

# Engaging National Identities: The Arnisador and the Samurai in *The Pacific Connection*

Rey Carlo T. Gonzales

Division of Social Sciences, College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines Visayas, Miagao 5023, Iloilo

---

## ABSTRACT

Following a period of nation-building after its independence at the end of World War II, the Philippines sought to define its national identity. In the 1970s, mostly as a result of the popularity of Bruce Lee films, the government endeavored to appropriate Filipino Martial Arts (FMA) for nation-building. FMA practitioners sought to contribute to the discourse on national identity by attempting to define it from their perspective. One such practitioner was bodybuilder-turned-actor Roland Dantes who conceptualized and starred in a series of FMA-themed action films. Dantes' most iconic film, *The Pacific Connection* is a cornerstone in FMA. Drawing mainly from concepts by Anthony Smith on the *ethnie* and *ethnosymbolism*, this essay examines the way in which the film's main character was defined against the film's antagonist—a Japanese samurai—and argues that FMA's representation of Filipino national identity involved a process of construction by drawing from national history, cultural elements, and idealized concepts of Filipino nationalism. Furthermore, such articulations of national identity were intrinsically formulated around perceived characteristics of a foreign other. The filmic engagement of the two characters reflected how concepts of national identity are expressed in FMA, and how FMA practitioners perceive their location and role in the nation.

Keywords: FMA, national identity, nationalism, *ethnie*

---

Rolando Pintoy, better known by his screen name Roland Dantes, was a bodybuilder turned actor who came to be regarded as a Filipino counterpart to Arnold Schwarzenegger (Worden, 2013); (Velasco, 2009). Several of his many films featured Filipino Martial Arts (FMA) as a central theme. FMA here is defined as the set of indigenous martial arts in the Philippines which are characterized by the use of one or two sticks, for example *Arnis* and *Eskrima* ('Philippine Republic Act 9850, An Act Declaring *Arnis* as the National Martial Art and Sport of the Philippines'. Philippine Laws and Jurisprudence Databank, Arellano Law Foundation, n.d.). Dantes personally studied *Arnis* under the tutelage of Modern *Arnis* founder Remy Presas who would also later be responsible for choreographing the fight scenes in Dantes' films. Dantes would later go on to passionately advocate various projects which involved FMA. As a result of his FMA advocacy, he was a pivotal figure in the nationalization of *Arnis* as a national sport and martial art. Dantes' FMA-themed films were vital in articulating a Filipino national identity along the framework of FMA. Moreover, his very imposing and muscular figure became the

embodiment of the masculinity that FMA practitioners ascribed their interpretation of national identity through FMA to. Filipino national identity, and to a similar degree Filipino nationalism, are products of an extensive process of—borrowing Rachel Hutchins's term—'negotiation' between and among FMA teachers and students (or practitioners in general) (Hutchins, 2011). Films became one of the platforms upon which this construction and negotiation took place.

Following arguments made by Ernest Gellner (1964) on the modernity of the nation, Terrence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm (1992) on the process of 'inventing'—that is, constructing and reconstructing, to the point of even fabricating—the nation, Benedict Anderson's (1991) 'imagined communities', and Smith on the *ethnie*, this essay argues that FMA films acted as platforms for constructing and reifying Filipino national identity (Smith, 1986); (Smith, 2000). On one hand, FMA films drew from an idealized, romanticized and mythologized Philippine past and *ethnie* to articulate an FMA-styled Filipino identity in martial

---

arts fantasy. On the other, this articulated identity was engaged with another character – a foreign ‘other’, or more specifically a foreign martial artist archetype – in order to cultivate national pride and self-esteem, for example when the Filipino martial artist emerges victorious.

This essay is an intervention into the manner in which national identity is perceived of as a monolithic, perennial, and non-contingent concept. Rather than dismiss it simply as a form of national or market branding, this work treats FMA-styled national identity as a means by which—to borrow Martin Manalansan’s phrasing—FMA practitioners ‘negotiated around categories of identity and cultural products into meaningful arrangements that inform their lives’ (Manalansan, 2010). This essay critically analyzes a narrative strategy—the narrative being a site of such kinds of negotiation – in one of Dantes’ most memorable films, *The Pacific Connection* (Nepomuceno, 1974). Particularly, this strategy involves the juxtaposition of two main characters in the film—the Arnis-wielding protagonist Ben (played by Dantes), and his samurai-wielding nemesis Mori (played by Hiroshi Tanaka). By examining the nuances of the filmic representation of Ben and Mori, this essay explores one of the ways in which nationalism and national identity were being idealized in FMA. If, as Andris Zimelis’ (2010) argued, nationalism could be also understood as a process by which a nation is ‘imagined’, then this essay explores one way of how FMA practitioners ‘imagined’ themselves within the nation as an expression of their nationalism. The filmic representation of national identity in FMA films is thus treated here as a product of a process of negotiation around culture and identity that occur among FMA practitioners. It is revealed in the story-telling mainly through the mobilization of the ethnic and history in order to imagine the nation. Ultimately, both the process and the product enables practitioners of FMA to make sense of their role and location in the nation.

The essay is divided into four sections. The first section presents some debates about Filipino nationalism and national identity, and establishes the premises this work adopts towards the nation—particularly the interplay between the nation’s modernity and the way it ‘imagines’ itself by drawing from cultural elements from the past. The second section explores some theoretical frameworks for analyzing representations of national identity in martial arts films and why FMA films are credible sources for reading national identity. The third section provides

a brief historical background for the emergence of FMA during the state-led nationalization of Arnis in the 1970s. Additionally, it discusses how postcolonial anxieties in the Philippines over national identity has shaped FMA-styled nation-building—something which is present in filmic representations of national identity in Roland Dantes’ film, *The Pacific Connection*. The last section presents and critically analyzes the narrative of *The Pacific Connection*—expounding on the conflict between the film’s protagonist, Ben, and his nemesis Mori—and examining three ways in which the film idealizes or articulates national identity using the theme of Ben and Mori’s conflict namely: (1) it draws from colonial history; (2) it establishes anticolonialism; and (3) it establishes self-regeneration.

### ***On the Novelty of the Nation***

The line dividing the debate on the origin of nations lies between primordialists (or perennialists) who argue that nations are based upon primordial ties of kinship (ethnicity), and modernists (or instrumentalists/constructivists) who argue that nations are born out of more contemporary societal needs. Constructivism and instrumentalism are often used interchangeably with modernism, the key concept being that nations and national identity are social constructs used to ‘filter reality rather than reflect it’ (Anbarani, 2013) (Brown, 2000). Essentially, the dichotomy is in terms of those who believe that nations and natural, permanent and real, and those who argue they are contingent and mutable (Dawisha, 2002).

Primordialists include scholars like Edward Shills, John Armstrong and Clifford Geertz who analysed ways in which human societies have placed value upon this kinship and interpret membership to nations as being natural and default (Shills, 1957); (Armstrong, 1982); (Geertz, 1973). Shills placed emphasis on kinship as the basis of nations, and Geertz argued that states base their power on long-standing ties based on categories such as blood and language (Anbarani, 2013). Armstrong’s study of ethnic identity and shifting political boundaries were examined historically in terms of the Braudelian *la longue durée* which would later influence Anthony Smith’s own analysis of nations and nationalism. Smith (1998) argued that primordialist scholars are often misunderstood—it wasn’t that these scholars believed that nations were primordial, but that they believed that people believed that nations were

primordial. Rogers Brubaker (2004) later added that the real primordialists were not the analysts but the participants of nations and nationalism.

For the most part today, scholars of nations and nationalism are critical of the primordialist perspective. Collectively, majority are categorized as constructivists or modernists. They generally argue that nations are only 'real' insofar as they are constructed by their members, and are consistently being reconfigured across time based on people's interactions and historical needs (Motyl, 2001). In other words, they are willed and shaped into being. As Hugh Seton-Watson (1997) commented, '... nations exist when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to be a nation.' (p.5). Gellner (1964) argued that nationalism 'is not the awakening of nations but the invention of nations where they do not exist' (p.196). It is along this same idea of invention that Eric Hobsbawm (1992) famously wrote that 'Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not true' (p.12).

