GRAFFITI IN CHINA

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MARTINA MERENDA

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NEW FORMS OF CALLIGRAPHY IN CHINA
A CONTEMPORARY CULTURE MIRROR

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INTRODUCTION

Adriana Iezzi

China is a vast country, the extension of which amounts to 30 times the Italian territory, making it the third largest area in the world after Russia and Canada. With 1,400,000 inhabitants, it is also the world's most populous country. This handful of figures shows how complex and dispersive China, or rather the People's Republic of China (mainland China), is: we are talking about an entire continent! Analysing any socio-cultural phenomenon with respect to so enormous an area with such a diverse population – composed of 56 different ethnicities – is, therefore, a titanic effort.
This book about graffiti in China focuses on three cities – Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu – and some of their most influential crews and writers (Fig. 1). Rather than provide insight into the current Chinese graffiti scenario, which would take at least a dozen books, it aims to offer a glimpse of the phenomenon, of which little is known, and a stimulating analysis of modern China and its structure, which is considerably distant from the western world, and therefore all the more fascinating.

The leading artists of Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu

The choice of the cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu was not made randomly, but on three grounds: the first is geographical, the second strategic, and the third purely personal.

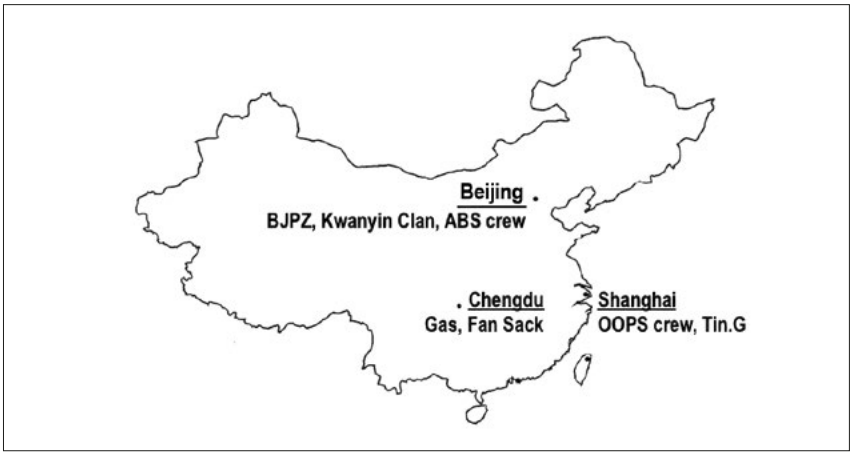


Fig. 1. Chart of the People's Republic of China with the three cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu) and their relative crews and writers analysed in the volume.

With regard to the geographical motive, Beijing is located in the north of the country, Shanghai in the south, and Chengdu in the centre (Fig. 1). Therefore, each of them represents the core of their respective areas, and together they essentially represent the entire Chinese territory.

Strategically, they feature three divergent and peculiar ways of spreading graffiti, each very different from the other. Beijing is the capital of China as well as its political and administrative core; the authorities have a strong, sometimes even repressive presence here, and yet it is a city with a lively artistic scene and the site of the country's first graffiti. Shanghai is China's economic and financial core, a "cosmopolitan" city, possibly the most western in the country, with a huge number of foreigners, and its international and commercial nature is reflected in its graffiti art. Chengdu, on the other hand, is a marginal centre where, however, graffiti has had space to spread considerably, epitomising the importance of minor cities in the diffusion of this art form in China.

The third and perhaps predominant reason that guided our choice is that these are the cities in which we conducted our research. In these cities we

had the chance to meet the artists and to see first-hand how the development of graffiti progressed.
The crews and writers presented are the result of our direct experience, and thus cannot be considered exhaustively representative of the cities' graffiti scene. They are the artists that we managed to interview personally, in order to provide fist-hand testimonies and recount through their words what we saw on the walls and/or heard about from secondary sources.
Of course, we didn't choose them arbitrarily: we sought to reach the artists who embody the graffiti phenomenon of their respective city and, together, give as diverse an overview as possible of graffiti in China.

Reading guidelines

The structure of this book is simple and intuitive: the first two chapters give a general framework of the phenomenon. Chapter I, by Marta R. Bisceglia, is about the rise of graffiti in the West, while chapter II, by Adriana Iezzi, is dedicated to its spread in China. The other three are macro-chapters, respectively about Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu. Their openings outline the cities' hallmarks, as well as the diffusion of graffiti in the area. These parts outline the contexts in which the artists analysed in the following paragraphs can be properly placed.
For Beijing (see Ch. III by Adriana Iezzi), we examined three of the preeminent crews that have made the history of graffiti in the capital: the Beijing Penzi, the Kwanyin Clan and the ABS crew.
The Beijing Penzi is the first crew established in the city, and its top representative, Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528), is the forerunner of Beijing graffiti, as well as the first acknowledged graffiti writer in China.
The Kwanyin Clan is another of the first crews formed in Beijing and the one that above all has searched for a Chinese style rooted in traditional culture (they make use of characters and add references to calligraphy, traditional painting and literature to their pieces). EricTin, whom we interviewed, is one of its founders, as well as the artist that most drives the group in this direction.

Very active to this day, the ABS is a long-standing crew in Beijing and the most successful. They were the first to open a graffiti store and make graffiti art their actual job, through collaborations with major brands. They were also the first to travel to Europe and work with foreign writers, giving the group a strong international flavour. We conducted several interviews with Andc, the social soul of the group, who contributed to opening the crew up to the world.

For Shanghai (see Ch. IV by Marta R. Bisceglia), we chose the city's first and foremost crew, the Oops Crew, which has succeeded in combining Chinese features with a fresh modern style. Moreover, we interviewed the female writer Tin.G who founded the first all-women Chinese crew, the China Graffiti Girls (CGG). Her stile has evolved from simple writing to stickers and finally to elaborate pieces with puppets and an "ultrafeminine" aesthetic.

For Chenghu (see Ch. V by Martina Merenda), we present two very different writers: the forerunner Gas, who paints extremely intricate Chinese characters and elements that point to the "Chineseness" of his pieces; and Fan Sack, a Chengdu writer who moved to Paris and whose art has gone from old style writing to painted pieces of Buddhist inspiration, while never abandoning his native street world.

The book closes with a graffiti-themed terminology glossary (by Marta R. Bisceglia), where the reader can find in-depth descriptions of technical terms (such as writer, crew, tag, wildstyle, etc.) alongside their Chinese translation. As a result, such terms are explained only once, when they first appear in the text, after which we invite the reader to consult the glossary. Lastly, readers will find the bibliography and webliography of the main sources used for the text. The webliography primarily consists of websites, official blogs, YouTube videos, and Flickr, Facebook and Instagram pages, allowing the reader to explore the Chinese graffiti phenomenon independently.

All that remains, therefore, is to hope that you enjoy this book and that it takes you on a pleasant journey in spray paint.

CHAPTER I

GRAFFITI WRITING: ROOTS AND STYLES

Marta R. Bisceglia

In any self-respecting critical essay, providing reliable sources is crucial. But how to do so when literature on the subject is almost non-existent? The only plausible source for us was dialogue, made possible by interviewing the artists and transcribing their direct point of view[1]. This dialogue has shaped a horizontal treatise on a topical subject that has only recently received the attention it deserves, and is still unfortunately not fully understood. While studying this varied and enigmatic subject, we have considered many questions to which we hope to give the right answers. Therefore, before crossing any geographical barrier and exploring the universe of graffiti in China, it is essential to provide an adequate terminological and etymological explanation of this topic, with the intention of trying to understand what graffiti is, who the artists are and, above all, what they mean to convey.

Firstly, care must be taken not to confuse Street Art – a mishmash of artistic expressions (sticker art, stencil art, poster art and video art) performed in the streets often illegally – with graffiti writing: graffiti is a different kind of art (also performed in the streets). Some find it hard to place it in this "street art mishmash", but the truth is it lays at its foundation. Although, nowadays, any pictorial work in a public place is referred to as graffiti, it is important to clarify that the artistic phenomenon we are going to analyse is "graffiti writing".

The etymology of the word *graffito* derives from the Latin term *gràphium* (or "engraving style"), which stems from the Greek word *gràphein* (*γράφειν*, to scratch, to hollow, to draw), while the English term "writing" refers to the artistic practice that deals with the execution of letters and thus implies the study of lettering, or "the style of letters".

"It's a simple game with simple rules: get yourself a tag and write it in an original style, as often as you can, everywhere and anywhere." (Mininno 2021, p. 29). With this premise, Alessandro Mininno, the guiding spirit of these first pages and an outstanding expert on the subject, unveils his scrupulous analysis of graffiti writing which, in general terms, can be defined as a social, cultural and artistic movement spread across the globe. This phenomenon is a spontaneous expression of a heterogeneous group of people belonging to a subculture which operates with no declared intent: the Hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop is a cultural movement that arose among the Afro-American and Latino communities of the New York suburbs in the late 1970s. The four main aspects of hip-hop culture are: speech (rap or *MCing*), music (*DJing*), movement (breakdancing or *B-boying*) and sign (writing). As a complex and structured form of visual expression in constant evolution, graffiti writing represents an act of interpreting and developing letters – so as to give birth to a proper tag, or signature – using spray paint or markers in public spaces.

"Signatures, or tags, thus are the backbone of the writing phenomenon. All pieces [the term by which we will henceforth refer to graffiti], even the largest, the most colourful and the most elaborate, are basically no more than tags: any illustrations and figurative characters – often found also on trains in the 1970s and 1980s – are almost always secondary, there only to enhance a composition which always revolves around lettering. It's on the letters that a writer's style is based," continues Mininno.

Writing is the writers[2]

> A melting pot of low-class Afro-Americans and middle-class white kids who end up expressing themselves with clearly common means (spray paint as their medium, lettering as their subject matter and the public space as their canvas) yet often with very individual and diverse intentions. (…) Some paint for the sake of vandalism and for a ten-minute thrill in a subway tunnel, while others, closer to the artistic sentiment, prefer to spend days pouring over their letters within a legal arena (*ivi*, pp. 31-33), called "hall of fame".

However, it is not just a matter of illegality: some artists' primary objective is quantity, that is, to cover (or bomb) entire cities' walls with their signatures and attain the fame of "king" (the best and most skilful writer, respected by all); conversely, others prefer to put the emphasis on quality, always seeking an original style. And, often, this dual nature coexists in the same person. Writers do not work alone, they normally gather in crews, small groups of friends carrying on a common name: an acronym (usually two or three letters) serving as a brand for the whole group (Mininno 2008, p. 168).
Before getting to the heart of the Chinese phenomenon, it is essential to tell the story of writing from its birth in the United States until its spread to Europe, outlining the stylistic foundations of the Old School.

American graffiti and the evolution of tags

The birth of graffiti writing dates back to the late 1960s in Philadelphia, USA, and can be traced to the activities of Cornbread and his friends. However, the Big Apple undoubtedly gave this phenomenon a decisive boost in the early 1970s, when artists like Taki 183, Julio 204 and Cat 161 painted their names on walls and in Manhattan's underground stations (Mininno 2008, pp. 16-17). In the years following 1972, considered the crucial moment of birth and development of American graffiti, writers felt the need to

transform their simple tags into forms of style experimentation. Firstly, the letters began to grow in size, and then to change, being refined and swelling into new, different styles, depending on the artist who created them. They were enriched with backgrounds, bubbles, 3D effects and arrows, as well as fill-ins and outlines.

The second stage in the evolution of the tag is the "throw-up" or "flop", a stylised drawing of one's signature or its abbreviation (e.g., the first two letters), executed quickly but on a larger scale, using a few colours often roughly sprayed, even without fill-ins. Throw-up is an art in itself: the style is immediate, often very simple and rubbery but not banal, and very few colours are used (one or two) (Mininno 2021, p. 93). It is perfect for bombing.

The third stage is the "piece" that, if particularly successful, will stand out among the others and earn the title of "masterpiece". After 1972, the first pieces began to appear on entire train cars. The high visibility of the tags, the vast potential audience, and their role in creating a connection and communication between city neighbourhoods and writers, led to the much-loved practice of train bombing, that is, bombing as many trains as possible in a race to see who can create the most captivating piece. In the second half of the 1970s, more elaborate and complex styles began to emerge. 1975 saw the appearance of the term "wildstyle": softie letters started to stretch, to twist, to become separate from one another and be adorned with arrows, regardless of the overall legibility of the piece (*ivi*, p. 49). Wildstyle is often considered the most difficult form of writing to execute and the least readable for "non-writers". It took less than a year for writers to realise that they could infuse the movement with a significant aesthetic evolution simply by eliminating smudges and adopting more uniform colouring and precise outlines. In the same period, after 1974, writers started to add figurative elements to their pieces, such as cartoon characters, known as puppets (Mininno 2008, pp. 20-21).

Arrival in Europe

With Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, graffiti art officially entered the international art scene. Around 1983, with the hip-hop culture cult film *Wild Style* and the documentary about New York underground graffiti *Style Wars*, the graffiti phenomenon also found fertile ground in Europe, especially in Amsterdam and in the Parisian suburbs. Major capitals, such as London, Berlin and Paris, had already witnessed their first tags and pieces in the early 1980s. By 1987 (when the volume *Spraycan Art* documented writing also outside the United States), the movement had reached almost all major European cities, and writers had started to paint trains in Vienna, Düsseldorf, Munich, Copenhagen, Paris and London, although most Europeans preferred to work on walls.

> Writing, which had taken more than ten years to fully develop in the Big Apple, arrived with disarming speed in Europe, its forms and methods already established. While Americans were stuck with the intricate forms of Wild Style, with all its arrows and bars, tangles and swirls that often made the final result illegible or deliberately obscure, Europe reacted (with substantial differences from nation to nation) through the evolution of more linear and often more comprehensible letters. (Mininno 2021, p. 63)

As in other European countries, writing arrived in Italy in the early 1980s, also thanks to the appearance of pieces by foreign graffiti writers, especially in Bologna and Rome. Inspiration for young writers in Italy came from cult films, foreign writers on tour, and fanzines (unofficial independent amateur magazines dealing with cultural and subcultural phenomena). From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, mainly thanks to hip-hop, writing spread like wildfire and went through a sequence of radical changes in styles: from the unreadable and knotted New York style to a more open and comprehensible one, which makes it possible to focus mainly on the quantity of pieces (Mininno 2008, pp. 30-39).

