

## Where Are We ?

By Zhang Xiaogang

Where are we? Are we living in the past, the present or the future? Are we living in a constant accumulation starting from scratch? On quite a few occasions I thought I almost came up with the answers, or at least I thought I could almost “feel” the answers — on quite a few occasions I struggled to wake up from dreams of the past and scrambled to touch the reality of the present, but only to reach sheets, pillow shams and lamps bought in IKEA. What we can see on different TV channels are only different faces playing the same role.

I can indeed “feel” that we have marched onto the interchange highway of economic globalization from the “Socialist Grand Avenue”, and are riding on this multi-layer interchange one round after another. We have been constantly told, be it in primary schools, high schools or universities, that we are in a brand-new time in history! It is true though. We are always embracing brand-new life, which means that we should discard the contemplations we have been having without the slightest hesitation, that we have to give up the games we have just learned to play so as to fly against the sunshine on wings of imagination.

June 10; At Wangjing; Slightly sunny and cloudless

The temperature is rising day after day. My working plan for today was ruined by a friend who took me to visit a villa neighborhood in the suburbs, newly created by a developer from Chongqing. This developer used to boast of its projects as “No. 1 in Chongqing” and now as “No.1 in Beijing”. However, I am not that impressed by the neighborhood we visited. To be sure, there are a lot of all kinds of trees in the neighborhood, creating a very pleasant surrounding. But it seems to me not so different from a town in Italy, Spain, America, or France. Developers have been keen on copying architectural styles of western towns when building their projects in China in recent years. With this, we find ourselves living in a counterfeited western world even without knowing it. But the fact is, this is not a genuine West whatsoever and not an East either. Where are we living after all? We live in a perception, or rather, to be more precise, we hope to live in a “western perception”. In such an imitative world, our memories can only be kept in books, photos and movies, or be transformed into mixed memories through mutation. All this has resulted in our double (or even multiple) personalities, distorting our contemplations and behaviors...

December 1; at Beilingju, Shenzhen; Cloudy and humid

Our time has been changing too rapidly, and so has our life. We are trapped between the loss of memories on the one hand and memories on the other. The moment when we have just gotten ready for sadness, we are surprised by pleasant events. All those around me and I have been forced to experience significant changes in our time again and again. Shall we be grateful to this rapidly changing time, which makes it possible for us to experience an abundance of pleasures and excitement in life in such a limited space of time? Are we lucky to be born into a time which leads us to be constantly running forward without any extra time to take a look at what is happening around us or even to revisit our diaries written years ago? Or perhaps we should learn to comprehend the world that has become increasingly cruel, which has at least made us recover the primitiveness that has long been muted. When we are forced to live in a perennially changing but dull environment, our memories would only throw us into unnecessary sadness and fear — a disease that has been troubling humankind since the beginning of its history, perhaps?

March 11, 2008; Hegezhuang, Beijing; Sunny and slightly cloudy

The spring seems to be just around the corner. Although trees in my garden have yet to turn green, I can already smell spring in the air. The year of 2007 has lapsed with my back and forth flights, media coverage anytime, anywhere, and reflections and contemplations over this or that matter. At this time last year, I was looking forward to some really exciting work, however, my schedule was then filled with all kinds of gatherings or events that I was obliged to attend. The summer arrived very soon, followed by the fall and winter in no time. A lot of things about life, my family or the art circle happened in this period of time. One “miracle” followed another in the market. And my exhibition in Finland also ended on an interesting note.

Pleasant surprises hit us one after another, to which we could only adapt without any alternatives. We could only run with the rapidly developing trends — no one knows what would follow and no one knows where this high speed train would take us to. We do not have the time (or even the necessity) to have reflections. Desires per se would suffice.

Do not attempt to measure the gap between life and reality. Do not doubt that your ideals are in the future towards which you are running. Everything is just telling you that all you need to do is to use your “capability to lose memory” in order to embrace the realities and look to the future. One

is always troubled by confusion or a sense of emptiness, even exhausting nights when lying on the sofa watching all kinds of TV programs. One illusion about life follows another. Our memories are underlying currents encapsulated by concrete that will only flow quietly when we are asleep, confusing and blurring the boundaries of time and space.

As she grows up, my daughter's memories of childhood will be lost with each passing day. The "memories" she has run against the realities she is confronted with, forcing her to adopt a brand-new mindset. Despite confusions and conflicts, new life will bring with it new memories, though not necessarily an extension of or a supplement to the past. That is true — when incomplete and unrelated memories are interwoven with life and made a colorful sheet covering us, what dreams are we going to dream? When we wake up in the sunshine on the next day, are we certain that we did wake up from yesterday? That is true — every single day is a beginning and, in the meantime, an end.

On the night of May 6; At No. 6 North Section of East Forth Ring Road, Beijing; Hot and stuffy

I moved from one city to another, from one neighborhood to another, with my living environment becoming ever "better" but harder for me to identify myself with. "Hometown" or the origin of birth or family has become a dictionary that one can no longer refer to. What does time mean to us? Does it mean the things you have in life that need to be repaired or even abandoned when they are out of date? Does it mean the growth of a daughter or the ever longer time parents sit on sofas? Does it mean a stone randomly taken out of the pocket of "yesterday" and inlaid into the ring of "today" for the attendance of one cock-tail after another? The answer is perhaps we never really live in "today" and everything is just a copy of "yesterday".

Perhaps it does not really matter where I am after all, since where we are heading is out of our control. What matters is to find out where we have arrived. This sounds cruel and upsetting, but also somehow exciting sometimes.

It is like a science fiction movie: we are running in a gray stony world without knowing if we are filled with pleasure or hope; I am not able to judge where I am heading, for my experience and knowledge does not provide any bases for imagination about the future; the only thing I can do is just to keep running, with a double-edged sword firmly in hand, getting myself hurt and bleeding while cutting away thorns on my way; a strange smell mixing the past and the reality of the present can be found everywhere in the air; lightning tears apart the sky down the road we are running on...