To borrow Daniele Conversi's (2007) term, modernists are preoccupied with identifying the 'manufacturers' of nations based on who stood to gain the most from them. Conversi's argument generally illustrates two salient features of nations from this perspective: first, they are recent rather than antiquated; and second, they are constructed rather than inherent. Additionally, Conversi's interpretation highlights how the nation is inorganic—manufactured by agents of nationhood because its existence benefits them one way or another. While modernists generally agree on the first two points, they differ in terms of the third—who or what manufactured nations, how these agents manufactured nations, and what period in modernity nations came about. It has thus far been a daunting task to trace a point of origin for the nation, as well as formulating a uniform theory for the forces of nationalism which breed nations. John Hutchinson (1994) argued that nations exhibit protean characteristics. Craig Calhoun (1997, p. 8) likewise argued that the 'multiplicity of forms' of nationalism need to be understood using multiple theories. In short, no one theory applies to the multitude of models of nations and metamorphoses in societies that led them there.

As such, nations have been interpreted from various scopes—cultural, sociological, or political, to name a few dominant ones (Doyle & Grant, 2006). Ellie Kedourie (1960) identified a particular historical

period for the emergence of nations, arguing that rather than being pre-existing primordial entities, nations are products of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the French state. Ernest Gellner (1964, 1998) located the emergence of nationalism during the transition of societies from agrarian to industrial. For Gellner, the social and political conditions needed to sustain industrialized societies necessitated the birth of nations to facilitate these functions through national institutions. Building on Kedourie, Eric Hobsbawm argued that political developments after the French Revolution gave rise to modern concepts of citizenship and democracy which required new paradigms of identity and relationship between rulers and ruled, utilizing nationalism as some form of 'new secular religion' (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 303, pp. 14-45). It is for this reason that traditions were often 'invented' as modes of inclusion. Where Hobsbawm perceives an invention, Benedict Anderson (1991, p. 6) sees an imagining—'not by their falsity-genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'. Anderson also departs from Gellner in that for him, the developmental transition had less to do with the agrarian to industrial shift, but rather with the fall of religious and dynastic societies at the end of the eighteenth century (Anderson, 1991). For Anderson, the nation was an 'imagined community' whose members are never fully aware of each other, but are aware of their membership to a nation. 'Print capitalism'—the rise of print technology in the form of newspapers and novels, and the drive to sell as much of these—expedited the imagined sense of community. This essay adopts Anderson's view in two ways: First, it is not preoccupied with the falsity or inaccuracy of how FMA films mobilize history and culture—often appearing in *The Pacific Connection* as anachronisms—but in how these are employed to imagine national identity. Second, that the ways in which history and culture were mobilized were ways in which FMA practitioners were able to imagine the nation as a community.

Both Hans Kohn (1944) and John Plamenatz (1976) accepted the modernity of the nation but further argued that two types developed because of the uneven distribution of nationhood and modernity, particularly in Europe where the concept of nation was born: hence, the distinctions made between the West (civic) and East (ethnic) models. Western societies (i.e. France, England, and later the US) which already had some form of cohesion drew up the nation along civic lines—citizenship, duties, rights—while Eastern

societies (Eastern Europe, followed by Asia, Africa and Latin America—including the Philippines which emerged from colonization in 1946) which developed later and within former empires drew up the nation along ethnic lines.

Smith (1998) critiqued Hobsbawm's Marxist approach as being overconfident in pinpointing the manufacturers of the nation. Hobsbawm (1992) also critiqued Gellner's approach as being too top-down and thus could not fully explain nationalism. Nevertheless, the modernist approach has been the generally accepted model, with Anderson as arguably being the most widely read of the modernist scholars. Yet there is no consensus as to the seminal manufacturer of nations and the point in time from which they emerged. Erika Harris (2009) argues that Anderson's view 'doesn't quite explain the rise of nations and certainly does not account for the huge political upheavals and loss of human life that nationalism has engendered. Moreover, many of those sacrifices continue to be in the name of the nation which, often far from abandoning religion as a form of communal identity, has taken religion, its myths and symbolism as its main identity marker' (p. 61)—for instance, Islam and Moro identity.

In his seminal work on nations, Anthony Smith (1986) argued that nations emerged from the ethnic—French for ethnic group. Adopting an ethnosymbolic approach, Smith (1999) argued that nations should be studied using the *la longue duree* (long term)—rather than fixing their birth to a specific point in modernity. For Smith (2001), nations are constituted by ethnosymbolic elements—myths, memories, symbols, and culture—which create cohesion for people across history. Smith does not contend with the idea that nations are born of modernity, but argues rather that they rationalize themselves and find meaning from ethnosymbols from antiquity. A disciple of the ethnosymbolic approach, John Hutchinson (2001) argued that nations mobilize their populations towards national identity using ethnosymbols regardless of their modernity. The ethnosymbolic approach thus emerges from the intersection of modernity and antiquity. Montserrat Guibernau (2004) has critiqued this approach for its narrow focus on the cultural aspects of nations. However, it is a cultural phenomenon which surfaces when examining the ways in which FMA mobilizes history for building national identity. Ethnosymbolism is by far a most potent tool for analyzing FMA nationalism because, like in *The Pacific Connection*,

it mainly employs the mobilization of ethnosymbols—myths, symbols, or traditions. FMA's affinity for ethnosymbolic mobilization is not an isolated case. Stuart Kaufman (2013) analysed national identity and nation-building in the Philippines based on three perspectives: linguistic diversity/homogeneity, the nation as imagined community bound together by ethnosymbols, and social coalitions and networks as basis for determining identity. Kaufman argued that only the ethnosymbolic approach could explain 'curious strength of Filipinos' national pride' (p. 20). Despite the ambiguities and contradiction in their national narrative, competing entities in the nation found it relatively easier to identify with ethnosymbols than they did with the other two. Ethnosymbols evoked stronger emotions, and was at times 'devoid of ideological content' which could otherwise fracture senses of affiliation. It is for this reason that despite its being contested by its members, Kaufman believes the Philippines does exist as an 'imagined community'.

This essay's theme of the exploring national identity (in the context of FMA) emerges from a long tradition of historiography in the Philippines which is preoccupied with understanding nationalism and nationhood. As nationalist historian Renato Constantino (1974) famously critiqued, the Filipino sense nationalism reached a point of becoming too preoccupied with national identity as a label or brand name in the world nations. Sixty years ago, John Carroll (1961, p. 23-24) wrote that Filipino historians were mainly interested in two things: The 1896 Revolution against Spain, and Philippine history before the arrival of Spanish conquistadores. The fascination over these two periods is geared towards studying the course and nature of nationalism and nationhood on one hand, and the assertion of civilization prior to Spanish colonization—both of which aim to evoke a sense of national self-esteem, national prestige, or what Carroll called 'national glory'.

The nationalist classics *History of the Filipino People* by Teodoro Agoncillo (1960) and Renato Constantino's (1975, 1978) two-volume work on Philippine history are possibly two of the most influential works which stem from this tradition. Because of their strong anticolonial tone and departure from earlier historiographic trends which were not as critical towards colonial powers in the Philippines, Usha Mahajani (1971, p.2) termed their generation of historians as 'neo-nationalist'. Examining various examples of nationalisms in the world, Craig Calhoun (1997, p. 111) argued that by



nature, nationalist discourse ‘commonly subjugates’ other social categories (such as gender, religion or class) which often, in the postcolonial era, could serve as counter-nationalist forces. Nationalist histories tend to exhibit similar tendencies. Agoncillo and Constantino have interpreted Philippine nationhood and nationalism along the Marxist framework of class struggle—forwarding a history of ‘the people’ or ‘the masses’. They have been critiqued for giving the impression that the making of the Filipino nation was a unitary and monolithic trajectory along formulated along class lines, rather than being a contested or negotiated space between Filipinos of varying social categories. For decades around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these views and related issues have been queried by Filipino and other historians and social scientists, variants of which are integrated into thematic presentations and discussions more directly relevant to the essay’s intentions below.

For instance, Lisandro Claudio (2013) critiqued that Philippine nationalist historiography has emphasized nationalist unity at the price of dismissing the social cleavages which existed throughout Philippine history. Resil Mojares argued that national historians who employed class analysis—particularly referring to Constantino—removed the focus away from the elite and highlighted the role of the masses (Mojares, 1997). This critique of how other sectors involved in the revolution were seemingly downplayed was similarly shared by Schumacher (1975), and Nery (2015). The danger of reading a nation’s history as a monolithic narrative (for instance, the Philippine Revolution as the struggle of the masses without looking at the various other players that intersect with them) is that it treats nation-building monolithically as well, silencing the various ways in which groups within the nation—which have contributed, contested, or negotiated to building it—choose to tell its story and articulate their membership in it.

