Claiming spaces for urban art images in Beijing and Shanghai

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Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, intricate and ever-changing negotiation processes are shaping the spaces for urban art images in mainland China. The scenes and their developments vary from one city to another because of the impact of individual local and foreign creators of urban art images, government officials, agents of contemporary art including, among others, gallery owners, art critics, art professors, and many other related features, such as local and international events. Rapid urban development has both created and destroyed sites for urban art images. Despite some accepted sites to paint, for many locals, creating any kind of urban art image is a short-term pastime, usually a part of student life. Most of the early pioneers have become occupied with their daily jobs and time to continue engagement on the streets is very limited. Some creators, such as art students, may only take part once or twice in authorized events by officials promoting their own understanding of acceptable forms (see e.g. China.org.cn 2013).

Regardless of the ephemerality of the images, sites, and creators, the aim of this chapter is to introduce the main characteristics of the phenomenon through case studies focusing on the scenes in Beijing and in Shanghai, and to suggest a framework beneficial for further research. When compared with the international trends that have defined the emergence and transformation of what is usually addressed as “graffiti” or “street art,” we are able to pinpoint significant differences in terms of intentions, perceptions, reception, employment, and the art market in both Beijing and Shanghai. The focus of this chapter lies in these two cities in which I have followed the developments since 2006 through fieldwork periods, news and social media, interviews, personal communication, and observations in situ.

Examining urban art images in mainland China

Understanding the concepts of “graffiti” and “street art” varies greatly among scholars, media, officials, citizens, and the creators involved in these formats. Especially when we travel outside of the Euro-American cultural context, the meanings can be remarkably different. As art historian John Clark (1998: pp. 49–69) argues, in the context of modernity in Asian art, transferring art discourses from one cultural area to another is a highly restricted and complex receptive process. It is controlled by the needs of the receiving culture, and the adaptation also depends on varying...
modalities of transfer as well as the mediating culture. This kind of partial adaptation is visible in terms of the visual forms of self-expression in urban public space today: They may have new formats, intentions, and values based on the needs of the locals.

The habit to denote anything scribbled, written, drawn, smudged, or incised on any surface as “graffiti” usually ignores the obvious differences in style, format, materials, language, content, and intentions as well as variations in the understanding of the phenomenon, which depends on the socio-political and cultural contexts (Valjakka 2011). The risk in this approach is to disregard the richness and indigenous historical background of the visual phenomena. It is necessary to acknowledge that the Chinese language has different concepts for different formats of writing and/or painting in public, especially when it comes to indigenous formats: For instance, shìkè (石刻 “stone engraving”), dàzhǐbào (大字报 “big character poster”), or nóngmín huà (农民画 “peasant painting”) painted mainly by peasants and workers especially during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), or chāi (拆, the character written by officials onto the houses doomed to be demolished) are not regarded as túyā (涂鸦 “graffiti”) or túyā yìshù (涂鸦艺术 “graffiti art”) in Chinese. The colloquial word túyā indicates “poor handwriting,” “to scrawl” and is used also to refer to small children’s doodling. Because of the negative connotations, the news media and those involved in túyā in the twenty-first century have often opted for túyā yìshù (“graffiti art”) to create a more positive response.

Further elaborations, such as “ancient,” “traditional,” “gang,” and “subway” graffiti can serve as useful concepts to elaborate the discussion to some extent in Euro-American cultural contexts but not necessarily outside of them. The indigenous formats and the concepts used in the local language and how they are constantly changing, reveal the inherent interaction with the socio-political and cultural context in question. In other words, the concepts bear deep and complex cultural meanings and values that have an impact also on the development and reception of the contemporary formats. As an example, even today, dìshū (地书 “street calligraphy”), written with water and brush (or a sponge modified as a brush) is popular especially among elderly men. It is considered as a form of shūfǎ (书法, “calligraphy”) which has been appreciated as a form of art before and above ink painting since the early centuries of the Common Era. This form is clearly different from túyā or túyā yìshù because of the materials, intentions, and evaluation criteria. To label this appreciated form of public writing as “graffiti” would confuse more than clarify.

