

## 6. Memory as Redemption

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WHEN HOU HSIAO-HSIEN'S IDEA for *Good Men, Good Women* changed from the problems of adjustment for a newly released political prisoner and his daughter to a film within a film,<sup>1</sup> the original inspiration from Chu T'ien-hsin's story "Once upon a Time There Was a Man Called Urashima Tarō" took on a life of its own. Hsu Hsiao-ming's *Heartbreak Island* also takes up the issue of reintegration into society but focuses more on the betrayal of political ideals. And Wan Ren's *Super Citizen Ko* uses the iconic figure of a political prisoner and sets up a sharp contrast between past and present. In all three films, both the personal and the historical past are constantly recalled to serve cinematic and ideological purposes. *Super Citizen Ko*, in particular, is saturated with the past of its main character, Xu Yisheng, but the film is preoccupied with atonement to the extent that the construction and representation of his memory become a form of redemption.

*Super Citizen Ko* revolves around Xu Yisheng, an intellectual who was a member of a reading group in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, such as Zhong Haodong, he is arrested for reading prohibited material and charged with intent to subvert the government. While under torture, he reveals the name of another reading-group member, Chen Zhengyi, who takes the blame as the leader and is later executed. Ko is sentenced to sixteen years in prison. Shortly after the beginning of his incarceration, Ko hands divorce papers to his devoted wife, with the intention of sparing her embarrassment and suffering. Instead, she commits suicide, leaving their young daughter to fend for herself. When Ko is released, he goes into self-imposed exile in

a nursing home for twelve years, until one day a dream about Chen Zhengyi's execution prompts him to reenter society and embark on a quest for Chen's burial site. Settling into the comfortable apartment of his now married daughter, Ko continues to live an isolated life with little interaction with his daughter and her family. He roams the streets of Taipei and travels out of town, looking up old friends to ask where Chen's grave is located. When he finally finds it in an overgrown bamboo grove, Ko lights up the area with candles to offer his apology.

The film starts in media res with Ko waking up in the nursing home, and his past is relived and related to the audience through an interior monologue during his search for Chen's grave. Chen Ruxiu has argued that "what he [Ko] is searching for is himself" and that his only path to redemption is trying to find his friend's grave.<sup>3</sup> If we accept Chen's analysis that Ko's search is a kind of self-rediscovery, then the memory dredged up in the process becomes a form of redemption that finally delivers Ko from his suffering. This interpretation also is reinforced at the ending when Ko lights the candles. How, though, is this redemption possible (or is it even necessary?), and how, as a cinematic re-creation of the White Terror, does the film increase our understanding of the representation of the government's persecution of intellectuals? Finally, how does the closure function? As Robert Chi points out, *Super Citizen Ko* "enacts a cathartic closure"<sup>4</sup> and "was lauded as being, obviously [when compared with *Good Men*, *Good Women*], much less cool, much warmer, and hence more intimate, more humane, more moving," for it "offers a memory that audiences were more likely to identify with, be moved by, assent to, and remember."<sup>5</sup> It is precisely the complicity inherent in this type of film that demands investigation, for in their appreciation of the film and sympathy for its tormented protagonist, the public's memory of the White Terror is formed from Ko's personal (and fictional) memories.

#### MEMORY AS INTERIORIZATION

Much of what we learn about Ko's past and present emotional state is related in his interior monologue, which is a convenient and convincing cinematic technique for an old man who has just come out of self-imposed isolation. The interior monologue itself is a strategic option,

for “soliloquy and interior monologue are cinematic codes for exteriorizing thought. Their conventions work to the same end in making unspoken thoughts available to the audience, whether the character is alone or in the presence of others. . . . When this language undertakes to tell a story, we have a narrational activity that calls for a covering term to represent a common mental origin. Thus mindscreen narration.”<sup>6</sup> What is most illuminating about this technique is the fact that “mindscreen narrations were not limited to being tools for conveying the main story but were seized on for dramatic scenes of self-confrontation.”<sup>7</sup> The main character’s interior monologue in *Super Citizen Ko*, in which he questions the meaning of political ideals and admits his guilt, allows him to confront a past that he has tried to suppress.

