

Article

# The Issue of Healing War Wounds Viewed from Two Sides: Through Korean and Vietnamese Literary Works

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## Introduction

Vietnam and Korea<sup>1</sup> established the official foreign relations in 1992. For more than 20 years, Vietnam-Korea cooperation relationship has been ceaselessly developing and now has attained a level of “Strategic Partnership.” Nowadays, Korea is a leading investor in Vietnam. Vietnam is one of the Asian countries where *hallyu* (Korean wave) is received the most warmly. Diplomatic relations between Korea and Vietnam are constantly expanding and closely linked. However, there are still past debts which cannot be ignored if the two sides truly wish to promote effective and sustainable partnership relations. One of these important issues relates to the involvement of Korean soldiers in the US War in Vietnam.

Along with research works (by the scientists Kwon Heonik, Ku Su Jeong, etc.), many memoirs of the officers involved in the Korean Vietnam War (such as Kim Jin Sun, Kim Ki Tae, etc.) have also been published in Korea and Vietnam, with actual information about the war events. Besides, there are many literary works by Korean and Vietnamese writers on Korean soldiers’ participation in the Vietnam War. Literary works reflect not only the reality, but also ways of feeling and thinking on reality. They contribute to a mutual understanding between two nations, directed at closing a grief past and towards a bright future.

Some research papers relating to this topic have been published in Vietnam. Ha Jae Hong (2009) in the paper “A Comparative Study of *The White Land* by Nguyen Trong Oanh and *The Shadow of Arms* by Hwang Seok Young” focused on the content and the form of two novels on the Vietnam War. Tran Van Toan (2010) analyzed “the East Asian discourse” through the poem selection *Miss Saigon* by Lee Dong Soon. Nguyen Thi Thanh Xuan (2012) paid attention to the repentance and reconciliation themes in two novels by Korean writers about the war in Vietnam—*The Shadow of Arms* by Hwang Seok Young and *Times for Eating Lobster* by Bang Hyun Suk. Son Yoo Kyung (2013) made the images of “war’s prisoners and the past’s prisoners” clear in three short stories such as “The Pagoda,” “A Returned Man,” and “The Bird in Molgaewol” by Hwang Seok Young. Most Korean and Vietnamese critics were more interested

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1. In this paper, we use “Korea” to refer South Korea.

in the works of Korean writers than Vietnamese ones.

Applying comparative method, combining poetic and socio-historical approaches, in this paper, we study the issue of healing the war wounds through 6 works by Korean and Vietnamese writers. Two aspects are analyzed: 1) the themes and systems of characters; 2) the viewpoints, the voice, and the ideas.

## The Themes and the Character Systems

In literary works related to Korean military involvement in the Vietnam War, one can easily identify three types of themes and character systems which are associated with three socio-historical aspects:

- (1) The theme of Vietnam as the battlefield for Korean soldiers in the past and at the same time the marketplace for Korean businessmen in the present—such as in the novel *Times for Eating Lobster* (*Thoi gian an tom hum*) by Bang Hyun Suk and the drama *The Source* (*Coinguon*) by Le Duy Hanh.
- (2) The theme of Vietnamese war victim and their Korean mixed race children—as in the selection of poems *Miss Saigon* by Lee Dong Soon and the selection of short-stories *The Drifting Lives* (*Nhung manh doi luan lac*) by Tran Dai Nhat.
- (3) The theme of Korean veterans in Korea—as in the short story “A Returned Man” by Hwang Seok Young and the short story “The Old Man Owning a Restaurant in Seoul” (*Ong gia ban quan an o Seoul*) by Vo Thi Xuan Ha.

### ***The Theme of Vietnam as the Battlefield for Korean Soldiers in the Past and the Marketplace for Korean Businessmen in the Present Time***

During the Vietnam War, more than 320,000 Koreans worked as mercenaries for the United States of America from 1964 to 1973, in Central and Southeast Vietnam, especially in Quang Ngai, Quang Nam, and Binh Dinh. The Korean divisions such as White Horse (*Bach Ma*), Green Dragon (*Rong Xanh*), Powerful Tiger (*Manh Ho*) had massacred many civilians. The numbers of Vietnamese civilians who were killed by Korean soldiers were up to 9,000. According to

Professor Kwon Heonik, in 13 of 43 massacres recorded, more than 100 people were killed at once.<sup>2</sup> In exchange, during this period, Korea received between 1 and 1.5 billion dollars annually as US aid to revive the economy and build the foundation for Korea to miraculously “take-off.” Since the mid-1990s, after Korean-Vietnamese diplomatic relations were established, more and more Korean businessmen seek opportunities in Vietnam. Currently, Korea is one of the top investors with nearly 4,000 enterprises and 150,000 Koreans living and working in Vietnam.

The novel *Times for Eating Lobster* by Bang Hyun Suk appeared in Korea in 2003, the drama *The Source* by Le Duy Hanh appeared in Vietnam in 2006, nearly 40 years after Korean massacres and nearly 10 years since the first Korean enterprises doing business in Vietnam. Both of the works open with a Korean company in Ho Chi Minh City in the present time, and back to the past, exploring the war debts of Korean troops in the Central Vietnam.

