Korea's Vietnam:
Popular Culture, Patriarchy, Intertextuality

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As America's closest foreign ally during the Vietnam War, South Korea sent more than 340,000 troops to active combat in central Vietnam over a period of nearly a decade. Motivations for and the aftereffects of Korea's military involvement have been analyzed along the dual axes of economics (developmentalism) and politics (anti-communism), but South Korea's involvement remains a matter of both shame and vainglory in popular memory today. At times reviled as no more than a species of government-authorized male prostitution and at other times celebrated as an example of Korean "toughness" and "ingenuity" on and off the battlefield, Korea's Vietnam offers a fascinating intertext to the trauma of America's Vietnam. This paper focuses on constructions of masculinity in representations of the Vietnam War in South Korean popular culture and identifies the latter as a site both of patriarchal alliance between the nation and the family, and of the dissolution of that alliance. Special attention will be paid to gendered revisions of Korea's Vietnam found in two recent films, *R-Point* (2004) and *Sunny* (2008).

Keywords: Vietnam War, popular culture, music, intertextuality, masculinization, nation, family, developmentalism, anti-communism, patriarchy, *R-Point, Sunny*

Korea's "Un-traumatic" Vietnam

A striking difference that emerges when one compares certain iconic representations of the Vietnam War veterans in Hollywood with their counterparts in Chungmuro concerns the theme of masculinization. In films as divergent in style and outlook as Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), and Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of*

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July (1989), the continuing and irresolvable trauma of the Vietnam War manifests itself on the bodies of American veterans as a form of emasculation. Key scenes in these works feature a veteran bound to a wheelchair who must suffer the despair of a failed sexual encounter. Coming back from Vietnam as "damaged goods," these men are portrayed as having difficulty functioning as men, both literally and figuratively. Even in cases where veterans are not physically marked with missing limbs or complications arising from exposure to Agent Orange, psychological problems riddle them, caused by post-traumatic stress syndrome and the shame and self-hate of having participated in a morally unjustifiable war. Widespread images of Vietnam War veterans as homeless drug addicts, alcoholics, and even psychopaths, made famous by films like *Taxi Driver* (1976), highlight the way Vietnam has been seen as an ordeal that incapacitates men from re-entering civilian life and becoming "productive" members of society. While these negative images did undergo some revision in Hollywood in the eighties, giving birth to the "veteran as superman" stereotype popularized by the likes of Chuck Norris and Mr. T, they still maintained much of their sharp anti-social and anti-government edge (Cawley 1990:71).[1] Even in Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood* (1982), a film that solidified Sylvester Stallone's tough guy image as the impossibly muscular and hyper-masculine Rambo, a highly decorated Vietnam War veteran erupts in a violent rage only after suffering a series of humiliations at the hands of "ungrateful" fellow Americans and the law enforcement steeped in negative stereotypes of Vietnam War veterans as "drifters," "social outcasts," and "criminals in the making."

In contrast, the stock image of the Vietnam War veteran in South Korean popular culture has been the high school military drill sergeant or gym teacher whose tales of "heroic feats" in Vietnam have the effect of greatly enhancing his manhood, and with it, his social power and authority. While the best known and most acclaimed of the few Vietnam War films of feature length that have been produced in Korea over the years may be Jeong Jiyeong's *White Badge* (1991), which takes a critical look at Korea's Vietnam in a manner reminiscent of American antiwar films, a much more pervasive image of the vet is the kind featured in passing in Yu Ha's "Once Upon a Time in High School" (*Maljuk-geori janhoksa,* 2004). In this film, the Vietnam vet is the drill sergeant who

1. Leo Cawley identifies the "myth of the solitary combatant" in these films and argues that the hero almost always goes into the fight alone, having to battle not only the enemy but bureaucracies and prejudices in their own corrupt government and society.

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routinely regales the students with tales of how many VC he has killed and how viciously he has killed them, all the while enforcing corporal punishment on his own students. In these proud, boastful reproductions of the legendary ROK military action, the kind that ended in maximum kill ratios which the better-equipped U.S. Forces could far from outdo, let alone match, the focus is on the "manly culture" (*sanai munhwa*) of Korea's Vietnam.[2] If, as Seungsook Moon has argued, modern nation-building in post-Liberation South Korea has relied on the "paradoxical relationship between physical force and the subjectivity of citizens," Vietnam provided an exemplary international stage where Korean men proved themselves "dutiful nationals" by excelling in their execution of organized institutional violence (Moon 2005:142). Even in American military reports, the individual ROK soldier has been consistently described as "tough, aggressive, well-disciplined, patient, persistent, and thorough... the epitome of a soldier, almost faultless" (Rasmussen 1968:54). Likening the Vietnam War to an orchestra where one or another of instruments may need to be emphasized at different times, General Creighton Abrams testified that the Koreans played one instrument and one instrument only—the bass drum (Larsen 1985:153).

Such representations give us an insight into why the war that ended in a military and moral defeat "so intolerable that it has been repressed in our political unconscious" in the U.S. has been received relatively free of trauma in a country that was, after all, America's most trusted ally throughout the war effort (Higashi 1990:179). Far from rendering men disillusioned with their government, compromised as sexual partners, and ostracized from society, Korea's Vietnam had a particular way of being narrated as the experience that helped generate men who were productive under all of the three dominant ideological categories structuring the Park Chung Hee era: anti-communist nationalism, nationalist developmentalism, and patriarchal familism. Of course, this does not mean that there were no South Korean veterans who returned disabled from Vietnam. Not only were there over 10,000 men wounded in action, tens of thousands of veterans continue to suffer from the aftereffects of exposure to Agent Orange even today. What it does mean is that their plight

2. A storied operation in this regard was Operation Ojakkyo I, conducted in spring of 1967 jointly by ROK's White Horse and Flying Tiger Divisions in Phu Yen Province. Sustaining only 23 fatalities on their side, ROK Forces managed to kill 831 enemies, receive 234 defectors, and capture 659 weapons (Rasmussen 1968:54). A different U.S. military publication gives the higher figure of 940 as the number of enemies killed by the ROK operation.

