

**From “Hopeless” to “Magnificent”:  
The Transformation of South Korea’s National Image during the Vietnam Era**

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**INTRODUCTION**

South Korea is now undertaking a national image building campaign called “Dynamic Korea.” This campaign highlights the rapid transformation of South Korea during the last 50 years from a war-ravaged country to a dynamic global presence that draws worldwide attention. In general, non-Koreans seem to agree. According to one survey, seven out of ten respondents recognized “Dynamic Korea” as the “best slogan” to define today’s Korea.<sup>1</sup> The present “Korean Wave,” or *hallyu*, testifies to the vibrancy of Korean society. The most critical moment in South Korea’s struggle to become dynamic came in 1965, when Korea entered the Vietnam War. Tens of thousands of Korean soldiers and civilian workers landed in the beleaguered South Vietnam to join the war effort. In a way, Korea’s intervention in the Vietnam War was the first “Korean Wave” in the international arena in modern history and, indeed, history was made there. Out of the ashes of the Vietnam War, South Korea emerged as responsible, resilient, and resourceful nation. The Vietnam War produced some unspeakable pains and failed to achieve its objective, to stop the communist takeover. However, it remade South Korea and its national image to the world, and laid the foundation of today’s dynamic Korea.

Had a poll been taken in the early 1960s regarding Korea’s national image abroad, most would have viewed Korea as dysfunctional rather than dynamic. South Korea, in the two decades since its independence from Japan at the end of the Second World War, lived through what the U.S. government called a “perpetual state of crisis.” To borrow from John F. Kennedy, South Korea carried every mark of a “hopeless” nation.<sup>2</sup> After three years of military occupation by the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the Korean Peninsula was divided into two ideologically opposing nations. The rivalry between North and South Korea led to the Korean War that lasted for three years and caused the estimated two and half million deaths. Following the war, South Korea’s first president, Syngman Rhee, turned dictatorial and, eventually, he was toppled by a popular uprising in 1960. After Rhee, South Koreans experimented with democracy but not for long. In 1961, an army general, Park Chung Hee, launched a military coup and overthrew the civilian government. In 1963, Park was elected president but his mandate to rule was still questioned and challenged.

South Korea’s economic health was not that different from its political situation. Korea largely survived on U.S. aid which amounted to nearly \$4 billion in the first two decades following 1945. Despite this massive assistance, Korea’s GNP per capita hovered around \$100. As noted in a U.S. Congressional report, in the minds of Koreans, “the pattern of psychological and economic dependence was ingrained, as was the lack of confidence in Korea’s economic future without U.S. assistance.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, South Korea was a mendicant nation that “slurp[ed] at the trough of the American taxpayer,”<sup>4</sup> According to one commentator, South Korea at this point was “a sorry specimen” that was “overpopulated, underskilled, poorly led, poverty ridden, corrupt, and embittered.”<sup>5</sup> Robert Komer, an advisor to President Lyndon B. Johnson summed it up well: South Korea was “a mess” and one of America’s “great failures despite billions in pump priming.”<sup>6</sup>

South Korea’s image as a nation suffered more because it had tough competition to overcome, North Korea. Despite the greater destruction North Korea had suffered in the Korean War, it was, by almost any measure, ahead of the South. Militarily, its armed forces were far superior compared to South Korea’s. Developmentally, as noted by American officials, North Korea had the potential for “rapid economic growth,” including a strong cohesive ideology.<sup>7</sup> On

the other hand, South Korea suffered from an “ideological vacuum,” and its developmental policies were at best, “hit-and-miss.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, South Korea was the most troubled and troublesome client of the U.S., or, in Komer’s words, America’s “unstable stepchild.”<sup>9</sup>

According to a popular Korean saying, one shall find opportunities in crisis. In 1965, the crisis in Indochina presented an opportunity for South Korea to shed its image as a threatened, poor, unstable, and isolated nation. That year, the U.S. decided to “Americanize” the Vietnam War because of South Vietnam’s failure to stem the Viet Cong insurgency. The U.S. did not want to go in alone and sought assistance from its allies. In all of its major military actions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. had allies that backed its mission and fought together -- in World Wars I and II, as well as the Korean War. The Vietnam War, however, turned out to be a lonely intervention. America’s European and Pacific allies failed to muster meaningful help.

South Korea was an exception. Korea understood the Vietnam War, or America’s deepening involvement, as an opportunity to remake itself. The government of Park Chung Hee was so determined to enter the war that U.S. officials had to put a damper on its enthusiasm. On one occasion, Dean Rusk, secretary of state, lectured to the South Korean government that the Vietnam War was beyond its capabilities:

[The] struggle against [the] Viet Cong is a guerrilla war in which [the] enemy is elusive and difficult to find and fix. He seeks to attack by surprise....When being pursued he often melds into [the] population. Under such circumstances it is difficult even for [the Vietnamese] forces.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, South Korea lacked “skilled cadres...with command of English/or French, who might be most useful against the Vietcong.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Korea’s combat soldiers have no “suitable role” to play.<sup>12</sup> Regardless, the Park government persisted and, when it became clear to the Johnson Administration that no other allies were willing to contribute combat forces, the U.S. forged an alliance with South Korea in the Vietnam War.

