

The Noise of Missing

In the Chinese context the English word “miss(ing)” – by the meaning of “to feel sad because you do not have something or cannot do something you had or did before.”¹ – could be translated into 想念(xiǎng niàn)“ or 思念(sī niàn)“ as nouns, and 想(xiǎng)“ as verb, which according to one of the earliest Chinese dictionaries 说文解字 (*Shuowen Jiezi*, Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters)“ means “eager to gain something, thus thinking about it.”² By “thinking” it’s actually the character “思(sī)”, means also “to deliberate”. And the character “念(niàn)“ means “to always put something on mind”³.

[the gifs rolling along with the text]

The Etymology of Dismantle

The etymology of Germanic languages may finally be traced back to a long time ago. It is kind of the same in Chinese that the very original meaning of the words would be dug out. But one specialty of Chinese language is that the written words are not actually spelled but drawn: they are hieroglyphic.

“Let’s tear the three characters apart!” a voice in my head shouted to me with excitement as I am sitting in front of the computer, facing to the screen that was maybe a little bit too bright, comparing to the rather darker night through the window behind me. A common part of these three characters is “心(xīn)“, which means “heart(mind)“. In ancient China people once assumed that the “heart” is one of the organs of “thoughts“. “Brain” and “heart” would work together when people think. They cooperate with each other. Mencius⁴ once argued that, “The faculty of the mind(heart) is to think,”⁵ however, “the faculties of hearing and sight do not think and are obscured by things. When

¹ Mayor, M., 2009. In: Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 5th ed. Pearson Longman.

² Chai, J. and Li, Z. ed., 2001. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*. 1st ed. Beijing: Jiu Zhou Chu Ban She, p.607.

³ Ibid. p.603.

⁴ also Meng Zi or Meng Ke.

⁵ Mencius., Ivanhoe, P. and Bloom, I., 2009. *Mencius*. New York: Columbia University Press. p.130.

one thing comes into contact with another, it is led astray. "⁶ And "...by thinking, it apprehends; by not thinking, it fails to apprehend." The verb (namely the character) that was translated to "apprehend" has also another meaning other than comprehension, that is to gain. The argument of Mencius seems to suggest that the "heart(mind)" rules, which we might call idealism nowadays, and through these inner activities, one could achieve another form of gaining.

The upper part of "念(*niàn*)" is "今(*jīn*)", which means "the time now". It is actually the most used character when expressing the current time period in modern Chinese, such as "今天(*jīntiān*)" means "today", or "如今(*rújīn*)" means "nowadays". "念" is not only about the past, but also about something that one always carries with and lives one's life by keeping it in mind. "思(*sī*)" is the combination of mind and heart, the upper part evolved from "囟(*xìn*)", which means "brain" in ancient Chinese.⁷ It is the pure character of "thinking", rational and emotional.

When human beings activate the "missing" emotion, there's always a longing for, a hope for achieving, or in German the "sehnsüchtig" of something. In Chinese, that would be the upper part of "想(*xiǎng*)" -- "相(*xiāng/xiàng*)". The left half of it means "wood" and the right half means "eye". The original meaning of the character is "to observe", which explained by *Shuowen Jiezi* that, "There's no way on earth that could let one see further, other than standing on the top of a tree."⁸ It is possibly the most vivid "longing for" ever, imagine that one was lost in the woods, the object that the one has been *missing* was not far away, but the one couldn't find the direction no matter in what way. With this eagerness, the one climbed onto the top of the highest tree in the woods and looked around. Finally, she saw a plume of cooking smoke in the distance, which was also the direction that could lead the way back to home.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Chai, J. and Li, Z. ed., 2001. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*. 1st ed. Beijing: Jiu Zhou Chu Ban She, p.602.

⁸ Ibid.p.192.

And yet the one could only lay her eyes on it. The word “home” – as for the first time ever to live in a foreign culture for almost one year – occurs to me every day. I cannot reach or even see it by being at the other end of the continent. But still, I can feel it when hiding under the quilt which was shoveled into my suitcase by my mother, who would always ignore me when I say something like: “Mom, I suppose they also sell quilts in Germany”.; or when capturing the familiar tinges in the welcoming autumn breeze which reminds me of being told by every Beijinger I’ve met that autumn is the most beautiful season of Beijing.

The Long Way of Retrieving

The “miss(ing)” in the English context emphasized the part of “unable to do it again”, in Chinese however, it seems to suggest that one can regain the *missing* object through certain activities of the mind.

Along with the interrogative “how”, an interesting fact about sense and memory occurs to me which I have learnt several years ago.