New frontiers: the birth of post-graffiti

After an initial phase in which the dominant element was represented by letters, contemporary graffiti culture moved towards wider horizons: the post-graffiti movement. The personal style of each artist was free to evolve without constraints and to employ a wider range of expressive means: from stickers, posters and stencils to airbrushes, oil chalks, paints and even sculpture (Ganz 2005). Post-graffiti is based on stylistic trends that have their roots in the culture of graffiti writing and street art, flourishing in multiple disciplines such as painting, sculpture, graphics, design, illustration, fashion, photography, architecture, video art and calligraphy. The frontiers of this creative universe are in fact far more porous today than they used to be, and this process facilitates the rise of new styles and ways of perceiving graffiti. While graffiti writing was born and developed in the US to impose its model on a planetary scale, the post-graffiti movement has risen and spread in a global world, insofar as it lives through the Internet. The Internet is the place where people look for new models to be inspired by and publish pictures of their work.

The late advent of the graffiti movement in China – already contaminated by new experiments related to post-graffiti – led to the blossoming of a hybrid form of graffiti art. This kind of art not only echoes the fundamentals of American graffiti, but also blends with street art in a broader sense.

CHAPTER II

CHINESE GRAFFITI ART

Adriana Iezzi

Chinese graffiti art is a recent phenomenon with very unique features. It emerged in the mainland in the mid-1990s, only to spread and gain visibility from 2005 to 2010 (Valjakka 2011, p. 73). Its breakthrough is usually traced back to the work of one artist in particular, Zhang Dali 张大力 (Harbin, 1963). In 1995, he flooded the city of Beijing with his massive art project *Dialogue and Demolition* (*Duihua yu chai* 对话与拆, 1995-2005) (Fig. 2, p. 36), involving more than 2,000 giant portraits of his own profile spray-painted on soon-to-be-demolished buildings. His tags AK-47 (initials for Kalashnikov) or 18K (initials for 18-karat gold) (Pizziolo, Rovasio 2009, p. 8) were his signature. There is no consensus of opinion on this pioneer of Beijing graffiti art (who will be discussed in depth in the third chapter). While acknowledging the powerful driving force of his work, some (especially young writers) consider Zhang Dali an artist who devoted only part of his career to graffiti.

Another important artist is often mentioned alongside the figure of Zhang Dali as a (hypothetical) forerunner of Chinese graffiti art. This is Tsang Tsou-choi (*Zeng Zaocai* 曾灶財, 1912-2007), better known as King of Kowloon (*Jiulong Huangdi* 九龍皇帝), whose artistic activity was based in Hong Kong (Pic. 27). Tsang Tsou-choi was born to a family of poor farm workers in a small village in Guangdong, a province on China's southern

coast with Canton as its capital. At the age of 16 he moved to Hong Kong, where he began his self-taught studies. In 1954, armed with brush and ink, he started bombing the city streets and avenues with insulting writings, an activity he would carry on for the rest of his life (Clarke 2001). The content of his works is rather obsessive: in his "calli-graffiti" (calligraphy-style graffiti) he almost unalterably and compulsively repeats a predetermined line-up: his name, the title he ascribes to himself (king/emperor of China or Hong Kong or Kowloon), a list of about 20 of his ancestors, the name of some illustrious Chinese emperors, and a series of outrageous expressions against the British crown, proclaiming each nation's right to sovereignty (Zhang 2011).

The artist is convinced that in ancient times the district of Kowloon, the most populous in Hong Kong and the one where he has made the majority of his writings, belonged to his ancestors, as allegedly confirmed by the discovery of important documents. Thus, the calligraphic pieces he systematically creates around the city on all kinds of surfaces represent an act of war against the British government, which, according to Tsang Tsou-choi, has been usurping part of his ancestors' land, since they annexed it to the British domain without his family receiving any compensation. That said, the fact that he does not use the conventional means (spray cans) and contents (tags) of graffiti writing to bring his urban works to life, on the one hand makes his art unique, and on the other differentiates it from the peculiar methods of this art form, bringing it rather closer to the art of calligraphy.

This makes it easy to understand why he is not universally considered the father of Chinese graffiti. His works are defined in the most diverse ways: they're usually called "calligraphy graffiti" (*shufa tuya* 书法涂鸦) (Zhao 2012), but also "character graffiti" (*wenzi tuya* 文字涂鸦) (Zhang 2011) or more generally "calligraphic works" (*shufa zuopin* 书法作品), "writing works" (*shuxie zuopin* 书写作品) and "graffiti art" (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术). These five definitions highlight how difficult it is to frame his art, which stands midway between graffiti and calligraphy. Moreover, Tsang Tsou-

choi is active in Hong Kong, which until 1997 was not part of the People's Republic of China founded by Mao Zedong in 1949, but was a British protectorate, and thus not directly traceable to actual China.

Hong Kong: a hub of development and diffusion

Despite these distinctions, Hong Kong has unquestionably played a crucial role in the spread of graffiti in China, especially the "purest" form of graffiti writing. There is no doubt that writers populated this city from as early as the first half of the 1990s, and that this climate has had a strong influence in the diffusion of graffiti in the People's Republic of China[3]. MCRen (MC 仁) is one of these writers. In an interview, he claims to be the "first writer in Asia" (Valjakka 2011, p. 90): he does not recognise the King of Kowloon's status as a true writer, and he was active in Hong Kong long before Zhang Dali in Beijing.

A number of writers working in China, like Dezio (Sanada, Hassan 2010, p. 14) and Tin.G, affirm that the origin of Chinese graffiti is to be traced back to Hong Kong. And even certain scholars of the phenomenon believe that graffiti originally spread from the south as a result of foreign influences in Hong Kong (Sanada, Hassan 2010, p. 11; Lu 2015, p. 31). Soon after the city returned under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China, some nearby cities paved the way for graffiti art to influence the rest of China. After 1997, many Hong Kong graffiti writers came to Shenzhen, a city located right at the northern border. Hong Kong had just been opened, thus allowing these artists to move from one region to another (see Video section, Hassan 2010). From there, in 1998 they reached Guangzhou, a megalopolis located north of Shenzhen (Sanada, Hassan 2010, p. 14). Unlike in most other countries, especially in the early stages of the phenomenon's development, in China graffiti spread most significantly in minor centres, such as Chengdu and Wuhan (located halfway between Chengdu and Shanghai), because in metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai control by the authorities was greater (*ivi*, p. 11).

However, the speed and extent to which graffiti has spread throughout the country have been significant, especially since the early 2000s. Driven also by the newly arrived hip-hop culture (Valjakka 2015, p. 76), as from 2005 graffiti reached Beijing and Shanghai, where it experienced a peak in popularity between 2007 and 2013. During this period, particularly between 2008 and 2012, two Hong Kong graffiti writers, Xeme and Sinic, organised the world-famous *Wall Lords Graffiti Battles*, the most important graffiti jam sessions at the Chinese and Asian level: every year, several Chinese and non-Chinese crews would participate, showing the highly technical and expressive level they had achieved (Valjakka 2016, p. 369)[4]. However, their success was short-lived. Between 2014 and 2015, particularly in Beijing and Shanghai, graffiti art gradually started to decline, mainly due to the government's repression of this art form and to economic pressure, which led to the demolition of graffiti places and their replacement with modern residential neighbourhoods or commercial areas. It should not be forgotten that in 2013 Xi Jinping became President of the People's Republic of China, initiating a policy of ever-growing control over civil society, also widely implemented by the five-year plan launched in 2016. China experienced an increasingly authoritarian rule starting in 2017, when the President's political thought became an integral part of the Chinese Constitution.
Unfortunately, this kind of policy persists to this day and the Chinese graffiti world continues to bear the consequences, leaving little room for the critical voice and freedom of writers. The choice is to bow to the rules of economics, forming commercial partnerships and working on commission, or to stop making graffiti on the streets.

Legal and illegal art forms

Since it was introduced in China, graffiti has acquired distinctive features that set it apart from western graffiti. The first major difference lies in the fact that in China graffiti is not strictly regarded as a form of vandalism, a criminal act or a manifestation of class conflict. Although Chinese law prohibits writing and drawing on urban public spaces, court officers are

usually tolerant of writers, as long as their works are not too eye-catching, do not go viral, and are not offensive (Valjakka 2011, p. 82). Punishments against them are mostly limited to paying fines or cleaning the defaced walls (Valjakka 2015, p. 263).

In China, graffiti is often referred to as "half legal and half illegal" (Bidisha 2014). Unlike in western cities, there is a distinct scarcity of tags in public transportation areas (the place where graffiti originated and are mainly found in the West) and in urban spaces, with the exception of contemporary art districts, including Beijing's 798 Art District and the Moganshan Road area in Shanghai. Bombing trains with graffiti, particularly underground cars, is a very common practice in the West, while in China it is extremely rare. In southern cities a few writers occasionally try to break the rules, but this is quite exceptional due to fear of repercussions from law enforcement agencies. Damaging public places of great visibility (such as the underground) makes the police less tolerant (Valjakka 2011, p. 82). Writing on trains or any other government property is absolutely forbidden and considered an overtly subversive act. The risk is that of being detained by the police or placed under surveillance, and immediate expulsion from the country for foreigners (Valjakka 2015, p. 264).

In spite of their revolutionary intent against the homogenization and dreariness of cities, vandalism and the illegal side of graffiti have resulted in writings being outlawed along the underground or on any other form of public transportation. As a result, Chinese graffiti writing has been emptied of its underground nature. However, in every Chinese city there are "semi-legal" walls on which graffiti writers can bring their pieces to life without police intervention. These are not halls of fame authorised by the government, but walls on which writing graffiti is not illegal. Chief among them is Honghu West Road in Shenzhen, where the first graffiti appeared between 2002 and 2003 (*ibid.*). Other prominent "semi-legal" walls are Moganshan Road in Shanghai (see Ch. IV), Jingmi Road in Beijing (see Ch. III), Fuqing Road in Chengdu (see Ch. V), Mong Kok Alley in Hong Kong, and Huangjueping Street in Chongqing. Consequently,

most graffiti in China, especially those placed in highly crowded areas, are apolitical (*ivi*, p. 265) and devoid of any message of social protest. On the contrary, graffiti is sometimes created precisely in support of government political messages, like the pieces that appeared all around Beijing before the 2008 Olympics to promote the momentous event and propagandise the image of a rich, powerful and prosperous country. One striking example is *Olympic Beijing* by the Kwayin Clan, described below (Fig. 8, p. 73). Similarly, in the same year, the graffiti made by Tin.G (see ch. IV) and Moon, a graffiti writer from Quanzhou in the Fujian Province, responded to the heated debate among foreigners calling for greater autonomy for some regions of China (Tibet, in particular) with a double inscription in English and Chinese, *One China Forever* (*Yi ge Zhongguo* 壹個中國), on Moganshan Road, reiterating that China is, and always will be, one and indissoluble (Valjakka 2015, p. 266). Interestingly enough, these are all personal initiatives of the writers themselves, not mandated by the authorities but actually spontaneous. This is not to say that there are no expressions of protest among Chinese writers. Albeit very rare, these are usually rendered abstractly or through complex visual references, and generally made in barely visible, hard-to-access places like abandoned buildings (*ivi*, p. 265).

As it is not considered an act of vandalism, graffiti in China appears as a pure form of artistic expression (primarily in the eyes of the writers), and the contemporary art system has strongly supported its development since its inception, particularly in Beijing and Shanghai. Contemporary art districts have become the main graffiti "hubs" since they are among the few places where writers have always been free to bomb and make elaborate pieces. Graffiti-related exhibitions and events aimed at encouraging and giving visibility to this art form have been held in such districts from the very beginning (Valjakka 2011, pp. 78-80). Among the most prominent was the exhibition *Art from the Streets (The History of Street Art – from New York to Beijing)*[5], where Chinese writers could show their pieces along those of the likes of Banksy, Blek le Rat, Invader and Shepard

Fairey. Another important point of contact between the world of graffiti and the world of art is the artistic background of most Chinese writers: they are mostly art school or academy students, designers, or young people working in the creative industry (*ivi*, p. 80). As a result, many of them also transpose their style into graphic design works made on a temporary support or canvas. Indeed, it is not uncommon for graffiti writers to become fully-fledged artists. Fan Sack, discussed in the last chapter, is one such artist. Unlike in the West, in China, the osmotic nature of these two worlds makes it easy to switch sides.

Middle-class experiments and on demand professionals

The primary functions of Chinese graffiti do not include rebellion, but individual expression and embellishment of urban spaces. In particular, many new-generation Chinese graffiti writers, especially in Beijing, use walls as canvases on which to pour their artistic expressiveness, enlivening their pieces with numerous purely fictional figurative elements, such as ghosts, dragons, animated mushrooms and cartoon characters (Valjakka 2011, p. 75), thus leveraging a greater creativity instead of simply combining letters. This is because graffiti constitutes a form of escape from reality for many youths who come from middle-class or wealthy Chinese families, very far from the New York ghettos of the 1980s. In fact, for a good deal of them it is kind of a short-lived hobby: after a couple of years (or even less) most of these writers stop their activity (Valjakka 2016, p. 367) due to strong family pressure to find a "real" job and fit into the social fabric.

As a result, the number of active Chinese writers is small when compared to the number of inhabitants, which explains why the graffiti scene has never fully developed, despite some writers being very talented and technically proficient (Valjakka 2015, p. 263). According to Andc, leader of the ABS crew, at the peak of its development between 2013 and 2014 there were about 500 professional writers in China, mainly in Beijing and Shanghai, but only about fifty or less had good writing skills (for Andc see Tung 2013; Wu 2014). By 2015, as the decline began, the estimat-

ed number had already dropped to 350 - 250 (*ibid.*), while today it has halved. The Chinese view of graffiti as an art form, partly due to the aforementioned skills of many writers, has encouraged the tendency to make paid or commissioned works, in contrast to the West, where most writers claim that only illegal writings are worthy of being called graffiti (Valjakka 2011, p. 82). In China, on the other hand, it is quite common for writers to collaborate with national or foreign commercial brands for advertising campaigns or new store openings and other promotional initiatives. For example, the crews covered in this volume have undertaken countless collaborations with renowned brands. For many of these writers, especially at the beginning of their career, commercial collaborations were just a way to earn money to be reinvested on the street. Subsequently, they turned out to be a springboard to establish actual companies specialised in commercial graffiti making. One of the first to grasp this opportunity was the ABS crew (see Ch. III), followed by others in Beijing, such as the DNA and Tuns crews. Another is the CGG crew, of which Tin.G is a member (see Ch. IV), and which brings together female writers from Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Hainan. Gas also followed their example, opening a spray-paint store in Chengdu and establishing a business partnership with another writer, Seven, with whom he still creates works on commission (see Ch. V). For Chinese writers, this seems to be the only way to survive and not disappear. Moreover, the exponential growth of their business activities goes hand in hand with a dramatic decrease in illegal street activities, and you can easily guess why.

It is also important to note that Chinese writers, although belonging to different crews, are first and foremost friends. There is no real "territoriality" or street warfare as in the West. On the contrary, artists exchange ideas and even materials, generating a large community in which absolute freedom of expression prevails. In this atmosphere, sharing becomes the humus of art, and freedom makes the soil of creation fertile.