In September 1965, Korea’s combat soldiers landed in South Vietnam where Korea’s military engineering units had been operating since February. In September 1966, Korea’s troop strength reached 50,000. In conjunction with the military buildup, South Korea’s civilians arrived in Vietnam to work for various military contractors. In 1966 alone, 10,000 Korean civilian workers left Korea for Vietnam. Once in Vietnam, South Korea embarked on a national campaign to impress the free world; the U.S., the leader, in particular. The campaign turned out to be a watershed in Korea’s modern history.

## **MILITARY**

The most dramatic changes in South Korea’s national image in South Vietnam took place *vis-à-vis* Korea’s military forces. Before the Vietnam War, the South Korean military forces suffered from one predominant image shared by many American commanders, the so-called “bug out” from the Korean War. During the early stage of the war, the South Korean defense had simply crumbled before the invading North Korean forces. The soldiers abandoned their positions in panic and became part of a stream of refugees heading south. As noted by the *Stars and Stripes*, the U.S. armed forces newspaper, in the Korean War, the “Korean troops did not always perform in a manner designed to inspire respect”<sup>13</sup> The Korean soldiers in the Vietnam War turned that perception around and rode a wave of respect for their actions in and out of the battlefield.

Initially, the U.S. military remained cautious about infusing the Korean forces into heavy combat. Since the Koreans were “sensitive to the possibility of heavy casualties,” the U.S. commanders concluded, they should first “take over the security mission at the major logistic bases of Cam Ranh and Qui Nhon,” then gradually “extend the secure areas and reinforce the ARVN in that populous and important province” along the coastal areas of central Vietnam.<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, South Korea's combat soldiers entered the war primarily as sentries at American military depots in Vietnam.

Such a cautious strategy turned out to be unnecessary. Korean forces went on the offensive early on and continued to expand their tactical area of responsibility beyond the periphery of Qui Nhon. Eventually, the Korean forces "provided protection to the South Vietnamese for a distance of several hundred miles up and down the coast," from Da Nang in north to Phan Rang in the south.<sup>15</sup> According to South Korea's official tallies, its forces killed more than 40,000 enemy soldiers while suffering about 5,000 casualties.

In Vietnam, South Korean forces acquired two conflicting images. On the one hand, they were recognized by the U.S. military as well as by journalists who reported on the war, as fearless and effective combat forces. On the other hand, Koreans were criticized for their sometimes cruel and heavy-handed tactics. The most definitive approval came from U.S. military leaders in Vietnam, notably, General William C. Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam. In March of 1966, six months after the arrival of the first contingent of Korea's combat soldiers, Westmoreland's military command conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the Korean units. The American military command was impressed with the Koreans despite some problems. First, in terms of their combat effectiveness, Koreans were reported to have achieved a kill ratio of about 16 to 1 against the enemy. They "excelled in defending and securing installations and routes." They were also "very effective in maintaining security over an area, either alone or in coordination with ARVN units." U.S. and Vietnamese officials agreed that the "social behavior" of the Koreans was "excellent" and perhaps, "better than that of Americans." The Koreans were observed to have spent leisure time playing "volleyball rather than in bars," even in Saigon where there were, certainly, "more bars than volleyball courts."<sup>16</sup>

American commanders were especially impressed with the way Koreans were better able to win the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese than U.S. soldiers. As a result, the Vietnamese were more receptive to the South Korean units' pacification efforts. Again, Westmoreland was impressed. He reasoned, "Since a sizeable percentage of the Korean troops had agricultural backgrounds, a natural kinship existed with the rural inhabitants of Vietnam and improvements in farming techniques and village accommodations."<sup>17</sup> After receiving a report on South Korean units' psychological warfare, the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam excitedly cabled Washington, "This is the kind of clever politics, plus clever soldiering which our side must do. It is what I have been dreaming of for three years. And now it has happened. We are going all but out to get the word around so that others may do the same."<sup>18</sup> In conclusion, the Koreans were doing "a magnificent job," according to Westmoreland.<sup>19</sup>

War correspondents too reported on the accomplishments of the Korean units. Nicolas Tomalin, a reporter for the *Times of London*, visited South Vietnamese, the American, and Korean units near Qui Nhon, and reported the following comparison: in the area under responsibility of the Vietnamese troops, he found that the Viet Cong forces units were in "total control." Actually, "one can see their [Viet Cong] sandbagged roadblock through binoculars." To the west of the Koreans, he met the Americans who were conducting a "search and kill" operation, code-named, "Crazy Horse." Tomalin writes, "All that resulted" from a week long operation was "the highest American casualty toll of the war (146 killed, over 800 wounded), and indiscriminate mayhem." On the other hand, in the areas where the Koreans took charge, Tomalin relates, he drove "60 miles in total darkness," during which he encountered "Not one shot, no sign of ambush." He noted, "Nowhere else in all Vietnam can one do that." What made Koreans succeed "where the kind, rich Americans have relatively failed?" The answer was simple: "the Koreans understand this war and fight it with as much ruthlessness, and hand-to-hand determination as the Viet Cong." Therefore, Tomalin concluded, "if all Vietnam were occupied by Koreans, or if the Americans could learn" from the Koreans' *ruse de guerre*, "this war would be won by now."<sup>20</sup>

The weekly news magazine, *TIME*, was equally impressed with the Koreans. The following incident was cited as brilliance of the Korean patrol in the jungles of South Vietnam: a

Korean patrol entered a cottage belonging to a Vietnamese peasant family and found three people, a woman and two children, having a meal of rice. At that point, the leader of the patrol, a first lieutenant named Lee, “noticed at once what a Western might easily have missed: there was too much rice for three people.” Lee immediately concluded that the family was expecting company. So, Lee and his soldiers “rounded up the villagers and placed a guard in three houses. Then his men moved out to set up an ambush.” Two hours into the ambush, “three Viet Cong came to dinner” and, according to *TIME*, they soon “died of lead poisoning” caused by M-16 rounds.