Sometimes I will do my best to get information, like an addiction. Reading irrelevant magazines, social media, or sneaking into lectures full of strangers. Once on an internet forum, the writer of a post somehow claimed that olfactory sense is the most sensitive and also sentimental one above all other senses, since the olfactory bulb is the closest to the hippocampus and the hippocampus is the storage of memory.

Actually, it was a short novel, and the description of olfaction was meant to support a scene describing a woman suddenly burst into tears after she captured the familiar scent of her late father on a street full of strangers. I had my doubts and looked it up, there is no obvious evidence that olfaction is more sensitive than other senses, but it could be more sentimental, also more reliable. It would activate more areas of the cortex when we sense and store scent, and it would be stored not only in the hippocampus but also in other areas that the olfactory signal passed. Hence the patient who has amnesia

could forget what he had for breakfast but still could recognize the smell of his childhood.⁹

Missing happens for a reason, either triggered by the outside world or some imperceptible existence, like when you were doing nothing but trying to meditate, your brain suddenly decided to assign you some sad emotions. But whenever the feeling of *missing* occurs, it would be accompanied by remembering about a certain period of memory. Memories are part of *missing*. Referring to the character “*xiǎng*”, to see further by standing on the top of the tree, seems to relate to looking forward rather than backward, that is to imagine rather than to recall. Or would it work either way, if only it would pull us out of our current state of mind?

The functional neuroimaging studies recently revealed the relation between remembering and imagining that there is an “activation of a common brain network during these two forms of mental activity”¹⁰, which suggests that when we remember or imagine, the brain activities are actually very similar. Furthermore, the impacts of each other are bidirectional. Not only that we can only imagine something we already have known, but also the imagination may adapt our memories as we recall it:

“... (there is) a striking overlap in the neural networks recruited during memory and imagination, suggesting an interplay between these two processes. It has been hypothesized that episodic memory contributes the necessary ingredients for the simulation of novel events, while semantic memory provides an organizational framework upon which an imagined event is constructed. However, while it is clear that imagination draws heavily on memory, this relationship appears to be a bidirectional one. The nature of an imagined scenario has an influence on its subsequent memorability, and can also contribute to the formation of distortions in memory. In order to understand how we imagine the future, we must look toward the way in which

⁹ Gottfried, J., Smith, A., Rugg, M. and Dolan, R., Remembrance of Odors Past. 2004. *Neuron*, 42(4), pp.687-695.

¹⁰ Schacter, D., Addis, D., Hassabis, D., Martin, V., Spreng, R. and Szpunar, K., 2012 (Devitt & Addis) (Wering & Cheng). *The Future Of Memory: Remembering, Imagining, And The Brain*.

we construct the past, while bearing in mind that the past may in turn be a product of our imagination.”¹¹

Nothing could be more interesting than to examine oneself as a human being and to reveal how odd a biological machine a human could be. Like what we would like to do with other things, to set boundaries and categories, the “memory” is also finely categorized¹².

[Insert MEMORY.mp4 here]

Tulving¹³ also believes that episodic memories are organized temporally and involves the conscious retrieval of contextually unique events. That means when we retrieve a certain episode of memory, it is a reactivation of associations that involves multiple senses.

Memory would leave traces mentally and corporeally. In memory science studies, there is a widespread idea that remembering involves three processes: encoding, storage, and retrieval. Encoding refers to the process by which information makes its way into the memory. The information must draw one’s attention to get its chance as being a candidate of remembering. Storage refers to the process by which information is maintained in memory, and retrieval is the process by which information is recovered from memory:

“An event happens, a person experiences it, memory traces are laid down representing the event, the past vanishes and is replaced by the present. The memory traces of the event continue to exist in the present, they are retrieved, and the person remembers the event. This, in a nutshell, has been the understanding of how memory works. It is simple and straightforward; there is no need or room for magic, or marvel.”¹⁴

As I was standing under the shower, thinking about how the memory traces and senses combined as events, formed as memories, which left and

¹¹ Devitt, A. and Addis, D., 2016. Bidirectional Interactions Between Memory and Imagination. *Seeing the Future*, pp.93-116.

¹² Werning, M. and Cheng, S., 2017. Taxonomy and unity of memory. *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory*, pp.10-12.

