

Article

Cinematic Amnesia as Remembering: *Coming Home* (2014) and *Red Amnesia* (2014)

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Abstract: This article examines the trope of amnesia—the crisis of memory—in two recent Chinese-language films dealing with traumatic memories of the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath: Zhang Yimou’s *Coming Home* (Guilai, 2014) and Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Red Amnesia* (Chuangru zhe, 2014). Cinematic representation of real and symbolic amnesia, I argue, can be an affective way to overcome historical amnesia, both institutionalized by the Party-state and privatized by individuals. By exploring the dynamics between forgetting and remembering at both collective and individual levels, we can reach a deeper understanding of the profound impact of the Cultural Revolution and its present-day repercussions.

Keywords: amnesia; China; the Cultural Revolution; memory; trauma

Who controls the past . . . controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.

—George Orwell, 1984

. . . time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.

—T.S. Eliot

1. Introduction

Amnesia has been a common plot device in world cinema since the silent era. From the 1915 film *The Garden of Lies*¹ to Chinese time-travel fantasy romance *Once Upon a Time* (San sheng san shi shi li taohua, 2017), many commercial films have used various ploys of amnesia for its dramatic potential to create suspense, provoke emotional responses, and explain away preposterous situations. Because amnesia is closely associated with physical and/or psychological traumas, cinematic representation of amnesia can also be used to tackle issues of historical narrative and serves as an affective vehicle for dealing with remembering and loss. In this article, I examine the trope of amnesia in two recent Chinese art films, *Coming Home* (Guilai, 2014) and *Red Amnesia* (Chuangru zhe, 2014), with respect to memory and trauma in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The films, directed by the leading directors of the Fifth Generation and Sixth Generation Zhang Yimou and Wang Xiaoshuai, respectively, imbue cinematic amnesia with an ethical urgency of historical reflection. Amnesia has been forged as a powerful symbol of historical trauma suppressed by political manipulation and personal guilt. By confronting the audience with the devastating consequences of amnesia, the films call attention to post-Mao memory crisis and re-engage the concealed and neglected history affectively, thus opening up the possibility of overcoming historical amnesia.

¹ According to (Baxendale 2004, p. 1480), no fewer than 10 silent movies (before 1926) feature amnesic characters. *Garden of Lies* is one of the earliest and a trendsetter of nuptial amnesia. Furthermore, *The Right of Way* is “one the first films to depict amnesia as the result of an assault and the trigger for starting life afresh.”

2. Ruins of Private Memory

As China renegotiates its position in the world order with feverish modernization projects and tight political control, memories of the Cultural Revolution, a tumultuous decade of massive violence and repression that displaced and killed millions, have been fading out of Chinese political and cultural life. Still a highly classified “state secret,” the total number of the upheaval’s victims remains unknown, and non-quantifiable devastations have never been fully appraised. The Party-state has been consistently discounting its catastrophic significance and denying the people reflections on this dark period of Chinese history through heavy-handed censorship and ideological control. Authoritarian politics compounded with consumer economy has created a culture of collective amnesia that keeps younger generations oblivious to the nation’s recent history. Since the early 1990s, Chinese art cinema has been exploring the narrative and allegorical power of amnesia to underscore the fundamental contradictions of historical narrative in modern China. Jiang Wen’s much-discussed directorial debut *In the Heat of the Sun* (Yangguang canlan de rizi, 1994), for instance, uses an unreliable narrator who interrupts, intervenes, denies, and rewrites the seemingly linear narrative about coming of age during the Cultural Revolution. The dynamic use of an amnesiac voice-over in the film creates a double temporality that frames the distant memory of the Cultural Revolution against the recent memory of the 1989 crackdown and marks a double remembering of suppressed memories. Jiang’s later film *The Sun Also Rises* (Taiyang zhaochang shengqi, 2007) furthers his experimentation of disrupted time and memory. It features an amnesiac character, “Crazy Mother,” whose fragmented memory of the past blurs the lines between reality and madness. The film’s nonlinear storytelling, dreamlike visual style, eccentric characters, and symbolic objects all accentuate the futile struggles of reconstructing memory disjointed by personal trauma. Emblemized by the absent father, the past can only be reconstructed as a disembodied affect. In the labyrinth of amnesia, broken pieces of the past are delicately pasted together but fall into pieces again in a matter of a sneeze.

