

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FAMILY MEMORY IN THE MOVIE COMING HOME (2014)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the concept of family memory in the movie *Coming Home* (2014) to underline the importance of family memory in maintaining the family wholeness. This paper is a qualitative study with sociological approach focusing on the concept of family memory by Halbwachs. The results of this paper demonstrate that the presence of family memories determines one's perception and action toward other family members and helps family members to encounter challenges that occur within the family or in the society. Meanwhile, the absence of family memory makes someone care less to other family members and get easily influenced by external factors outside the family. Family memory is concurrently possible to maintain cultural tradition within a family and even a nation, thus family memory between family members goes beyond family affair, not only strengthen and unite a family but also a nation.

**Keywords:** family memory, cultural revolution, film coming home, Zhang Yimou

### **ABSTRAK**

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menelusuri konsep memori kolektif keluarga dalam film *Coming Home* (2014) yang memperlihatkan pentingnya memori kolektif keluarga dalam menjaga keutuhan keluarga. Penelitian ini merupakan penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan sosiologi yang menyoroti konsep memori kolektif keluarga oleh Halbwachs. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kehadiran memori kolektif keluarga menentukan persepsi dan perilaku seseorang terhadap anggota keluarga lainnya, dan membantu anggota keluarga menghadapi tantangan yang terjadi di dalam keluarga serta di masyarakat. Ketidakhadiran memori kolektif keluarga antaranggota keluarga dapat membuat seseorang tidak peduli terhadap anggota keluarga lainnya dan mudah dipengaruhi oleh faktor eksternal. Memori kolektif keluarga juga dapat menjaga tradisi budaya dalam lingkup keluarga hingga negara, sehingga memori kolektif keluarga yang dimiliki antaranggota keluarga tidak hanya memperkuat dan mempersatukan keluarga tetapi juga bangsa.*

**Kata Kunci:** memori kolektif keluarga, revolusi budaya, film coming home, Zhang Yimou

## **INTRODUCTION**

In China, families become a central part in constructing social and governmental structure. (Watts, 1989) states that China is family-centered society, influenced by Confucianism places families as a mecca to build harmonious social life. Every family member has a role where husband and/or father is in the highest family structure. Confucius in Qi (2016) insists that adult children must satisfy their parents' material

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needs, and show them reverence and obedience. Qi furthers that traditional family relations and filial obligation are maintained through parental authority, especially the father, and a duty of obedience from adult children. Considered as the head of the family, the father has to be respected and followed by his wife and children. This principle concurrently initiates the term “filial piety”, a principle that mandates children to be obedient, filial and responsible of their parents until the rest of their life (Watts, 1989). The belief of “filial piety” can be considered as collective memory among communities in China as it has been implemented as generational family values in most China’s families. It simply implies that collective memory plays significant role in establishing cultural practices of a nation, in this case particularly, building national family values.

Collective memory is generally defined as a memory formed from shared experiences between two or more people. Collective memory consists of two categories, namely memory from original experience and memory that has undergone a cultural process but is experienced by a group of people. Family memory is an example of collective memory rooted from real experiences. Frequent interactions between family members determine the quality of kinship among family members. Even if a family member is separated from the family for a long period of time, their bond can remain strong due to the quality family memory. However, social life can also influence one’s identity. When people enter a wider environment, their principle, thoughts, and values are concurrently extended. Their personalities do not root merely from the family but also from the community. The community gives them collective memory because they interact or communicate with each other directly or indirectly. If family memory loosens due to less interaction or connection between each other, their memories, thoughts, and action will be easily dominated by external factors (Halbwachs, 1925).

