the defeat of the French forces in Dien Bien Phu, their descendants visit Vietnam to remember their colonial history and the wounds of the Indochina War (Biles et al. 1999).

H said it was hard to find the battlefields of Korean soldiers because they were located on mountain tops or in dense forest and “there was nothing interesting to see as a tourist spot.” And K added, “Without any memory or feeling, the travel would be boring and tough. We have vivid feelings from each grass and each space. We are different from ordinary tourists.”

Trips to former battlefields have a blurred boundary between pilgrimage and leisure activity because they include schedules unrelated to war experiences. The pilgrimage in search of the traces of painful memory has an instrumental nature but people also seek relaxation and amusement from the tour courses. They also enjoy exotic food and go shopping. The difference between travelers to battlefields and tourists for leisure becomes unclear. Nevertheless, it is argued that war veterans’ field trips are genuine because they comprise a pilgrimage to places which have not become commodities in search of their own memories and experiences.
The Veterans Remaining in the Battlefield and Reconstruction of Memory

The battlefield travelers attempt to find the sites in their memories. Even if no traces are left, they talk about the old battles at the places in their memories and they try to restore the past. H said he first set out for the combat areas of the Maeng-ho Division in 1994 but it was difficult to find the traces. Until 2005 since then he had visited neighboring areas 15 times to no avail “because the passage of time has erased the traces.” While giving a tour for former soldiers from the Maeng-ho Division in January 2008, he happened to find traces of the regiment headquarters, to his delight.

Even a brick has not remained. The end of a road seemed to be the place where the front gate used to be. A Vietnamese old man in his 70s testified that it was where ‘Manh Ho’ (Vietnamese for Maeng-ho) had been. But there were no traces… I’d asked over and over again this and that person all day. Finally, I discovered the trace of a water supply pump for fellow soldiers at the back of the school!

War veterans explained in a somewhat exaggerated manner that they eventually came to visit the battlefields because of the “karma like a destiny” with the places. H said “combat soldiers and the places of fierce fighting should have a persistent karma binding tightly together like a destiny.” Most of them revisit the battlefields after 40 years, bringing with them the photographs taken at the time, and compare the present with their fragments of memory. They try to assess and share their experiences while longing for the past and comparing the current changes with past memories. Then they begin to repeatedly let out exclamations of joy when they come across something in their memories.

With a black and white photo in hand, I rummaged through the battlefields, only to find three pieces of big white stone which used to be in front of the sentry post. Although rolled to the roadside as if in the way, they seem to have waited for me until I come again… There remained no memory of it but I found three cornerstones. I was comforted to see the traces (10 September 2008, “Writing after the Trip” by A).
K said if a person sheds tears only to see weeds, the person was a combat soldier for sure. Tears well up in their eyes when they find the traces of stones or rocks they rested on or leaned against for a break. The traces of memory made a war veteran a poet.

“In Search of Memory in Tuy Hoa”

Forty years have passed on the land,
Where no traces of barracks remain
Even if we visit the land again
We may wander about in the field,
Where no fragments of memory remain
To assemble into a piece again
Tuy Hoa, where we’re called in youth by the fatherland
And stayed for a year at the risk of our lives
Why do we still wish to visit there again?
Even if our memories fade away one by one
We wish to visit the land over and over again

The veterans perform rituals to commemorate the war before evidence which restores their memories. To most war veterans, the “Jeon-seung-bi” (victory monument) on the 638 Pass is a shared source of collective memory. When they find a monument inscribed in Korean as “Jeon-seung-bi”, they pour a cup of drink, light the candle and lay flowers. Singing their national anthem and saluting before the monument, they conduct a ritual ceremony.

There were buds of anonymous flowers in front of the Victory Monument. They seemed to look closely at me, shining radiantly among the weeds where I breathlessly sat down. Thank you, comrade, for visiting us from afar! Buried on this pass in our 20s even before we bloomed in youth, we will grow like the flowers and live forever… The flowers whispered, ‘Say hi to our fellow soldiers for us. Farewell, fatherland!’ (H, “Flowers in front of the Victory Monument’’).
War veterans visiting battlefields try to find “Korean troops’ achievements” but feel sad that there remain almost no traces or records of them. They said that’s also because of the indifference of the Korean government and people. Although Korean soldiers left their footprints here and there in Ho Chi Minh City, including the Korean headquarters building, octagonal pavilion, and the Saigon bridge built by the Korean force, the government and people do not try to find or restore them. They were also sad that there remained no marks or signs related to Korean troops.