Different from Jiang’s films, which focus on the Cultural Revolution period per se, Zhang Yimou’s *Coming Home* and Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Red Amnesia* are more engaged with the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Loosely based on the final chapters of Yan Geling’s novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* (Lu fan Yanshi, 2011), *Coming Home* subtly touches upon the untold history of labor camps in northwestern China, where many intellectuals were sent to be “re-educated” through forced labor in the Gobi Desert since the Anti-Rightists Campaign in 1957, and quietly shows how a family is ripped apart and permanently devastated long after the Cultural Revolution has ended and the surviving prisoners returned.

Wrapped in a touching love story between a rehabilitated political prisoner and his amnesiac wife, played by veteran actors Chen Daoming and Gong Li, the film set a record for box office receipts for art films in China, grossing 295 million RMB in its first two weeks (Chou 2015). However, reading the film as a “twilight romance” is reductive and misses the point. A renewed collaboration between Zhang Yimou and Gong Li, *Coming Home* immediately invokes the intertextual connection to their early work *To Live* (Huozhe, 1994), also starring Gong Li and dealing with individual lives deeply affected by political turmoil. *To Live* won the Jury’s Grand Prix at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival but was banned—a form of institutionalized amnesia—in China, and Zhang Yimou was banned from making films for two years. In contrast to *To Live*, which confronts people’s sufferings and survivals against China’s pivotal historical moments directly, Zhang chooses a restrained and elliptical narrative style that exposes only the tip of the historical iceberg in *Coming Home*. In a 2014 interview, Zhang Yimou said it was his intention to use *liubai* as a key narrative strategy (Zhang 2014). *Liubai*, or leaving empty space, is a compositional device in traditional Chinese ink painting that intentionally leaves empty space to prompt affective contemplation. *Coming Home*’s avoidance of melodramatic treatment of historical traumas is both a political strategy to pass censorship and an aesthetic choice to expand cinematic space affectively.

The film begins three years before the end of the Cultural Revolution: Lu Yanshi, a former professor who has been imprisoned for over a decade, escapes from the labor camp and tries to

covertly rendezvous with his wife Feng Wanyu. Their daughter Dandan, a gifted ballerina striving to claim the leading role in revolutionary ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*, turns him in when she discovers her parents' plan to meet at the train station. Three years after the Cultural Revolution has ended, Lu is rehabilitated and allowed to return home. He finds out that Dandan has become a textile factory worker, ousted from home by Feng for her betrayal, now living in a dormitory, and his wife Feng no longer recognizes him. Diagnosed with an affective amnesia possibly induced by physical injury, psychological trauma, or malnutrition, Feng persistently denies Lu as her husband. On several occasions, she panically mistakes him for an "Officer Fang," a former member of the local Revolutionary Committee who Lu later finds out had sexually assaulted her during the Cultural Revolution. Aided by Dandan, Lu makes every effort to take care of Feng and restore her elusive memory, including recollecting old photos, playing her favorite tunes, spending time together reading unmailed letters Lu had secretly written in the labor camp, and faithfully accompanying her to the station to "pick up" himself on the fifth day of every month. Gradually, Feng allows Dandan to move back home and accepts Lu as someone she can trust, but still refuses to recognize him as her husband. The film ends on a wintry morning many years later. An old and weary Lu accompanies a now-wheelchair-bound Feng in heavy snow at the train station. They are waiting behind a closed gate for the impossible return of Lu himself.

