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De-Politicizing and Dis-Remembering the White Terror Through Gothic: The Grand Narrative and Embarrassed Politics of Collective Commemoration in the Movie *Detention*

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Abstract

This article aims to read Taiwan's 2019 cinematic horror sensation, *Detention*, as part of the nation's effort to construct a grand narrative of collective commemoration, as it tries to streamline its multiple conflicting memories about the Nationalist government's violent political suppressions of suspected dissidents during the mid-20th century, commonly called the White Terror. For this nationalist narrative to follow the Gothic scenario of progression from repression to liberation, embarrassing elements of the past, especially many White Terror victims' sympathy with the Chinese Communist Party, must be de-politicized and dis-remembered. The movie adopts a ploy that can be called "isomorphic camouflage" in presenting its scenes and characters to evoke most viewers' impressions about the White Terror while removing their actual political significances. This Gothic agenda, however, confronts its traumatizing point at the center of the movie, its female protagonist Fang Ray-shin, whose "ignorance and innocence" ironically expose the limitation of the nationalist collective commemoration.

Keywords

Taiwan horror movie – *Detention* – White Terror – collective commemoration

Introduction

Based on the video game sensation of the same title released in 2017, its movie adaptation *Detention* (its Chinese title, if directly rendered, being *Back to School* or fǎn siào 返校) attracted much media attention and even raised great expectations in the more politically and historically conscious section of its potential audience in Taiwan when the film hit the theatre screen in 2019. There had been very few local films dealing, even just indirectly, with topics related to the bloody suppressions of suspected political dissidents by the Nationalist government during the mid-20th century, commonly called the White Terror. Furthermore, they were often regarded as arthouse films (hence not very popular among the general audience) and were produced in the early 1990s (hence feeling outdated now).[1] More than thirty years after martial law was lifted, Taiwan needs a more accessible rendering of its history, even in a pop-culture form, that would help the younger generations face it squarely and relate to it meaningfully. If the video-game source text could win the interest of the target generations who have no personal experiences of the White Terror and prompt some of the players to research the history (as Lee Shuchuan claims she has observed; 2021, 95), the film adaptation, with fewer narratological limitations and higher imaging technologies, should be able to render a more accessible and proper account.

This wish for historical authenticity of the movie, though indeed unreasonable and impractical to make of a fictional construct and a commercial venture, must have borne heavily on the production team of *Detention*. In fact, when its producer, Li Lie, announced the adaptation plan back in 2017, she already tried to temper the eagerness by emphasizing that the White Terror would serve only as the narrative setting of the movie, with its focus on human nature rather than politics (Lin Yinyu 2017). This "statement of purpose" provoked the concern that the adaptation would betray the motivation of transitional justice underlying the fragmentary narrative in the video game (GEME 2017). However, with the film's box-office successes in several Asian countries and award-winning records in film festivals, most critics started praising its faithful reproduction of the oppressive atmosphere of the original game or echoed its obvious moral that we should treasure the hard-won liberties we have

1 The better known examples are Edward (De-chang) Yang's *A Brighter Summer Day* (its Chinese title, if directly rendered, being *The Murder Case of Guling Street* or gǔ lǐng jie shào nián sha rén shì jiàn 牯嶺街少年殺人事件, 1991) and Wan Jen's *Super Citizen Ko* (chao jí dà guó mín 超級大國民, 1994).

enjoyed since the lifting of martial law.[2] Some reviewers still deplored the film's inadequate treatment of the White Terror materials, which are supposed to make the adaptation unique. Two of such criticisms are particularly worthy of attention because they touch on the core of the issue. The title of He-Alan's article, "*Detention*: Liberty Betrayed," clearly indicates the reviewer's concern that the movie individualizes the oppressions of the political power mechanism, thus focusing on the victims' and victimizers' guilt and remorse; the catchphrase, "To Liberty," which appears on the death-will note left by the martyred teacher to his beloved girl student, sounds like "Kitsch" in the critic's ears (He Alan 2019). The other critic, Sang Ni, is indeed semi-ironical about the way the movie handles "those political, way too political stuffs [*sic*]" (the subtitle of her review, as directly rendered from Chinese). She notes in particular how the fantastic scenarios in the nightmarish campus "counteract" the White Terror realities the movie is expected to portray, due to the highly stylistic, generic demands of the horror movie (Sang 2019).

These criticisms seem odd because the movie abounds with references to scenarios and details of the White Terror era, such as a repressive atmosphere generated by prevailing anti-communist hysteria, a constant suspicion of relations and friends as potential secret informants, a secret study group reading banned books, torturing and court-martialing of civilian suspects by military personnel. However, as the present article will point out below, when these references are examined closely, their political significance and historical accuracy become unstable or uncertain. In other words, the film's representation of the White Terror in Taiwan is blurred into a general impression of a totalitarian regime's violations of the citizenry's basic human rights, while details about the historical setting that carry specific political meanings are displaced or obscured. The precise motives of the regime's atrocities against the civic society as well as the specific identities of the perpetrators (not even

2 Some typical samples are as follows: Lubian, "《fǎn siào》 jhíh de ˚kàn ma˚? wǔ dà kàn diǎn fen si jhè bù táiwan tè yǒu jhǒng diàn yǐng！《返校》值得看嗎？五大看點分析這部「台灣特有種」新類型電影！[Is Detention Worth Watching? Five Major Angles Wherefrom to Analyze the New Type of Film Unique to Taiwan]" *Marie Claire* https://www.marieclaire.com.tw/entertainment/movie/45041; Kuntingtu, "《fǎn siào》 zuèi kě pà de˚ bù shìh bái sè kǒng bù hé jiè yán《返校》：最可怕的不是白色恐怖和戒嚴 [Detention: What Terrifies Most is Not the White Terror and Martial Law]" *Kuntingtu's Comments on Films/24 Frame Image Museum*, February 28, 2022, https://quentin1012.pixnet.net/blog/post/354701770-movie-detention; Rulu, "《返校》《f ă n siào》：tái wan bù ying gai bèi yí wàng dì lì sh ǐ h,jyù cíng cíng jié chong jí shíh zú 台灣不該被遺忘的歷史,劇情結局衝擊十足 [*Detention*: The History Taiwan Should Not Forget & the Powerful Impact of the Movie's Ending]" *Rulu's Movie Notes,* September 15, 2019, https://loory.tw/detention-movie/.

the government agencies in charge) are thus left literally in the dark, as if the supernatural essence of the horrors would be enough for explanation.