While visiting the battlefields, war veterans also reproduce the fear and horror of the war. H said, “Although the combat too became like a habit, the combatants were always harassed with fears of death or injury, particularly with horrors of booby traps, mines, falling behind or being isolated. The veterans visiting the former battlefields reproduce the fear felt at the time by identifying combat sites and taking pictures of them. H posted his writing about the sense of horror on the homepage with the photographs. Using Photoshop software on the pictures, he marked the traces of the bullets in red line or drew the scenes of bomb explosions to vividly reproduce the actual scenes of suspension and feelings of terror at the time. It seems that he still remains in the battle of the past.

“Enemies are just 15 meters away, firing wildly at us . . . Ugh, save us!”

The lonesome 86 Pass no one visits because there are only a few survivors. In the underground barrack of the 1st platoon, most soldiers were killed. On the tragic spot of 42 years ago, trees and grasses grow thick now. Enemies had occupied our bases, we had to come out of the trench and indiscriminately shoot at the approaching enemies. After the close combat for two hours in the dark dawn, a platoon hid in the heavy weapons bunker and avoided bullets. Because three enemies were in the heavy weapons bunker just 15 meters away, we could not slip away and fired back with automatic rifles to the end. Firing back and forth for two hours again, the fight did not finish.
Other veterans visiting battlefields also emphasize that the same terror as they felt in the past remains in their memories. The veterans reproduce the memory of that breathless time when they were stuck in the mire due to the bombing. They shrink from the memory as if in an underwater cave. Even during meals, they contrast their steamed rice with combat rations at that time. I heard numerously about their stories of boiling the rations with field fuel made of broken Claymore mines in the cans supported by stone, and of missing steamed rice and fermented bean soup while eating c-rations mixed with meat and peanuts in the heavy rain. K said he’d never forget the taste of *kimchi* that he had eaten when he was stationed at a mountain.

During the field trips the veterans also Korean-ize the Vietnam War or Daihan-ize the *Wol-nam* war. The place Korean veterans had been to was referred to not as Vietnam but “*Wol-nam*.” They said, “I’ve never fought the Vietnamese people but the faceless Communists.” They attempt to reproduce memories related to their war participation even from spaces in which Korean troops did not directly intervene. At tourist attractions unrelated to the Korean troops, they relate reminiscences and assessments which derived from the then dominant anti-Communist ideology. They identify the Vietnamese with the Viet Congs. War veterans visiting the Cu Chi tunnels, which in fact had nothing to do with Korean operations also Daihan-ize their experiences of the past.

“We searched Cu Chi Tunnel”

*Daehan* veterans went to occupy the Cu Chi underground tunnel. We felt bad to hear the gruesome terms such as “puppet government” or “puppet army.” I’d enter the underground base by all means, where Viet Cong infiltrated through underground passages to attack the American army and hid away like ghosts. No one dared to give it a try. Who’s going to search? Sure enough, sergeant L from the brave *Maeng-ho* went underground as an advance guard, deserving a Daehan soldier. The passage hole is unthinkably narrow. Watch out for a poisoned needle on the way! This is all the search of Cu Chi tunnel. Hurray, Go Korea! (2007-11-30, H).
The land they revisited is Vietnam but the time seems to stop in *Wol-nam* in the 1960s. Present Vietnam means nothing but a place which restores the feelings of Daihan at that time for them.

“Oh, Saigon!”

In April 1968, I met you, my first love, in this land with waves of *ao dai* and full of abundance. A happy life is to cherish the feeling of first love and to end his life in the bosom of the first love, but you left me in April 1975. Deserted, I wandered about in the desert or in the forest to forget the pain of my first love. In April 1989, I returned to you at the call of your waving hand. You remember how saddened my heart was to see you grow sick and withered, with your beautiful youth faded away, and how much I cried out holding your hand! The power of love is great. To see your beauty again, I’ve dedicated 18 years unconditionally to you (In the morning of the New Year in 2007, J).

