

Introduction to symposium, transPOP: Korea Vietnam Remix  
February, 2009, UC Berkeley

Today's event represents nearly a full circle return to the diasporic beginnings of a journey that started with a conversation between Viet Le and I over a lunch of budechige in Koreatown, Los Angeles which launched the project, with trips for research and visits with artist to Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Seoul, Gwangju, Busan and New York City. We returned to Seoul for the premier of the exhibition in December 2007, then next year to Ho Chi Minh City for the second leg of the exhibition tour, then to UC Irvine gallery culminating at its current and final venue, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts across the bay where it is until March 15, 2009. In each venue, we held symposiums as a companion to the exhibition.

An artist and UCI alum, Hong An Truong's first work in our grad program was a graffiti on a gallery wall that screamed: "Vietnam is a country not a war." This statement hit me hard, provoking something close to a mind/body split. Perhaps because my experience of the war in Vietnam is so indelibly interwoven with my formative years in a new country as an immigrant, on a forced diet of war on the Cronkite evening news on our prized Zenith color console. The War also nearly tore our family apart: my brother fought the draft till the end of the war while I fought with my father who supported the war.

Over time, the fuller significance of the war gained even greater traction in "a psychic border between fiction and history, as a residual space," in the terms of a colleague and artist Simon Leung, and became the focus of several projects, examining different facets of the war. For the current curatorial project, researching the scholarship of Charles Armstrong, Hyun Sook Kim and Heonick Kwon among others as well as the novel *Shadow of Arms* by Hwang Su Kyong, various films and TV dramas (some of which are in the mash-up) afforded me a glimpse into the experience of the war for Koreans in the war and at home. Simultaneous with this research was my addiction to Korean dramas that spurred an interest in the transnational flows of culture including the Korean Wave. This project, given form in exhibitions, programs and these two publications, reflects the shared interests that Viet and I have in the intersections of history and pop culture.

I want to highlight a few sequence of events that point to the profound tension between official memory (or lack thereof) and counter memory of the War and the inflection of Korea's colonial legacy in Korean relationship to the War. In 1992, Korea normalized diplomatic relation with Vietnam and the film *White Badge* was released, to critical acclaim. In 1996, Kim Young Sam was the first Korean president to visit unified Vietnam but he made no mention of the war. A year later, Korean TV dramas begin broadcast in Viet Nam. In 1999, at a time when Korean civil groups were pressing the Korean government to issue a state-level apology, Vietnam announced that they had already forgiven Korea. This led many interested parties to question the right of the state to issue an apology on behalf of its citizen without consultation, reminiscent of their own government's signing of the unpopular Japan-Korea Normalization Treaty of 1965 that "forgave" Japan.

The Vietnam War is the forgotten war in Korea in much the same way that the Korean War is forgotten in the U.S. Despite the formal and direct apology that the then Korean president, Kim Dae Jung gave in 2001 to the visiting SRV president Luong that stated: "I am sorry for the suffering caused to the Vietnamese people by our participation in that unfortunate war," there has been no official commemoration of the war nor official investigations of the atrocities committed by Korean military. In contrast to their enthusiastic send off, most Korean veterans returned home to an absence of fanfare and to subsequent marginalized lives. Considering the extent of Korea's involvement in the War in quantifiable terms: over 300,000 troops committed (5,000 killed), 24,000 skilled workers who found jobs there, 2 presidents during the 80s who were officers during the war, 3 major chaebols (Hyundai, Daewoo and Hanjin) and other heavy industries, got a major boost during the war along with an estimated billion dollar economic aid from U.S. (a "goldmine" according to Armstrong) a catalyst in transforming Korea from a war worn country in the 60s to a thriving economy by the late 80s--it is no wonder that the widely shared memories and experiences of the war is embedded in popular culture. The war also introduced a new consciousness to Koreans that they were no longer victims but the aggressors. It remains to be seen when the official reluctance for a fuller reckoning can be overcome.

### **Korean clips:**

- The President's Barber- the excerpt centers on the uncle of the story's narrator (a young boy). In showing off his craze for all things American, playing guitar, doing the twist, the Uncle tells of how he wants to meet Elvis, "even" Mohammed Ali, wants to go to Vietnam so that he can meet Americans. In the following shot, he's told off by U.S. soldiers who don't want to befriend him. On a related note, the movie White Badge is based on the novel titled White War when it was published in 1983. This is an apt title that emphasizes that it was an American War with an Americanized racial experience. In the heightened contact zone of this war, there was pronounced asymmetry in the regard for soldiers and their bodies. U.S. soldiers got three times higher salaries than those from third world countries like Korea. In death, U.S. bodies were embalmed, wrapped in national flag and frozen for its return home. Korean bodies were merely cremated. Vietnamese bodies were commonly not buried but discarded.
- The Classic was a mainstream popular film aimed at younger audiences that revolves around flashbacks to the 70s. The excerpt depicts the female lead vainly searching for her lover in a parade celebrating the send-off of the troops.
- I included a 1 min clip from near the end of R-Point, an important horror film which will be discussed later by Professor Kyu Hyu Kim.
- Sunny features two popular oldies – Niman Monggosae (Far Away Love which is the Korean title of the movie) and Sergeant Kim, sung originally by Kim Chu Ja that

became a big hit in the early 70s. The main clip shows the latter song being sung by the central character who became a cabaret singer during the war to search for her estranged husband fighting in the war.

