

Stories Beyond Sensation, Lessons in Lenses: Reflecting on the Marcos Sr. and Mao Regimes in *Liway* (2018) and the *Blue Kite* (1993)

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ABSTRACT

Films have been a platform that allows the proliferation of stories and lessons, facilitating the process of what is remembered and recorded about the self, the society, and the nation. Such notions are critical elements in memory and history building, especially for nations like the Philippines and China, as they have traversed critical junctures of their social and political history. Through a comparative analysis, this article examines the stories and lessons on history and memory as depicted in the films *Liway* (Kip Oebanda, 2018) and *The Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993). The discussions highlight the setting and children-characters, as well as meanings and symbolisms in the reflection process, which emphasize the need to investigate the everyday and quotidian stories of those who lived through the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and China under Mao Zedong. The discussions and reflections raise the need to continue upholding the overarching principles behind the Philippines' Second Golden Age in Cinema and China's fifth generation of filmmakers, which is to continue remembering and coming to terms with the nation's traumatic and tragic pasts.

Keywords: *Philippine film, Asian cinema, history, memory, nation*

Cinema, Memory, and the Nation

Hallmark revolutions have influenced the contemporary political and social landscapes of China and the Philippines, having experienced some of the most volatile episodes in their respective recent histories. Such conditions were born out of a familiar feature, mainly the rule of strongmen.

Mao Zedong served as the paramount leader of the People's Republic of China from its establishment in 1949 until his death in 1976. The Mao years of China could be summarized in the Communist Party of China's (Party, hereafter) consistent objective of cleansing the country from various rightist, foreign, and non-proletarian elements. Such a goal culminated in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966 to free the Party and the country from ideological revisionist elements through a perpetual revolution.¹ Meanwhile, the Philippines would experience its own tumultuous episode when the late Philippine president Ferdinand E. Marcos (Marcos Sr., hereafter) placed the entire republic under martial law when he declared Presidential Proclamation No. 1081 on September 21, 1972. In this proclamation, Marcos Sr. expressed the intention of keeping the country safe from what he highlights as the rising threat of "lawless elements" aimed at inciting sedition and continuous anarchy in the Philippines.² With such objectives, the political movements of Marcos Sr. and Mao's times inevitably became social engineering projects of their respective countries. They have enabled conflict and change to become their inevitable outcomes; dissent and opposition became the natural enemy forces under their regimes.

In the Philippines, peace and order were central in the formation of Marcos Sr.'s idealized version of the nation, which he called the "Bagong Lipunan" ("New Society" in Filipino). Within this system lie several implementations, like the implementing of curfews throughout the nation, subjecting public utilities to the military, banning of public demonstrations and rallies, suspending of international travel, and the fighting between government forces and tagged threats to national security like communist forces and separatist movements in the southern part of the country,³ all despite a report by the Rand Corporation that the political system is stable and responsive, and that the existing threats are not too serious anyway.⁴ What followed after two decades of rule under

¹ Communist Party of China, *Resolution on CPC History* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1982), 32.

² Ferdinand E. Marcos. "Proclamation No. 1081, s. 1972," *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*. accessed August 30, 2022.
<https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1972/09/21/proclamation-no-1081/>.

³ Teodoro Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: R.P. Garcia Publishing Co., 1990), 576-577. ; Michael Charleston Chua. "Ang Ating Panahon: Ang Bayan Mula Pagkabansang Republika Hanggang Kapangyarihang Bayan." *CHED - UP Departamento ng Kasaysayan Seminar-Workshop sa Kasaysayan ng Bayan*. (Cabanatuan, Nueva Ecija., 2007), 6. ; Primitivo Mijares, *The Conjugal Dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos* (United States: University of Michigan, 1976), 58-59.

⁴ Mijares, "The Conjugal Dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos," 81.

Marcos Sr. is what has been branded as a peaceful and bloodless revolution that led to the ouster of the longest reigning presidency in the country's history.⁵

China's launching of a series of revolutions since the start of Mao's rule aimed at the birth of a socialist nation in the form of the People's Republic. But even before 1949, revolutions had been a crucial component in its search for an identity amid Western domination of the region. In particular, one of these movements included the Rectification Campaign that started in 1942, being at the center of Mao's consolidation of political power⁶ and call for unification⁷ through correcting the "three bad work styles: bureaucratism, subjectivism, and sectarianism."

What is recorded and remembered about the periods of Marcos Sr. and Mao would revolve around the social and political conditions reflective of an authoritarian rule. Despite being two separate and different sets of phenomena in the countries' histories, the Philippines under Marcos Sr. and China under Mao have produced various, even polarizing experiences and memory within those who lived in these times. These experiences and memories have been the subject, hence represented, in different social, cultural, and aesthetic artifacts, including cinema. However, more importantly, the two periods, based on scholarly and popular literature, have involved discussions of political confrontation and daily struggle as usual components of experiences in the said periods.