Even during the field trip with me, their “Daihan-ization” went on. War veterans did not refer to the places as they are currently named but as their fellow soldiers had pronounced or memorized them in the past. When they could not find out the village name, they replaced it with the name of a Korean military division, generally called by the number.

After the trips, the veterans eagerly shared their stories with other fellow veterans and put together the fragments of memory, thereby forming a collective memory. War veterans use the homepages on their websites as spaces of reminiscence and attempt to share their nostalgia through their reply. They describe the encounter between the past memories and the present as if they synchronously happened. The participants in the trips talk back and forth about the process of participation in the war, battle experiences, and their memories of the fellow soldiers. They also talk about their drift overseas after returning to Korea and their ill bodies due to the after effects of defoliants as well as the process of coming back to Vietnam in search of “*Wol-nam.*” They post on their “home” or homepages their memories revived during the trips, together with music, photographs, and video clips. Using Photoshop software on the photographs they took during the trips, they vividly describe the actual scenes and feelings of suspension and terror of combat at the time. To this, many responses are posted by fellow veterans with similar memories. This practice serves to form and sustain their collective memory.
Descriptions and the reproduction of combatants’ experiences and memories can also be found on the homepages run by war veteran groups. Since 2000, war veterans’ organizations began to be active and operated their Internet homepages. Today, related Websites exceed 100, but three homepages are the most active: www.vwm.co.kr for Ve-cham, www.vwv.or.kr for Wol-cham, and www.vietvet.co.kr with a subtitle of “the Wol-Nam War and Korea: War Story of ROK Forces in Vietnam 1965-1973.”

The www.vietvet.co.kr is a non-official homepage operated mostly by the soldiers who participated in the battles and some low-ranking officers. Its home screen features the following passage, “It was only 30 years ago; but nobody intends to remember it.” This site has the highest participation rate as it allows the general public unrelated to the war to exchange their opinions and information. “Dear netizen, welcome to Our Home! We post stories of soldiers dispatched to the Vietnam War who fought to protect freedom and peace in the far-off land of Vietnam from 1965 to 1973.” Together with this introduction, it explains its aim in English as follows: “Although the war veterans shall fade away one by one as time flies, the glorious victories they have proudly achieved shall permanently be engraved upon our history.”

In a directory named “the Wol-Nam War and Korea,” former combatants eagerly reproduce their experiences and memories. They put pop songs of the wartime as background music and unfold their stories of how they fought to protect freedom and peace in a far-off land. By making directories such as “Good bye, Busan Port,” “Cheong-ryong lands in Da Nang,” and “In Nha Trang, Tuy Hoa,” they gather together their fellow soldiers who experienced the same space and time, reproduce their shared experiences and memories, and relive their nostalgia for the past. War veterans search documentaries or videos of the wartime and post them with captions. They are in their late-60s or early-70s and belong to a generation unfamiliar with the Internet and computers, so they have to learn how to run programs like Photoshop and edit videos to post them on their Website. War veterans do not just search and reunite with their fellow soldiers on the Websites but also make trips to the battlefields in search of their collective memory.
Reconciliation with the Past and Unfinished War

Participants in the field trips are thankful that villagers in their former posts treat them as familiar neighbors rather than to express hostility against them. H said, “With the passage of time, enemies of the past have become friends of today.” K said, “Many fellow soldiers cannot revisit Vietnam because they are afraid of retaliation. I too could not visit the combat areas for two years after coming back to Vietnam because I was afraid of being beaten to death by any chance.” War veterans contend that the villagers’ welcoming them demonstrates that the alleged civilian slaughter is a groundless and unreasonable charge. They also stress that the Vietnamese are not bound to the past nor they are hostile against foreigners. They believe that Vietnam’s friendly relationship with the United States was possible as the Vietnamese saying went, “Kep lai qua khu huong ve tuong lai (burying the past and cooperating for future-oriented development.)”

War veterans were sometimes directly engaged in supporting the poor in Vietnam. They were particularly interested in support for schools and poor children in the villages in the battlefield areas. They have also made continuous attempts to heal the wounds of the War and reconcile themselves with the painful past. One example is their effort to support “lai dai han” or Koreans’ sons and daughters. Field trips on N Café include visits to the families of lai dai han and activities in search of them. They said, “The reason they try to help the second-generation Koreans is to repay what they are indebted to ‘Wol-nam,’ not to the present Vietnam.”