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failed to enter the arena of popular imagination, that a particular kind of amnesia was practiced for at least two decades following the end of the Vietnam War which made the stories of these men largely unnarratable. As would be expected of an authoritarian era, active government censorship had a role to play in silencing these voices, but even more powerful may have been a social mechanism at work which made these stories uninteresting, even to the victims themselves. I argue that a much more "interesting" story was unfolding; the people's imagination was captured by what, starting in the late 1960s, began to be called the "Vietnam Boom." This paper, asks how this story came about through an examination of a number of popular cultural texts.

It is generally the case that the hidden mechanisms at work in constructing any seamless social text become visible only after the seams have begun to unravel. So it is that the mechanism of what I call "triple alliance" among the three ideologies of Korea's Vietnam avails itself fully to analysis only after that alliance has begun to fall apart. Perhaps as a symptom of this disintegration, the Vietnam War has returned, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as an important plot element for a number of South Korean feature films ranging in genre from melodrama (*The Classic,* 2002) to sci-fi adventure (*R.U. Ready?*, 2002), and even serves as the backdrop to a popular music video (Jo Seongmo's mega-hit, "Do You Know?"). More serious second-takes of Korea's Vietnam, however, are to be found in two very recent films of note: *R-Point* (2004) directed by Gong Suchang and *Sunny* (*Nim eun meon gose,* 2008) directed by Yi Junik. *R-Point* is a horror film about retribution exacted upon a Korean squad by ghosts of the Vietnamese war dead. *Sunny* tells the highly improbable tale of a woman who becomes an entertainer in order to track down her husband who has been deployed to Vietnam. As becomes obvious even in such a short description, neither plot is "realistic" in any strict sense. While both films are highly critical of the war, neither is interested in establishing gritty, unglossed accounts of "what really happened" in Vietnam or unearthing previously untold stories of pain and suffering arising from the war in the manner of Hollywood's best antiwar films.[3] Even though both films take place in war-era Vietnam , the revisions they offer are not of what happened in Vietnam per se but of how

3. I have in mind Sidney Furie's *The Boys in Company C* (1978), Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartan*s (1978), and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). For the second type of antiwar film dealing with the painful reality of the return home for Vietnam veterans, the most famous example would be Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978).

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Korea's Vietnam has been constructed as an "un-traumatic" experience back home and woven into the fabric of the developmentalist discourse. In this regard, both films may be read as intertexts that build upon, or radically turn on their heads, the existing narratives of Korea's Vietnam buttressed by years of private and public myth-making. Achieving these revisions by foregrounding dual subtexts of gender and colonialism, *R-Point* and *Sunny* portray on screen the disintegration of the triple alliance of anti-communism, developmentalism, and patriarchy. As commentaries on Korea's Vietnam, the two films also comment on how these film texts are critically implicated in the growingly virulent political struggle in South Korea today over the memory of the entire Park Chung Hee era.

Locus Classicus: "Sergeant Kim's Return from Vietnam"

In his article "Between Memory and Oblivion: The Dispatch of Korean Combat Troops to Vietnam," Bak Taegyun argues that more than three decades after the withdrawal of the last of Korean forces from Vietnam, the causes and effects of that involvement still remain veiled in a cloud of false or selected memories (Bak 2007:288-311). In these memories, the Vietnam War is associated less with conventional horrors of war—dismembered bodies, cries of freshly orphaned infants, lives of young soldiers nipped in the bud or their bodies maimed forever—than with money. Indeed, much has been made of the economic side of Korea's Vietnam. The oft-cited "Brown Memorandum" set the price tag for direct U.S. payments to Korea at one billion dollars just for the years between 1965 and 1970, a good part of which the Park regime is believed to have channeled toward laying the infrastructure necessary to jumpstart rapid industrialization (Woo 1990:86). Indeed, it has become commonplace for Vietnam veterans to claim that Gyeongbu Freeway, the all important highway connecting Busan and Seoul, was laid with their own blood, sweat, and tears.[4] In addition, large numbers of Korean laborers found jobs in American corporations carrying out military-support contracts, and several of the best known Korean companies such as Hyundai and Hanjin started on their way to becoming

4. In an interesting recent development, a Christian group called Association for Korea-Vietnam Cooperation has declared July 7th, the day Gyeongbu Freeway first opened to the public, as "Vietnamese Day."

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leading conglomerates with American contracts in and exports to Vietnam. Despite the general scholarly agreement on the importance of the impact of the Vietnam War on the fledgling South Korean economy, Bak Taegyun argues that the equation of the Vietnam War with money tends to create a kind of amnesia that complicates the task of accurately assessing the Vietnam War's place in Korean history. For Bak, portrayals of the war in popular culture are chiefly to blame for the perpetuation of these highly selective memories. Bak singles out "Sergeant Kim's Return from Vietnam," a 1969 chart-topper written by Shin Junghyeon and sung by the eternally iconoclastic Kim Chuja, as reinforcing the link between the Vietnam War and money in popular memory.

In the way that the song charts the emergence of a masculine subject at the intersection of nationalist and patriarchal ideologies, "Sergeant Kim's Return from Vietnam" serves as the *locus classicus* for our analysis of more recent film texts as well. The following is a translation of the complete lyrics:

> Black-faced Sergeant Kim back from Vietnam,
> returning after so long.
> Black-faced Sergeant Kim back from Vietnam,
> how I have waited for him.
> That firmly closed mouth, that heavy metal helmet,
> he's come back with a smile.
> Young sibling welcomes him, rushes into his arms,
> followed by everyone else.
>
> Young Kim the Troublemaker, people used to say;
> with a medal of honor hanging from his chest,
> how dignified First Sergeant Kim is now.
>
> All the villagers mill around,
> just to see his face.
> His mother dances,
> the whole village celebrates.
> First Sergeant Kim, so pleased with himself,
> he has claimed my heart.
> First Sergeant Kim so trustworthy,
> he has claimed my heart.