Characterering and figurativism: Chinese style lessons

With regard to stylistic research, Chinese graffiti has undoubtedly always imitated Euro-American styles (Valjakka 2011, p. 84), and even today most styles draw inspiration from the western tradition (Valjakka 2016, p. 368). This also results from the presence of the foreign writers who have operated (and continue to operate) in the Chinese metropolises, regularly collaborating with local writers: they have conditioned the Chinese scene, making it much more international. In Beijing, for example, mention should be made of Zyko (Germany), Aigor (Europe), Sbam (Italy) and Zato (USA); and in Shanghai, of Dezio (France, Pic. 19), Fluke (Great Britain) and Diase (Italy). These writers have lived and operated in China for a long time, strongly influencing its scene.

Nevertheless, an attempt to develop a Chinese style has been evident from the earliest stages of graffiti development in China, defining the work of some crews and several writers. A significant sign of this attempt is the use of Chinese characters instead of Latin letters. Thus, we will no longer speak of lettering, but of *characterering*. Characterering is a neologism we have coined to refer to the character style in Chinese graffiti, since many writers do not use the Latin alphabet. Graffiti made of characters are extremely difficult to compose because they do not follow fixed rules: while western writers develop (and practice on their sketchbooks) their own lettering that can be repeated for any type of writing, in Chinese this is not possible because each character is written differently. Therefore, every time writers need to create a new way of portraying each character and harmoniously connecting it to the others in a consistent way. To do this, considerable familiarity with the use of the spray-can and a great deal of creativity are essential, especially if one wants to use wildstyle and the 3D (three-dimensional) style.

In addition to characterering, the use of visual elements evoking Chinese culturelike dragons, pandas and lanterns, sometimes creatively restyled, is another feature we find in many of the graffiti made in China. Those who were perhaps most successful in pushing the pursuit of a Chinese style are

the Beijing Penzi and the Kwanyin Clan in Beijing (see Chapters IV and V), as they have been able to fill their works with elaborate visual references to their home culture (Valjakka 2015, p. 271).

Other artists that often combine Chinese characters and Latin letters are the Oops crew and Popil from Shanghai (see Ch. IV). Popil is a writer and illustrator who uses yoga postures to shape the "Letter girl" that underlies her lettering (Walde 2011).

In Beijing and Shanghai, some foreign writers also try to use Chinese characters in reference the local language: the first is Dezio, known in Shanghai for his elaborate pieces in which he uses his Chinese tag (*Duxi'ao* 度西奥) (Valjakka 2016, p. 363), and the second is Zato, who has covered Beijing with both his Chinese tag (*Zatuo* 杂投) and other mysterious Mandarin writings.

But this kind of research is not only limited to Beijing and Shanghai. The Chengdu-based writer Gas consistently makes use of Chinese characters in his works, choosing words that recall relevant concepts of Chinese culture (see Ch. V). In Shenzhen there is Touchy (a.k.a. Touch), who creates extremely elaborate charactering pieces that are difficult to decipher even for native speakers. He heavily reshapes different sized characters, written in random order and with mixed colours, to condemn the deceiving messages of the growing advertising industry (Valjakka 2015, p. 273). In Hong Kong, both Xeme and Sinic, two brothers well known in local circles, use Chinese characters in their pieces and sometimes draw inspiration from traditional calligraphy (Johnson 2008). Other writers who regularly make use of characters are Mora (*Chen Shisan* 陈十三) from Guangzhou, Moon (*Yue xia* 月下) from Quanzhou (Fujian province), Exas (*Lingdan* 灵丹) and Zeit (*Shijian* 时间) from Beijing (Mouna 2017), each of them following their own personal style. China's internal graffiti scene, therefore, is utterly diverse and very different to the one we are used to. Its in-depth analysis can provide us with an interesting interpretation of some of the salient features of the local youth culture, alongside the chance to discover unprecedented aspects of modern-day China.

Terminology issues

Exploring how graffiti is defined in China today allows us to understand how complex and rich in specific features the phenomenon is. While it may seem a purely terminological "niche" issue for philologists or sinologists, it reveals much about what graffiti represents in today's China and how it is perceived. The most commonly used term in colloquial slang to define graffiti is *tuya* 涂鸦, a word that literally means "poor handwriting, scrawl", such as by a child: what we would call "chicken-scratch". The word is composed of two characters – *tu* 涂 "spread on, scribble" and *ya* 鸦 "raven" – and derives from two lines of a poem by the Tang dynasty (618-907) author Lu Tong 卢仝 (795-835), where he tells how his son, as a child, used to enjoy scribbling in his books in raven ink[6]. The original meaning of the word thus takes on slightly negative connotations, creating a parallelism between graffiti and children's attempts at writing. Consequently, the local media tend to prefer the term *tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术, or "graffiti art", thereby elevating this form of expression to artistic status by emphasizing the strong interconnection between graffiti and the art world, as previously explained. There are several further definitions with different nuances: both the local press and writers sometimes speak of *jietou tuya* 街头涂鸦, or "street graffiti" (Valjakka 2015, p. 261; Llys 2015), referring exclusively to mostly non-legal graffiti in urban contexts and emphasising the link with the street as the preferred place for graffiti. The use of this expression highlights how, in China, it is by no means obvious that graffiti is done on the streets, as it can just as easily be found in other locations (exhibitions, store and clubs interiors, merchandising and designer objects) that are entirely legitimate and recognised as such.

Occasionally, they are also referred to as *tuya huihua* 涂鸦绘画, or "graffiti painting/drawing" (Valjakka 2011, p. 77), to underline how each piece is perceived as an authentic painting primarily representing a decorative feature of the urban context, where the presence of figurative elements is always welcomed. In relation to this definition, there are other expressions like *jietou qiangti caihui* 街头墙体彩绘, meaning "street murals", or *shou hui*

qiang hui 手绘墙绘, signifying "hand-painted murals", occasionally adopted to express the idea of urban decoration. The use of such apparent lexical inaccuracies is due to the fact that graffiti is often classified and defined as a form of *jietou yishu* 街头艺术, or "street art". In fact, although in the Euro-American context there has recently been a sharp distinction between writing-based graffiti and painted murals, which represent a form of street art, in China this differentiation is not clear-cut and the two forms are often intertwined (Valjakka 2016, p. 358).

The Chinese word for "graffiti writing", based on the letters of one's tag and the use of spray paint, is *tuya shuxie* 涂鸦书写, which is the exact translation of the English expression. Still, it is little used because few artists devote their career exclusively to graffiti writing.

The terms adopted in the legal field are *tuxie* 涂写 and *kehua* 刻画 (Valjakka 2014, p. 98), the first recalling the idea of graffiti writing (*tuxie* literally means "to scribble, scrawl, doddle") and the latter referring to street art works based on figurative elements. Indeed, *kehua* means "to depict, portray" and thus, again, brings us back to the art world. In Chinese law, therefore, graffiti are either doodles or fully-fledged paintings with nothing to do with their original function.

Even the word "writer" has several translations in Chinese, once again highlighting how much of a fluid terrain this is. The first is *penzi* 喷子, which literally means "sprayer", that is, someone who uses spray cans. The term comes from the verb *pen* 喷 (lit. to spray), used by writers to convey the act of graffiti making (Valjakka 2011, p. 77). The Beijing Penzi crew (see Ch. III) made this word part of their name, thus presenting themselves as a crew of "Beijing writers".

However, Chinese writers mostly tend to define themselves as *tuyazhe* 涂鸦者 or *tuyaren* 涂鸦人, meaning "graffitists" or "graffiti writers". Publications prefer to use the expression *tuya yishujia* 涂鸦艺术家, or "graffiti artist", which again reminds us that the general public perceives graffiti as a form of art (Valjakka 2011, p. 77). Finally, there are two similar words that recall the central element of graffiti, namely writing, and they are

xiezizhe 写字者 and *xieziren* 写字人 (Flowerstr 2017), literally meaning "a person who writes characters". These two terms refer to the lively debate in Chinese circles around the use of Chinese writing within graffiti. They turn favourably to this idea and bring us back to the original feature of graffiti writing: the importance of writing in order to exist. Our book is inspired by this very concept, and it is the reason why we have favoured the analysis of artists who, first and foremost are – or have been – graffiti writers, and who have used writing as a vehicle for expression, existence, and even a means of subsistence.

In this volume, we describe works that have writing as their main element and medium, as we believe that this cannot be disregarded when talking about graffiti; especially in China, where the world's oldest in-use writing system is still adopted, and writing represents a symbol of individual and national identity.

CHAPTER III

BEIJING: CAPITAL OF CHINA, CAPITAL OF GRAFFITI

Adriana Iezzi

Beijing is a megalopolis where more than 21 million citizens live today: more than one third of the entire Italian population and almost as many inhabitants as the whole of Australia. This makes it the most populous country capital in the world! Today, 20 underground lines navigate the city, while up until 2007 there were only two. This speaks volumes about both its territorial extension and the rate at which the city evolves and transforms: a supersonic speed that we can hardly imagine. From an administrative point of view, Beijing lies at the centre of the Municipality of Beijing, an autonomous region covering a territory of about 16,400 km. The city is the political centre of mainland China, home to the National People's Congress and all major Chinese institutions, where the most important decisions for the entire nation are taken.

It was founded under the Mongol Empire (the Yuan dynasty, 1271-1368) and named *Dadu*, or "The Great Capital". In 1421 it became the capital of the Ming Empire (1368-1644) with its current name – Beijing 北京, or the "Capital of the North" – and has almost uninterruptedly retained this role ever since. Despite being the capital of the oldest empire in the world, Beijing, about 600 years old, is relatively young (Pisu 1976, pp. 15-16). Its founding is linked to a legend: the geometric perfection of its plan is the earthly translation of divine images that appeared in a dream to the

Buddhist monk who was the tutor of the emperor Yong Le (1360-1424) who founded the capital during the Ming dynasty. One night he dreamt of a splendid otherworldly city – the residence of the Lord of Heaven – and suggested that the emperor draw inspiration from its pattern to build the new capital. Yong Le faithfully adhered to this divine vision in order to reaffirm the close relationship between Heaven and the emperor, called the Son of Heaven. Just as the Lord of Heaven lived within a Purple Enclosure, a constellation of celestial bodies clustered around the North Star, so on earth the Son of Heaven must live in a purple city protected by walls, representing the centre of the earthly world.

The Forbidden City was thus erected: an Imperial palace enclosed by purple-coloured walls – the centre of the city and the power core of the entire empire (*ivi*, p. 19). Up until forty years ago, all around this splendid residence with golden roofs (the colour of the emperor) was nothing but an endless expanse of one or two-storey houses with low curved roofs: in between geometric blocks, the tangle of dusty *hutongs* – Beijing's traditional unpaved alleys – was a succession of grey blind walls (*ivi*, p. 29). Aside from the Forbidden City, only a few other temples and monuments scattered here and there would dot the sea of greyness: the Temple of Heaven, the Drum and Bell Tower, and little else. For Le Corbusier, the geometric perfection of the city layout and its plan made up of a set of straight lines intersecting at regular distances, represented the urban model of human perfection, as opposed to the city of Paris, entirely composed of irregular curves. According to the architect, it was indeed unthinkable that an "imperfect" city like Paris could claim to bring civilisation to a "perfect" city like Beijing (*ivi*, p. 19).

And yet, what remains of ancient Beijing today? Very little: it is a towering mass of ultra-modern skyscrapers in which the heights of the Forbidden City are lost and dispersed. All that is left of the *hutongs* and old neighbourhoods are fragments, since (almost) everything has been swept away by the fury of modern China's bulldozers. The perfect tangle of orthogonal alleys has been overlapped by a series of motorway loops that expand well out of

proportion and develop at the same unstoppable pace as the city. Still, the greyness remains, caused by the haze of pollution that constantly hovers over the city. This, however, is contrasted by the lively cultural scene that characterises the city. Beijing is one of the preeminent centres of culture in China, and in some respects the most important. It is home to the major governing bodies of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Academia Sinica (Pisu 1976, pp. 34-35), as well as no less than 91 university-level higher education institutes, including Peking University and Qinghua University, which are listed among the best in the country. Beijing is also home to the China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), China's most prestigious art academy which has trained some of the greatest contemporary artists in the country (e.g. Xu Bing, Zhang Huan, Zhang Hongtu and Hong Hao), and to many other art and design academies attended by talented graffiti writers. In addition, Beijing has more than one hundred museums, including China's most distinguished institution of modern and contemporary art, the National Museum of China (NAMOC), which has hosted the country's most important exhibitions in the last forty years. Here, after being banned from exhibiting their ground-breaking works in 1979, the group of artists Stars (*Xingxing*) decided to display them on the museum gates, giving birth to Chinese dissident and avant-garde art. Ten years later, in 1989, the *China/Avant-Garde Exhibition* took place precisely at NAMOC. It was the first exhibition in the country dedicated to experimental art, with the aim of presenting the public with a complete overview of the works produced by the new Chinese artistic currents in the last decade. This step-up in exhibitions also concerned (and continues to concern) graffiti art. It was in fact at the CAFA Art Museum that China's first international exhibition dedicated to graffiti and street art took place in 2016, entitled *Art from the Streets* (*The History of Street Art – from New York to Beijing)*, with artists from the United States, Brazil, Great Britain, France, Italy, Portugal, Senegal, and, of course, China.

Beijing is thus confirmed as the heart of contemporary Chinese art development. In the last few decades, numerous galleries have opened their doors,

joining the wave of eager interest in contemporary Chinese artists by international auction houses, collectors and museums from all over the world. In the second half of the 1990s, only a shrewd handful of galleries had realised their fruitful potential and created independent showcases for artists who previously had had very few opportunities to show their works to the world (Marescialli 2008, p. 23). In Beijing we find the country's most important districts dedicated to contemporary art: Yuanmingyuan artists' village, Songzhuang art community, 798 Art District and Caochangdi. These last two are particularly important for graffiti art. 798 Art District, located in the north-eastern part of the city, is an old state-owned industrial complex designed in Bauhaus style in the 1950s by a group of East German architects, which once housed a production line of electrical components for military use. In the early '90s it was closed due to financial difficulties, but in 2000 it started to repopulate, attracting to its large (and cheap) spaces a growing number of local artists looking for places to set up their studio. Within a few years, it became "a sort of Chinese Greenwich Village" (Curcio 2015, p. 10), a "post-industrial-chic community made up of artists, designers, media people and white collars" (Marescialli 2008, p. 59), turning it into the first art district in the city. Today, the district houses contemporary art festivals, studios and dozens of independent artists' homes, including painters, sculptors and photographers, several national and international galleries, museums, like the famous Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA), art bookshops, designers' studios, cafés, magazine newsrooms, and a number of local and international companies' offices. It is also a central district for the spread of graffiti art in Beijing. Indeed, 798 is one of the areas where the first graffiti in the capital appeared: the studio of the Kwanyin Clan, one of the first and most important graffiti crews in Beijing, was based there, as well as China's first graffiti store 400ML, opened in 2012 and run by the ABS crew. For the last 15 years at least, this is also the place where the city's graffiti crews and writers have been meeting to create pieces on the buildings' walls, and where various graffiti festivals are hosted. Among them, the most important is the annual *Meeting Neighbourhood*, which brings together artists and graffiti enthusiasts from all over the world.

