

The Fatherland, Nationalist Films and Modernity in South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines

by Rolando B. Tolentino

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The 1980s were marked by the historical shift of political power from dictatorial rule to popular presidencies in the Asia Pacific. Oppositional leaders have taken the rein of government.

At the same time, the move to democratize the nation also comes at a time when the nation has already been economically liberalized and is reaping the rewards of economic liberalization, when it has already been well placed in the global economic network, whether as an enclave of global capital or as a terrain for the global division of labor; when there is no position to speak outside the global economy.

Economic liberalization has democratized the acquisition of wealth, trickling it down to individuals and sectors that generate and consolidate the middle class. It has made real estate prices soar so high that landed farmers can now own capital. Political liberalization also comes into play in the transformation of the economy. States are only too eager to transform past atrocities into present workable “win-win” situations in the name of national peace and harmony.

Commissions of truth and good government--fact-finding committees to look into the excesses of past dictatorships especially in cases of human rights violations and corruption--are formed by national governments wanting to deal with their traumatic past, an undoing of the state's doing. The objective is not to try personalities but to present a collective truth about the past, both as national closure and birthing of eras.

Doubling allows us to speak of A Single Spark (Park Kwang-su, 1995), a film biography of the political awakening and self-immolation of labor union martyr Chon Tae-il. Park's directorial focus is to present the fetish of the state for surveillance and discipline, and how activists are able to circumvent the state operations. By the continuing existence of a network of activists and protest actions within the very network the state interrogates these people and actions, state power is never complete. However, the civil society that allows for the existence of emergent protest activism is only articulated through the language of state crisis. So pervasive are state surveillance and discipline in sweatshop factories, as the film depicts, that self-immolation becomes an instant reprieve from civil society's indifference to the workers' plight. Chon's self-immolation becomes the "morbid symptom" in the crisis, a way to temporally break state hegemony in civil society. In doubling a crisis within a crisis, Chon provides a punctuation to the workings of the state. This punctuation, however, also points to its very limit, becoming the single last action of political dissent. Park reworks this life in the larger course of directing the formation of the recent civil society in South Korea that allowed, for example, for the election of a former political dissident, Kim Dae Jung, into the presidential office in 1998.

In the film, prior to Chon's own self-immolation, he first lights up a black book containing the labor code. Chon's symbolical gesture marks the failure of the state to implement its own laws on the safety and just compensation of its workers. His own immolation, depicted in slow motion, repetitive shots of black-and-white and colored intercuts of fire engulfing his body, marks the double failure of the state. The state did not provide for adequate protection of its youth laborer-citizen; neither did the state oppress Chon enough for him to accept the conditions of the sweatshop.

The state still hovers as the large entity that prefigures the inscription of the nation and modernity in nationalist films. In the process of seeking redress for ill practices and conditions of the sweatshop where Chon works, labor officials would connect these conditions with the patriotic mission of Korean workers. The state rationalizes the poor conditions and unjust practices in the sweatshop factory as part of the trajectory of the national project for economic development. With sustained growth of the Asian economies until the crisis of 1997, the standards operative in the 1970s working conditions are either minimized or transported to other less-developed transnational sites. This does not mean that state and capitalist oppressions are eradicated; it means that these are displaced elsewhere or newer oppressive relations are established with recent movement of capital. By focusing on the life of the martyr Chon and connecting such sacrifice to recent protest actions by youth and students, A Single Spark missed out on other pertinent connections especially as these relate to newer social relations with the more recent movement of capital and the restructuring of labor. Recent International Monetary Bank prescription for bail-out money to be flushed into South Korea's saddled economy required the liberalization of hiring and firing of workers. The production of critical texts should include the production of a range of contexts in which such texts can be read. Rather than maintain allegiance to the official trajectory of the recent civil society, nationalist films should equally elaborate on further broadening the connections between the past national trauma with present conditions of gentrification and newer exploitative relations with capital especially as it concerns a collaborative project of consciousness raising.