To make a basic, although not unproblematic distinction, I suggest that “contemporary graffiti” be used for the new, international form of graffiti that emerged in East Asia in the late 1980s and in mainland China in the mid-1990s. However, even this concept is not sufficient for a comprehensive approach on its own. Some Chinese involved with the phenomenon see graffiti and graffiti art as a form of jiētóu yìshù (街头艺术, “street art”), while others think that street art focuses on art and music performances on the street and excludes any kind of graffiti. For many, the concepts are interchangeable, but during the last couple of years, the Euro-American perception has been gaining ground that contemporary graffiti have to be based on writing, whereas murals with pictures represent street art.

In order to assist a more open-minded study which can take into account the changing understanding of the key concepts of this visual phenomenon in mainland China, I propose to use the broader concepts of “urban art images” and “creators of urban art images,” without limitations of the format, content, style, or language employed (Chinese characters, transliteration of Chinese in pīnyīn, or Latin alphabets) in the images created today. Inspired by James Elkins’ (1999: pp. 82–89) suggestion of a trichotomy of an image as writing, notation, and picture, I define urban art images as creative action that leaves a visible imprint, even a short-lived one, on public urban space. They can include numbers and writing (in any language), pictures, and three-dimensional objects and materials – or any combination of these three.
Also, urban art images can be legal or illegal, commissioned or voluntarily made, resulting from private or collective actions. Focusing only on illegal actions would limit the understanding of the scene: The notion of “illegal” is complicated because some sites and formats are semi-illegal or even legal (Valjakka 2014). In addition, especially in Beijing, dates are also a relevant factor for the levels of illegality. Near to any major events or significant dates, such as October 1st (National Day), June 4th (Tian’anmen Incident), or political meetings, the city tightens the overall level of surveillance. This was seen with urban art images, too, during the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008. As Jacob Dreyer (2012: p. 50) argues, “[i]n contemporary China, the most forceful language that the government can speak is the language of controlling urban space itself.”

Claiming the space for urban art images in contemporary society is a continuous negotiation process between officials, media, companies, advertising, citizens, and the creators of urban art images. The creators devise standards and norms for the scene itself and they can deviate somewhat from the common social norms. Internal disagreements are unavoidable and influence the accepted formats, styles, identities, collaborations, etc. The circumstances fluctuate continuously and can vary greatly between cities even in one country. Roughly speaking, in mainland China, the majority of the urban art images – especially those easily visible to the general public – are apolitical in their content, because targeting the establishment would cause severe problems. Accordingly, urban art images are not necessarily anti-institutional, but they are still primarily non-institutional by virtue of having been created without institutional or organizational support.

The detailed study of the developments and the current status of the scenes of urban art images are only possible through a many-sided contextual analysis. Such analysis takes into account the other traditional and contemporary forms of public writing and visual arts in China, the nationality/ethnicity and agency of the creators of urban art images, as well as the site-responsiveness, content, language, format, and style of urban art images. It also considers the changes in Chinese legislation concerning self-expression in public space, media, art markets, and the impact of Euro-American trends. Through this approach, the aim is to allow varying notions to exist and new formats to emerge within these two “umbrella” concepts. When writing about the individual creators, I will use the concepts preferred by the creators themselves.