These media texts, especially newer ones, allow people to remember critical historical episodes like the martial law under Marcos Sr. and the Mao era of China. More particularly, cinema has not only taken the primary media roles of informing, educating, and entertaining, but it has also taken the significant role of representing mental, social, and even national realities. With this, the presence of said texts allows the solidification of archetypes of both personal and national memory. Not only do these films on the Philippines and China serve as artistic representations of reality during these periods, but they also serve as artifacts that manifest "cultural translations" of the social and political contexts

⁵ Michael Charleston Chua, "Ang Ating Panahon," 8.

⁶ Orville Schell, and John Delury, "Not a Dinner Party (革命): Mao Zedong, Part I," In *Wealth and Power: China's Long March to the Twenty-First Century*, by Orville Schell and John Delury (United States: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014), 220.

⁷ John King Fairbank, and Merle Goldman, "China's War of Resistance, 1937-1945." In *China: A New History*, by John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman (United States: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 323.

they are set in. Given their popularity and accessibility, these artifacts become historical tools for remembering and understanding the past, not as stories that pontificate a singular perspective but as narratives that provide insight.

However, before the advent of films that are reminiscent of either a nostalgic or a tragic past under Marcos Sr. or Mao, the cinema industries of the Philippines and China were under tight scrutiny by the governing strongmen. These conditions underlined that the film industry, aside from presenting narratives of tragedy, conflict, and trauma, was also once a channel for state propaganda.

In the Philippines under Marcos Sr., the declaration of martial law also led to strict control over the media, which included cinema.⁸ A Board of Censors for Motion Pictures approves or rejects films deemed acceptable for consumption in the country; more specifically, a final screenplay should be submitted to the board before the start of the actual filming.⁹ Films adherent to Marcos Sr.'s "Bagong Lipunan" were also made. In addition, in the reinstatement of the Manila Film Festival in 1975, it was mandated that all festival entries present a specific message highlighting this "New Society."¹⁰ Moreover, specific themes depicting corruption or anything that places the government in a bad light were also firmly restricted.¹¹

Under the People's Republic of China, a propaganda system is institutionalized where film is included in one of the conceivable media that transmits messages to the people, which were under the jurisdiction of the Party's Propaganda Department.¹² Originally, films were viewed as a platform associated with the bourgeoisie¹³ and as an avenue for disseminating foreign ideas. However, filmmaking, especially by the Party, also centered on the immediacy and accessibility of the medium to the general masses, allowing it to become a tool for education, despite its Western origins and orientations.¹⁴ Film

⁸ Mijares, "The Conjugal Dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos," 285

⁹ Bienvenido Lumbera, "Problems in Philippine Film History," In *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), 77.

¹⁰ Lumbera, "Problems in Philippine Film History," 77.

¹¹ Eddie Romero, "Film Censorship and Social Change," In *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), 256.

¹² David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy." *The China Journal*, no. 7 (2007): 28.

¹³ Chris Berry, "Cinema: from foreign import to global brand," In *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Chinese Culture*, ed. Kam Louie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 306.

¹⁴ Paul Clark, "Film-Making in China: From the Cultural Revolution to 1981," *The China Quarterly*, no. 94 (1983): 305. ; Berry, "Cinema: from foreign import to global brand," 306.

as an education and propaganda tool was at its height in the Cultural Revolution. After the medium's hiatus due to attacks on being Western, it focused on remodeling traditional operas that highlighted the revolutionary.¹⁵ It was also the industry that Mao's wife Jiang Qing was able to mobilize in maneuvering her way into the political scene of China at that time.¹⁶

However, the artistic traditions of both the Philippines and China did not refuse to show the realities of the times despite institutionalization within the state's bureaucracy and restrictions set forth by the movements in both countries, hence the ushering of the Philippines' Second Golden Age in Cinema and China's fifth generation of filmmakers. The tide of these films' emergence led to an unwelcoming response from the governments of their respective countries; some of these films have even been considered as subversive material. But the Philippine government's tight grip on the press and the media, as well as the pressing challenges on film production, did not stop the proliferation of films that highlighted the social and political conditions of these times;¹⁷ a number of filmmakers in this line included National Artists for Film Lino Brocka, Ismael Bernal, and Kidlat Tahimik.

Meanwhile, Chinese fifth-generation filmmakers shared key characteristics with one another. They are graduates of the Beijing Film Academy, coming from different walks of life, and have experienced life during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁸ These filmmakers paved the way for more critical depictions of the country through unpacking and reflecting on the conditions caused by the political movement.¹⁹ This tradition of film production was in stark contrast with the earlier generations characterized by the film as an educational tool that conveys the messages of the Party and the state. Filmmakers belonging to this category include Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou, and Chen Kaige.

¹⁵ Clark, "Film-Making in China," 309.

¹⁶ Ross Terill, "Recovery and Revenge: Politics as Theater (1960s)," In *Madame Mao: The White-Boned Demon*, by Ross Terill (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 243.

