

## EAST ASIA'S VIETNAM

## Trauma Returns and the Sub-Empire of Memory

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This chapter delves into the enduring legacy of the Vietnam-American War (1955–1975) for East Asian countries by focusing on the geo/politics of memory. Although the main focus is on South Korea, I also take aim at the failure of Japan, Taiwan and China to acknowledge their complicity in the messy conflagration and its impact on Vietnamese people. Deflecting attention away from the violence of the war and towards postwar economic integration demonstrates the ignorance and historical amnesia of these states. These powerful Asian countries have whitewashed their role in the brutal atrocities that took place during the war—actions that demand answers and prompt communal rage from Vietnamese and other Asian survivors.

A trans-Pacific conception of the Vietnam War and its haunting afterlives challenges the spatialized notion of the Vietnam War as something that is localized (e.g., a civil war) and uproots the neoliberal demand to forget the temporal past for the sake of economic security and future prosperity. It does so by revealing the ways ‘development’ and ‘progress’ throughout the Asia-Pacific region are undergirded by historical violence and memory gate-keeping (Kim 2019). Trauma—collective and personal—emerges in the legal limitations and knowledge gaps surrounding the geopolitics and political economy of memory. Asian studies scholars use the term sub-empire to describe the exercise of power by nations like Japan, South Korea and China, either by serving other bigger empires (like US or USSR) or asserting their powerful world status over smaller less wealthy countries through the economic sphere (Isaacs 1951, Ueno 1996, Lee 2009). Building on this, I posit a *sub-empire of memory* to suggest the ways that collective memory and memory work are subordinated to geopolitical economic interests. Former client states of the United States like Japan, Taiwan and South Korea engage in sub-imperialisms and surrogate militarisms that subjugate history and memory (Lee 2009). We can expand on this reality to think about how these hegemonic polities engage in what I have termed the ‘returns of war’—the process by which people, groups and nations economically profit from postwar memory gains or loss (Bui 2018). Here, I conceptualize the ways the temporal memory of war in Vietnam rubs up against the profit motive in the post-Cold War neoliberal era.

Trauma, as a collective phenomenon, evinces what sociologist Yvonne Kwan (2020) calls trauma formation, asymmetrical relationships embedded within transgenerational psychosocial structures. I add to this framework by considering ‘trauma returns’ as the ways in

which trauma forms around political capitalist systems in which memory is manipulated or mobilized by powerful states. Taken in this way, trauma remains not ossified or sealed in time, but forever changing and evolving due to new circumstances and actors. Indeed, truth activists are shifting the conversation, pushing for greater political accountability in traumatized societies and for the decolonization of memory (Brewer 2006).

Chronic denial of responsibility to the dead by East Asian political leaders has only resulted in a great eruption of memory and legal disputes. Here, the struggle continues to determine the salience of a “civil war” (and proxy war) that supposedly concluded in 1975 with the communist takeover of South Vietnam. An abiding commitment to silence in South Korea, Japan and other regional powers amounts to a sanctioning of war crimes and crimes against humanity. It disavows the experience of Vietnamese victims, both living and deceased. We can ask then how might this global-historical flashpoint affect East Asians, riveted to their own histories of war with one another and with the United States? What are the repercussions of *not* remembering history or properly dealing with the returns of trauma?

In tackling the sub-imperial dimensions of multilateral relations, I identify attempts to rectify gross historical abuses made in the name of economic security, instilling forms of trauma defined as a deeply distressing or disturbing experience and the ensuing shock. After discussing war crimes committed by South Korea in Vietnam, I turn to the specific case of gender-based violence. This is followed by a discussion of Japan, Taiwan and China. What stitches these different nations together is the matted sense that the Vietnam War was not just a military venture but also an economic one. The desire by Asian states to forget their Vietnams lays the contested grounds for grappling with justice and potential paths towards reparative actions.

