



TWENTY EIGHTY-FOUR— Two Takes on George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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1. The Master is Watching You

It was a hot humid morning in the fourth month, just like all the others, and the sea was lapping at the base of the clock tower, making it difficult to hear the thirteen beeps of the time signal. Winston, sweat pouring down his face in the 40C heat, poled his raft into the lobby of Xianggang Mansions and quickly pulled the glass doors shut, but not quickly enough to prevent a sluggish swirl of discarded noodle cups and plastic chopsticks from drifting in behind him. Exhausted, he stepped onto the makeshift jetty the management had knocked together out of old railway sleepers. The aircon was off again. The temperature inside was even more oppressive than outside. There, at least, the fitful breeze offered some respite from the heat. He headed for the stairs – there was no point in trying the lift. The lobby smelt of musty curry - the tell-tale sign of medicine being brewed - and joss sticks. Smoke from these rose in dragon-like coils in front of a sodden poster, its top edge already peeling away from the mould-covered wall. The poster depicted an enormous face, more than a meter wide. It was the face of an old gentleman with drooping moustaches and a thin, wispy beard. From each landing of the 120-storey building it gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures so contrived that the eyes followed you about as you moved.

The Master says: Every single day reflect on your behaviour in the three cardinal domains, ran the caption in Chinese and English.

Inside his room the sound of a large gong being struck came from the flat screen set into the far wall. Winston picked up the remote and changed channels. From the electric picture apparatus, as it was quaintly called, the swooping chants and staccato percussion of a Beijing opera filled the room. Masked figures in flowing robes and impossible headgear paraded across the screen, followed by a slender, raven-haired young woman in a round-collared, tight red bodice and body-hugging shorts slit up the thigh. “*Groups Thirty and Forty*”, she called. *Wan See-tun I can see you!* he heard her croon, fluttering her fingers at him. Quickly, Winston kicked off his rubber boots, stepped out of his damp shorts and stood there expectantly in his boxers, waiting for the best part of his day to begin. Knees slightly bent, arms loosely outstretched in front of him as if holding between them a huge invisible ball, he assumed the position. Almost expertly, he glided into the slow-motion moves that Miss Wang was demonstrating on screen, barely able to contain his growing excitement.

Dear Diary, he wrote later that day, These East Asians are okay!

2. Double Jeopardy

O’Brien smiled faintly. “You are no metaphysician, Winston. Remember the Party slogan: *Who controls the genes controls the clones; who controls the clones controls the world?*”

O’Brien held up three fingers.

“Who are you, Winston?” he asked

“Four, I’m Winston Four.”

His words ended in a gasp of pain. The needle had shot up to sixty-five.

“Who, Winston...?”

“Four, I’m Winston Four. What else can I say?”

There was another burst of pain.

“Again, Winston.”

“Three! Three! Three!”

“No, Winston, you are lying.”

“Two! Four! Three! Anything you like. Only stop the pain...I don’t know!”

“Better,” said O’Brien, patting his hand reassuringly.

“This time it will not hurt.”

There was a devastating explosion inside his head.

“Who are you?” O’Brien asked.

“Three, I’m Winston Three”, he gasped.

“Good,” said O’Brien, putting his arm around his shoulder.

A needle jerked into his skin.

When he came round O’Brien was bending over him.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Three, I’m Winston Three. You know that,” he said, thankful the torture was over.

An excruciating pain ripped through his body.

“I have never seen you before. My name is O’Brien Six. Shall we start?”

He held up five fingers.