

Accountability and Redemption:
Cinematic Representation of Atrocity in Taiwan*

Sylvia Li-chun Lin
University of Notre Dame

What I want to talk about today concerns the redress of government atrocity against its own people, focusing on the accountability of perpetrators of state terror and redemption as portrayed in a film called *Super Citizen Ko*. But first, a brief historical background. For those of you who are familiar with Taiwan, please bear with me.

In 1887 Taiwan was made a province of the imperial Qing court, but was ceded to Japan in 1895 as a result of imperial China's defeat at the hand of the newly modernized Japanese military. Over the next fifty years, Taiwan was colonized by the Japanese, until the end of World War II, when the Allies agreed that "territories stolen by Japan" would be restored to China, then ruled by the Nationalist government, which had overthrown the Qing in 1911. When Japan surrendered in 1945, Taiwan became part of the Republic of China, headed by Chiang Kai-shek.

For the Taiwanese, it was, at first, a period of jubilation over the end of Japanese colonial rule, but the festive mood was short-lived. Problems following the end of the War and the withdrawal of the colonial government were compounded by other troubles resulting from the arrival of the new government, which was manifested in the February 28 Incident, commonly referred to as 2/28. On February 27, 1947, a Taiwanese woman, Lin Jiang Mai,¹ was selling legal cigarettes in one of Taipei's busy commercial districts. A widow with two young children, she supplemented her income by carrying contraband, untaxed cigarettes. When agents of the Tobacco and Alcohol Monopoly Bureau formed by the Nationalist Government confiscated her cigarettes, legal and illegal, along with all her money, she begged to have the legal cigarettes and money from the legitimate sales returned to her. In response to her resistance, one of the agents

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

hit her in the head with the butt of his pistol, drawing the attention of residents and shop owners in the area. In their struggle to get away from the angry crowd, one of the agents shot and killed a bystander, Chen Wenxi. On the following day, February 28, 1947, news of the beating and the killing quickly spread throughout Taiwan, plunging the Island into a flurry of protests, uprisings, and armed rebellion. Over the following weeks, chaos reigned on the island, while Taiwanese gentry, including businessmen and prominent local figures, tried to negotiate with the Governor-General to restore order; most were later arrested and executed. On March 8, a large contingent of troops from the Chinese mainland arrived in northern Taiwan. Eyewitnesses reported that, as soon as they landed, soldiers opened fire on anyone in sight. Rampant bayoneting, rapes and robberies were followed by the looting of homes and buildings. When order was finally restored in late March, an estimated twenty thousand Taiwanese had been killed or “disappeared.”² In late 1949, the Nationalist government was driven off the Mainland by the Communists and fled to Taiwan; in May 1949, martial law³ was declared to ensure the total submission of the Taiwanese, thus beginning a reign of White Terror, and the 2/28 Incident became a taboo.

In the name of stability and security, the Nationalist government immediately stripped residents of Taiwan of their civil liberties, creating an atmosphere of pervasive fear, with the Garrison Command “responsible for arresting and punishing individuals who allegedly threatened national security and public order. Civilians were subject to arrest by military personnel and trial by military courts. By one estimate, military courts tried the cases of more than ten thousand civilians.”⁴ While many of those arrested were intellectuals who voiced dissent, there was also a substantial number of innocent people falsely incarcerated either by over-eager agents of the Garrison Command or vengeful enemies who made false accusations.

In addition to the persecution of anyone suspected of plotting to subvert the government,

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

one of the most pernicious effects of the White Terror was the fear instilled in the citizenry and the self-censorship the people of Taiwan learned to practice, as the surveillance apparatus of the Garrison Command was omnipresent. Family members of those who died or disappeared in the immediate aftermath of the 2/28 Incident were harassed and carefully watched. Intellectuals were often charged with sedition simply because they belonged to reading groups, like the main character in the film I'm discussing tonight. Even those who were abroad could not escape the net of persecution; the Nationalist government installed spies or recruited informants among overseas students to report on anyone who voiced criticism of the government and/or were engaged in activities related to the Mainland, Communist China.