During more than 10 years of “pregnancy” of a story about the Vietnam War, the writer Bang Hyun Suk (born in 1961) has visited Vietnam 20 times. Together with Ku Su Yeong, one of the few Korean historians who carefully conduct research on massacres by Korean soldiers in Vietnam, he went to field. Before *Times for Eating Lobsters*, Bang Hyun Suk published his essay selection *The Stars Rising in Hanoi* (2002). His novel *The Form of Existence*, published together with *Times for Eating Lobsters* (2003), had the same theme of Korean soldiers and businessmen in Vietnam.

The main character in *Times for Eating Lobster* by Hwang is Choe Kon Suk, Head of the Department of Business Management. He can speak Vietnamese fluently. When trying to settle a conflict between Korean managers and Vietnamese workers, he went to the native country of Vo Van Loi, the workers’ leader, famous as the “made-of-iron man” because he carries 32 bullet pieces in his body and always being blocked when passing a metal detector (which Korean managers set up to avoid employees’ stealing the plant’s materials). Kon Suk arrives at the village of the E De ethnic people in the Tra Tinh district, Quang Tin province on the Day of Worshiping memorializing the 137 villagers massacred by Korean soldiers. Vo Van Loi was one of only three

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2. This source is available at <http://kienthuc.net.vn/phong-thuy/nhung-toi-ac-cua-manh-ho-rong-xanh-dai-han-o-vn-218777.html>.

survivors. Though the names of places are modified slightly by the writer, the readers still easily relate this event to the real massacre in October 1966 when Korean Force Tiger troops from Quang Thanh hills (in Tinh Tho commune, Son Tinh district, Quang Ngai province) swept in, killing nearly 300 people, most of whom were elderly, women, and children.

*The Source* was written by Le Duy Hanh as a script for *tuong* (a form of Vietnamese traditional theater), then was adapted by Hoang Song Viet into a script for *cai luong* (a form of theater, combining Vietnamese heritage and Western influence, that emerged in modern times). Both Dao Tan Tuong Theater and Tran Huu Trang Cai Luong Theater have successfully staged *The Source* and were awarded national prizes in 2004 and 2008. The online versions of *The Source* are viewed and commented on by many audiences.

In *The Source*, Kim Soo Young went to Vietnam, where her mother, Lee Si-Ho, opened a company. She witnesses a strike of Vietnamese workers protesting the rigid labor discipline, harsh punishments for them. Through the story of Sau Binh, grandmother of Thuy—the workers' leader—and through the story of her grandfather, Kim Soo Young was shocked at the massacres of Korean soldiers killing more than 1,000 civilians in a village. Sau Binh was the only survivor. The drama plot is based on a historical event in Binh An (now Vinh Tay, Tay Son, Binh Dinh province) where in 1966, more than 1,000 people, mostly women and children were brutally murdered by Korean soldiers of the White Tiger Division. Binh An is the hometown of Le Duy Hanh (born 1947), the author of *The Source*.

Both *Times for Eating Lobsters* and *The Source* are structured as parables, drawing parallels between the behaviors of Korean soldiers in the past and of Korean businessmen in the present.

In *Times for Eating Lobsters*, the character Kim, Vice-Director of Choson-sho, a veteran, when getting drunk, made comparison of two periods of his life in Vietnam: "During war time, we were thrown in this land by the government, and now, we are sent to this land again by the company. In the past, we truly did not know why we had to fight here. But now we know. Do you know why I come here now? That's because of the rice cooker" (Bang 2004b, 205). In *The Source*, the character Sau Binh also compares the massacres by Korean soldiers in the past with the starving and sunning hundreds workers by Korean managers in the present and indignantly condemned: "In the past, you used the power of weapons, and in the present, you trust the power of money. You always rely on

‘the truth of the strong.’”

During the early days of Korean companies doing business in Vietnam, many Korean scholars tried to explain that the tense relations between Korean managers and Vietnamese staff in the present rooting in the hostility of Vietnamese people to Korean mercenaries in the past are too serious to be resolved. In the world of *Times for Eating Lobster*, such a causal link proved not to be the core problem. The important thing is the way of behavior of Korean managers in the present. Kon Suk finds that in his company, Korean managers have imposed harsh labor disciplines on the Vietnamese staff which were applied in Korean companies 20 years ago during a time when Korea had just come out of the Korean War and suffered during post-war poverty. Such a military kind of business management created confrontational relations instead of collaboration between Korean and Vietnamese people. It even seems like a continuation of a new kind of war in Vietnam.