¹⁷ Joel David, "A Second Golden Age (An Informal History)," In *The National Pastime: Contemporary Philippine Cinema*, by Joel David (Pasig: Anvil Publishing, Inc, 1990), 17.

¹⁸ Berry, "Cinema: from foreign import to global brand," 312.

¹⁹ Ban Wang, "Trauma and History in Chinese Film: Reading "The Blue Kite" against Melodrama," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 129.

Unfortunately, however, social and psychological challenges, like forgetting and failure to maintain memory, voluntary disassociation from the past,²⁰ distortion of existing narratives, and even the outburst of nostalgia, have enabled the emergence and propagation of counternarratives that negate existing stories. More specifically, in China, the rapid economic development has enabled it to become a fertile terrain for Mao Zedong Thought to re-emerge,²¹ which may pose a challenge to engage in reflection on their tragic, traumatic, and conflict-infested history. On the other hand, in the Philippines, despite the current democratic rule as preserved by law, this same system empowers whitewashing and distortionists to launch their own stories of what happened in these crucial moments of the country's modern history. What appears to be a "humanization" of the enablers of such episodes are then sensationalized, popularized, and pauperized stories aimed to capture the general public. Understanding history through tragic periods now becomes significant more than ever for both nations.²²

Research Questions

Films not only emphasize the richness of popular media texts but also play a critical role in the exercise of reflecting, remembering, and recording what happened in these contentious episodes of the nation. Through a comparative textual analysis, this article unpacks various elements found in the films *Livway* (Kip Oebanda, 2018) and *The Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993). It is important to note that these films present representations that attempt to be consistent with history, memory, and reality, without completely replicating them, but at the same time without resorting to sensationalism, gossip, and exaggeration. They do not only show images of daily living and uncertainty brought about by these times' social and political conditions. They also translate into creative energies that would, in turn, inevitably contribute, complement, and become historical narrations themselves.²³

With these, the following research questions are posited:

1. How are the Marcos Sr. and Mao regimes portrayed in the selected films?

²⁰ Cindy Minarova-Banjac, "Collective Memory and Forgetting: A Theoretical Discussion," *Center for East-West Cultural & Economic Studies*, no. 16 (2018): 20.

²¹ Yuan Li, "Who Are Our Enemies? China's Bitter Youths Embrace Mao," *The New York Times*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/08/business/china-mao.html>

²² Michel Bonnin. "The Threatened History and Collective Memory of the Cultural Revolution's Lost Generation." *China Perspectives*, no. 4 (2007): 64.

²³ Cirilo F. Bautista. "Literature as History." *Philippine Studies* 36, no. 2 (1988): 195.

2. How do these portrayals provide reflections on the histories of the Philippines and China?

Frameworks

Conceptual Frame

The selected films reflect the people's and social histories of the Philippines and China, emphasizing the everyday, quotidian, and pauperized dimensions of the involved regimes and periods, as well as the inherent potency of artifacts and texts in the narration processes. These types of history and historical reflection highlight two core assumptions of how the remembering and recording processes are done. Firstly, narrations of this kind highlight types of narrations by ordinary people,²⁴ which potentially deviate from what the mainstream presents but with the reminder of not resorting to distorting the truth and taking advantage of sensation and gossip. With the films *Lirway* and *The Blue Kite* emphasizing less on the trauma, violence, and contentious politics, their plots place a premium on the Marcos Sr. and Mao regimes from the perspective of those in the margins, specifically children and mothers. Secondly, memoirs serve as potent materials for narrations.²⁵ Reflections done through these artifacts empower those who tell the story, like in this paper's case, Chinese fifth-generation filmmaker Tian and "martial law baby" filmmaker Oebanda. With their backgrounds as individuals who have experienced specific social and political conditions of Mao and Marcos Sr.'s regimes, they are able to channel insights, reflections, and memories through the films they have created.

Methodological and Critical Frames

This article utilizes a formalist approach in extracting and analyzing the central plot, historical setting, children-characters, and symbolisms and meanings found in the selected films to reflect on the Philippines under Marcos Sr. and China under Mao. Under the formalist view, films present a specific view of the world that adheres to a specific narrative forwarded by its creator, without being totally dependent on reality. In this case, film goes beyond being a transmission channel for the theatre and the natural world.²⁶

²⁴ Andrew Port. "History from Below, the History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory." *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* 11 (2015): 108.

²⁵ Andreas Lixl-Purcell. "Memoirs as History." *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 39, no. 1 (1994): 228.

²⁶ J. Dudley Andrew, "The Formative Tradition," In *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*, by J. Dudley Andrew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 45.