In addition to the critical function of self-confrontation, an interior monologue creates a subtle but important impression of Ko’s world as a former political prisoner. Because the other characters “may be present but do not hear the words,” his sense of isolation is intensified. In other words, the interior monologue allows the director to insulate Ko from society in order to stress the detrimental effects of political persecution. Because an invisible label has been attached to former political prisoners, they have no choice but to live in isolation. Moreover, because the damage to their mental health and psychological well-being cannot be easily verbalized, Ko’s interior monologue serves as a symbolic function when he talks to himself but no one else, similar to the attempt made by his fellow political prisoner to ensure his own safety. During the previous year, Ko’s friend Professor Wu suddenly begins exhibiting a form of paranoia; he wears headphones and listens to propaganda broadcasts all day long to demonstrate to the listening device (which, he believes, the government has implanted in his head) that he has nothing but pure, patriotic thoughts. Wu’s wife tells Ko that she has repeatedly told Wu that martial law has been lifted but that he never believes her: “When the trauma is of human origin and is intentionally inflicted, . . . it not only shatters one’s fundamental assumptions about the world and one’s safety in it, but also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity.”<sup>8</sup>

Most ironic is the fact that Professor Wu’s persecution complex appears only *after* martial law is lifted. When freedom of speech and of congregation are finally given to the people, the past comes back to haunt Wu and plunges the victim of the White Terror into paranoia.

He is, in essence, the victim of “History as Tragedy,” in the sense posited by a film historian: “We might contrast these opposing visions of history by calling them respectively ‘History as Epic’ and ‘History as Tragedy.’ In ‘History as Tragedy’ people are seen as the product of their context. Their structures of consciousness, their forms of perception, their ways of being in and relating to the world have been inexorably shaped by their historical experiences. They are caught in the past.”<sup>9</sup> Only through such a portrayal can the devastating effects of the White Terror be conveyed so poignantly.

### CONTESTED MEMORIES

As a film that deals with the White Terror, *Super Citizen Ko* does not rely solely on the detrimental effects of thought persecution. Instead, it uses flashbacks and evokes various kinds of memories to advance its central theme: “By suddenly presenting the past, flashbacks can abruptly offer new meanings connected to any person, place, or object. Flashbacks then gain a particularly rich dimension in the coding of the psychology of character, and because their evidence is the past, they immediately imply a psychoanalytic dimension of personality.”<sup>10</sup> In *Super Citizen Ko*, we see ample instances of such coding, but what is most significant is that we see flashbacks of both Ko and his daughter, Xiuqin. When their memories of the past are flashed back to them, a discrepancy is inevitably formed. The variance can be explained simply by means of the cliché that people remember things differently. People do not remember an event in the same way because the event does not have the same meaning and importance for each person. It is through this variation in memory and the interpretation of that memory, then, that *Super Citizen Ko* conveys the aftermath of the White Terror.

The most obvious discrepancy in memory is in Ko’s and his daughter’s recollection of the prison visit during which Ko hands his wife divorce papers. In Ko’s flashback, his wife sits down, smiles, and looks up at him. A reverse shot shows Ko looking at her and giving her the divorce papers. She gets up and starts to leave, but then turns to look at him before finally walking away. Like most of the flashbacks, this scene is presented in complete silence, although the emotional turmoil in both

characters' minds is clearly depicted through the wordless exchange between husband and wife. Later when his daughter relays her own memory of the same prison scene, we spot her standing behind her mother, watching the wordless exchange between her parents. When the mother gets up to leave, the daughter hesitates and then follows her mother out. The daughter's flashback of the prison scene also is presented in total silence. Even though it is not much different from what the father remembers, their different perspectives succeed in distorting their memories.

As Maureen Turim points out, "certain characters get certain kinds of flashbacks at given moments, and analysis of a film can benefit from remarking not only on the presence of a given flashback but the absence of others, not only on what information is presented in a flashback, but what is left out."<sup>11</sup> What is left out of the father's flashback is the presence of his daughter and, as she complains to her aging father later, her feelings and her life after her mother's suicide. Earlier in the film, we became familiar with the father's lack of interaction with his daughter and her husband and son. Her recollection of the prison scene serves to highlight her absence from her father's mind. Chen Ruxiu argues that Ko gradually realizes that he has been forgotten by the world, just as he forgot about his wife and daughter while he wasted his life for his ideals.<sup>12</sup> In other words, Chen believes that the aging Ko regrets his life and wishes he could have lived it differently, for "he wants to prove that the past is just a dream and nothing is real."<sup>13</sup>

Although we cannot deny that Ko's youth was completely ruined by the absurdity of the White Terror, it is an oversimplification to read *Super Citizen Ko* as a film about regret for one's youth. In fact, as Lan Bozhou's "Song of the Covered Wagon" does, *Super Citizen Ko* exemplifies the question of appropriately allocating narrative space to the public and the private. The public, like the government control apparatus, is constantly invading the private sphere of familial life. Thus in these two flashbacks, we detect the competition between the private and the public. For Ko, the intellectual who joined a reading group, the concern was the public, the political situation of Taiwan in the 1950s. He decides to divorce his wife, believing that it would spare her hardships, with little regard for her private emotional state, which is best illustrated by her suicide.