¹³ Tulving, E., 1972. Episodic and semantic memory. In E. Tulving & W. Donaldson (eds.), *Organization of memory*. New York: Academic. pp. 381–403

¹⁴ Tulving, E., 2002. Episodic Memory: From Mind to Brain. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), p.19.

lingered in my head, I suddenly noticed the bubbles, which gathered around the drain, like they were talking about something behind my back. After a while, the bubbles figured that I was staring at them, so quickly they escaped down to the drain. The slippery feeling under my feet and the flake alike bubbles remind me of the heavy snow in my hometown, as I was staring through the window on that day, it was cloudy but so bright as if the sun has melted itself into the thick clouds. The sky was bright, and the snow was white, they met each other at the horizon, as if the firmament was never blue and the ocean could also be white. I was sitting in front of the desk, could not remember which book I was reading since my sight was attracted to the snowing feathers outside. It was in the morning, normally I should sit in the classroom and read Chinese poems out loud, but the school has had to give us a few days off because of the extremely heavy snow. Back then the phone screens were rather small but function well, that one could see the name of the contact immediately when receiving a message. It was the name of a boy that once would quicken my heartbeat every time when I saw or heard it. He asked me if I want to take a walk in the park. While my parents were out, I slipped out of the room and wrapped the only warmth in my thickest coat.

“Mental time travel” is a seemingly attractive notion, which based on the simulative and constructive abilities of the human brain.¹⁵ The blurry line between remembering and imagining, suggests that when we reminisce a past event, the brain is actually simulating the experience we think we had, and constructing a similar scene, making us believe, that we are experiencing it. At the moment I stepped out of the door, the heavy snow that lasted for three days stopped. However, the entire city would take at least a week to digest the marks the snow has left. The traffic was paralyzed and the road was blocked. Even the iron monsters that once galloped all around the city were trapped by their cumbersome limbs. I kept moving forward with my flesh-made feet and feeling the moments of “crunches”, which would only appear when the snow was compressed to a certain extent by the boots.

¹⁵ Michaelian, K., 2016. *Mental Time Travel*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, pp.97-120.

I didn't see the boy at the entrance of the park. After standing in coldness for a while, I took off my gloves and took out the phone, pressed the small green button on the keyboard with my fingertip, which was trembling either because of coldness or nervousness. And the result of a short conversation was, he went to the other entrance which was exactly in the opposite direction. So we decided to meet in the middle of the park.

It was the largest park in the city center, divided into two areas by an artificial lake. "Let's meet at the small pavilion in the middle." I forgot which of us got the chance to say the line, but that's the only sentence I could recall from the brief talk we had. The park was unexpectedly deserted. As I was walking through it, few young people passed me by from time to time — "young people" as in the context of the present me standing under the shower. They chat and they laugh. The noise of their pleasant conversation approached then faded away and again approached then faded away. Snow turned into ice after being stepped on and on again. The slippery feeling under my feet, as I was standing under the shower, grabbing the ground with my toes, also standing on the frozen snowy road, going forward step by step.

I haven't seen snow for almost three years. I wonder if winter has the same smell all over the world. In the late autumn of this October, as I was walking along the street in front of the Bochum Museum, the leaves were either falling or dancing in the sky. A breath of winter wafted by. It first declared the dryness of the coming winter, then the humidity in the air increased, due to the warm greeting from the wet earth, alongside with a touch of coldness. Every inch of the nerves in my nose was awakened and the previous joy memory about the heavy snow was recalled again. I realized that I've already forgotten about the boy, even can't remember his face. I only remember standing in the almost knee-length snow, seeing the air was shining with small water droplets that were left after the snowflakes have fallen. I remember my heart was beating fast because of the happy anticipation and fast walk, urging me to breathe the after-snow air – the humid, cold, winter air.

Rather than to achieve, I was only recalling and being lost in the *missing* of snowy days, sober up from the scenarios with melancholy. I wanted but couldn't recall the winter smell by remembering the sense, as I'm sitting in a warm indoor room, filled with the fragrance of coffee and wood. Narrative limited our imagination, and imagination would revenge for it. We have created so many words to describe what we've sensed, but still, we would never be sure if we sense the same as each other do. And memories would fade, hidden by the brain, abandoned by reality. Hence we create, with other forms of narrative. We draw to describe what the scene could be like in our sight, we take photos to capture the moment, so the time will not wash it away.

"In art, science, and ordinary life we construct, lean on, parasitize, and transform artifacts and external symbol systems. And in turn our bodies and brains are inflected and contaminated by the material supplements and cognitive prostheses which we incessantly internalize."¹⁶

But are these copies of our *missing* scenarios really reflecting our memories, or are they just physical containers of the memories, representing the vacancy of actual contents?

False beliefs are about the controversy between one's mind and reality, like when you believe something was there, but it has already gone or been moved. It happens when we tend to achieve our *missing* with placebos.