N Café operators post on their homepages stories of lai dai han they met during the field trips at their request to look for their father. In 2007, the café operators found a Korean father living in Australia who had left three daughters in Vietnam. Their reunion was broadcast as a documentary titled “Tears of Lai Dai Han” and came to be known to the world. Another Korean man had been dispatched to Vietnam as an engineering soldier and had a daughter and two sons while working in Nha Trang. He met their now middle-aged children again 30 years after his return to Korea with his eldest son only. Another veteran had been dispatched to Vietnam alone, leaving his wife and family in Korea, and had children with a Vietnamese woman. He and his wife met the Vietnamese children during their trip to Vietnam. War veterans keep fundraising, saying, “We have to support the deserted second generation children with Korean blood in them as our children.”
A pilgrimage to battlefields of the past is not just to return to the past, but to be healed and reconciled. However, the wounds of the past which they want to be healed and reconciled are not from the present Vietnam but from “Wol-nam.” The land where they tried to protect freedom was Wol-nam and it can be said that the sentiments of saving Wol-nam continue in the current Vietnam.

The veterans attempt to protest themselves for failing to exercise their own rights to remember and share their experiences, or against the government and society for lack of compensation. Most of them set out for their trips in ill-health and reproduce the war stored in their body as a war remembered in the heart. War veterans in Pham Van Hai talk about their ‘destiny’ of coming back to Vietnam “as they wanted to be back before they die” and ended up staying there for a long time.

Saigon is so vibrant and free to the extent that I doubt if this is a socialist country. The land I first set my foot on in 1966, the place which gave me the disease. Was this all a mischief of the destiny? I had to fight the illness for nine years in Korea and overcame the crisis of death many times, but I thought I could not end my life so miserably. Now I am proud that I stage another war against myself and I won the war against death. While I live here, I kind of feel that I return the disease I got from Wol-nam to Vietnam (“New Life,” Y).

Not until 20 to 30 years after the war had they come to learn that they were afflicted with the after effects of defoliants. However, war veterans in Pham Van Hai remember that they were physically debilitated even at the time of the battle. H, diagnosed with the after effects of defoliants in 1994, said that he had seen grasses and trees dying and that in the second year as a combatant his eyes became blurry and he felt his body gradually ruined. Y said that when he came out of an ambush one morning, the ground had been covered with the white powder sprayed overnight by the U.S. soldiers and the powder had been white on his combat uniform, but he had thought it was a kind of herbicide. The veterans asserted that “they had not let us know what kind of damage it would do to us” at that time.
War veterans talked about their painful stories of how they managed to find their fellow soldiers with difficulty and yet could not continue to meet them because they were suffering from the after effects of Agent Orange. Although the government began to officially receive reports of the after effects in 1992, the veterans said it was “like a pie in the sky” to be judged to have the after effects of defoliants. Those who joined the trips to the battlefields emphasized that the issue of defoliants was not over and the consequences of the war should be addressed. The “Wol-nam War” does not just become the present in the war veterans’ memory but also the wounds stored in their body testify that the war is not over yet.

War veterans stress the difference of memory between soldiers and officers or between combatants and non-combatants. For example, to the veterans, “genuine war veterans” refer to combatants. They contrast the difference in their discourses in many ways. For example, officers and civilians could learn the Vietnamese language but it was impossible for combatants to learn Vietnamese as they were fully occupied with fighting while staying in the field. They make the contrast between the soldiers who were serving on the battle sites who continue to use the name “Wol-nam” but officers and civilians refer to the country as “Vietnam.”10 H and K said in one voice that genuine trips to battlefields apply to combatants who followed orders at the risk of their lives. Unlike “officers or high-ranking people” who join commercially developed package tours, combatants like them try to visit “genuine battlefields.” Their pilgrimage to the scenes of battle becomes a struggle to declare who is the true actor of remembering, representing, and describing the trauma and glory of the Vietnam War.