For his daughter, Ko's ordeal is entirely personal, which is why she is against getting involved in politics. Her flashback of the boat ride home after the fatal visit accentuates the contrast between father's and daughter's memories. Her mother is standing with her back to the wind, and the daughter watches as her mother rips the divorce papers to pieces. Although Ko has no way of knowing about the boat trip, his daughter's recollection of it indirectly reveals the devastating effects of the White Terror on the people's private lives. In her case, her father is arrested because he has read some books with a few friends, and unbeknownst to her, she will soon become a de facto orphan. The flashback is most poignant for her, as an adult, recalling the incident many years later, for she now knows what the papers contained and what was going on in her heartbroken mother's mind. Her father's well-intentioned plan ultimately caused her mother's death. At a time when serving tea to the members of the reading group cost a young woman (Professor Wu's sister) three years of her life, there was no distinction between public and private, for everything one did and thought fell into the all-pervasive jurisdiction of the police state.<sup>14</sup>

#### FABRICATED MEMORIES

The notion that private life can never be safe from an invasive and pervasive government control mechanism is further enforced in a different kind of memory, what I shall call *fabricated*, in that the characters either dream or imagine a scene in the past that they cannot have witnessed. In the beginning of the film, before the opening credits, we see the headlights of trucks in the dark meandering through a field. One of the trucks turns out to be a military vehicle transporting soldiers who will then execute the prisoners in the other truck. Then we see three prisoners kneel on the ground, and one after another they are shot in the back. Except for the three gunshots, this scene, like the other flashbacks, has no dialogue. The next scene shows a trembling hand clawing at a blanket; the camera then slowly pans up to Ko's sleeping face. Ko opens his eyes and the camera cuts to the execution scene, in which the third prisoner, obviously Chen, falls forward as the bullet pierces his body, dark blood oozing out to stain his white shirt. A slight variation on the scene reappears as Ko's flashback when he

visits Youth Park, the former execution ground. In this scene, Chen is shown in full frontal shot when he looks up and then falls forward at the sound of a gunshot.

As critics have pointed out, Ko cannot have witnessed the execution of his friend; rather, he dreams or imagines the scene after seeing Chen's raised hands to indicate the sentence he has received. In one of the flashbacks, Ko hears the sound of chains clanging against the floor and walks up to the opening on his prison cell door to see Chen being led away. Chen raises his hands, his left showing two fingers of his left hand and one of his right, indicating the death sentence for political prisoners, according to article 2, section 1, of the martial law. The knowledge gained from Chen's hand gesture leads Ko to fabricate the scene of Chen's execution and also serves as the motivational force behind Ko's termination of self-exile. But "since Xu [Ko] himself was not present at that event, nor does he find any witness to the execution, the image wavers between Xu's point-of-view dream vision and a reality that no one in the film claims."<sup>15</sup> The film strongly suggests that the execution scene is part of Ko's dream, and it is repeatedly shown with slight variations in the form of flashbacks.

To some filmgoers, the repetition of the gory execution may seem gratuitous and unnecessary. In fact, its repetition may be derived from the idea of catharsis, which "has acquired tremendous force in contemporary culture and has become a foundational concept for explicating the relationship between visual media content and viewers."<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, we cannot resolve here the cathartic functions of screen violence, and so it may be more constructive for us to consider the mnemonic power of Ko's fabrication or dream. That is, as a movie with a clear ideological agenda, *Super Citizen Ko* does not simply re-create part of Taiwan's history (the past) but also creates a memory of that past (the future knowledge of that past), for memory "cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective. Nor can it be literally collective, since it is not superorganic but embodied."<sup>17</sup> Wan Ren, the director, once disclosed in an interview that he was interested in creating a contrast between past and present to conduct a sort of reflection on Taiwan. But this process is far from being a mere cinematic re-creation, since it has strong political ramifications, as argued by Jonathan Boyarin: "What we are faced with—what we are living—is the constitution of both group 'membership' and individual 'identity'

out of a dynamically chosen selection of memories, and the constant reshaping, reinvention, and reinforcement of those memories as members contest and create the boundaries and links among themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

In a similar fashion, but focusing again on the private domain, Ko’s daughter, Xiuqin, fabricates in a flashback a memory of her mother’s death from her perspective. After the mother and daughter return home from the visit during which Ko hands his wife the divorce papers, Xiuqin is seen sitting on the bed and letting her mother comb her hair. Xiuqin then goes to sleep while her mother stares at herself in the mirror and swallows some pills (presumably sleeping pills). Then the camera cuts to the mother sitting against the Japanese-style door frame, burning letters and a wedding photo. Because Xiuqin cannot have witnessed her mother’s activities, she more likely inferred them later from the ashes and perhaps from a diagnosis of the cause of her mother’s death. This imagined scene is inserted in Xiuqin’s flashback between her recollection of the boat ride home and her memory of her mother playing the piano one last time. These details form the memory of a young girl whose father’s actions inadvertently brought on her mother’s suicide and left her a virtual orphan.