Both plots of *Times for Eating Lobsters* and *The Source* make discoveries where the truth is found out at the end with surprises to the insiders. The characters are linked by fate in tangled relationships: they maybe enemies/rivals at the same time as being allies. Not until the last lines of *Times for Eating Lobster*, Kon Suk learns that Pham Van Quoc, one of the three survivors of the Tra Tinh massacre, who went to study in North Korea and became a prestigious leader in local politics, was the younger brother of Pham Tuan An, a famous hero in Vietnamese resistance against the US, and uncle of Eban H’Lien, the E De ethnic girl whom Kon Suk loved passionately. The process of Eban H’Lien’s family photos gradually being filled is the process that Kon Suk gradually comes to realize great things about the Vietnamese. This is also the process that Kon Suk comes to negotiate with himself through an old family photo which he kept for a long time. In the photo, his father was together with a strange woman and his older brother. Kon Suk’s father participated in the Vietnam War. Kon Suk’s older brother, with the Korean name Choe Kon Chan and Vietnamese name Nguyen Khai Hoan, shares the same father but has a different mother. The brother whom Kon Suk always hated (even always secretly wished for his disappearance) but at the same time was indebted to, offered his salary to support Kon Suk’s study.

In *The Source* by Le Duy Hanh, even the first scene opens dramatically. In the house of Mrs. Lee Si Ho, the Director of a Korean company, Sau Binh meets An whose parents were killed in the massacre, coming back from studying

in Korea with a passionate love for Kim Soo Young, Mrs. Lee's daughter. A kind of generational conflict arises when Sau Binh raised her voice: "Is there no other country than Korea for you to go to study? Was the feud forgotten by everyone, except for only me, this miserable old woman?" The love between An and Kim Soo Young seems like Romeo and Juliet. In the last scene, by recognizing Sau Binh's old necklace, a secret was revealed. Lee San Yoo, Kim Soo Young's "grandfather," participated in the massacre. As a military doctor, he stopped Kim Da Jeong, the commanding officer of the massacre, killing a pregnant woman. He helped the woman deliver her baby and while the woman fainted from exhaustion, he decided to save the baby. The mother who survived was Mrs. Sau Binh. The baby who was brought to Korea, and raised by Lee San Yoo as his own daughter was Mrs. Lee Si Ho, the Director of the Korean company in Vietnam. Lee Si Ho's husband was none other than the son of Kim Da Jeong. Eventually, Mrs. Sau Binh realizes that her foe was also her benefactor and that her foes were also her relatives, even blood relatives.

Both of the works tend to a happy ending. In *Times for Eating Lobster*, with his goodwill and sincere love, Kon Suk finally was accepted by the H'Lien family. He is the Korean guy who learned to know how to enter a matriarchal society, to "do as the E De ethnic people do when living with them." In *The Source*, Mrs. Sau Binh prayed to the departed souls for closing the feud and directing to the future of cooperation between Vietnam and Korea.

### ***The Theme of Vietnamese War Victim Women and their Korean Mixed Race Children***

During a war, women are always the victims. With regard to the involvement of Korean soldiers in the Vietnam War, not only a lot of Vietnamese women were massacred but also many suffered sexual abuse. These women and their mixed race children were abandoned after the war. There are no official statistics, however, at a rough estimate there were more than 1,000 Korean-Vietnamese children after the war.

During a one-month trip to Vietnam in 2005, writer Lee Dong Soon (born 1950) was particularly haunted by war wounds. In his selection of poems *Miss Saigon*, 9 poems are on Vietnamese war victim and their Korean mixed race children. The title "Miss Saigon" easily reminds one of the famous musical work by Claude-Michel Schonberg, Alain Boublil, and Richard Maltby: the

tragic love story between an American soldier named Chris and a Vietnamese girl named Kim. In June 2006, when performing for the first time in Korea, this musical piece was an immediate box office success. The writer Lee Dong Soon in particular, and the Korean public in general, could have been touched by the sad love stories between Korean soldiers and Vietnamese girls in the shadow of Chris-Kim love, or vice versa, were moved by the Chris-Kim love story in the shadow of sad loves between Korean soldiers and Vietnamese girls. Before Lee Dong Soon, Pak Yong Han's novel *Far, Far Songba River* (*Meonameon Ssongba-gang*, 1992) dealing with the love story between Hwang, a Korean sergeant, and Bich Thuy, a Vietnamese student, was published. *Far, Far Songba River* was adapted into a set of TV dramas compelling Korean audiences in the 1990s.

Most of the nine poems in Lee Dong Soon's *Miss Saigon* are narrative ones, or poem reports. In them, the poet's voice echoes the feelings of Vietnamese war victim women and their Korean mixed race children.

The man whose name I do not remember  
Do not know where to live in distant Korea  
I just remembered his family name  
As "Kim"  
The son of his and mine  
Called as "Korean mixed race child"  
Miserably suffering detraction  
Over the years growing up  
I am called by everyone as "Miss Saigon"  
Still waiting him back

(Lee, "Miss Saigon")

*The Drifting Lives*, including 15 short stories, is written by Tran Dai Nhat, a "mixed race child" (born 1970) with the Korean name Kim Sang Il. He studied the Korean language, went to Korea to seek his Korean father. He luckily met his father by chance in the company where he worked in Korea. The Korean father accepted Tran Dai Nhat as his son but eventually there is not opportunity for him to reunite with his former wife and his children in Vietnam. Some short stories in *The Drifting Lives* bear autobiographical nuance. Some of them are like reports of the lives of real people that Tran Dai Nhat has met or known during the 19 years of his journey to seek justice for the many unfortunate mothers and children. When *The Drifting Lives* was published in 2008, Tran Dai Nhat had



a list of more than 500 Korean mixed race children in Vietnam with detailed information.

