[Interview] A Vietnam War documentary “to gently untangle the knots of the past”

Film producer hopes that South Korea-Vietnamese collaboration on documentaries will be a path to reconciliation

“I want to express my gratitude to my Korean friends who attended the memorial services for the victims,” said Hoa Nyut Thao, 39, on Jan. 2. Ho produced the documentary “The Last Lullaby” for Vietnam’s national television broadcaster VTV in Quang Ngai Province. “If the day comes when South Korea and Vietnam work together to create a documentary about the issues of the past, that would be another way to achieve reconciliation,” he added.

Hankyore Theh (Hani): How did you end up making this documentary?

Hoa Nyut Thao (Hoa): There were memorial services in various parts of Vietnam in 2016 on the 50th anniversary of civilian massacres by South Korean forces. Half a century had passed without enough attention being paid to many incidents, including the massacres at Binh An, Dien Nien and Binh Hoa.
I've done a lot of work on documentaries about war. When I heard that a group of Koreans were coming to attend the memorial services, I joined them to cover the story.

**Hani:** Had you personally been aware of the massacres by Korean forces?

**Hoa:** In Quang Ngai Province, where I'm from, there are memorial stones in every village that South Korean troops passed through. There are even quite a few villages in which every other household lost someone to South Korean forces. I'm from the postwar generation, but I was well aware of these massacres. The stories were drilled into me when I was a child.

**Hani:** Did you have any trouble producing the documentary?

**Hoa:** South Korea is currently the country with the most foreign investment in Vietnam. History is a sensitive issue diplomatically speaking. I couldn't help but be careful about moderating my tone.

**Hani:** Why did you call the documentary “The Last Lullaby”?

**Hoa:** “The Last Lullaby” is the Vietnamese title of the “Vietnam Pieta” statue: you have a newborn baby whose life has ended before it can be given a name and a mother crouching down to cradle that baby in her arms even as her life ebbs away. As I see it, “Vietnam Pieta” means “the last lullaby” sung by our Korean friends so that the countless people whose lives were taken by South Korean forces could enter a deep and peaceful rest in a world where there is no more pain. The moment when blind Doan Nghia [who is 50 years old] was running his hands over the statue and my Korean friends were watching with tearstained faces is still frozen in my heart even now. I think that this documentary will soothe the feelings of Vietnamese and will move the hearts of Koreans.
Hani: A few days ago, “The Last Lullaby” was broadcast nationally on VTV channel 9. What response did you get?

Hoa: I was expecting that people would be shocked, but we heard more people talk about how moving it was and how it brought them to tears. The response from viewers was so powerful that the documentary is going to be shown again soon [on Jan. 9]. We expect that the documentary will be aired not only on central broadcasters but on local broadcasters as well.

Hani: What message do you hope to convey through this documentary?

Hoa: I wanted to gently untangle the knots of the past by following along as the elderly women told stories of the past. As a Vietnamese, I want to express my gratitude to my Korean friends who attended the memorial services for the victims. The presence of each and every one of you was a big consolation for us Vietnamese.

Hani: Do you intend to make a sequel?

Hoa: I will get started on a sequel when I come up with a plan. South Korea and Vietnam fought the same war but remember it differently. It occurred to me that if the day comes when South Korea and Vietnam work together to create a documentary about the issues of the past, that would be another way to achieve reconciliation.

By Ku Su-jeong, director of the Korean-Vietnamese Peace Foundation

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