### South Korea and the War in Vietnam

In April 2021, Nguyen ThiThanh became the first Vietnamese citizen to sue the Government of South Korea for atrocities committed during the war. The sixty-year-old had travelled to the Republic of Korea to participate in a citizens’ peace tribunal with support from non-governmental organizations like the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation. Along with over a hundred victims, Nguyen reported being shot near her village in 1968 with five members of her family murdered (Lee 2019). Today she endures major trauma from losing so many loved ones and pain from a severed intestine caused by the shooting. The tribunal proposed that the government make a formal apology to the plaintiffs and open a victims’ fund under the 2008 State Compensation Act after concluding that Korean troops had committed a massacre. Despite no support from the state, the tribunal called on the moral authority of *justice for humanity* to make this claim. Seoul never took an official stance on the matter, since doing so would amount to an admission of wrongdoing.

Seeking terms of justice that exceed the normative bounds of the law, Nguyen’s lawyer argued that she was suing ‘regardless of the outcome, [because] getting a judicial decision will help trigger a public discussion about the anger and suffering of the victims of the civilian massacres’ (Lee 2019). The ROK’s statute of limitations remains five years, even though the UN General Assembly in 2005 affirmed the restriction does not apply to *serious* violations of international humanitarian law or to grave abuses of international human rights laws (General Assembly resolution 60/147). Seeking redress in the legal realm potentially ends up re-traumatizing victims, but for Nguyen and those who have come forward, their acts posit a form of ‘trauma bonding’ within a shared moral community (Yang 2021, 4). Repeating the

facts before an official body re-externalizes the trauma of victims by putting the burden of proof and responsibility on the latter to respond (Feldman and Laub 1992, 69).

The lawsuit urged the South Korean government to organize an investigation of civilian massacres. Subsequently, a task force for the Presidential Commission on Policy Planning submitted a report in 2018 to the president calling for an investigation into civilian suffering caused by Korean troops during the Vietnam War (Lee 2019). The committee found that ignoring the victims' requests for an apology and compensation contradicts South Korea's official position on 'comfort women' (Korean women forced to serve as sex slaves for the imperial Japanese army). The report concluded that denying the trauma of human rights violations against Vietnamese civilians would be similar to denying Korean women's trauma at the hands of Japanese soldiers.

While South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not favour an official investigation, uncovering war's misdeeds remains of interest to South Korean veterans who had also suffered from the war. Former soldiers experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (and Agent Orange side effects) are suffering in silence (Do 2020). During the war, other than the United States, South Korea sent the most troops to Vietnam. Korean soldiers committed eighty massacres causing an estimated 9,000 civilian casualties, which were never reported under free speech restrictions imposed by President Park Chung-hee, who seized power in a coup in 1961 (Park and Clayton 2003). The former army general turned president ordered a cover-up of the massacres. Conservatives honour Korean troops as heroes and blocked liberal leaders like President Moon Jae-in from offering a full apology to Vietnam. In 2017, Moon made a controversial remark about Korean expeditionary forces in Vietnam, saying simply that his country 'has a debt of heart' without directly invoking the massacres. Vietnam responded to Moon's apology by saying that South Korea should avoid actions that might 'negatively' affect bilateral cooperation (Do 2020). For its part, the current Vietnamese government commemorates North Vietnamese soldiers as its war heroes, while the opposing southern troops are relegated to the margins, regarded as ghosts not worthy of public dignity. In this context abuses and atrocities committed by Korean troops in South Vietnam are officially ignored.