Guided by the *liubai* aesthetics, *Coming Home* uses minimal dialogues and relies on the scene to convey the emotion. With the exception of Lu's re-capture at the train station early in the film, explicit violence is remarkably absent on-screen in the film. Nonetheless, the film confronts the audience with a more subtle, resounding, and slow-burning kind of trauma epitomized by Feng's crisis of memory. "There is certainly a feeling that we are struggling to remember our past," said Zhang Yimou in another interview (Koepke 2015), after *Coming Home* was released at Toronto International Film Festival. "I believe that movies are the most potent, powerful form of art; I have this sense of responsibility to use my movies to influence other people's [view of the Cultural Revolution], especially young people in today's China, to let them know more about history." The adaptation decision of refocusing the film's narrative to Feng's amnesia reflects both the filmmakers' aesthetic preference for the *liubai* technique and their anxiety about collective amnesia. In a sense, Lu's attempts of recovering Feng's memory parallel filmmakers' effort of recovering historical memory through artistic endeavors. Feng's amnesia thus carries symbolic significance. The physical and psychological traumas brought by the state violence mercilessly rupture the family life. Within the film's narrative, Feng's amnesia erases the traumatic episodes and suppresses the painful memory of her husband's re-capture and Fang's assault on her. Her failure to recognize the newly released Lu, who has apparently been transformed by his suffering in the labor camp, as her husband, is a symptom of her physical/psychological trauma. However, at the symbolic level, it can also be read as an outright rejection of the post-Cultural Revolution state rhetoric that calls the people to let bygones be bygones and move on. In a particularly poignant scene, when the same Director Li from the district communal committee, who intrudes Feng's apartment earlier with two cadres from Lu's labor camp during the Cultural Revolution, tries to convince Feng that Lu is indeed her husband, she says: "Don't you trust the Party? Am I not a Party representative? Shouldn't you trust me? In the name of the Party, I assure you that this man right here in front of you truly is your husband Lu Yanshi." Her crude insertion of state authority into private matters highlights the continuity of China's authoritarian political system and invites a sense of *déjà vu*. Feng's panicky response that the man before her is not her husband, but rather Officer Fang, represents a desire to reject the narrative the Party assigned to her. Lost memory parallels lost trust between individuals and between the individual and the state. In this sense, her persistent amnesia embodies both her family's psycho-physical traumas as well as their crisis of trust with regard to authority and its authenticity.

The violent erasure of personal memories by political forces is visually exemplified in Lu's family album. At the doctor's suggestion, Lu Yanshi tries to help Feng recover memory by reconstructing a shared past. His first effort is to recollect family photos in the hope that a photographic referent of him

may rekindle a spark of remembering. After all, in pre-digital age photography, as Roland Barthes has observed in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1981, pp. 76–77), we “can never deny that *the thing has been there*.” However, Lu discovers every single image of him has been completely cut out from their family album by their daughter Dandan. The memory holes created by the visual removal of an unwelcome father is a choice both personal and institutional. Dandan, who was only three when her father was arrested, had no personal memory of Lu in everyday life. Guided by party propaganda and her own desires for career advancement, Dandan conceived of Lu strictly as the abstract representation of a class enemy.

Like empty space left in a traditional Chinese painting, the traumatic events that directly cause Feng’s amnesia mark their absent presence through other details. Feng’s amnesia creates two senses of time. On the one hand, she is nostalgic for the uncontaminated time, the good old days before the trauma; on the other hand, she is hopeful for the promised return of her husband on the fifth day of an unspecified month. When Lu finally recovers a photo from their youth picturing two couples in western dress, the other man in the photo has committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. Feng is unable to recognize the friends, but she immediately identifies Lu. Her affectionate attachment to a pre-Cultural Revolution memory and her unacceptance of post-Cultural Revolution Lu as her husband explain the emotional intensity of her response to the piano music Lu plays to her; the tune Lu softly plays is an adaption of *Song of the Fishermen*, the theme song of the 1934 eponymous film directed by leftist filmmaker Cai Chusheng, who was tortured and died in 1968. In a surge of emotions, she reaches out her hand to touch Lu’s shoulder. Both in tears, they share an embrace. However, the physical contact instantly triggers the traumatic memory of her being assaulted. Feng slaps Lu and breaks away. Haunted by the unhealed trauma, a substantiated reconstruction of the past is impossible. The intertextual connection not only expands the film’s narrative and affective power, but also deepens the tragic loss of the bonding between Lu and Feng. After Lu has gradually won Feng’s trust as a friendly neighbor, Feng entrusts him with the task of reading her husband’s letters from the labor camp. The letters, written in tiny characters on whatever scraps of paper a prisoner could find, provide a fragmentary glimpse into the life in the labor camp. Writing is an act of resistance against amnesia. The reading of the letters not only represents the slow process of rebuilding personal connections between Feng and Lu, but also sutures another gap of memory, that of the untold horror stories of the forced labor camp.