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The tale that the song tells is a simple one. Young Kim the Troublemaker comes back from Vietnam as First Sergeant Kim, now sporting physical emblems of toughness like black skin and a firmly closed mouth. He wins the heart of a young maiden from his village, and the song ends on a happy note, presaging a marriage to follow. Though simple, the text is rich in allusions to social context contained in the details. First, Sergeant Kim's rank, the highest attainable by a non-commissioned officer, combined with his black face, suggests a particularly lengthy and successful tour of duty in the fields of Vietnam. Upon his return, Sergeant Kim's young sibling rushes into his arms, and the significant age gap thus suggested between the siblings makes one surmise that Sergeant Kim may be the eldest child in the family. Sergeant Kim's mother dances with joy, making the absence of Sergeant Kim's father all the more glaring; it is likely that Sergeant Kim, like so many young men of his generation, is the male head of his family. The problem, noted musically by the switch to a minor chord in the second stanza, is that as Young Kim the Troublemaker was not yet Sergeant Kim, he was unable to take on the role of the patriarch demanded of him. Here, at the risk of over-reading, we might also ask what turns young men into troublemakers, and draw a link to lack of economic opportunities and the high rate of poverty that marked life in rural Korean communities in the early days of the rush toward industrialization. Sergeant Kim's return is also an occasion for the village to celebrate. What makes the crowd mill about Sergeant Kim may not simply be the fact that he has been to a foreign land and back, but that he has brought back with him material traces of his contact with a developed nation—a "return box" containing empty cartridges, perhaps a camera, record-player, television, maybe even a refrigerator, as was customary for Korean troops returning from Vietnam. Answering the call of the nation thus turns an unruly young man into a marriageable partner.

Extra-textually, the song does suggest some fragmentations. We might read a degree of ambivalence, for example, in the song's musical indebtedness to Jefferson Airplane and the antiwar politics of the West Coast Rock movement by extension. We can also point to the iconoclasm of Kim Chuja as a woman who owns her own sexuality, and the clash between the suggestive gyrations of her performance and the overtly patriarchal message of the song. The latter is an issue we will revisit in our analysis of the film text of *Sunny*.

In the final analysis, however, the song remains univocal and stages the perfect marriage of the twin state ideologies of nationalism and developmentalism in the recoding of Sergeant Kim as the proper patriarch and

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the masculine symbol of his time: filial son, responsible elder brother, and by the end of the song, someone who is poised to become the perfect husband and father as well. An individual's aspiration to escape poverty, establish a stable life for his family, and climb up the social ladder—the universal dream for South Korea, especially during the poverty-stricken postwar decades of the 1960s and 70s—gets harnessed to the state discourse of anti-communist authoritarianism and rapid industrialization in a powerful way. The song thus offers an archetypal construction of how Korea's Vietnam was disseminated, not only through government campaigns, but through popular culture as well, and presents a textbook case of what happens to patriarchal ideology when it is baptized by the nationalist rhetoric of a developmentalist state.

The superimposition of the patriarchal ideal onto the figure of the Vietnam War veteran continues in the eponymous film produced two years later. *Sergeant Kim's Return from Vietnam,* directed by Yi Seonggu, sketches the trials and travails of Vietnam veterans struggling to readjust to civilian life upon their return home. Rather than present veterans struggling with the plight of emasculation as in Hollywood films of the kind, the film keeps intact the image of Vietnam veterans as dutiful sons and responsible fathers. With the actor Shin Yeonggyun in the lead role, the film harnesses Shin's virile image to tell the story of a veteran who takes up the responsibility not only for his own family but for the widow and children of his dead comrade as well. At the end of the film, Shin's character marries his comrade's widow and establishes the economic foundation for building his own family by becoming the head of his own construction company, no less.[5] Even more interesting, however, is the way the film treats a veteran's disability. Jinyeong loses his arm in Vietnam and with it, his dream of becoming a concert pianist. Though devastating for Jinyeong, the loss of limb kills a selfish, romantic, and slightly effeminate desire, allowing him to emerge at the end of the film as a skilled cog in Korea's industrial revolution. Played by Kim Hira, another actor whose impressive physique symbolized male virility for the generation, Jinyeong's disability becomes not the painful loss that ruptures the fantasy of male power but the necessary rite of passage that

5. The choice of construction company is not accidental, either for the character or the film. The detail alludes to the very real link that exists between the Vietnam War and the explosive growth of the construction industry. On the heels of the "Vietnam Boom" came the "Middle East Boom," as one Korean construction company after another landed lucrative contracts in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Libya, and other oil-producing nations (Jo 1988:229-65).

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prepares an errant individualist for his role in society and makes him, for the first time, properly male. Once again, Young Kim the Troublemaker has become Black-Faced Sergeant Kim; it goes without saying that what lies between the two is Korea's Vietnam.

Ghostly Enemies and Gendered Retribution: *R-Point*

It is this equation between institutionalized exercise of violence in Korea's Vietnam and gendered construction of dutiful national and responsible patriarch that undergoes an ingenious revision in *R-Point.* The film opened to respectable reviews and box office numbers late in the summer of 2004. Audiences expecting the usual summer horror fare were surprised to find a historical critique of considerable weight in between the suspense and gore, until they were reminded that the film represented the directorial debut for the screenwriter of *White Badge* and *On the Eve of the Strike* (*Paeop jeonya,* 1990). A former member of *Jangsangotmae,* an underground collective of radical filmmakers dedicated to democratization and social change during the era of authoritarian rule in South Korea, Gong Suchang honed his skills in writing a psychological thriller with the star-studded and critically panned *Tell Me Something* (2000).

