Contesting transcultural trends
Emerging self-identities and urban art images in Hong Kong

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Introduction

Hong Kong¹ is transnational and transcultural by nature. The trends in visual and popular culture are constantly shaped by people and vogues flowing through the city. A key issue visible in all spheres of life is the balancing between two aims: How to be part of the international scene while also developing Hongkongnese self-identities (as citizens of Hong Kong) mirrored against the mainland Chinese as the “other.” Differentiation from mainland China co-exists with interdependence and co-operation in many fields of culture, too. While the impact of foreign trends and creators of urban art images² has been significant in Hong Kong, one should not lose sight of original production, either. A case in point is the “King of Kowloon” (Tsang Tsou-choi, 1921–2007), a prolific writer of calligraphic texts on any surface in urban public space since the 1960s. As will be discussed, King and his oeuvre is an illuminating case of transforming perceptions and the inconvenience of Western definitions. He also illustrates how the development of urban art images differs from that in mainland China: His production spans decades of Hong Kong history, from British governance until 1997 to the city’s particular status as a Special Administrative Region of the Peoples Republic of China. The socio-political and cultural context of Hong Kong has clearly had an impact on the emergence and development of the urban art images, including the variety in content and format as well as the varying levels of transculturality, concepts, acceptance, and employment for different purposes by institutions, city authorities, and even the police. Nonetheless, the vicinity of mainland China, and of the city of Shenzhen as Hong Kong’s next-door neighbor, allows forms of collaboration with mainland Chinese creators in exhibitions and various events in particular, including the Meeting of Styles (MOS).

Adaptation of urban art images

A consensus regarding the definitions for “graffiti” and “street art” does not exist and is not foreseeable for the near future. Especially when these concepts are used in different and historically dependent socio-political and cultural contexts, their meanings are contested and
altered. New styles and meanings are clearly visible in Hong Kong, where the different perceptions on the formats, contents, and materials of “graffiti” and “street art” have generated five broad groups in terms of self-identities: first, “graffiti writers,” who are closest to the old-school definitions; second, “graffiti artists,” who primarily but not solely use spray paint and writing but wish to emphasize the artistic process, placing more value on the pictures; third, “street artists,” who mainly use formats other than spray paints; fourth, those who are fine with any of these three identities; and last, those who do not consider themselves part of the first three groups but would prefer to use other concepts, such as “spray painter,” “mural artist,” “mural painter,” “artist,” “street art maker,” or just a “player” – or no definition at all. This last group is clearly the largest, and growing.3

Quite a few creators also change their primary format or use a variety of formats and/or mixed techniques throughout their oeuvre. Unsurprisingly, they find it even more challenging to identify with the two major concepts of “graffiti” or “street art.” For instance, a Canadian Chinese PROSE a.k.a. Grayshades, who moved into Hong Kong in 2012, writes PROSE in his graffiti pieces but signs his black-and-white photograph stickers with Grayshades. For him, to be undefined feels the most suitable identity choice.4

I find it far more beneficial to examine the complex contemporary scene in Hong Kong through the broader concepts of “urban art images” and “creators of urban art images,” rather than simply “graffiti” or “street art.” “Urban art images” and “creators of urban art images” allow us to explore more open-mindedly what is happening today – without limitations of the format, content, style, or language employed in the works.5 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.

Furthermore, urban art images can be un/authorized, resulting from private or collective actions. Focusing only on illegal examples would limit the understanding of the scene, as the notion of “illegal” is considerably complicated because some sites and formats are semi-il/legal or even legal (Valjakka, 2014). The majority of the creators in Hong Kong, including graffiti writers, are willing to accept legal commissions, as far as the emphasis in their oeuvre remains in unauthorized works. However, while urban art images are not necessarily anti-institutional, they are still primarily non-institutional: they are created without institutional or organizational backing, (i.e. without financial or material support). Through this approach, the aim is to allow varying notions to exist and new formats to emerge within these two “umbrella” concepts. When writing on the individual creators, I will use the concepts preferred by the creators themselves.