This perspective in film criticism is appropriate in developing reflections on history as it bridges what appeals to the audience and the memory and narration intentionally forwarded by the creator of the media text. When audiences perceive media texts and subtexts, the perceived elements are the first to be captured in processing an overall message. In the case of relaying history and memory, specific representations of settings, characters, conflicts, and many others become critical rather than the actual manifestations of said elements in recorded versions of history. With this, the article's intention is not to underline the films analyzed as the sole record and version of memory and history valid for reflection. Instead, the current endeavor highlights not only the significance taken by films and other popular media texts in the facilitation of memory and history, but also the process of examination, scrutiny, and reflection on these said texts to uphold a more informed audience and citizen of the nation. As an art form, film is expected to present a specific world that is consistent with reality, by merely presenting facts and firmly providing room for interrogating realities and actualities.²⁷

Comparative Analysis of the Films

Overview of the Films

Liway, a film by Kip Oebanda (2018), revolves around the life and struggles of Day (played by Glaiza de Castro) as she traverses the latter part of the Martial Law under the late president Marcos Sr. as a dissident named Commander Liway. The film also magnifies the life of her son Dakip (meaning “captured” in Filipino, played by Ken Ken Nuyad), who comes of age within Camp Delgado and beyond its prison walls. As life unfolds, Dakip learns to deal with the stark differences between prison life and the outside world through his mother's stories about Liway, the enchantress of Kanlaon, and his encounters with other people critical in fighting an oppressive regime.

The Blue Kite, a fifth-generation film by Tian Zhuangzhuang (1993), centers on the motherhood of Chen Shujuan (played by Lu Liping) as she provides for her only son named ‘Tietou’ (meaning “iron head” in Chinese, played by Chen Xiaoman as an adolescent) within China under Mao. Life in Dry Well Lane was difficult, more so, Shujuan had to deal with three different marriages and the continuous struggle for a better life for her and her son. The film unravels how Tietou comes of age during the socially and politically tumultuous periods of

²⁷ Petronilo Daroy, “Social Significance in the Filipino Cinema,” In *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), 107.

Mao's time, specifically the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution.

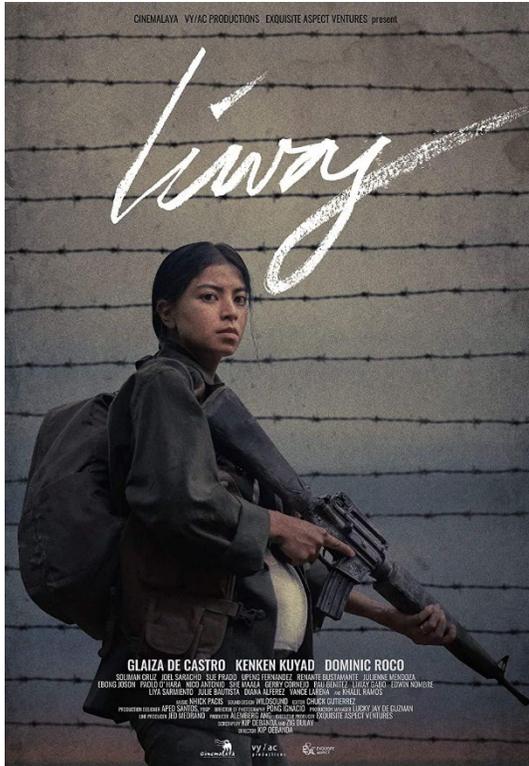


Figure 1. *Liway* (2018) film poster.²⁸



Figure 2. *The Blue Kite* (1993) film poster.²⁹

The Setting: Socially Engineering the Nation

Both films depict the tumultuous periods of the Philippines and China in the middle and latter parts of the 20th century. Marcos Sr.'s and Mao's regimes were also viewed as significant social engineering projects to achieve a more orderly and ideal society. *Liway* underscores sacrifice and discipline, while *The Blue Kite* emphasizes "politics first" through rectification and revolution.

Images of Marcos Sr.'s martial law rule and the attempt to engineer his "New Society" are revealed in a more detailed form in *Liway*. The film's main setting Camp Delgado served as the microcosm of the Martial Law rule implemented

²⁸ IMDb, *Liway (2018) Movie Poster*, Movie Poster, accessed August 15 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8661074/mediaviewer/rm1072986624>.

²⁹ KinoLorber, "*The Blue Kite*," KinoLorber, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.kinolorber.com/film/view/id/31>.

by Marcos Sr. The everyday Filipino, through criminals, rebels, and other characters, interact as set by the rules and norms of the prison authorities and the broader system. More specifically, even the slightest of actions are controlled by those in power, including the extremely precise rationing of food during mealtimes (see figure 3), the strict implementation of the “lights off” rule during bedtime (see figure 4), the organized grouping of inmates in the camp,³⁰ and the tight grip of the higher authorities even on immediate supervising figures like the prison warden.