Xiuqin’s fabricated memory serves two purposes. First, by inserting this imagined scene into her recollection of her mother’s last visit, she points an accusatory finger at her father for having neglected his responsibilities as a husband and a father, thus extradiegetically dispelling the myth about the families of political prisoners. Wan Ren revealed in the same interview his objection to the heroic and sympathetic images portrayed in print media (fiction, magazine articles, and biographies): “In fact, I discovered that subconsciously they [the family members of political prisoners] were bitter and were unable to forgive, resentful even.”<sup>19</sup> Xiuqin’s resentment offers an important (albeit symbolic) dissenting voice in the representation of the White Terror and explodes the monolithic image of the victims and their family members as understanding, magnanimous, and self-sacrificing. A compelling contrast can be found in the character of Cai Qianhui in Chen Yingzhen’s “The Mountain Road,” who willingly subjects herself to a lifetime of toil and ultimately wills herself to death. Cai’s selfless and steadfast image, as analyzed in chapter 2, serves political and didactic functions, and Wan Ren’s character complicates the portrayals of victims of the White Terror, dispelling the mnemonic myth



of victims and their families. In his discussion of how Hollywood filmmakers “establish and dramatize their portrayals through images drawn” from American mythology, some of which derive from literary works, Robert Toplin argues that these images “emerged especially from the movie culture itself. These visions wield tremendous emotional force in the present day. Consequently, the filmmakers produce part history, part myth.”<sup>20</sup> Taiwan’s literary and cinematic history/mythmaking presents an intriguing confirmation of and divergence from Toplin’s assertion. To be sure, Chen Yingzhen creates an iconic woman in “The Mountain Road,” which has, to a certain extent, created a minor mythology of suffering women. Lan Bozhou’s nonfictional *Good Women of Taiwan*, for instance, exemplifies such a literary lineage. But Wan Ren’s *Super Citizen Ko* offers a differing image in Xiuqin and may well be an alternative strand of myth.

We cannot ignore, however, that Xiuqin’s mother commits suicide without regard for Xiuqin’s well-being, and after her mother’s death, she is passed around among relatives and must deal with police harassment alone. How do we then interpret the problem of culpability? Is the film implying that during the White Terror the Guomindang’s thought police was the sole culprit and that people like Ko, his wife, and his daughter were simply collateral damage? To answer these questions, we must return to the issue of memory in flashback and to Boyarin’s notion that a chosen selection of memories shapes and reshapes a social group and an individual. Flashback films, writes Maureen Turim,

imbed the process by which memory forms the individual and the social group within the narrative. They narrate what it means to remember. They indicate what the power of memory can be for a fictional character while becoming a similar extension of that memory formation for their audience. Through their structuring of memory sequences as subjective recall of historical and personal experience, these films structurally underscore the process by which memories are granted the power to define the individual and the social group that identifies with the remembered experience of another’s story.<sup>21</sup>

In *Super Citizen Ko*, we can assume that Xiuqin’s memories are intended to represent the memories of all victims of the White Ter-

ror as well as the memories of the Taiwanese in general. The film appeals to the sensibility of the average moviegoer and thus lacks a greater measure of self-reflection. There is an easily discernible parallel between a film that creates a story of the victims of the White Terror and the daughter of a political prisoner who imagines the last scene of her mother's death. Consequently, in a perverse but clearly unintended way, the film calls into question the construction and transmission of memory. The conclusion of the flashback, however, falls victim to the temptation of melodrama, for toward the end Xiuqin is awakened by the sound of her mother playing the piano and sees her mother collapsing on the piano when overcome by the effect of the pills.<sup>22</sup> The past remains mired in the past for Xiuqin, and her memories, both fabricated and real, serve primarily to vent her resentment and bitterness. In sum, she is representative of the kind of victim's family that dramatizes the director's politics. Although we can be sympathetic to the director's intent, the scene is reminiscent of a film historian's observation on mourning: "Despite its insistence on the didactic and transformative nature of confrontation with loss, the mourning paradigm monumentalizes, schematizes, melodramatizes, and hence oversimplifies the dynamic nature of the past and the role that the past plays in the present."<sup>23</sup>