To the war veterans in Pham Van Hai, the memoir (2006) by former general Chae Myung-sin was like a dictionary to correct their war memories. The veterans had almost the same arguments as the memoir in many respects, such as the effects of war participation and the protest against the charges of civilian slaughter and Korean soldiers as mercenaries. On the other hand, they point out that the memoir records stories of people “without memories of fear close to death.” Saying that there are almost no stories of combatants at that time; they suggest that the book should have recorded the vivid stories of combatants to be more educational or it should have also recorded in detail even the battles in which Korean forces were defeated. Their assessments in effect argue that the materials used in official histories do not present
in more vivid detail the real experiences of combat soldiers. As such, the process of turning their war memories into discourses reflects the need for the presentation of the collective memory of ordinary soldiers and also their arguments for authenticity. Furthermore, they express their discontent and they protest against other kinds of war memories which do not demonstrate any understanding of the pain of combatants.

From the position of Korean veterans who “crossed the borderline of life and death,” charges of civilian massacres or arguments that they were mercenaries are “non-sense talk” by those who do not know about the war. War veterans resented the fact that for them “their honor was damaged by the groundless suspect of slaughter, which have a negative impact on the next generations.” War veterans protested that the government was largely responsible for their being criticized rather than being justly compensated for the sacrifice of their lives for their fatherland.” They maintained that if the state treated war veterans with due respect, young people would learn a lot from this attitude. They envied the veterans from the United States which has shown respect to war veterans as heroes, those from Australia which have been provided with pensions and those from France whose grandchildren visit their grandfather’s battlefields.

Thinking we were mercenaries, our children are ashamed of us. Although we received allowance for fighting, we were dispatched by the government and we did our sacred duty of military service. The government should take the initiative in solving this issue (O, born in 1945, former Maeng-ho soldier).

Anyway, if the state mobilized us to join the war, it should commemorate what should be remembered and compensate for the wounds. But Korean society does nothing about the after effects of the war. I am indignant at this. I risked my life but they say it was a shameful thing . . . . I demand that the government restore our honor (L, born in 1944, former Cheong-ryong soldier).

Their protests narrated in the context of the field trips include criticism of the government’s attitude toward war veterans, but most of them were strongly influenced by the dominant political ideology prior to the 1990s. Their protests
largely address the dominant discourses and ideologies surrounding the war participation (see Lee Han Woo 2006).

Conclusions

This study has paid attention to the alternative practice of reproducing the memory of war veterans and their trips to battlefields. Those who make official history either promote or oppress a certain kind of memory. Those who experienced a certain historical event inter-subjectively impose meanings on the event amid the interaction with the people with which they form diverse social relationships. The subjective meanings of the same event can be different depending on the particular individuals involved. The problem is that such differences are suppressed in a particular political and social circumstance. Personal history formed by personal experiences and perceptions is often projected retroactively by the conspiracy or persuasion of official history but it also has latent negative and reactive aspects which remain indefinitely (Choi Horim 2008, 113-14). The Vietnam War too is engraved on the memory of those who lived through the war as an unforgettable event or one that should be forgotten.

If individuals’ experiences and memories are related to a state-led ideology, the diversity and difference in them are liable to be ignored or suppressed. Some memories of war are institutionalized as “history,” whereas others remain forgotten, even without being recalled. Some war memories are systematically avoided and forgotten, while other memories are exaggerated and manipulated to politically surface to the forefront of higher level discourses. Until the early 1990s, the most prevalent method of memory in Korean society had been “organized forgetting” (Connerton 1989).

The battlefield travel is a pilgrimage of experienced history to reproduce social identity as well as ritual journeys into memory and transnational leisure activity. By traveling not to the popularized spaces of commercial memory but to their actual former posts or battlefields, war veterans make their own memorial spaces to unfold their struggle of memory. This practice is a reaction to the deprivation occasioned by external forces of their initiative to remember and interpret their own experiences. Whatever the war was, they are the greatest victims but they are prevented from interpreting their war experiences. Therefore, their reconstruction of memories through their
battlefield trips could be a “resistance” to their failure in playing the role of the owner of their own experiences and memories.

They want to become the main players of the memory and reproduction of the war. But their trips are one-time and personal. Therefore, their acts of posting and sharing the stories or descriptions of the trips to the battlefields on the Internet are part of the process of the socialization or social identification of collective [counter-] memories. War veterans attempt to restore and preserve the places of memory through their field trips. The places they try to restore and preserve should be a venue for those memories to be located and concentrated as well as a production site and a field of competition of social memories but their effort still seems to be beset with difficulties.