The Caochangdi district, located about 20 km away from the city centre, is the second key art district in Beijing (after 798). Since Ai Weiwei (Beijing, 1957) chose to move his studio to Caochangdi in 1999, numerous other artists and galleries have followed, notably Chambers Fine Art, Ink Studio and Taikang Space. Unfortunately, since July 2018 the art district has been partially dismantled: many galleries and art studios, including Ai Weiwei's, have been demolished or forced to relocate (Mouna 2018), leaving a large void in the artistic fervour developed in the area. The district is also a significant location for Beijing's graffiti art, as it was home to the studio of the city's and mainland China's first graffiti writer, Zhang Dali[7], and of Beijing's first graffiti crew, Beijing Penzi, where its members painted skateboards and other similar items for commercial purposes (Feola 2014).

Beijing's cultural and artistic turmoil, as well as its reputation as a postmodern hyper-commercial megalopolis pervaded by grey concrete and unbreathable air, made it the ideal setting for the development of graffiti art in China, also thanks to the spread of an underground culture that has flourished in the city since the 1990s. Today, the city seems to be the ideal setting for multicoloured and sometimes provocative graffiti that break its leaden monotony. It is no coincidence that the first manifestation of graffiti art in mainland China appeared precisely in Beijing.

The birth and spread of graffiti in Beijing

Graffiti art was introduced to Beijing by Zhang Dali, who embarked in 1995 on the artistic project *Dialogue and Demolition* (*Duihua yu chai* 对话与拆, 1995-2005) (Fig. 2): he spray-painted more than 2,000 giant portraits of his head's profile on the walls of buildings destined to be demolished, often accompanying them with the tags AK-47 or 18k (abbreviations for Kalashnikov and 18-carat gold) (Wu 2000; Marinelli 2004). This artistic and photographic project, which triggered heated debate in Beijing in 1998, was intended to draw attention to the disturbing trend of demolishing entire districts of the old city with their history and the

stories of the people who lived there. Its goal was to warn citizens about the side effects that modernization was bringing about in China (Curcio 2015, p. 71). The choice of its two tags (AK-47 and 18K) was by no means incidental: the abbreviation of the Kalashnikov recalled the idea of violence inflicted by the government on the city and its citizens; while the 18K gold was a reference to the power of money and the pursuit of wealth that was distorting Chinese society and culture. The idea of creating the first graffiti in the city was the result of the six years Zhang Dali spent in Bologna, where the artist moved after the tragic events in Tiananmen Square in 1989. In Bologna, the artist had taken part in the city's intense artistic activity. Here he was introduced to graffiti writing for the first time, by which he was profoundly inspired. Once back in China, he realised the havoc that was being wrought there and decided to apply what he had learnt in Italy to the walls of Beijing. It may be said, therefore, that if

Fig. 2. Zhang Dali, *Dialogue and Demolition 1998121*, 1998, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Chaoyangmen Wai Avenue. Courtesy of the artist.

graffiti art has managed to make its way into the Chinese capital, it is also partly due to Italian influences.

Although Zhang Dali is usually considered the "Godfather of Beijing graffiti" (Bonniger 2018, p. 21), some experts disagree. According to them, the first graffiti writer in the city was not Zhang Dali, who is regarded as a street artist rather than a writer, but Li Qiuqiu 李球球, known as 0528 (Fig. 3), who started his activity in 1996 (see Video section, film Crayon 2012; for Zeit see Mouna 2017). They argue that Zhang Dali's work had no impact on the following generation of writers, since he always worked alone without interacting with other artists, and only practiced graffiti for a short period of his career (1995-2005), later moving on to other forms of expression – indeed, he identifies himself as an artist rather than a graffiti writer (film Crayon 2012; Valjakka 2016, p. 361). Li Qiuqiu's work, instead, had a strong impact on the following generation: he has always interacted with young Beijing writers and, being a pioneer in this field, founded one of the city's first and most important crews: the Beijing Penzi (Mouna 2017).

Regardless of the "rightful" authorship of the first Beijing graffiti, for about ten years Zhang Dali and Li Qiuqiu were unquestionably the only known writers working in the city (Valjakka 2016, p. 361). The next generation of graffiti writers appeared on the scene only in 2005, partly thanks to the establishment of *The Great Wall of Beijing*, he city's first hall of fame located on the southern side of Renmin University, a major university in the capital. The wall and its graffiti, or pseudo-graffiti, were all dedicated to the Beijing Olympic Games (Bonniger 2018, p. 22) to be held in August 2008: a momentous event for the entire country. The wall was 700 metres long and about 300 volunteers took part in its decoration (Llys 2015)[8]. The success of this large-scale project, supported by the government with evident propaganda purposes, increased curiosity and helped to spread interest in graffiti throughout the city, from public opinion and art circles to young art academy students. As a matter of fact, from 2006 onwards, individual graffiti writers started to gather, found-

Fig. 3. Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528), *0528*, summer 2005, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Sanlitun North. Photographed by Llys on 4 July 2006. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

ing the first crews like the aforementioned Beijing Penzi and Kwanyin Clan. Besides, other street artists started writing individually, like Hades or The Little Mushroom (*Xiao mogu* 小蘑菇), who was very active in bombing the 798 Art District, Sanlitun and the city centre. Most of his works consisted of a cartoon-like mushroom, usually depicted donning a red hat with white polka dots and a smiley face with various expressions on the stem. In keeping with the finest urban graffiti tradition, the artist's identity is still unknown. We only know he is a designer, tattoo artist and skateboarder, which is quite common among Chinese graffiti writers.

Another important artist at that early stage of graffiti development was Xu Ruotao 徐若涛, who created graffiti in the district of Tongzhou in 2004. His writings were subsequently published in *Art World*, an important Chinese contemporary art magazine, marking an all-time achievement for this art form. Together with Li Qiuqiu, Xu Ruotao is a pioneer in the use of Chinese characters in his pieces: in one of his works created in 2004 near

the Bali Qiao underground station on line 1 East, he wrote *Mei ge ren dou shi shibaizhi* 每个人都是失败者 (All men are fallible). Although the writing style is still very rudimentary, it is one of the first graffiti works entirely in Chinese characters in Beijing.

In those early years of graffiti development in Beijing, the favourite spots for graffiti writers were the 798 Art District, the Sanlitun shopping district, which is very popular among foreigners, the Wudaokou nightlife district, filled with bars and clubs, a few areas in the city centre, mostly those at risk of demolition, and the China-Japan Friendship Hospital (*Beifu* 北服), the oldest non-state-established graffiti hall of fame in the city (Crayon film 2012)[9]. Ever since 2007, an increasing number of foreign graffiti writers has arrived in the city, introducing new styles and techniques and massively influencing the Beijing graffiti scene (Bonniger 2018, p. 23). Among those writers, we should mention Zyko (Germany) and Aigor (Europe), who "were showing them [the Chinese writer] the mental or internal side of graffiti" (Feola 2014). Zyko first came to Beijing in 2006, when there were few graffiti around, as he says, and then again in 2008, when the scene was much more active and had completely changed, mainly due to the intense activity of the Beijing Penzi crew. He thus decided to move to the Chinese capital in 2009 (film Crayon 2012). He mostly works alone, in search of his own style, but sometimes also collaborates with local and foreign writers (Valjakka 2016, p. 363). According to Zyko, one of the major problems of making graffiti in China is excessive costs: while spray cans are cheap, they are of extremely poor quality and last three times less than the European ones. He calculated that it costs around 20 euro to make one piece, which is a considerable amount for a Chinese person, meaning only those with adequate financial means can approach this form of art (film Crayon 2012). In terms of style, according to Zyko, the foreign writers who had the greatest impact on Beijing's artists were the German Cantwo (a.k.a. CAN2) and the American Revok (from the MSK crew), also through their work in the city, as well as the AWR crew from Los Angeles (Valjakka 2016, p. 363).

In an interview, Aigor, active in Beijing for a couple of years mostly with

his bombing activity, highlights another difference between China and Europe: although creating graffiti in China is dangerous, it is far easier than in Europe. Since this art form is still poorly known among the Chinese, there is little repression and much curiosity surrounding graffiti (film Crayon 2012). In Europe, writers can take two to five minutes at most to create a piece without being discovered, while in Beijing they can take even up to an hour. Zyko agrees with this view: he speaks of a form of "nice anarchist feeling in the street" that cannot be found in any European city. This form of freedom is the reason he does not want to leave Beijing (*ibid.*).

Other foreign writers present in Beijing in recent times are Mike (a.k.a. Iron Mike), from Stockholm, who has been active since 2011, the Italian Sbam, who arrived in 2012, and Zato, who came in 2013 and is still very active in the city today. What is special about Zato is that he frequently uses Chinese characters in his pieces: most of his works consist of bubble style two-colour throw-ups, in which he transcribes the two Chinese characters *Zatou* 杂投, representing his Chinese tag, often accompanied by a caricature of a stylised man with cross-shaped eyes and a beak-like mouth. His ideal surfaces for writing are shutters, walls and roofs of shops and restaurants, while his favourite areas are those of the *hutongs* of the old city. Sometimes Zato also enjoys writing entire sentences or idiomatic expressions in Chinese characters with enigmatic meanings, such as *Wo bu yao guoqu, wo bu yao weilai* 我不要过去，我不要未来 (I don't want the past, I don't want the present), *Hen huang, hen baoli* 很黄很暴力 (Very yellow, very violent), and *Mei you yiyi* 没有意义 (Without meaning), giving his works a mysterious aura (Feola 2013). The choice of employing Chinese characters in his pieces stems from his desire to make his art accessible to as many people as possible, and this, in his opinion, can only be achieved through the local language. According to Zato, graffiti has no special meaning and should have nothing to do with money, business, or art. Its only aim is to give passers-by the unexpected opportunity to come across new, striking sights (Huang 2016).

New generations: the KTS crew

Due to the international buzz surrounding the graffiti scene, new crews have been sprouting in Beijing since 2007, some long-lived and others with a very short lifespan. Among the latter, we should mention *Jiu Men* 九门 (Nine Doors), which was founded in 2007 and disappeared the following year, and the *Beijing xinshengdai tuyazhe* 北京新生代涂鸦者 (Beijing Cenozoic Writers), formed by university students and active from 2007 to 2009 (Llys 2015). Other more successful crews, which are still active today, are ABS (founded in 2007), KTS (2009), DNA (2010), TMM (2011), Tuns (2013) and YDS (2016) (Bonniger 2018, p. 23).

The KTS crew was founded by Mes and Boers, joined first by Wreck and later by Exas (a.k.a. Swe). This is one of the most respected crews in all of China (Crayon 2017). Its four members are old-school writers, and their activity mainly consists in bombing the city streets (Valjakka 2016, p. 362). Most of their work focuses on the crew's acronym (KTS), which stands for Kill The Streets, later changed to Keep The Smile, or their names tagged-up in Latin letters, alongside bubble style or simple 3D style blockbusters and throw-ups. Nonetheless, early in their careers (and beyond), Mes and Exas, in particular, produced numerous graffiti of their Chinese tags in Chinese characters – *Fengji* 疯奇 (crazy, weird, funky) for Mes and *Lingdan* 灵丹 (panacea, soul) for Exas – using different styles, from the more graphic (and calligraphic) to the more elaborate.

According to Mes, who is now 33, his first encounter with graffiti dates back to 2006, when he was still a high school student: after seeing graffiti on the Internet, he decided to pick up the spray can for the first time. From that moment onwards, graffiti became his purpose in life, and he never gave them up. At the beginning, his goal was to decorate the city by creating aesthetically appealing pieces, but he soon understood the sharp difference between "painting a wall" and "writing graffiti", and started bombing difficult, dangerous places, creating his own distinctive style. About a year and a half after he started making graffiti he met Boers on Baidu Tieba, China's most important online platform, and they started bombing together. At the time, Boers

was a computer science student two or three years older than Mes, who used to paint cartoon style mice. During a graffiti competition in October 2009, Mes and Boers decided to found the KTS crew. Utterly engrossed in his new life, Mes quit high school during his third year so that he could spend every night bombing the streets of Beijing. Together with Boers, he set up a company through which he could use graffiti for commercial purposes, but the venture failed. Mes' parents then started to put pressure on him and forced him to attend various design schools, until they decided to send him to university in Great Britain. Once back in China, again under pressure from his father, Mes started working in a design company, and has since been seen more and more sporadically painting graffiti along the streets of Beijing. A year younger than Mes, Wreck approached the graffiti world in 2008, thanks to the propaganda for the Beijing Olympics and the exponential rise of illegal graffiti in the city. He met Mes in 2009, once again through the platform Baidu Tieba, when KTS was the most important and active crew on the streets of Beijing. Wreck started an intense night-time bombing activity, together with the other two crew members, even venturing to write on trains, which is quite rare in China. The crew initially focused its efforts on the Haidian University District, one of Beijing's key areas, home to the Summer Palace and the Old Summer Palace, where the three writers lived. Later on, they expanded their reach to the entire city. As stated by Wreck himself, the choice of his name is rooted in his desire to have his tag begin with a "W", since no one had used that letter before, as well as in its meaning, evoking the concept of "ruin", which comes close to the perception of what graffiti is for him: a thorny presence in an ordinary landscape (Huang 2016). Because of his intense bombing activity, Wreck has been repeatedly arrested and released on bail, also with the help of his friend Boers. Today, he is a tattoo artist and owns a studio called Delight (*Dengta* 灯塔) located at 46 Fajia Hutong, an alley near Gulou East Street in the city centre, where he brings elements borrowed from graffiti art into his tattoos. His studio is also an important centre for the propagation of graffiti culture and a meeting point for Beijing writers, many of whom have become close friends of

his. Although much less frequently than in the early years of KTS, until a few years ago Wreck could still be seen night-time bombing together with Giant (YDS crew), producing about one throw-up per month. Today, he is out of the scene. He has stated that he has not time to draw on the streets due to various family and work commitments, severe government restrictions, and the increased police monitoring of recent times. Exas was the last to join the crew but, after a very intense period of activity, he moved to New York to attend American schools. There he instantly saw the stark difference between doing graffiti in New York and in Beijing. As Exas says: "I couldn't do anything too complicated or intricate because [in New York] I never had more than ten minutes to throw something up." […] "In Beijing I didn't care who was watching me because when I painted I felt like a god" (Crayon 2017).