Barclay & Koefoed,(2021) argue, family memory builds one’s identity as family is the foundation of someone’s personal history. Additionally, family memory possibly builds national history because it reflects not only the interaction among family members but among communities that establish a nation. This perspective implies that image of families can reflect the image of a nation itself. The principle of “filial piety” that has been the image of China through times was attacked and undermined in the

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Mao Era, during the Cultural Revolution (Qi, 2016) The Cultural Revolution that occurred from 1966 to 1976 attempted to achieve national rejuvenation which impacted on distorting China's family values as the people had to force to prioritize the country. Singer (1971, p. 80) states that young people of whatever background tended to resent the older generation for failing to abide by the revolutionary ethic that it had preached. The mission of Cultural Revolution broke apart families, brainwashing children to disobey their parents if their parents disobey the authorities.

The distortion of family values in China due to cultural revolution is reflected in the movie *Coming Home* (2014) directed by China's renowned director, Zhang Yimou. This movie is adapted from a novel entitled *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* written by Yan Geling. The storyline centers around a family of three members: a father named Lu Yanshi, his wife Feng Wanyu, and their daughter Dan Dan. As the title itself, *Coming Home*, the movie tells a story of how Lu Yanshi who is exiled by the government, attempts to come home. Lu Yanshi is considered as the enemy of the country because of his identity as an intellectual that is against the revolutionary mission. The escape of Lu Yanshi from the prisoner camp in order to come home causes problematic tragedy in his family. His daughter, Dan Dan, betrays her parents reporting Lu Yanshi to the authority. His wife, Feng Wanyu, who is witnessing his arrest and trying to chase him, gets into accident. She falls and hits the ground in the head, causing her having partial amnesia. The rest of the story draws their struggle to reunite and reconnect as a family after the cultural revolution ends.

Film indeed has the ability to communicate numerous issues on several levels. It conveys certain messages created by the cinematographers. As Petrie & Boggs (2020) states, "Film even surpasses drama in its unique capacity for revealing various points of view, portraying action, manipulating time, and conveying a boundless sense of space." In *Coming Home*, audiences can interpret various points of views depending on which aspects are focused on. Film also plays a role to be a medium that shapes and reflects the societal structure of its time. It conveys social messages that can be essential to help its audiences comprehend current phenomenon critically (Fauziah Habibah, 2022).

Cai, 2015) finds *Coming Home* depoliticizing the historical background by creating melodramatic scenes in order to eliminate critical moral judgements. Presenting

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emotional exaggeration in a political-background movie is considered a strategy to be accepted and welcomed by both the public and political conservatives. On the other hand, (Ashari & Wuryandari, 2019) discovers the destructions of family institution in *Coming Home*, specifically of Lu Yanshi's family are caused by the policy implemented during Cultural Revolution. The impact of Cultural Revolution even extends after it has ended. The findings of this study show Lu Yanshi's family cannot happily reunite as before the tragedy occurred.

Different from both previous studies, this paper explores how the concept of family memory is presented in the movie *Coming Home* (2014) and what the impacts of the absence and presence of family memory are to the main characters in the movie. This is aimed to underline the significance of family memory to maintain family wholeness and to show how it reflects the phenomena in real social life.

## **METHOD**

This paper is a qualitative study using descriptive method to analyze the data. The corpus of this paper is *Coming Home* (2014), a Chinese movie directed by Zhang Yimou. This paper applies sociological approach to analyze the importance of family memory in the movie. Sociological approach in literature puts literary works as a part of the society, reflecting the situation in the reality Sulaeman & Goziyah (2019) This study applies sociological approach in analyzing the data to further the understanding of social phenomena outside the literary works, in this case is the external factor of the movie *Coming Home*. To collect the data, this study focuses on narrative and cinematic aspects of the movie. The data collection is later analyzed further using family memory theory by Halbwachs (1925).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The absence of family memory in one's self makes him or her less care to other family members. In *Coming Home*, Dan Dan has been abandoned by her father since three years old, because of political reason caused by the Cultural Revolution in China. Her memories about her father are only rooted from the reality of expression. Reality of expression is simply defined as formed reality based on interpretation or experience of

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someone else. It generally departs from texts, performances, films, verbal conversations, images, and more (Turner & Bruner, 1986). When Dan Dan was three years old, her memory had not yet developed completely because the process of child's cognitive development still merely centers around motoric sensory. Around the age of three, a toddler would find it difficult to remember or store family memory (Desmita, 2009). Therefore, Dan Dan's memories of her father from she was born until three years old do not stay long. She only recognizes and knows her father from pictures and other people's stories, not from her own experience. Halbwachs explains that lack of regular interaction between family members influences their family bond. Evidently, Dan Dan who never met her father for ten years does not have strong family memory to establish family bond with her father. Furthermore, she is abandoned in the age when her brain development has not yet been able to capture memories permanently.