Super Citizen Ko (Wan Jen, 1995) tells the story of an aging Ko's investigation of a colleague's fate. Ko has been forced to tell on the colleague to the police to escape further torture

during the Kuomintang's "White Terror" campaign in the 1950s. The film shows the shifts in Ko's national identity--from being a soldier of the imperial army when Taiwan was colonized by Japan, to an intellectual imprisoned for allegations of working for Taiwanese independence during Chang Kai Shek's era, to an aging citizen in present Taiwan. Ko's quest is undertaken at a time when Taiwan is undergoing a national election, choosing between pro-unification and pro-independence political parties, where issues are openly raised, issues which could have caused someone's life fifty years ago. Ko is lost in the politics, time and space of modern Taiwan.

Ko's search for a colleague's fate is an analog of his own search for national identity; it is a search that marks the pain and limits of national identity formation. He is lost in the newness of politics, time and space of Taiwan, after having been imprisoned for 16 years and choosing to isolate himself for 18 more. When he can no longer bear the haunting of an imagined memory of his friend's execution, Ko begins his search. This search is predicated not to succeed other than to resolve symbolically individual national identity, as when Ko lights up candles in the isolated graves of victims of Taiwan's forgotten period in the film's ending. For how can the search anchored on Taiwan's forgotten history be made to materialize in the 1990s, when such national memory has already been invoked in the everyday politics? How can a repressed memory be dealt with when it has now been surfaced? How can one begin to talk about a traumatic past in an age when the past has been symbolically and materially obliterated, when the signifiers of the past trauma have already been transformed into nodes of the postFordist service sector? In the film, the building of the Bureau of Public Security that supervised surveillance, torture and summary execution in the 1950s now houses the Lion Forest Department Store; the military Tribunal office

is now a five-star hotel; the execution site is now called Youth Park. Like Ko's citizenship, the city is a signifier without a signified.

The point that the film makes is a critique of recent Taiwanese civil society, one that has failed to substantiate Ko's being. This point, I think, posits the continued strength of the state to organize and define Taiwanese modernity and nation. The state may have liberalized, but only in relation to absorbing alternative politics and history that support its own survival as a quasi-nation internally, and a transnation externally. Ko's own obsession with what really happened only presents the futility of unearthing historical truths. Like Ko's own quest and discovery, such truths have long been buried in isolated grave sites, and all one can do is to memorialize the memory.

In Super Citizen Ko, the transnational link was suggested to be the purveyor of present-day civil society and identity formation. In the Philippine film Eskapo (Escapee, Chito Rono, 1995), however, the connection is more embarrassingly overt, using nationalism in the service of big business and traditional oligarchs. The film narrates the heroic escape from Marcos' maximum security prison by two members of affluent Filipino families--Genny Lopez, scion to a political dynasty and business empire that includes the monopolistic franchise of an electric company, the nation's largest television and media conglomerate, and formerly owner of a leading newspaper; and Sergio Osmeña, III, also a scion to a political and business dynasty in Cebu. Upon declaration of martial law in 1972, they were imprisoned for allegedly plotting to overthrow Marcos. The film explains that they were used by Marcos as hostage to quell political and economic opposition. When all else failed, after five years in prison, they decide to escape from the military camp and fly out of the country by a private plane.

Funded by Lopez' own film company, Eskapo presents a nationalist project that is tied up with business and traditional political interests. Disenfranchized during the Marcos dictatorship but reenfranchized during Aquino's takeover of the presidency twenty-five years later, the rich have never seen better times. Most families saw the return of their properties and businesses, including political power, having already earned profit and mileage. The film tackles a trauma shared by nation--the Marcos dictatorship--that provides the impetus for greater endeavor in business and politics amongst the traditional rich. In the film's ending intertitles, updates on the careers and pursuits of Lopez and Osmeña are presented--the political activities they engaged in during their exile in the U.S., the return of sequestered business to them, and the further enlargement of business and political interests. So unabashed is the film in acclaiming the two personalities. The film even utilized the country's two leading dramatic actors to portray the characters. The film legitimizes big business and traditional politics, especially as to how these were repressed, liberated and transformed.