Young crews, including women

The DNA crew revolves around the figure of its leader Daboo (*Dabo* 大波). Born in Beijing in 1989, Daboo started writing graffiti in 2005. Up until 2017, when he became a father, his main activity took place at night in the Daxing District, located in the southern part of the city. Here, he filled walls, bridges, and the rubble of demolished buildings with his tag, spray-painting simple to elaborate pieces (Yau 2018). In 2010, he founded the DNA crew together with other two writers. Their aim was to make graffiti for commercial purposes, decorating gyms, cafes, schools, and restaurants. As a result, most of DNA's works are elaborate pieces with an "international" flavour, consisting predominantly of the use of English (the works in Chinese characters are rare) and western puppets.

TMM (The Marginal Man, also known as The ManageMent) was founded at the beginning of 2011 by Clock and Dios, joined shortly afterwards by Gan, Camel and 525. Three members of the crew are not native of Beijing: one is from the Hubei province, one from the Hebei province and one from Canton (Valjakka 2016, pp. 362-363). The crew does not seem to be active anymore, although three of its writers, Clock, Camel and 525, continue

to work individually. Clock mostly creates elaborate pieces, sometimes accompanied by puppets, and frequently works with the female writer Sick. To him, graffiti is a form of entertainment rather than rebellion against the system (see Video section, film Crayon 2012). 525, whose tag is based on his date of birth, prefers the activity of bombing, transcribing his tag also in large scale works. He often collaborates with Wreck of the KTS crew and is the author of some works in Chinese characters.

Camel (a.k.a. Camel617) is extremely good at painting cartoon style puppets with distinctly Chinese features: his characters are often portrayed eating or drinking local delicacies such as Peking duck or Chinese schnapps. These puppets are usually accompanied by balloons with Chinese writings in a very personal graphic style, a sort of title indicating the theme of the piece. He uses the same style in his spray-painted red square seals recalling those used in calligraphy or traditional paintings. Graffiti are a form of rebellion for Camel – although, like all Chinese writers, he knows that there are boundaries that should not be crossed, so he is careful not to paint his works in sensitive places such as Tiananmen Square or on government buildings and is always cautious about the subjects he portrays (Sebag Montefiore 2014). His 2009 work, spray-painted on a wall in Beijing, in which he portrayed an "urban inspector" (*chengguan* 城管) as an evil hooligan, gained him some fame and cost him a fine of 3,000 yuan (about 400 euro). In 2017, he created another important series of works with Chinese characters for the Internet technology company NetEase, with the goal of expressing the concerns of many young Chinese people. He painted five large-scale brightly coloured murals in three different Chinese cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Canton), in which he posed, in very personally styled Chinese characters, some critical questions for today's youth (How can we avoid wasting our fleeting youth? What do we have that cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence? What is the best way to die?), together with some of the answers provided by those same youths (Fan 2017). Finally, Camel has created several stickers, something quite unusual among Chinese writers, in which he reproduces his style and puppets.

The Tuns crew (*tunshi tuya tuandui* 吞噬涂鸦团队), founded in 2013, is the first all-women crew in Beijing[10]. Its Chinese name *Tunshi* 吞噬 – from which the term Tuns comes – means phagocytise, and is intended to express the group' aspiration: to "devour the city" with its pervasive writings. The main exponents of this mission are Zhao, Fatso and Mage, who are devoted both to bombing and to the creation of elaborate pieces containing their tag or the name of the group. They are well versed in the use of both Latin letters and Chinese characters, and in a variety of styles, from bubble to wildstyle. They have set up a company based in Beijing and Shanghai which, like that of the DNA crew, aims to create graffiti for commercial purposes.
The latest crew founded in Beijing is YDS (acronym for *YiDunShun*, 顿顺 "always stealing"). It was founded in May 2016, during *Meeting Neighbourhood*, the major graffiti festival organised every year by the ABS crew in 798 Art District. The crew is made up of six members, the most active being Giant and Gear. Giant is the youngest; he was only 18 when he joined the crew, and yet he had already been painting graffiti in the city for three years. He discovered graffiti in the United States, where he was sent by his mother to attend elementary school and live with his father. Due to health problems, Giant was forced to return to China, and has since devoted himself first to skateboarding, then to rap (he is a freestyle rapper) and finally to graffiti (Huang 2016). His decision to pick up the spray can was greatly influenced by watching the documentary *Style Wars* (1983), directed by Tony Silver, which describes the street hip-hop culture of early 1980s New York (Crayon 2017). This film helped Giant understand that graffiti springs from a form of rebellion against the system and is a product of social marginalisation (Elvita 2017). As he himself stated, the choice of his tag was accidental: "I needed a tag name so I found a book titled Giant and chose that as my name" (Crayon 2017). His Beijing writers of reference and inspiration are Wreck, Sbam and Zato, the most active at the time of his initiation into graffiti art (together with Boers and Gear).
Gear, his fellow crew member, started to write graffiti together with his university colleague Wreck (KTS crew). Besides being a writer, Gear is

also a rapper and a break-dancer, as well as an elementary school art teacher: quite a strange, but successful mix. The meaning of his tag, when used as an adjective, is "Excellent! Strong!!" – the exclamation he hopes the sight of his graffiti will provoke (*ibid.*).

The YDS crew's work is very similar to that of KTS and consists mostly in bombing the streets of the city, tagging the crew or individual writers using spray cans and creating bubble style, 3D style and wildstyle blockbusters or throw-ups. The style of Sope, another crew member, is interesting for his use of contrasting colours and chaotic, broken, "vibrating" curves that create the effect of decomposition and liquefaction. The purpose of his works, through this constant repetition of curves, is to show the corrupt state of things from a "degradation perspective". For Sope, the state of decomposition from which his art draws inspiration is the first evolutionary stage of every natural cycle (Elvita 2017).

Local writers and street artists

Interesting Chinese street artists and writers are still active in Beijing, beside the foreign writers and crews discussed so far. Among these, Biskit and Zeit are definitely worth mentioning. Biskit bombs the streets with his tag through quick throw-ups or elaborate pieces, frequently in collaboration with other writers. Zeit started to make graffiti in Australia and mostly carries on his bombing activity in areas destined to be demolished, creating bubble-style throw-ups of his Chinese tag, *Shijian* 时间 (Time), which is the translation of the German term *zeit*. He also uses Latin letters to write his tag, and usually embellishes his pieces by adorning them with Chinese writing. He strongly believes in the use of Chinese writing in graffiti works made in China (Mouna 2017).

Other writers active today in Beijing are Diego, Mask, Viga, 618, Mczs, Qincy and Poste (Dartnell, Yuansheng 2020; BDMG 2019; Bonniger 2018).

As for street artists, the most important are Qi Xinghua, Stu, Shuo, Robbb and Ge Yu Lu. Qi Xinghua is regarded as "Beijing's first 3D street artist" (Crayon 2017) and "China's most famous practitioner of anamorphic

graffiti" (Wang 2016). He is now 40 years old and has painted the largest existing mural in the world, in Canton, entitled *Lion's Gate Canyon* (Crayon 2017). He runs his own graffiti studio and has worked on many government commissions. His works always include references to Chinese art and culture (such as dragons and pandas), as his intention is to depict the traditional aesthetics and culture of China (Wang 2016). Stu, on the other hand, is an artist who uses spray cans to create circles within which he inserts Chinese decorative elements. He draws inspiration from the Russian graffiti writer AK (film Crayon 2012).

Shuo and Robbb are the only two stencil artists in China. Shuo, referred to by many as the "Chinese Banksy" (Pan 2017), started out as a graffiti artist and then switched to stencils, creating extremely ironic works targeting Chinese society. One of the most popular was made in 2014 and depicts President Xi Jinping in front of a long line of people, including writers and street artists, with the inscription "So busy" above his. The stencil expresses hope that the government will officially acknowledge graffiti art and create space for it in the streets, as for all the other demands of the general public. Due to the political content of his works, Shuo has chosen to stay anonymous. A choice also made by Robbb, who creates life-size stencils depicting Beijing citizens, including children, old people, businesspeople and construction workers, made from photographs taken on the streets and painted on the walls of buildings under demolition. Robbb is a rather prolific artist: more than 200 street art projects bear his name in the city (Lin 2015).

Another interesting street artist is Ge Yu Lu, who graduated in 2017 from the School of Experimental Art of the China Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. In 2013, he hung a sign, replicating the city's street signs, in a street in Beijing with the three characters of his name, *Ge*葛 *Yu*宇 *Lu*路. Having no other road sign, the street has been called "Ge Yu Lu" for no less than four years, even though it originally had a different name. Following the success of this brilliant street art action, Ge Yu Lu repeated the same experiment in a number of other streets in the capital (Pan 2017).

The development stages of Beijing graffiti

Except for the early experiences of Zhang Dali and Li Qiuqiu (1995-2005), the first real development of graffiti spanned the years from 2005 to 2008, when the first two halls of fame were established in the city (at Renmin University and China-Japan Friendship Hospital), the first crews were formed, and the first foreign writers began to operate and influence the emerging scene.

The period from 2009 to 2013, instead, represented the golden age of graffiti in Beijing. At the time, the city was essentially a blank slate for a small number of crews and writers – either Chinese or foreign – working together, and the countless pieces and tags they painted in different parts of the city would remain for weeks or months before being covered up (Crayon 2017). The halls of fame were multiplying: the most important was on Jingmi Road (*Jingmilu* 京密路), a long highway running north-east of the capital from the city centre to the airport, used for the first time in 2010 by the ABS crew. In 2012, it became the longest hall of fame in Beijing. Thus, Jingmi Road, alongside historical places like the 789 Art District, the Sanlitun neighbourhood, Underground Line 10 from Zhichun Road to Wudaokou, the Gulou area in the city centre and Tainchun Road, northwest of Haidian District, were covered with graffiti (Yau 2018; Huang 2016).

Starting from the end of 2014, however, things have changed: the development of graffiti art has significantly slowed down because Beijing has become increasingly expensive and, since the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in 2014, there has been a huge effort by the government to remove all the graffiti in the city (Crayon 2017). Moreover, in recent times, intensification of the government initiative *Embellishing Beijing* is promoting continuous buffing – a process to remove illegal graffiti – by urban inspectors, who incessantly cover up graffiti with grey paint (Bonniger 2018, p. 25). Today, the graffiti scene in Beijing is quite limited: only a handful of graffiti crews are still active, generally making graffiti for commercial purposes (like the ABS, DNA and Tuns crew), and

the total number of active writers is below one hundred (the exact number is actually unknown). According to Zeit, in 2017 "there were 70-80 graffiti writers in Beijing, only 30 of whom were writing regularly" (Mouna 2017); for Giant, the writers were only 30, of whom 15 were active (Crayon 2017). Andc of the ABS crew is even more pessimistic, stating that less than ten writers were active in Beijing in 2018 (Yau 2018).
Whatever the number, what matters are the pieces, and some of them, be they old or new, are really worth exploring and delving into, particularly with regard to three crews: the Beijing Penzi, the Kwanyin Clan and the ABS crew, which embody the entire history of Beijing graffiti and have opened up new possibilities for the development of graffiti in China.

The first crew in Beijing: the BJPZ

The Beijing Penzi (BJPZ) was the first crew established in the city of Beijing. It was founded in 2006 by Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528), More (a.k.a. Mo), Soos and Als (from France), and was joined, two years later, by Zak, Quer and Corw (Valjakka 2016, p. 361). If truth be told, the date of their foundation is not entirely certain: in one interview, Li Qiuqiu states that it was around 2005, in another it was 2006 (*ivi*, p. 369), and on one of their blogs they mention February 2007. This is due to the informal nature with which the crew was formed: they are a group of friends who met almost by chance and share a passion for graffiti and (in several cases) skateboarding, which was the reason for their collaboration. 41-year-old More, whose real name is Wang Mo, recounts that he met Li Qiuqiu, the crew's veteran, through skateboarding, and that the Beijing Penzi crew was born out of their desire to do something together (film Crayon 2012). Zak, whose real name is Zhang Lei, says that the idea to join the crew came after meeting More at his friend's Soos' birthday party. Only later did he have the opportunity to get in touch and hang out with Li Qiuqiu. In short, the foundation of this crew springs from a series of fortuitous and fortunate coincidences.

Beijing Penzi is an all-round crew. As authors of both elaborate pieces and night-time bombing (which they love the most), the crew members collaborate with famous brands, and also create socially motivated works. They use both the Latin alphabet and Chinese characters in their large-scale works as well as in their tags or lettering on the side of their pieces, and all three Chinese co-founders of the crew (0528, Soos and More) write in both Latin letters and Chinese characters.

Moreover, many figures animate the pieces of these writers, not only the large works but also the quick acts of street bombing, always with a keen eye on bringing out their Chinese cultural background. Still, the presence of the French artist Als proves the internationality and openness of the crew. Als undoubtedly influenced the development and evolution of the style of the entire group with his western background.

In the words of Li Qiuqiu, the name *Beijing Penzi* 北京喷子, which means "Beijing writers", was chosen because the term *penzi* – literally meaning "sprayer, atomizer" and, by extension, "writer" – is used in the Beijing dialect to refer to a garrulous person, and is also the name of a firearm. These two meanings tell us a lot about why the crew was created and what its programmatic aim is. As a matter of fact, according to Li Qiuqiu "[…] We would often have fun bombing together with friends, and so we decided to start our own crew" (interview, 2016).

The idea behind the crew is therefore to reproduce a loquacious expressiveness that floods the audience of passers-by with a thousand words, using the force of a gunshot, but replacing bullets with written messages. What unites the members of the group is the pleasant sense of fulfilment that bombing gives them. The name of the crew also reveals their background and other purposes that hold them together:

> It's not difficult to understand, from the name of our crew, that we come from the streets. We grew up immersed in the underground culture and we want to carry it forward and promote it. We wish to change the perception of graffiti art and make sure that graffiti is no longer seen as scribbles on

> the walls but can be accepted and appreciated by everyone. […] Our aim is to make graffiti in as Chinese a style as possible. All over the world graffiti is made using the English alphabet, but ours is not. In our works, we want to represent traditional architecture, the faces of Chinese people […] and Chinese writing, which is unique in the world. We don't care what others may think of us, this is what we want to keep doing. That's what graffiti is for us: we "play" with our culture. After all, we are "the Beijing writers" (*Beijing penzi*) and our background comes from the city most steeped in culture in all China. (*Ibid.*)

Therefore, the goal of their art is to develop a style that mirrors their Chinese origins (Valjakka 2016, p. 361). Indeed, in their works we find pieces in Chinese characters, Chinese writing and figurative elements that constantly recall the world of "China".