R-Point, which revisits Korea's Vietnam in the horror genre for the first time, relies on a ghost tale to strip the outer layer of institutionalization from the violence committed by the South Korean military against the Vietnamese so that ethical questions can be brought to the surface.[6] The film begins with a creepy radio transfer from a soldier in the South Korean squad supposed to have been lost in action deep in central Vietnam. The inexplicable event initiates a top-secret search mission, but the mission goes ominously awry from the start when the soldiers kill a young female guerilla in a panicked episode. On the way to R-Point, they also come across an epitaph containing a curse fraught with foreshadowing: "Those with blood on their hands will never return to their homeland." The curse comes true in the sense that all of the men in the squad

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6. My reading parts ways with the view held by some critics that because *R-Point* is a horror movie, it cannot be categorized as a film about the Vietnam War per se. Remarking on the scarcity of Vietnam War related films in Korea, Bak Jinim argues that only *The White Badge* could be considered a serious effort to examine the Vietnam War cinematically prior to the release of *Sunny* in 2008 (Bak 2008:617).

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except for one meet a ghastly death at R-Point, killed by gunshots fired by one another in a moment of abject fear and derangement brought on by what they believe to be repeated encounters with the ghosts of the war dead.

Read allegorically, the presence of ghosts in *R-Point* debunks the narrative of moral imperative in which Korea's Vietnam had been cloaked for decades. As Charles Armstrong has observed, the justification for Korea's enthusiastic response to Lyndon B. Johnson's call for "More Flags" in Vietnam had always been couched in terms of "a noble defense of freedom against communist aggression, welcomed by the South Vietnamese" (Armstrong 2001:531). As early as 1965, Park Chung Hee exhorted South Korean soldiers fighting in Vietnam to view themselves as patriotic pioneers who would herald a brilliant new chapter in Korea's history as they help protect the "allies of the free world" (*jayu ubang*) from the spread of communism. "With the deployment of our troops to Vietnam," Park announced, "we have become a nation that provides aid to other nations.... We have left behind our past as an aid-receiving nation and are now poised at the cusp of creating a new glorious history" (Han 2003:300). The speech invoked the memory of the Korean War in order to legitimate South Korean involvement in Vietnam as a case of settling an old debt (to the U.S.) and gaining international respect by becoming a nation that no longer receives aid but offers it (to less fortunate Asian brethren). Deriving its particular rhetorical force by mixing equal doses of national shame and national pride, such state-led and news media-supported accounts of Korea's Vietnam remained largely unchallenged through the subsequent regimes of Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, two former military generals who had also served as field commanders in Vietnam.

For the hapless group of young men who find themselves pointing guns at one another at R-Point, however, there are no communist enemies to fight and no welcoming South Vietnamese to save. There is only the harrowing sight of a gutted building which had once housed wealthy French colonialists on vacation. The South Korean squad's mission, doomed to fail from the start, inserts the men into a colonial narrative that long predates them. At R-Point, a historical site that bears witness to Vietnam's encounter with the imperial ambitions of the French, then the Chinese, and finally the Americans, South Korean men are forced to pay the price with their lives for the part they play in the perpetuation of the violence they themselves did not originally author. The retribution meted out to them by their ghostly enemies gives the lie to the ideological rhetoric of the Park era and establishes South Koreans as "America's mercenaries and a

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foreign power intervening in a war of national liberation the Vietnamese were waging against the U.S." (Kang 2008: 418).

Lest the men be portrayed simply as innocent pawns forced to fight another's war, the film implicates the South Korean soldiers' guilt at another level, namely, their exercise of violence against women. In fact, a highly significant but often overlooked detail about the film is the gendered nature of justice and revenge since the film establishes at the start that the blood the men have on their hands is unequivocally female. As already discussed, the South Korean squad's mission begins with the killing of a young female guerrilla. Even before this particular scene unfolds, however, a different inflection to their participation in gendered violence is given when it is revealed that the men end up being deployed on the mission because they have failed the mandatory test for sexually transmitted diseases administered to the soldiers before they are given permission to return home. The opening sequence of the film finds the protagonist, soon to be made the leader of the doomed search squad, in a seedy Saigon brothel, shooting down a woman who had killed his fellow Korean soldier in the act of having sex. The sexual context that provides the prerequisite condition for the men's entrance into the difficult mission to R-Point thus suggests that the "blood on their hands" does not simply refer to the number of "enemy lives" they had taken down in action. It also refers to an entire range of sexual activity from rape to prostitution to abandonment of Vietnamese common-law wives and children that formed the off-the-battlefield reality for so many soldiers, the same reality that would be shuffled to the category of the forgotten once the men cleared the mandatory STD test and came home to a hero's welcome. In the figure of the female ghost who comes back to deliver her brand of justice to the men at R-Point, Gong Suchang's film reminds us that the black skin and firmly closed mouth of Sergeant Kim—those attributes of masculine strength that mark him as a desirable sexual partner and reliable marriage partner—may also hide unspeakable tales of gendered violence.

Not surprisingly, then, the only soldier of the squad to make it out of R-Point alive is Sergeant Jang, an eighteen-year-old virgin who joins the accursed mission after selling his medical clearance to an infected soldier for fifty dollars. He escapes the gendered retribution that befalls his older comrades because, as a virgin, he is literally the only one in the film who does not have the blood of a woman on his hands. And yet, even he will not return home scot-free. Blinded during the climactic scene that kills off all of his comrades—and makes his military identification tag disappear to boot—Sergeant Jang faces an uncertain

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future and even more uncertain marriage prospects at home. As the tearful eighteen-year-old calls out for his mother in utter fear and loneliness at the very end of the film, he seems a forlorn child at the edge of a precipice and further than ever from the manly image of triumphal Sergeant Kim.