Indeed, *Detention* adopts a representation mode that can be clearly identified as Gothic, especially its Asian cinematic variations, which generally draw on local supernatural folklores for the content and take after Japanized Hollywood horrors in aesthetic style; the so-called J-Horror, a trend initiated by movies like *Ringu* and *Ju-on* at the turn of the century, surely influences the making of Taiwan horrors ever since. Also, discourses on the White Terror in Taiwan have usually called its killed victims "the aggrieved spirits" (yuan-hun; 冤魂), and the metaphoric expression could be visually literalized in the *Detention* franchise. However, this Gothicization of the political terror in representing a problematic episode of the recent Taiwan history takes on a more fundamental level of political implications which the film criticisms about *Detention* cited above fail to address. To explore this level, it may be more illuminating to return to the originary moment of the Gothic in its Western tradition, especially the connection of its development to the traumatizing outbreak of the French Revolution in the late 18th century. Joseph Crawford located the formation of what he calls "Gothic rhetoric" – an approach to "human wickedness and suffering in supernatural terms," with "an insistence upon the numinous, incommunicable, incomprehensible quality of true evil," etc. – in the 1790s for the British people to make sense of what they witnessed during the traumatizing Reign of Terror; there is then an intrinsic "relationship [...] between 'terrorist novel writing' and 'terrorist politics'" (2013, viii, x). Gothic then becomes a paradoxical means of mediating complex, tangled experiences of political evils and sufferings into some manageable form by attributing and absolutizing them to a realm beyond. Maria Beville, in her aptly titled article "Gothic Memory and the Contested Past: Framing Terror," (2014) describes similar "Gothic dynamics" in historiography of "translating the past [...] in the generation of cultural memory in the case of contested pasts" (p. 53). Borrowing Timothy Jones' notion of "Gothic habitus" as "a shared way of understanding and 'doing' things which we describe as Gothic" in a community and as "something between the ceremonial and the ludic," Beville emphasizes the Gothic as "ritualised forms of collective commemoration" (2014, 54–55). The commemoration, which is conducted as a practice of remembrance or through an object of memorialization, can negotiate a meaningful ordering of the confused and disturbing experiences of the lived pasts. More importantly, this Gothic formation of memory assumes a certain function of "trans-temporality" because it "serves both as a part of our way of looking back and also a part of the way in which we carry the past forward into the future." In the same vein but in a more negative light, David Punter takes the oppositional

dyad, "Trauma and Refuge," as the motif around which Gothic deploys itself politically, for "Gothic [arises] as a fantasy construct that could be used to defend against specific nations' perceived otherness" – this time from the past (2014, 30). Punter notes, in particular, the "birth-trauma" – the moment a (national) community perceives how the heterogeneous, conflicting elements within threaten its imagined integrity – which the Gothic tries to cover up; as he puts it bluntly, "nationalism is set of clothes in which to dress the wounded nakedness of trauma" (2014, 24).

The movie *Detention* should be taken as a Taiwanese case of the Gothic "Sartor Resartus" in dealing with its chaotic and tangled White Terror pasts. Punter's twisted interpretation of the classic Gothic convention, "the explained supernatural," is apt here: "the purported horrors of superstition [and the supernatural] are not so horrible after all" (2014, 26). In fact, as Katarzyna Ancuta has rightly observed, "Asian ghosts and spirits are seen as protective [...], and the typical relationship they foster is that of negotiation" (2014, 211). Ghostly hauntings are indeed traumatizing, but ghosts also stand ready to be appeased. The film, with its atmospheric evocation or Gothic remembrance of the White Terror period through the individual characters' supernatural experiences, consists of attempts to negotiate through the embarrassing, even traumatizing, irregularities of the historical pasts (as if to confront and appease them as ghosts) that do not fit in the overall Gothic scheme of breaking down the demonic totalitarianism for the emergence of a new liberal community. The strategy of depoliticizing and disremembering the historical inconveniences can be described as "isomorphic camouflage" – a kind of sleight-of-hand or mimicry whereby a scene in the movie looks almost exactly like and reminds the viewer of a corresponding historical scenario, but without the latter's underlying political significances; in other words, the historical situation *seems* to be represented in the movie, but actually with its political meanings drained or forgotten. However, in the animal kingdom, where the term is derived, it is usually an innocuous species that adopts the camouflage to appear threatening; in contrast, in the world of *Detention*, scary scenes of double-crossing, arresting, interrogating, torturing, executing, etc., though immediately reminiscent of the White Terror, do not carry the same political messages as they used to in the historical period. The "inauthentic" or inaccurate details some critics complain about the movie's representation of the White Terror are symptoms of the historical trauma that the movie fails to cover up with its ceremonial and ludic practice of Gothic collective commemoration. Before identifying specific instances of the camouflage in the movie and their political meanings, it needs a detour to survey the history (or histories) of the authoritarian rule in Taiwan since its decolonization from

Japan in 1945 to understand the thorny issues the movie has to handle in telling a story against this historical context. The issues include the civic society's current embarrassment over forming a collective memory about this recent period and the general indifference (even suspicion) about the government's transitional justice efforts.