While working on my book, *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan*, which is forthcoming from the Columbia University Press in November, I found the scholarship in Holocaust studies enormously helpful and inspiring. For instance, James E. Young's work on documentary fiction and Lawrence Langer's *Use and Abuse of the Holocaust* provided me with fresh perspectives in examining the salient features of literary and cinematic representations of government atrocity when I analyzed problems arising from the various forms of re-creation. Once martial law was lifted in 1987, the floodgates opened and in rushed an outpouring of texts on Taiwan's past, including fiction, collections of poetry, reportage, memoirs, eyewitness accounts, historical research, archival documents, conference proceedings, and feature and documentary films, as the people in Taiwan felt the urgent need to remember, reconstruct, and rewrite that part of their history. What is at stake in this reconstruction process is best illustrated by Pierre Janet's distinction of "habit memory," the "automatic integration of new information without much conscious attention to what is happening," and "narrative memory," "consisting of mental constructs, which people use to make sense out of experience."⁵ In the case of post martial law

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

Taiwan, where many people feel they have been robbed of their past, there lies the danger that what one reads or sees in literary and cinematic texts may not be actively or consciously analyzed. Uninterrogated textual and screen memories then form one's only memory of the 2/28 Incident.

On the other hand, as Dominick LaCapra points out in his discussion of memory as a crucial source for history and its complicated relations to documentary sources: "Even in its falsifications, repression, displacements, and denials, memory may nonetheless be informative--not in terms of an accurate empirical representation of its object but in terms of that object's often anxiety-ridden reception and assimilation by both participants in events and those born later."⁶ The issue then is not to reject memory as unreliable but to be informed of its imperfect nature, as one remembers the past without being paralyzed or manipulated by that memory.

Confronting the Taiwanese is also the problem of imagining an event that the writers and film makers themselves have not lived through and have to reconstruct out of someone else's memory, be that "someone" a government archive or survivors of the event. Consequently, people who must often learn about their past through textual and cinematic representations, are seemingly twice removed from that past. Memory is never innocent; how and what one remembers is inevitably colored by one's perspective or politics, especially when dealing with atrocity. What is termed the politics of memory is in effect "rhetoric about the past mobilized for political purposes."⁷

It is precisely this politics of memory that demand these texts to be examined closely. For a film that is based on someone else's memory, *Super Citizen Ko* provides us with an opportunity to look at the case of Taiwan in dealing with government atrocity.

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

Super Citizen Ko revolves around Xu Yisheng, an intellectual who was a member of a reading group in the 1950s [explain the name]. Like many of his contemporaries, he is arrested for reading prohibited material and charged with an intent to subvert the government. While under torture, he reveals the name of another reading group member, Chen Zhengyi, who then takes the blame as the leader and is later executed. Ko is sentenced to sixteen years in prison on an off-shore island. Shortly after the beginning of his incarceration, Ko hands a divorce paper to his devoted wife, with the intention of sparing her embarrassment and suffering. But she commits suicide, leaving their young daughter to fend for herself. When Ko is released, he goes into self-imposed exile, cocooning himself in a nursing home for twelve years, until one day a dream about the execution of Chen Zhengyi prompts him to re-enter society and embark on a quest for Chen's burial site. Settling into the comfortable apartment of his now married daughter, Ko roams the streets of Taipei and travels out of town, looking up old friends to inquire into the location of Chen's gravesite. 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 recounted to the audience through interior monologue during his quest. One critic has argued that "what he [Ko] is searching for is himself" and his only path to redemption is trying to find his friend's grave site.⁸ If we follow this 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 over his past action. We also find reinforcement of this interpretation in the candle-lit ending. But we must ask how this redemption is possible (or whether it is even necessary) and how the film as a cinematic recreation of the White Terror informs our understanding of representing government persecution of intellectuals. Finally it

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

remains questionable as to how closure functions. This evening I would like to focus on two aspects of this film—the functions of memory in the indictment of government atrocity and the issue of accountability.