In *Miss Saigon* and *The Drifting Lives*, Lee Dong Soon and Tran Dai Nhat reflect on the diverse relationships between Korean soldiers and Vietnamese women. The popular cases are Korean soldiers making acquaintance with Vietnamese girls in their personal free time to entertain, to momentarily forget war sorrows (such as in the poems “The Diary in a Camp” and “The Korean Crossbred Child—3”). Some of these appointments have resulted into true loves, even marriages (as in the poem “The Korean Crossbred Child—1” and the story “A Human Desert”). There are also cases that Korean soldiers were raping women who passed their camp (as with a crazy girl or a dumb woman in the story “The Drifting Lives”). The most tragic are the ones where girls were raped brutally in raids, right next to the dead bodies of her parents and brothers (such as in the stories “The War Time” and “The Drifting Lives”). In all these relationships, Vietnamese women are always in passive roles.

Some Korean husbands/fathers returned to Vietnam (as in the story “The Woman on the Harbor”) or requested their friends going to Vietnam searching for their wives and children (as in Tran Dai Nhat’s “The Way Back Overwhelmed with Frost”). Though they could not take Vietnamese wives and children to Korea because they were married there, they wanted to give a little money to help them. But such men are of an extremely small minority.

Most war victim women and their Korean mixed race children suffered bad fates. In Lee Dong Soon’s works, there are the children going to their father’s home in Korea, even requesting for assistance from the Justice Office, but all efforts become hopeless (“The Korean Crossbred Child—4”). Their mothers are considered as “used utensils that have to be thrown away” (“The Korean Crossbred Child—3”). They are considered as “a stone on the road which nobody pays attention to” (“The Korean Crossbred Child—2”). In Tran Dai Nhat’s works, many women were shunned because of having a child “with the enemy.” They had to work as servants or became beggars to raise their children. Some of them went crazy. Bearing birth certificates without a father’s name, most Korean mixed race children met with many difficulties in going to school or finding a job. They were insulted by their friends. Many of boys became herdsmen, masons, even thieves, or robbers to make a living. Many of girls became restaurant waitresses, even prostitutes. From grandmothers to mothers and children, the successive generations had to live in “the hell on earth” (in “The

Drifting Lives”).

In *Miss Saigon* as well as in *The Drifting Lives*, the problem of war victim women in the past is put in relation with the problem of cross-culture marriages in the present. The wave of Vietnamese women getting married to Korean men started in the early 2000s. Today there are about 60,000-70,000 Vietnamese brides in Korea. Tran Dai Nhat depicts the actions of matchmaking as “a new kind of raid.” Through Tran Dai Nhat’s stories such as “The Way Back Overwhelmed with Frost,” “Seoul Wildflower Café,” “A Korean Crossbred Girl of 8X-Generation,” “The Story of Going out with Mr. Kim” and Lee Dong Soon’s poems such as “The Moment while Shedding Tears” and “The Arirang Bar,” the authors shine into dark corners of the international marriage market, where many Korean men depend on money, disregarding the dignity of Vietnamese women who, due to their poverty, have to accept marriage with foreign men. In one poem by Tran Dai Nhat, Korean crossbred girls, while standing on streets as prostitutes fear that they may meet with their own Korean fathers.

### ***The Theme of Korean Veterans in Korea***

While the themes in the two previous parts are on Vietnamese victims in Vietnam, the themes of veterans are on Korean victims in Korea. Of approximately 320,000 Korean mercenaries, about 9,000 people have died in Vietnam. The surviving soldiers returned to Korea coping with the long-term effects of war, physically as well as mentally.

The writer Hwang Seok Young (born 1943) was a veteran himself. He fought from 1966 to 1969 in Da Nang. During his early twenties, he was responsible for “cleaning” the traces of massacres of Vietnamese civilians and bringing Korean soldiers’ corpses away (Hwang 2012, 524). Hwang Seok Young published his first work on the Vietnam War in 1970 and pursued the subject for over 35 years. His most famous novel is *The Shadow of Arms* (1985) which has been translated into 7 languages. Relating to the topic of veterans, his most representative work is the short story “A Returned Man” in the selection *Land* published in Korea in 2004.