The discourse on nationalism in the Philippines has in the last two decades given rise to a new kind of historian—what Trevor Hogan (2006, p. 127-128) termed as post-nationalist—who ‘is most anxious to avoid any kinds of historical narratives of nationalism that imply essentialist notions of identity, whether originary or teleological’. In particular, Hogan pointed to Vicente Rafael (2000) who, for example, viewed ‘Filipino’ as a term which signified a ‘history that coming from the outside, continues to arrive from the future’ (p.18). Resil Mojares’ (2006) analysis of modern knowledge production—read through

the works of Filipino intelligentsia—as a wellspring of Filipino nationalism is another example which illustrates the discursive formation of and fissures in the interpretation of nationalism even around the period of the revolution itself.

This essay’s approach to studying the discourse on nationalism from the perspective of FMA practitioners adopts Hogan’s notion of post-nationalist in that it regards *The Pacific Connection* as a platform which enabled FMA practitioners to elaborate on their understanding of Filipino nationalism and national identity. Moreover, the voice of FMA practitioners is one of many in the nation that seek to shape and understand the nation or their place in it. As a whole, this essay attempts to show that Roland Dantes and FMA practitioners examined and rationalized their role and place in the modern nation by idealizing FMA fighter ethnosymbolically. The protagonist of *The Pacific Connection* is formulated from an anti-colonial and postcolonial context and undergoes a self-regeneration by drawing from the power of Arnis. The perspective of the ethnosymbolic approach adopted for this essay emerges from junctures of modernity and antiquity—or constructivist and primordialist—emerging from society’s perceived needs when the film was produced in the 1970s. However, as the discussion below on the state’s appropriation of FMA reveals, the dualistic East-West categories often overlap. Moreover, the antique-modern and civic-ethnic dichotomies also appear to be fluid and flexible and cause conflicts in trying to define the nation or national identity.

### ***FMA films as legible sources for reading National Identity***

Martial Arts Studies is an emerging field of academic study in the last ten years or so which has often been (wrongly) interpreted as ‘trivial’ (Bowman, 2019, pp. 19-32). Paul Bowman, one of the pioneers in the field, was referring in particular to the research field rather than the pedagogical field. He argued that far from being trivial, martial arts as a historical and cultural entity was swimming in ‘themes and problematics that organize not only cultural studies but also many other fields—such as ethnicity, postcoloniality, polyvocality, polysemy, multimediality, cultural translation, intertextuality, sex/gender identity performativity, postmodernity, enculturation, hegemony, commodification, resistance and subversion, and so on...’ (p. 26). Similar sets of themes are also quite pronounced in *The Pacific*

Connection—themes such as interrogation of ethnicity and performance of identity, framed within anti-colonialism.

Martial Arts films are only one of the more recent expressions of this cultural form which could be read in one or more ways such as those mentioned above. Bowman suggests that martial arts films should be understood not so much as straightforward reflections or expressions of established cultural values, rather that they register, rework, reiterate, and replay 'familiar cultural values in complex and creative ways—but ways that always seek to "make sense" by relating to, playing around with and reworking established ideas and values' (p. 126). In this regard, FMA films like *The Pacific Connection* serve as sources that could inform us about the intersection of the perceptions of national identity in the Philippines in the 1970s in general, and among FMA practitioners in particular. *The Pacific Connection* sought not just to articulate an FMA-styled national identity, but also to make sense of it from a particular cultural position. Such understandings would go on to inform later generations of FMA practitioners about national identity and nationhood.

Of the many themes martial art films explore, it is national identity and nationalism that are commonly situated in martial arts narratives. Siu Leung Li (2001) argued that in the 1970s that Hong Kong martial arts had similar patterns of storytelling which were deeply steeped in nationalism. Their themes usually featured clear representations of national identity and tradition which were then engaged with either a foreign other (an actual foreigner), with modernity (seen as being derived from foreign or Western culture), or with both. Man-Fung Yip (Yip, 2017, p. 26) noted this pattern in martial arts films of invoking 'Japanese or Western imperialist forces as a foil against which a sense of collective identity was affirmed, by way of a mirror-like play of self and other.' As was common in Bruce Lee films, the martial arts protagonist has to confront foreignness and modernity using the nation's hallowed traditions and valued qualities—for example, cultural features like martial arts coupled with dedication to the welfare of the community or a strong sense of nationalism. In other words, martial arts films revealed a sense of national identity that was often derived in opposition to what it did not consider itself to be. This brings to mind Homi Bhabha's (1994, p.34) concept of 'enunciation' which highlights cultural difference—the attempt to highlight the supremacy of one identity is 'produced only in the moment of differentiation'. As

such, these kinds of articulation in martial arts films needed to be pitted against an opposition—often embodied by the film's antagonist—and emerges in a 'Third Space' which lies between the colonizer and the colonized (p. 37).

Because martial arts films draw from martial arts narratives, the way they wrangle with themes like identity, foreignness and modernity reveals how martial arts practitioners perceive nationalism and national identity. For D.S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge (2011), these features in martial arts fantasy are allegorical of national anxieties and are commonly resolved by the hero's self-regenerative qualities—his initial defeat and eventual triumph. One particular anxiety involves the ambivalent stance of former colonies towards their colonizer. Former colonies are faced with the dilemma that while there was a conscious attempt to set the nation apart from the colonizer, the colonizer acted as the basis of or standard for nationhood and modernity. In effect, as what Partha Chatterjee (1993) argued, nationalism in former colonies is derived from a colonial model. Chatterjee, for example, commenting on Indian Marxist historians, argued that the British were essential to the awakening of an Indian nation, thus making it difficult for Indian nationalists to altogether reject British legacy (pp. 22-23). John Plamenatz (1976), likewise argued that while China detested Western models (political, economic, or cultural) because these were reminders of China's colonial experience, China used the same models in order to 'catch up' with the West. Two observations can be drawn from these arguments: Firstly, that the foreign or colonial other was a necessity in order to define the national self; and secondly, that the foreign or colonial other acted as some form of benchmark to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the 'native' elements of the national self. From the 'other', a new understanding of the national self is brought about and is reflected in martial arts fantasy as some kind of self-regeneration. Self-regeneration conveys an understanding in martial arts that a nation's enduring traditions can persist and overcome in a globalized and modernized era.

Martial arts films have a unique characteristic which stands out from other types of films. The telling of their stories lie within what M.T. Kato (2005) called a 'kinetic narrative'. Martial arts movement could be read as emancipatory tools for decolonization. As Paul Bowman (2011) argued, martial action between the characters can be regarded as a form of

'communication'. In essence, martial arts films were built around impressive displays of martial combat upon which the subjects of decolonization and anti-imperialism could be articulated. By itself, the choreography of martial combat is the integral feature of the film that reflects the cultural and national value ascribed to martial arts that is also engaged with themes of nationalism and national identity. Expanding Bowman, if communication was involved, it existed on two levels—that between the characters who communicated 'with their fists', and that between the film and its viewers who consumed nationalism through film.

Kinetic narrative becomes evokes emotions of national prestige and identity if it is 'enunciated' in ways that stress differentiation. For example, in the *Pacific Connection*, there needs to be a showdown between a Filipino and a Spaniard, the Spaniard has to use European fencing while the Filipino uses Arnis, and the Filipino eventually wins—that is, of course, the Filipino must win. If the protagonist used Kendo instead of Arnis, or if the protagonist's Arnis ultimately lost to Kendo, the nationalist agenda is nullified. Equally, if the Spanish European fencer (as antagonist) was changed to a Spanish Arnisador, the narrative loses its nationalist potency. National identity in FMA films could be thus understood as being formed by a process of cultural differentiation which is primarily expressed through movement, and employs ethnosymbolic elements. In the film, these ethnosymbolic elements appear in the form of emphasis on the darker (and bare) native body, wooden instruments (as opposed to metal weapons), ritual and tradition, or mythical items such as amulets and 'iron reeds'.

To summarize, FMA films are credible sources for reading constructions of national identity for three reasons: First, they commonly reflect expressions of nationalism and national identity. Secondly, they also reflect national anxieties towards globalization and modernity and thus strive to draw meaning from antiquity. And lastly, the 'martial' aspect of martial arts films are significant mediums for addressing the concerns of the first and second reasons.