The careless behavior of Dan Dan toward her father appears in the scene where a propaganda officer informs her and her mother about the escape of Lu Yanshi and forbids them to meet him, saying he is the enemy and suggesting them not to cross the line. Dan Dan declares her position in the situation by saying, "I have nothing to do with him. I will obey the Party's decisions (CH/2014/04:51). Not only by verbal expression, the careless behavior of Dan Dan toward Lu Yanshi is also portrayed by her facial expression (CH/2014/04:47). In this scene, her facial expression demonstrates how firm she is to follow the government command. Dan Dan instantly nods, confirming the instruction. When asked to declare her position, her facial expression shows confidence and no doubts to follow the order.

Actors act with their bodies as well as their faces. How a character walks, stands, or sits conveys a great deal about personality and attitude (Bordwell et al., 2020, pp. 135–136). The expression and posture of the actress playing Dan Dan stresses her careless attitude toward Lu Yanshi. Oppositely, intact family memory motivates someone to still care to other family members even if a long separation occurs. Different from Dan Dan, Feng Wanyu regularly interacts with Lu Yanshi in the age when she is able to save memories permanently. Although they have been separated for 10 years, Feng Wanyu remains remembering him and does not show any behavior changes toward her husband because family memory does not fade because of

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separation. As conceived by Freud (1915) human's memory is as if an iceberg. The tip of the iceberg is the conscious mind where our thought perception resides. The middle part between the tip and the bottom of the iceberg is our preconscious where memories or stored knowledge occupy. This illustrates that the memory of Feng Wanyu about Lu Yanshi is stored in the preconscious. It can emerge to the conscious mind once recalled. When questioned by the propaganda officer, Feng Wanyu does not respond much, mostly in silence. When hearing the propaganda officer stating Lu Yanshi as the enemy, her expression shows sadness. She also does not directly declare her position when asked to follow the order and instead expresses doubt while delaying her response. Her facial expressiveness is framed in close-up to interpret her emotions toward Lu Yanshi. Bordwell et al. (2020) reveals that the most expressive parts of the face are the mouth, eyebrows, and eyes. All work together to signal how the character is responding to the dramatic situation (2020, p. 134). The actress playing Feng Wanyu shows as if the character is recalling her family memory about Lu Yanshi that making her sad by gesturing sad eyes when asked to stay away from him.



Figure 1. The expressions of Fang Wenyu and Dan Dan hearing about Lu Yanshi

The perception and action of someone toward other family members can be easily influenced by external factors due to the lack of family memory among them. In *Coming Home*, Dan Dan's perception toward Lu Yanshi is strongly influenced by external factors because she knows her father from other people more than her father himself. Their first face-to-face interaction is only when Lu Yanshi has been a fugitive. Dan Dan even tells his father that she does not know him when he is sneaking to meet Dan Dan and her mother in their apartment (CH/2014/15:34). It is worsened by the fact that the false consciousness spread in the Cultural Revolution is successfully implanted

in her, driving her to resent her father as commanded. False consciousness is best defined as a social phenomenon that manipulates a lot of people to accept and implement a promising yet potentially harmful ideology. An ideology can be considered spreading false consciousness if it leads to negative impacts experienced by wider communities (Rosen, 1996). False consciousness also occurs due to collective memory where shared identity is created, leading to memory distortion and possible to political manipulation at the community level (Wang, 2008)