3. The Silent Specter of History

With a similar sensibility to afterwardsness² found in Zhang Yimou’s *Coming Home*, Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Red Amnesia*, the last installment of his Third Front trilogy, presents a psychological and allegorical take on the problematic legacy of the so-called Third Front Construction (*sanxian jianshe*). From 1964 to 1971, China secretly carried out a massive urban-to-rural migration program intended to build self-sufficient industrial bases inland for national defense concerns. Thousands of existing factories and their workers were uprooted from the coast and relocated to the remote southwestern and western region, where they endured harsh and isolated conditions for many years. As government funding for such facilities gradually dwindled during the mid-1970s, workers started seeking opportunities to return to their native cities. Ever since the reform of state-owned enterprises started in the 1980s, some factories have moved out of the mountains, some have been dismantled, some have tried to reinvent themselves and remain productive, and others have simply been abandoned (Naughton 1988). The negative impact of the program on China’s economic development, as Naughton (1988, p. 351) points out, is “certainly more far-reaching than the disruption of the Cultural

² The term “afterwardsness” is coined by Jean Laplanche in his *Essays on Otherness* (Laplanche 1999), as a translation and extension of Sigmund Freud’s German term *Nachträglichkeit*. The concept suggests that an earlier event in one’s life can later acquire a meaning. The notion suggests a dual temporal directionality at play in the hermeneutics of trauma: a retrogressive and a progressive direction.

Revolution.” Wang’s film demonstrates how the specter of this forgotten past returns as postmemory trauma and continues to haunt the present.

Red Amnesia follows the everyday life of a retired widow Deng in present day Beijing. When her life of daily chores is disrupted by a series of mysterious silent phone calls and the appearance of a migrant boy in a red cap, her seemingly forgotten past begins to resurface and haunt her like an unburied ghost. A former Third Front factory worker, Deng managed to win the only opportunity of returning to Beijing by informing on her rival Zhao forty years ago. When she revisits the factory in remote Guizhou for the first time ever since, she is confronted with not only her past but also the brutal impossibility of atonement. Discontinuity editing in *Red Amnesia* creates a strong sense of anxiety, confusion, and disorientation that visualizes the affective disruption of past trauma and guilt lurking in the present. The inaudible caller remains silent but persistently demands a hearing. The police and her daughter-in-law dismiss it as the imaginings of a lonely old lady. Deng’s older son Jun suspects a retaliation from his unpaid contract worker. Furthermore, Deng, visibly affected by the silence emotionally, secretly believes it is from the specter of the recently deceased Zhao.

For Deng in *Red Amnesia*, the willful forgetting of her past transgressions gnaws on her conscience and makes its comeback with full force. Her memory of the Third Front factory was directly triggered by the news of Zhao’s death. It has been forty years since Deng managed to leave the remote factory and move back to Beijing. Her younger son Bing, born in Beijing, is totally oblivious of the family history. Since 1992, China has been accelerating its pace toward marketization and urbanization to be assimilated into the global economy. Motivated by financial profits, massive real estate projects obliterate sites of memory and recreate its past. In tandem with the privatization of state industries, the state-sponsored workplace-based social benefit system that had supported workers in their old age, ill-health, and during times of economic hardship has gradually vanished, leaving a vast vacuum to fill. This process of rapid social changes has created a huge gap between major cities and hinterlands. Workers who remain in the Third Front towns not only could not benefit from China’s economic reform, but also feel their contribution and sacrifice have been unfairly neglected or forgotten. Before his recent death, Zhao had been bedridden for about four decades as a result of a stroke shortly after he learned Deng’s informing on him has dashed his hope of moving back to Beijing. The family still lives in the dilapidated residential compound where Deng and their co-workers had lived in the distant past. Most families have moved out, but the Zhaos, poverty-stricken and left behind, are confined to their past and see no way out. Their children have become migrant workers. Their only grandson, the boy in the red cap, becomes a homicide fugitive driven by a transgenerational hatred toward Deng and the urban life she represents.