As a film that deals with the White Terror, *Super Citizen Ko* uses flashbacks and evokes various kinds of memories to advance its central theme. As Maureen Turim points out, “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.”⁹ 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 flashback to them, discrepancy inevitably occurs. A simple explanation for the variance is the cliché that people remember things differently. People do not have the same recollection about an event because the event does not carry the same meaning and importance to each of them. It is through this variation in memory and interpretation of that memory that *Super Citizen Ko* conveys the aftermath of the White Terror.

The most obvious discrepancy in memory occurs in Ko’s and his daughter’s recollection of the prison visit during which Ko hands his wife a divorce paper. 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 paper. She takes the paper, gets up and starts to leave, then turns to look at him before finally walking away. Like most of the flashbacks, this scene is presented in complete silence, but the emotional turmoil in both characters’ minds is clearly depicted through the wordless exchange between husband and wife. Later when his daughter tells her own memory of the same prison scene, however, we see her standing behind her mother, watching the wordless exchange

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

between her parents the whole time. When the mother gets up to leave, the daughter hesitates and then follows her mother out. The daughter's flashback of the prison scene is also presented in total silence and is not essentially different from what the father remembers. However, the different perspectives inevitably *distort* their memories.

To quote Maureen Turim again, “[c]ertain 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.”¹⁰ What is left out in the father's flashback is the presence of the daughter and, as she complains to her aging father later, her feelings and her life after the mother's suicide. Earlier in the film, we are already familiar with the father's lack of interaction with his daughter, as well as with her husband and son. Her recollection of the prison scene highlights her absence in her father's mind. Critic Chen Ruxiu argues that Ko gradually realizes that he is forgotten by the world just as he forgot about his wife and daughter, as he wasted his life for his ideals.¹¹ In other words, Chen believes that the aging Ko is looking back at his life in regret, and wishes it undone, for “he wants to prove that the past is just a dream and nothing is real.”¹² While we cannot deny that Ko's youth was ruined by the absurdity of the era of the White Terror, it is oversimplifying the situation to read *Super Citizen Ko* as a film about regret for one's youth. In fact, the film exemplifies a persistent question of allocating appropriate narrative space to the public and the private. The public, as with the government control apparatus, is constantly invading the private sphere of familial life. We detect a contest between the private and the public in these two flashbacks. For Ko, the intellectual who joined a reading group, his concern was the public, the political situation of Taiwan in the 1950s. His decision to

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

divorce his wife in the belief that it will spare her hardships is made with little regard for her private emotional state, which is best illustrated in her suicide.

For his daughter, on the other hand, the ordeal is all personal, which is why she is dead set against getting involved in politics. Her flashback of the boat ride home after the fatal visit further accentuates the contrast between father's and daughter's memories. Her mother is standing against the wind, and the daughter watches her mother as the latter rips the divorce paper to pieces. To be sure, Ko has no way of knowing about the boat trip; however, the daughter's recollection of the trip 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 virtual orphan. The flashback is most poignant for an adult recalling the incident many years later, for she now knows what the paper entails and what goes on in her heartbroken mother's mind. Her father's well intentioned plan ultimately causes her mother's death. In the White Terror era, there was no distinction between the public and private, for everything one does and thinks falls into the all-pervasive jurisdiction of the police-state.¹³ A telling example is given in this film—the sister of another persecuted intellectual is sentenced to three years in prison simply because she served tea to the reading group when they gathered at her house.

The notion that private life can never be safe from the invasive and pervasive government control mechanism is further re-enforced in a different kind of memory, which 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 slithering through a wild 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

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

we see three prisoners kneel on the ground and one after another they are shot in the back. Except for the three gunshots, the scene, like other flashbacks, does not have any conversation among characters. 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 of 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 creates the scene out of his own imagination 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 hand, indicating the death sentence for political prisoners, according to Article Two, Section One of the Martial Law. The knowledge gained from Chen's hand gesture leads Ko to fabricate the scene of Chen's execution, and serves as the motivational force behind Ko's termination of self-exile. But, as observed by Robert Chi, "[s]ince Ko himself was not present at that event, nor does he find any witness to the execution, the image wavers between Ko's point-of-view dream vision and a reality that no one in the film claims."¹⁴ The film strongly suggests that the execution scene is part of Ko's dream, but the scene is repeatedly shown with slight variations in the form of flashbacks.