Generally, the phenomenon of false consciousness occurs as a result of hegemony or power relation. In *Coming Home*, the practice of false consciousness is demonstrated by the exile of Lu Yanshi. He is considered as an enemy of the country because of his profession as a lecturer. In the Cultural Revolution, the government spread anti-intellectualism propaganda to establish an educational revolution. Many intellectuals who considerably had only book knowledge were disciplined by being exiled (Singer, 1971, p. 79). Evidently, Dan Dan naturally believes Lu Yanshi as an enemy without questioning. Dan Dan convinces her mother not to be involved with Lu Yanshi, dismissing the fact that Lu Yanshi is still her father and the husband of her mother. Dan Dan says, "Mother. You must not see him. He's an enemy of the party" (CH/2014/07:02), Her facial expression even shows her anger when forbidding Feng Wanyu. Not only affected Dan Dan's perception toward Lu Yanshi, the false consciousness implanted in her also steers her action that breaks China's traditional family values, "filial piety". As mentioned previously, China has passed the principle of "filial piety" that mandates children to be obedient, filial and responsible to their parents (Watts, 1998). Father is belted as the head of the family and has to be respected and followed by his family. Due to the strong influence of external factors and lack of family bond with her father, Dan Dan does not implement the traditional family values. Instead, she ignores her mother's loyalty to her father and reports her father to the authority to be arrested. Rather to put her father as the head of the family or someone to be respected and followed, she chooses to conform with the government, the external part of her life.

In contrast, intact family memory can protect one's perception and action toward other family members from external influences. Jones & Ackerman (2018) argue that

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family memory can be a guidance to live. It influences people's identity, sense of belonging in the world, and the ways people relate to events in life. Furthermore, they state:

The memory we have of our own lived experiences shapes our personalities, actions, and relationships. The memories of the communities that we are members of, including our families, shape us as social beings and situate us in a particular sociocultural instance in history. Family stories convey the shared, ongoing narratives of family memory, persistent beyond any single member, that a family builds to create a sense of collective identity and connection across multiple generations.

Feng Wanyu who has strong family memory with Lu Yanshi does not believe he is the enemy of the country. Although they have been separated for ten years, Feng Wanyu maintains the family values within her. She follows her husband's instruction to meet him at the designated time and place even it can threaten her position in the society. When Dan Dan forbids her to meet his father, Feng Wanyu states, "I must think of your father" (CH/2014/20:24). When insisting to meet Lu Yanshi and confronting Dan Dan, Feng Wanyu expresses different body language and facial behavior. This time, she shows domination in the conversation to stress her state in the dilemmatic situation. Her face and voice are intense, establishing her as a tough character when it comes to saving her husband. Moreover, she dares to fight the authority and not let Lu Yanshi is arrested. Feng Wanyu, who is seeing a group of police heading toward Lu Yanshi from afar, yells "run" to him. Instead of saving herself and leaving Lu Yanshi, she is chasing him to try helping him escape (CH/2014/25:01).

By the same token, the presence of strong family memory can motivate family members to stay involved, maintaining family bond. After the end of Cultural Revolution, the relationship between Dan Dan and her mother faces challenges because Dan Dan feels the blame of her mother's accident and the arrest of her father. She leaves her mother's house and lives alone. However, she still takes care of her mother and wants to be involved in her life. Dan Dan's strong family memory with her mother also encourages her to bring home Lu Yanshi, hoping the presence of Lu Yanshi can help her mother's memory back. This happens because of filial piety that has been planted and become her identity since she was a child. As stated by Nydegger (1991)

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every child naturally has filial affection to his or her parents. However, every family faces challenges through time. Crisis encountered by children and parents is a process of strengthening their bond to reach filial maturity. As children matures, so do parents. The filial piety in Chinese society, particularly, is in line with the process of myth turning into a belief. According to Barthes (1972) this process can be explained by the theory of signification. According to Barthes, there are two levels of signification. First is in denotation level where there is a signifier and signified to sign symbols and meaning explicitly. Denotative sign roots from literal interpretation of a sign, such as the understanding of a word in a dictionary. After the connotative meaning has been implanted in the society and established memory collective, a sign will become a myth because it is normalized. Myth in this context is considered as message, language, or a part of communication tool. After a myth or a message has been repeatedly shifted as memory collective and implanted in the society, the myth turns into an ideology and later a belief.