### ***FMA and the Nationalist Agenda – a brief background***

In a previous work (Gonzales, 2015), I endeavoured to explore the complex and delicate nature and relationship between FMA practitioners

and nationalism as—to borrow Calhoun's (1997) definition—a discourse and a project. As a discourse within FMA, nationalism mainly involved promoting FMA as a beacon of national identity, with FMA practitioners drawing from ethnosymbolism and negotiating national identity around their more localized constructions of identity. As a project, FMA practitioners participated in the state's nation-building programs (which started in the 1970s during the time of then-president Ferdinand Marcos, and continues to this day) through a process which I termed as 'reverse appropriation'. That is to say, although the state initially mobilized FMA for nation-building, FMA practitioners turned it into their own project in order to understand and locate themselves in the nation. Although the process was two-way, with both the state and FMA practitioners benefiting from this partnership, practitioners were nevertheless martial artists first, and Filipinos second. In other words, practitioners' articulation of national identity illustrates not so much how FMA practitioners tried to fit their martial arts into the nation, but how they tried to fit the nation into their martial arts. If national identity was a product of discursive formation among FMA circles, then it was contingent upon their pre-existing FMA values and traditions first, and their presuppositions of the nation second. The *Pacific Connection* is one such product which acted as a site for nationalism as a discourse and project in FMA. This section discusses the history behind how FMA became involved in the state's nation-building program, and would help explain how nationalism became a strong subtext in films like *The Pacific Connection*.

To understand the presence of nationalist undertones in FMA films, it is necessary to historically situate the films and contextualize them in the larger social circumstance—a process Rey Chow (1995) regards as 'cultural translation'. The Philippines has a rich history of constructing and mobilizing national symbols—from the formulation of Rizal as a national hero in 1901, to the institutionalization of Filipino as a national language in 1946, the movement of Independence Day to June 12 (which coincides with Aguinaldo's proclamation of independence in 1898) instead of July 4 (formal independence from America after the Second World War), down to Marcos' assertion of a supposedly original name of the country (Maharlika) in place of the Spanish-coined 'Philippines'—which exhibits an overarching, nationalist project in the country to culturally shed off Western colonial influences. Chatterjee (2001)

referred to this postcolonial scheme as ‘culturally re-equipping’ the former colony with its own national identity after it had emancipated itself from the colonizer. This strategy followed general trends of nationalism and assertions of national identity among newly-formed independent Asian and African states at the end of the Second World War—for instance, countries which participated in the 1955 Bandung Conference.

It is also important to flag up the role of Japanese and Chinese martial arts (and martial arts films) as the foreign others against which Filipino national identity through FMA was defined. The period after the end of the Second World War saw the resurgence of Japanese hegemony, this time in the form of culture. Japanese martial arts and martial arts films became considerably popular in the Philippines between the 1950s and 1960s. Japanese action films that featured Karate had so deeply penetrated the film industry that there were Philippine versions of Karate superstars, such as the celebrated ‘Karate King’ of the Philippines, Roberto Gonzales. Meanwhile, the 1970s saw the overwhelming popularity of Chinese martial arts, largely due to Bruce Lee and his films.

FMA was used as a cultural tool to demonstrate the superiority of Filipino culture over other martial arts—particularly Karate and Kung Fu which were popularized in film. Displays of cultural superiority in martial arts films was expounded by Vijay Prashad (2003) and M.T. Kato (2005) who analyzed Bruce Lee films as decolonizing and anti-imperial platforms which challenged the hegemony of Japanese martial arts. FMA films like *The Pacific Connection* were designed along similar objectives and dichotomies. In the same way that Bruce Lee’s films defined Chinese identity and celebrated Chinese cultural superiority over the Japanese as a way of asserting national self-esteem (Yip, p. 32), FMA practitioners sought to define Filipino national identity and celebrate Filipino cultural superiority by engaging FMA with Japanese and Chinese martial arts.

FMA-styled nationalism emerged simultaneously with state programs for nation-building and the popularity of Chinese and Japanese martial arts in the 1970s. FMA—more particularly the stick-based fighting styles known as Arnis or Escrima (also spelled as Eskrima)—was first mobilized in the 1970s as a cultural tool that could help realize national identity by highlighting and laying claim to a perceived unadulterated and uniquely Filipino martial art (or

group of martial arts) that could rival the more popular Japanese and Chinese martial arts in 1970s. FMA was nationalized to reformulate and foster a strong sense of nationalism and national identity. To this end, then-president Ferdinand Marcos established the National Arnis Association of the Philippines (NARAPHIL) in 1975 which was composed of FMA clubs and practitioners around the country. Its main goal was the promotion of FMA through teaching, tournaments, and cultural presentations such as the Festival of Asian Martial Arts held later in 1975. Both Roland Dantes and Remy Presas, along with other prominent FMA practitioners, became highly involved in the activities of NARAPHIL. Among its initial activities, NARAPHIL organized the ‘Festival of Asian Martial Arts’ at the Folk Arts Theatre in 1975, and later introduced Arnis to schools and universities including the police and military academies (Mascardo, 2007).

The cultural appropriation extended into FMA films. *The Pacific Connection* was itself made during the early wave of nationalizing FMA during the Marcos years. It must be said that the film was by no means a small production—it was directed by Luis Nepomuceno (son of the ‘Father of Philippine Cinema’, Jose Nepomuceno), it had an international cast including Chinese-American actress Nancy Kwan as leading lady, a Spanish colonial era ship was built to scale as one of the film’s props, and the script was in English so it could be released for international audiences. Since then, there have been several other films made that illustrate that the endeavour started but was not confined to the 1970s. Some examples include *Kamagong* (Caparas, 1986) during Corazon Aquino’s administration, *Mano Mano 3: Arnis the Lost Art* (Ricketts, 2004), and *One Percent Full* (Richardson, 2007) — the latter two being made during Gloria Arroyo’s time.

At this point, two clarifications must be made: (1) That FMA films were products of the juncture of FMA’s reverse appropriation of nationalism and the cultural hegemony of foreign martial arts, particularly Karate and Kung Fu; and (2) that the construction of FMA-styled national identity was only state sponsored, and remained a predominantly FMA endeavour.

It may be easy to question the argument that *The Pacific Connection* was a story that just happened to feature FMA rather than a story that was specifically built around FMA and FMA-styled nationalism. The former case invalidates a conscious, nationalizing FMA agenda. Some examples of this are Hollywood



films like *The Bourne Identity* (Liman, 2002) and *300* (Snyder, 2007). They are films where if you were to replace the action sequences with any other martial art, it would have no significant effect on the plot. The latter is where it was necessary to feature FMA, otherwise the story changes drastically. There are two points that can prove that the latter was the case for *The Pacific Connection*: Firstly, the personal advocacy of Roland Dantes cannot be denied—he was an active participant in both the state’s nationalization of FMA and the private activities of martial arts clubs and organizations. It was practitioners like Dantes and Presas who conceived the narratives in FMA films, drawing from narratives in Arnis which they learned as practitioners. In fact, Presas acted and performed stunts in *The Pacific Connection*. Other FMA practitioners like Rusty Lopez, Ronnie Ricketts, and Topher Ricketts did the same in other FMA films. Hence, FMA practitioners were indeed heavily invested in these films. Secondly it is also important to take into consideration that FMA played an integral role in the telling of the story. Its themes and choreography conveyed the nationalist agenda of FMA. Taking both points into consideration, it is therefore apparent that FMA films involved Chatterjee’s cultural re-equipping (Gonzales, 2015). It is for the same reasons why films like *The Pacific Connection* are good primary sources for reading into the discourse of national identity-building within FMA.

It is necessary to stress that the country’s appropriation of FMA to ‘culturally re-equip’ the Philippines was not essentially and solely a Marcos-led phenomenon and confined to Marcos-led nationalism. FMA’s reverse-appropriation of nationalism took on a life of its own, with much of the discourse around national identity occurring in FMA circles rather than in political offices. The arrogation merely emerged during the time of Marcos—mainly catalysed by the popularity of Bruce Lee films, but spurred on by state support and funding—and was subsequently carried on by later politicians and FMA practitioners. After Marcos was ousted from power, his rival and successor President Corazon Aquino also capitalized on FMA as a tool for nation-building. Five months after the ouster of Marcos, the Aquino government sponsored the Philippine Arnis Federation (later Arnis Philippines Incorporated or ARPI) which promoted Arnis in the country in the same way as NARAPHIL. Over twenty years later, President Gloria Arroyo signed the Arnis Law in 2009 which made Arnis—understood as FMA—a national symbol, and the

country’s national sport and martial art. Presently, the cause is being championed by Senator Juan Miguel Zubiri, himself an FMA practitioner, who works closely with the numerous FMA teachers and practitioners in linking them with government programs involving FMA.