**Local premises of the Beijing scene**

Contemporary graffiti was introduced in Beijing by contemporary artist Zhang Dali (张大力) in 1995. Zhang had started to create a profile of a bald-headed man already in Italy and continued to paint this figure in Beijing. In 1998, he further developed his idea of a spray-painted graffiti image; he decided to chisel holes shaped exactly like the bald-headed man onto the walls of partially demolished buildings. Together, these works constituted a series of artworks entitled *Dialogue (对话 Duìhuà)*. In an interview, Zhang explained that the profile originated from his own self-image but gradually transformed into an abstract concept of an empty man without identity. Zhang also emphasized that true graffiti requires the use of spray paint and that he can therefore be regarded as the pioneer in Beijing. It was not until the mid-1990s that spray paint could even be bought in mainland China. Zhang continued to make the spray painted profiles until 2005, when he decided to concentrate on other forms of contemporary art. In December 2006, he nonetheless felt obliged to spray paint once more in Qianmen area, which was undergoing remarkable reform because of the forthcoming Olympic Games.

Zhang said that he used three symbols to express his understanding and relationship with the city. The first of these symbols is the head, the second the AK-47, and the third reads as 18K.
Figure 27.1 Zhang Dali’s Dialogue, 798 art district, Beijing, photographed in May 2007, © Minna Valjakka
These reflect the changes and issues of Chinese society at the time: Money, violence and the residents’ growing indifference (Zhang, interview in Crayon 2012). Although a groundbreaking form of art in the 1990s in China, contemporary graffiti was only one method of many for Zhang to express his ideas. In addition, he has not considered himself a graffiti artist but instead prefers to be defined as an artist adhering to extreme realism（极端現在注意jídùān xiànzǎi zhùyì）9. Despite his abundant oeuvre and significance in promoting an understanding of contemporary graffiti as art (see Valjakka 2011; Pan 2014), Zhang’s impact on a new generation of creators has been limited.10 Zhang has not been part of any crew nor has he actively interacted with other creators.

Still, another local pioneer in contemporary graffiti Li Qiuqiu admits that Zhang has influenced him to a degree. Li Qiuqiu, who today prefers to define himself as a street artist, started in 1996 mainly by spray painting pictures. For almost a decade, there were apparently no other active creators in Beijing than Zhang and Li. Around 1999–2000, Li started to use the tag name 0528. In 2006 he co-founded the Beijing Penzi crew (BJPZ) with MORE, SOOS, and ALS. Two years later, ZAK, QER, and CORW joined the team. BJPZ, one of the first known crews in Beijing, focused on both pictures and writing and developed a style that reflected their Chinese origins. The crew and the members were active for some years, but they are now kept busy by paid work and seldom have time to create on the streets.11

It was not until 2004–2007 that contemporary graffiti gradually started to become visible in Beijing. The growing presence of contemporary art and art districts facilitated the development and the establishment of some crews along with the emergence of other specific locations popular for painting. These areas include those in the vicinity of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Wudaokou, Sanlitun, Renmin University, and China–Japan friendship hospital. Naturally, the attractiveness and accessibility of the walls have fluctuated during the years. At the moment, Jingmi Road（京密路）is the longest wall to paint safely, also during the daytime.

The Kwanyin Clan12 graffiti art studio was established in June 2006 in the 798 art district in the northeast of Beijing by TIN, YUMI, QUAN, and JEV. A year later, the crew was joined by NAT, AP, KENO, VICA, JAK, and SCAV. The most active period lasted for three years, until 2009. The crew’s primary aim was to develop a notion of Chineseness in contemporary graffiti. The perceptions became more diversified when more people joined the crew and the crew also started to explore ways of employing contemporary graffiti style in other visual arts including ceramics. Unfortunately, after the crew members graduated from university, the competitive everyday life in Beijing has forced the members to focus on their daily jobs in order to support their families.13

The Beijing scene has also benefited from people moving in from other cities. The four writers（写字人xiězìrén）of the ABS crew14 are originally from different cities around the Bohai Sea. SCAR (a.k.a. SMER), SEVEN, and ANDC come from Shijiazhuang; SCAR and SEVEN started to paint in 2004, while ANDC took up painting a year later. NOISE from Dalian started to paint in 2007, the same year when the four writers set up a crew. In 2010, the members moved to Beijing and established their first studio in the 798 art district in northeast Beijing. In 2012, the ABS crew opened a store named as “400 ML,” to sell spray paint, and graffiti/street art-related books, and other related street gear. ABS also aims to promote acceptance of contemporary graffiti through events and happenings, such as “Meeting Neighborhood”（邻里相聚línlì xiàngjù）and “Graffiti On”（涂鸦手稿交流活动túyà shǒugǎo jiāoliú huódòng). Besides legal activities, the crew continues actively to bomb in the streets.15