### The King and his bequest

Tsang Tsou-choi (1921–2007), “the King of Kowloon,” can be regarded as the pioneer in the history of urban art images in Hong Kong. Because of his materials, brush, and a mixture of black ink and paint, Tsang was rather a calligrapher than a graffiti writer. Even more importantly, he started before the new form of graffiti emerged in New York (Clarke, 2001: p. 177). Still, no definition really captures Tsang and his works (Vigneron, 2014: p. 315).

The main motivation behind Tsang’s work was to declare that the land which had originally belonged to his family in Kowloon had been wrongly taken by the British government, but the ideological context of Tsang and his works has shifted remarkably since the handover in 1997. In the context of decolonization, visible first in visual arts, Tsang was transformed “into a signifier of a local” (Clarke, 2001: p. 183). Tsang and his works became an important part of
the local identity building. In the wake of his deteriorating health and move into elderly care, Tsang started to write on paper and objects instead of public surfaces (see Lau, 1997; Chung, 2010). Gradually, his works were treated as contemporary art as well as re-employed for souvenirs. According to art critic Oscar Ho (2014), King and his work was betrayed in the end, and because his works were detached from the urban public space, his work gradually lost its meaning.

The protection of Tsang’s last surviving works in public space as cultural heritage, gained media attention in 2013. One of the remaining examples was collected by the new museum for visual culture, M+ (e.g. Chow, 2012, 2013), while another is protected by plexiglass at the Tsim Sha Tsui Ferry Piers. Tsang also continues to command respect in the streets. Shortly after Tsang’s death in 2007, European graffiti writers, MAIS and ORSEK, with a local graffiti writer JAMS created a commemorative piece close to Fotan metro station, including two facial portraits of Tsang. The respect among the creators today derives from Tsang’s substantial oeuvre and ability to connect with the city. Site-responsiveness was already important for Tsang, who modified the content of his writings according to the site (Valjakka, 2015a, pp. 99–105; see also Valjakka, 2015b).

There are clear differences in style, materials, format, content, and intention in the commemorative piece mentioned above and Tsang’s own writings although they all emerged in public space in Hong Kong and are blandly labeled as “graffiti.” Here, too, any deeper understanding of the richness of this visual phenomenon and its varying formats is rather obscured than clarified if the concept of “graffiti” is used to denote anything and everything scribbled, written, drawn, smudged, or incised on any surface – as it often is. The unfocused usage of “graffiti” ignores the obvious differences which primarily depend on the socio-political and cultural contexts, contents, and intentions (Valjakka, 2011). Further elaborations, such as “ancient,” “traditional,” “gang,” and “subway” graffiti may serve as useful concepts to start a discussion. However, Tsang represents indigenous, “traditional” forms of writing in public space, developed before and independently from the new, international form of “graffiti” which has its roots in putting up one’s name with spray paints and marker pens as developed in the United States since the end of the 1960s. To make a basic, although not unproblematic distinction, I suggest that “contemporary graffiti” be used for the new, international form of graffiti which emerged in East Asia in the late 1980s. Nonetheless, contemporary graffiti remains only as one contested subcategory of urban art images in Hong Kong today. In the following, based primarily on intentions, materials, and stylistic motivations, I will explore the varying new forms of visual self-expression which started to emerge in Hong Kong in the 1980s.

Emerging scene

It is impossible to discuss all the local and foreign creators in this short introduction, let alone how they have contributed to the scene of urban art images. For instance, many creators have been active only briefly and established and/or joined in many crews successively and/or simultaneously. But what is characteristic for the Hong Kong scene is transculturality and transnationality, which occasionally even hinders clear definitions of the “local”: crews have members from different nationalities and across borders, people have ethnically mixed backgrounds, and/or they were born elsewhere but have lived most of their lives in Hong Kong.