### ***Engaging national identities in The Pacific Connection***

Rey Chow (2000) argued that Western culture has reached a point of dominance such that non-Western societies have begun to define themselves in terms of how they are different from the West. This reactive form of self-definition has become the default rhetoric for asserting national identity outside the West and can be found even in martial arts films like *The Pacific Connection*. More familiar examples could be found among Bruce Lee films. As M.T. Kato (2005) showed, the anticolonial narrative in Bruce Lee’s films used the samurai sword and Karate as simulacra of Japanese invincibility, which were nullified by the nunchaku and Chinese boxing. Kato, for example, cites Patrick McCarthy as arguing that the nunchaku acted as a ‘material antithesis to Japanese martial ideology’ (p.68).

It is along similar lines that the Arnis sticks were cinematically engaged with the samurai sword, and the Filipino Arnisador Ben against the Japanese samurai Mori. These juxtapositions revealed two kinds of idealizations: the embodiment of Ben as the archetypal Arnis practitioner, and the superiority of Arnis over Kenjutsu or Japanese swordsmanship. The film expresses these idealizations by drawing from colonial history, establishing anti-colonial intentions, and starting processes of self-regeneration while revealing how FMA perceives of its role and location in the nation. Mori was not the only character in the film who was representative of the foreign other; there were, for example, the governor and his sons who were Spaniards, and even a Chinese merchant. This paper focuses on Mori particularly because he was the greatest rival of Ben, and he epitomized the dominance of Japanese Martial Arts, which prior to the 1970s was the popular martial arts in the Philippines. Moreover, the Japanese occupation of the Philippines between 1941 and 1945 also left deep scars and marked a history of Japanese oppression in the country similar to Spanish and American colonization. For this reason, Japan is remembered in the Philippines in the same light as ‘western oppressors’. Comparing Ben with Mori then touches

on two levels of meaning for FMA practitioners: first relating to the dominance and popularity of Japanese martial arts in the 1950s onward, and second relating to the stigma of the Japanese as invaders during World War II.

Such juxtapositions lie at the very heart of FMA's articulation of national identity. It is in the imagery of difference where national identity can be located. It assumes the space—what Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 2) called the interstitial space ('the overlap and displacement of domains of difference') where 'the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated'—where FMA-styled national identity is negotiated. National identity lies between imaginings of the Philippine ethnics and a rejection of colonial values and dominance—it needed Mori just as much as it needed Ben.

To better understand the juxtapositions, a short synopsis is required. Ben, the main character lives outside of town with his Spanish father and Filipina mother in colonial Philippines. Their lives are overturned when the two sons of the local Spanish governor harass them for taxes. When one of the two sons molests Ben's mother, Ben and his father fight back using *Arnis*. However, the sons return at night with their father and a retinue of troops. The governor kills Ben's father, rapes and murders his mother, then sends Ben to do forced labor on a ship. Later, the ship is destroyed in a storm and Ben finds himself on a remote island. This marked his first self-regeneration in the film where he sees himself freed from the reach of the governor and his sons. Sometime after however, the governor's sons appear with the intent to subjugate the population. Ben and the islanders fight back using *Arnis* and the brothers are driven off. However, the brothers again return, this time with their father, and a Japanese samurai in the service of the governor. The samurai, Mori, is ordered to fight Ben and easily defeats him after cutting Ben's wooden weapon in half. Ben survives the ordeal and is once again reborn. A blind, old hermit takes him under his tutelage and trains him in *Arnis* for two years. After his training, the old man advises him to go on a quest for a mythical hardwood called an 'iron reed' that could not be broken by blades in combat. Ben goes on a quest and upon finding the iron reed, he fashions a pair of *Arnis* sticks and pursues the governor and his sons. Having trained extensively and armed with the unbreakable iron reed, Ben once more confronts Mori and this time manages to defeat him using the

mythical weapon.

Played by Roland Dantes, Ben is a hulk of a man — muscular and imposing. He is the biggest person in the entire film and his presence dominates the screen. Understandably, this characterization fit perfectly with the male action hero trope of the 1970s. Yip (p. 26) argues that more than just being a proverbial eye-candy for the viewers' 'erotic gaze', the martial arts body in film functioned as an 'imaginary source of omnipotence', making it a 'perfect figure for identification and conjures up a powerful sense of pride and collective self-love.' At the same time, however, Ben's muscular figure becomes representative not just of the nation, but also of the impressive strength and well-trained form ascribed to practitioners of FMA.

### ***Setting the Stage during the Spanish Colonial Era***

When Ben first makes his appearance, he is presented as being *mestizo* — half Filipino, half Spaniard — hence the product of an amalgamation of two races and cultures. This does not, however, disable the film from drawing a solid line between native and Spaniard. The film's antagonists — a Spanish governor and his sons — refer to Ben (and erroneously as well) as an *indio* (native). In doing so, Ben is relegated to a lower status as per the social conditions of the Philippines during the Spanish period. Regardless of whatever his actual race is in the film, his social position is firmly established as being beneath that of a Spaniard since both an *indio* and a *mestizo* are of lower social rank than full-blooded Spaniards. Ben's mixed-ancestry echoes Bhabha's concept of hybridity and ambivalence. As a representation of the national body, Ben is the product of both colonizer and colonized. Moreover, the dichotomy between his Spanish father and his Spanish nemeses simultaneously embraces and demonizes Spanishness.

Ben is symbolic of the Philippines' historical marriage to Spain. That goes without saying that FMA is rife with Spanish elements. For instance, even the names of the martial arts *Arnis de Mano* and *Escrima* are Spanish terms. As FMA scholars Celestino Macachor and Ned Nepangue (2007) argued in their controversial work on Cebuano *Eskrima*, the Spanish influence in FMA is so predominant it becomes a sore spot for nationalist martial artists who espouse the pre-colonial origins of *Arnis* and *Escrima* because there is little credible evidence to

establish that Arnis and Escrima emerge prior to the colonial period. Macachor and Nepangue's work treat FMA as an invented tradition that is more traceable to Spanish origins rather than native, precolonial ones. Although Macachor and Nepangue are not able to conclusively establish the point of origin of FMA (their work revolves mainly around critiquing the idea of the pre-colonial origins of FMA), their interviews of FMA practitioners and analysis of FMA narratives reveal a social memory among practitioners that FMA was already around during the Spanish period.

The film does not address the origins debate directly, or at all. In fairness to it, the self-reflexive critique of FMA happened in the early 2000s — some thirty years later — after FMA was popularized in Hollywood by a series of films leading to questions raised about national symbols and their appropriation. Instead, the film takes from FMA narratives, and chooses to set the story during the colonial period. In doing so, it is able to plant FMA in a colonial setting where, historically, cleavages based on race and social position were more evident. This further allowed the film to position FMA as a Filipino cultural tool for addressing the tensions brought about by these cleavages.

Similarly, the film does not establish the exact year during which the story occurs. Like FMA narratives, it is more preoccupied with the idea of injustice and inequality than it is with historical accuracy. These omissions are characteristic of how ethnosymbols are mobilized when they deal with people's understanding of history as a tool for finding meaning and rationalizing nationhood or national identity. By not specifying an explicit point in Philippine colonial history which might be laden with nuanced history-specific ideologies, the film frees itself up to construct its own idealizations/ideologies of nationalism and anticolonialism. True enough, the film seemingly collapses the entire three-century period (1565-1898) of Spanish presence into a cognitive *mélange* containing ingredients like subjugation, oppression, inequality, and so on. It draws from history — or rather, an understanding of history — in order to contextualize and romanticize the function of FMA in a historical setting.

To illustrate how the film reduces the Spanish period into a negative idea, the film offers no background detail or contextualization as to why the governor and his sons were unashamedly tyrannical and cruel. Early in the film, the two sons of the governor are shown pillaging a town to collect taxes.

It does not really explain who the townspeople were, or why the Spaniards needed to resort to violence. It just was. Furthermore, there is very little investment into developing the characters of the governor and his sons in the course of the film. Ultimately, the Spanish era setting and the Spanish characters thus act more as a fixed platform upon which Ben's character could later be understood and elaborated, and where Ben could be later engaged with the character of Mori.