Mainland Chinese creators commonly praise ABS as skillful and as one of the best-known current crews in mainland China. The crew members have their own strengths of writing and/or painting characters（公仔gōngzǎi/人物rénwù）and they have learned to collaborate to make the
best of their individual talents. ABS focus on artistically skillful, large works; they favor wildstyle but also employ comic and funky styles. Their skills have also been recognized more widely. In 2011, ABS won both the Wall Lords China competition in Chengdu and the Wall Lords Asia in Taiwan.\footnote{16}

Another currently active Beijing crew is KTS,\footnote{17} set up in October 2009 by MES and BOERS, who had started doing contemporary graffiti one year earlier. Shortly afterwards, the crew was joined by WRECK, who had taken up graffiti in 2009, and later by EXAS (a.k.a. SWE). All four old-school writers were either born or grew up in the capital. Instead of creating large pieces, KTS are mainly active in bombing (崩 be¯ng) in the Haidian district but consider the whole city as their playground and battlefield.\footnote{18} A fourth crew that has been influential during the past years in the capital is TMM (“The Marginal Man”) set up by CLOCK and DIOS in
early 2011. Three other members, GAN, CAMEL and 525 soon joined. Three of the members are originally from Hubei, Hebei, and Guangdong. Despite the indigenous origins of the contemporary graffiti in Beijing, transcultural and national trends have obviously affected the scene. For instance, ZYKO, a German graffiti writer, first visited Beijing in 2006 and made it his home in 2009. ZYKO paints mainly alone and is currently working on his own style but also collaborates with locals and visiting foreigners. Another foreigner who was recently influential for a couple of years on the scene, especially through active bombing, was AIGOR. Two other foreign graffiti writers who have more recently made their mark on the scene are SBAM, who arrived in 2012 and ZATO in 2013. ZATO has also been experimenting with writing in Chinese. Style-wise, according to ZYKO, the German CANTWO (a.k.a. CAN2) and the American REVOK from MSK crew as well as AWR crew from Los Angeles have had an impact on contemporary graffiti in Beijing. Both REVOK and CANTWO have also visited China, CANTWO on repeated occasions.

The impact of foreigners is growing to an extent, because during the recent years more short-term visitors have come to Beijing and interact with locals both in authorized and unauthorized activities. Some of the visitors such as American James Powderly, co-founder of Graffiti Research Lab (GRL) and one of the developers of laser graffiti, have tested the boundaries of the acceptable. In 2008, Powderly was working together with students for a Free Tibet in conjunction with the Olympic Games protests. One evening, in the outskirts of Beijing, the group was making laser stencils when they were detained for ten days and deported for disturbing the public order (see, e.g. Jacobs & Moynihan 2008). The message and the connection to pro-Tibet activities was too much for the officials although the medium itself, laser tagging, does not harm the buildings.

**Internationality of the Shanghai scene**

Shanghai’s history as a semi-colonial city with international settlements makes it somewhat more international and accessible for foreigners even today. While urban art images came to Shanghai only around 2005–2007 – later than they did to Beijing – the Shanghai scene has been more international from the very beginning. The oldest of the known Shanghai crews is the Paint Every Night (PEN) crew, founded in 2005 by SAIL and Mr. Lan, both from Changsha, Hunan province. SAIL and Mr. Lan are still occasionally putting up their works, which represent their own unique styles, on the streets of Shanghai.