The boy’s tragedy derives from a transgenerational transmission of trauma, or what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory.” Denied the possibility of returning to their native city, those who remain in the Third Front region commonly suffer from loss of identity and dignity. When Deng revisits her former factory in Guizhou, she has a gathering with her old co-workers. Their accents indicate their various immigration backgrounds from Beijing, Shanghai, Sichuan, etc. One old man remarks, “When I am dead, I don’t want to be buried in Shanghai or here. Just sprinkle my ashes into the sky.” Growing up in the declining factory town, the children bear witness to their older generations’ unaddressed wounds of victimization, and they are further marginalized as a result of their inherited disadvantages. Unchecked, the inherited traumatic memory, compounded by their own personal experiences of victimization and disorientation, may manifest in violent ways.

The Chinese title of *Red Amnesia*, *Chuangru zhe*, means “the intruder(s).” As Wang (2017) observes, both Deng and the boy are seen intruding into other people’s lives and leaving unwanted marks. However, ultimately, as the film reveals in the end, the state itself is the most violent and ubiquitous intruder of private lives. The unpredictable state policies have created a general sense of rootlessness and disorientation. In her native city Beijing, Deng finds she has turned into an outsider who does not belong to any group. Once she returns to her former factory, she instantly experiences a *déjà vu*: “I’ve seen this in my dreams: right here by this tree, we are talking about the same things.” Walking

down memory lane, the film uses extra-diegetic music to auralize Deng's affective link to the past: the sound of bugle call, the Chinese rendition of "Ural Rowan Tree" (a popular Soviet song about factory romance), and laughter of children. However, the pan shots reveal only an empty swing and dilapidated buildings. The factory and the apartments have almost completed moving to a new district. The site of her memory is in the imminence of disappearing.

Both the socialist regime and global capitalism join hands in pursuit of strategic oblivion. Forgetting the past allows the country to sprint unhindered toward becoming a global economic powerhouse. The youth embrace this loss of history so as to loosen the chains that weigh down older generations. In *Red Amnesia*, Deng is seen regularly visiting and caring for her elderly mother in a senior home. While Deng seems to have found an attentive audience in her mother, with whom she can share her private thoughts about her grown-up children and her own aging, the mother is always silent. Like the relic of some bygone society, she continues to exist but has no voice of her own. She has stopped passing on memories to younger generations, and so is forgotten by them. Once, Deng brings her grandson with her on a visit. While she is feeding her mother food, the child stands by at a distance with a puzzled look. When they are picked up later, her daughter-in-law grumbles that she should not bring the child to a place like this. To a younger generation caught in the whirlwind of economic growth, the past—both the history and the older generations who embody it—is an inconvenient burden that they are taught to forget with relief.

4. Conclusions: Amnesia and (Im)possibility of Redemption

Over forty years have passed since the end of the Cultural Revolution; however, the government has yet to admit responsibility or engage in any meaningful dialogue. Artistic interest in examining the suppressed history has never ceased. Early works tend to simplify historical trauma in a binary discourse of victim versus victimizer. As Wang (2017, p. 55) points out, the representation of the memory of the Cultural Revolution in Chinese cinema has largely accepted a logic of collective victimization. Films like *Legend of the Tianyun Mountain* (Tianyunshan chuanqi, 1980), *The Herdsman* (Muma ren, 1982), and *Hibiscus Town* (Furong zhen, 1988) adopt a melodramatic mode that provides "easy and comforting answers to difficult and complex questions. It offers moral clarity at a time when nothing seems clear" (Pickowicz 2009, p. 321). *Coming Home* and *Red Amnesia* are notably more nuanced efforts of confronting the past, its long-lasting impact on the everyday life in the present, state and individual responsibility, and the problematics of forgetting.