The first known examples of contemporary graffiti appeared in the early 1980s. In 1982, American based ZEPHYR, Dondi, and Futura from The Death Squad (TDS) crew were commissioned by Jeffrey Deitch, an art curator and dealer to paint in the I Club. Despite the difficulties of acquiring spray paints, they managed to paint the enormous space (Witten & White, 2001: pp. 160–161). At around the same time, a local television broadcast a video by The Clash,
a British punk rock band, featuring Futura and his works. In 1983, THREE, a British citizen living in Hong Kong, started to write his SOS tag (the O crossed by diagonal lines) already before visiting the I Club, but he became even more inspired to continue to explore further when he saw the pieces of TDS. In the following years, a few other foreign teenagers made some tags too, but they remained scarce. Some local contemporary graffiti apparently emerged in the late 1980s, but no visual evidence nor detailed information has so far surfaced.

The contemporary graffiti gradually started to take root in the mid-1990s. International creators kept passing through Hong Kong or were invited to specific events by shops targeting younger customers, such as the now defunct BFD skateboard shop. For instance, the first subway train was bombed by German LOOMIT and CHINTZ in Kowloon Bay Yard in January 1996 on their stop-over to Australia. The information was first published only in a German magazine, and most of the locals have been rather unaware of their input until recently.

The first local creators and crews known today also appeared in the mid-1990s. SYAN made his first graffiti pieces in France in 1990. His first piece in Hong Kong, however, dates from 1994. With 3DOM, REALM and SPOON, SYAN established Chinese Evolution Aerosol (CEA) crew in 1997. They remained active all around the city for a few years. SYAN still makes the occasional work both legally and illegally. He created his latest unauthorized work in Hong Kong in 2010.

In 1998, a skateboarding team of several members started to bomb under the name of freeS. In 1999, three members from this team, KDG, GRIV, and GHOST 2 (KOSTWO) formed a crew, Fuck Da Cops (FDC) and were active around the city. Around 2000, two European

Figure 28.1 The first “ChinamanWall” by SYAN in collaboration with MIST and TILT, in Mongkok, Hong Kong, June 2005. Photo courtesy of SYAN.
graffiti writers, DOFI and CIE, were briefly part of the crew too. In 2002, KDG, GRIV, and GHOST 2 set up a shop, Dirty Panda, selling spray paints and other related materials. Recently, KDG has been taking care of the enterprise, promoting contemporary graffiti also through collaborations with local schools, institutions and youth centers. In around 2008, FDC was further joined by SICO and in 2010 by MCHKG.13

The early local creators also include KS (a.k.a. Kahs), who started around 1998/1999. For a short while he also had a crew, K7C. Today KS is more concentrated on arts. 14 One of the first females, ROSA, became involved around the same time, in 1999. She spent seven years abroad before returning to Hong Kong in 2010. She has since been exploring on wheat-pastes and stickers as CathLove and continuing contemporary graffiti under both names.15

The beginning of the twenty-first century

The turn of the century saw significant developments among new local and foreign crews and creators. The abundance of foreign creators makes it impossible to identify them all, and it is even more challenging to verify who has had an impact on the scene and how. Depending, for instance, on the duration of the stay, the media publicity, and the level and format of pursuits, the impacts of foreign creators vary greatly in terms of style, inspiration, collaboration, and pushing the scene forward. Some foreign visitors might not collaborate with the local scene so their effect remains limited and unmentioned. As an example, apparently a foreign graffiti writer, MORE, had made throw-ups in Hong Kong Island before 1997,16 but whether he influenced anyone remains unclear.