OOPS Crew, the best-known crew in Shanghai, represents the transcultural and transnational trends. Although it was set up in 2007 by Shanghai-based Tin.G, REIGN and READ (a.k.a. HURRI), OOPS Crew evolved to include SNOW from Shanghai, KITE from Guangxi, AEKONE from Yangzhou, and two Europeans, STORM and DIASE. The crew cultivates varying perceptions and self-identities in their work, but they are as a whole known for their elaborate pieces combining alphabets, Chinese writing and characters. Currently, many of the local members are occupied by their everyday work and seldom have time to paint. Street artist Tin.G started around 2006 and is the only female in this international crew. She is one of the rare long-term female creators in mainland China – and one of the most acknowledged. Another female representative based in Shanghai, but originating from Guangzhou, is illustrator Popil, who around 2007 began to paint mainly with brush. Her current work focuses on legal commissions.

The transcultural and transnational impacts are not limited to OOPS Crew. Numerous foreign creators have either visited Shanghai or lived there for a while shaping the scene. Short-term residents usually remain members of their original crews in their home cities and paint mainly...
as individuals when in Shanghai. Dezio from France, who has lived in Shanghai since 2006, has had a recognizable impact on the development of contemporary graffiti in the city. His works have exhibited playful yet skillful engagement with contemporary graffiti for around two decades. Dezio is known not only for his accomplished alphabets but also for his elaborated writing in Chinese, which he uses even for his own name (度西奥).23

In addition to the international creators, the Shanghai scene benefits from Moganshan Road (莫干山路), the long street leading to the M50 art and creative district. Despite occasional rumors that the wall along the road would be demolished (Shanghai Daily 2011) and the fact that a short stretch of it was actually torn down in December 2013 (Yao 2013), the wall has remained

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Figure 27.4 Tin.G’s part of the collaboration with other members of Graffiti Girls crew in Meeting of Styles in Shenzhen in April 2014, © Minna Valjakka

Figure 27.5 Dezio’s part of the collaboration with KEFLOUIS, at Moganshanlu, Shanghai, 2013, photo courtesy of Tom Dartnell
a safe site to paint since 2007. In other areas in Shanghai, surveillance is tight and over painting is quick. Some smaller walls and demolition areas have been popular too, but these tend to be gone quickly.

Old-school writer FLUKE was active in Britain in the early 1990s, but stopped painting around 1995. When he moved to Shanghai in 2010, he gradually started to write again. He is still a representative of “Brighton style” from the 1980s. FLUKE doubts whether there is currently a contemporary graffiti scene in Shanghai at all. Only less than ten foreigners remain active, such as Dezo, DIASE and FLUKE; many of the long-term locals are too busy with their everyday lives to keep on painting. Not many newcomers are emerging, either, because contemporary graffiti might not be that trendy anymore.

Indeed, the popularity of creating urban art images has been decreasing. Based on my personal observations and comments deriving from the creators in Shanghai, it appears that fewer people are painting in public space. Although numerous small events, happenings, and exhibitions have been organized in Shanghai, at least since 2007, they have not had a lasting impact. The public in general and the audiences of contemporary art have remained uninterested in the trends of street art and contemporary graffiti. Most recently, the French Magda Danysz gallery – known for discovering some of the most famous international street artists and promoting their works in Paris for years – opened a new gallery space in their own premises in Shanghai in 2012. The gallery has hosted exhibitions for such international celebrities as Portuguese street artist Vhils, French Miss Van, one of the first ladies painting on the streets in the 1990s, and French JR, world famous for his black-and-white photographic portraits. From these, Vhils has left the most enduring mark to the city: Two large works are permanently visible on the outer walls of the gallery. While the exhibitions have drawn crowds, the local audience has not yet been keen to purchase the works of international street artists. The gallery has not yet exhibited any local or Chinese creators of urban art images. The promotion of Chinese and Asian creative people, including street artists, is nevertheless the primary interest of NeochaEDGE, a Shanghainese creative agency and their bilingual online magazine.
Challenges and characteristics