The social wounds of civilians frequently become pushed aside by demands to move on for the sake of national development and economic progress, but Vietnamese villagers are unrelenting in creating informal rituals dedicated to victims of massacres and 'grievous death' (see Kwon 2006, chp 6). This local 'embedded memory' makes it hard for the state to annihilate their memory of trauma. Their commemorative work and forms of enshrinement honour both dead Vietnamese children and Korean soldiers. As political scientist Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo (2005, 168) suggests, commemoration is not 'a symptom of an incessant, pathological return to be cured with assimilationist remedies', but a way in which people can recover their histories as they rub up against nationalist agendas. Idealized notions of restorative healing, which focus only on victims, should be redirected to culpable agents and oppressive social systems. In the early 2000s, officers of the ROK military, stricken with guilt, spoke to newspapers about cutting off the ears of Vietnamese prisoners, a practice learned from the Japanese (Le 2021, 25). South Koreans' traumatic experience under decades of US bombing, Japanese colonialism and anti-communist counterinsurgency instilled a culture of violence in which killers and victims are both made invisible. In the United States, the Korean War is dubbed the 'forgotten war'; likewise, the Vietnam War remains the forgotten war in South Korea. The lack of truth commissions and the will to forget threaten to undermine East Asian peace by encouraging mistrust between states and individuals (Guthrey 2015).

Given no official recognition of their pain, veterans and victims are forced to relive their traumas every time textbooks ignore them, museum exhibits diminish the severity or existence of the problem, or governments place blame on the United States for everything that happened in Vietnam. The sensational, unseen and mundane ramifications of war open towards an apprehension of structural issues and the political economy of memory. Former war-devastated countries like South Korea would not have advanced had it not been for the largesse of the US military-industrial complex and Asian co-conspirators. Whereas today Vietnam is a rising 'tiger' economy, it was for many decades associated only with war, loss and ruin. The country's ascent on the international stage and growing stature, however, has not deterred efforts by Vietnamese individuals and groups to remember slights and abuses. Foreign investment by South Korea in Vietnam's economy cannot adequately offset the lack of reparations for war crimes. While Vietnam lacks a free press, South Korea has many independent media sources and civil society organizations that include groups like the Committee for Finding the Truth about Vietnam, Below the Lotus Flower and the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation—organizations that conduct mock trials and submit petitions. They are seeking lasting justice over empty prosperity.

### **Korea-Vietnam Economic Relations**

Sub-empire of memory explains why there is slow progress on this matter as the ROK's wealth and modernity enable it to gloss over its past crimes in poorer nations. South Korea is Vietnam's largest foreign direct investor, a strategic relationship that is all the more important given Vietnam's territorial disputes with neighbouring China. South Korea's economic modernity, funded by Japanese reparations in 1965 (\$800 million in loans and grants) and by the United States (which paid more than \$2 billion to South Korean mercenary soldiers), looms large over Vietnam as it competes for foreign investments. Due to the bilateral state commitment to improving relations, Vietnam and South Korea push historical grievances to the side. Vietnam never pressured the South Korean government for an investigation, reparations or an apology, as it did with the United States. This approach reflected Vietnam's strategy of diversifying relations and promoting economic integration in the Asian region. Once South Korea became one of the world's leading economies, and millions of South Koreans were able to overcome their wartime trauma of starvation and poverty through a new higher standard of living, a general sense of 'moving on' was enabled by militarized developmentalism. At the same time, the ROK's deep economic ties with Vietnam today give room for consideration of what might be rectified in the shared past of Asian societies.

At stake in citizen-driven initiatives for justice is a question of history and memory as well as the normalization of trauma as relegated to the past or oblivion. Challenging neoliberal futures and cultural amnesia, everyday people negotiate the psychic symptoms of traumatic events with powerful reverberations, according to visual studies scholar Viet Le (2021). Observes Le, 'These 'untranslatable' temporalities are inherently tied to shifting geopolitics and the politics of translation. The legacies of such traumas have yet to be understood beyond uplifting narratives of socioeconomic reconstruction' (2021, 32). Vietnamese and Korean contemporary artists' attempts to represent war trauma become a 'trauma of modernity', due to the overwhelming need to respect the booming trade and bilateral relations between Vietnam and South Korea. Given the image of South Korea as a positive investor and benefactor of Vietnam, Le asks how we can reconcile this orchestrated amnesia with the historic fact that Korean soldiers in Vietnam 'were brutal, slicing off ears, echoing earlier Japanese

occupation in Korea' (25). Under the traumatic fallout from wars of aggression, it is here that the sub-empire memory continues to block efforts to address horrendous wartime atrocities.