The history of participation in the Vietnam War is newly interpreted and reconstructed in the transnational cultural topography of Vietnam tourism. Not only the attempt to turn war memories into resources and revitalize the memories which unfold in Korean society today and between Korea and Vietnam centering on the Vietnam War but also the aspect of competition to reproduce memories in the field of war can be understood within the concept of the “politics of memory” or “politics of making memory.” The state still tries to limit the political vitalization of war veterans’ organizations and their political attempt in “making memory.” However, a growing number of war veterans recently began to reproduce their memory through trips to battlefields or their operation of blogs or Websites. This activity has the significance of “reproducing memory” as an alternative political practice. But it is yet to be determined whether this practice will lead to the overcoming of the dominant narratives of memory or the hegemony of “organized forgetting,” and the creation of an alternative history. For the tourism practices of war veterans contain ambiguities situated as they are on the periphery of the dominant memory constructed in the official history of Korean involvement in the Vietnam War.

Notes

*Horim Choi* is a professor at Division of International and Area Studies (DIAS), Pukyong National University, South Korea. He obtained PhD in Anthropology. Email: hrchoivn@hanmail.net; hrchoivn@pknu.ac.kr
1. The dispatch of Korean soldiers to the Vietnam War was carried out as part of the United States’ ‘More Flags Campaign’ announced in April 1964. The first deployment of Korean soldiers was a medical support team with 130 medical soldiers and 10 *Taekwondo* (Korean traditional martial arts) instructors who arrived in Vung Tau in October 1964. A large-scale dispatch was made in February 1965 with the deployment of the *Bidhulghie* (Dove) Unit, which consisted of about 2,000 non-combat engineering and construction soldiers. About 20,000 soldiers of the marine Cheong-ryong (*Blue Dragon*) and army *Maeng-ho* (Brave Tiger) Divisions landed in Qui Nhon and took over the *tactical* areas of operational responsibility from the U.S. in October 1965. *Hyesanjin* Unit formed a combat division in April 1966 and the *Baek-ma* (White Horse) Division landed in the Cam Ranh Gulf in August 1966. The Brave Tiger Division was additionally dispatched in April 1966 and to reinforce military forces, 3,000 soldiers were additionally sent in June 1967 (Source: Patriots and Veterans Affairs Agency; www.vwm.co.kr). Until the withdrawal of the troops in 1973, Korea emerged as the largest dispatching country after the U.S., with 325,517 soldiers, all told. Among them, about 5,000 and 16,000 soldiers respectively returned home, dead or injured. We still have unresolved issues over the Vietnam War such as the veterans’ physical and mental injuries, missing soldiers, and suspects of the civilian massacres, etc.

2. I took the following course for the field trips with Korean veterans in October 2008. 1) Thu Duc bridge in Saigon and barracks of the *Bidulgi* Division on the Dien Bien Phu street, 2) Allied Forces Headquarters in Vietnam on the Ba Thang Hai street, 3) Hexagonal pavilion in Hoa Binh park, Hung Vuong street, 4) Korean Troops Headquarters in Vietnam, Tran Hung Dao street, 5) Rex Hotel, Presidential Palace, etc., 6) Arrive at Cam Ranh Airport, Nha Trang and visit the second generation Koreans (*lai dai han*), 7) the hangar built by Korean troops on the roadside of Nha Trang, 8) the guard post site of Ninh Hoa *Sipjaseong* (Cross) Division (currently Vietnamese military base), 9) Headquarters of the *Baek-ma* Division and the war monument (in the shape of a globe on the head), 10) meet villagers in the old Korean posts, 11) dinner at a restaurant run by a second-generation Korean, 12) *Maeng-ho* Division’s Battlefields in Quy Nhon and Binh Dinh provincial museum (Korea-Vietnam Culture Hall), 13) Cu Chi tunnel, war museum, and 14) War veterans’ barracks in Pham Van Hai.

4. It was known in 1991 for the first time in Korea by an ethnic Korean in Australia that a lot of war veterans suffer from diseases caused by defoliants. In 1992, some war veterans posed the after effects of defoliants as a social problem. In February 1993, the “Act on Supporting Defoliant After effect Suspect Patients” came into effect. By the end of December 2005, a total of 131,910 people had received examination. Of them, 25,723 people (19.5%) were judged to have after effects; 68,046 people (51.6%), after effects suspected; 51 people, belonged to second generation patients; 38,090 people (28.9%) were non-applicable; and 3,557 people were under review (Lee 2006, p. 134).