(How) to Remember and to Forget, That is the Question

The ultimate source of the hauntings that the movie *Detention* has to grapple with lies in the fundamental impossibility but a popular inclination to make two disparate sets of historical experiences tally and fit within a grand historiographic framework of Taiwan's progress from authoritarianism to liberalism. A symptom of this conflict can be found in the seemingly minor issue of dating. Temporal demarcations of the White Terror in Taiwan vary among historians; while it is generally agreed that it ended with the lifting of martial law in 1987, its beginning could be dated in 1947 or 1949. This difference about the dating of the beginning may seem small but significant because, with the former date, the outbreak of the so-called February 28 Incident (or simply 228 Incident) would be included within the White Terror era, even serving as its traumatizing starting point. However, as Vladimir Stolojan points out, the 228 Incident and the White Terror "were very different historic experiences" (2017, 28; see also Lee's similar comment, 2021, 82). The Incident, a series of clashes spreading throughout the island in 1947, broke out between the newly stationed Nationalist (or the Kuomintang, KMT) troops from China and the recently decolonized Taiwanese from Japan. In the eyes of the Taiwanese people who felt acute disappointment over the Nationalist government, its arrogance, corruption, and incompetence in managing the affairs of the island, along with ensuing severe economic hardships, heralded another round of oppression and exploitation from which the people of the island believed they had just struggled free. The country to which the Taiwanese had joyfully (re-)turned to as "home" or "mother" less than two years ago seemed to become another *alien nation*; the takeover administration from Mainland China could then be deemed the latest *colonial* regime that lorded it over the island again. Therefore, among the pro-independence political activists in Taiwan, the 228 Incident has gradually gained the status of "founding trauma" (Stolojan 2017, 28). The idea gradually bore down on them that, throughout its history, Taiwan had been taken over and given away from one foreign power to another, though each once claimed that the people on the island were kind and kindred of its nation. For the pro-Independents, Taiwan can achieve its true freedom

and autonomy when its people shake off these presumed "parental" bonds imposed on them, as the Taiwanese once attempted (though unsuccessfully) to do. Identity politics is thus involved in the memorization and historicizing of the Incident, involving differences in terms of nationalist vision between the local Taiwanese who resented the "foreign" Chinese control, pursuing the island's independence *de jure*, and the Chinese mainlanders who followed the defeated Nationalist government to Taiwan in 1949, thus hoping for the eventual reunification with China. The ethnic aspect of the memory about the Incident also looms large because the military reinforcements sent from China to suppress the 228 uprisings waged a series of "cleansing" campaigns throughout the island against local community leaders.

While the 228 incident and its aftermaths are basically outright military actions against civilian protests that lasted for only a few months, the White Terror featured long-term surveillance and oppression of the whole country and assumed a (quasi-)judiciary framework that operated with the combined efforts of not only the military but the police and the intelligence agencies. As this longest period of martial-law rule in modern history rolled on, the White Terror in Taiwan gradually took on disparate elements and features in terms of the purposes, targets, agencies, means, and intensity of its repression, rendering the historical experiences of the White Terror very different from those of the 228 Incident. For the then mainland-based Nationalist government, the 228 Incident was, after all, a local disturbance happening in a remote, newly-recovered territory and not intrinsically related to the raging civil war against the Communist army. In contrast, when the government was forced to retreat to Taiwan in 1949, the authoritarian rule it imposed through diverse repressive measures proceeded under the "double-war" (the civil war and the Cold War) framework, intending to defend Taiwan as "the free China" from the infiltration of the "Communist Villains" through their spies and fellow travelers. As the Nationalist government was pressured by this anti-Communist agenda that concerned its survival, "90 percent of the [White Terror] violations of human rights in Taiwan occurred before 1970" (Wu 2005, 92). While it is true that many of the legal charges the government brought against the White Terror convicts were simply wrong, mistaken, or fabricated (just like what happened in the KMT's post-228 cleansing campaigns), many of the prosecuted admitted to having actually been involved in Communist underground activities or simply been members under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party (Wu 2005, 99; Stolojan 2017, 33). Consequently, as the threat of imminent invasion from Communist China and the hope of immediate recovery of the lost mainland were both receding in the 1970s, the Nationalist government, which still wanted to maintain its absolute dominance in the political scene, focused

more of its repressive effort on the long-existing but burgeoning political forces that challenged the status quo and eventually evolved into Taiwan's pro-independence movement. The so-called "Kaohsiung Incident" in 1979 and the ensuing "Formosa Trial" in 1980, both being highly publicized on news media, became the last major episode of the authoritarian oppression and libertarian resistance in the history of White Terror in Taiwan. Due to its high publicity and temporal proximity, the incident and its aftermath also came to represent the White Terror for the "post-90s" generations of the Taiwanese population.

The disproportionate attention paid to the 228 and Kaohsiung Incidents in the recounting of the Taiwan White Terror history can cause undesirable impacts on the truth and reconciliation-seeking work of the ensuing transitional justice project. In fact, the project in Taiwan has been conducted as a fragmented, disoriented, tortuous, and uneven process. In general, as Nien-Chung Chang-Liao and Yu-Jie Chen (2019) put it, "the focal point of Taiwan's transitional justice has so far been the 2–28 massacre, less so the White Terror period, and least of all the human rights abuses during Japanese colonial rule" (p. 628). Not long after the lifting of martial law and the death of Chiang Ching-kuo, the last leader of the authoritarian KMT regime, the transitional justice effort in the early 1990s gathered momentum around the 228 Incident. As mentioned above, the incident's status as the "founding trauma" of Taiwan's pro-independence nationalism, along with the element of ethnic differentiation at play, has left "Taiwan's transitional justice … deeply intertwined with identity politics" (Chang-Liao & Chen 2019, 641). Similarly, although the street demonstration that ignited the confrontation and triggered the judiciary persecution around the Kaohsiung Incident was held on Human Rights Day in the name of liberalization and democratization, most of the leading organizers of the event became prominent figures in the first major opposition party founded in 1986, the Democratic Progressive Party, whose pro-independence inclination has grown increasingly salient since the 1990s. Consequently, though motivated by very different political agendas, the DPP has carried on the KMT's previous anti-Communist China ideology while the KMT has decided to end its decades of "sibling rivalry" with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and promoted cross-strait exchanges instead. Therefore, many people of Chinese Mainland origins dating back to the mid-20th century and political groups that hold various anti-independence stances looked distrustfully upon the transitional justice policies implemented during the two DPP administrations since 2000, regarding them as ploys of partisan politics to blame the White Terror injustices on KMT-affiliated groups and to push them out of the power game in deciding Taiwan's future (Chang-Liao & Chen 2019, 640). In the view of the KMT sympathizers who treasure the