In 1968 in the Vietnamese villages of Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat sixty-nine people were killed by South Korean soldiers, according to a declassified US investigation report kept secret for decades (Griffiths 2018). South Korea's legacy of involvement in Vietnam remains under wraps, since it remains focused on the legacies of its own civil war (1950–1953) and Japanese colonial rule. Embracing narratives of victimization, South Korea has not reckoned with its role as perpetrator.

### **Remembering Sexual and Gender-Based Violence**

Civilian massacres went hand in hand with rape as weapons of war. Wartime military rape and sexual violence are difficult to separate, as recounted in testimonies from both veterans and sexual survivors. There are little to no statistics on the scale of sexual violence compared to murders, which remain undercounted. The My Lai massacre by US Marines overshadowed atrocities committed by Korean troops against villagers in a 'forgotten' My Lai (Griffiths 2021). The Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat murders and rapes committed by South Korean soldiers remained largely unknown until the early 2000s, when revelations sparked widespread condemnation. After sifting through US government cables and reports, Korean researchers and media identified a clear pattern of criminal action that was never reported. Whereas some veterans mobilized to defend their honour, other Korean ex-combatants shared their trauma narratives with the public and 're-militarized' themselves in the process by going to ideological war with their own government (Guichard 2019). Many South Koreans remember the ROK as part of the losing side in the Vietnam War, and there is a reticence to label soldiers as violators rather than victims. Public forgetting is enforced despite a years-long effort by international peace campaigners, Vietnamese survivors, Korean journalists and US veterans testifying about the conduct of Korean soldiers. A witness during the 'Winter Soldier' hearings in the United States testified about handing over captured female North Vietnamese army nurses to ROK Marines who raped the prisoners.

Only 800 rape survivors out of thousands of victims remain alive to recount their traumatic stories (Griffin 2022). As one survivor named Tran Thi Ngai writes, 'I lost everything after I was raped. I was imprisoned, I lost my home and my children lost their future. Any apology will probably come when I am dead. But I will accept it, even in the afterlife'. Tran's three children were conceived through rape, and a group called Justice for Lai Dai Han (JLDH), whose name translates into mixed-race children of Koreans, advocates for such youth. The organization's founder grew up in Vietnam as a child of rape. A large number of Korean soldiers left behind thousands of children, leaving them to deal with discrimination and poverty in Vietnam. The United States offered to bring over these mixed-race offspring to start a new life through the 1982 Amerasia Act. The original Senate proposal included children born in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Japan, the Philippines and Taiwan. In the final version of the bill, however, the Philippines, Japan and Taiwan were excluded, since they were not 'combat zones' during the Vietnam War, thus artificially limiting war trauma although they hosted US troops and military facilities (Reyes 2020). With South Korea remaining in the bill, the United States contributes to the differential and gendered forgetting of East Asia's Vietnam.

Every year, Korean businessmen and tourists flock to Vietnam, taking advantage of the services of local spas, an industry that emerged out of 'rest and relaxation' zones installed by the militaries of Japan and the United States (Kay Hoang 2015). With the Vietnamese state

accommodating this illicit sexual economy, global traffic in desire conjures up memories of the war and how Southeast Asian women's bodies then and now are used as proxy battlefields. The politics of subversion, ambiguity and legitimation by patriarchal governments stage an 'empire of trauma' in which trauma is colonized, racialized and gendered (Edmondson 2018).

I also wish to discuss trauma in gendered terms, since what is 'public' is normalized or found worthy of commemoration is typically masculine (and militarized) while the feminine is consigned to the private secrets, a place where women must suffer as private martyrs (Gasviani 2022). Let us consider the sub-empire of memory as a contested site where war trauma is both maintained and repressed under commodified gender relations. Within this inter-imperial formation, wealthy influential men write or speak history from above and women are tasked with the role of 'memory keepers', building an intimate archive of knowledge (Fujita-Rony 2020). Colonized women occupy the *gendered intimate*, their memory work occurring within and between empires. Women whose lives have been shaped and disrupted by wars resist the historical amnesia of male-dominated states by suing in courts and demanding a public forum to air these matters.