Also, *TIME* made note of the Korean forces’ success with the pacification campaign. It reported, “When refugees come back to a Korean cleared village, they are likely to find their houses cleaned and repaired, the grass cut, and area sprayed with insecticide.” Had there been any misdeeds committed by Korean soldiers? Of course. However, Koreans had unique way of dealing with violators. “Two Korean soldiers who raped a Vietnamese woman were summarily shot in front of their company.” Because of the Koreans soldiers’ effectiveness, *TIME* concluded, they “accomplished in eight months what eluded the French and Vietnamese for 20 years: securing the lush and prosperous coastal plain of Binh Dinh province.”<sup>21</sup> The *New York Times*, which often criticized the allied war effort, also recognized that “Cocky, disciplined and tough -- some say brutal -- the Fierce Tigers [Maeng Ho] operate the only sizable piece of South Vietnamese territory wrested from the Vietcong.” In the areas controlled by the Koreans, the reporter noted “it is possible, if not necessarily wise, to drive unarmed at night.”<sup>22</sup>

In May 1968, the *Reader’s Digest*, arguably the most popular magazine in the world in terms of copies sold, contained a somewhat unusual story. The magazine, whose stories are considered light and soft, usually about the beauty of nature, personal heroism and pleasant Americana -- included a story about America’s allies in the Vietnam War. This article, written by a military editor of the *New York Times*, made the following note on the Koreans:

Because the Rocks [Republic of Korea soldiers] tolerate little dissent, some Vietnamese appear to be afraid of them. But the Korean’s administration generally seems fair, if stern. They bring to the Vietnamese war an Asian psychology, an Oriental approach, which Western troops lack, and their methods -- some think have had a greater effectiveness because of this.”

The article also noted that “the Koreans have already built a dam across the Gia Phu River, north of Qui Nhon, which permits irrigation of 2200 acres of arable land.”<sup>23</sup> Obviously, the importance of this article lies not with its military analysis. Rather, it was presumably the first time that South Korea was featured in such positive light in a magazine of America’s heartland. The news reports regarding the Korean military in South Vietnam seem to have relied on heavily spun official briefings that were derided as “follies.” Regardless, the fact of the matter is that they were widely read and contributed to the shaping of a new image of South Korea as a confident, capable, and committed friend in America’s most perplexing military challenge.

The Korean soldiers’ reputation and record in combat against the Viet Cong helped some of them find employment as security guards in Vietnam after being discharged from their tour of duty. The U.S. military contracted them to provide security around compounds that housed U.S. military and embassy personnel in Saigon. These paramilitary security guards, too, left strong impressions on the Americans they protected. For example, one naval commander recalled that this “tough bunch” of Koreans protected many Americans in Saigon during the Tet offensive of 1968.<sup>24</sup>

South Korea scored a symbolic victory for itself toward the end of the war. In November 1969, President Richard Nixon announced his intention to “Vietnamize” the Vietnam War. The following month, in December, the Philippines withdrew its Civic Action Group from South Vietnam and became the “first out.” In late 1970, Australia began to withdraw forces and, within

a year, except for a handful of advisors, the Aussies were gone. By spring of 1972, Thailand and New Zealand completed their withdrawal of troops. In August, the last U.S. combat forces departed from Vietnam. In comparison, South Korea's withdrawal schedule was more gradual and delayed. Between December 1971 and April 1972, South Korea withdrew about 10,000 soldiers including the Marines. However, Korea kept its infantry units, about 37,000 soldiers, in Vietnam until March of 1973. In doing so, South Korea can claim the title of being the "last out" in the Vietnam War. That was a dramatic change from the "bug out" that characterized the South Korean military for a long time.

At the same time, concerns over the Korean forces' tactics were expressed. U.S. officials invariably described the Korean units' *modus operandi* as "meticulous," "deliberate," and "harrowing." For example, Henry McPherson, Johnson's special assistance, sent to Vietnam to report on America's third country allies, wrote back, "God, they [Koreans] are a tough bunch. They have a method of seal-and-search that is the epitome of war psychology; it is slow, harrowing, and effective." He told Johnson that his only hope *vis-à-vis* Koreans was that he would "never meet one in a rice paddy some night without the right set of credentials." McPherson also remarked that, because Koreans are "too brutal and careless of civilian life," during their operations, some U.S. officials in Vietnam felt that they "created as many problems as they solved."<sup>25</sup> General Creighton Abrams, successor to Westmoreland as the commander of U.S. forces, once compared the war effort in Vietnam to orchestral music and made the following remark about the Koreans: "It is sometimes appropriate to emphasize the drums or the trumpets or the bassoon, or even the flute." Koreans, he noted, played mostly one instrument – "the base drum," or brute force.<sup>26</sup> Despite such criticisms against the Korean forces, it was not questioned that "the Korean forces have proven themselves to be a highly effective fighting force, without which, the Vietnamese Armed Forces (South) and other free world forces would be severely pressed to maintain control of this important part of the eastern coastal plains."<sup>27</sup> In other words, the Koreans were indispensable.