To some the repetitive and gory sight of an execution may seem gratuitous and utterly unnecessary. Needless to say, the issue concerning the cathartic functions of screen violence can

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

never be resolved, and hence it may be fruitful for us to consider, instead, 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 a page of Taiwan history (the past); instead, it also creates a memory of that past (the future knowledge of that past), for screen memory "cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective."¹⁵ 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 recreation; instead it has strong political ramifications, as one historian puts it: "[w]hat 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."¹⁶

In similar fashion, but focusing again on the private domain, Ko's daughter, Xiuqin, fabricates a memory about her mother's death in a flashback from her perspective. After the mother and daughter return home from the visit during which Ko hands his wife the divorce paper, Xiuqin is seen sitting on the bed to let 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 doorframe, burning letters and a wedding photo. Xiuqin cannot have witnessed her mother's activities; more likely she later infers them 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 the memory of her mother playing the piano one last time. These

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

details form the memory of a young girl whose father's actions inadvertently bring on her mother's suicide and leaves her an orphan.

Xiuqin's fabricated memory serves two purposes. First, by inserting this imagined scene in her recollection of her mother's last visit, she points an accusatory finger at her father for neglecting 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," he said, "I discovered that subconsciously they [the family members of political prisoners] were bitter and were unable to forgive, resentful even."¹⁷ 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.

Yet, one cannot ignore the fact that Xiuqin's mother commits suicide without regard for Xiuqin's wellbeing; 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 the KMT's thought police during the White Terror is the sole culprit and that people like Ko, his wife, and daughter are simply collateral damage? To answer these questions, we must return to the issue of memory in flashback, and the notion that a chosen selection of memories shapes and reshapes a social group and an individual. In the case of *Super Citizen Ko*, one can posit that Xiuqin's memories are intended to be representative of the memories of all victims of the White Terror, and, more importantly, the memories of the Taiwanese in toto. The film appeals to the sensibility of the average moviegoer and thus lacks a greater measure of profound self-reflection. There is an easily

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

discernible parallel between a film creating the story of victims of the White Terror and the daughter of a political prisoner imagining 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 past remains mired in the past for Xiuqin, and her memories, fabricated and real, serve primarily to vent her resentment and bitterness. She is, in a word, representative of the kind of victim's family that dramatizes the director's politics.

When a part of the past is presented as a flashback in *Super Citizen Ko*, with few exceptions it is attached to either Ko or his daughter as memory (imagined or not), and precisely because of the difference in their disparate perspectives, the screen memories they impart to the audience serve to underscore the disastrous repercussions the Taiwanese suffered under martial law. These screen effects are furthermore achieved through flashbacks with unknown or unclear originators, or what I will call *floating* memories, and their function in conveying the notion of redemption. In one scene with floating memory, Ko approaches a noodle stand; the camera moves closer and closer, from Ko's point of view, to finally 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 shot-reverse-shot often used in scenes when two characters are engaged in a conversation. We are usually shown the face of A speaking, then the camera cuts to B. This reversal of perspective gives the audience the impression that we are looking at A from B's angle and then looking at B from A's viewpoint. If we apply this reading to the two scenes in this flashback, we first look at the soldier from Ko's perspective as the

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

former lights up his cigarette; then we see Ko from the soldier's viewpoint. If this is the case, the flashback has an ambiguous originator, for it could be Ko or the former soldier-turned-noodle stand owner, or it could be both.

The blurring of flashback 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 but a cog in the KMT's machinery of oppression and persecution. In their conversation, the former soldier says to Ko that Taiwanese were not the only group targeted, as many Mainlanders who uttered any discontent were also arrested and sentenced to eight or ten years in prison. In a somewhat apologist fashion, the former soldier offers the explanation for the KMT's policy that many innocent people were arrested in order to ensure that not a single Communist infiltrator was spared, which was precisely the circumstance of the White Terror. In the heyday of the collective anti-Communist paranoia, everyone was a suspect, and everyone could be the patriot who helped expose a Communist, if one was vigilant. The political climate at the time demanded that everyone be part of the anti-Communist enterprise.¹⁸ As a consequence, participants like the former soldier can be excused for taking part in enforcing the law.