In fact, Sergeant Jang's life story may be seen as a clever intertext to "Sergeant Kim's Return from Vietnam," since the primary motivation behind Sergeant Jang's every act is his desire to support his family. With the fifty dollars he makes from selling his medical clearance, Sergeant Jang plans to buy a cow for his mother back home. As in the popular song, the prominence of the mother and even more prominent absence of the father suggests that the mother may be a widow whose very existence becomes a reminder to her son to take up the patriarchal role as early and as thoroughly as he can. But unlike Sergeant Kim of the song, Sergeant Jang is a younger brother who steals away in the middle of the night with the draft notice meant for his older brother. In other words, Sergeant Jang is not himself the head of the family, but his act of sacrifice allows that position to be preserved intact. Thus *R-Point* tells the story of what would have happened had the younger brother who rushes into Sergeant Kim's arms in Shin Junghyeon's song been the one to go to Vietnam in the first place. Throughout the film, Sergeant Jang remains a doe-eyed kid whose face remains pale to the end.

In drawing attention to a hidden dimension of gendered violence at the very heart of Korea's Vietnam, *R-Point* thus deals a heavy blow to the triple ideological alliance that had sustained narratives of the war as justifiable moral (*myeongbun*) and profitable in practical terms (*shilli*). The ideology of anti-communism falls away from view as simply irrelevant. Nor does the war turn boys into men and deposit them back at the homeland's shores, willing and able to take up the arduous but "noble" task of buttressing the nation's economy while shouldering the family's livelihood. At the end of *R-Point,* the promise of Sergeant Kim is nowhere in sight.

The Battlefront as the Homefront: *Sunny*

Yi Junik's *Sunny* turns the masculinization of Korea's Vietnam on its head in an even more dramatic fashion by presenting the battlefields of Vietnam as the backdrop for a woman's, rather than man's, emergence into subjectivity. As the film opens, we hear a disembodied voice of a young woman singing as the

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camera pans a peaceful bucolic setting with reeds rustling in the wind and rolling hills enfolding rice paddies in their bosoms. The camera then zooms in until it comes to rest on the face of a young country woman named Suni. Her eyes closed, she sings a gentle, quiet melody warning a lover to come back to her before it's too late, though her audience consists only of a couple of older women taking a break from farming. The peaceful scene comes to an abrupt end with the appearance of the young woman's mother-in-law, who scolds Suni for engaging in something as frivolous as singing when her husband is away, serving in the military. The bucolic setting loses its reedy, wind-swept romance as we discover that, for Suni, the village is the site of her subjugation to patriarchal ideology, both personified in theory and enforced every day by her overbearing mother-in-law. Trapped in an arranged marriage to a college boy with "modern notions" who would rather "escape" to the military than submit to a rural life with a wife he did not choose, Suni leads an existence that is little better than that of an indentured servant.

Indeed, patriarchal ideology and the emphasis on the family are posited from the start as oppressive constraints on individuals' desires rather than as a noble calling that functions to justify ethically dubious acts of violence committed by Korean men in Vietnam.[7] For Sanggil, Suni's husband, as well, family is an extremely oppressive entity that forces him to give up his love choice. The love choice is also imbued with the possibility of living otherwise as a college-educated modern individual capable of authoring and executing his own desires rather than serving first and foremost as a representative of the extended family line. Sanggil's resistance to patriarchal ideology can only take shape in an exceedingly passive fashion as an escape. Too busy nursing his own wounds, however, Sanggil fails to realize that his own act of passive resistance further victimizes Suni, who must then bear the brunt of responsibility, as well as the mother-in-law's anger, for failing to produce an heir to continue the family line.

In *Sunny,* Korea's Vietnam thus takes place in a context remarkably stripped of all national or political significance. For Sanggil, as we saw, the deployment to Vietnam has nothing to do with either the moral imperative or the profit motive, but occurs as an accidental result of his foiled love—an exceedingly private affair indeed. In an even more dramatic way, the Vietnam War is initially

7. In this regard, *Sunny* provides an interesting contrast to *R-Point* where filial piety buys Sergeant Jang a new lease on life.

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presented simply as the backdrop for the family drama unfolding in the film, rather than as a national event in its own right capable of capturing the imagination of every Korean living through the period. Suni and her mother-in-law live in the remote countryside where people seem beyond the call of the national campaign and untouched by the "Vietnam Boom." Sanggil's mother, for example, is surprised to hear that her son has been deployed to the warfront. Even after hearing the news, she continues to think of Vietnam as she might a neighboring village—a place where she can go to visit her son and set in motion the all-important task of securing a family heir. She insists that Suni track down her husband somehow on the battlefields of Vietnam, find a way to sleep with him even while the war rages on, and manage to come back with his "seed" so that the family name could be carried on. It is her singular insistence on the duty to the patriarchy that forces Suni to take the improbable journey to Vietnam as a female entertainer to the troops. She is accompanied on her journey by an out-of-luck rock band seeking a change in their fortune in the chaotic cauldron that was wartime Vietnam.

The rest of the film traces the journey that transforms Suni into Sunny. It is a journey that takes a shy virgin and turns her into a performer who sells her sexual charms to men far away from home; in a key scene she even sells her body to an American field commander in order to get his permission for her to enter Hoi An, an area under VC control in which her husband is presumed to have been lost. Suni's desperate attempt to escape the opprobrium of her mother-in-law's ultra-patriarchal demand takes the paradoxical form of following that demand literally, but the process turns into an awakening of sorts for Suni and leads to an awareness of her own gendered subjectivity. Her dogged adherence to the impossible mission of finding her husband on the battlefield, even if she has to sell herself sexually in the process, may be seen as an act of subjectification so that at the end of the film when she finally succeeds in demanding justice from her husband face to face on the battlefield, Sunny emerges ennobled. In the final scene when tearful Sanggil kneels in front of Suni in a posture of penance amid the deafening noise of bombs and gunfire, the Vietnam War recedes and becomes strictly the backdrop for the domestic confrontation between a wronged woman and her husband. In the process of embracing the subjugation that thrusts her into a foreign world full of untold dangers, Suni paradoxically achieves subjectification, though not liberation. It is this ambiguity which makes the film so fascinatingly problematic from a specifically feminist perspective.