This paper's choice of juxtaposing Ben and Mori was not so much a matter of preference or coincidence on the part of the researcher; rather, the film itself was leaning towards developing that particular theme — with deportment and performance of Ben and Mori as simulacra of the clash between FMA and Japanese martial arts. Unlike the governor and his sons, Mori is given more emphasis and character development because he is being set-up for the symbolic confrontation. Having Ben and Mori engage in a simulated confrontation reveals a lot about what questions preoccupied FMA practitioners in the 1970s when the film was made: 'how does our very own Filipino martial arts stand up to the more traditionally dominant and popular Japanese form?' Such questions were examined at the time when FMA was starting to be institutionalized at the national level under the government's program of nation-building. As a result of these developments, FMA practitioners acquired a culture-based identity consciousness which they explored in relation to other existing and more dominant martial arts.

### ***Ben as a Champion of Decolonization***

Another notable feature of Ben is his unrelenting desire to fight against oppression which in the film is linked with colonial institutions. The governor's oppression of the natives stems from his role in the colonial structure. For instance, when in the course of collecting taxes the governor's sons notice Ben's mother and touch her inappropriately, prompting Ben and his father to lash out at the sons using the Arnis. The governor later punishes Ben's family by raping Ben's mother, killing Ben's father, and condemning Ben to forced labor aboard a Spanish ship. In the film, the rationale behind colonial institutions—an elaboration of which could have offered a logical explanation behind their imposition—is absent. Instead, they are equated with cruelty and violence and reduced to being a colonial evil. In imposing them, the governor and his sons resort to or are led towards acts of cruelty and oppression, and thereby associate

these institutions with cruelty and oppression as far as the story is concerned. This representation too gives the impression that colonial institutions could only be imposed violently. Much like the ambiguity in locating the narrative along a specific timeline, the way in which Spanish colonial institutions were portrayed allowed the film to have a clear basis for establishing Ben as a decolonizing tool.

Later on in the film, after Ben is shipwrecked on an island and looked after by peaceful natives, the governor and his sons arrive. Before they could dominate the island, Ben fights them off and defeats them in battle. This prompts them to call on the services of the samurai Mori who was in the country as a diplomatic gift to the Spaniards. In doing so, the film symbolically cast the Japanese martial artist in the same lot as the evil colonizers—both of whom were entities against which FMA practitioners were trying to articulate themselves. The remainder of the film pursues the conflict between the two martial artists Ben and Mori.

For his part, Mori is not himself downright evil. However, as with tax collection and forced labor, Mori becomes an agent of the governor and his sons — a cog in the wheels of colonization, and therefore, a villain. Just as the film fails to explicitly elaborate on the intricacies or necessity of tax collection and forced labor, it does it spell out that Mori is really a decent man who is unfortunately serving bad men. By not elaborating on the nuances of these institutions or of Mori, the film effectively reduces and rationalizes colonization as an evil much like it reduces the entire Spanish period as being all evil, and ascribes Ben the role of savior and defender against this evil. The instances of colonial oppression allow Ben to be formulated as a virtuous, anticolonial champion who struggles against inescapable oppression—inevitably winning by putting an end to the colonial representatives in the form of the governor, his sons, and the Japanese samurai in their employ.

In doing so, the film reveals how FMA perceives of its role and function in the nation — as its defender and savior. Ben's resistance to and eventual defeat of his enemies is allegorical of colonial resistance, cleverly expressed in martial arts choreography and serves as — to borrow M.T. Kato's (2005) term — a 'kinetic narrative of decolonization'.

### ***Self-Regeneration and making sense of FMA***

Another theme shown in *The Pacific Connection* subscribes to a common trope in martial arts fantasy which involves the metanarrative of self-regeneration. D.S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge (2011) argue that the character's individual triumph 'allegorizes national anxieties as well...', that is to say that when a character like Ben overcomes every challenge thrown his way, it becomes a symbolic expression of the indomitability of the Filipino, or of FMA, or the Filipino FMA practitioner (pp.13-15). In the film, Ben undergoes two episodes of 'rebirth'. The first is after he survives being shipwrecked and finds himself on an island with peaceful natives. Having escaped the clutches of the governor and his sons, or in essence having escaped Spanish colonization, he decides to start a new life there. This particular scene is significant because it reveals a certain perception that life is better without colonial institutions and is evocative of Philippine precolonial times (from whence the Philippine ethnies may be located) which is romanticized to be peaceful and generally much better than the Spanish colonial era.

Ben's second rebirth occurs after the governor and his sons somehow managed to find the island. Ben suffers a humiliating defeat against Mori who effortlessly breaks his wooden Arnis sticks with a samurai sword. The governor, believing Ben to be already dead, allows the islanders to whisk Ben away to recuperate from his wounds. Admiring Ben's character, a mysterious blind, old hermit promises to teach Ben Arnis when he recovers. Ben undergoes intense training for two years, including being blindfolded for months until he could fight with his eyes closed. His rebirth is capped by a magical new weapon introduced by the old man — an iron reed which could not be cut in two by Mori's samurai sword. Armed with his newfound skills and weapon, he manages to defeat the governor and his sons, and Mori, slaying them in the process.

Yip argued that in Chinese swordplay movies, physical empowerment was set 'against a larger framework of cultural nationalism in which a sense of national identity was articulated through the nostalgic reconstruction of a premodern, even mythical China marked by traditional cultural ideas and practices' with scant references to concrete historical realities and adhering to a kind of culturalist hermeneutics premised on the idea of premodern tradition as the main source of contemporary identity' (p. 26).



The mysterious hermit, the mythical iron reed, and Ben's operose training could thus be read as FMA's emphasis on the nostalgic, precolonial past, veiled in a shroud of myth and mystery, as a source of decolonizing power.

Li (2001) argued that the Kung Fu imaginary operated in a 'self-negating' and 'self-dismantling' mode which 'denies its own effectiveness in modern life'—for instance, in how useless Kung Fu can be against firearms—and developed from a self-reflexive anxiety over modernity. True enough, Ben's Arnis sticks are destroyed in the face of the samurai sword. The Pacific Connection, however, offers another suggestion for overcoming this anxiety by introducing the mythical iron reed. Ben's long and dangerous journey to find the iron reed was an allegorical search for the Philippine precolonial past, and the weapon itself served as a metonym for that past. It was not better technology that would eventually also break Mori's sword, but traditional methods of training under a mysterious hermit who later advises him to search for a mythical reed which grew naturally on the side of a volcano. Moreover, in their second encounter, having reached his full potential, Ben is now shirtless. All of these elements were clever ways of expressing ethnosymbolism.

Some interesting observations could be further made about the instances of self-regeneration in *The Pacific Connection*. On one hand, Ben's symbolic transformation through his two-year study of Arnis with the old man and his finding of the iron reed is parallel to Chatterjee's earlier mentioned concept of how the nation culturally re-equips itself in order to 'catch up' with the colonizer (Chatterjee, 2011, p. 2). FMA narratives attribute foreign cultures — especially that of the colonizers — with some form of superiority which could only be matched by Filipino self-regeneration. In the film, Filipino self-regeneration is brought about by Ben's values such as perseverance and self-discipline — especially when he trains in isolation for two years. It is also brought about by the mythical silver bullet in the form of the iron reed which is symbolic of a journey or return to a Filipino mythical past.

On the other hand, the theme of self-regeneration touches on the subject of tradition vs. modernity or globalization. As was previously discussed here, the Japanese Karate was the more popular martial art between the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1970s, Chinese Kung Fu was beginning to upstage Karate,

mostly due to the popularity of Bruce Lee. Even in the 1970s, when the government supported FMA events and programs, FMA never really acquired a larger market than other martial arts such as Karate, Taekwondo, or Judo. The point is that at the time *The Pacific Connection* was filmed, FMA practitioners were wrestling with the idea that their own art — a Filipino art — was an underdog compared to Karate or Judo — the martial arts of an economic giant, Japan. The film's portrayal of self-regeneration thus gives viewers a glimpse of how FMA practitioners imagined what they needed to do to overcome the then current cultural dominance of something like Japanese martial arts.

Moreover, if the 1970s was a period of new developments for FMA (such as finally getting government funding, being recognized and organized under the government, or seeing the meteoric rise of Bruce Lee and how he beats the Karate practitioner Chuck Norris in film), then FMA practitioners were poised to re-evaluate themselves and figure out what FMA stood for and where it was located in the contemporary cultural and political circumstances of the Philippines. In other words, they were going through their own period of rebirth, and the *The Pacific Connection* was very satisfactorily able to reflect that preoccupation in FMA.