In contrast, the impact of German graffiti writers, NECK and SEAK from CNSkillz crew is acknowledged although they visited only briefly in 2000. They were invited by the Warehouse Teenage Club, a non-profit youth center, which had started to promote new forms of youth culture and contemporary graffiti, to paint the wall of the center’s basketball court in collaboration with SYAN . . .17 In addition, the local creators usually name Eric Haze, PATROL, DILK, and Space Invader when asked which foreign short-term visitors have influenced them in the early phases.
It could be argued that anyone who has created urban art images in Hong Kong has been influential to an extent – at least by making the scene highly transcultural and transnational. Usually, however, those who decide to live in Hong Kong for some time have clearly more impact than the short-term visitors. The more influential creators include FlipOne, FLOW1, DANSK, and Selph. The level of the impact may not directly correlate with the length of the stay and/or it can also vary during the stay. This was the case, for example, with graffiti writer DOFI, who lived in Hong Kong in 2000–2013. During the first years he was very influential in the scene, but subsequent disagreements made him stop collaborating with other creators and focus on working with his own crew, The Wild Ones (T.W.O), established in 1995.18

Local crews and creators started to emerge in growing numbers, partly inspired by international names. For instance, four local females established the Bombing Never Stop (BNS) crew in 2000. After about a year, SWAMP, SMIRK, and REDY still continued, the latter two most actively. Before moving to Germany in 2011, REDY repeatedly painted with other crews and friends. So far she is the most long-term female graffiti writer in Hong Kong.

In 2001, graffiti writer XEME became active and has continued ever since. Two years later, he and his peers, BASE and SHRUB, established the Kong Brotherhood (KB) crew, which is one of the most distinguished crews in Hong Kong because of its history, size, and presence. KB has had around fifteen members and at the time of writing involves XEME, FACTS, BASE, SINIC, and YUMOH, and – from mainland China – TOUCH, MOON, and GAS.19 KB is the most active bombing and tagging crew in Hong Kong today. Of the crew members, XEME and YUMOH, a graffiti writer who started in 2008, are visible around the city through tags, throw ups, rollers, and stickers.

MICK (a.k.a. MIC) similarly started in 2001. During 2003–2007, he was an active all-city writer, and his name is still visible on the streets. In 2011, he also experimented with street art, putting up wheat-pastes based on Chinese New Year decorations. Currently, he is more focused on art on canvas, running a gallery, and preferring to define himself as a street art maker.20

Local graffiti artist Uncle also started on the streets in 2001. With PERS, he had a Start team for a couple of years. In 2009, he launched AfterWorkShop, which he currently maintains with his wife Rainbo from mainland China. He has recently focused more on commissioned works, such as murals.21

The first years of the twenty-first century left a visible mark on what is usually considered street art. THREE, who had been practicing art after graduating from university, returned to Hong Kong from Britain. In 1996, he decided to start creating in public space, drawing dozens of spirals in wet cement laid on the streets. At the time, however, there was no street art in Hong Kong, so whether THREE’s spirals could be considered as street art remains questionable.
In 2002, THREE extended his oeuvre on the streets to small cement sculptures, stencils, and number threes made in metal, becoming part of the emerging street art scene. 22

One of the local pioneers of street art, Start From Zero (SFZ), was established by Dom in 2000 and Katol soon joined in. SFZ has since become known for the variety of its works, including wheat-pastes, stickers, and stencils – some with a witty socio-political edge. 23 Another influential local artist is Big Mad (also known as BM 13177 and Otoss), who actively explored various formats during 2002–2012. One of Big Mad’s trademark was a face drawn with one fluent line.

Around the same time, in 2002, MRM, British by birth but living in Hong Kong since 2000, started to write as FUSION. With local school friends RETRON, SHA, and MELLOW, he set up the Time 4 Change (T4C) crew the following year. Their involvement in street art was mainly inspired by SFZ and Big Mad. In 2005, however, MRM started to write MRMENA, the crew’s name was changed to Freelance Urban Deco (FUD), and they got more involved with contemporary graffiti. MRMENA mainly maintained the crew alone during 2006–2008. In recent years he has expanded to commissioned mural paintings and art works. 24

The past decade

The scene has fluctuated between revivals and regressions. Since 2005, it has grown especially vigorous thanks to new creators, events, institutional support, and competition among the crews and creators. For instance, in 2005 a local creator who prefers to be identified as a spray painter, 25 4Get About It, who had returned from London the previous year, started to experiment with spray paints and hand-drawn stickers. 26