Despite deploying over 300,000 soldiers to Vietnam, South Korea's role in the conflict is little known or accorded a minor role in South Korean media and textbooks (Moon 2007). To bolster their country's militarized modernity, South Korean male generals deny any wrongdoing, even though Vietnam was Seoul's largest overseas military operation (Lee 2009). The Park government welcomed participation in America's war because it was paid in coveted US dollars and strengthened the alliance. In Korean popular memory, the Vietnam War is an event primarily yoked to the Americans and the Vietnamese and not something that centrally involved South Korea. Nonetheless, the 'just memory' of those Vietnamese women sexually violated by South Korean soldiers lingers; their accounts expose the sins and indignities of history and the ethics of remembrance (Nguyen 2013). Despite the assumption that Vietnam as a country has 'moved on' from its terrible past, survivors' embodied trauma surfaces in translocal contexts. Literary scholar Cathy Caruth (2016, 24) observes that 'history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma'.

More Korean movies are being made about the war, frequently as co-productions between Vietnamese and Korean companies, documenting wartime ROK involvement in Vietnam and breaking the public's silence on the matter. Critically acclaimed films like *The Classic* (2003), *R-Point/Ghosts of War* (2004), *Sunny* (2008) and *Ode to My Father* (2014) convey the message that war is always fought on politically disputed grounds. At times reviled as no more than a celebration of Korean masculinity (and government-authorized prostitution), 'Korea's Vietnam' offers an intertext to the trauma of America's Vietnam (Ryu 2009).

Korean artist Kim Seo-kyung said that she designed a statue 'to apologize in our way' to Vietnam (Griffiths 2021). However, her plans to unveil statues in Vietnam and South Korea collapsed under bureaucracy and red tape. The artist had been inspired to make the piece, after noticing Japanese people coming to rallies to apologize for that country's treatment of Korea and she wanted something to give to the Vietnamese people on behalf of Koreans. A sculptor couple had built statues dedicated to Vietnamese women throughout South Korea, after being disappointed by President Moon Jae-in when he lauded Korean veterans who fought in Vietnam. Despite the marginality of these statues in South Korea at large, in the political arena the artist believes South Korea's status would be elevated over Japan in the international community by accepting its horrid past. With public statues being erected around the world for Korean comfort women incensing the Japanese government,

this ongoing controversy intensifies conflict over the remembrance of Vietnamese rape survivors.

### **Japan and the Indochina War**

During the First Indochina War (1946–1954), Japan seized control of Vietnam, after France had been taken over by Nazi Germany in 1940. With French colonizers temporarily subordinated under Japan, the Japanese military terrorized and looted the Vietnamese countryside, and a famine ensued when rice was hoarded for export to Japan for the war effort. An estimated two million northern Vietnamese peasants starved to death and thousands more were displaced from their villages (Dung 1995). Those internally displaced people began telling their stories to newspapers before they died. Japanese occupation and the famine of 1945 left a permanent mark upon survivors, whose experiences are still being told. Much like the British colonizers with a hand in the Bengal famine of 1943 in India, Japan does not acknowledge these people's famine trauma as their own. Such trauma does not dissipate with the elderly war generation and survives among descendants who bear the burdens of intergenerational trauma. The wartime myth of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in which Japan promised to bring material benefits to its colonized neighbours submerges everything to the economic sphere. Alongside South Korea, Japan is today a major investor in Vietnam's economy and the possibility that Japan's government will apologize for its war crimes seems unlikely, since foreign aid serves as an informal 'bribe' to overcome past war crimes. How then is justice for humanity to be achieved?