Figure 3. Prison warden Sulpicio (L, played by Soliman Cruz) polices the lunch lady for giving out an “extra” piece of dried fish.³¹



Figure 4. Day (L) and Ric (R) are reminded of the “lights off” notification by Sulpicio.³²

The framing of such moments highlights the specific conditions of authoritarian rule within a controlled environment like prison grounds without using images of extreme violence and chaos as depicted in mainstream academic and popular depictions. However, the film later unravels as shown in figure 5 (below) a tighter grip within prison grounds as the situation in Manila, unshown to the viewers as it is presented as a faraway place, becomes more volatile and uncertain. This depiction of Manila is a stark contrast with the popular notion of how the EDSA revolution was overall a peaceful one. Furthermore, images indicative of this volatility include the change of wardenship (see figure 6), the more intense inmate segregation,³³ and the remorseless separation between a mother and her deceased son (see figure 7).

³⁰ Kip Oebanda, “Liway,” VY/AC Productions, Exquisite Aspect, 2018, film.

³¹ Oebanda, “Liway.”

³² Oebanda, “Liway.”

³³ Oebanda, “Liway.”



Figure 5. Ric mentions to Day and another female inmate the chaotic situation in Manila.³⁴



Figure 6. The newly appointed prison warden threatens an inmate who refused to follow new segregation policies.³⁵



Figure 7. Prison authorities allow a crying mother to carry her dead son and say her goodbyes before removing the corpse from the prison grounds.³⁶

The Blue Kite is particular in showing images of China under Mao as it introduces the life and struggles of Shujuan and Tietou. Interestingly, the film is divided into three segments based on the family patriarch at that time: the father,³⁷ the uncle,³⁸ and the stepfather.³⁹ Each of these segments coincides with the political movement that overarches the setting as the film progresses. The family and their peers are consistently reminded of the primacy of politics in their daily life.

The intertwining of the social and political conditions is highlighted as early as the film starts with a wide angle shot of Dry Well Lane, the village where the Chen family lives. The opening sequence depicts what was supposed to be a happy marriage celebration between Chen Shujuan and Lin Shaolong (Tietou's father, played by Pu Quanxin). This was followed by a tragic announcement over the public radio that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin had passed on. Such an event compelled the family to move the celebration to a later date (see figure 8).

³⁴ Oebanda, "Liway."

³⁵ Oebanda, "Liway."

³⁶ Oebanda, "Liway."

³⁷ Zhuangzhuang Tian, "The Blue Kite," Beijing Film Studio, Longwick Film, 1993, film.

³⁸ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

³⁹ Tian, "The Blue Kite."



Figure 8. The Chen family and friends listening to the radio announcement of Soviet Leader Stalin's death.⁴⁰

Participation in the movements was shown as significant. The Rectification Movement compelled characters in the film, more specifically Shaolong and his colleagues, to also pitch in ideas to critique the Party (see figure 9). However, when the critiques were deemed too radical, they were also eventually condemned as reactionaries and were given appropriate sanctions like being sent to reeducation camps.⁴¹ The family mentions the effects of the production system set forth by the Great Leap Forward.⁴² Moreover, in the latter part, the younger ones also joined in the Cultural Revolution by targeting the enemies of the state, mostly their adult acquaintances (see figure 10).



Figure 9. Shaolong and his colleagues discussing their potential participation in the Rectification Movement.⁴³



Figure 10. Red Guards condemning a teacher in a public denunciation.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁴¹ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁴² Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁴³ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁴⁴ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

The Characters: Children-Characters as Viewpoints

Children as viewpoints allow the unpacking of their characterization in the films within the specific settings.

Firstly, their names Dakip and Tietou reveal the social and political conditions they were immersed in. As shown in figure 11, Day was still pregnant with Dakip upon her capture in the mountains by the Philippine military. It was later on revealed at the end that upon his baptism, the priest opted for the name “Kip” instead, thereby connecting the names of the director and the main character of the film.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, as shown in figure 12, “Tietou,” according to his own narration, was first named “Lin Dayu” (meaning “heavy rain” in Chinese) since he was born on a rainy day. Such a name also foreshadowed the conditions that would befall his family in the coming times. However, he explains that the name Tietou was preferred so he would grow up strong.⁴⁶



Figure 11. A co-dissident helps hide a pregnant Commander Liway from government forces.⁴⁷



Figure 12. Newborn “Lin Dayu,” who would eventually be called “Tietou”⁴⁸

This device frames these children-characters with a specific and determined set of personalities within moments like martial law, imprisonment, and revolution, among others. On the one hand, Dakip is seen as a constricted little child having to consistently be confused with everyday matters like social interaction and object perception. On the other hand, Tietou is shown as a resilient, growing kid amid his family’s struggles within China’s volatile conditions. Furthermore, these conditions appear to have a certain level of permanence placed in the characters’ identities, introducing what was to be the human condition of children like them in the riptides of the Philippines under Marcos Sr. and China under Mao.

⁴⁵ Oebanda, “Liway.”

⁴⁶ Tian, “The Blue Kite.”

⁴⁷ Oebanda, “Liway.”

⁴⁸ Tian, “The Blue Kite.”