5. Recently, tourists from the U.S and Korea have increased sharply and over 100,000 tourists from France, Australia, and Thailand steadily visit Vietnam every year. It is noteworthy that all of these countries had directly intervened in the wars in Vietnam over a period of 30 years from 1946 (Choi 2009, p. 279-80).

6. As the United States and Vietnam restored their diplomatic relations, Americans, particularly war veterans returned to Vietnam in large numbers and have since selectively re-americanized the sentiments and landscape of the Vietnam War (Kennedy and Williams 2001, p. 135). The term “Daihan-ization” is an imitation of the term “re-americanization” by the author. The term “Daihan” is a Vietnamese pronunciation for “Daehan” (Republic of Korea), with reference to Korean soldiers by then-South Vietnamese people.

7. Despite the proliferation of diverse groups, Korean Vietnam War veteran groups are mainly divided into three: the Association for Vietnam War Veterans of Merit (Ve-cham), the Association for Wol-nam War Veterans (Wol-cham), and the Association for Veterans Affected by Defoliants (VAD). These groups have dozens of branches divided by city and province. They are all different in composition and political orientation, and in terms of war experiences and the formation of a network of collective memory (Lee 2008, p. 251-252).
8. www.vwm.co.kr is run mostly by former officers and generals with former General Chae Myung-sin as its chairman. This site focuses on the introduction of Korean forces’ achievements in the War, and the development of the Korean economy and society. www.vww.or.kr is the official homepage of Wol-cham registered as a social welfare corporation for war veterans and their families. This site mainly consists of information on the process and result of the war participation and requests for supportive measures for war veterans. This site follows the suit of the state’s public discourses that Korean troops joined the war to protect freedom and contributed to the rapid economic development and modernization of their fatherland. But the site also posts opinions on the after effects of war veterans, criticisms against the unfair treatment of them as “mercenaries,” and arguments for restoration of honor and just compensation. The collective memory of then-officers posted on www.vwm.co.kr is focused on the heroic achievements of the Korean military forces and positive economic influences of the War. By contrast, the experiences of privates revealed on www.vww.or.kr are more precise and demonstrate prolonged memories of the pain when they directly tasted moments of life or death on the battlefields.

9. “Lai dai han” are children of mixed blood born between Korean men and Vietnamese women in the Vietnam War period. They are estimated to be from 3,000 to 30,000 people. “Lai dai han” had not emerged as an issue during the war and the period when there was no exchange between Korea and Vietnam. But in the late 1980s, the issue began to be discussed in earnest (Lee 2006, p. 135).

10. “Wol-nam” is a simple Korean pronunciation of the Chinese name of Viet Nam, but the term has political connotations. Those who emphasize Wol-nam stress that they helped “free Wol-nam” before the country was re-unified; this was not Vietnam. The issue of the name is also directly related to the identity of the two groups, Wol-cham and Ve-cham. War Veterans groups take on the peripheral trait of the state power and the trait of civil society groups as well. Ve-cham is close to the former and Wol-cham to the latter (Lee 2008, p. 261-262).

11. The charge was first raised in 1976 regarding the slaughter of Vietnamese civilians by Korean soldiers. Michael Jones and his wife looked into the brutalities that occurred in the area of the Blue Dragon Unit post and revealed them in 1976. The couple alleged that Korean troops slaughtered about 3,800
civilians in 42 incidents (Hong 1992, p. 34). Among Koreans, Koo Su-jeong, a Vietnam correspondent of the magazine *Hankyoreh 21*, was the first to raise the problem in May 1999. She wrote that, “An incident broke out in Phan Rang, Vietnam, on Oct. 14, 1969, where South Korean soldiers wielded their guns at Buddhist monks of the Linh Son temple” (The Hankyoreh 21, No. 256, May 6, 1999). She also reported that from Jan. 23, 1966 to Feb. 26, 1966, 1,200 residents were slaughtered in Tay Binh, Tay Son district, Binh Dinh province, by the Korean *Maeng-ho* Division (See also, Kwon 2006).

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