However, much as one 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 upon issues of reconciliation and responsibility. On the one hand, one feels 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

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

other hand, one wonders 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. Redemption replaces revenge as the central theme of the film, 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 originator of the flashback metaphorically blurs the difference between the perpetrator and the victim. However, one cannot help but wonder if state terror like this kind can be easily forgiven by simply invoking the spectre 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 malaise of a less democratic time. The fundamental issue raised by this scene has larger political and perhaps ethical ramifications: can a perpetrator, however minor a role he plays, 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? I can't help but being reminded of a scene from Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, in which, one after another, the German SS members proclaim that they were not responsible. Perhaps the intention here is to be inclusive in addressing issue of restitution between the perpetrators and the survivors in these scenes portraying Ko's meeting with the former soldier and the flashback of his arrest. But the encounter, in a paradoxical way, questions the healing effects of memory.

Memory, it seems, brings more suffering to Ko. In the conversation, the former soldier, with somewhat irrepressible pleasure, reveals to Ko that he has long retired from the Garrison

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

Command and has opened the noodle stand with his wife and daughter. “Life isn’t bad,” he concedes, before inquiring, “What about your wife?” Well-intentioned though it may be, the question seems thoughtless and cruel beyond description; 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 gravesite so he can be rid of the guilt that has caused his self-imposed exile and tormented him for many years. Moreover, implied in the scene is also a contrast between a former perpetrator of terror and his victim: the former has his family and a humble but comfortable life, while the latter lost his wife and is estranged from his only remaining family member. The recalling 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.

However, memory does bring deliverance for Ko, when he finally locates Chen’s burial site, his subconscious can conjure up the memory of his wife, though 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 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 is also possibly that Xiuqin is imagining it upon 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 memory for the future.

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

Among the films that deal with acts of government brutality and suppression of dissent in Taiwan, *Super Citizen Ko* is the only one in which the victim comes face to face with a member of the Garrison Command, who carried out the arrest, 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 explicated by Paul van Zyl's question whether '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."¹⁹ Yet, Ko's search for *truth* (i.e., the burial site of Chen) unconditionally validates and legitimates the need for reconciliation. Hence, what one sees 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 movie Ko finally finds the site where Chen and others who were not identified by their families are buried.²⁰ He lights up 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, where a painstaking effort is invested in recollecting and recreating a memory of the White Terror. By saying this, I am not arguing that one needs to dwell on the past, but rather questioning whether Ko's action (and by extension, the film) in the end mirrors the tired *slogan* of forgiveness in the post-martial law atmosphere of reconciliation. The ending hastily dispenses with many lingering issues that still face Taiwan. Dominick LaCapra's analysis of mourning can help illustrate 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

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

commitment. Moreover, one remembers and honors the lost other but does not identify with the other in a specular relation that . . . confuses the self with the other.”²¹ Whether Ko is eventually able to mourn the past, and analogously, whether Taiwan has succeeded in mourning the loss, remains the ultimate question.

*Adapted from Chapter Six of *Representing Atrocity in Taiwan: The 2/28 Incident and White Terror in Fiction and Film* by Sylvia Li-chun Lin. © 2007 Columbia University Press.

¹ In sources dealing with the Incident, her name is often erroneously given as Lin Chiang-mai or Lin Jiangmai; in fact, Lin is her husband's family name and Jiang (Chiang) is her surname, for the custom at the time was for the wife to place the husband's family name before her own.