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In rewriting Korea's Vietnam as a profoundly domestic drama, one that could not realistically have taken place anyway, *Sunny* strips the historical experience of its ideological aura. The war is largely irrelevant not only for Suni, but for the musicians with whom Suni travels. Musicians who have become jaded and cynical after years of playing commercially in U.S. camp towns around Korea, these are men looking for a break and a fast buck in Vietnam, and as such, are driven entirely by the profit motive, at least until Suni's single-minded adherence to her goal of finding her husband changes them. They are willing to perform for Americans, Koreans, and even the Vietcong for the right price. In a particularly telling scene, the musicians take advantage of battlefield mayhem to steal a truckload of expensive military supplies from a Korean military installation and plan to sell them in Saigon's black market to the highest bidder, even if such a sale would ultimately end up outfitting the VC or North Vietnamese. The film further suggests that in pursuing the profit motive only, the musicians are only an extreme version of the Korean military in Vietnam as a whole. When the band members are captured by a VC unit and beg for their lives by protesting that they are "just here to make money," the VC unit commander chillingly replies that in that pursuit of profit they are no different from their fellow Koreans in uniform.

Ironically, the political context initially evacuated from the rewriting of Korea's Vietnam as a domestic drama returns in the film's use of musical intertextuality. Parallel to the plot of a woman's journey and subjectification is the story of a musical genre's evolution. In some ways, popular music deserves as much of the center stage as any of the characters. *Sunny* participates in the nostalgia for the 70s' popular culture that recently swept through South Korean cinema, television, and music.[8]

The soundtrack of *Sunny* consists almost entirely of popular songs composed by the legendary "Godfather of Korean Rock" Shin Junghyeon and sung by the charismatic female singer Kim Chuja. The title of the film itself derives from Kim Chuja's popular hit, and throughout the film, the emotions that Suni cannot verbalize into words are expressed through the vehicle of the song. "First Sergeant Kim Back from Vietnam" is again the *locus classicus* as Suni's performance becomes a musical intertext: the overlapping of the particular

8. Notable examples include films like *Go Go 70s,* television serials such as *East of Eden* and *Fashion 70s*, and the retro-style music videos of Wonder Girls' "Nobody" and Eum Jeonghwa's "Disco."

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performance that Suni gives of the song in the context of the revision that the film offers of the Vietnam War onto the original performance makes visible important ambiguities in this seemingly perfect text of nationalist and masculine interpellation. Throughout the film, in fact, it is musical intertextuality, this kind of layering upon layering of performance upon performance, that becomes the site of many of the ambivalences of Korea's Vietnam: Korean psychedelic rock as the medium for Korean soldiers' cathartic gyrations, Korean pop songs as sung by the South Korean captives that melts the heart of a North Vietnamese guerrilla leader, familiarity with songs like "Danny Boy" and "The Star-Spangled Banner" as the marker of the Korean difference from the VC. But it is in Suni's repeated performances of "Susie Q" that the film achieves its sharpest political critique.[9]

The performance of "Susie Q" occurs three times in *Sunny* and each performance is pivotal. The first occurs on the ship to Vietnam when the bandleader orders his drummer to teach Suni the song in preparation for the concerts they will be performing in Vietnam for American G.I.s. "Susie Q" is thus the first American song that Suni encounters. With its strong, syncopated rhythm and one of the most recognizable guitar riffs in the history of rock, "Susie Q" serves initially as the marker of American difference for wide-eyed Suni. The song is also a vehicle for alluding to the history of Korean rock, a musical genre born and popularized in the shadows of the U.S. occupation in postwar Korea.

The second performance is an aborted one that takes place as Sunny makes her debut in Vietnam. In front of raucous and expectant U.S. troops gathered in a club in Saigon, nervous Sunny attempts to squeak through a performance of "Susie Q" but is booed off the stage after managing to deliver only a couple of lines. The disastrous performance causes the bandleader to decide on a change of direction. Instead of entertaining American troops, Suni and the band will focus on Korean troops and perform Korean songs instead. The final performance of "Susie Q" comes toward the end of the film when Suni, seasoned by numerous twists and turns she has experienced since leaving home, performs at an American base in the front lines of the war effort in central

9. The choice of "Susie Q" will evoke cultural nostalgia for Koreans who have lived through the 1970s and 80s in yet another way. The song was the soundtrack for the signature comedy routine of Yi Juil. Yi, who died in 2002, was the greatest Korean comedian of his time, perhaps of the entire twentieth century.

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Vietnam. No longer the shy country cousin, Sunny, now in a sexy outfit and smoky make-up to match, delivers a desperate and emotionally raw performance of the song. She swigs down an entire bottle of tequila, and invites American G.I.s on the stage to rub skin with her and stuff wads of dollar bills into her bra. In the unfolding of the film's narrative, each repetition of "Susie Q" is designed to punctuate the different stages of Suni's journey.