The veteran character “I” narrating the first person, in the story “A Returned Man,” was seriously insomniac and had to return to his home in the country for convalescence. While watching Mansu, his old friend, torturing

the spy who had Mansu's parents killed, Mansu's brother mad at the Korean War, says: "We would not harm you more than what you've made us suffered" (Hwang 2004, 111), the veteran, "I," suddenly recognizes the cause of his sleeplessness. During the Vietnam War, the character "I" killed many people who did not do anything harmful to him and whom he did not hate. "I" shot, at a very close range, meek old people and innocent children. The character "I" with his military fellows tortured Thanh, a guerrilla, a teacher, a husband, and a father who had no other sin, but being a patriot fighting for his country's freedom and independence, maintaining his dignity, not subjugated by his enemy. "I" became repentant:

What I leave on the battlefield is only immorally hatred...I killed them just because they are the opponents, just because it is the self-evident rule of war. I aimed at shooting them with my courage and the nothingness of war. But...apart from that thing, is there anything else? (Hwang 2004, 116)

After being discharged, the character "I" thought he escaped from the time at war, like a silk worm escaping his cocoon. But, it is not like this because many things lost can't be regained and many things dead can't be regenerated.

The writer Vo Thi Xuan Ha (born in 1959) was never a soldier. However, as she once said: "To say that I was not affected or not pained by this war is merely a way of trying to conceal my losses" (Hoa 2003).<sup>3</sup> Vo Thi Xuan Ha's parents lived in North Vietnam and participated in the resistance against the US while three uncles of hers living in the South fought for the Republic of Vietnam forces as US's allies. After reunification when the relatives met, they all avoided talking of the past war. That's why Vo Thi Xuan Ha's works on the war are always haunted by it.

The short story "The Old Man Owning a Restaurant in Seoul" by Vo Thi Xuan Ha was first published in a newspaper in 2013. The storyteller character in the second person is a Vietnamese young actress going to Korea to attend a training program and acting the role of a mother who was shot in a film about the massacre by Korean soldiers. There are two veteran characters in the

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3. This source is available at <http://giaitri.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/gioi-sao/trong-nuoc/vo-thi-xuan-ha-viet-de-do-dau-don-hon-khi-nhin-thuc-te-1877725.html>.

story. The first is Kim Shin Hao, a famous Korean film director. When giving instructions for the young actress to express the tragic of the war which she growing up in peace has not experienced, Mr. Kim “embracing a guitar, sings a song in Vietnamese” which “arouses a love, dreamy and drastic” (Vo 2014, 96-98). Although not explicit, the story shows the image of a veteran trying to offset his past debt by creating his art work on the war. The second veteran character is an old man owning a restaurant in Seoul. The storyteller character, a Vietnamese actress, met him many times. At first, she was only his customer. Then he called her “a Vietnamese friend of mine.” She knew only a few words in Korean and he knew only a few words in Vietnamese, however, she could feel his warm heart for Vietnam:

When leaving Seoul, she still has not known the name of the old man who kindly bustled setting the table for her. She will also never know that he was a marksman in the Vietnam War who had a bullet lodged near the spine of a woman and who never recovered from the distressed eyes of her baby. (Vo 2014, 100-01)

## **The Viewpoint, the Voice and the Ideas**

Both, Korean and Vietnamese, through their works, are interested in healing war wounds. Korean writers’ works often express the repentance and awakening. Vietnamese writers’ works often express a sincere desire for reconciliation. And Korean writers as well as Vietnamese ones try to build a profoundly mutual understanding and sympathy between Korea and Vietnam.

### ***The Repentance and Awakening in Korean Writers’ Works***

Kon Suk, the central character in *Times for Eating Lobsters*, is not depicted much in his job. We can find him as the Head of the Department of Business Management at Choson-sho Company only through his work interpret in meetings between Korean and Vietnamese people. Besides that, we find him in his everyday life (eating, drinking, love, etc.). The most important event was his journey to Vo Van Loi’s native land at the Day of Worshiping to memorialize the 137 people killed by Korean soldiers. This was a potentially dramatic event.

However, he did not suffer any retaliation. The outcome was his discovery of a historical truth concerning Korean soldiers' wrongdoings in Vietnam as well as of Vietnamese people's tolerance and forgiveness.

Kon Suk is manifested mainly through his thoughts and feelings. In other words, the author pays more attention to his characters' "inside action" than "outside action." We find Kon Suk often sunk into contemplation. He was often affected by past obsessions. In his mind, "his older brother's sincere and resent eyes can't be obliterated." His mixed race brother was forced by them, with his accomplice, to climb a very tall tree and was seriously injured in his ear while falling down, eventually turning deaf. The remorse for "having treated his own brother as a stranger" often appeared whenever Kon Suk pondered his way of behaving, on the one hand, with Korean managers as his compatriots, and on the other, with Vietnamese people whom he more and more connected with. Also recurring in Kon Suk's mind was the image of his brother, as a leader of the workers' demonstration in a company in Korea, accepting death rather than being despised. Kon Suk saw "Vo Van Loi's face blurred and became one with his brother's face." The struggle of Vietnamese workers in Choson-sho was contemplated by him in comparison with the struggle for democracy in Korea. The writer Bang Hyun Suk often lets his character questioned by others, and more significantly by himself.