In memory of the Sichuan earthquake victims

The Beijing Penzi's 2008 work entitled *R.I.P. 512 Sichuan Earthquake* (Pic. 4) is representative of their idea of graffiti art. It was created on one of the outer fencing walls of Renmin University, one of the most important halls of fame in Beijing, by Soos, 0528 and More, to commemorate the victims of the devastating earthquake which occurred in the Sichuan region (north-western China) on 12 May 2008, causing around 70,000 deaths. The acronym R.I.P. in the title of the work means "Rest in Peace", a farewell from the crew to those who died in the tragedy. The work is composed of a portion with Chinese characters on the left, in which a *chengyu* (a four-character idiomatic phrase) reads *Zhongzhichengcheng* 众支（志）成城 (unity is strength). This is an incitement not to be discouraged even in the darkest moments, but to work together to face the immense catastrophe and find the strength to recover.

The four characters composing the *chengyu* fade from red to yellow on a black background, and their style resembles the running or semi-cursive script (*xingshu* 行书)[11] used in Chinese calligraphy, in which the charac-

ter strokes are joined together by a single quick stenographic stroke. Its thickness varies constantly, its shapes are rounded, and the beginnings of lines are evident and allow the public to mentally retrace the agitated rhythm of this spray "brushstroke". Altogether it reproduces the upheaval and brutality of the event. The gestures and poses of the figures portrayed next to the written portion echo the agitation of such moments. To the immediate left, three rescuers from the National Rescue Team, wearing red jackets and helmets, work tirelessly to remove the rubble with their bare hands, trying to save a little girl from the wreckage. The expression on the child's face is one of terror and all around her is death and despair. By her side, there is a hooded young man with a blurred face trying to rescue another crying child, holding him steadily in his arms. Next to him there is a masked nurse, whose face is unrecognizable, calling for reinforcements with her arm raised. They are all symbols of the kind of humanity that, in the midst of so much despair, rolled up its sleeves to help those in need, and represent the unity of purpose and aid[12] proclaimed by the slogan in characters.

The 3D style number 512 completes the work and stands for the date of the catastrophe, which occurred on the 12th of May. The fill-in colour is red, like the blood that was spilled, while the black depth represents the darkness of the catastrophe, and the yellow outline is a longed for glimmer of light highlighting the importance of the number. At the top of the work there are the artists' signatures: from left to right we find the names BJPZ Crew in blue, followed by SOOS in black, 0528 in red, and MORE in yellow. On the left side, there is one last inscription on the protruding edge of the wall: *Jinian Sichuan* 纪念四川 (Commemorate Sichuan). The highly graphic cursive style with which Soos created this element, repeated in the *penzi* 喷子 (writer) characters situated vertically below it, recalls the zigzagging of the seismograph waves reproduced to the side, and stands as a reminder of the earthquake.

Underground Basketball

In addition to pieces with a strong social content, Beijing Penzi has created several works on commission. As Li Qiuqiu stated, the crew has collaborated with various brands, like Tiger Beer (part of Heineken Pacific Asia), Lee Jeans, Casio G-Shok (a wristwatch brand), Adidas, Nike, Panasonic and Haier (a Chinese home appliance company). We should also remember that this crew had a commercial orientation even before it was founded: as early as 2001, Li Qiuqiu and his friends created a brand called *Shehui* 社会 (Society) linked to the world of skateboarding, with the purpose of promoting events, activities and products connected with spreading this sport in China along with its related cultural industry[13]. A few years later, together with the other members of the crew, Li Qiuqiu opened a design studio in Caochangdi – one of the most important art districts in the capital – where he could sell his art, write graffiti on commission, and keep decorating skateboards and other similar objects (Feola 2013)[14].

The most famous among the crew's commercial pieces was the one created in 2007 for Nike (Pic. 1). At the time of its creation, it was the tallest graffiti piece in China: 10 metres high and 3.15 metres wide[15]! It took Soos, 0528 and More two days to complete, and they only employed spray cans for its creation. As in the previous piece, here we find an inscription in Chinese characters, together with a figure with Chinese somatic features and traditional Chinese decorative architectural elements. The work is thus close to a manifesto of the search for "Chineseness" that the crew's works strive for. The inscription in Chinese characters can be found in the top section of the piece and stands as its title: *Wo de lanqiu you jietou dazao* 我的篮球由街头打造 (My way of playing basketball is born in the street). It recalls the underground street culture of New York's inner city and of Chinese cities, where playing basketball is a way to hang out with friends. The inscription sets out to connect the place where graffiti art was born, the USA, to the place where it is now developing, China, while obviously referencing the sport that is the subject of the commercial advertising requested by Nike. The characters are written in 3D style,

the fill-in colour is red with beige inlays, decorations and underlines, and the outline is white with dark green depths. This triumph of colours and decorations underlines the sense of light-heartedness with which the piece is imbued. The writing style is rounded and playful, calling to mind the idea of leisure associated with the theme of the graffiti. In the lower part of the piece, a puppet represents a basketball player intent on juggling the ball in the street. He is wearing a pair of dark glasses and a cap slung backwards, which make us think of an outdoor game. His hip-hop look seems to bring him very close to the creators of the piece, but the extremely large hands with which he catches the ball, on which the Nike logo is clearly visible, are a good reminder of the purpose of the work and its commissioner. The outdoor setting is also highlighted by the purple background, over which the player stands out. The skyline is an ancient Chinese city with pagoda roofs and a temple in the middle, a distinctive element of the work of 0528. The whole piece is executed in a very captivating cartoon style. The graffiti is framed by a vine full of yellow buds, which is a recurring element in Soos' works and his second signature. Inside one of these buds, right in the centre of the work, stands the inscription "Nike" and, below it, the three tags of the authors of the piece (0528, Soos and More) and that of BJPZ.

The piece was created on a panel installed on the outside wall of a Yaxin shop selling branded Nike products in China. The shop is located in Dongsi, in the city centre near the Forbidden City, and represents one of the sanctuaries of sportswear in the capital. Right beside the shop stands a KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), the American fast-food chain restaurant specialised in fried chicken, which is very popular in China. Although some might disapprove of it, the location chosen by BJPZ is an emblem of the American-style Chinese consumerism typical of our times. Graffiti, born to fight this kind of inequality-generating society, here integrates to perfection with the surroundings, even becoming an unexpected catalyser and promoter of a hyper-consumerist and disengaged society. There appears to be an inherent contradiction; so why? What lies behind the need to make such graffiti?

When the crew is asked why they commit to this kind of commercial activity, they answer that this is the only way to earn money to be reinvested on the streets. The crew uses their earnings to buy spray cans for their favourite activity: bombing the streets of Beijing at night.

Street bombing

The BJPZ tags covered the city for a few years, especially the 3.3 underground car park in the Sanlitun neighbourhood, the 798 Art District, the overground Wudakou line, Nanluoguxiang street in the city centre, the Dawang bridge and the Xinjiekou area, as well as some of the main highways connecting the city, more precisely on Third and Fourth Ring Road North and the Third Ring Road West. Besides the traditional tagging-up, the 3D or bubble style throw-ups, and some bubble style blockbusters (mostly with

Fig. 4. BJPZ crew (Soos, More, 0528), *Puppets and tags*, 2008, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Baiziwan. Photographed by Llys on 27 March 2008. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

the name Beijing Penzi), the crew members enjoyed playing with puppets or easily recognizable stylised figures in writing their tags (Fig. 4). 0528 draws young boys' faces with oblong heads and typical Chinese features (Fig. 4, on the right); More, whose tag seems to reproduce a flattened face with a beak and two large ears, adds a fun cone-shaped puppet with two prominent incisors and round ears (Fig. 4, centre); and Soos paints a Xiao R (小R, Young R), a puppet with a flame-shaped head featuring only two dots serving as eyes, tapering hands and feet, and a stout body (Fig. 4, on the left). This puppet is reminiscent of the shape of a virus whose task seems to be that of infesting the streets. When painted together with More's puppet, Xiao R is often accompanied by swirls and a beating heart, as a clear reference to the passion bonding these strange characters. The swirls, called *xiandao* 线道, literally "roads of lines" (Llys 2015), are a second recurring feature in Soos' works. They became his signature style, together with another element he invented, the "jellyfish clouds" (*shuimo yiyun* 水母意云): little cloud-shaped floral outgrowths arising from the tentacles of a jellyfish. The idea of the jellyfish is echoed in the sinuosity of the stems of these strange pom-pom flowers (see the buds in Pic. 1). The inspiration for the jellyfish clouds comes from the *Kongming deng* 孔明灯, a type of oil lamp with steam vents invented by one of the greatest strategists of ancient China, Zhuge Liang (181-234), whose public name was Kongming. The jellyfish clouds, together with Chinese writings, faces, and architectures, are meant to enhance a sense of "Chineseness", often expressed in BJPZ's works.

Li Qiuqiu, the forerunner of Chinese graffiti

The intense bombing activity that has been a feature of BJPZ since its foundation has decreased over time. After a few years of hard work on the streets, the crew members are now actively working mostly on commission, and only rarely do they have time to create on the streets (Valjakka 2016, p. 361). The reason is that most of them have families, therefore the time on their hands is limited and they need a more stable occupation to provide for their household. For example, Li Qiuqiu is now the father of twins

and, therefore, has little time for graffiti, especially those on the streets that fulfilled him the most (Huang 2016). In fact, as he states himself, although the crew is still active, each of its members now has other jobs, making it difficult to create pieces all together (interview, 2021).

Among the various members of the crew, Li Qiuqiu is the only one to have really made graffiti history, not only in Beijing, but in the whole of China. He is considered by many to be "the father of Beijing graffiti" and the leader of the movement. For this reason, he earned the nickname of "old boss" (*laoda* 老大) (see Video section, film Crayon 2012). Li Qiuqiu was born in 1978 and is now 46 years old, but he started creating graffiti in 1996 (Valjakka 2016, p. 361) when he was only 18. At the beginning he did not write; instead, he depicted simple figures with his spray cans. Around 1999-2000, he started to write his tag 0528, marking his territory around the old city of Beijing (Wang 2016). Actually, when asked when he started graffitiing, Li Qiuqiu answers: "I believe that everything dates back to my elementary school days; I have loved to paint ever since I was a child, and back then I often used chalk and brushes to draw and write on walls" (interview, 2016).

In short, he was born to be a writer – one who initially, however, lacked a tag. About this choice, Li Qiuqiu recounts: "0528 is a reference to my birthday [the 28th of May]; I chose this tag in the hope that everyone would remember when I was born!" (interview, 2016). This may sound a bit eccentric, but is reminiscent of the numeric tags of the first writers in New York, although those were linked to the street numbers of their homes. By using his birthday as his personal tag, 0528 would later be emulated by a member of another important Beijing crew the TMM crew, whose tag is 525 as a reference to the writer's date of birth, the 25th of May. Li Qiuqiu thus seems to have set an example even in the choice of tag, but his influence goes further than this.

Li Qiuqiu's initiation to graffiti art is linked to another of his great passions: skateboarding. Indeed, Li Qiuqiu often went to the Wudaokou neighbourhood to practice with his skateboard together with friends, and this offered him the opportunity to soak up the hip-hop culture (Huang

2016). As we already mentioned, it was thanks to this passion that he met More, and they subsequently came up with the idea to form the BJPZ crew (for More, see *ibid.*). In 2001, he also founded the *Shehui* 社会 (see § *Basket underground*) brand together with other friends, which is still very active today and for which he continues to work, dealing with graphics and brand dissemination.

Although Li Qiuqiu never disdained the commercial side of graffiti, the main purpose of his art is strongly linked to the old school and the wish to bomb the city with his tags and pieces as an act of denunciation and rebellion, even though his works are actually neither seditious nor subversive. More than 10 years ago, 0528 refused to create Olympics themed graffiti in the 798 Art District, even though commissioned by the government. This was because, as he says, he wanted to feel free to do whatever he wanted, wherever he wanted, never allowing things to be imposed from above (film Crayon 2012)[16]. Since he sees himself as a free spirit, his "contacts" with the police have not been at all rare (Wang 2016)[17]. As he recalls, the first encounter was during high school, when he was making graffiti near the Temple of Heaven, one of the city's renowned monuments. The policemen confiscated his ID card, which his father demanded back the next day, provided Li Qiuqiu restored the wall to its original condition before his intervention. His worst experience was in 2010, in Amsterdam, where painting on walls is a crime. He was arrested, held in custody for 24 hours and had to pay a fine of 370 euro to get out of prison, an exorbitant amount for his means! The funniest anecdote happened in 2006 in Tianjin, a big city close to Beijing. On that occasion, the police approached him while he was making graffiti on a government building wall – the Municipality – which was considered utterly unacceptable. They took him to the police station, but here one of the policemen declared he knew and liked his art. He mentioned to his colleagues that the person they had detained was an artist and, through his intervention, Li Qiuqiu was released after 24 hours of custody without even having to pay a fine (film Crayon 2012).

These "encounters" with the police were frequent also for the other crew mem-

bers. For example, More said that he and other writers happened to be picked up by policemen quite regularly because they mostly bomb at night. For him, the most troubling experience happened while creating graffiti in Shanxi, a region near the municipality of Beijing, where he had to pay a 300 yuan fine (around 40 euro) to be released (*ibid.*). Zak, on the other hand, was first detained by the police when he was writing his tag with a marker on an underground carriage door at the Andingmen station in Beijing. As he explains, this was the first of a long series of arrests, and every time the police forced him to cover up his writings. From his own experience, he also learned that during festivities and major city events, detention is more likely because police checks are more frequent (*ibid.*). Unlike Europe, China has no specific law regulating vandalism on walls, so writers are generally tolerated, and punishments are minimal – usually small fines or an order to cover up their work – although this does not mean going unnoticed by the police. However, as experienced by Li Qiuqiu in Amsterdam, things are very different in the West!

