

REVIEW

BOOK

False Nostalgia: The Marcos “Golden Age” Myths and How to Debunk Them

By JC Punongbayan

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Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels once said, “repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth.” Goebbels, who was Adolf Hitler’s one-man propaganda machine, oversaw creating not only lies for Nazi Germany but supervised the spread, through media, of “Hitler Lies” to gain political and social control. Psychologically speaking, if a lie is repeated often, it makes us believe and think it is the truth. It challenges not only our rationality but also our beliefs. A very good example of this, in the Philippine historical context, is the proliferation of what we may call “Marcosian Lies.” Through the help of social media personalities, mostly vloggers and influencers under a web of network disinformation, these Marcosian Lies became the essential truth for some Filipinos. Marcosian Lies are backed by historical facts and narratives, yet facts and narratives are perverted for a particular purpose or for propaganda’s sake. The crisis of being drowned in Marcosian Lies not only rests on the study of history but on the politics of memory—and this catastrophe was best seen when millions of Filipinos favored the return of the Marcoses to power.

It makes us question, however, if it was Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and his dictatorship that spread this bag of lies as a form of state propaganda or were these fabrications only made in the post-EDSA era as a form of rebranding the Marcos image in preparation for their return to Malacañang. Economist JC Punongbayan, a graduate of the UP School of Economics and a public intellectual who regularly decodes issues of political economy for online news platform Rappler, sifted through some of these Marcosian Lies in his first book, *False Nostalgia: The Marcos “Golden Age” Myths and How to Debunk Them*. Punongbayan’s primary focus is on

the Marcosian Lies that are built on the Golden Age narrative. The Marcoses and their supporters created a false reality that argues that the Marcos dictatorship was a glorious past of economic growth and development, political stability, and social peace. *False Nostalgia* clarifies all these considerations with rock-solid data and critical interpretation.

False Nostalgia is divided into three parts that can be read in any order. Each part tackles a certain theme, and are titled “Carefree Utopia,” “Crisis Management,” and “Crazy Rich Filipinos.” Every chapter begins with a question, for example: “The Philippines was the richest country in Asia?” or “Nobody was poor?” during the dictatorship years from 1972 to 1986. It attempts to clarify highly debated topics like “Marcos riches came from hard work, not from large-scale plunder?” or the most notorious subject matter, “The Marcoses own a million tons of gold?” In total, *False Nostalgia* is composed of eighteen chapters—which can be read independently—but as a historian, I recommend reading the chapters chronologically to see how ridiculously fabricated these historical claims are about Marcos and the Martial Law years.

Punongbayan’s strength lies in the interpretation of data and the use of sources. In Chapter 2, for instance, *False Nostalgia* asks readers if the currency exchange rate of the Philippine Peso at 1.5 or 2.0 was at par with the US dollar (27). Punongbayan does not immediately proceed to debunk the myth, but rather traces the history of Peso-Dollar exchange rates from the American colonial period to build a sound narrative. I can vouch for Punongbayan’s approach, not only in this chapter but in other parts of the book as well. For Filipinos, in general, currency exchange between the Philippine Peso and the US dollar has been a subject under debate for decades (29-35), and most of the time it could also be misleading without prior economic and historical knowledge. In general, the book’s storytelling is simple and approachable. However, there are occasions when the economic explanations and data presentation can be overwhelming.

One of the commendable aspects of the book is how each chapter clarifies the so-called “claims.” In Chapter 18, there is an absurd claim that “The Marcoses are rich because Ferdinand inherited gold from Jose Rizal, with whom he founded the World Bank.” First, the source of this claim is from a YouTube video (265), which already diminishes the credibility of the claim. Second, using basic facts alone, Rizal and Marcos did not even encounter each other, since the former died in 1896 and the latter was born in 1917. What I find interesting in this “claim” is how known historical facts are combined with apparent falsehoods to create distortion. Facts and contextualization should be considered together in order to build stable claims.

We have seen in the past few years how fact-checking was not an effective deterrent against disinformation.¹ If Filipinos are already convinced of an alternative past built on distorted facts and false narratives, then lies can truly become the truth. Punongbayan, however, offers us a potential approach: facts should be building blocks to narratives. One of the main obstacles that Punongbayan's *False Nostalgia* needs to overcome, however, is how the print format can battle with the vast ocean of social media content. *False Nostalgia* does not provide the answer, yet it can be a starting point. For historians, the challenge is how to translate highly technical research for wider public consumption.

False Nostalgia is a must-have for every teacher of history. Similar to how lies can become truth when repeated, it can be a battle to promote historical facts and narratives which have to be repeated not only inside the classroom. One need not have been alive during the Marcos dictatorship, or to even have experienced it, to have a sound opinion about Marcos and his dictatorship (275-276). Besides, our perceptions change and minds decay over time, unlike data. At the end of the day—data is king.

REVIEWER

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1 As part of the Digital Rights Programme for Civil Society Organisations together with Google Asia Pacific, Asia Centre hosted a virtual discussion panel about fact-checking and disinformation. While the panel members acknowledged the efficacy of fact-checking, evolving technological advancements in recent years have posed challenges. See Asia Centre. 2024. "Fact-Checking Useful, But No Longer Primary Tool Against Disinformation." Asia Centre, March 27, 2024, <https://asiacentre.org/fact-checking-useful-but-no-longer-primary-tool-against-disinformation/>.