legacies of the two Chiang presidents, the harsh campaigns the two leaders waged against the secret Communist cells and pro-independence activists during the martial law era, though causing such collateral damages as wrong, mistaken, fabricated cases of prosecution and conviction, quelled the political turmoil Taiwan had suffered since the mid-1940s and laid the firm foundation to build Taiwan's "economic miracle" in the 1970s and 80s (Wu 2005, 12). The political prisoners convicted of joining the underground communist cells were particularly embarrassed by the "transition" because no true "justice" would be served in their cases. Their faith in the vision of liberating Taiwan from the corrupt KMT to be reunited with communist China, no matter whether abandoned or not later, ever rendered (or still has rendered) their White Terror experiences unspeakable. Under the persistently hostile political atmosphere against communist China during and after the martial law rule, political prisoners under the White Terror who have revealed their ideological or nationalist sympathy with "the enemy" may still suffer stigma.[3] In an often cited study done by Lin Chuan-kai, who conducted interviews with more than two hundred prisoners and compared their accounts of the victimage, he found that many former political prisoners would plead their ignorance of the CCP underground network and incompetence in understanding the communist ideologies or working for the CCP in his first interview(s); they would admit being "guilty as charged" (proudly or regretfully) only during later interviews, when they felt it was safe, trouble-free, or consoling to confess (Lin 2014, 61). Most scholars on transitional justice agree that forming a generally shared or collective memory of the authoritarian past through truth-seeking would pave the way to transitional justice, with due retribution and reconciliation (Stolojan 2017, 35), but the emergence of such a memory is hardly possible under the current situation of conflicting historical interpretations vying for political legitimacy (Wu 2005, 18). This is the major political and historical complication that a film like *Detention* has to surmount or bypass, for a popular representation of the White Terror is supposed to contribute to the (pro-independence) grand narrative of Taiwan breaking from reactionary oligarchy (which communist China exemplifies now, more than ever) to liberal democracy.

While book-form publications involve comparatively low expenses in their production and circulation – though reaching only limited readership in the pre-Internet age – cinema has always been a capital-intensive venture and

3 As a case in point, they were ineligible to receive financial compensation from the government, whose reparation policy in the 1990s for the White Terror political prisoners excluded those who were proved to have actually joined the underground Chinese communist cells (Stolojan 2017, 32).

required a much wider range of audiences to support it. Therefore, in terms of venue and finance, films are much more sensitive to the concerns of reception and become highly cautious about choices and treatments of political and historical topics. The target audiences are very aware that essentially cinema is "a contested medium in its potential to represent and misrepresent history, as well as create (false) memories of the past" (Lin 2007, 97). Of course, during the martial law era, due to the strict censorship, historical & political films that did not conform to the official Nationalist ideologies were simply unthinkable; even since the lifting of martial law, films that touched on the 228 Incident and White Terror have been rare, for they could touch on controversies over the Independence/Reunification issue and thus offend significant portions of the potential audience (Lu 1998, 337–38). The production and release of the film *Detention* fell within and near the end of the first presidency term of Tsai Ing-wen, who launched the latest phase of Taiwan's transition justice in 2017 and was running for her second term; its promotion thus incurred KMT-supporters' suspicion of the film project as part of the ruling party's propaganda campaign.[4] The film adaptation, after all, was jumping on the bandwagon of the video game's success and aimed to exploit the commercial opportunities created by the source material. The moviemakers of *Detention* therefore faced a tricky situation: on the one hand, they could not afford simply jettisoning the story's extensive invocation of the White Terror circumstances and atmosphere that make the movie appealing to the fans of the video game; on the other hand, overly specific and truthful references to typical situations, figures, and symbols of Taiwan's martial law era would alienate the moviegoers whose general but settled impression about the White Terror could disagree with the version they would find in the movie. Thus, as specified above, the movie adopted the Gothic mode of commemoration to negotiate the dilemma – by rendering references to the evils of the White Terror through imageries of supernatural horror and by obfuscating the political significances of these references within moralistic frameworks, sometimes even to the extent of concealing and distorting historical facts. Instead of laying out and sorting through the ideological intricacies behind the White Terror political scene, *Detention* just highlights the violation of human rights and deprivation of individual liberties – commonly recognized features of the martial law

4 See Lin Yun, 2019, "《fǎn siào jhǐh zao cao zuò fù miàn sīng siao fǔ syuǎn lyù yíng jhìh piàn lǐ liè bù mǎn tí gào wǎng yǒu 《返校》遭指操作負面行銷輔選綠營 製片李烈不滿提告網友" [*Detention* Being Imputed of Practicing Negative Propaganda in Support of the Pan-Green Camp, The Annoyed Producer Li Lieh Pressing Charges against the Net Commentaries] *Up Media*, October 15, 2019. https://www.upmedia.mg/news_info.php?Type=24&SerialNo=73362.

rule, which even its defenders have to admit to. As the judiciary abuses and disciplinary atrocities befalling the victims in the movie are portrayed without explanations given about the political reasons for their victimization, these victims can only be "innocent" and the cases against them must be all unjust, mistaken, or fabricated ones. For the victims, to endure, survive, and expose the tortures unjustly inflicted upon them becomes a moral triumph over the former regime, which itself was driven hysterical and insane by an overwhelming enemy. Indeed, this scenario was adopted (and probably devised) by the former political prisoners of the White Terror when they were interviewed and gave oral accounts of their persecutions right after martial law was lifted (Lin 2014, 43). The politically sanitized and morally exalted scenario becomes the most widely tolerated version of the "collective" memory Taiwan society has so far forged about the White Terror, as long as further questions and specific details about the targets, means, and agencies of the persecutions are silenced and obscured. And the film *Detention* adopts this approach to the historical materials which its producers are attracted to but intimidated about.