Figure 28.4 Piece by XEME in Yau Tong in spring 2014. Photographed in March 2014. Photo courtesy of HKstreetart.com
Figure 28.5 One of the faces by BM still visible in Tai Hang, Hong Kong. Photographed in March 2015. © Minna Valjakka
Similarly, in 2005, a local crew SABCAT was established by JAMS, AMSON, DEVIL, and ZIM. SABCAT remained active until 2012, and was known especially for piecing. In 2011, Stay Home Son (SHS) got set up by DREAMS, HAMP, JAMS, and TAYE from Shanghai. A year later, Parent’s Parents – which also seeks to build a brand – was established by JIMJIMJIMSON (a.k.a. AMSON), WONG TIN YAU (a.k.a. JAMS), CHRIS, and YSOO, one of the new women on the scene.27 Both SHS and Parent’s Parents are active today albeit in different ways.

Also in 2005, a French graffiti writer MAIS made Hong Kong his home and started to collaborate with both local and foreign writers. Soon, along with European SHOES, he joined a crew, Fuck Hong Kong (FHK), established by American CEME and European ORSEK in 2006–2007. Later, the European ASMO came along. The previously mentioned two locals, JAMS and AMSON, were also part of the crew for a short while.28 Unsurprisingly, the name of the crew and some actions of the members have caused disagreement and misunderstandings. The opinion and intentions among the members vary even today, but according to MAIS, the name of the crew was to suggest displeasure with the normative society restricting, for instance, the usage of public space,29 and the relative lack of culture in Hong Kong compared to other large international cities. FDC echoed the rebellious notions of MAIS’ earlier crew in France, On détruit Montpellier (ODM, in Eng. “we destroy Montpellier”). It was not intended to have racist implications towards the locals although this is how it was interpreted.30 Today, only MAIS and CEME of the crew’s foreign members have stayed in Hong Kong, remaining active in their own, different ways.

Also the street art circles got new participants. In January 2005, Jay FC established ST/ART, a collective of around ten local and foreign creators: *COM, C#, Graphic Airlines (GAL), Ping, KS1, Big Mad, Start From Zero (SFZ), and ESP including Dkoda, Selph, PHlfy, and Irie. ST/ART aimed to increase artistic value, strengthen skills and confidence of the artists and make art accepted in public space. By working together, they managed to launch the careers of some artists most active today, such as the above mentioned SFZ and Graphic Airlines (GAL),31 formed by Tat and Vi in 2002. In 2006, GAL started to create stickers and wheat-pastes on the streets. Since then, they have become acknowledged for their original style, which emphasizes the “aesthetics of the ugly.”32

Among the local graffiti writers and artists bubbling under, such names as DOVE (a.k.a. Dovetail), and ROES represent the most recent generation. Also many new foreign creators keep moving in, including Masa in 2008, and Mark Goss and Cara To (a.k.a. Caratoes) in 2013, who use different formats and add their own flavor to the multilayered scene. More recent visitors or short-term residents include, to mention a few, DRUIDE, UTAH and ETHER, BUCKET, JR, Kidult, Dfáce, Anthony Lister, PEAR, NASTY, EDGE, and Kaid Ashton.33 Their actions vary from targeting the trains and streets in various formats to gallery exhibitions and participation in Art Basel, the world-known international art show.

The development of the scene is also reflected in new formats. Lenticulars34 were introduced in spring 2013 by the American designer OBSRVR, who has lived in Hong Kong since 2010.35 Another new format is urban knitting. Local Esther Poon got inspired by a workshop organized with Magda Sayeg in conjunction with her exhibition at a Hong Kong shopping mall in July 2012. Gradually, Esther continued, first through legal works but in February 2014, she started to put up unauthorized pieces, too.36 In 2013, the street art scene was further strengthened, when two local females formed a street art crew, the Martians, to put up stickers and wheat-pastes.37 Despite these recent developments, the scene has remained relatively small. Estimates of active creators vary, but based on my own assessment of all formats of urban art images in 2013–2014, there were about thirty creators active in some ways, and more than fifty had moved away or
Figure 28.6 Urban knitting by Esther Poon, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong, September 2014. Photographed in October 2014. © Minna Valjakka
withdrawn. Without a doubt, some creators are still unknown to me. The ratio of locals to foreigners also keeps changing. Roughly estimated, in the early years of the twenty-first century, about half of the creators were locals, half non-locals. In 2012–2013, the relation slightly shifted in favor of the locals but it might be reversing at the moment.