## ECONOMIC

The Vietnam War engendered one of the most massive and rapid construction drives in history. Ironically, in order to destroy the enemy, the U.S. first had to build South Vietnam's infrastructure. As noted by RMK-BRJ, the principle construction consortium that the U.S. government relied on in South Vietnam, "every type of useful facility known to man had to be built for the military service." The most challenging part of this construction bonanza, popularly called "Building by the Billion," was assembling the necessary labor force. Part of the problem was that American officials and contractors found the local Vietnamese work force generally unsatisfactory. As an alternative American contractors relied heavily on Korean civilian workers. The *Engineering News-Record*, America's leading construction and engineering trade magazine, described the Vietnamese workers as "small men" who "often weigh[ed] only 90 lb or so, and look[ed] like children at the wheel of a big bulldozer or truck." Some were physically equipped for no more than "only four or five hours a day" of construction work.<sup>28</sup> Some were willing and physically capable, but they were "quite limited" in skill.<sup>29</sup> American companies were also suspicious of the Vietnamese work force which was susceptible to Viet Cong infiltration. American managers even faulted Buddhism whose elaborate ceremonies and holidays forced them to lose "thousands of man-hours of work."<sup>30</sup> American contractors had even less respect for the Vietnamese subcontractors who were suspected of paying-off both the Viet Cong and South Vietnamese authorities. Such practices were "distasteful enough, but a necessary price of operating in the strange war environment" of South Vietnam, noted the *Engineering News-Record*.<sup>31</sup>

Unsavoury working conditions compounded by suspicion and prejudice toward local Vietnamese laborers prompted American companies to search for third country workers. "Though the Vietnamese government frown[ed] upon it," the *Engineering News-Record* insisted, the

American builders had “no choice but to increase its hiring of Filipinos and Koreans.”<sup>32</sup> Between 1965 and 1971, U.S. contractors in Vietnam employed more than 15,000 Koreans.

A good example of the reliability of the Korean work force in Vietnam was the construction of the American airbase in the Phu Cat Mountains, 20 miles north of Qui Nhon. In early 1966, the U.S. government contracted RMK-BRJ for the project and the consortium brought in a large number of Korean civilian workers. Before the start of the construction, units from Korea’s Tiger Division were called to clear the Viet Cong presence in the area, which was once their stronghold. Under the Korean soldiers’ protection and escort, Korean workers went to work. The construction of Phu Cat base was a challenging project even by the standards of wartime Vietnam. This is how the U.S. Air Force’s official history records what the construction crew members were up against:

When the [Vietnamese] villagers entered the [runway sites] they collected fire wood, stole runway stakes, set booty traps, and on one occasion, committed a murder.

Leaflets left by the Viet Cong were frequently found in the work and living areas. The operator of the water treatment plant was discovered to be a Viet Cong. Mines and booby traps were a constant source of concern -- one Korean soldier was killed and three injured by a mine. The American excavation superintendent emerged from his truck after a mine blew it fifty feet into the air. Two Korean officers were killed by snipers near the construction site. The Koreans repulsed a Viet Cong attack on the workers.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the challenges, on December 20, 1966, the first concrete was poured and 11 days later, planes began to land at the Phu Cat air base. U.S. veterans who were at the Phu Cat base during its construction stage readily give credit to the Korean soldiers and crew members. One soldier later recalled that “the camp had ROK [Republic of Korea] marines [maintaining] security and the Viet Cong did not like to fight against the Koreans, as they showed no mercy.”<sup>34</sup> Another American soldier had the following recollection:

Free time at night at Phu Cat was taken by enrolling in Karate [Tae Kwan Do] classes. One of the [Korean] workmen was...[a] black belt and for a nominal charge would give nightly lessons. Unfortunately, to get an advance belt, one had to ‘fight’ a Korean soldier who already held the level of belt you desired. Not many Americans got over 1 [the first] belt -- me included. The ROK [Republic of Korea] soldiers took no prisoners, even in training.<sup>35</sup>

South Korean civilian workers were also hired as stevedores and drivers in support of American logistics operations. Some U.S. soldiers left Vietnam with a strong impression of the Koreans who unloaded and delivered the war *materiel* to different military units. The workers of Korea’s Han Jin Company, which the U.S. military contracted to handle the cargoes at the port Qui Nhon, are a good example. According to the U.S. 5<sup>th</sup> Transportation Terminal Command, which took charge of logistics operations at Qui Nhon described this relatively unknown Korean company of being “capable of discharging vessels, moving commodities to the beach, loading into beach clearance vehicles, and transporting to the depot or other inland destinations.” One member of this command had the following comment on Korean drivers: “Even though they were civilians, they were great. They lined up in the convoys like anyone else, wore their steel pots and flak jackets, and drove with professional dependability.”<sup>36</sup> These drivers traversed the Qui Nhon-An Khe-Pleiku route, one of the most important supply-lines into the highlands of South Vietnam. American military contractors compensated the Korean civilian workers well because of their skills and dependability. In the beginning of the war, American contractors preferred Filipino workers primarily for their command of English. However, Korean workers gradually outpaced

the Filipinos in terms of number and salary scale due to their skill level and their ability to work with Korean military units. The Vietnamese laborers earned significantly less.