Genre conventions of supernatural horror cinema come to the *Detention* production team's rescue when it is handling the thorny problem of representing the evils and suffering of the White Terror by providing overwhelming pathos without passing political justice-related judgments onto the people and situations involved. A typical Taiwan White Terror witness account shares with a conventional ghost movie the feature of an excessively confined and individualized narrative perspective, thus withholding the "whole picture" of the incident from the first-person narrator/protagonist and the audience. Just like the "ignorant and innocent" victim of the White Terror persecution, the haunted protagonist in the film, an ordinary person with common merits and foibles, may never know what he or she has done wrong to incur the ghost's wrath and harassment. Even if the "motives" of the haunting are eventually revealed, they are mostly personal grievances or feuds, with the socio-cultural factors receding into the dimmed background – another horror movie convention *Detention* would take advantage of to be exempted from the expectation of representing the White Terror as a political system. Last, and probably the most problematic of all, the agents and agencies responsible for the atrocities during the martial law rule can remain unidentified in the movie, because supernatural evil presumably stays outside the knowledge and jurisdiction of the human world.[5] *Detention* renders a situation natural (or "supernatural") which many

5 As mentioned above, according to Crawford, the English Gothic fiction of 1790s or the "terrorist literature" of the time served a similar representational function of helping its contemporary readers make sense of Jacobins and their Reign of Terror, though in the way of putting them beyond the ken.

scholars researching Taiwan civic society's attitude toward the White Terror complain about: There is only "Transition without Justice" because the public is generally lukewarm about exposing and prosecuting the security agents who once worked for the authoritarian regime (Wu 2005, 89).

To Liberties! But What Liberties?

The connection of *Detention* with Taiwan's White Terror history relies heavily on general impressions that are retrieved from distant personal memories or fragmentary media reportages across at least three decades, and the movie also merely evokes the impressions with densely littered visual prompts, without really unifying or refining them. The beginning sequences of the movie – students in uniform outfits and hairstyles marching past a big wall displaying slogans and under megaphones blaring warnings against association with "villain spies," a military training/inspecting officer standing at the school gate and watching for student suspects who may carry contrabands, the daily national flag raising ceremony requiring every attendant to sing the anthem loudly, and finally a small group retreating after school to a remote corner of the campus for secret gatherings – all conform to the stereotypical impressions many Taiwan people may have about the harsh atmosphere of the campus life and the aura of secrecy around the "study group" in the early decades of the White Terror era. Near the end of the sequences the voice-over of the male protagonist Wei Chung-ting and the following intertitles in black and white give the impressions a definite shape in words: The era is defined as "an age in which discussing freedom was a crime and reading banned books was a life-and-death matter." This definition about the martial law regime, seemingly corroborated by the opening sequence, tends to preclude a critical question: Exactly what freedom (or liberties) and books did the government forbid the people to access? The question may become more critical when an intertitle specifies that making anti-government comments could incur heavy (or even death) penalties; because none in the study group seem to have made such comments, most of them could only lose their lives or suffer long imprisonment for what they did in the study group. As one member, Wen-hsiung, once cries to Wei, "How could the whole thing end up like this? Didn't we just read a few books?" The questions are not merely rhetorical; to face them squarely may uncover the sleight-of-hand the movie performs in depoliticizing and romanticizing (or Gothicizing) its representation of the White Terror.

In representing the typical situations that are often associated with the White Terror, the movie adopts a strategy that has been described above as

"isomorphic camouflage." The movie's representations of the study group and particularly the banned books, around which *Detention*'s relatively thin story plot unfolds, best exemplify this depoliticizing move. The few bright happy scenes depicting the activities in the study group – with the students reading and discussing poetry with their young teachers, copying lines and illustrations from the precious volumes for more copies to be shared, staging a puppet show with the recital of lines in the Taiwanese dialect (emblematic of quintessential local culture despised by the KMT authorities) – are as innocuous as they could be, and the participants do not deserve the harsh penalties they later receive. The truth is, they would not have suffered so back in the real Taiwan of the 1960s. Right after the movie became a cinematic sensation, an expert on Taiwan's 20th-century publication and translation history, Professor Sharon Tzu-Yun Lai, on her popular Facebook fan page pointed out a few mistakes about the way *Detention* handled the banned-book issue. The three books mentioned in the movie – Tagore's *Stray Birds*, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, and Kuriyagawa Hakuson's *The Symbol of Depression* – were indeed banned, not due to their contents and authors but because of their respective translators, Cheng Chen-tuo, Lu Xun, and Ba Jin, who were leading leftist intellectuals active back in the early 20th-century China and were hence considered "supporters of the Communist Bandits." Versions produced by other translators, along with those proscribed translators' versions as long as their names were suppressed or replaced in the published copies, were legally and widely available since the early 1960s (Lai 2019).[6] Even during the harshest period, the possession of these banned books would only lead to their confiscation rather than land the readers or owners behind bars; these outlawed publications were probably as "treacherous" in the eye of the inspector as the puppet Wei takes out of Ah-Shen's bag to forestall the discovery of the books. Like many other details in the movie, this one had better avoid scrutiny; that's why, at the climactic moment when the female protagonist Fang Ray-shin presents the "hard evidence" of the secret study group's existence to the military Instructor/Inspector Bai, the shot of the book cover lasts less than one second so that a theatre viewer may not have the time to check the publication information.[7] In fact, in the

6 Professor Lai thus observes that the story of *Detention* should be set in 1950s – the decade when the White Terror rule in Taiwan was at its most repressive and relentless – rather than 1962, as the intertitle specifies.

