

## Don't Ask Where We Are Going

By Shao Zhong

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? It is questions such as these that impress me most in the radical article — *Where China Is Headed* published by the late Yang Xiaokai, famed contemporary thinker of the latter period of the Cultural Revolution. A sensation throughout China, the article was fraught with the pathos of a poet who longed for democracy and freedom and worried about the future of the nation. And the price he paid was being forced into exile overseas. However, such concerns have been buried under the earth of honor, status, power and money; and what everyone is most concerned with now may be whose artwork is worth the most. It's no wonder that Hu Ren also keeps apace with the times and has appraised and selected the Fortune 100 of Chinese artists.

The disillusion of faith, the failure to accomplish ideals, the aridity of wealth and the apathy of human feeling — the intertexture of all these is what characterizes our era. We cannot bear a snobbish society in which the poor are belittled and the rich worshipped. Nor can we accept an overly correct society in which the poor are bold with justice and the rich stoop to compromise.

So what is Chinese contemporary art? Where is it? And where is it going? Confronted with these questions, we must consider them in the context of Chinese social reality. Through retrospection of the development of Chinese contemporary art over the past three decades, the theme following the Cultural Revolution and throughout the entire 1980s was the relationship between art and social politics. To shake off the function of art as preaching ideology, artists transplanted the Western concepts of enlightenment, introspection and salvation. These borrowed ideas played an indelible role in peeling off political burdens, but as they highly advocated individual consciousness, they inevitably fell into the situation of Utopia. From the 1990s, with the baptism of China in the great tide of market economy, the theme of contemporary art then turned to the relationship between art and commodities. Like all other economic fields in China, the intervention of the burning hot capital lead to a fever in the art market; the terms 'art market' and 'contemporary art' were often confused; the art market even played the role of scorer in contemporary art. In the new millennium, the extensive introduction of a commodity economy results in the globalized operation of capital. Now, with the intense commercialization, the relationship between globalization and localization has become another theme of contemporary art in China. The two current tasks of Chinese contemporary art are both arduous: the first is to get rid of the bubbles and retrieve the ideality, independence and power of thinking in the creation of art; and the second is to find a system of communication through which the true relationship between Chinese culture and modern reality is produced by comparison, integration and interplay with foreign cultures.

Another work that deals with these questions is the famous 1897 post-impressionist style painting by Paul Gauguin. This is a painting full of religious allegorical implication and the painter questioned the emptiness of the modern society of the day.

In April 2006, the Palazzo Grassi of Venice was re-opened to the public and the opening ceremony was called "Where Are We Going?". The exhibits are the personal collection of Francois Pinault, Chairman of Gucci Group and also the collector who ranked first on the world artistic power listing of that year. Exhibition posters asking the question, "Where are we going?" were spread all over the streets and lanes of Venice, the rushing tourist city. It was thought-provoking.

In May 2008, on the occasion of the opening of Beijing Center for the Arts, Ms Weng Ling proposed that “Where are we?” be the theme of the first exhibition and that it be a serious questioning of the current situation in the Chinese contemporary art community, where prosperity and emptiness mingle.

Ms Weng Ling is one of the exhibition planners who first brought Chinese modern art to the international art market. She is also one member of the art community who remains most sober in the face of the crazily hot phenomenon in the domestic art market. In recent years, she has masterminded many vigorous art exhibitions with power of thought and I have been concerned about them. Although the exhibitions differ from each other in proposition and representation, they have one point in common: that is, the careful concern with and consideration and presentation of contemporary Chinese reality. Her definition of and judgment standards for contemporary art are simple and definite and I very much agree with her. Art is “all the realistic and unrealistic things related to the persons and life of the times considered and with which dialogues are conducted through any possible media materials”. “If a certain art exhibition discusses what you are thinking about, it is a good exhibition and good art for you”.

The old question “where are we”, which is still profound and powerful today, is surely not only be asked to the contemporary art. When everyone is busy embracing the future, what we need most is to make a pause and ask ourselves: “where are we?” It’s obvious that Ms. Weng Ling’s exhibition has made a start. We also expected that this topic could be discussed continuously and rationally in a more extensive and deep extension in this open and harmonious era.