South Korean companies that won U.S. government contracts eventually grew into business conglomerates (chaebol). Han Jin Company, contracted to do stevedoring at Qui Nhon, was not considered a major Korean conglomerate in the early 1960s. After five years in Vietnam, Han Jin rose to become the third largest conglomerate in Korea in terms of total assets by 1971. The Hyundai Corporation was another major beneficiary of the Vietnam War. Hyundai Corporation's legendary founder, Chung Ju Yung, proudly wrote that the foundation of its rise to become a global construction concern and top Korean conglomerate was laid in South Vietnam.

Korea's economic growth, largely fueled by earnings from South Vietnam, attracted the attention of the international business community. In the middle of 1966, a year and half since Korea's combat force were dispatched to South Vietnam, *Businessweek* noted that "While War raged in Vietnam, another Asian country once threatened with a Communist takeover -- South Korea" was "churning with...a drive to industrialize." It observed that "gleaming new buildings" and the chimneys of "modern factories" loomed over "thatched-roof villages." Also, "Hundreds of tiny, primitive manufacturing shops in the cities [we]re humming as never before, with workers turning out garments, textiles, and light manufactures." As reminded by *Businessweek*, "The U.S. like[d] this, of course."<sup>37</sup>

Korean civilian workers had their moments of incompetence and unrest. The most troubling moment in the history of Korea's labor export to South Vietnam came in late November 1967 when Korean civilian workers rioted and took over the docks of Qui Nhon. The incident started when dead bugs were reportedly found in the meal prepared for Korean workers by an American catering contractor. The Koreans loudly protested and the panicky American manager of the mess hall fired warning shots into the air. The protesting crowd dispersed but the rumor began to spread among Korean civilian workers throughout South Vietnam, numbering more than 10,000 at that point, that two of their compatriots were shot and killed by American guards. Enraged, 2,000 Korean workers gathered in Qui Nhon and began the protest that eventually turned into a riot. The protesting Korean workers commandeered heavy equipment and destroyed billets of their American supervisors. According to one eyewitness, docks of Qui Nhon, one of the most critical logistics base in Vietnam fell into a state of lawlessness. Horrified by the violent actions of the Korean workers, their American supervisors and colleagues refused to show up for work for a while even after calm was restored.

Also, there were incidences of mishandling of expensive and vital cargoes by the Korean workers. For example, at Da Nang, Korean stevedores had once accidentally dumped six Patton tanks into the sea. The Korean crew had first unloaded the tanks from the naval transport ship and placed them on a barge. Unfortunately, the tanks were wrongly positioned and the waves from a tugboat caused the barge to rock and the tanks to fall into the harbor. A costly salvage operation had to be undertaken to the dismay of U.S. officials. One incredulous American soldier recalled: "Underwater divers were brought in the next day to begin hooking up the tanks...and get them out of the salt water. All six were removed and fresh water tank trucks came to the port every to wash down the tanks." Eventually, the rusting tanks were taken to the Philippines for scrape metals. The tanks were mis-positioned on the barge because the Korean stevedores were rushing to unload as much and as fast as possible, for they were paid by the tonnage of cargo they offloaded.<sup>38</sup> Also, not all Korean technicians were in command of the skill level they claimed in their job applications, thereby inviting complaints from their American employers. The Korean military contributed to this problem by placing some Korean soldiers completing their tour of duty in Vietnam with American companies as skilled technicians.

The Korean civilian work force in Vietnam included entertainers who were organized into 4 or 5 member so-called "go-go bands" and crisscrossed the country to perform for Korean and American soldiers. Some of them left behind the image of eager-to-please, superficial and

comical Asians in the minds of American soldiers whom they were contracted to entertain. One naval officer found them more hilarious than entertaining:

A young Korean group, “*The K-Tones*” sponsored by the USO took the stage. They could not speak English, yet began playing and singing American pop songs. With jet-black ducktail hair, flashing teeth and gyrations ala Elvis, they were real showmen. The only problem was their enunciation of mimicked lyrics. They could not overcome the harsh “sing-song” nasally twang common among Orientals.

As I remember, their rendition of the Los Bravos hit “*Black is black...I want my baby back.*” sounded something like, “*Block ish block, aaww vant mi bobbie bock.*” Now, imagine their attempt at Christmas carols! It was absolutely hilarious!<sup>39</sup>

Some American G.I.s who ferried Korean entertainers between bases had harsher things to say about them. An army helicopter pilot had the following recollection: “I remember flying around a group of pungent Korean beauties at one point....I remember landing at several ROK [Republic of Korea] outposts and listening to the girls sing folk songs....Talk about [Viet Cong] Mortar Magnet. I was happy to get out of there before dark.” Another pilot remembers them for their bodily odor: “I got to fly miss Korea pageant around to their [Korean] fire bases. I was told to be on my best behavior, not to drool (as if.) If I remember, they smelled like *kimchi*, yuck.”<sup>40</sup>

## CULTURAL

Before the Vietnam War, the most well known cultural product of Korea outside of the country was, arguably, the Korean War orphans and the abandoned children adopted by the Westerners. Foreign adoption was the “the primary social policy for orphaned and abandoned children” of South Korea in the 1950s and the 60s and many of them found new life in middle class homes throughout the U.S. Other than these transplanted orphans and, possibly, the Kim Sisters, a modestly successful Las Vegas act in the 1960s, Western societies had very little to identify as distinctively Korean. *Tae Kwon Do*, Korea’s national martial arts, changed this sad reality.