### ***Engaging Ben with Mori***

The film seeks to establish two things: to reflect FMA idealizations through Ben, and to establish that FMA could defeat other more popular martial arts such as Japanese martial arts. To achieve these, the film uses strategies such as drawing from colonial history, articulating anti-colonialism using FMA, and highlighting self-regeneration as a way of locating and rationalizing FMA within the nation and in relation to other global martial arts.

At the core of these themes is the character development of Ben and Mori. Without Mori in the plot, Ben could not be articulated as the archetypal FMA fighter. It is against Mori that Ben's own character is defined. Additionally, Mori's character reflects what FMA believes itself to be up against. Mori is an agent of the Spanish governor and so his defeat meant symbolically defeating colonial oppression. As the simulacrum of Japanese martial arts, he is formidable and impressive and so defeating him would establish the superiority of FMA. Lastly, it is his superior strength and skill which creates a predicament for Ben, forcing

Ben to have to reconstruct himself. Analyzing Mori's role in these three themes reveals that he is employed in two ways: first, as a benchmark for identifying the perceived standards of martial arts; and second, as way of isolating uniqueness and asserting superiority. The first relates to Partha Chatterjee's (2001) argument on cultural re-equipping as a way of catching up (p.2); the second relates to Rey Chow's (2000) idea of using the foreign or colonial other in order to set the colonized self apart (pp. 2-7).

A lot is revealed by Mori's physical appearance. His clothes and demeanor show him to be very cultured. His rigid poise and very placid composure in dealing with any form of tension gave off an aura of order and discipline. Furthermore, he is impressively skilled. In one scene of the film, one of the governor's sons questions the quality of the Japanese katana against a Spanish sword. Mori indulges him to a friendly sparring match. While the Spaniard clumsily tumbles over and over during the fight, Mori remains sure-footed. Mori's cuts are so precise that they are only deep enough to cut through the Spaniard's clothing. At the end of the match, Mori pulls a few threads from the Spaniard's shirt and the whole thing comes off. Mori is also unquestionably loyal and honorable. Employed in the service of the governor, he is duty-bound to defend the villain. This makes Mori a villain only by circumstance. While the governor and his sons are clearly portrayed as evil and oppressive, there is absolutely nothing that Mori does that could suggest he was evil. When Mori defeats Ben for the first time, he is ordered to kill Ben. An islander who has fallen in love with Ben throws herself over Ben's unconscious body and begs for his life. Refusing to strike down the woman, Mori sheathes his sword. Later in the film, when Ben's iron reed breaks Mori's samurai sword, Mori admits defeat and begs Ben to take his life. Ben refuses to kill Mori, but is interrupted when the governor charges at Ben. Ben picks up a nearby sword and throws it at the governor. Mori steps in front of the governor and gets impaled. With that sacrifice, Mori redeems his honor.

Mori can be understood as the way in which FMA practitioners idealize their Japanese counterparts to be. Unlike the governor to whom he is duty bound to serve, Mori is not portrayed as cruel and oppressive. He exhibits a lot of positive traits such in terms of his fighting skills, as well as his character: his movement is fast and has finesse, he is righteous, he does not strike down the defenseless, he follows orders, he respects his enemy, and he values his honor dearly

even at the cost of his own life. Mori sets the perceived benchmark for the ideal martial artist among FMA practitioners. That said, Ben does not differ from Mori too much. This is important because signals that FMA practitioners believe FMA to be at par with the more popular Japanese martial arts. In fact, the film is careful to portray Ben almost like just being a Filipino version of Mori. This mirror-like portrayal of Ben and Mori is significant because it underscores FMA's ambivalent position towards the Japanese martial arts. Moreover, it illustrates how the martial aspect of FMA-styled national identity in the film was derived from an articulation of Japanese martial arts through Mori.

Ben and Mori share a comprehension of the language of martial arts, and have a mutual respect for each other. For instance, in the first confrontation, they salute each other before they fight. They also both hesitate when the opportunity to kill the other presented itself. Mori could have killed Ben after their first encounter, and Ben could have killed Mori after breaking his sword during their second encounter. Instead, Ben only unintentionally kills Mori because the latter suddenly stepped in front of the governor as Ben delivered the death blow. In comparison to other fight sequences in the film (for example between the Spaniards and Filipinos), there was no belittling and insults exchanged between the two. Instead, they quietly circled each other, their eyes locked. Mori's death is also significant as it was shown to be nobler. In contrast, the governor and his sons receive slower, more agonizing deaths at the hands of Ben.

The combatants are portrayed as equals in the same way that Arnis and Kenjutsu are portrayed as equally reliable on the field of battle. If the collocation of Ben and Mori's physical appearance establishes their ethno-cultural differences, their conduct, as well as the choreography of their fight sequences establishes their similarities. It highlights that though Arnis was unique from Kenjutsu, it could engage with Kenjutsu on equal terms. By establishing that Arnis can go toe-to-toe with the martial arts hegemon of the 1970s, the Filipino nation is portrayed as being able to engage with a cultural-economic giant like Japan.

While the differences between Ben and the governor are polarized and plenty, there is actually little difference between Ben and Mori. This is interesting because it shows that a different dynamics of comparison is at work between Ben and the Spaniards, and Ben and Mori. It signals FMA's own

position towards colonization, versus its position towards Japanese martial arts. While the story is able to easily distance the natives from colonization by portraying it negatively, it portrays Mori a bit more positively. In a sense, Mori just happens to be a good guy working for the bad team. The main nuances in how the two men are portrayed gives emphasis to how more backward the native fighter is in comparison to the samurai. During their confrontations, Mori wears a yukata and hakama while Ben is topless. Mori wears sandals while Ben goes around barefoot. Mori's hair is neatly combed and tied while Ben looks slightly more disheveled. Then of course, there was their weapons — Mori brandishes a metal samurai while Ben swings around wooden sticks which are cut in two by Mori's sword. The idea of the comparison shows that apart from the technological disadvantage, the Arnisador

can go toe to toe with the formidable Japanese samurai. This view is shared by FMA practitioners, and there is a rich oral history about FMA practitioners who fought against Japanese soldiers armed with samurai swords (Vivit, 2012).

In order to counteract the technological disparity, Ben undergoes a rebirth by training intensely, and going on a quest for the mythical iron reed. It is also an analogy for the differences between the Philippine and Japanese economies, and between Arnis and Japanese martial arts. By showing that Ben can overcome Mori, the film romantically suggests that Arnis is really superior to Japanese martial arts, and that the nation can be at par with a first world country like Japan one way or another.



In their final battle, Ben breaks Mori's sword. Mori pleads Ben to kill him as a matter of honor, which Ben refuses (Nepomuceno, 1974 [screengrab]).

## CONCLUSION

Roland Dantes would go on to conceptualize and star in other FMA-themed action films like *Arnis: The Sticks of Death* (Caparas, 1986). He would be immortalized as an FMA symbol, and consequently, a national symbol. Dantes' roles in the martial arts film genre were absorbed by FMA practitioners as part of their own construction of national identity. Taken by many of his admirers (whose lot included prominent FMA teachers) as homologous with the characters he portrayed, Dantes both embodied and participated in FMA-styled national identity construction. His role on screen, as the proverbial canvass upon which Filipino identity was expressed, legitimated his position (later on in his life) among FMA teachers and practitioners as a go-to person in the subsequent discourse of nationalism in FMA. Though in *Arnis: The Sticks of Death*, Dantes would play the role of a policeman — a figure of authority, as opposed to a colonial subject — the character pattern established in *The Pacific Connection* was still there: obedient, righteous, chivalric, brave, etc. Through such articulation, FMA's version of national identity and nationalism would become glorified and reified.

This research explored how the film *The Pacific Connection* articulated concepts of Filipino national identity and nationhood from the perspective of FMA. The paper established that FMA films were legible sources for reading into concepts of national identity among FMA practitioners. *The Pacific Connection* drew mainly from FMA narratives, and many FMA practitioners such as Dantes himself participated in the making of the film either as actors or even stuntmen.

As Macachor and Nepangue argued, FMA emerges in modern times. Nevertheless, they are imagined and rationalized in relation to the nation and reflect Smith's concept of ethnosymbolism. *The Pacific* mainly sought to depict FMA's version of the ideal Filipino. It used three strategies which drew from history, myths, and ethnosymbols. The research paid particular attention to how all these strategies converged around the characters of Ben and Mori. While Ben acted as the figure upon which FMA idealizations were constructed, Mori existed as both an antithesis and benchmark for constructing these idealizations.