The filial affection Dan Dan has for her mother leads to build her family memory with her father. As they work together to improve Feng Wanyu's health condition, Dan Dan and Lu Yanshi create reality of experience. Reality of experience refers to the reality that occurs to people when they experience something by themselves directly and consciously (Turner & Bruner, 1986). The experience builds real memories in their mind, feelings and hope. The memorized experiences are not only verbal forms of what they see or hear, but also imaginations, and impressions that relate to emotions. By building reality of experience with Lu Yanshi, Dan Dan establishes family connection and filial affection. Her behavior towards Lu Yanshi changes. Dan Dan shows regret of what she has done to her parents and apologizes sincerely (CH/2014/01:16:24). The facial expression of Dan Dan in this scene looks sad with watery eyes, showing her regret while saying "*I'm sorry about you two*". This concurrently confirms the establishment of family connection between Dan Dan and her father because they have been maintaining reality of experience.

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Figure 3. Dan Dan apologizes to Lu Yanshi

Additionally, the significance of family memory is confirmed in the last scene of the movie where the scene jumps to many years later. Dan Dan helps Feng Wanyu who has already been much older than before to get ready picking up Lu Yanshi in the train station (CM/2014/01:42:35). These last scenes interpret how Feng Wanyu does not recollect her memory about Lu Yanshi and does not remember Lu Yanshi even though he has been home after the Cultural Revolution ends. However, Lu Yanshi does not leave her and Dan Dan. Oppositely, he pretends to be someone else and gives a ride to Feng Wanyu to the train station. The presence of strong family memory manages strong family bonds even if they are in crisis. Dan Dan who regrets her action to their parents does not leave them and instead devotes herself to implement the filial piety. This reflects the argument of Qi (2016)

Intimacy in Chinese society has more to do with actions than words, which involves tending to each other's needs and concerns, involvement in each other's affairs and decision-making, being reliable in crisis, and similar behavior.

Therefore, the character of Dan Dan represents Chinese society that does not demonstrate the filial affection in words by saying "*I love you*" or other words with similar meanings. She displays the intimacy with actions by staying involve in her parents' needs and concern, decision-making, as well as being reliable in the family crisis. She does not leave her family behind when her mother lost her memory and estranged her because of her mistake to her father. Oppositely, she takes care of her mother and tries to make amends with her father for reaching the family wholeness. Furthermore, she remains to look after her mother in her adulthood.

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## CONCLUSION

Family memory is best described as shared memories between family members that determines the quality of their kinship. By this definition, *Coming Home* (2014) conveys the significance of family memory among family members, particularly family members in the main family. This movie shows that family memory is established by direct interactions (reality of experience) between family members and by formed interaction (reality of expression) that is based on other people's experiences. The presence of family memories determines one's perception and action toward other family members. To establish strong family memories, family members need to build reality of experience frequently. Strong family memories can help family members to encounter challenges that occur within the family or in the society because the family memories are able to motivate them to stay involved in each other's life despite any crisis arises. On the other hand, the absence of family memory makes someone care less to other family members and get easily influenced by external factors outside the family such as false consciousness spread in the society. In cultural context, family memory is concurrently possible to maintain cultural tradition within a family and even a nation. Dan Dan's filial affection departs from family memory that her parents taught as to enliven Confucianism principle implanted in Chinese society before Cultural Revolution. Although the Cultural Revolution has faded Dan Dan's filial affection to her father, she remains to regain the filial affection after the tragedy ends. In conclusion, the filmmaker of *Coming Home* attempts to criticize the values of family memory of Chinese society as the movie represents the social phenomenon in the reality of Chinese society and possibly global societies. This movie underlines that family memory between family members goes beyond family affair. It does not only strengthen and unite a family but also a nation.

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