- Sergeant Kim is sung again, this time by kids in the first clip of *White Badge*. The author of the novel and the movie scriptwriter, Anh Janghyo was himself a Vietnam vet. This was the first foreign film, even among U.S. films that was actually filmed on location in Vietnam. Like the U.S. film *Deerhunter*, it dramatizes the trauma of brutality and atrocities committed and experienced by Korean soldiers in the War and their difficulty in adjusting to civilian life afterwards. Since most R.O.K. soldiers or rocks (as they were called by Americans) were young boys during the Korean War, the war in Vietnam triggered flashbacks to the Korean War (treated in B&W in the film almost as if to reinforce the notion that war in Vietnam was in living color and the Korean War in B&W)
- *Sandglass* is the first TV drama to represent the Gwangju uprising and massacre. Chun Do Hwan and Roh Tae Woo were the two presidents in the 80s who were officers in the war. It was their troops who suppressed the uprising. The war in Vietnam can be said to be replayed on the streets of this provincial city in these soldiers' brutality and the use of the military helicopters.
- Two scenes of *Golden Bride* are lifted from youtube. In spite of the terrible resolution I wanted to show this popular TV drama and its rendition of the bride market that is populating the Korean countryside of Vietnamese females.
- *I'll be Seeing Her* is a documentary by Kim Soyoung that focuses on the role of women in cinema history and female spectatorship and the inestimable role that that silver screen held in the popular constructions of modernity and the "modern woman."
- *Wild Korea* is a farcical parody about Korea's appropriation of modernity American style, in its giddy embrace of legalized guns.
- *So Hot* – is the second of a trio of mega hits by this girl group whose music and choreography is by the musician/producer powerhouse Park Jin Yong who has demonstrated a knack for an artful negotiation of kawaii cute and seductive sexuality. This Korean Wave product is primed for cross over appeal with its Konglish and indigenized American cultural references.

#### TALKING POINTS/ QUESTIONS

1. Without falling into any fixed East/West binary trap, what do you see as the relationship between some of the new formations of East Asian and Southeast Asian pop cultural identities/subject positions and Western constructs? Can the Asian gaze be said to differ from the Western gaze?

2. Cultural production (such as film and art) is at varying levels tied to economic development and political agendas. In light of the (global) economic crisis, what changes/challenges do you think will arise?
3. As artists and academics, what role does cultural translation play? Who are your audiences?
4. Do you see a significant relationship between Korea and Viet Nam's traumatic pasts and current cultural production? If so what are its salient characteristics?
5. What themes do you see recurring in recent films/ art market?
6. The Nation/State has been critiqued on a number of critical fronts and is also chipped away by many prevailing currents and forces identified with globalization. In what ways is the nation or an ethnicity a viable, productive category for research and creative production and in what way can this category be limiting or irrelevant?

### **Media and Migration**

This panel is framed around Appadurai's linked forces of media and migration to underscore their profound interactive impact in the creation of new social spheres and practices of the imagination. The papers in this panel all touch upon aspects of these twinned forces.

In order to do interdisciplinary work, it is not enough to take a 'subject' (a theme) and to arrange two or three sciences around it. Interdisciplinary study consists of creating a new object, which belongs to no one. - Roland Barthes

Keywords: transnationalism, globalization, modernity, agency, new subjectivities  
Cultural translation, hybridization and creolization – all forms of indiginization in the local arena.

Interactivity between the local and the global: The world is standardized through diversification and diversified through standardization: The operation of global cultural power can only be found in local practices while cultural reworking and

appropriation at the local level necessarily takes place within the matrix of the global homogenizing forces.

Exposure to forced appropriation of modernities in the non-West has also produced polymorphic indigenized modernities and thus has destabilized the exclusive equation of modernities with the Western world.

Cultural proximities – juxtaposed similarities and differences among contemporaneous Asian modernities

Appadurai – imagination as a social practice – media and migration has made it possible for a broad spectrum of people to imagine their subjectivities in less fettered ways.

Culture vs Cultural – noun vs adjective Cultural homogenation/heterogenization

Indeginization Deterritorialization Commodity Selfhood, Me Moment Invention of traditions Cosmopolitanisms

it was also a bit blurred in my attempt to assimilate the likes of Kerouac, Lessing, Dylan, Beatles, Otis Redding, Dear Hunter, Breathless, Sweet Movie, Archile Gorky and Eva Hesse.