#### FLOATING MEMORIES

When a part of the past is presented as a flashback in *Super Citizen Ko*, it is, with few exceptions, attached to either Ko or his daughter as memory (imagined or not). Because of the difference in their perspectives, the screen memories they impart to the audience underscore the disastrous repercussions the Taiwanese suffered under martial law. These screen effects are achieved through flashbacks with unknown or unclear origins, or what I call *floating* memories. Shortly after we learn about Chen's death sentence through Ko's flashback, the older Ko is shown writing in his diary about Chen's execution and its effect on him. Next we see Xiuqin's husband trying to convince her that politics is no longer dangerous and that it is a good time to get involved. The camera then cuts to Ko writing at his desk while the conversation between Xiuqin and her husband can be heard coming from the

living room. We are introduced to another flashback right after the husband asks, “What are you afraid of? Do you think I’d harm you? What do you women know anyway?” In this nearly pitch-black scene, soldiers are searching the Kos’ house, and Xiuqin and her mother are held back by a rifle-wielding soldier, watched helplessly by Ko, who obviously has been brought back from prison. The next scene shows Xiuqin and her mother running down the stairs and into the street as the camera pulls back to show a moving vehicle. Xiuqin runs after the truck and calls out to her father. When she stops running, a medium shot shows Ko staring at the camera (and presumably the receding image of his daughter). The scene then returns to the present, and she is in the kitchen chopping vegetables.

The last shot of the flashback showing Ko’s face seems to have emerged from his memory upon hearing his son-in-law’s complaint about Xiuqin’s fear of political activities. Or the earlier part of the flashback might be her memory of soldiers ransacking their house. Or it could be a fusion of father’s and daughter’s memories, as the scene before the flashback is the father writing in his diary and the scene afterward is the daughter chopping vegetables. Not knowing the exact origin of the flashback helps highlight the contrast between the past and the present in regard to political freedom. For the son-in-law, who obviously did not suffer political persecution, the lifting of martial law means only an opportunity to be a player in the election game. For Ko and his daughter, merely an interest in politics in the form of reading and organizing a reading group can bring back terrorizing memories of torture and death.

The contrasting attitude toward politics appears frequently throughout the film. Earlier, when Ko begins roaming the streets of Taipei, he encounters groups of protesters demonstrating against the construction of Taiwan’s fourth nuclear power plant and advocating for people’s rights. Back in his daughter’s apartment, Ko is inundated with images of violent confrontations between the riot police and protesters as he flips through the television channels, all of which are new to him and serve as a stark contrast with his own past. When we consider the cinematographic significance of these post-martial law images, along with the floating flashback, it is impossible not to regard the contrast as a commentary on politics in contemporary Taiwan. The older generation, represented by the young Ko, has higher

aspirations and ideals, whereas the younger people, like Ko's son-in-law, are opportunists with no beliefs except in the service of personal gain. This contrast is intensified when Ko's son-in-law is later arrested and charged with bribery. This contrast becomes less plausible, though, when we consider a statement made by Ko immediately after his flashback of being tortured in prison: "What are youths and ideals?" In other words, when the aging Ko questions his own youthful actions, the possibility that the film is privileging the older, idealistic generation no longer exists. Instead, the film seems to be mocking political activities, past and present.

As discussed in previous chapters, the narrative strategy of contrasting the past with the present can problematize the work's political and ideological stance if the author/director intends to privilege the past over the present. But by casting both the past and the present in a negative light, *Super Citizen Ko* seems to reject such an approach, for the film is less interested in validating Ko's past actions than in promoting a kind of closure. This brings us back to the notion of redemption, best exemplified in another flashback. In this floating memory, Ko approaches a noodle stand, and the camera moves closer and closer, from Ko's point of view, finally to focus on the stand owner's face. The owner looks up and blinks a few times in the watery mist of the steaming noodles, followed by a brief flashback of Ko on a truck, very likely after the search of his house. In this flashback, Ko is shown, in a medium shot, looking slightly to his left (possibly at a birthmark on the soldier's face); then the camera cuts to the soldier, who lights a cigarette and exhales before turning to look at Ko. These two scenes have the effect of the shot–reverse shot often used in scenes when two characters are engaged in a conversation. We are usually shown the face of A speaking, and then the camera cuts to B. This reversal of perspective gives the audience the impression that they are looking at A from B's angle and then looking at B from A's viewpoint. Applying this reading to the two scenes in this flashback, from Ko's perspective we first look at the soldier as he lights his cigarette, and then from the soldier's viewpoint we see Ko. If this is the case, the origin of the flashback is ambiguous, as it could be Ko or the former soldier turned noodle-stand owner or both.