Like photos, videos, records, which I would reach for help when I try to fill the void of *missing*. Could they achieve the *missing*? Could they achieve my longing for? I would ask myself every time, while browsing these placebos again and again, since repeating the memories in my mind could not achieve anything anymore, while the *missing* subjects are still not there in reality.

An episode from Black Mirror impressed me a lot. It is an Othello-like story, a man suspected his wife of having an affair with another man. The episodes of Black Mirror always have a near-future technology background shell, just

¹⁶ Sutton, J., 2002, Porous memory and the cognitive life of things. in D Tofts, A Jonson & A Cavallero (eds), *Prefiguring cyberculture: an intellectual history*. MIT Press (Michaelian, 2016) (Tulving, Episodic and Semantic Memory, 1972) (Tulving, Episodic Memory: From Mind to Brain, 2002), pp. 130-141.

as the title itself that refers to computers, mobile phones, and all other electronic screens that we see every day, which are colorful and diverse, and at the same time are all the same when they are not enlightened — the same black void. In this episode, a chip has been plugged into every man and woman from birth, which will record everything one sees and hears in real-time, and any recorded scene can be replayed anytime. They call these recorded scenes memories. Through the remote control, people can replay their joy memories, or project them on the wall to share their interesting experiences with friends. The man, who suspected that his wife was cheating on him, found conclusive evidence by replaying and examining his own memories. He confronted her, to make her admit the affair, and forced her to play the memories of her with the other man in front of him. The woman then left the man, and the man was staring at the empty house, while the old memories of his wife being played by the chip, through his eyes. In the replayed memories, the man saw his wife making coffee, smiling and saying good morning to him, but in real life, the kitchen was messed up and there was absolutely no warmth of home. In the next scene, the man's face was covered with blood, and he was trying to take the memory chip out by himself, end of the story. I would hardly agree that the recorded videos could be called memories. On the one hand, there was only visual and audio. On the other hand, memories are never entertaining props.

Missing represents a fondness of familiarity, sometimes it is a feeling of anti-definition, embracing something blurry and cozy, but at the same time, it's also determined, only by ourselves, by the narrator self. No one would occur to the situation when he or she was telling a story about his/her childhood, and someone else suddenly stood out, pointing at the narrator, criticizing the story was "lack of evidence". *Missing* is a hunt without prey, but its purpose was never to capture.

To the Collapsing Future

Qu Yuan once expressed how he entrusted his *missing* to his imagination in the poem "Wandering faraway"¹⁷:

"...

I was wandering aimlessly through clouds and blue sky,
When I caught sight of that old home of mine.
My charioteer felt homesick and my heart grieved,
The draft beasts looked back and would not go on.

Images of fond old times filled my mind with longing,
Deep in sighs I wiped my tears away.
But breaking my hovering delay I rose higher,
Suppressing the thoughts for a time, controlling myself.
..."

The entire poem is a wandering of imagination. Qu Yuan imagined as if he was away from the dusty moral life and touring to the god's place accompanied by immortals. Qu Yuan was a minister of the kingdom Chu during the Warring States Period¹⁸ of ancient China. He was wise, loyal, and had a reputation for blunt speaking, however his life was miserable, and his fate was unsettled. First Qu Yuan was slandered by a treacherous eunuch, plus the king of Chu didn't fond of his plainspoken, he was hence twice exiled and forced to live far away from his homeland. In Qu Yuan's imagination, he and the immortals traveled to the mountains, to heaven, swimming in between the clouds and the blue sky. He rode his steed in the sky and saw his hometown down below, the place he had been *missing* and longing for. The hometown in the poem is as beautiful as before, as peaceful as in the old days. In actual history, during the second exile, Qu Yuan went

¹⁷ Qu, Y. and Sukhu, G., 2017. *The Songs Of Chu*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.178.

¹⁸ 475-221 BC, Chu was one of the strongest kingdoms. When the kingdom Qin showed its ambition to conquer and unify other kingdoms, Qu Yuan suggested the king of Chu to unite other kingdoms against Qin, but the king didn't listen to him. The appeasement policy put Chu eventually also in a dangerous position and was conquered by Qin in 223 BC.

back to his hometown but only had seen it from distance, as his hometown was burning with the flames of war. He realized that he might never have the chance to return to his former homeland again. A few months later, he committed suicide by drowning himself in the Miluo River.

Hume famously wrote in *A Treatise of Human Nature* that nowhere we are freer than in our exercise of the imagination. Through imagination, we could use our own experience to assume thousands of future scenarios, which doesn't exist, and won't likely happen.