As the soundtrack of both Suni's botched initial performance and her harrowingly mature final performance in front of American soldiers, "Susie Q" is a musical intertext that alludes to a famous scene in Francis Coppola's "Apocalypse Now." In this scene, a group of Playboy playmates are flown into Vietnam on a military chopper to provide some adult entertainment to the servicemen and to boost their morale by "extending a touch of home." The Playboy playmates are introduced in a dramatic fashion one by one as "Miss July," "Miss August," "Playmate of the Year," etc., as they descend from the helicopter. Once on the stage, the playmates begin gyrating in lurid ways to the blaring music of "Susie Q" and the frenzied cheering of the soldiers. The event, however, ends in disaster as the excited troops mob the stage, each man trying to get a piece of his own playmate action, until the host of the show is forced to evacuate the girls by throwing smoke bombs at the soldiers. The scene, laced with Martin Sheen's internal monologue, develops a truly surreal quality and contributes to the sense of absurdity that Coppola's film builds up, scene after scene. A touch of home gone sour in this particular rendition of "Susie Q" attests to the collective madness that descends upon everyone in the apocalypse of the Vietnam War.

In contrast, the musical intertext of "Susie Q" in *Sunny* functions more specifically to highlight the imperial dynamics at work in Korea's Vietnam. The botched performance at the beginning and the successful one at the end frame the relatively happy middle space of Suni's journey when she finds some degree of satisfaction performing for Korean, not American, troops. Because of her horrific failure at the beginning, Suni's successful performance in front of Korean soldiers is met with a great sense of relief by her band members and by the audience as well. Furthermore, the sexually aggressive behavior of the American soldiers in the final performance of "Susie Q," which sets up Suni's loss of virginity to the American commander retroactively confers an aura of familial security to Suni's performances in front of Korean soldiers. The sexual content of her performances to Korean troops gets bleached out as an atmosphere of family celebration predominates. The family logic continues in

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the reactions of Suni's band members. As Suni peddles her sexual charms to American G.I.s in her performance of "Susie Q," her band members maintain steely expressions, as though they have been forced into complicity in the prostitution of their own sister. After the performance, the men burn the money they made during the concert. Emasculated by the imperial power structure within which they live, the men can resist American hegemony only passively through the symbolic gesture of refusing to lap up the crumbs scattered at the master's table. It is clear, however, that theirs is a resistance fated to futility from the start since the act of defiance will go unnoticed by the Americans themselves.

Here then we see the return of the political context that had seemed foreclosed from the domestic tale unfolding at the start of the film. "Susie Q," the soundtrack for the commodification of women and absurdity of war in America's Vietnam of *Apocalypse Now,* becomes in *Sunny* the soundtrack for the history of the asymmetrical power relationship between the U.S. and R.O.K. By emphasizing this history, *Sunny* suggests that the asymmetry of power so painfully visible to every Korean who comes into contact with an American on and off the battlefields in Vietnam is the dark unavowable truth at the heart of all the loud celebrations of the two countries' bilateral "alliance."

In making such an argument, I side with the director's own account of what he sought to accomplish in *Sunny,* against some feminist critiques of the film. In a 2008 interview with Screen magazine, Yi Junik described *Sunny* as "herstory coming to the rescue of the twentieth century's history" (Yi 2008:114), and commented that the film was born of the desire to wrest Korea's Vietnam from the dominant male- and U.S.-centered perspectives. For several critics, however, *Sunny* is a film that accomplishes precisely the opposite effect. One critic has gone so far as to pan *Sunny* as a film that "a man in his fifties goes alone to watch" (Bak 2008:618). *Sunny* is neither historical nor feminist, but nostalgic, where nostalgia serves as a handmaiden to amnesia: "*Sunny* fails to delve into any one of these questions. It stops at being a mere music film, an entertainment flick where the focus is on remembering the bygone days through the combination of black-and-white photo images and the songs of Kim Chuja" (Bak 2008:620). For Bak, the adoption of a woman's perspective in the film is superficial at best and frivolous at worst; the improbable plot detracts from the historical seriousness of the matter and turns the heroine into an object of nostalgic desire for all the male fifty-somethings who would be watching the film by themselves. The prominence of music in the film only furthers the

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entertainment value. Though a powerful vehicle of memory, the music of the 1970s used throughout the film delivers pleasure without pain, memory without humiliation. The critic’s indictment of the film as a *mere* music film reveals her failure to appreciate how political critique is carried by musical intertextuality in *Sunny.* In consolidating gender and music as the double axes of revision which enable critical reflection rather than detract from history, Yi Junik’s film reveals the suturing operation that was at work in the process of consent-building for Korea’s Vietnam. It also allows us to glimpse the social mechanisms by which Korea’s Vietnam became consumable by the Korean public.

Patriots and/or Mercenaries?: The Political Battle over Korea’s Vietnam

Films like *R-Point* and *Sunny* are clearly products of the twenty-first century in Korea. This is so not only because the revisions they offer of Korea’s Vietnam would never have passed the censorship of the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee, Chun Doo Hwan, and Roh Tae-woo, but because the dismantling of the ideological apparatus formed by the triple alliance of anti-communism, developmentalism, and patriarchy first necessitates a critique of asymmetrical U.S-Korea relations. That critique provided the fuel to the fire of the protest movement of the 1980s, and became a cornerstone of foreign and domestic policy for at least two of the administrations that took power in the 1990s.

The political battle over the memory of Korea’s Vietnam is far from over, however. In June of 2000, more than two thousand South Korean veterans of the Vietnam War gathered in Seoul outside the offices of *Hankyoreh* to stage an angry protest against the progressive newspaper. For over a year, *Hankyoreh,* along with its sister magazine *Hankyoreh 21,* had been running a series of feature articles bearing such headlines as “Mercenaries More Brutal Than American Soldiers,” articles which relied on testimonies of both Vietnamese civilians and South Korean soldiers in implicating South Korean troops in a number of civilian massacres committed in central Vietnam between 1965 and 1973. Coinciding temporally with the Pulitzer-winning investigation of the alleged killings of Korean civilians by American soldiers at Nogeun-ri during the Korean War, these reports represented a part of the larger effort to reinterpret Korea’s place in the global unfolding of Cold War history along lines that would have been impossible to tow in South Korea during the more authoritarian times of its past.