The films also magnify through Dakip and Tietou what growing up was like in these times. Social interaction was essential for the child characters, as they only had their parents and extended family members. Especially for Dakip, he only had other children whose parents were also prisoners (either rebels or criminals) of Camp Delgado, who can be assumed to have the same upbringing and understanding as him. Interaction with those from outside the prison was limited only to his family's visitors and the voices from the other side of the prison walls. It was when Dakip was invited to speak at a prayer rally where he could then interact with different people; appearing awkward, nervous, but nonetheless candid.⁴⁹

In Tietou's case, despite the relative freedom contrasting with Dakip's situation, the inconsistent presence of a paternal figure and the authoritative parenting usually seen in Chinese families would account for restricted social interaction. In addition, the harsh treatment for misbehavior made him distant from Shaolong. His mother's remarrying also reveals him being uninterested in growing closer to what was supposed to be his new family. He sometimes even showed defiance and resistance, like with his stepfather during lunch.⁵⁰



Figure 13. Day (L) and Ric (R) dress up Dakip (C) as he prepares to attend a prayer rally.⁵¹



Figure 14. Shujuan wondering about why Tietou was difficult to handle.⁵²

More importantly, the child characters were presented with early realizations of the difficult conditions of their countries, and consequently, their lives.

Dakip's confusion about the truth behind Liway, for instance, would lead him being upset with his mother Day. Crying with frustration, he asserts the truth from Day and insists that he is no longer a child, and that the truth need not be

⁴⁹ Oebanda, "Liway."

⁵⁰ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁵¹ Oebanda, "Liway."

⁵² Tian, "The Blue Kite."

concealed anymore.⁵³ This crucial moment in the film reveals the child's burden in coming to terms with three conflicting realities: the myth and the real, that Liway was not an enchantress but a dissident; the life inside the prison and outside it, where the story of Liway plays a vital role on why their family was imprisoned in the first place; and ultimately, the struggle between good and evil, on what could Dakip possibly do next after knowing all the things his mother had told him that moment.

Tietou appeared stubborn, adhering to his name 'iron head.' Some scenes in the film depict this. He would also be in fights with other children.⁵⁴ This would also be evident in a scene where he fights with the Red Guards to save his mother.⁵⁵ After getting scolded, he became distant from his father Shaolong. Even at home, he would make trouble, like ruining his uncle's homework.⁵⁶ The film was not explicit about him being oriented to proper behavior aside from using force. This character also reflected how the youth became defiant and resistant to their adult counterparts come the Cultural Revolution, as the movement compels the elimination of old thinking and revisionist ideas.

However, Tietou comes across a contention between being a revolutionary youth and a filial son when the Red Guards captured his mother after being condemned, because she was a wife of a reactionary Party official. Perhaps, he was at his softest, showing his vulnerability for his mother. But he also was at his toughest at this time; he was compelled to fight for his mother despite being outnumbered. However, he still ended up beaten to death.⁵⁷



Figure 15. Silhouette of Tietou (R) attacking a Red Guard with a brick.⁵⁸

⁵³ Oebanda, "Liway."

⁵⁴ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁵⁵ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁵⁶ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁵⁷ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁵⁸ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

The human condition faced by children in the periods of Marcos Sr. and Mao highlights the grappling with inherent childhood needs and the demands of their respective social and political backdrops. Dakip and Tietou depended on their parents, specifically their mothers, to develop social graces and desirability and to shape moral values, which were constantly challenged and negotiated as they encountered different people. With these are the realization that the child's coming of age within these times is the human condition at its rawest form, begging the question of how they are supposed to accept the volatility and uncertainty, while becoming a developed person. This human condition also included accepting the end, even when it was never desired or expected. What Dakip thought to be the final words his mother Day would tell him—that darkness somehow would not last long⁵⁹—would be a sharp realization for him, as he was forced to understand that he could potentially and vaguely lose his parents. Tietou's case was more tragic, as it appeared to have ended with death while struggling for the people he loved. In its simplest terms, the paradox of certain and uncertain death would also govern even the child.

Meanings and Symbols: Myth-telling and Cultural Preservation in the Film Titles

The titles of the two films serve as the central symbols of the stories they forward. They suggest a solid adherence to myth-telling and cultural preservation in the depicted stories in the films.

What eventually unfolds in *Liway's* latter part is a deeper understanding of the significance of the personhood and essence of Liway, especially for a growing Dakip. In the initial part of the film, Liway is introduced through the paper doll scenes as the mythical enchantress of Kanlaon bound to save her home from the enemies.

However, looking at figures 16 and 17, the film unravels another meaning of Liway, which is tragic and confusing for Dakip. In the scene one evening, as Day and Dakip were about to call the night through a prayer, a drunken man suddenly visited Camp Delgado, calling out a "Commander Liway." Day was forced to come out and appease the said man. However, Dakip follows her from the sleeping quarters; he would come to the aid of his mother being shouted at and called with said name. Such a revelation forced a crying Dakip to raise

⁵⁹ Oebanda, "Liway."

suspicious about who his mother really was and the truthfulness of the drunken man's claims. This prompted Day to tell her own story and that of her family.