Besides being considered the father of Beijing graffiti, Li Qiuqiu is certainly a pioneer of the development of a "Chinese style". He was arguably the first to experiment with the use of Chinese characters in his graffiti, or at least his are the first of which we have photographic evidence. Indeed, among the first pictures of pieces with such characters in Beijing are two works by Li Qiuqiu (Pic. 2, Fig. 5). These were captured in 2005 by Liu Yuansheng (a.k.a. Llys), a retired professor with a passion for photography who has been documenting the development of local graffiti art since 2004, going around the city in search of works to take pictures of and share through his official blog. In the first work (Pic. 2), Li Qiuqiu painted the head of a black man on the left, his tag 0528 in the middle, and the two characters of the brand *Shehui* 社会 (Society) on the left. The character depicted is typical of the initial stage of his career, when he used to draw enormous heads of men with half-closed eyes, full lips, a snub nose, sometimes with sunglasses and a bald head or with the features of a man of colour. The style is always caricature-like, and the idea behind these big heads probably comes from the giant profiles used by Zhang Dali

in his series *Dialogue and Demolition* (Fig. 2). Li Qiuqiu himself admits that Zhang Dali was somehow an influence for his art (Valjakka 2016, p. 361), together with other street artists like Banksy, Bonzai, Hobey, Kobra and Chinaman (Li 2016)[18]. As for the structure of this work, we can see the tag 0528 in the middle, rendered in 3D style with blue and light blue double depths and no fill-in. The tag is stroked by the large hand of the curly-haired character on the left, introducing a sense of continuity between these two elements. The colouring and the sinuous progression of the writing evoke sea waves, and the drips under the number recall an aquatic atmosphere. It is not by chance that the two Chinese characters on the right stand out on a background of blue bubbles, the same colour as the writing: the fill-in is light blue, the outline is white, and the depths are blue. The work was created in Wudaokou, one of the most international and graffiti-rich neighbourhoods in Beijing, on the enclosing walls of a residential area that isolate it from the rest of the neighbourhood, like a ghetto markedly separating the wealthy from the rest of the population. The place was not chosen randomly, but obviously hides an underlying social criticism. The writing style used for the Chinese characters is geometric and reminiscent of "regular script" (*kaishu* 楷书), an easily intelligible calligraphic style where each stroke is distinct and discernible.

We can find an evolution of this geometric style in works like *Bie feihua* 别废话 (No superfluous words, 2006), whose lines reveal the influence of the graphic style used in the tagging-up and of the bubble style used in works like *Penzi'er* 喷子儿 (2005, Fig. 5). Compared to *Shehui* 社会 (Pic. 2) of 2005, in works like *Bie feihua* or others created slightly later some of the strokes are rounded and appear more fluid-like, without however losing their geometric shape completely. This leads to Li Qiuqiu's writing style, in which the strokes are sometimes rounded, sometimes orthogonal, in a skilful interplay of delicate balances.

The second piece with Chinese characters from 2005 of which we have photographic evidence is *Penzi'er* 喷子儿 (Fig. 5). It was created at the 798 Art District, another historically important place for Beijing graffiti. It is

Fig. 5. Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528), *Penzi'er* 喷子儿 (*Writer*), 2005, spray paint on wall, Beijing, 798 Art District. Photographed by Llys on 12 June 2005. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

composed of three characters, *pen zi er* 喷子儿, which together mean "writer". The first two characters are the same used in the crew's name (*penzi*), to which the suffix *er* "儿" – a typical ending of the Beijing slang – is added. This small addition made the authorship of the piece, or at least the writer who created it, unequivocal. The writing style thoroughly differs from the other 2005 work (Pic. 2): this features a very rounded bubble style in which the character strokes are joined together, as in running script (*xingshu*). 3D style is employed too: the fill-in is a triumph of colours and nuances ranging from blue to green and red, while the depths and outline are black. This mixture of styles, with multicoloured three-dimensional characters written lengthwise, whose strokes are stretched, rounded and stenographic as in running hand script, and in which the thickness of the strokes always varies like in calligraphy, is a very distinctive stylistic feature of Li Qiuqiu's

works. As in *Shehui* (Pic. 2), the background is a tangle of bubbles, waves are depicted within the characters (in the central section), and the face of a seal (or penguin) appears in the bottom left-hand corner. All elements that, again, are reminiscent of aquatic settings. Thus, through the marine atmosphere, in these first two pieces (Pic. 2 and Fig. 5) Li Qiuqiu seems to disclose a world in which everything – waves, bubbles, architecture, walls, street art – is fluid and fleeting, while also granting a touch of liveliness to the composition, as we occasionally find in his graffiti.

Another important work in which Li Qiuqiu abundantly employs Chinese characters is the one he created in June 2006 in the underground car park of the 3.3 mall, in the Sanlitun neighbourhood (Fig. 6). This piece was part of a work commissioned to 0528 and other famous writers by the owner of the mall, with the purpose of attracting young customers. The project proved so successful that it was repeated in 2011, and some of the graffiti made on that occasion are still standing today (Bonniger 2018, p. 22)[19].

Li Qiuqiu's piece, which stretches over two different portions of the wall, consists of two puppets, an inscription in Chinese characters, and various other one-liner Chinese and English writings. The first cartoon style puppet depicts a little pig with a helmet, her fingers raised in a sign of victory. She is portrayed wearing a summer dress with the character *chi* 吃 (to eat) at the centre. Next to her is the large inscription *Wan 65 jiu shi xintiao* 玩65就是心跳 (Playing 65 is heart-stopping). The number 65 refers to one of the biggest online videogame platforms in China and expresses the intent to target a young audience. The 3D style is achieved with striped red and light blue fill-ins, and purple depths and outline. The charactering style is reminiscent of running script with many strokes joined in a single "brush-stroke". The strokes are always sinuous and rounded, like marshmallows. This style is the upgrade of the artist's early bubble style and will often be used by Li Qiuqiu in other pieces (Fig. 5).

The expression in characters *Wan 65 jiu shi xintiao* 玩65就是心跳 can also be found on the second puppet's cap. Here, the calligraphic style is similar, but the strokes are simple black lines obtained by means of a single spray

Fig. 6. Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528), *Wan 65 jiu shi xintiao* 玩65就是心跳 (*Playing 65 is heart-stopping*), 7 May 2006, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Sanlitun, underground car park, mall 3.3. Photographed by Llys on 21 August 2006. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

of paint. The same captivating graphic writing style also occurs in the word "Fuck" on the puppet's cap, in the characters *kaishi* 开始 (lit. to start) placed in the direction of his finger, and in the tag 0528 below his hand (the last two elements are also found in the other section of the work). The dots with which the lines end and the decorations that highlight them are typical of the style adopted here. This type of writing is also found in many of Li Qiuqiu's later works, particularly in his tags.

The second puppet is a writer, or in any case a young man imbued with hip-hop culture, as is clear from his clothes (cap and large T-shirt), his grumpy expression and the insulting word on his cap. He has the features of 0528's

puppets (large face, almond-shaped eyes, full lips and snub nose) and the somatic traits are those of a young Chinese man. The puppet's colours are unrealistic (purple skin, yellow mouth and eyes, red shading), but recall the colours used in the other section of the piece and in the arrows in the background. The choice of the puppet is certainly linked to the work's target audience and to the intention of offering an alter ego of the non-conformist soul of the new generation, with which young people can identify.

Even though it is a commercial piece, this graffiti is of great importance for the stylistic development of Li Qiuqiu's art because it displays writing styles and characters that will become representative of his future production: the writing style of the characters will be found in other similar works done on the streets, the puppet of the young writer is a clear evolution of the balding heads and faces depicted before, and the single black line writing style will become a signature of his later works. This writing style will also feature in a recurring expression used in his graffiti, *Bie feihua* 别废话 (No superfluous words), generally used in his bombing activity. The style is very graphic, with stretched final strokes, and numerous circles and hooks. It stands as a warning against the meaninglessness of language currently pervading everyday life, and against the flooding of political, social and economic information to which we are subjected on a daily basis. This over-exposure to language often leads to a loss of meaning, now as in the past. In China, a similar process occurred during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when everything was reduced to slogans – forced and meaningless repetitions of propagandistic statements. Li Qiuqiu, instead, appears to tell us that language is a serious matter, and that words must be weighed and not wasted; rather, they should be selected and filled with meaning because narrative is what creates meaning, and narrative is nothing but a "meaningful" concatenation of words – interesting food for thought for passers-by, who absent-mindedly come across these writings while strolling around the city.

As mentioned, Li Qiuqiu often uses the Chinese language in his works in an attempt to grab the attention of his audience and make his pieces under-

standable. To do this, in addition to characters he uses many Chinese visual elements, favouring faces with oriental somatic features (Fig. 3) – which sometimes look almost like caricatures of Mao (as in one of his graffiti created in 2006, again in the 3.3 mall car park) – dragons (as in a 2012 piece where an enormous dragon holds a *mah-jong* tile in his claws), or bamboo and lotus flowers on plum branches. Why does Li Qiuqiu choose these very elements? The Chinese face is something viewers can identify with, and the depiction of Mao is emblematic of modern China, being an image to which Chinese people are used, if not inured. Suffice it to consider the propaganda posters that covered the walls of the city during the Cultural Revolution (Landsberger, Min, Duo 2015) and the huge portrait of Mao that still stands in Tiananmen Square, looming over the red walls of the Forbidden City. The dragon is the most prominent creature in Chinese tradition and represents the emperor's alter ego. The lotus flower is another symbol often associated with the East, being the Buddhist emblem of purity. Finally, the bamboo and the plum are considered two of the so-called "four noble ones" in Chinese pictorial tradition: the straight, evergreen, hollow and blending bamboo symbolises modesty, honesty, rectitude and open-mindedness, characteristics which are traditionally attributed to the perfect Chinese gentleman (Illouz 1989, p. 57); while the plum, with its bare, gnarled branches dotted with delicate little flowers, embodies vigour, longevity, endurance and independence (*ivi*, p. 60).

Thus, the use of these elements in his graffiti shows Li Qiuqiu's effort to draw on Chinese tradition and evoke its rich ancient culture, as declared in the crew's intentions. The goal is to bring Chinese people closer to graffiti – an unfamiliar art form – through familiar elements, and, at the same time, bring some "Chineseness" into his art, so as to make it unique.

Li Qiuqiu did not merely portray this universe; he reinvented it in a perfectly innovative way. Not only did he rethink graffiti in caricature or cartoon form and rearrange traditional elements (for example, sometimes portraying lotus flowers on plum branches). He took things further. He brought to life a completely new and distinctive Chinese entity called *Fangshen* 房神

(Spirit of the House), inspired by traditional architecture, and made it one of his stylistic features. This entity is the personification of the traditional Chinese house (Pic. 3): its front door is the rapt face of an almost meditative or perhaps somnolent spirit, the roof serves as its hair or a kind of sumptuous hat, and the small columns at the side of the door become two long locks of hair contouring the face. Chinese lanterns sometimes sprout from the two locks of hair, resembling elastic bands from which other fringes of fake hair emerge. In some graffiti, we see the body of the spirit below the "architectural" face, wearing traditional clothes, as well as the enclosure walls of the house that extend to the right and left of the doorway in a circle and become a supporting element for a large bamboo basket on the spirit's shoulders, full of mountain peaks and white clouds. The peaks are reminiscent of the so-called "Sacred Mountains", home to the Taoist deities, while the clouds resemble the traditional "decorative cloud motif" (*yunwen* 云纹), often found in ancient Chinese artifacts. Finally, the hands and gestures of the spirit occasionally seem to mimic typical Chinese martial arts poses or certain *mudra* (hand positions) of the Buddha. In the same way, his face can transfigure into the shape of a panda, one of the symbols of China.

Hence, everything about this "Spirit of the House" evokes its unmistakably Chinese origins. Even its name originates from a folkloristic belief: in China, the term "Spirit of the House" designates wild plants growing on the roofs of houses to anchor the tiles, making them more stable. The name *washen* (瓦神) – "spirits of the house", "deities of the tiles" – comes from this. These plants were considered a good omen for the family members living in the house on which they grew, and they were also used in Chinese pharmacopoeia to treat injuries. They are very resilient since they grow in harsh conditions and withstand all kinds of weather. By choosing the name *Fangshen*, Li Qiuqiu thus seeks to evoke the spirit of resistance and resilience embodied by these plants, calling for its return to the old neighbourhoods of his city, which are increasingly being disfigured by aggressive and brutal property speculations. The puppet's name was later changed to *Fanxian* (梵仙, celestial figure called Fan)[20], with Buddhist and Taoist references. *Fan-*

xian can be literally translated as "immortal Buddhist": in Chinese, *Fan* 梵 means "Buddhist", while *Xian* 仙 means "immortal Taoist". This because Li Qiuqiu believed the name to be more romantic, with a more poetic, less direct and immediate flavour. The idea of "spirit, deity" (*shen*) has thus been replaced by "immortal" (*xian*), which are two distinct concepts. The spirit or deity is an entity that resides permanently in Heaven, while a Taoist immortal is a person who has earned eternal life by practising asceticism and austerity. The artists thus chose to emphasise the link with worldliness and factual human origin.
As Li Qiuqiu explained:

> It is a series I started thinking about in 2003, inspired by people who work carrying goods on their backs in the mountain areas of Yunnan (a province in southwest China). In everyday life, we all seem like machines that repeat the same actions, tasks and daily routines over and over again. That is exactly what happens to these mountain carriers, even though they endure quite a different lifestyle. They keep going despite their hardships. I was inspired by their spirit, their bravery before difficulties and courage to take responsibility. I therefore combined the most oriental architecture with the baskets on the shoulders of these mountain carriers to mirror the attitude and the place where I come from. I dressed up various puppets and animals with this harness and portrayed them in a half cartoonish, half realistic style to give them the divine aura of celestial creatures. From my studies of Buddhism and Taoism, I realised that becoming immortal or a deity is not the ultimate goal; the aim is rather to convey love and good-heartedness. This is what inspired the name *Fanxian*. I have always sought to express experiences, feelings and states of mind through an exemplary and distinctive image […]. (Interview, 2021)

Although Li Qiuqiu imagined the *Fanxian* in 2003, he first portrayed them in 2007, using canvas for his early experiments. In that same year, 0528 started depicting traditional roofs on walls, the same that would serve as "hats" for his future

Fanxian. The first outdoor *Fanxian* were made in 2008. The first piece on a wall of which we have photographic evidence was made in the 798 Art District, while the first on a panel was commissioned by Nike and reproduced on the wall of the Nike 706 Art Space at 798 for the inauguration of a Lebron Experience Center project promoting the game of basketball (and its products) in China. From that time on, as Li Qiuqiu himself states, *Fanxian* became the symbol of his art (interview, 2016). This element is still very much present in his work and appears in various guises: a lute or flute player, a panda or tiger, a surfer or seal, its transformations allowing us to retrace all the stages of Li Qiuqiu's stylistic evolution. The most successful combination of the *Fanxian* with its setting may be found on the walls of buildings under demolition. In such instances, the graffiti seem to restore a soul to places from which it had been stolen and shattered, making these soon-to-disappear constructions "immortal". This is the function of such celestial creatures: to continue inhabiting places that, even when materially demolished by the fury of bulldozers, are still "spiritually" alive and narrate the lives of the people who once lived there. Li Qiuqiu's work here acquires a polemical vein and becomes a subtle denunciation against unbridled speculation and the tragic force of the mass demolitions imposed by the government, which have destroyed the historical and social fabric of much of ancient Beijing.