Organizational and institutional collaborations

In order to support their activities, creators have found ways to form collaborations. One internationally common form of developing the scenes is to establish related publications. Since the end of the 1990s, the local media has repeatedly published on urban art images in Hong Kong, characterizing the work in both positive and negative terms (see, e.g. Pearl Channel, 2007). Despite continuous media interest and the growing use of social media and related websites, publications on any kind of urban art images remain surprisingly rare.38 *Invasian*, a magazine of contemporary graffiti in Asia and urban culture, was launched in May 2008.39

One of the endeavors to enhance the development of and collaboration among the Asian graffiti community was Wall Lords, established by Hongkongnese XEME and SINIC. During 2008–2012 they organized annual contemporary graffiti competitions on national and regional levels around Asia, including the Philippines, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Taiwan.

Two more recent attempts to invigorate the scenes locally in Hong Kong are MicroGalleries and HKwalls, which both highlight different formats. In 2013, without consulting the city officials, MicroGalleries organized two street art events: first in Tai Hang in April and second in Wan Chai in December. The local and international artists employed such varied methods as photographs, wheat-pastes, installations, and mini gardens.40 In May 2014 and in March 2015, HKwalls, an annual street art and graffiti festival, has focused on creating on the walls and shutters with spray paints, brushes and markers.41 Both events intend to continue in the future.

Hong Kong displays growing institutional interest in urban art images and their use for varying purposes, from advertisements to office decoration and crime prevention. Efforts to transform at least some formats of urban art images into acceptable forms of art through teaching, exhibitions, and commissions are made both by institutions and individual creators. For instance, the Warehouse Teenage Club has continued to organize workshops and collaborate to find legal walls. Two crews have been established in connection with this collaboration, Paint Da Wall (PDW) in 2003 and Graffiti Art Association (GAS) in 2006. In 2011, Warehouse also co-organized an exhibition with local and international artists (Tang, 2011).42

Three galleries have been supporting the local creators in the face of Hong Kong’s tough and costly realities. Part-of Gallery, the first of these, was founded in 2008. One of the benefits is a large wall in the alley leading to the gallery – often painted in accordance with the exhibitions. The galleries of HAJI and Above Second opened in 2010 and have staged several exhibitions. Above Second also invites international names.43 For instance, in spring 2013, they arranged a collaborative street art exhibition “Work in Progress” with Swire Properties, inviting Cyrcle, Vhils, Beastman, Cannonball Press, Rone, Victor Ash, and Meggs to give workshops and create on the walls in collaboration with local creators.

Private enterprises, too, continue to shape the scene. At the beginning of 2014, the French restaurant Bibo invited international names to create works for the premises. Among the arrivals was one of the pioneers of street art, French Space Invader, who also took the opportunity during his second trip to Hong Kong to place forty-eight works around the city, a process which he calls an invasion.44 Some of his latest works were based on the American animated character from the 1970s, *Hong Kong Phooey*. To use American subject matter, trained in

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Hongkongese kung fu, adds to the layers of transculturality in the Space Invader’s oeuvre, which has mainly focused on figures deriving from Japanese video games, Space Invaders and Pac-Man. Unfortunately, the works were quickly removed, to the consternation of many citizens.