The uncertainty of the flashback's perspective implies that both the soldier and Ko are implicated in a political turmoil that is beyond

their control. Later, when the former soldier and the former political prisoner sit down at the noodle stand to share a drink, the former soldier says with a straight face, “Back then I was only charged with arresting people.” The subtext of his declarative statement is that he was simply following orders and was only a tiny cog in the Guomindang’s machinery of oppression and persecution. In their conversation, the former soldier says to Ko that the Taiwanese were not the only group targeted, as many mainlanders who exhibited any discontent also were arrested and sentenced to eight or ten years in prison. In a somewhat apologist fashion, the former soldier offers the explanation for the Guomindang’s policy that in the White Terror, many innocent people were arrested in order to ensure that not a single Communist infiltrator was spared. In the heyday of the collective anti-Communist paranoia, everyone was a suspect, and everyone could be the patriot who helped expose a Communist. The political climate at that time demanded that everyone be part of the anti-Communist enterprise.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, participants like the former soldier could be excused for taking part in enforcing the law.

Much as we would like to forgive foot soldiers like the noodle-stand owner, the scene still conveys a sense of absurdity while forcing the audience to reflect on issues of reconciliation and responsibility. On the one hand, we feel a sense of unease at seeing the former political prisoner drinking with the man who ransacked his house and terrified his family, not to mention that the organization he served indirectly caused the death of Ko’s wife. On the other hand, we wonder exactly how such an encounter should be portrayed cinematically. Wan Ren’s original plan for the movie was to depict a former political prisoner’s search for those who were responsible for his incarceration and to seek revenge. But he changed his mind when he learned more about the families of the victims and after reading Chen Yingzhen’s “The Mountain Road.”<sup>25</sup> Redemption thus has replaced revenge as the film’s central theme, hence the floating memory of the scene on the truck and the post-incarceration encounter at the noodle stand.

The wordless exchange of gazes on the truck becomes an emblematic gesture toward future reconciliation, for the unclear origin of the flashback metaphorically blurs the difference between the perpetrator and the victim. But we cannot help but wonder whether state terror like this can be easily forgiven by simply invoking the specter

of the White Terror. That is, questions remain as to whether or not the soldier did indeed believe that the formation of a reading group threatened national security and whether all past wrongs could be simply written off as the consequence of a less democratic time. The fundamental issue raised by this scene has larger political and perhaps ethical ramifications: Can a perpetrator, however minor, be absolved of his responsibility because the political climate gave him no option but to follow orders? And should a film addressing atrocity promote such an approach to history? Marcia Landy's meditation on material monument may be helpful here:

The creation of monuments as a perpetual reminder of suffering and as an expression of the need for restitution is addressed both to the perpetrators and their heirs and to the handful of survivors and their offspring. The injunction to remember, the coupling of recollection to the motto "Never again," the insistence on the healing effects of memory, and the need to provide appropriate cultural instruments to enhance this "work" are articulated for German as well as for Jew, Gypsy, and homosexual, and perhaps for all modern humanity.<sup>26</sup>

In the scenes of Ko's meeting with the former soldier and the flashback of his arrest, we detect the director's intention of addressing the issue of restitution between the perpetrators and their heirs and the survivors. But the noodle-stand encounter falls short of convincing us of the need to remember and, paradoxically, questions the healing effects of memory.

Memory seems only to bring more suffering to Ko. In their conversation, the former soldier, with somewhat irrepressible pleasure, reveals to Ko that he has long retired from the Garrison Command and has opened the noodle stand with his wife and daughter. "Life isn't bad," he concedes, before asking, "What about your wife?" Well intentioned though it may be, the question seems thoughtless and cruel, and all Ko can do is keep drinking. To be sure, Ko's search for the former soldier has nothing to do with his wife or his family life; his sole concern is finding Chen's grave so he can rid himself of the guilt that has caused his self-imposed exile and tormented him for thirty-four years. Also implied in the scene is the contrast between a former perpetrator

of terror and his victim: the former has a family and a humble but comfortable life, whereas the latter has lost his wife and is estranged from his only remaining family member. The recall of the past in this scene is devoid of therapeutic power, and remembrance seems only to heighten Ko's determination to locate Chen's grave.