Essentially, the film emerges at a point in history when there were certain developments in FMA. Then, FMA was being organized under and with support from

the national government. As such, FMA practitioners were beginning to be aware of their community and identity in relation to a larger nation. When the nation started to mobilize FMA, then practitioners began to ask questions related to their role in the nation. The film was one result of this self-interrogation that was happening in the FMA community. In addition, *The Pacific Connection* was an interjection to the 1970s martial arts film industry largely dominated by Hong Kong and Japan. The martial arts market in the country was ruled by foreign martial arts such as Karate, Judo, and Taekwondo. Using the prism of martial arts fantasy, *The Pacific Connection* was a statement that the Philippines was not, so to speak, left behind.

*The Pacific Connection* addressed FMA anxieties over these developments. FMA concerns over nationhood and identity were translated in the film using themes of colonial oppression and resistance to it. FMA concerns over being culturally dominated by other martial arts were addressed using the plot of the film which pitted the characters of Ben and Mori. The film expressed its idealizations on the FMA fighter by projecting the story's setting into the Philippine historical past, establishing FMA as a decolonizing cultural tool. The film also used mythical elements such as the quest for the iron reed as solutions for dealing with the superiority of the samurai which resembled modernity and globalization (specifically Japan's cultural reach into the Philippines). Ultimately, the film served as an artistic interpolation into debates that preoccupied the FMA community in the 1970s, and set the blueprint for how FMA imagines and rationalizes its relationship with the nation.

## REFERENCES

- Agoncillo, T. A. (1990). *History of the Filipino People*. Garotech Publishing.
- Anbarani, A. (2013). Nation, Nationalism in Controversial Debates and Thought: A Review of Origin of Nation and Nationalism. *Canadian Social Science*, 9(3), 61–67.
- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso
- Armstrong, J. A. (1982). *Nations Before Nationalism* (1st edition). The University of North Carolina Press.



- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Brown, D. (2000). *Contemporary Nationalism: Civic, Ethnocultural & Multicultural Politics*. Routledge
- Bowman, P. (2011). The Fantasy Corpus of Martial Arts, or, The "Communication" of Bruce Lee. In D. S. Farrer & J. Whalen-Bridge (Eds.), *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World* (pp. 61–96). State University of New York Press.
- Bowman, P. (2019). *Deconstructing Martial Arts*. Cardiff University Press.
- Calhoun, C. (1997). *Nationalism*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Caparas, A. C. (1986). *Arnis: The Sticks of Death*. M-Kor Productions.
- Carroll, J. (1961). Contemporary Philippine Historians and Philippine History. *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 2(3), 23-35
- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Chow, R. (1995). *Primitive Passions*. Columbia University Press.
- Chow, R. (2000). *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*. Duke University Press.
- Claudio, L. (2013). Postcolonial Fissures and the Contingent Nation: An Antinationalist Critique of Philippine Historiography. *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 61, 45–75.
- Constantino, R. (1974). *Identity and Consciousness: The Philippine Experience*. Malaya.
- Constantino, R. (1975). *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*. Renato Constantino.
- Constantino, R. and Constantino, L. R. (1978). *The Philippines: The Continuing Past*. The Foundation for Nationalist Studies.
- Dantes, C. (2012, September 19). Dantes [Personal communication].
- Dawisha, A. (2002). Nation and Nationalism: Historical Antecedents to Contemporary Debates. *International Studies Review*, 4(1), 3–22.
- Doug, L. (2002). *The Bourne Identity*.
- Doyle, D. and Grant, S. (2006) H-Nationalism Interview with John Breuille Retrieved March 29, 2020 from <https://networks.h-net.org/node/3911/pages/5917/h-nationalism-interview-john-breuille>
- Farrer, D. S., & Whalen-Bridge, J. (Eds.). (2011). *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*. SUNY Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (First Edition edition)*. Basic Books.
- Gellner, E. (1964). *Thought and Change (First Edition edition)*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gellner, E. (1998). *Nationalism*. Phoenix.
- Gonzales, R. (2015) *Filipino Martial Arts and the Construction of Filipino National Identity (Unpublished doctoral dissertation)*. University of Manchester.
- Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (Eds.). (1992). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hogan, T. In *But Not of Asia: Reflections on Philippine Nationalism as Discourse, Project and Evaluation*. Thesis Eleven, 84, 115-132
- Hutchins, R. D. (2011). Heroes and the renegotiation of national identity in American history textbooks: Representations of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, 1982–2003. *Nations and Nationalism*, 17(3), 649–668.
- Hutchinson, J. (1994) *Modern Nationalism*. Fontana.
- Hutchinson, J. (2001). *Nations and Cultures*. In M. Guibernau and J. Hutchinson (Eds.), *Understanding Nationalism* (pp. 74-96).
- Kato, M. T. (2005). Burning Asia: Bruce Lee's Kinetic Narrative of Decolonization. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 17(1), 62–99.
- Kaufman, S. J. (2013). The Limits of Nation-Building in the Philippines. *International Area Studies Review*, 16(1), 3-23.
- Li, S. L. (2001). Kung Fu: Negotiating Nationalism and Modernity. *Cultural Studies*, 15(3–4), 515–542.
- Mahajani, U. (1971). *Philippine Nationalism: External Challenges and Filipino Response, 1565-1946*. University of Queensland Press.
- Manalansan, M. F. (2010). Search for community: Filipino gay men in New York City. *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, 393–404.

- Mascardo, R. (2007). About NARAPHIL. Filipino Martial Arts Digest.
- Mojares, R. B. (1997). Revisiting Local Histories. *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, 25(3/4), 225–231.
- Mojares, R. B. (2006). *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge*. Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Motyl, A. J. (2001). *Encyclopedia of Nationalism: Leaders, movements, and concepts*. Credo Reference Limited.
- Nepomuceno, L. (1974, November 14). The Pacific Connection [Action]. Luis Nepomuceno Productions.
- Nery, J. (2015, October 13). Miseducated by Constantino | Inquirer Opinion. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/89344/miseducated-by-constantino>
- 'Philippine Republic Act 9850, An Act Declaring Arnis as the National Martial Art and Sport of the Philippines'. *Philippine Laws and Jurisprudence Databank*, Arellano Law Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved May 19, 2020, from [https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2009/ra\\_9850\\_2009.html](https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2009/ra_9850_2009.html)
- Plamenatz, J. (1976). Two Types of Nationalism. In E. Kamenka (Ed.), *Nationalism: The Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (pp. 22–37).
- Prashad, V. (2003). Bruce Lee and the Anti-imperialism of Kung Fu: A Polycultural Adventure. *Positions: Asia Critique*, 11(1), 51–90.
- Rafael, V. (2000). *White Love and Other Events in Philippine History*. Duke University Press
- Saguin, P. (2012, September 20). Saguin [Personal communication].
- Schumacher, J. N. (1975). Re-reading Philippine History: Constantino's A Past Revisited. *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 23(4), 465-480.
- Seton-Watson, H. (1977). *Nations and States: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*. Methuen.
- Shils, E. (1957). Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties: Some Particular Observations on the Relationships of Sociological Research and Theory. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 8(2), 130–145.
- Smith, A. D. (1986). *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1st edition). Basil Blackwell.
- Smith, A. D. (1998). *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*. Routledge.
- Smith, A. D. (2000). *Myths And Memories Of The Nation*. Oxford University Press, U.S.A.
- Snyder, Z. (2007, March 7). 300 [Action, Drama]. Warner Bros., Legendary Entertainment, Virtual Studios.
- Tongson, R. (2012, July 28). Tongson (Bacolod City) [Personal communication].
- Velasco, B. (2009, March 21). Farewell, Roland. Philstar.Com. <https://www.philstar.com/sports/2009/03/21/450195/farewell-roland>
- Worden, K. S. (2013, November 29). Roland Dantes—National Treasure of the Philippines: An Interview with Roland Dantes Part 2. <https://www.usadojo.com/roland-dantes-interview-part-2/>
- Yip, M. (2017) *Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity*. Hong Kong University Press.

---

Author:

**Rey Carlo T. Gonzales**, Division of Social Sciences, College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines Visayas, Miagao 5023, Iloilo; [rtgonzales@upv.edu.ph](mailto:rtgonzales@upv.edu.ph); [ompoygonzales@gmail.com](mailto:ompoygonzales@gmail.com)

---