

Film Review: *Red Amnesia*

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Wang Xiaoshuai (Director). *Red Amnesia*. Film. China: Dongchun films, Inlook media Group, Herun Media, Edko (Beijing) Films, Gravity Pictures Film Production Company, Chongqing Film Group, 2014. 110 minutes.

Red Amnesia (or *Intruder*, the literal translation of the Chinese title) is a 2014 film directed by Wang Xiaoshuai. In it, a series of suspenseful events unfold, from phone harassment, stalking, and theft, to murder and a ghostly haunting. It is eventually revealed that these events are propelled by the legacy of the Third Front Movement, the relocation of several million volunteers to remote areas of China, between approximately 1964 and 1980, to participate in a large-scale infrastructure development project for military purpose. Importantly, as implied by the English title, the historical legacy that is referred to is one which involves both memory and loss of memory.

Deng Meijuan, a widowed lady in her seventies, prefers to live alone despite the fact that she has two sons.¹ Following the news of the death of a Mr. Zhao, Deng's life becomes deeply disturbed, for a series of mysteries begin to develop. She receives frequent phone calls from a caller who keeps silent; her window is broken by a flying brick; her son's doorway is blocked by garbage during her visit; and all the while, incidents of stealth and murder are reported by the local news. Deng kindly invites a homeless boy to her place, but after a nap, she finds that the boy has left without notice, leaving all her old photos on the wall, including those of Mr. Zhao, torn into pieces. Deng begins to suspect that she is being haunted by Mr. Zhao's ghost, which has created all these mysterious incidents as means of revenge. The origin of her hypothesis is revealed in a conversation between her two sons. Deng's younger son has no idea of who Mr. Zhao is and complains that Deng has become delusional. He is reproached by his older brother, who then tells him of an episode of his family history that had, until then, been unknown to him. Half a century ago, Deng and Mr. Zhao's families both relocated from Beijing to a poor, remote village in Guizhou in support of the Third Front Movement, a decision they later regretted because of the poverty and backwardness of the village. When the Movement ended, and only one family was to be permitted to return to Beijing, Deng wrote many letters to the central government accusing Mr. Zhao of violence during the Cultural Revolution² so that her family would be the one winning the opportunity to leave.

¹ In China it is common for parents to live with their adult children.

² A radical sociopolitical movement between 1966 and 1976 in which many people humiliated, imprisoned, tortured and killed alleged counter-revolutionaries.

Deng returned to Beijing and gave birth to her second son there, while Mr. Zhao, struck by Deng's manipulations, became paralyzed and spent his remaining life in the village.

When the guilt-ridden Deng visits Mr. Zhao's wife in Guizhou and offer her apologies, she finds to her surprise that the mysterious boy is no ghost, but is in fact Mr. Zhao's grandson. After Mr. Zhao's death, the boy had run away from his home to Beijing, where he broke into houses and killed a homeowner when he was discovered. He was also the one who had made the harassing phone calls, broken Deng's window, and left garbage at her son's doorway. When Deng hears that police are en route to arrest the boy, she warns him out of guilt. But as the boy tries to escape the police, he falls through the window of his home and possibly dies.

This film shows the entanglement of the two families' memories. As implied by the English title, *Red Amnesia*, for decades Deng has been trying to forget her selfish deed. She was frightened to hear revolutionary music and would run from its sound, as though it painfully reminded her of her youth, sacrificed to the communist cause. Her second son had no idea of how his privilege of having been born in Beijing had come about, as the infamous page of their family history had been torn off. In contrast, in Mr. Zhao's family, memories of misfortune pass on through continued poverty and disease. Carrying his family's agonizing past, Mr. Zhao's grandson runs away from home for revenge, and ends up committing crimes that ultimately lead to his self-destruction. His intrusion in Deng's family awakens the latter's repressed memory, and spurs Deng to begin a journey of confession.

The inheritance and the breaking down of memory depicted in this film cannot be explained solely in terms of personal gain and loss. On a greater scale, China's sweeping social transformations have shaped the trajectories of the two families and, in turn, affect how they interpret their memories. The economic reforms that began in the late 1970s made some of China's cities materially abundant and culturally diverse. Living in Beijing, Deng's first son is a married business man with a son, while her second son, who does not seem to have a regular job, is living with his boyfriend. Deng continually intervenes in her first son's family life, emphasizing traditional filial notions that cause much conflict with her daughter-in-law. Further, she is deeply troubled by her second son's sexual orientation. It seems she is estranged from the modernized city, which conflicts with her memories of the revolutionary era. Lonely and vulnerable, Deng lives in an empty nest. Only when looking at the photo of her dead husband can she speak freely of her sorrows. Meanwhile, in the last four decades, life in the remote Guizhou village has changed little. Because Mr. Zhao had become a bed-ridden invalid, his wife had to not only take care of him but also to maintain the livelihood of the entire family; their son thus swore to kill Deng's family.

When Deng kindly brings Mr. Zhao's grandson into her home, she asks him, "Aren't you of the age to be studying for the university entrance exam?" She has no idea, of course, that this boy has dropped out of school precisely because of what she has done and still cannot forget. Poverty, disease, deprived opportunities and emptiness are the irrevocable reality facing Mr. Zhao's family, forcing them to remember.

When trying to calm Deng, her two sons say that ghosts do not exist. Deng replies: "Your father talks to me every day. How do you know that Mr. Zhao cannot turn into a ghost?" One might interpret ghosts as memories kept alive. The "ghost" of Deng's husband is seen to rest in the photo above Deng's dining table, and appears when she is lost in thought. The "ghost" of Mr. Zhao, though never rendered visible on screen, is what had driven the plot behind the scenes. It roams away from his sickbed, from the run-down house, from the impoverished village, along the road his grandson follows when he runs away. It stalks Deng through the silent phone calls, and looms large when Mr. Zhao's grandson falls off the apartment building. It haunts two families, blurring the boundary between the victimizer and the victimized. It rises from the shadow of the Third Front Movement and has gone astray in China's massive social reconfigurations.