In early 1967, a battle in a South Vietnamese village called Tra Binh Dong, Quang Ngai Province, brought *Tae Kwon Do* into the international limelight. On the night of February 14, an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 North Vietnamese regulars that had infiltrated into the South attacked a military outpost defended by about 300 Korean Marines. Unlike the usual Viet Cong attacks, North Vietnam regulars mobilized significant firepower against the defenders. The Vietnamese attackers, while “screaming and blowing whistles,” launched human wave assaults against the outnumbered and outgunned Korean defenders. The Korean Marines repelled the frantically advancing enemy by getting out of their dugouts and engaging them in hand-to-hand and bayonet combat. When the enemy retreated in the morning of the 15th, there were 104 dead communist soldiers lying within the Korean defense parameter, “many of them eviscerated or brained.” The Koreans lost 15 Marines. The key to this stunning outcome, which the *New York Times* called South Korea’s “greatest victory” since its intervention in the war, was the martial arts skills of the Korean soldiers. As reported in *TIME*, the Tra Bihn Dong battle was a “knife to knife and hand-to-hand -- and in that sort of fighting the Koreans, with their deadly tae kwon do...are unbeatable.” *TIME* also noted that “a swift, cheek bone shattering flick of a Korean’s bare hand” can easily persuade tight-mouthed Viet Cong suspects to talk during interrogations.<sup>41</sup>

A young second-lieutenant of the U.S. Marines, James L. Jones, serving in Vietnam near the Korean Marines got a “lasting impression” of their martial art skills that evoked “respect among allies and instilling fear in the enemy.”<sup>42</sup> Lieutenant Jones noted that “the ROK Marines’ reputation so intimidated Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army units they actively avoided

ROK forces during combat.” He later became the Commandant of the U.S. Marines and set up the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP), which is required of all U.S. Marines -- from the commandant down to the newest recruit. MCMAP is more than a hand-to-hand combat training program. As in *Tae Kwon Do*, the self-discipline component is as important as the ability to neutralize the enemy with deadly kicks and punches to his vital points. As envisioned by Jones, MCMAP is a program that emphasizes, in addition to “physical conditioning, practical fighting skills, and the confidence such training instills,” the idea that “brute force applied without a specific purpose is usually counterproductive.” Therefore, MCMAP also “stresses developing analytical discrimination to judge the appropriate use of force as a situation might dictate, even at the lowest tactical levels.”<sup>43</sup> One admirer of the program writes that “by combining a program of martial-arts training with the character-building aspects of mental and ethical instruction,” MCMAP creates “strong core values” that “would serve to reinforce the Marine traditions of honor, courage, and commitment.”<sup>44</sup> It could be said that the Korean soldiers in Vietnam turned all present and future U.S. Marines into students of *Tae Kwon Do*.

*Tae Kwon Do* also contributed to Koreans’ image building among the Vietnamese. As a matter of fact, South Korea’s first contribution to the Vietnam War was a group of ten *Tae Kwon Do* instructors who arrived in South Vietnam in September 1964. *Tae Kwon Do* became so hugely popular in South Vietnam that, according to Korean government record, nearly one million Vietnamese received *Tae Kwon Do* training. When the Vietnam War ended, hundreds of Korean *Tae Kwon Do* instructors left Vietnam and resettled in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. They continued with the export of the most internationalized cultural product of Korea of the time.

The most painful legacy of South Korea’s engagement in South Vietnam in the cultural realm is the Vietnamese who were fathered by Koreans during the war. Most of the South Korean civilians who had worked in wartime Vietnam came without their family members. Therefore, it was not uncommon that they established extramarital relations with Vietnamese women. Also, many such children were born to Korean soldiers and their lovers. Since the end of the Vietnam War, neither the Korean embassy nor the military has undertaken organized efforts to evacuate the women or their children. As in the case of Amerasians, the Vietnamese children fathered by Koreans were subjected to discrimination and ostracism. For example, after the communist victory in the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese children that carried Korean blood were barred from attending school for five years. Understandably, many of them remained illiterate and poor. Their demeaning and deprived lives and South Korea’s refusal to deal with this issue is well reflected in the fact that no one is sure how many of them are living in Vietnam. The estimate varies from 1,500 to 50,000. Recently some of them have successfully brought patrimony suits against their surviving fathers in Korea who, in most cases, refuse to provide financial support. This painful cultural legacy of South Korea’s involvement will not go away because, as one such child, Choi Su Jin, now in her 30s, wrote to her long gone Korean father, a colonel in the Tiger Division during the war, “I will find and greet you as long as you are alive in this world.”<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The question of what image South Korea established in the Vietnam War is one of the most controversial issues concerning Korea’s past. To borrow from the noted anti-war intellectual, Noam Chomsky, the Koreans were “professional killers [who] just massacred people outright.”<sup>46</sup> Some Vietnamese who survived the war agree. Nearly forty years after the war, one Vietnamese villager recalled that “[m]eeting a Korean was like meeting death.”<sup>47</sup> The historian Frank Baldwin castigated Korean soldiers as “America’s Rented Troops.” Some have branded Korean civilian work force in South Vietnam as war profiteers benefiting from “pure featherbedding” by the U.S. government. For example, one observer noted that, in Saigon, Korean civilian workers manned “huge Manhattan style trucks that mechanically ingested the refuse, when there were thousands of