Japan provided goods, including napalm, to the US war effort in Vietnam, and American military forces relied on bases located in Okinawa, a part of Japan that the United States controlled between 1945 and 1972, for rear area support and R&R. This war procurement bolstered Japan's 'economic miracle' and export-oriented industries much like the Korean War that helped the country recover from WWII and pull out of an economic slump. As a silent partner in the American war in Vietnam, Japanese firms earned at least \$1 billion a year between 1965 and 1972 in selling goods and services to US and South Vietnamese forces (Havens 1990). The maturation of Japan and its export markets in Southeast Asia therefore relied heavily on military-enabled regional connections (Stubbs 1999), providing a boon for not only Japan but other East Asian economies like South Korea to ramp up their industrial capacities. But failing to wrestle with this fact in favour of inter-state neutrality and a new Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere led by Japan consigns Vietnamese survivors of the war to the un-honoured dead. Nodding to the source of that trauma remains a sensitive subject for Japan, since doing so means recognizing how military ventures greased the wheels of its capitalist globalization (Kim 1907; Naya 1971; Park and Clayton 2003). Intensified economic activity however inadvertently breaks open more social-regional connections that could then invite legal action by survivors.

As memory studies scholar Cathy Schlund-Vials (2012, 15) posits, mass-scale war shapes a legalized public sphere. State-authorized silence represents trauma as predicated on claims of factual authenticity by plaintiffs; refugees and other displaced figures use those same legal avenues to seek asylum, infusing them with moral and political dimensions. Popular texts, people's tribunals and other modes of remembrance motion towards alternative routes for engaging with 'the ability of the nation-state to negotiate such trauma'. She argues that public remembrance of wartime famine installs a traumatized interpretation of history and national ruin 'epitomized by a sense of left-behindedness, silence and chance' (Schlund-Vials 2012, 101). Other imperial states have not handled this any better, as illustrated by Britain

and the Bengal famine. Japan is thus not an outlier to a general phenomenon in which wealthy Global Northern countries brush aside evidence of their criminal interactions with the Global South. A gap is evident in the ways Vietnamese victims can only speak about their experiences as a form of silence or shame in the face of powerful governments that accuse them of reviving the ugly past for financial gain (Su 2017). The consequence of this gap is the sense that trauma can only be atomized to individuals or groups, rather than taken to a larger structural level that involves nation-states or regions as a whole.

The tumult and aftermath of the Vietnam–American War induced an exodus of people to other Asian countries. Many of these political exiles were thrown back into the sea with estimates that up to 400,000 perished in the ocean according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Nguyen 2022). Forced migrants were spurned or mishandled by border patrols; their mistreatment remains a stain upon the international community. Almost half a million Vietnamese took to the seas to escape the communists, but as more so-called ‘boat people’ from Vietnam fled to neighbouring Asian countries, this influx of refugees put pressure on them to deal with its postwar mess, which was seen as the fault of the US (Sahara 2012). There are Vietnamese refugee communities in South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, but their numbers are small compared to populations resettled in North America. This lack of critical mass makes it appear that East Asian countries had little to do with the war at all, which is not the case.

Southeast Asian countries near Vietnam like Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines offered temporary refuge to these refugees (Espiritu and Ruanto-Ramirez 2020). Thousands were forcibly returned/repatriated, and once back in communist territory, they were consigned to imprisonment, torture, miserable living conditions and often early death. Anti-migrant sentiment and restrictions on foreign entry of ‘unwanted’ ethnic groups derive from the racialized sense that East Asian nations are ethnically homogenous and should remain pure. Japan enforces one of the strictest laws for immigration but it grudgingly took in an unprecedented 13,000 Indochinese refugees in 1980–1981 under US pressure despite a history of exclusionist sentiments (Havens 1990). Since then Japan has accepted just a total of 915 refugees from all countries (Asahi 2022). Vietnamese today send the largest number of temporary migrants to Japan on special working visas, another strand in the economic web of bilateral relations (Tran 2020).