At the beginning of the story, when a Vietnamese man who was handicapped due to Korean soldiers' crime, angrily asked Kon Suk: "Do you know who made my leg become like this?" (Bang 2004b, 121). Kon Suk was angry of being charged with a mistake which he did not do: "I am not a soldier and not a politician" (Bang 2004b, 122). For a long time, he tried to "regard himself as an island, separately standing between Vietnamese and Korean people." Gradually, he realized he was wrong, he realized that he could not help but got involved. He expressed the repentance not personally but collectively: "On the issue of Vietnam War, many Koreans felt sorry" (Bang 2004b, 273). However, Pham Van Quoc was not satisfied with this: "Later on, regarding sending soldiers to Iraq, Korean people would say "sorry" again, is this excuse enough?" (Bang 2004b, 273). Pham Van Quoc's argument: "The hopelessness of yours is that *hubae* [younger] generation takes the same evil footsteps of *seonbae* [older generation]" made Kon Suk feel shame (Bang 2004b, 272).

While watching Eban H'Lien cutting up a lobster for food and being cut by this lobster, Kon Suk remembered Pham Van Quoc's words: "I don't know

what you will get from Iraq; but from now on, I can confirm that you will lose something, which is first your personal dignity and then national dignity” (Bang 2004b, 282). Thinking of the special ability of lobsters who can cut their own wounded limb and then a new healthy one, Kon Suk muttered: “Why we can’t remove the decayed part of ours like lobsters?” (Bang 2004b, 285).

The veteran character, “I,” in the short story “A Returned Man” by Hwang Seok Young often was haunted by “the shadow of a face with a big mouth laughing.” When watching Mansu torturing his enemy, the character “I” “realized that it was the image of four persons laughing including myself.” The character “I” and his three military fellows tortured Thanh, the guerrilla, like torturing an animal. As mercenaries, forced to become war tools, “I” and his friends could not know the pride of the people fighting for lofty ideals as Thanh. That’s why they could not bear the willpower of the guerrilla determined to preserve his dignity, not accepting even his enemy’s condescension. Thanh might be the Korean soldiers’ prisoner but they can’t deprive him of his freedom. In true nature, Korean soldiers, on the other hand, are war prisoners who never have autonomy. At the end of the work, the character “I” found himself desperately fleeing. He is chased by himself. Finally, the character “I” had to face his ego. He could not trust any help from outside. He was forced to face all past mistakes which his own honesty could not shake off.

The most precious in *Times for Eating Lobsters* as well as in “A Returned Man” is the mindset of questioning oneself and other, gain and loss, spiritual and material value, etc. It is crucial for repentance, awakening, and resurrection.

### ***The Tolerance and Sincere Desire for Reconciliation in Vietnamese Writers’ Works***

In an article in the *Choongang ilbo*, Park Soo Mee, while taking a glimpse of some literary works on Vietnam War by Korean and Vietnamese writers, commented: “The differences arose when many Vietnamese writers treated issues of the past with ‘tolerance’ while the Korean writers viewed history as a source of continuing political turmoil. A Vietnamese proverb summed up their feelings—‘One doesn’t take revenge on old enemies’” (May 29, 2006).<sup>4</sup> The six

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4. This source is available at <http://mengnews.joins.com/view.aspx?aId=2730729>.

works examined in this paper Park Soo Mee's statement. While Korean writers' works are concerned with the enmity kept by Vietnamese people, Vietnamese writers' works seek tolerance and forgiveness.

In Le Duy Hanh's drama *The Source*, the character Sau Binh who is the only survivor from the massacre of 1,000 people, is a symbol of not only a personal feud but also a collective hatred. However, the plot is reversed with the character Lee San Yoo, a military doctor, who dared sacrificing himself to stop the bloody hands of the commanding officer: "These innocent civilians are not our enemies. Where is our conscience?" While saving the mother and her baby, he was injured. The plot is also reversed with the love between Kim Soo Young and An. Their love blossomed when Kim Soo Young watched An acting the role of a Vietnamese prince of the Ly Dynasty who emigrated to Korea in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and became a leader in Korean resistance against the Mongols. Impressed with the heroism and humanism of the Vietnamese people, Kim Soo Young was very discontented with her mother's behavior to Vietnamese workers. While Lee Si Ho expressed the pragmatic viewpoint of businessmen who trust that efficient work is necessarily based on rigid discipline, Kim Soo Young believed in the noble qualities of the Korean people, "the people in white dress."

All stories in Tran Dai Nhat's *The Drifting Lives* are sad, even tragic, dealing with war victim women and their children. With an insider's viewpoint, Tran Dai Nhat expresses his sympathy for them and, at the same time, his discontent. He asks questions about responsibilities not only of Korean husbands/fathers in particular, but also the Korean people in general. Furthermore, he makes a comparison between Korean mixed race children and American ones. While American mixed race children are taken to America, Korean mixed race children face "a way back overwhelmed with frost." Being disdained and renounced not only by Koreans but also by the Vietnamese, war victim women and their mixed race children seem living in a "human desert."