7 It is "Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, translated by Lu Xun." The information itself is erroneous because Lu Xun never translated the novel in Chinese. His name is shown on the cover because, for most people in Taiwan, he is the most famous leftist intellectual in the early 20th-century China, much better known than the actual translators of the novel.

early decades of the White Terror, the sort of reading materials that had to be accessed and circulated in such painstaking secrecy and that could induce the counter-intelligence agencies to inflict hellish tortures on the owners to extort information about other readers can only be communist publications, especially Karl Marx's writings and Mao Zedong's speeches. Many study groups the security agencies busted in the 1950s were not private gatherings for literary and art activities, but were underground cells of the CCP that were spreading Maoist revolutionary ideologies, recruiting members into the CCP, and even plotting organized revolts against the KMT government.[8] Symptoms of the politically dangerous nature of the study group which the fictional counterpart in the movie is modeled after still creep up on the screen, or the alarmed urgency in the tone of Yin Tsui-han's admonishment against Chang Ming-hui's secret affair with Fan could not be justified. Yin voices her opposition not really out of jealousy, as the eavesdropping Fan has misunderstood, but because Chang's illicit relationship with Fan may trigger undesirable complications and attention from the school authorities, hence jeopardizing the whole cell, as it indeed does later. The scene is almost incomprehensible when the movie undercuts the political subtext of the pervasive anti-communist hysteria that leads to Yin's nervous insistence on the secrecy of the study group – unless one would earnestly believe that reading a few literary works could lead to torture and execution in prison. However, this incorrect impression about what drove the martial law regime to excessive violence and oppression may contribute to the grand Gothic narrative of Taiwan's progress to liberation, with the suppression of the conflicting historical element about the real-world study groups' communist sympathy.

Under this Gothic framework of remembrance about the White Terror and with the martial-law regime assigned to the role of Gothic villain/monster, the movie may leave one with the impression that the regime was simply atrocious in an irrational and demonic way. A problematic political message to be derived therefrom is that, as long as a regime allows its people to read, sing, draw, and love with as little restriction as possible, the government then

8 The best known of these CCP underground networks in Taiwan are Taiwan Work Committee and Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League. The vicissitudes of these secret Taiwan Communist organizations have been thoroughly researched in Cheng-Hui Lin's long article, "1950 nián dài zuǒ yì jhèng jhìh àn jiàn tàn tǎo: yǐ shěng gong wěi huèi jí tái méng siang guan àn jiàn wéi jhōng sin 1950 年代左翼政治案件探討：以省工委會及台盟相關案件為中心 [Political Persecution of Leftists during the 1950s: Cases Regarding Taiwan Work Committee of the CPC and Taiwan Democratic Self-Government League]", tái wan wún siàn jì kan 臺灣文獻季刊 [*Taiwan Archive Quarterly*] 60, no. 1 (March, 2009): 395–477.

guarantees all the freedom and rights due to its subjects. However, in this vein, the concepts of freedom, liberty, or human rights would be understood only at a personal, even corporeal level. As mentioned above, one curious thing about *Detention*'s plot design is that no one in the study group, not even the two teacher-leaders, ever make explicit criticisms against the government; they are in fact as "ignorant and innocent" as the former political prisoners who came out to give their first witness accounts back in the 1990s. Their later confessions to the membership of the Chinese/Taiwanese Communist Party at the moments of their arrest highlight the very liberty and right they were deprived of during the martial law rule and right after its lifting – the freedom to express one's political stances, even those that are unpopular not only with the government but with the general public. However, emphasis on such political rights and freedom potentially goes against the smooth formation of a community, especially when its members may exert the right to express their sympathies for the ideologies of the community's "enemy" that threatens its survival. It is indeed hardly possible for the study group in the movie to show its true ideological color. Since the characters in *Detention* can only voice a faith in "freedom" and "natural rights" in abstract terms, it becomes interesting to examine what liberties and rights the characters have claimed to offend the regime besides reading the forbidden books.

Again the movie shifts away from this supposedly more important concern but instead invokes the customary visual memories or impressions of the White Terror, about how the police, especially the military police, stormed into the campus or private household to take away criminal suspects by force. However, in a similarly depoliticized vein, it turns out later that they are *not* really arrested on charges of political crimes. The first spectacular arrest scene in the movie is staged about an insignificant, nearly anonymous character, a school teacher who is also a member of the study group. Although he shouts out aloud a provocative accusation, "The state kills," while being dragged away by the military police during the school's daily national flag-raising ceremony, the strong anti-government message is effectively neutralized by the aesthetically-minded study group's quick recovery from the loss of this "comrade"; the members only caution one another about the approaching threat of their literary-artistic conclave's exposure. Indeed, literary texts and art productions like the verse note, sheet music, the lily painting, the deer-shaped jade necklace, etc. abound in the movie, serving as a whole set of metonymic artifacts for expressing the individual will, personal identity and relationship, private emotion, and so on, as these objects usually do in classic Gothic fiction. In short, they relate to the affirmation of will and freedom at individual levels, far from liberties and rights in the public realm.

Sometimes the characters have no legitimate ground to claim rights or liberties when they get into trouble with the authorities. The other conspicuous arrest scene centers around Fang Ray-shin's father, whose unsuspecting daughter returns home to find several military officers politely but firmly insisting on taking him away, with a gunnysack over his head. What seems to complete this scene, already replete with White-Terror emblems of state persecution, is the immediate revelation by the mother that the arrest is prompted by her report to the security authorities, in revenge for his marital infidelity and domestic abuse. This situation is again reminiscent of the claims of many former political prisoners that they were betrayed to the authorities by their close friends and relations out of private feuds or personal interests. However, here the wife's report on the husband is not for such political crimes as sedition or treason, but for a financial misconduct like embezzlement – an allegation that is obviously true. Even in a democratic society, this felony may still lead to the police's search of the suspect's household and an arrest – not necessarily as a case of political persecution. With this significant (though generally ignored) detail in mind, one should stop to examine what seemingly transgressive "liberties," beyond those for artistic expression, the members of the study group are fighting for. Here the male leader-teacher, Chang Ming-hui, is apparently the only one who yearns for extra, though still non-political, freedom – the one for romantic relationships across the teacher-student divide. One of the often-echoed slogans cited from *Detention*, "To liberty," actually appears only once in the movie, in the death-will note that he hides behind a painting of a narcissus flower (his own work) and that he asks Wei to retrieve for Fang after he survives the persecution; the whole note goes thus, "Narcissus to White Deer: This life we've missed; next life we'll meet. To liberty." Chang had previously explained to Fang about the non-political, even non-secular, connotation of the narcissus flower as an emblem – a code name he adopts for himself to signify his aloofness from and nonchalance about the wider world.[9] As to the "liberty" he looks forward to in the "liberal" next life of current Taiwan, it remains, ironically, illegal and transgressive. Due to several waves of the "Me Too" movement in the recent decade, the Ministry of Education in its latest amendment of the Gender Equity Education Act has specifically outlawed the romance between an adult teacher and a minor student – exactly the type of