"Your grandparents are both in good health?" Holding the cell phone against the window with her hand, Ping threw me this question as we were talking about her documentaries. We were sitting in a restaurant located in an old building in Shanghai for a simple lunch. The wind was blowing hard outside, and Ping was using her phone to record two flying plastic bags outside dancing duet. Ping makes documentaries about the present and memories of the village she was born in. The famine, The Cultural Revolution, the rough road of the history of PRC was paved with people's blood and faith. It was not easy, nor has it been entirely glorious. Three years later, I recalled that conversation again and understood Ping's feeling when she learned that my grandparents were both living and in good health. "You must talk to them more often while they are still there." Early last year, my grandfather passed away. I can feel the eager time to time ever since, that I really want to see him again, and we would again gather around with other family members, eating pancakes and snacks he made for us, talking about his past, and his fantasies about the communist party. His memories have also gone with him. I remember once I asked my grandfather, what he misses the most. "It was such a fun time, doing all kinds of stupid chemistry experiments when I was in university." He said, "Back then our relationship with the Soviet Union went bad, and the Soviet experts left, we had to count on our own." So calm he was, as telling me the story about his young age, but to me, every sentence would be a remarkable witness of history.

I used to wonder if reminiscing about the departed is the most painful *missing*, because it can neither be dispelled nor be achieved. But time is a

shot arrow, which only towards forward. As recalling the memories, I know it couldn't but still believe that what I was *missing* could happen again. In the *Seagull*, when Nina finally came back, she told Treplev that she was wandering around the yard, found that their stage was still there, and how wonderful the time was before. But after Treplev had confessed his heart, Nina suddenly changed her attitude and left. What she was *missing* was the inability to go back to the past, and the familiar daily life she used to have before she left with Trigorin.

Future will collapse if we observe it, that's why *missing* values due to its absent. As long as the *missing* parts are still in the brain memories, in the future imaginations, then they will never be stolen by the reality.

When I was little, I used to take Chinese traditional painting classes, and my father would take me there. He was even more energetic than me, I suppose that's because he likes to watch me eating breakfast. There was a dilapidated bungalow near the painting classroom, which had a touch of the style from the 60s. The red square Chinese characters depict the word "breakfast" on the wall. Or was there a white sign? Or was there actually a simple wooden board leaning against the door?

I could never forget the delicious millet porridge, the spicy and salty cabbage shreds, the golden fried steamed buns, and the small magical window, from which the food was constantly delivered from the kitchen to the customers. It was a very small restaurant, and my father and I often sit by the door. Back then father was much taller, not the man in his fifties who is now only half a head taller than me. But he still has the same smile on his face. I ate as much as my dad. He would eat a big bowl of porridge, and so would I; he would eat two fried steamed buns, and so would I. Father smiled and looked at me: "Don't be too full!" I stuffed my mouth with food and mumbled: "But it's delicious!" It was the most delicious breakfast I have ever had. After I went to middle school, there was no time to paint anymore. We moved and never went back to the breakfast place, but I used to miss it a lot. Until one day my parents and I went to see my grandmother and we were on the way home. My father was sitting in the front seat, as he suddenly pointed

to some ruins of a building by the side of the street outside the window, and turned to me and asked: "Meng, do you remember this place?" In the end it was just a dilapidated bungalow which was dismantled, neither the ancient gate buildings of Beijing, nor the thousands of books that were burnt during the Culture Revolution.

The collapsing future is continuous as every new day comes after another. Until the people die out, the *missing* could never be retrieved, the history gets lost in itself. A hundred years ago the invaders burnt the palace, robbed the treasures, tread on our culture and belief. We would never know, that nowadays, we bury our traditions by our own hands.

Being lost in imaginary memory scenes would make reality a stranger; addiction to placebos could lead us to somewhere deserted by time; the uncertainty of the future must be remained, to maintain the possibility of achieving it. As the most notorious thief, reality constantly steals our dreams and imagination. Is achieving missing predestined to fail?

The room was gradually lit up as the first ray of sunlight was sprouting on the quilt. In the dimness, I thought I was on the bed at my home in Beijing, and my cat was lying on the mat, snoring. It was just another normal morning. Outside the window was the quiet street, covered by the shadow of swinging trees. As the bus was passing by, a cold female mechanical voice announced its route and terminal loudly. Occasionally, a bird would land nearby the window, chirped twice, and then spread its wings and flew away. It is time to get up. I stretched out my hand to touch the cat's belly. She was not there. The sharp noise of a fire truck broke the hazy dream. I felt like I had been there. For a short moment, my soul has escaped through the crack between the reality and dream. But it never lingers on.

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