However, as Tran Dai Nhat answered in an interview with the BBC, he did not aim to deepen past wounds, to deepen revenge. Many female characters in his works continued preserving nice memories of love to their Korean men. Many mixed race children longed for calling: "Father!"

In some stories there are the characters, such as a writer, a journalist or a tour guide, who, to a certain extent, are the author's "avatars." They speak out Tran Dai Nhat's notion that "The mission of literature is to light a flame of

love” (Tran 2008a).<sup>5</sup> The character Du in the story “A Night in a Windy Beach” thought: “With *jeong* (a good heart) for each other, everything will be good!”<sup>6</sup> The character “I” in the story “In the Darkness” expresses his altruism and dedication to other mixed race children:

Like a lotus from the mud, I am aware of my fate and try my best to emerge on the water to see the light of blue clear sky. But, there are still many people having the same fate as mine, many dreams of becoming lotuses have not been realized. This concern often makes me have insomnia.<sup>7</sup>

Tran Dai Nhat’s works often end with the strong belief that sincerity will make sympathy and reconciliation will be good for both of two sides.

### *Sympathy and Mutual Understanding*

On the poem selection *Miss Saigon* by Lee Dong Soon, the critic Ahn Mi Yeong once commented: “The poet not only exposes the reality of Vietnam but also read out the mistakes of our nation which are closely relevant to Vietnam. He recalls historical scarred wounds of our nation which are very similar to these ones of Vietnam. In such meaning, *Miss Saigon* can be read as a guide book awakening ‘our present’ with ‘Vietnam as a space to think’” (Lee 2009, 152). In literary works by Korean writers there is not only repentance and in literary works by Vietnamese writers there is not only desire for reconciliation. More importantly, the two are building a profound mutual understanding between two nations who have many historical and cultural similarities and who share a common fate.

The Vietnam-Korea relations in Le Duy Hanh’s drama *The Source* have been shown in a significant historical and cultural perspective, beyond the limits of a certain period. From the author’s viewpoint, it is the harmony spirit as a common value of both Korean and Vietnamese national traditions that becomes

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5. This interview is available at <http://www.nxbkimdong.com.vn/chi-tiet-tin/3-tac-gia/gioi-thieu-tac-gia/71070-nha-van-tran-dai-nhat-van-chuong-phai-thap-lua-tinh-yeu-.html>.

6. For *The Drifting Lives*, I consulted e-book. This source is available at <http://4phuong.net/ebook/32590382/124418672/3-dem-bai-gio.html>.

7. Ibid.



the foundation for a bridge connecting two nations for co-development.

*Times for Eating Lobster* highlights Bang Hyun Suk's message about the tragedy of war by US imperialism that both Vietnam and Korea are all victims. The character Kon Suk said to Vo Van Loi: "I find all of us pitiable. All of us have been placed under war wheels" (Bang 2004b, 240). And the character old man of E De ethnic nodded:

"Vietnamese people are pitiable, however, I think Koreans seem more pitiable. We, because of defending our fatherland, must fight and sacrifice. But Korean soldiers, why they have to go to a faraway country not having any relation with them to be injured and killed?" (Bang 2004b, 240-41)

In *The Drifting Lives*, according to Tran Dai Nhat's viewpoint, the issue between Vietnamese victim women and Korean soldiers, in essence, is the same as the issue of Korean victim women and Japanese soldiers. Korean women occupied a majority of about 200,000 women forced into sexual slavery for Japanese soldiers during the Second World War.

Vo Thi Xuan Ha's short story "The Old Man Owning a Restaurant in Seoul" likes a symphony with sad silences, leaving many thoughts. While listening to the song which the Korean director sings, the Vietnamese young actress was moved. She was also touched by the song which the old man owning a restaurant in Seoul sang when he drove the car taking her and her friend to visit the North and South Korean border. The girl has not enough words to talk to the old man but she can share, in deep silence, the sorrow of the country's division which was the past of Vietnam but is still the reality on the Korean peninsula. At the end of the work, the Vietnamese actress went to the restaurant to saying good bye. She sadly found the old man "skinny as a dry tree in Korean winter."

He said that he was seriously ill. She has not enough words to understand what he had. Just know that it's a certain disease related to something toxic in battlefields in Vietnam. This invisible poison soaked into anyone including this side and the other... (Vo 2014, 99-100)

She holds his hands. It's a gesture of compassion and sharing between people of both sides of a war but having the same "orange" pain.

The works by both Korean and Vietnamese writers start as journeys into

an exotic culture and history of another nation but end as journeys back to their own nation. They contribute to the understanding of Vietnam-Korea relations in an East Asian perspective.