Opinions are split as to whether the scene is better in Shanghai or in Beijing. The development has been fluctuating in both cities, depending on, among others, the occasional tightening of surveillance, the changing circumstances in contemporary art scene, and changing numbers of active creators. However, more foreign creators are passing by or making the cities their home, at least for a while. The scenes have become increasingly international especially in recent years.
Transculturality and transnationality have been enhanced by crew members of different nationalities, living in these two cities or even across borders. The scenes remain small in both cities, but at the time of writing, Beijing has more bombing and tagging going up in the streets than Shanghai. Also, the locals are becoming more prominent in Beijing than in Shanghai.

Common perceptions of Beijing and Shanghai and of their contemporary art scenes are occasionally reflected in the comments of the creators of urban art images, too. Both Beijing and its contemporary graffiti are sometimes referred to as being closer to Chinese culture or as expressing “Chineseness,” while Shanghai is seen as more commercial. Such statements are mere simplifications of the complex realities that relate to the individual creators’ aims and intentions in shaping the scenes.

As AZEROX, a British old-school graffiti writer who has lived in Zhenjiang near Shanghai since 2004 has claimed, contemporary graffiti in China serves a different function than it did in Europe originally. Contemporary graffiti in mainland China is a form of escapism, afforded mainly by children from the middle classes or wealthier families. For many Chinese, it is a short-lived hobby; the creators may turn to something else within a year or two. Similar thoughts have also been raised by ZATO in Beijing. There is little deep passion to do contemporary graffiti in mainland China today. Because few have the zeal to spend years mastering the skill of spray paint and because the level of competition is not high, the scene can even appear boring.

Depending on the political and monetary value of the site where urban art images are made and on their content, creating unauthorized urban art images is basically seen as mischief; the punishments are seldom very strict. In addition, there are walls where one can paint safely. Despite this leniency, urban art images have not really spread among the youth in Shanghai and Beijing. What is strictly unacceptable is hitting the trains. Estimates on how many times locals or foreigners have aimed to mark the subways or trains in Beijing or in Shanghai vary, but it is not a very popular activity. A handful of foreign creators have also tried but have occasionally been caught and deported.

We need to bear in mind that the formation of a scene for urban art images not only depends on legislation, although the authorities’ agency is no doubt a crucial factor. For instance, it is sometimes assumed in relation to European cities, that strict surveillance and zero tolerance will eliminate creative activities. Although strong policy will restrict the phenomena to certain extent, it seldom erases it completely. Another formidable factor is the tolerance and potential support to urban art images shown by the ordinary citizens: Whether they report the actions to the police or allow or even invite creators to paint their walls. While these two agencies obviously exert an influence, the core issue is the need of the creators. If they have no urge to create urban art images, the scene will not develop. At the same time, if the creators really wish to leave their marks on the public space, they will find a way to do so. Even if the surveillance is high, the options are many, from small stickers to semi-illegal and legal sites.

In addition to differences of class, brought up by AZEROX, the creators in mainland China differ from those in the early stages in Europe in terms of their level of education. Many of the creators have a background in arts or other related creative industries. This explains partially why hopes to develop creating urban art images into a profession have been so strongly visible in mainland China right from the start. For many creators, contemporary graffiti is indeed a form of art. Foreign creators in particular have voiced their disapproval of this artistic development and at times blame their Chinese peers for misunderstanding and/or misrepresenting the conventions of contemporary graffiti. However, we should not forget that even the early forms of graffiti were exhibited as an art form already in the 1970s and that it has been argued to represent the most important art movement of the late twentieth century (Austin 2001: pp. 6, 271). Similar increasing interest in legal commissions, forms that are usually considered
as street art, and professional careers as artists has also been seen in Euro-American cities during
the past couple of decades

Criticism of issues of style is expressed both by locals and foreigners. Chinese creators are
technically very skillful, but not many of them are necessarily developing their own ideas in
contemporary graffiti. Often they follow the trends inspired by foreigners, and some foreign
styles easily become a fashion in China. For instance, around ten years ago 3D style caught on
because American REVOK (Rime) from the MSK crew was one of the first contemporary
graffiti celebrities idolized in China. Even today the majority of the styles echo the traditions
of Euro-American scenes. Because of the numerous interactions and visiting German creators,
the German styles have also had a fairly heavy impact on the Chinese scene, visible even today.