² There is a great discrepancy as to how many Taiwanese were killed. George Kerr, author of *Formosa Betrayed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), believed the number was about forty thousand, while ten thousand was claimed by Lai Tse-han, Ramon H. Myers and Wei Wou, editors of *A Tragic Beginning: The Taiwan Uprising of February 28, 1947* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Twenty thousand is generally considered a more plausible number. What is at issue, of course, should not be the number but the circumstances under which the massacre occurred, its subsequent silencing and the prolonged delay of any redress. An analogous case can be found in the debates over the number of Chinese victims during the Nanjing Massacre of 1937. For an insightful analysis of how such a focus on numeral accuracy overshadows important issue of redress and admission of guilt, see Daqing Yang, "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre: Reflections on Historical Inquiry" in *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, ed., Joshua A. Fogel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 133-79.

³ Partial martial law is sometimes used by political scientists and historians to describe government policy during the period between 1949 and 1987, which is commonly referred to as the martial law era in Taiwan. With the ultimate power granted by the "Temporary Provisions Effective During the Period of National Mobilization for Suppression of the Communist Rebellion," the Garrison Command reinforced the rules of martial law, including regulating foreign travel, emigration and custom, censoring publications and broadcasts, prohibiting protests, demonstrations, and congregation, worker and student strikes and walk-outs, banning the formation of new political parties, etc. Over the years, some of the rules were gradually loosened, but full civil liberties were restored only after the lifting of martial law. For a complete description, see *Documentary Collection on the Democratization Movement of Postwar Taiwan* (Zhanhou Taiwan minzhu yundong shiliao huibian), vol. 1, *The Martial Law Era (1945-1987)* (Cong Jieyan dao Jieyan), compiled by Xue Yueshun, Zeng Pincang, and Xu Ruihao (Taipei: National Archive, 2000).

⁴ Roy, *Taiwan*, p. 89.

⁵ See the reference in Ernst Van Alphen, "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma," *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 36. Janet also includes "traumatic memory (the events that resist integration);" I will discuss the issue of trauma in the next section.

⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 19.

⁷ Jonathan Boyarin, "Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory," *Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 2.

⁸ Chen Ruxiu, "History and Memory: From *Good Men Good Women* to *Super Citizen Ko*" (Lishi yu jiyi: cong Haonan haonü dao Chaoji da guomin), *Zhongwai wenxue* 25. 5 (October, 1996), p. 55.

⁹ Turim, *Flashbacks*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Turim, *Flashbacks*, pp. 42-43.

¹¹ Chen, "History and Memory," p. 55. June Yip made similar observation in her book; see "Memory and Imagination: *Good Men, Good Women* and the White Terror" in *Envisioning Taiwan: Fiction, Cinema, and the Nation in the Cultural Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 121-25. Yip appears to follow the conventional interpretation that the past is praised over the present, particularly as far as politics is concerned. Although one can surely agree that Ko's son-in-law's corruption paints a bad picture of post-martial Taiwan, one must bear in mind that such activities as protests and demonstrations were strictly prohibited before the lifting of law. Even making a film like *Super Citizen Ko* would have been impossible, which shows that it is oversimplifying the case to examine the film (or Taiwan in general) from a purely dichotomous good past and bad present.

¹² Chen, "History and Memory," p. 55.

¹³ In the same scene in which the daughter talks about the past, a flashback shows how she is called to an office to answer questions about her personal life: when she visited her father, who she went with, what her father said to her, how long they stayed on the offshore Green Island for political prisoners, etc.

¹⁴ Chi, "Picture Perfect," p. 287.

¹⁵ Jonathan Boyarin, "Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory," *Remapping Memory*, p. 26.

¹⁶ Boyarin, "Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory," p. 26.

¹⁷ Chiao, "A Dialogue with Wan Ren," in *New New Wave*, p. 119.

¹⁸ Those who grew up during the period can vividly remember slogans such as “Be careful! A Communist spy could be right next to you,” “It’s everyone’s obligation to expose Communist spies.”

¹⁹ Paul van Zyl, “Dealing with the Past: Reflections on South Africa, East Timor and Indonesia” in *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, ed. Mary S. Zurbuchen (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), p. 338.

²⁰ In the heyday of the White Terror, the executed were buried in mass graves, if their family members failed to claim the bodies in a timely fashion because they lacked the money (we recall the extortion exacted upon Zhong Haodong’s family), were afraid, or simply were not notified.

²¹ LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, p. 184.