Memory does, however, bring deliverance for Ko. But it is not until he finally finds Chen's burial site that Ko's subconscious can conjure up the memory of his wife, although the scene is not a flashback recollection in the strictest sense. At the end of the film, when Ko returns to his daughter's apartment after the candle-lighting episode, he collapses in the doorway. His daughter helps him to bed and, finding his open diary, starts to read, with Ko's peaceful sleeping face serving as the backdrop. The film ends with a sepia scene of the aging Ko strolling on a breezy open field with his young wife and daughter on either side. Holding hands, they walk in slow motion, smiling at the camera, and then the frame freezes. Since it is utterly impossible that the old Ko could exist in the same time frame with his wife and daughter when they were young, this scene can only be imaginary. The most logical explanation is that it is Ko's dream, but it also is possible that Xiuqin is imagining it while reading her father's diary. Ultimately, we must consider the final shot to be a shared, imagined memory for father and daughter. It is a memory of the past and at the same time a memory for the future.

#### DOCUMENTARY MEMORY

In a fashion similar to the use of fabricated memory, *Super Citizen Ko* also incorporates archival footage at two critical junctures. These two segments, one from the late colonial period and the other from the early days of Nationalist rule, are strikingly similar in both their documentary nature and their function in the film. Both featuring the ruling governments' display of military prowess, these documentary excerpts appear in a nearly seamless manner after following flashbacks of former political prisoners. They create intriguing, ideological interpretations of historical events and offer a personalized view of Taiwan's past by juxtaposing personal flashbacks with archival footage.

The first archival footage appears when Ko succeeds in locating the first person implicated in the reading group, You Minshun, a musician, who lives in a dilapidated, illegal shack and earns a living by playing at funerals and weddings. Unwilling to talk about Chen Zhengyi, You focuses instead on an earlier time, when both Ko and You were classmates and comrades in arms after being drafted by the Japanese colonial government to fight in the Pacific War. You then picks up his saxophone and walks out into the ramshackle yard, where he plays a march. With the military music playing in the background, we first see a black-and-white scene in which You, Ko, and three others from the same village sit for a photographer before they are sent to the battlefield. After the photographer's flash, the camera cuts to documentary footage showing marching soldiers and a troop inspection by the Japanese governor-general of Taiwan, followed by archival film of battle scenes, including dead soldiers lying in the trenches. With the militant music continuing to play but at a lower volume, the camera cuts from archival footage to Ko and another soldier (possibly You) arriving at a Japanese house where deceased soldiers' families kneel to receive their bones. This mixture of historical documentary film and fictional characters' flashback ends with Ko and You crying with the families as the camera cuts to the roofs of illegal dwellings in Taipei in the 1990s.

The immediately discernible significance of this segment is the ironic effect created when the archival footage clashes with the personal flashback. You was not a member of the reading group but nonetheless was sentenced to six years because he had paid a visit to his old classmate, Ko. We can infer that You, like so many victims of the White Terror, suffered both in prison and after his release. Constant harassment from local police and difficulties finding steady employment were but two of the most common forms of persecution, even after the prisoners had served undeserved sentences. It is therefore understandable that You does not want to discuss Chen or any related matter.<sup>27</sup> Instead, he prefers to recall an earlier time, when as loyal subjects of the Japanese emperor, they were offered the great honor of dying for the emperor. The recollection of the delivery of dead soldiers' bones is clearly from Ko's perspective, as we see the camera zoom in on his sobbing face. Accordingly, what is glorious for You represents only death in Ko's memory.



The irony of the archival footage becomes even sharper when contrasted with other footage whose appearance is filled with ideological and political implications. In a scene that triggers a combination of documentary film images and personal flashbacks, Ko visits Professor Wu, who puts on his headphones when Ko asks where Chen is buried. Ko lifts one of the earphones and hears an anti-Communist propaganda song. Then we see a black-and-white documentary of the Double-Tenth celebration, with Chiang Kai-shek inspecting the troops. As the shrill voice continues to drone on about the importance of recovering the mainland, the image of tanks displaying the military prowess of the Guomintang regime segue into military trucks rushing in and disgorging soldiers to arrest Ko and other members of the reading group. The functions of the documentary footage are many. First, it serves as an ironic reminder to the post-martial law audience of the absurdity through which most of them lived:

Because the historical film by definition refers to a past reality known to most viewers prior to the film either from experience or from representation, they enjoy the effect of recognition. . . . This extra referent, which appeals to historical knowledge (and knowledge that exists outside of the film's fictional sphere), produces an additional level of meaning and increases the meaning potential of the film.<sup>28</sup>