Most Korean and Vietnamese works on war wounds were published from 2003 to 2008, approximately 20 years after Korea freed itself of dictatorship and Vietnam started its Renovation (*Doi moi*) and in both of two countries the freedom of writers had improved. However, themes of war wounds between Korea and Vietnam, in different extent, remain sensitive ones that many people on both sides do not like to verbalize, especially in the context of strengthening Korean-Vietnamese cooperation in many aspects. That's why Vietnamese and Korean writers' works show their citizen responsibility as well as their bravery as the writers daring to "engage." In a meeting with Vietnamese writers, Bang Hyun Sook (2005)<sup>8</sup> said:

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korean government sent troops to Vietnam and recently has sent troops to Iraq. This harsh reality can't be expressed in poems and that's why I have to become a writer....We still have to look back on the past. Because in the journey to the present, many people had to sacrifice, many people were killed and even disgraced.

As the President of the Korean Young Writer Association for Understanding Vietnam as well as Co-Chairman of "Asia Culture Network," Bang Hyun Suk has contributed to cultural exchanges in Asia in a general and mutual understanding between Korean and Vietnamese people in particular.

## Conclusion

The authors and works selected in this paper are typical literary achievements of Vietnamese and Korean literatures on the subject of healing war wounds. Many of these writers are talented ones. The most famous is Hwang Seok Young who was nominated as a Nobel Prize candidate for consecutive years. Le Duy Hanh

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8. This interview is available at <http://www.tienphong.vn/van-nghe/mot-nha-van-han-quoc-noi-tieng-voi-de-tai-viet-nam-3540.tpo>.

is a playwright and at the same time a director who has received numerous prestigious awards, including the National Prize for Literature and Arts (2001). Lee Dong Soon, Bang Hyun Suk, and Vo Thi Xuan Ha have received many literary awards. Hwang Seok Young was directly involved in the war as a soldier. Le Duy Hanh was born on the countryside and suffered the massacre of Korean soldiers. Tran Dai Nhat is a mixed race Korean himself. Although Bang Hyun Suk, Lee Dong Soon, and Vo Thi Xuan Ha have no direct experience of war, they have penetrated the issue enough deeply to echo its impact effectively.

The themes on healing war wounds are expressed by Korean and Vietnamese writers in many forms of different literary genres: prose (from short stories to novels), poetry (from narrative to lyric poems), and drama.

Most of the works are successful both at home and abroad. After *Times for Eating Lobsters* was published, it immediately became “The Best Novel in 2003” in Korea. Its Vietnamese translation was published in 2004, and in 2008 it was adapted into a film with the same title by Vietnam Feature Film Studio in cooperation with KBS. *Miss Saigon* was also immediately selected as “The Excellent Poem Selection of the Year 2005” after its publication in Korea, and in the same year, was translated and published in Vietnam. *The Drifting Lives* was published in 2008 by one of the most prestigious publishing house in Vietnam. It attracted many local readers.

Through literature, both Korean and Vietnamese writers try to find solutions for healing war wounds, to close a painful past, and direct towards a brighter future of the two nations. Their literature is not in an ivory tower but direct and tangible. Their works have contributed to awakening the people of two nations, calling their attention as well as practical activities to heal war wounds.

Mr. Anh Duc, a famous Vietnamese writer once said to Korean writers: “A bullet is very fast, whereas literature is slow and dormant. But looked at another way, this could also mean that ‘slow literature’ can control a ‘fast bullet’” (Park 2004).<sup>9</sup> Bang Hyun Suk (2004a), in a meeting with Vietnamese writers, also said that: “Only literature can overcome suffering to bring people, from all countries, closer together in friendship.”

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9. This interview is available at <http://giaitri.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/gioi-sao/trong-nuoc/nha-van-bang-hyun-suk-viet-nam-da-danh-thuc-toi-1882084.html>.

The preface that Mr. Ta Duy Anh (2004, 8), a famous Vietnamese writers, wrote to *Time for Eating Lobsters* can be applied to review literary works by both Korean and Vietnamese writers on healing war wounds: “For all of us, especially for Korean new generations who will come to Vietnam in a different way in comparison to their seonbae to stop being obsessed by a sorrowful past, the best thing to do is to honestly face this past, looking at the core of events, despite that this means even to face stigmas.” With such sense, *Times for Eating Lobsters* and *The Drifting Lives* in particular, Korean and Vietnamese literary works on war wounds in general, “have opened sincere and equal dialogues between two nations on their present and future” (Nguyen 2012).

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## Abstract

Vietnam and Korea established official foreign relations in 1992. For more than 20 years, the Vietnam-Korea cooperation relationship has been ceaselessly developing and now attains a level of “Strategic Partnership.” Looking forward to a happy future, the two nations have to try to close a sad past when more than 320,000 Korean soldiers participated in the American war in Vietnam. Korean and Vietnamese post-war literary works have contributed significantly to building a bridge for the two nations to getting closer, becoming more mutual understanding. This paper focuses on Korean and Vietnamese literary works on war wounds in Vietnam with regard to Korean participation. The issue is approached from thematic criticism and comparative study.

**Keywords:** Korean participation in Vietnam War, Korean literature, Vietnamese literature, post-war literature, East Asian discourse, literature and healing war sorrows