Figure 16. A drunken man (L) looking for Commander Liway is confronted by Day (R).⁶⁰



Figure 17. An upset Dakip (L) cries to Day (R) asking the truth about who she and Liway really are.⁶¹

Through this revelation, the miscible nature of Liway as a myth and Liway as a person is inevitably shown too. Myth-telling becomes central not only in cultural preservation and significance, but also in presenting facts and realities within the times.

Aside from being the film's title, *Liway* represents three prominent figures as viewers follow the childhood of Dakip. The screen captures in figures 18, 19, and 20 facilitate this characterization. Firstly, Liway first appears as a mythical character, also called the enchantress of Kanlaon. The film shows this in the paper doll narrations of where the enchantress hails from and what she does. This device highlights the mythologization of Liway's character as she attempts to separate and conceal reality through storytelling. She is shown as a kind-hearted young woman, preaching god's word and eventually the protector of Kanlaon from the ravaging "monsters from the north."⁶² Secondly, Liway is revealed as a mother and a daughter where Liway is shown in her most human form, having a family to care for and protect. Thirdly, Liway is then revealed as the alias of a dissident (Commander Liway), which is eventually shown as the alter-identity of Day when she was in the mountains running from the military. Day was under her dissident monicker when she met Ric (Commander Toto, played by Dominic Roco), who would eventually become her husband and the father of their son Dakip.

⁶⁰ Oebanda, "Liway."

⁶¹ Oebanda, "Liway."

⁶² Oebanda, "Liway."



Figure 18. Paper doll portrayal of Liway as the enchantress of Kanlaon.⁶³



Figure 19. Day (L) as “Commander Liway” with partner Ric (R), a.k.a. Commander Toto.⁶⁴



Figure 20. Day (L) with her friend Fiel (R) as preachers of Liberation Theology.⁶⁵

The dynamic characterization and conceptualization of Liway allow the portrayal of who the woman and the Filipina could be during Marcos Sr.’s martial law. Liway is presented as a hero not only within the family; she was also a central figure in Kanlaon as presented in the myth and a key personality within the groups of dissidents she is aligned with. Consequently, she is framed as a character of agency, powerful enough to combat the enemies and be on relatively equal footing with male co-dissidents as they set off in the mountains.

However, the film also shows how the political and social conditions of the periods represented, enable an additional layer of marginalization for women. As seen in figure 21, in the scene when the Constabulary holds a press conference after Liway and her co-dissidents’ capture, they verbally emphasized that their treatment of Commander Liway’s forces was “humane” and that had it been the other way around, the government’s forces would have been finished. This complex dynamic shows women being subjected to both forces of the state and forces of the patriarchy, where she had no other choice but to surrender frustratedly, to save herself and her son.

⁶³ Oebanda, “Liway.”

⁶⁴ Oebanda, “Liway.”

⁶⁵ Oebanda, “Liway.”



Figure 21. The Philippine Constabulary holding a press conference on the capture of Commander Liway and her co-dissidents.⁶⁶

On another note, throughout China's long history, kites have been symbolic, not only a part of its cultural heritage. Kites in the country are born out of traditional skills enabled by history and cultural adaptability,⁶⁷ making them symbolic of cultural resilience that withstood several political, social, economic, and cultural backdrops caused by dynasties and paramount leaders. Blue is also promising in Chinese culture, as it represents the wood element, symbolizing immortality and prosperity.

Zooming specifically in the backdrop provided by the film *The Blue Kite*, the kite parallels the Chen family's struggle for a decent life in China under Mao. Furthermore, the blue kite as a device is shown in several encounters in the film as shown in the screen captures in figures 22, 23, and 24. The film opens with the blue kite flying and the nursery rhyme about crows sung by a child; this serves as the symbol's introduction. The film shows a wide shot of Tietou playing with the blue kite in different instances. But the film also shows when the blue kite is flown and eventually stuck in a tree through a low-angle shot. As the film closes with Tietou left beaten by the Red Guards, the blue kite is then shown stuck in a tree again, torn and destroyed.

⁶⁶ Oebanda, "Liway."

⁶⁷ Yi Zhang, Yuwen Huang, Xinyu Zhao, Jingxuan Li, Fulin Yin, and Lin Wang. "Research on the Influencing Factors of Kite Culture Inheritance Based on an Adversarial Interpretive Structure Modeling Method." *IEEE* 9 (2021): 42140.