But should Chinese creators manifestly express their Chineseness? For a period, it was
quite popular to employ either Chinese language or other visual references that were easily
recognizable as Chinese, such as dragons, lanterns, and pandas. The notion shared by many
Chinese creators is to keep developing and to venture beyond the easy option of adding Chinese
visual references to their works. Some local creators aim to convey a sense of Chineseness by
other means, such as composition. According to SCAR and ANDC from ABS crew, for instance,
the aim is to express the quintessence of Chinese culture (中国文化的精髓 Zhōngguó wénhuà de
jǐngsuǐ).29 The perceptions among the foreign creators swing from anticipation of seeing
something original to emerge in China to arguments that using Chinese is an easy way of standing
out. It is also argued that contemporary graffiti is a “Western game” and in order to be part of
it, Chinese creators have to stick with the “Western conventions” including writing with Latin
alphabets. If Chinese creators opt for Chinese, their target audience and competition will remain
Chinese, while if they write in the Latin alphabet they are part of global competition. The past
cannot be erased, and some also doubt if it is possible to create something completely new in
the first place—especially as graffiti writers are expected to know the grammar of writing and
how it has evolved. The aim for developing a personal style is nevertheless a mainstay of the
global contemporary graffiti scene.

Conclusion

During the past ten years when I have been exploring the scenes of urban art images in mainland
China, it has become evident that the circumstances, perceptions, and manifestations of urban
art images change constantly both in Beijing and in Shanghai. Single events, art galleries, legislative
changes, and the existence of semi-illegal walls may have a significant impact on how the scenes
turn out. Every city in mainland China also has characteristics of their own, causing the scenes
of urban art images to vary and fluctuate in different ways.

In general, as this brief introduction to the scenes of urban art images in Beijing and Shanghai
scenes indicates, apolitical contemporary graffiti is tolerated to some extent. It is not regarded
as a severe crime as long as the content is not assaulting or does not become too prominent. It
is censored, and the formats and sites of visual expression are limited. The formats usually
employed in international street art, such as wheat-pastes, stencils, and stickers, are rare in
comparison to Hong Kong. One of the reasons given is that, for instance, wheat-pastes get
cleaned up very quickly, as the authorities are concerned with any possible political implications
of the messages.

As we know, similar to public space, information online or provided by news media in
mainland China is under a certain degree of scrutiny, which also applies to urban art images.
Some anti-governmental examples are occasionally discussed in the social media, but the clear
majority of controversial actions are not. In order to truly research urban art images in mainland
China, one needs to adopt an approach that includes observations in situ and communication with the creators. If the researcher does not take to the streets, how can s/he examine the physical interaction of the urban art images within the city, that very interaction that is highly dependent on the interrelations, visibility, and accessibility of the sites?

Notes

1 Here, “creator” denotes anyone who is creating urban art images in urban public space. This will be explained in detail in the next section.

2 For an introduction the “ancient graffiti” of the Greek and Roman worlds, see Baird & Taylor, 2011. The main differentiation of “traditional” and “subway graffiti” was suggested by Stewart (1989), but he also employs further categories, such as “gang,” “agnomina,” “political,” etc.

3 Cf. Valjakka 2011. As is elaborated in detail in the next chapter, contemporary graffiti emerged in Hong Kong already in the 1980s. However, as I have pointed out earlier (Valjakka 2011), it is important to remember that Hong Kong was governed by the British until 1997, so strictly speaking, contemporary graffiti in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) starts with Zhang Dali.