**Issues of style**

In the early years, the locals were eager to experiment and learn. They applied a mixture of styles, using bubble letters, wildstyle, 3D, and so forth, depending on who visited Hong Kong or whose work was accessible by other means. Despite transcultural trends, the locals have sought to develop indigenous styles and, occasionally, even formats, such as wheat-pastings resembling...
decorations used for Chinese New Year celebrations. However, there is nothing yet that could be defined as a recognizable “Hong Kong style.” The reasons vary from the scene’s small size and underdevelopment to commercialization and lack of collaboration. A factor which now to some extent hinders the development of an original style – not only in Hong Kong – is the prominence of the Internet and social media. An enormous amount of information is available online, and it is far easier to be inspired by new global trends than it was in the 1980s or 1990s. Currently, a clear majority of the creators in Hong Kong primarily aim to develop their own personal style, not a “Hong Kong style.” In the works of some crews, the individual styles can merge into a crew style. Naturally, opinions of who is interesting and/or improving in terms of styles vary enormously among the creators.

Indigenousness in urban art images can be expressed in many different ways. One is to use the Cantonese language and to include and/or modify written Cantonese characters as part of the work or as one’s tag. This is done, for instance, by SYAN . . . who has developed a method on dismantling and reconstructing the written characters by turning the angle of the writing process by 90 degrees to the left. Another popular method is to incorporate other visual references to the local society, politics, and culture, such as noodles, dragons, and local people. A third method would be to develop a style that goes beyond these visual references and to incorporate a notion of Hongkongness (i.e. the understanding of identity and unique cultural aspects which distinguish people in this territory from the mainland Chinese) to the content or composition. A fourth method is to use an indigenous format. As an example, since 2011, a local graffiti artist, RST2, has borrowed the banners of the political parties, spray painted them, and put up the remodified versions back on the streets.

**Conclusion**

The creators are not alone in traveling in and out of Hong Kong. Urban art images are also mediated in movies, magazines, on the Internet, and in the social media. These have all contributed to the emergence and current development of urban art images in Hong Kong. The flip side of this transculturality and transnationality is that although local creators and institutions work hard to develop the scene, international names remain more appreciated in galleries and commissioned works than the locals. This is partly because of a similar trend in the contemporary art scene: galleries rely on non-locals to bring in the profits. Furthermore, Hong Kong has become an essential site for the art market, coming close to New York and London. During the Art Basel in particular, organized annually since 2013, the city is filled with international art stars, including many famous creators of urban art images who tend not to miss the opportunity to put up their works on the streets. How much this will influence the scene is yet to be seen.

Another characteristic of the Hong Kong scene is the impermanence of the creators: both locals and non-locals move back and forth for study and work. In addition, creating urban art images is a short-lived fad for many local creators. The Hong Kong scene is often criticized by foreign graffiti writers for not being “hard-core” enough. For instance, there are also relatively few urban art images on trains or other forms of public transport in Hong Kong. What is becoming more popular instead is the bombing of trucks and vans that weave around the city. While many graffiti writers insist on the tradition of keeping it “real” through emphasis on illegality, bombing, and Latin alphabets, they might neglect differences caused by nationality/ethnicity, class, and socio-political and cultural contexts. For a Hong Kong writer in the twenty-first century, it cannot be exactly the same struggle as it was for the writers from poor ethnic minorities in the streets of New York in the 1970s. But does this inevitable difference,
dependent on the socio-cultural and political circumstances, necessarily mean that the scene in Hong Kong is somehow worse or lower in quality? Is it becoming too commercial and legal? These value-loaded questions are causing much heated debate, but similar trends transforming the scenes and the growing popularity of street art forms are visible worldwide.

For the majority of the creators in Hong Kong, regardless of the specific form of expression – whether they focus on putting up their name or leaving a message – it is more about self-expression and style, interaction with the city and other creators combined with a rebellious notion. However, especially those who do not have a steady job, or do not want to have one, often seek to build a profession on their passion. The options include developing one’s own brand with a focus on clothing and/or illustrations, organizing events, publishing, taking commissioned works, teaching, and developing an artistic career with exhibitions. Most of the creators I know would accept a commission, but the ways in which a work is created as well as its style and content obviously impact on how it is evaluated by the peers. A focus on only commissioned works is an open invitation for criticism. Street credibility with unauthorized actions is still a core value, no matter which format and identity are involved. Without a question, the locals and non-locals alike are increasingly interested in creating their own identities, perceptions, and adaptations.