destitute [Vietnamese] who desperately needed work and could have removed the garbage more cheaply and without...such costly equipment.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite such harsh criticisms, South Korea remained remarkably well focused in its mission to impress the enemy and friend alike in Vietnam. South Korea acted like a tough street cop who is famous for an excruciating arm twist and impressive arrest record. To South Korea and its allies, the former was what made the latter possible, therefore, there was no reason to hide the Korean forces’ tactics. Actually, the Koreans publicize them. After all, the allies were fighting in Vietnam because they considered the communist challenge a criminal violation of South Vietnam’s sovereignty. Korea also knew that there were more supporters than detractors of its tactics, as evidenced by the following story in *TIME*: “Once, when the mutilated body of a Korean soldier was found in a Viet Cong-sympathizing village, the Koreans tracked down a Viet Cong, skinned him and hung him up in the village.” There is no hint of horror or outrage in this news story. Rather, the report went on to note that “Not surprisingly, captured Viet Cong orders now stipulate that contact with the Koreans is to be avoided at all costs – unless a Viet Cong victory is 100% certain.”<sup>49</sup>

South Korea’s calculation paid off. During the Vietnam War years, South Korea received praises that were not thought possible before. From President Johnson, Koreans were “magnificent soldiers and a great tribute to their nation.”<sup>50</sup> Johnson once told Chung Il Kwon, South Korea’s Prime Minister, that he was deeply impressed with “the courage, friendship, gallantry, and love of freedom evinced by the people of Korea.” He even asked Chung to go “tell the mothers of these fine [Korean soldiers] just how proud we [Americans] all are of the job they are doing in Vietnam.”<sup>51</sup> Such words had never been uttered by an American president about South Korea or its soldiers. The U.S. ambassador to Korea in the 1960s wrote rather frankly that Koreans saved Americans “a great deal in blood and treasure.”<sup>52</sup> Before South Korea’s intervention in the Vietnam War, the same ambassador had averred that Koreans were “in no position to play important international role” because of their many internal problems.<sup>53</sup> After eight and half years of determined but controversial commitment in South Vietnam that no other American ally could match, as one White House aide summed up, South Korea became “no longer a fragile and isolated U.S. ward.”<sup>54</sup> At this point in South Korea’s history, that was the most urgent national goal.

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<sup>1</sup>Jae-woong Yoo, “‘Dynamic Korea’ Image Goes Global,” *Korea Times*. This article is available online at <http://times.hankooki.com/lpage/special/200502/kt2005021821500345250.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>“Notes of the 485<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council,” 13, June 1961, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963*, Northeast Asia, 481.

<sup>3</sup>House of Representative, 95 Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, “Investigation of Korean-American Relations, Report of the Subcommittee on International Organization of the Committee on International Relations,” October 31, 1978, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), p.165.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun*, (New York: Norton, 1997), 354.

<sup>5</sup>Edward A. Olsen, “Japan and Korea,” in *Japan’s Foreign Relations: A Global Search for Economic Security* eds. Robert S. Ozaki and Walter Arnold (Boulder, Westview Press, 1985), p. 171.

<sup>6</sup>Komer to Bundy, March 26, 1964, “Memos, Vol. I, 11/63 - 6/64,” Box 254, Korea Country File, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas. [Hereafter cited as Johnson Library]

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<sup>7</sup>“The Outlook for Korea,” September 7, 1961, “14.2, North Korea,” Box 5, National Intelligence Estimate, National Security File, Johnson Library, pp. 11-12.

<sup>8</sup>Hughes to Rusk, “Unification -- As Seen From North and South Korea,” July 30, 1964, “Memos, Vol. II, 7/64-8/65,” Box 254, Korea Country File. Johnson Library.

<sup>9</sup>Komer to Johnson, July 31, 1964, “Memos, Vol. II, 7/64 - 8/65,” Box 254, Korea Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>10</sup>Cable 12 to Seoul, July 3, 1964, “Cables, Vol. II, 7/64 - 8/65,” Box 254, Korea Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>11</sup>Research Memorandum, “Third Country Assistance to South Vietnam,” August 28, 1964, “Memos, Vol. XVI, 8/16 - 31/64,” Box 7, Vietnam Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>12</sup>Cable 12 to Seoul, July 3, 1964, “Cables, Vol. II, 7/64 - 8/65,” Box 254, Korea Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>13</sup>“‘Chesty’ Would Be Proud of These Marines,” *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, March 20, 1968.

<sup>14</sup>JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] 10969, 13 June 1965, “Cables (B), vol. 35, 6/1-21/65,” Box 18, Vietnam Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>15</sup>Stanley Larsen and James L. Collins Jr., *Allied Participation in Vietnam* (Washington D.C.: Department of Army, 1975), p. 136, 145.