The documentary footage also highlights Wu's damaged mental state and, by extension, that of other political prisoners. Most important, it is a silent accusation against the fascist state apparatus that in the name of recovering the mainland and resisting the Communists hunted down and persecuted many people, instilled a pervasive fear in everyone's lives, and destroyed people like Professor Wu, Ko, and many more. The juxtaposition of real archival footage and the fictional depiction of Ko's arrest has a subtle leveling effect in that it fictionalizes the real and brings a sense of realism to the fictional. As Anton Kaes argues in his discussion of Fassbinder's historical film: "The viewer senses, even if unconsciously, the unresolvable dual status of historical narratives, as document and fiction, authentically true and at the same time used within a freely invented story."<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, however, *Super Citizen Ko* emphasizes more the question of how real the historical

footage is, for as the Taiwanese who lived through the era can attest, the troop inspection was nothing but a staged display, a myth of the Republic of China. For all intents and purposes, the archival footage is as fictional as the film in which it is used.

Placed side by side, the two excerpts of archival footage reveal startling similarities. For instance, the troop inspections by the governor-general of colonial Taiwan and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek are nearly identical, with the same kind of amorphous soldiers goose-stepping before the podium in front of the presidential office (the former governor-general's office taken over by the Nationalist government). Taylor Downing's analysis of history on television is also appropriate here regarding footage in fictional films: "In newsreels, public information films, works of propaganda or television news-casts, film frequently not only captures an impression of what an event looked like but gives a topical and often revealing interpretation of that event."<sup>30</sup> Used several decades later, the incorporation of the archival footage in *Super Citizen Ko* presents a new interpretation that may be in direct opposition to the original intent. That is, both the military and the governor-general/president in front of their office are symbols of the state, but for the Taiwanese the definition of the state (*quo*) is extremely complex. Post-martial law debates over the issue of national identity inevitably return to the question of whether the Nationalist government was another colonial government, just like that of the Japanese. Although *Super Citizen Ko* does not dwell on this question, its title does hint at the issue of national identity: *Citizen* (*Guomin*, the original Chinese title). To which state does the title refer? It could well be a declaration of political allegiance, in the sense that a citizen of a given country should have the inalienable rights to congregate freely and to read any material that he or she wishes, without fear of persecution.



Among the films dealing with acts of government brutality and the suppression of dissents in Taiwan, *Super Citizen Ko* is the only one in which the victim comes face to face with the member of the Garrison Command who arrested him, but the central theme of redemption forecloses any possibility of probing the issue of culpability. To be sure,

we should be cognizant of prosecutorial romanticism, as defined by Paul van Zyl, which is “the notion that ‘retributive justice’ is a sufficient response to past abuse.” “The punishment of perpetrators is crucial to dealing with the past, but it will always be insufficient response to mass atrocity, and any successful attempt to deal with the past must seek to explore other strategies to make victims whole and to prevent a recurrence of past abuse.”<sup>31</sup>

Yet Ko’s search for truth (that is, Chen’s burial site) unconditionally validates and legitimates the need for reconciliation. Hence what we see is the tormenting of Ko’s conscience over unwillingly revealing Chen’s name. Perversely, Ko is the guilty one: he suffers years of isolation in prison and at the nursing home, and his wife commits suicide. Therefore, at the end of the movie Ko finally finds the site where Chen and others who were not identified by their families are buried.<sup>32</sup> He lights the bamboo grove with candles and offers his apology to Chen Zhengyi. This overriding concern with closure entails an urge to move forward and contradicts the earlier moments in the film that were invested in recollecting and re-creating a memory of the White Terror.

I am not arguing that we need to dwell on the past but am questioning whether in the end, Ko’s action (and, by extension, the film) mirrors the tired slogan of forgiveness in the post-martial law atmosphere of reconciliation. It is no wonder that Robert Chi states that “the whole premise of political prisoner as Urashima Tarō seems to be a pretext that prescribes and prescripts Xu Yisheng’s candlelit voicing of apology for his betrayal of Chen Zhengyi.”<sup>33</sup> While I believe that Chi has overlooked the entire film as a process of creating memory, I would argue that the ending hastily dispenses with many lingering issues that still face Taiwan. Dominick LaCapra’s analysis of mourning illustrates my concern: “In mourning one recognizes a loss as a loss yet in time is able to take (partial) leave of it, begin again, renew interest in life, and find relatively stabilized objects of interest, love, and commitment. Moreover, one remembers and honors the lost other but does not identify with the other in a specular relation that, however ecstatic or self-sacrificial, confuses the self with the other.”<sup>34</sup> Whether Ko is eventually able to mourn the past and, analogously, whether Taiwan has succeeded in mourning the loss, remains the ultimate question.