Notes

1 Hong Kong refers usually for the whole area of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, including the New Territories and Kowloon. Hong Kong Island is the southern, main island.
2 This concept will be explained in detail in the next section.
3 The information mainly derives from my fieldwork periods in 2012 (six weeks) and in 2013 (six months), which gave me the opportunity to follow up numerous events and activities, and meet and interview on several occasions dozens of active and non-active, local, and foreign creators and other actors related to the scene. I am greatly in debt to all who shared their time and insights.
5 For a more detailed discussion, see Valjakka 2014, 2015b; cf. Valjakka 2011.
6 MAIS, email correspondence, August 23, 2013; JAMS, email correspondence, August 24, 2013; ORSEK, email correspondence, September 16, 2013; South China Morning Post, August 1, 2007.
7 For a discussion of 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.
8 THREE, interview, June 3, 2012.
9 Friendly, one of the founders of Invasian, interview, May 21, 2012. Since August 2011, Friendly have been in sole charge of the magazine.
10 LOOMIT, e-mail correspondence, January 23, 2012. See also Bomber (1996) 7(11). A window-down silver train, a challenging target to hit, took them about half an hour to complete. “A window-down” is painted below the windows of a train or subway car.
11 SYAN . . . prefers his tag name written with three dots and is known as MC Yan (MC仁) as a musician.
13 KDG, interview, March 25, 2013.
18 T.W.O. originally included DOFI, TOIK, and ZUCK. At the moment there are six international members. They all live in different countries: DOFI in Asia, CIE in Australia, AZEROX in China, BOSE in the USA, TOIK in Sri Lanka and ZUCK in Denmark. DOFI, interview, March 15, 2013.
19 XEME, interview, May 24, 2013.
21 Uncle, interview, Mar 14, 2013.
22 THREE, interview June 3, 2012. The first cross put up in public space at Hospital Road in December 31, 2002, was still there on March 1, 2013.
23 Dom and Katol, interview, April 18, 2013. See also Lanyon (2013). SFZ also has a clothing brand the products of which were available at their Rat’s Cave shop until recently. The closing party of Rat’s Cave was held on June 20, 2014.
24 MrM, interview, May 15, 2013.
25 As stated in the beginning, a growing number of creators wish to employ other self-definitions than “graffiti writer,” “graffiti artist,” or “street artist.” “Spray painter” is one of the new identities.
26 4Get About It, interview, June 2, 2012.
27 JAMS, AMSON, and YSOO, interview, March 21, 2013.
29 As an example, the regulations for parks vary, but may forbid gambling, walking on the grass, skateboarding, playing ball, picking flowers, bicycling, walking dogs, feeding birds, sleeping on the bench, hawking, etc.
30 MAIS, interview, June 17, 2012, email correspondence, June 7, 2014.
31 Jay FC, interview, March 14, 2013. See also ST/ART’s website: www.start.hk/index.html.
33 Banksy’s works were exhibited in the Schoeni Gallery in May 2008, but whether he arrived in Hong Kong was not revealed and/or known by the gallery.
34 Lenticulars are a type of printing that enables the image to change depending on the viewer’s perspective.
35 OBSRVR, interview, February 16, 2014.
37 TheMartians, interviews, March 16, 2013.
38 Two books aim to introduce the history in Chinese: Kuang (2011); Chang and Kao (2012).
39 For more information, see Invasion’s website, www.invasionmagazine.com.
40 Kat Roma Greer, artistic director, interview, February 14, 2014. See also MicroGalleries’ website, www.microgalleries.org. I also personally documented the event in Tai Hang.
43 Steve Yuen, interview, March 5, 2013; May Wong, interview, June 24, 2012; Michael Lee and Mini Choi, interview, June 3, 2013.

References

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