Figure 22. Title frame of the film featuring the flying blue kite at the background.⁶⁸



Figure 23. A young Tietou (L) with his father Shaolong (R) flying a kite.⁶⁹



Figure 24. The torn and destroyed blue kite stuck in a tree.⁷⁰

The blue kite represents the fate of Shujuan and Tietou in traversing China under Mao. It is also seen as an object reflecting what was to behold the characters. When his kite gets stuck in a tree, Tietou is promised that a new one can be given to him anyway.⁷¹ He utters a similar promise to his nephew when it was his time to play with a younger relative in his life, with the kite getting stuck in a tree again.⁷² This depicts Tietou's and the patriarchs' unfazed hope. The kite becomes symbolic of their lives under these trying conditions—uncertain and still, but also resilient as new hope in the form of a new kite will eventually come anyway.

However, the blue kite also symbolizes a tragic denouement that culminated in the Cultural Revolution; the situations also do not end well despite unending hopes for a better and liveable future. Such a device also showed what childhood could be like in these trying times. The child did not remain unaffected by the conditions set forth by the policies and norms of the different movements in

⁶⁸ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁶⁹ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁷⁰ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁷¹ Tian, "The Blue Kite."

⁷² Tian, "The Blue Kite."

China. Especially in the third part, *The Blue Kite* magnifies the typical depiction of the Cultural Revolution, where the youth were at the forefront of mobilizing the movement.

Liway and *The Blue Kite* in Perspective

Looking at filmmakers with first-hand stories and experiences under the Mao and Marcos Sr. regimes, *Liway* and *The Blue Kite* provide parallelisms that enable viewers to delve into the reflections of what the Philippines and China were like in these times. These aesthetic representations are truthful, not necessarily to the actual events themselves, but to the messages about clamoring for coming to terms with trauma, conflict, and politics. More specifically, depictions of the setting provide a vivid set of microcosmic images of the country by providing glimpses of crucial events like the tail-end of the Marcos Sr. regime or the series of revolutions in China under Mao. Beyond the politics and factionalism of the times lie what the periods meant for those in the fringes of Chinese and Philippines societies at these times. The characters represent human agency and the lack thereof, as they try to traverse the riptides of societal and political conflict enabled by specific arms and institutions of the state. The symbolisms are specific reflection points of Chinese and Filipino cultures that aid in the storytelling processes of these periods. Ultimately, the selected film elements in this article enable multiple points of sensemaking and remembering of the countries under the said regimes, which allow a more inclusive way of sending the messages to more audiences.

Conclusions, Reflections, and Recommendations

In responding to the two posited questions in this paper, the Marcos Sr. and Mao regimes are presented as critical historical periods without being confined within the simplistic labels of conflict, trauma, and violence. The respective historical periods can also be understood sensibly as social engineering initiatives by strongmen using filmic works. But ultimately, the question of “whose stories are these?” can also be raised. More than the mentioned cinematic depictions, *Liway* and *The Blue Kite* are not just stories of the Philippines and China. They are also stories that are not often told in the mainstream. They are the stories of those like Dakip and Tietou, children who came of age in the

revolutions of their time as they attempted to live as normally as possible under unusual conditions.

They are also stories of those like Day and Shujuan, women who asserted their suppressed agencies to provide better and more acceptable lives for their sons. They are the stories of all the other characters in the films, people whose actions had to be adherent to the conditions set by martial law and Communist China. Hence, the films are quotidian and day-to-day perspectives that allow the current generation and audiences to engage in deeper reflection rather than the mere controversial and sensational layers of remembering history.

With the analyses presented, the continued upholding of the principles behind the Second Golden Age of Philippine Cinema and the fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers shall be in order, especially in an era of historical distortion, disinformation, misplaced nostalgia, sensationalism, and forgetting. As the existing films have done their part in the recording of past events through the aesthetic presentation of realities in their stories, characters, settings, and symbolisms, the viewers are then at the optimal place of using these media texts as tools of reflection and remembering what is perceived to be as their contentious and tragic pasts.

Films are unprecedentedly at the center of attention both in popular and academic terrains, given their audio-visual and widespread impact on the general public, positing what should be remembered, and how they are remembered. The portrayals they present become important tools in facilitating what is remembered and understood in the countries' contemporary political and social histories. Present-day societies have been graced with social, cultural, and artistic artifacts. In facilitating memory and history of the Marcos Sr. and Mao periods, it is essential to note that stories acknowledging the vulnerabilities and perils of the marginalized should never be overpowered.

This article uses the formal elements of the films as key points in highlighting the quotidian and everyday images of the Philippines and China in these times. Future reflective studies on these same films in the study, as well as other films, memoirs, or other media texts that represent the countries' histories will significantly assist in the realization of the intentions of the evolving film industries mentioned in the earlier parts.

The unpacking and reflections provided in this article ultimately serve as a reminder to fight against whitewashing and distortions, by upholding what is

true even if it is not beautiful and desirable because the vividly explicit truths teach the sharpest of lessons to future generations. For the Philippines, a vital realization now is that even the most rapidly developing countries also have challenges in coming to terms with their past. It is not yet too late to resituate the place of films in memory and history building of the people. With the analyses, discussions, and reflections above, the call to avoid misplacing nostalgia, sensationalism, and even gossip becomes more intense than ever.

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