9 Judging from Chang's own explication of the narcissus emblem, it is highly probably that the Narcissus story in Greek mythology and its association with narcissism are alluded to. The association reflects badly on Chang as a revolutionary, even a non-political type. The code name "White Deer" for Fang comes apparently from the necklace Chang presents to her, and it aptly fits Fang's image as a pretty, delicate, and timid creature, the type of Gothic damsel in distress who is easily frightened into unwise actions.

relationship developed between Chang and Fang in the movie (Everington 2023).

When the victims of the presumed "White Terror" in the movie are Gothicized as innocents who have provoked disproportionate or simply unjustified persecution with some petty, non-political offenses, the persecutors can only be fanatic sadists or furious demons who terrorize people only for terror's sake. As mentioned above, this typical scenario of the horror movie provides a convenient means of avoiding the thorny issue of naming the culprits in representing the White Terror in Taiwan. Researchers on the Transitional Justice usually point out how Taiwan society is reluctant or at most lukewarm about identifying and prosecuting individuals working for the martial law regime – primarily for the sake of maintaining communal harmony. This resignation may be more comprehensible in light of the Gothic grand narrative of Taiwan's progress from repression to liberation. The totalitarian regime had its own twisted but understandable reasons for imposing stifling control over civic society during the White Terror era; however, Taiwan has completed the long struggle for freedom from such oppression, which will not befall the people of the island unless it is again imposed from the outside, from a "China" that is no longer the one crossing the strait more than 70 years ago. When Taiwan has moved on far from the White Terror, why should the people stir the ashes of long-buried hatred and guilt when most of the victims and victimizers are already gone and the "truth" may only embarrass their children? As long as groups of different political and ethnic affiliations are still quarreling about the legacy of the martial-law rule, a collective memory that can unify the Taiwan people into a harmonious community may not start to form unless the history is "Gothicized" under an elegiac, consoling mood, in a ceremonial, even "ludic" manner (as pop-cultural products, for example). The final pleading words, uttered softly by the literally demonized Instructor Bai in the movie, "Isn't it fine to leave it in the past?", summarize exactly this mentality. Ironically, *Detention* in general delivers a similar message of "Forget and Forego (with or without forgiving)" about the treatment of the White Terror victimizers. First of all, the movie is extremely hazy about the organizations at play in Taiwan's political arena in the 1960s. The KMT is never directly named, only obliquely referred to once in the specter janitor's mumbled complaint of how hard he once fought for "the Party"; similarly, its archenemy, the CCP, is understood merely as the "Villain" in the obsessively repeated slogans blared out by the giant monstrous ghost, roughly in the appearance of Instructor Bai. When it comes to the symbols of Taiwan's authoritarian rule, the most prominent ones are surely the statues and portraits of Chiang Kai-shek, who is held by many as the chief culprit of the 228 Incident and the supreme dictator during the White

Terror. In a movie touting itself for its representation of the White Terror, the portraits and statues of the dictator are curiously missing from *Detention,* even though Chiang's images could be found around every public space, including the campus, of Taiwan in the 1960s. instead, in the movie, such portraits are all of Sun Yat-sen (or of a figure whose similarity to the founding father of the Republic of China blurs as the movie goes on). This pictorial sleight of hand, another instance of the isomorphic camouflage, may serve the double purpose of suppressing Chiang Kai-shek's association with the White Terror regime and of maintaining the Gothic framework of collective commemoration, as Sun is still widely accepted among (ethnic) Chinese people around the world as the liberator who terminated the corrupt Ching monarchy and initiated republican democracy, though Sun's portrait may still be an authoritarian symbol.

However, as a form of fantasy that aims at covering up traumas, Gothic also registers the return of the repressed. On the one hand, in most cases, *Detention* seems to have effectively depoliticized the White Terror period and its martial law regime into a remote time of merely insane deprivation of human rights and liberties, through the use of a supernatural gothic trope like the demonized military Instructor/Inspector Bai. Indeed, one can hardly find a more immediate representative of the authoritarian campus culture during Taiwan's martial law era than the institution of the military instructor/inspector, whose disciplinary function struck terror into the memories of many older Taiwanese when they were high school students. With his daytime image of a tall, lean, neatly uniformed, stern looking officer that is reminiscent of the mysterious, dangerous, but fascinating villain of the classic Gothic fiction and his nighttime appearance as a gigantic lantern-carrying, glass-faced robot that probably models after the demonic inspector from hell, Wu-chang (wú cháng 無常), in Taiwanese folklore, the atrocities he commits do not seem to be motivated by any self- interests or psychological aberrations; he behaves just like a humanoid machine that has run amok. And thus he cannot be held accountable by secular justice. The survivors should just congratulate themselves (as all survivors in a horror movie would do) when this White Terror robot (or authoritarian state apparatus)[10] decides to retreat into the shadow of the past; to demand explanation from the monster or

10 Although this is a speculation, the design of the demonized Inspector Bai as a gigantic robot is probably inspired by a literal rendering of the phrase "Party-State Machine" (dǎng guó ji cì 黨國機器), a term coined to refer to the KMT back in the 1990s, when martial law was just lifted and the French Marxist philosopher Louis Pierre Althusser's theory of the "state apparatus" (translated as "state machine" guó jia ji cì 國家機器) became popular in Taiwan's intellectual circle. This political implication, if it is really intended, is so deeply coded that it may be lost to the generations of viewers that know little about the neo-Marxist discourse.

even retribution on him would be considered an extravagant expectation. For a great number of Taiwanese people nowadays, the traumatic memories about the White-Terror regime, which the grotesque robotic figure embodies, should be dispelled from the bright liberal present time, just like how pain and fear also evaporate when the once domineering villains withdraw with their defeat, as in classic Gothic fiction.