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The protesting veterans, dressed in their military uniforms and sporting signature red scarves, demanded that the newspaper issue a public apology for "recasting patriots as murderers" and dragging the good names of their comrades through the mud in the process. After hours of negotiations, the veterans finally did disband, but not before they had stormed *Hankyoreh* offices, injured several employees with the iron pipes that they were wielding, and set dozens of automobiles on fire.

At a particularly charged point during the rally, one veteran lifted his pant leg to reveal a limb rotting from complications caused by exposure to Agent Orange and exclaimed that *Hankyoreh's* reports had added public insult to his physical injury by attempting to rob Korea's Vietnam of its moral justification. His sentiment was loudly echoed by other veterans who, as it turned out, all belonged to an organization called the Korean Association of Veterans Suffering from Complications Attributed to Agent Orange (*Daehan minguk goyeopje huyu euijeung jeonuhoe,* hereafter "Agent Orange Association"). From the perspective of those more familiar with the critical role Agent Orange victims have played in anti-war activism in the United States, the virulence with which these veterans have opposed any revision of Korea's Vietnam may seem surprising, to say the least. The ongoing plight of veterans suffering from Agent Orange-related ailments is no less wretched in South Korea than in the United States, and yet these veterans have become some of the most vocal defenders of the conservative state ideology which took shape under the very regime that mortgaged their lives and adopted policies directly responsible for their victimization. Since its establishment in 1991, the Agent Orange Association has increasingly mobilized its members against progressive administrations and political issues, such that it now represents the most militant and iconic element of South Korea's far right.[10]

10. Scholars have noted the irony of the Association's militantly conservative political line, given the actual policies that were adopted regarding veterans' affairs during different presidential administrations in South Korea. Notably, it was the "leftist" administrations of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun that began executing welfare programs for veterans suffering from Agent Orange-related complications in earnest; in contrast, Vietnam War veterans were barred from organizing and even excluded from receiving compensation from the U.S. manufacturers of Agent Orange during the administrations of Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo. In 1984, for example, Dow Chemical and Monsanto reached an out-of-court settlement worth $180 million with Vietnam War veterans. According to the terms of the settlement, veterans from Australia and New Zealand also received compensation, while South Koreans were excluded from the settlement even though Australian and New Zealander troop size had been much smaller than Korea's.

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In its aftermath, the incident sparked a charged volley in the media. *Wolgan Joseon,* the leading conservative monthly, hosted a roundtable on the meaning of the Vietnam War during which the Korean participation was reaffirmed as a necessary and heroic prelude to the miracle of the South Korean economic development. This response suggests that the politicization of Vietnam War veterans in recent years cannot simply be dismissed as reactionary nostalgia. At stake is not only the memory of Korea’s Vietnam, but the legacy of the earlier discussed “triple alliance.” The violence at *Hankyoreh* bespeaks the veterans’ anxiety that the new century has brought new rules to bear on a war that was fought with the old century’s rules, and that this newly revised world will have no place for them except as part of a disgraceful past to be overcome.

What were the old century’s rules? In essence, the old century’s rules allowed the coexistence between what have since become irreconcilable terms: the patriot and the mercenary. Even though mercenary or *yongbyeong* is a term that most Vietnam War veterans object to vehemently, they will also proclaim enthusiastically that it was their service in Vietnam that helped to pave Gyeongbu Highway and jumpstart the economic miracle on the Han River. For the veterans of the Agent Orange Association, for example, the nation of the Park era both demanded their sacrifice and made that sacrifice worthwhile. They were victims, but victims who could then emerge as subjects. It is thus the logic of developmentalism that performed the alchemy necessary to turn the risking and taking of lives for money into selfless acts of sacrifice for the national cause. The new century’s rules, however, have turned the connector that links the terms “mercenary” and “patriot” from “and” into “or,” and exposed the internal contradiction between the moral imperative and the profit motive that had seemed so seamlessly welded together in earlier accounts. This has been done by forcing into view those who had been surprisingly absent in existing narratives of Korea’s Vietnam: the Vietnamese themselves.

The task of continuing to demythologize Korea’s Vietnam faces a troubled future. On the one hand, it must fend off the conservative blowback of the kind witnessed during and after the *Hankyoreh* episode, a resurgent movement to remythologize the miracle of South Korea’s development. But a surprising threat also comes from the new visibility of the Vietnamese. For South Korea in the twenty-first century, Vietnam is no longer just the stage for the unfolding of yet another chapter in the history of U.S.-Korea relations, but a partner in its own right within the ascendant Asian regional order. Economic exchanges between the two countries are strong and growing, and Vietnam has also become a major

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consumer of Korean entertainment and cultural contents. An over-hasty reconciliation, however, creates new blind spots, as witnessed in the previously mentioned Korean cooperation group's tragicomical proclamation of "Vietnam Day" to coincide with the thirty-second anniversary of the opening of Gyeongbu Freeway (Kim 2002). The supreme irony of thanking the Vietnamese for allowing Koreans to kill so many of them and earn the dollars necessary to finance the building of the freeway seems to have escaped the proponents of this proposal to cement goodwill and reconciliation between the two countries. As such discomfiting and contradiction-ridden episodes suggest, Korea's Vietnam has not come to an end. Its full demythologization, I believe, will require neither the loud, selective reinvocations of the past nor a rush toward an amnesiac future, but a quiet rumination on the coincidence that brought the Nogeun-ri story to break at around the same time as the story of Ha My, Phong Nhi, Phong Nhat, and many other villages in central Vietnam where one might still catch tremulous voices retelling a very different story of numerous Sergeant Kims prior to their return home.[11]

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11. Heonik Kwon has collected these stories. His thoughtful analysis of the massacre of Vietnamese civilians by South Korean troops in the village of Ha My in 1968 can be found in *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* (2006).

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