4 For a more detailed discussion of the theoretical approach, see Valjakka 2015b, 2014; cf. Valjakka 2011.

5 In order to emphasize the actual interaction between the site, the work(s) and the creator(s), and the continuous impact of this interaction on the meaning of works, through visual dialogue (where one work is created as a response to an already existing one), I prefer using the concept “site-responsive” instead of site-specific. Valjakka, 2015b. Cf. Kwon, 2004/2002 and Bengtsen, 2013; Bengtsen, 2014, 134–135.

6 Zhang Dali, interview, June 20, 2008, Beijing. For images and more information, see Zhang (1999). Zhang Dali’s works were first discussed in English in Wu, 2000; Marinelli, 2004 and Marinelli, 2009 but without contextualizing them with the emerging scene of urban art images in China. More recent approaches which examine Zhang in relation to “graffiti” in China are provided in Pan, 2014: pp. 139–145 and Bruce, 2010: pp. 105–115. Both articles, unfortunately, do not define or question what the authors mean with “graffiti.” They also rely on information available online or in the media without consulting the creators directly. Illuminating as it may be, this kind of approach remains one-sided.


9 Zhang Dali, email correspondence, July 27, 2014. The idea of “realism” in Chinese art departs from common Euro-American usage and has changed notably in relation to ideologies and trends during the twentieth century. The detailed complexity of “realism” cannot be explained here but in contemporary Chinese art, “realism” is not a specific mode of representation. It is not limited to format or method. It implies the aim of adhering to and reflecting the realities of life through art as the artists experience them.

10 ZYKO, graffiti writer from Europe, interview, Beijing, April 15, 2014.

11 The literal translation of the name Beijing Penzi (北京喷子) is “sprayer(s) of Beijing.” Earlier, “pênzi” was used as an equivalent for “writer,” but currently “xiézirén” is more common. Li Qiuqiu, interview, Beijing, April 17, 2014.

12 The name derives from the East Asian goddess of mercy, also known as bodhisattva of compassion. The current transliteration in pinyin is Guanyin (观音).

13 NAT and TIN, interview, Beijing, April 17, 2014.

14 The first meaning of ABS is “active, brilliant, and significant.” It also refers to the anti-lock braking system, implying the quest to keep things on track and to follow the original idea of graffiti.


16 Ibid. Wall Lords, is the largest graffiti battle in Asia, established by Hongkongnese XEME and SINIC. During 2008–2012 they organized annual contemporary graffiti competitions on national and international levels around Asia, including the Philippines, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Taiwan.

17 Originally the name stood for Kill the Streets, but was later changed to mean, Keep the Smile.

18 WRECK, old school graffiti writer, email correspondence, July 29, 2014.
“‘Brighton style’ is a loose term for a lettering style (typically semi-wildstyle with a lot of sharp edges) that was popular in the UK in the 1990s. A writer called She One (who has gone on to have quite a successful art/graffiti career) started developing it while living in the south coast town of Brighton and members of his crew DFM (Da Freeze Mob) such as Fire, Nema and Skore 204 later adopted it and developed it further. By the mid-1990s it was being copied by writers from other cities in the UK, but most would acknowledge the style as Brighton style” (FLUKE, email correspondence, September 18, 2014).

FLUKE, interview, April 12, 2014. Foreigners visiting Shanghai for a short term are too numerous to be mentioned here. For more information, see Dezio’s interview in Sanada & Hassan, 2010, pp. 14–17.

For more information, see the agency’s website http://edge.neocha.com/agency/ (accessed June 5, 2014)

AZEROX, interview, Shenzhen, April 12, 2014. FLUKE, too, expressed similar ideas. FLUKE, interview, April 12, 2014.

ZATO, interview, Beijing, April 17, 2014.

SCAR, ANDC, and Wendy, interview, Beijing, April 15, 2014.

References