While Japan does not view the Vietnamese as undesirable then or now, the question remains if Japan will publicly apologize for its colonial history in the country of Vietnam, when Japanese military commanders held the power behind a French-controlled client state. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, Japanese anti-war activists criticized Tokyo’s complicity in the American war effort and invoked Japan’s wartime (1931–1945) depredations against fellow Asians, including Vietnam, to spur a collective sense of guilt, but that sense of responsibility has faded (Havens 1987). Japan’s economic investments and official development assistance (ODA) in Vietnam give it the power to camouflage its imperial history towards Vietnam. Japanese and Vietnamese activists have put a spotlight on that history for decades but the Japanese government does not dare to address it (Bui and Sahara 2002).

We must recognize but not reinforce stereotypes of Vietnamese refugee passivity or victimhood but attend to ‘the contingencies and varied, often conflicting desires’ found in refugee encounters (Nguyen 2018, 19). We can recognize the commemoration of trauma in memorials erected by Vietnamese camp inhabitants in Malaysia and Indonesia. Through sub-empire of memory, I take up the challenge of discussing trauma which ‘has been claimed and named by the global structures of command’ (Nguyen 2020, 221).



Some scholars still wonder if Northeast Asian allies were a clear oppressive force in Vietnam or merely complicit with the US empire. They point to Japan being restricted to offering mostly logistical support, although it also produced the napalm and stored the Agent Orange used by the United States in Vietnam, while South Korea was a developing country and junior alliance partner that supplied ground troops for the US war in South Vietnam. The ambiguous status of the US client states obfuscates war responsibility and postwar memory. Ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu (2006) calls this obfuscation the 'we-win-even-when-we-lose syndrome'. While Espiritu ascribes this syndrome to the United States, I extend her analysis to countries like Japan and South Korea, but also China and Taiwan, which I turn to in the next section. By "winning" in the economic sphere, the high-income Asian nations have been able to bury their past military actions and sidestep atonement for historical sins.

### **The Involvement of Taiwan and China**

Taiwan exploited the Cold War to build its industries and economy—neo-colonial linkages with Vietnam that persist today. Vietnam remains highly dependent on Taiwanese companies to expand its developing economy, despite the resulting environmental damage and health risks to the Vietnamese people. Postwar Vietnam in the years after 1975 remained utterly devastated, while South Korea, Japan and Taiwan became exemplars of the 'East Asian economic miracle'. International state relations and political economy cannot entirely obscure trauma returns, despite those factors undergirding it. The multiplex interpretation of war trauma constitutes a 'heteroglossia of history' with multiple competing voices and viewpoints. This contestation puts different parties in contention with one another over who can represent history as well as the future (Bui 2019).

As a material and logistical support base, East Asian countries like Taiwan supplied maintenance and resource assistance for US operations in Vietnam. For the CIA, it covertly helped transport and air drop American agents into North Vietnam and Laos, before the United States took over such operations (Leary 2006). Taiwan's anti-communist leader Chiang Kai-shek sent advisors to South Vietnam, which worried the United States about agitating Chinese/Vietnamese communists further (Trevithick 2014). Ethnic Chinese refugees and other migrants pushed out by the victorious communist regime of Vietnam were accepted by Taiwan after Saigon's fall. The emerging 'Asian Tiger' provided temporary refuge for South Vietnam's fleeing president before being transferred to the United States. This military-diplomatic alliance enabled Taiwan to build up its manufacturing capacities and globalize its foreign capital (Hsu, Gimm & Glassman, 2018). Taiwan's ongoing "civil" war with China conceals the fact that it was a participant in the Vietnamese civil war. While Taiwan might not have sent armed troops, it participated as a base for secret bilateral missions.

The possibility of open conflict remains ever present for Taiwan as well as for Vietnam, as China continues to advance its interests in the Spratly Islands, also claimed by Vietnam (Mearsheimer 2014). When Vietnamese are asked about their country's history of war, they do not necessarily just bring up the United States, but rather they raise the spectre of China, which last invaded in 1979 and is resented for centuries-long colonial history of subordination and abusive labour practices in China's many factories in present-day Vietnam (Sullivan 2015).