The history of China's long 1970s will constantly resurface and haunt the present generations who have seemingly forgotten the past. As scholars have observed from modern Chinese history, a political power such as the Communist Party can manipulate the memory machine, but so too can commercial culture (Liu 2007, p. 26). In *Red Amnesia*, stark generational differences and regional gaps manifest in everyday details. In the capital city, the retirees like Deng stay in crowded but still decent low-rise apartments presumably assigned to them by their work units during the planned economy period. They commute via packed public transportation, unplug electronics to conserve energy and prevent power leakage, eat preserved food, engage in collective activities like neighborhood watch and choirs, and are eager to provide care to their surviving parents and their children, regardless of whether it is welcomed or not. Eager to forget the past but still embodying it, Deng's generation is the transmitter and terminator of the Cultural Revolution's memory. The ambivalent attitude of Deng toward the Cultural Revolution is evident in her reaction on hearing the communal chorus of old revolutionary songs. She approaches the gate of the rehearsal hall, attentively peeks inside while keeping a cautious distance, and soon hurries away.

By contrast, the son's generation is, perhaps willingly, oblivious to their national and familial past. They embrace change and are eager to distance themselves from the memories of the old world. With new lifestyles afforded by the growing material wealth and social tolerance of the capital city, the new generation lives in sterile high-rises, commutes by private car, and enjoys greater financial and sexual freedom. Like the daughter-in-law who does not want her son being brought to visit his

great-grandmother in her senior home, or the younger son who does not understand his mother's sense of entitlement to intrude in his private life as a gay man, the younger generation in general both passively and actively forget the historical forces that shaped them.

However, like Zhao's alleged spirit, the dead do not rest easy. The shiny facade of modernized life only superficially covers a troubled past which does not hesitate to break out of its prison. The film opens with a slow-moving dolly shot capturing a dilapidated brick building with broken windows and the thumping sounds of machinery heard offscreen. It then cuts to the interior of a modern bathroom where a boy takes a shower. The shot of the building reappears a few scenes later when Deng answers a phone call. Serving as a subconscious flashback intrigued by the mysterious phone call, the scene of the dilapidated building reminds the audience of the site of hidden memory. When the film ends, the audience realize that the entire film is parenthesized by the factory in Guizhou, the haunting site of Deng's memory.

To restore the soul, one must retrieve the memory. If there is any redemption at all, it will come through memory. However, both films show the impossibility of redemption. For Feng and Lu in *Coming Home*, there is nowhere to seek revenge when the government never openly recognizes its past crimes, and the villain Fang, who never appears in the film, apparently is in jail for other reasons. In *Red Amnesia*, when Deng finally decides to revisit the site of her suppressed memory in Guizhou and apologizes to Zhao's widow, not only she does not receive forgiveness, she also indirectly causes the unintended death of Zhao's grandson. Hearing the thumping sound of the boy's fatal fall, the camera dwells on Deng's shellshocked face, as she collapses to the ground, overwhelmed by old and new guilts. The location sounds of dog barks and pounding machinery bridges the close-up of Deng's face to a flashback of the boy gazing back at the camera against the family photo wall in Deng's apartment that we have seen earlier in the film.

In the final shot of the film, the static camera gazes through the remains of the window frame, now beyond repair, into the abandoned factory buildings that have buried the memory of more than one generation of urban youth who were forced to uproot. After a moment of silence, the sorrowful extra-diegetic music swells and brings the film to its emotional climax. The location sounds are still audible but withdraw to the background. Toward the end of the credit sequence, the string music, composed by a rock band Ziyue Qiuye (credit as Umeit in the film), subtly quotes the motif of a well-known Cultural Revolution song "The Sun is the Reddest, and Chairman Mao is the Dearest." This commemorative song, composed shortly after Mao's death, is quoted so fleetingly as almost to escape the notice of the audience. It ends with a slight variation at the end of the second line replacing a rising note with a falling note. This anachronistic leitmotif drives home the past's tenacity in resurfacing even among mediums or genres attempting to rebel against it; yet at the same time, it also asserts that even the past cannot endure unchanged.

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