On the other hand, the only "accomplice" of the White Terror regime who can still be held accountable for her wrongdoing turns out to be the victim-like Fang herself. She can be thus prosecuted (also persecuted) exactly because her involvement in the White Terror has been completely depoliticized. In other words, because no political significance can be attached to her betrayal of the secret study group to the authority, she cannot be situated meaningfully in the grand Gothic narrative of collective commemoration. She is not a member of the study group and does not care about the "liberties" it is struggling for; her suicide driven later by the sense of guilt cannot consecrate her in the grand narrative as a "martyr" (thus unlike other members of the group, especially its leader Chang Ming-hui). Although the totalitarian regime "thanks" her and co-opts her treachery into its patriotic propaganda, she understands and believes it even less than the discourse of freedom and thus cannot justify her own act (as those defenders of the martial-law rule would do using claims of how the rule stabilized Taiwan's precarious survival in the mid-20th century decades). Being left outside the grand narrative, Fang ironically becomes the only and truly traumatic element and figure that disrupts (if not overthrows) the Gothic fantasy of progress, which tries to cover it up. She is the truly "aggrieved spirit," as Taiwanese folklore about such kind of ghosts has it. To the credit of *Detention* production team (though thanks to the inspiration of the video game), the movie takes up this deeply traumatizing moment of the White Terror as its central diegetic concern. The first part of the story unfolds when the seemingly "ignorant and innocent" Fang has to confront and claim, as the forgotten part of herself, the terrifying ghostly doppelganger that follows her around, to be the personification of her guilt. This allegorical representation of how she is "too afraid to remember" epitomizes the ignominy and difficulty of her remembrance under the grand Gothic framework of public commemoration, for she helps the totalitarian regime out of personal love and hate, she kills herself for a personal sense of guilt, and she rises up against it for her personal atonement. At the end of her adventure with Wei, she actually has no choice but "chooses" to stay in the spectralized campus because there is no proper place for her in the discursive space of the post White-Terror, politically liberated Taiwan. As a ghost, her grievances are individual, and she can be appeased only at a corresponding level – with the aged Wei unearthing

and showing Chang's love confession in his death will to the still young and beautiful Fang in the already dilapidated campus. This ending is to suture up the trauma with a love story across the life-death divide, but not within the grand Gothic narrative of progression from death to rebirth.

Who Is Too Afraid to Remember?

There is a self-referential, almost metafictional, scene in the movie. Fang meets Chang in a theatre for a romance movie; after nestling to him for a short while, she turns around and finds him, along with all the other viewers in the theatre, having gunnysacks tied around their heads. The gunnysack, prevalent in the movie, is an emblematic item associated with the White Terror and the totalitarian regime, as it is usually put on the head of a suspect or convict of political crime when he or she is arrested or executed; the purpose of this practice is to keep the victim ignorant about the location of the interrogation and the identities of the persecutors. Many viewers of *Detention* may be similarly blindfolded when they want to know more about the White Terror by going to the theatre. Most reviews of the movie praise it for helping the younger generations remember the often-neglected part of modern Taiwan history and for reminding them how precious the liberties indeed are that they have enjoyed and taken for granted. However, the movie can serve this didactic function well just because it follows an ideological framework that Taiwan has been trying hard to shape out of conflicting sociopolitical forces that began rising near the end of the martial law rule in 1980s – a grand Gothic narrative of progress from repression to liberation as a more or less consensual ground to understand the White Terror. As Wu Chia-rong points out in reviewing the movie, "*Detention* points to the unresolved conflict between the old national discourse and the new national discourse" (2021, 82), and the production team apparently adopts a generally depoliticized approach to the grand narrative by disremembering the politically embarrassing aspects of the White Terror history, such as many victims' pro-CCP inclination.[11] A more moralistic rendering

11 About the extent of the movie's involvement in the real politics of Taiwan during and after the martial law rule, my position is diametrically opposite to Wu's, as he persistently parallels the totalitarian regime in the movie with the KMT then and now and hails the movie as contributing to DPP administration's Transitional Justice efforts initiated since 2018. No matter how obvious the parallel seems to be, it is based on a presumption Wu shares with many of the movie's viewers because, as pointed above, the KMT has never been mentioned. Indeed, Wu has noticed the production team's "official claims to depoliticize the official release of the game and film"; he also makes a passing nod to

of the grand narrative, set in the mode of Taiwanese supernatural folklore, may help vindicate or idolize the victims as innocents or martyrs while demonizing but ironically discharging the victimizers as villains with impunity. In either case, secular justice becomes an irrelevant or negligible issue, and *Detention* as a latest instance of the grand Gothic narrative of collective commemoration, seems to have completed a similar mission of pacifying all parties involved in the White Terror – except for one traumatizing and traumatized figure. Depoliticization does not work on her because her implication in the White Terror is not political in the first place. *Detention* is at least candid about the complexity and banality of the "lived experiences" of the White Terror, with the truly traumatic, unappeased specter as the central figure of its story, to expose the grand narrative as one of half-truth, dubious reconciliation, and no justice. The movie, of course, does not leave the stray specter alone to haunt the grand narrative of liberal progress but tries to contain her within another grand Gothic narrative – that of love. However, it is questionable whether the containment succeeds. As Fang's (imagined) date with Chang to enjoy a romance movie in the theatre transforms into a gunnysack assembly, Wei's reunion with Fang, even with Chang's love confession in the death will, does not guarantee her appeasement. The movie ends abruptly here, with the ghost representing the historical trauma likely to haunt again.

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certain scholars' (including Lin Chung-kai's) reminders of the communist sympathies among the White Terror victims (2021, 73, 84). Still, he remains adamant to the reading of the movie "that is accessible to the general public in a politically correct sense …" (2021, 84).

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