<sup>16</sup>Cable 3169 from Saigon, March 2, 1966, “Cables, Vol. XLVIII, 3/1-16/66,” Box 28, Vietnam Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>17</sup>U.S.G. Sharp and W.C. Westmoreland, “Report on the War in Vietnam,” (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 224.

<sup>18</sup>Cable 16456 from Saigon, January 25, 1967, “NODIS, Vol. 5(B) 1/67-4/67,” Box 47, Vietnam Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>19</sup>“Background Briefing Presented By General Westmoreland,” 29 June 1967, “#18 History File, 1 June-1 July 67, [I]” box 12, Westmoreland Papers, Johnson Library.

<sup>20</sup>*The Sunday Times* (London) May 29, 1966, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *TIME*, July 22, 1966, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times*, February 12, 1967. p. 8.

<sup>23</sup>Hanson W. Baldwin, “We Are Not Alone in Vietnam,” *The Reader’s Digest*, May 1968, p. 125-129.

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<sup>24</sup>Ed Bookhardt, "Shotgun Red, Boom-Boom and the Year of the Monkey," This memoir is available online at <http://www.goatlocker.org/plank/bookhardt.htm>.

<sup>25</sup>Henry McPherson [Special Assistant to President] to Johnson, 13 June 1967, "Vietnam-1967 (part 2), [3 of 3,]" Box 29, Files of Harry McPherson," National Security File, Johnson Library.

<sup>26</sup>Larson and Collins, Jr., *Allied Participation*, p. 153.

<sup>27</sup>Bunker to Johnson, 7 June 1967, "Vietnam 8B[A]m Bunker's Wkly Rpt to the President," Box 104, Vietnam Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>28</sup>*Engineering News-Record*, May 13, 1965, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup>*Engineering News-Record*, February 10, 1966, p. 62.

<sup>30</sup>*Fortune*, September 1966, p. 203.

<sup>31</sup>*Engineering News-Record*, February 10, 1966, p. 62.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>John Schlight, *The War in South Vietnam: The Years of the Offensive* (Washington D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1988), 154-158.

<sup>34</sup>Bob Snider, "Phu Cat Air Base, Republic of South Viet Nam." This testimony is available online at <http://home.att.net/~usaf-redhorse/HorsemenTales.html>.

<sup>35</sup>This comment by Joe Kurtyka is available online at <http://www.c-7acaribou.com/album/jkphotos/jkindex.htm>.

<sup>36</sup>"A Tale of Two Truck Tours," Telephone Interview with John M. Horvath by Richard Killblane, 28 May 2002. The transcript of this interview is available online at <http://134.198.33.115/atav/horvath/horvath.htm>.

<sup>37</sup>*Businessweek*, May 7, 1966, p. 171.

<sup>38</sup>Rich Shaffer, "The End of U.S. Army Cargo Operations at Da Nang Port," available online at <http://134.198.33.115/atav/shaffer.htm>.

<sup>39</sup>Ed Bookhardt, "Shotgun Red, Boom-Boom and the Year of the Monkey," This memoir is available online at <http://www.goatlocker.org/plank/bookhardt.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> These comments are from the website of the 129<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Company of the U.S. Army: <http://www.129th.net>.

<sup>41</sup>*TIME*, February 24, 1967, p. 26.

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<sup>42</sup> LtCol James F. Durand, "The Battle of Tra Binh Dong and the Korean Origins of the U.S. Marine Corps Martial Arts Program," *Marine Corps Gazette* 2005, available at <http://www.mca-marines.org/Gazette/2005/05durand.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Jamison Yi, "MCMAP and the Marine Warrior Ethos" in *Military Review*, Nov.-Dec 2004, available at [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0PBZ/is\\_6\\_84/ai\\_n13821795/pg\\_3](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0PBZ/is_6_84/ai_n13821795/pg_3).

<sup>44</sup> Homer M. Brett, "One Mind, Any Weapon," available online at <http://www.military.com/forums/0,15240,84420,00.html>.

<sup>45</sup> This letter is available online at <http://www.vietnamgo.co.kr/go/father.html#3>.

<sup>46</sup> "An Interview with Noam Chomsky," *Indochina Newsletter*, No. 18 (November-December 1982).

<sup>47</sup> Ron Moreau, "Apocalypse Then: Vietnamese villagers mournfully remember a pattern of atrocities by South Korean soldiers," *Newsweek* (International Edition, Asia), April 10, 2000.

<sup>48</sup> George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How American Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), p. 335.

<sup>49</sup> *TIME*, July 22, 1966, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation Between President Johnson and President Park, October 23, 1966, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1964-1968, XXIX, Part I, Korea, p. 201.

<sup>51</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation," March 14, 1967. *Foreign Relations of the United States* 1964-1968, XXIX, Part I, Korea, p. 235.

<sup>52</sup> Cable 40 from Seoul, July 10, 1965, "Cables, Vol. II, 7/64 - 8/65," Box 254, Korea Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>53</sup> Cable 1008 from Seoul, April 15, 1965, "NODIS-LOR, Vol. II, 3/65 - 9/65," Box 46, Vietnam Country File, Johnson Library.

<sup>54</sup> Memorandum to Rostow, June 24, 1966, "Vol. 7, June 21 - 30, 1966," Box 8, Memos to the President, National Security File, Johnson Library.