What is squirmishly uncomfortable about the set-up is the way nationalist films have been invoked in the service of big business and traditional politics. In the refashioning of nationalism for the maintenance of hegemony, big business and traditional politics have set the agenda in redefining the terrain of engagement. Traditional politics have helped usher laws banning child labor, the inclusion of marital rape as a crime, stringent protection of the environment, and other politically-correct state measures. In the same light, traditional politics have also aggressively rubberstamped laws maintaining on-going capitalist principles of liberalization, privatization and globalization. On the one hand, forest parks are declared national monuments free from illegal logging. On the other hand and in the same vein, the Omnibus Investment Code is ratified that

guarantees preferential treatment to big transnational capitalists, and the Mining Act allows the speculative exploitation of all land resources. Whereas in the past, the propaganda films of the state disseminated official viewpoints and representational images, the task, like most governmental functions, has been taken upon by big businesses. More than any other time in the history of Philippine business, now is the era that corporations are keeping a keen interest on social issues and alternative practices as part of good business sense. Atlas Consolidated Mining Corporation is involved with a shoemaking project for Abaca, a sitio within the mine's parameters; Central Azucarera Don Pedro gave loans to housewives and dependants of employees to start up an industrial rags project; Negros Navigation has set up Bangko Sang Barangay (The Poor Man's Bank); San Miguel Agribusiness Division and Pilipinas Kao have opened cooperative projects; Phelps Dodge and Ramcar are involved in various livelihood projects.¹

Business undertakes the financing of the dissemination of laissez faire and human rights as prevailing social interests in Eskapo. Being a media mogul, Lopez doubles as both break and continuity in the democratic tradition of media to provide a public sphere for articulating dissent and consent. His story of victimage and rescue appearing on film seemingly poses the possibility of media to constitute and transform the public sphere. However, his authoring of the film biography--both as film subject and producer--not only represents a narcissistic relation to oneself but also to one's claims. Eskapo's public service becomes self service. Lopez, who should know the trauma of losing the media in the hands of the dictatorship, indirectly stresses class interest as purveyor of public interest. Nothing is neutral, not even those that seem to provide sympathy to trauma management. What the film becomes is a pedagogical tool for management of the public sphere, clearly demarcating the models and interests of civil society that produces this sphere.

Nationalist films in Asia Pacific cinema embody both the ideal way of dealing with a past national trauma--what contexts are to be used to generate meaning over the trauma--and the operations of hegemonic and counterhegemonic realities--how the past is made usable for present contending interests. More importantly, nationalist films, precisely because these deal with social trauma--interrogate the absence and rise of recent civil society. The figure of the fatherland, the masculine allegorical authority of the narrativization of the nation, provides the map to read the past trauma and present predicament. The fatherland, however, is to be distinguished from the motherland: the motherland provides the spiritual inspiration in the formation of the nation and national identity, the fatherland provides the material mapping of the formation and elaboration of the nation.

The elaboration of the national experience in South Korean, Taiwanese and Philippine cinemas also expounds on the nation's experience with modernity. On the one hand, the nation is continuously being interrogated and defined by contending and dialoging forces nationally and transnationally that produce oblique relations of power and national formation. This disjuncture in being and power almost always materializes through the experience of pain and suffering. On the other hand, since the formation of nation and national identity, and modernity prevail under the most trying circumstances. The nation is already spoken for in the experience of modernity, and vice-versa. One can therefore speculate that the nation is an enlightenment construct that interfaces with the more universal experience of modernity. The local experience of nation-formation is the parole in the language of modernity.

Endnotes:

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1. See Juan Miguel Luz and Teodoro Y. Montelibano, Corporations and Communities in a Developing Country, Case Studies: Philippines (Manila: Philippine Business for Social Progress and Center for Corporate Citizenship, 1993).