Despite Vietnamese communists repelling US and French forces, China went to war with Vietnam over border conflicts that resulted in almost 40,000 Chinese and Vietnamese dead

(Zhai 2000). In 1979, Chinese troops crossed the border to invade the country, waging a bloody scorched-earth strategy understood as Beijing's response to Hanoi's alliance with the Soviet Union and its invasion of Chinese ally Cambodia under Khmer Rouge rule. Thousands died in this border war also known as the Third Indochina War. China and Vietnam claimed victory in the skirmish, but the people who fought or perished in it are remembered by the occasional demonstrators in the street and social media users who talk about this border war. In 2013, retired general Le Van Cuong said it was time for official commemorations of this brief war in school textbooks. 'Thousands of people have lost their lives to protect the land in the north. Why do we have no words for them? It's late and can't be later... We cannot have a vague view or ignore this historic issue' (Nguyen 2017). Despite their shared communist ideology, bad blood continues and both the governments of Vietnam and China avoid discussion of this sensitive topic so as not to inflame public opinion. Trauma's return invites both nations to enforce silence and repress unruly protest.

The lingering hurt and pain of the Indochina Wars form the basis for a critique of power. Such critique emanates from the work of humanitarian organizations and citizens' efforts for memorialization, despite how 'non-political' something like Taiwan's logistics support might look. As social theorist Lauren Berlant (2007, 759) reminds us, trauma and its 'slow death' prosper not in 'discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides [but]... in temporal environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself, that domain of living on. The corporate-military lines of collusion/cooperation established during the war continue to haunt the contemporary social scene, where Chinese and Taiwanese companies are polluting towns in Vietnam, essentially engaging in an environmental war on the poor. According to critical logistics scholar Wesley Attewell (2020), the multinational sources of labour used to undergird Vietnam War supply chains laid down the roots for corporate hegemony in the trans-Pacific region. Today, villagers in Vietnam are protesting the toxic intrusion of foreign companies, whose export-driven capitalist accumulation and militarized development are life-constricting and killing people. Protestors assert that no amount of money is worth sacrificing public health as they seek to assert a post-Cold War national sovereignty.

## **Conclusion**

While Western countries like the United States, New Zealand, Canada and Australia have barely started to address their role in Vietnam, East Asian territories like China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have not done so at all or with much earnest. As shown in this chapter, their state-level denial of active involvement has resulted in the eruption of memory struggles in the media, the law and civil society. Crucial matters of collective history are reflected (and deflected) in matters of economic development, foreign aid, tourism, bilateral relations and legal redress. This is the sub-empire of memory.

Indifference by hegemonic East Asian powers hinders any hope for healing the traumas of war. Survivors' accusations of genocide, rape and desertion are real moments of grief and rage against a neoliberal 'peace' undergirded by trade and investment flows, representing what I call 'trauma returns'. By not addressing these issues head-on, either through official apology or public memorialization, this apathy furthers victimization of war subjects as they attempt to make their cases heard, in public discourse and in the courts. We can accept that no form of rectification is adequate to wrestle with military violence, but the path of healing

must begin somewhere. The continued repression of this circle of trauma is the quandary of what I termed East Asia's Vietnam.

Contemporary Vietnam as a site of high financial investment for East Asian countries conceals how commercial relations are erected upon multiple war traumas and multiple sub-empires of memory. Vietnam's government however is no innocent victim of this geopolitics, especially as it gains increased power in the economic sphere and uses it to block UN action on the 2020 military coup and 2017 genocide of ethnic minorities in Burma (Aggarwal 2021). As war continues to maim and mutilate lives, the endurance of this menacing spectre raises the issue of historical commemoration, and the question of who is answerable to the grief-stricken not only in current wars but previous ones as well.

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