Although Li Qiuqiu's artistic production is now mainly marked by the *Fanxian*, he continues to use Chinese writing extensively in his works and to make graffiti consisting of characters. An example of this is a recent work produced in 2020 with Corw, depicting the expression *Qingwu tuya* 请勿涂鸦 (Please no graffiti) (Pic. 5). The piece has a distinctly political orientation as it was created on Jingmi Road, Beijing's most important hall of fame for some time now, and once home – as Li Qiuqiu himself says – to numerous graffiti. Later, these were all buffed by the government and replaced by a long, grey and anonymous wall dotted with the black stencil inscriptions *Qingwu tuya* 请勿涂鸦 "No graffiti" posted by the government itself. As an act of protest, Li Qiuqiu and Corw decided to paint graffiti with the same text, but using bright colours and fun animations so as to brighten the blank

wall that had once been the heart of a shared creativity. As a result of this act of artistic rebellion, many other writers followed suit, once more filling the wall with graffiti: a fine example of a peaceful protest with spray cans.
In conclusion, we can consider Li Qiuqiu as a true pioneer of graffiti art in China and the creator of a Chinese style in which everything can be traced back to its particular authorship, from bombing to elaborate pieces, from simple writing to figurative and decorative elements (which seem to be veering increasingly towards street art). Li Qiuqiu is, in fact, one of the few who managed to move from emulating western styles and stylistic features to creating something new and original that is recognisably Chinese: a true benchmark for the development of graffiti throughout China.

The Kwanyin Clan: searching for a Chinese style

Among the numerous crews that have been operating in the city of Beijing for the past 20 years, the Kwanyin Clan plays a prominent role. The crew was founded in June 2006 in the 798 Art District by EricTin (a.k.a. Tin), Yumi, Quan and Jev (a.k.a. Jer), joined in 2007 by Nat(uo), Ap (Art), Keno, Viga, Jak and Scav (a.k.a. Scar) (Valjakka 2016, p. 361). The number of crew members has always fluctuated considerably. According to EricTin, in 2009 the crew consisted of nine members: Ap, Keno, Scar, Jer, Tin, Yumi, Viga, Nat and Jak, who joined the crew that year; while in 2008 there were 12 members: Daiyan (Quanr), Liu Zheng (Guantou, Eric_Tin), Song Tongshu (Yumi), Zheng Xuezhi (Apart), Jianshu (Jer), Lu Daning (Nat), Xu Yan (Scar), Lu Jiayin (Joey), Tang Mi (Keno), Xu Ou (Pluto), Xue Wenhao (Viga) and Jitou (Ctn) (see Video section, *Guanyin* 观音 2008). Only four members of the crew are currently active: EricTin, Viga, Jjj and Shala. The number varies, partly due to the sense of openness that characterises the crew. On the other hand, some of its members dedicated only a short period of their lives to graffiti as a hobby, and then returned to more stable occupations, as is widely common among Chinese crews (Valjakka 2015, p. 263).

The Kwanyin Clan is one of the first crews created in the capital and the most representative of a strand of research within graffiti art in China called *Chinese Style Graffiti* (*Zhongguo tese de tuya yishu* 中国特色的涂鸦艺术), involving the use of Chinese characters and very strong references to one's own artistic and cultural tradition. The crew's programmatic intention is, in fact, to merge graffiti art with Chinese culture, spreading this art form in contemporary China. Their Flickr page reads: "Our crew is committed to the dissemination and development of graffiti art in China. Explore the fusion of graffiti art with China, has always been the direction of our crew" (Flickr Kwanyin Clan).

The choice of the crew's name is also perfectly in line with this intention: Kwanyin (*Guanyin* 观音) explicitly refers to the Bodhisattva Guanyin, one of the most important deities in the Buddhist pantheon. Bodhisattvas are compassionate sages who forsake the liberation they achieve through *bodhi* (enlightenment) in order to assist people and guide them to salvation, thus becoming the object of worship and veneration. Guanyin is the Chinese counterpart of the Indian bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteśvara. The crew's choice of naming themselves after this sage is due to the fact that, ever since Buddhism spread throughout China during the Tang dynasty (618-907), Guanyin became the most popular bodhisattva in the empire, among the many introduced to China, and continues to be so. This is because, to adapt to the new situation, he underwent major transformations that led him to change his features from male to female. The choice of the name Kwanyin thus implies the founding idea of the crew, according to which graffiti artists, who come from a foreign culture, need to first integrate and merge with Chinese culture and society, to "sinificate" themselves, if they want to be known and loved like the bodhisattva whose name they bear (see Flickr Kwanyin Clan).

The Buddhist echo of the name also reverberates in the first logo designed by the group (Fig. 7), in which the image of the lotus flower, symbol of the Buddhist creed, is repeated twice: on the right, it is meticulously drawn in its traditional form; while on the left it is stylised in geometric

form. In correspondence with the corollas, the name of the crew replaces the conventional Buddha figure: on the right it has been abbreviated with the traditional character *Guan* 觀, which stands for *Guanyin*, while on the left the name "Kwan-Yin" is tagged in full in Latin letters. This double signature is often found within the works of the Kwanyin Clan and effectively sums up their creative mission: to create a bridge (represented by their works) bringing China (the lotus on the right) as close as possible to the West (the lotus on the left), in order to "push forward with an overwhelming momentum" the art of graffiti in China, as stated in their motto below the logo. In 2017, the logo was changed and now consists only of the capital letters KWAN.

The peak period of the crew's activity was from 2006 to 2009-2010. Afterwards, many members of the crew, formerly students of art or design academies in Beijing, graduated and were forced to give up graffiti and

Fig. 7. Kwanyin Clan, *The Kwanyin Clan logo*, digital graphic work. Courtesy of the artists.

devote themselves to more lucrative activities to support themselves and their families (Valjakka 2016, p. 361). The crew's first piece and mural (a complex, large-format work, covering the entire height of the wall and consisting of several pieces of writing and some puppets) both date back to December 2006, and from these first attempts, approximately one hundred documented graffiti pieces of medium and large dimensions emerged. From 2007 to 2009, the crew participated in the most important graffiti art exhibitions and competitions in China: in 2007, for example, the crew took part in *China's First Graffiti Exhibition* and *the 798 Art District Graffiti Festival* in Beijing, and in 2008 in *The Great Way of Graffiti Cultural Festival* and the *Shijingshan Cultural Festival Graffiti Show*. In 2009, they participated in the *Action for Seed Graffiti Jam* in Shenzhen and competed in the *Wall Lords Graffiti Battle* in Wuhan. On these occasions, they usually create large-format outdoor pieces on walls or removable panels (for the *Shijingshan Cultural Festival*, even on a plastic sheet) with the name of the crew and/or its members written in large letters or characters in bright colours, sometimes together with puppets or decorative elements like clouds and flowers.

As is often the case with Chinese crews, the Kwanyin Clan has regularly collaborated with the local Chinese government, to embellish the urban fabric of Beijing and create "visual propaganda" works (Valjakka 2015, pp. 258-259) to promote the image of a rich, prosperous, long-standing China. One example is the piece *Olympic Beijing* (Fig. 8), created for the 2008 Olympic Games near the Beijing Institute of Technology as part of the *Beijing Olympic Cultural Wall Creative Design Campaign*. This campaign was sponsored by the Beijing Olympic Committee, the Beijing City 2008 Environmental Headquarters Office, and the Beijing People's Broadcasting Station, with the aim of stimulating the creativity of artists in bringing further prestige to the international event and getting citizens to actively contribute to its success. Such mass involvement in artistic production is a distinctive feature of communist propaganda (Lu 2015, pp. 49-50). In *Olympic Beijing* we find a number of typically Chinese elements representing the country's past and present greatness (calligraphic inscriptions, bamboo, pagodas, a

Fig. 8. Kwanyin Clan, *Olympic Beijing*, April 2008, spray paint on wall, Beijing, western wall of the Beijing Institute of Technology, Weigongcun. Courtesy of the artists.

table-tennis player, traditional cloud and wave motifs), with explicit references to the Beijing Olympics (the central lettering, the Olympic torch, the stylised little man logo and the Fuwa mascot), and all accentuated by extensive use of China's hallmark red, recalling a modern-day nationalist propaganda poster.

Another important example of the Kwanyin Clan's collaboration with the local government was the decoration of an ornamental tower in Guanyintang Art Avenue, a street entirely dedicated to art, opened in Beijing in 2008. The 20-metre-high tower was entirely covered in old school freestyle graffiti created by the various members of the crew with brightly coloured lettering, making it the tallest graffiti in mainland China.

Besides legal activities, the Kwanyin Clan also engages in illegal street bombing in Beijing, but, as per Chinese customs, almost exclusively in specific areas where tolerance is higher, such as the 798 Art District and Sanlitun, the city's most international district. Their first documented experience of illegal bombing was in April 2007, in the 798 Art District. This type of activity usually consists of tagging up and/or throwing up bubble letters using one or two colours. More elaborate are the works created by the Kwanyin Clan on Beijing's most important halls of fame near the Today Art Museum and the 798 Art District, and between the China-Japan Friendship Hospital and the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, alongside a street particularly popular among the crew which they have renamed The Kwanyin Street. On these walls, the Kwanyin Clan usually creates complex masterpieces composed of wildstyle lettering and charactering, enriched by numerous figurative and decorative elements and calligraphic inscriptions in different colours and styles. In these works, the search for "Chineseness" is much more evident than in their commissioned or illegal works. Indeed, the crew's primary objective is to create a style whose aesthetic manages to mediate between the identification of distinctly Chinese elements, construction, conception and artistic practice, and the adoption of an art form and technique borrowed from the West. This idea of blending is recurrent in their works, especially the ones rich in Chinese writing, calligraphy and traditional painting elements, or where there are strong references to classical symbolism (from dragons to pagodas, to yin and yang symbol) or to artistic forms that marked the history of China (from the ritual bronze vessels of the 2nd-1st millennium BC to Maoist propaganda posters).

Ink painting in urban form

The real driving force behind the crew's artistic research is its leader, EricTin. What he seeks to do is pursue the search for a new aesthetic in which tradition makes modernity, starting from far-western media and art forms to create an identifiably Chinese style, strongly "sinificated",

yet aesthetically accessible on a global scale. "In our creative activity, we draw nourishment from Chinese painting […], and especially our large-format works are essentially based on the reuse of typically Chinese elements" (video *Guanyin* 观音 2008). This is exemplified in one of the Kwanyin Clan first masterpieces, entitled *Shanshui PIC* 山水 PIC (Landscape Painting PIC, Pic. 7). This enormous graffiti, measuring 42 m in length and about 2 m in height, was executed by the entire crew during *China's First Graffiti Exhibition* – indeed, one of the first graffiti exhibitions held in Beijing – which took place at the International Exhibition Hall from 9 to 11 November 2007. The aim of the exhibition was to present graffiti art to the public through murals, paintings and themed installations. The four-day exhibition was part of the programme of the *China International Cultural and Creative Industry Expo*, which provided artists with a 300 m long hall of fame and other public spaces where they could create free-subject or Olympics-themed graffiti. Regarding the title of the work, it is worth noting that the expression *shanshui* 山水, which translates as "landscape painting", consists of two distinct characters: *shan* 山, meaning "mountain", and *shui* 水, meaning "water". In Chinese landscape paintings, mountains and rivers are essential elements as they represent the backbone of the entire composition. PIC is an abbreviation for piece, but is also easily confused with "picture" (image, drawing) (Valijakka 2015, p. 263). At first glance, the work might appear like a traditional ink landscape painting, characterised by mountains in the background and a watercourse in the foreground, lush vegetation on its banks, a thick mist surrounding the mountains, clusters of huts in the valleys, and fishing boats on the river waves. The layout of the piece is also reminiscent of the handscroll, and the colours recall those of monochrome ink painting, the highest form of Chinese painting, which only involves the use of black ink in all its nuances, and the natural colour of the paper roll to create works with a strong expressive power. The whiteness of the paper is used to render the water of streams, mist and clouds. This is one of the peculiar characteristics of this type of painting,

which we find perfectly reproduced in this graffito: the black of the ink in various gradations (up to grey) and the whiteness of the paper in various shades (up to ochre). EricTin stated:

> Many features of Chinese classical culture can be transposed into contemporary graffiti […]. Just think about the arrangement of a composition: because of the horizontal support, the arrangement of a graffiti piece on a wall is very similar to traditional Chinese painting. The wall is like a scroll: once you transpose the traditional painting frameworks onto it, you will automatically have the feeling of being in front of a Chinese landscape painting. Moreover, we can use the typical colours of traditional Chinese painting (black, white, and grey) also for writing characters and letters. Consequently, the bottom colour tends to reproduce the texture of "rice paper"[21]. (See Video section, *Guanyin* 观音 2008).

> When we were shaping *Shanshui PIC*–- EricTin adds–- we wanted to reproduce the arrangement of Song Dynasty landscape paintings. Chinese landscape painting reached its peak in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) […]. Personally, I do like landscape paintings of that period, so in *Shanshui PIC* we tried to use a similar ink technique. (Interview, 2016)

The spray-painting technique used here by the Kwanyin Clan indeed mirrors the *cunfa* 皴法 (wrinkle method), a Chinese ink painting technique normally used for the surface of rocks and mountain reliefs. It is based on particular brush strokes applied in subsequent stages:

1) "outline" (*gou* 勾);
2) "texture" (*cun* 皴), e.g., the veins created by the brush within the outline to "wrinkle" the stones;
3) "rub" (*ca* 擦), which consist of spreading ink with a dry brush to accentuate the rough texture of rock surfaces, logs and mountain slopes;
4) "render" (*ran* 染), e.g., applying colour to the landscape with light ink;

5) "dot" (*dian* 点), e.g., the tracing of dots to represent the vegetation in the background and the musk on the trees (Illouz 1989, pp. 104-113).

While using spray cans instead of brushes, the Kwanyin Clan adopts a similar methodology in this work, where it:

1) transfers the sketch outlines to the panel;
2) fills in the outlines with different colours;
3) uses different caps to vary thicknesses and effects;
4) draws final outlines (after filling in, to further define the lettering);
5) adds dripping and "dotting" effects to the piece.

The method used to give depth to the piece is also taken from the classical tradition: this is the "three distances" (*sanyuan* 三元) methodology, devised by the famous Song dynasty painter Guo Xi (1020-1090) to create the illusion of depth in Chinese landscape painting.
If we look more closely at the work *Shanshui PIC* (Pic. 7), we will also notice two calligraphies. They are yet another obvious reference to traditional Chinese aesthetics, according to which calligraphic inscriptions are a requisite for the embellishment of landscape paintings. The first calligraphy is placed at the centre of the work and consists of two macro-characters *Guan Yin* 觀音, the name of the crew, written in regular script (*kaishu*), which is the most intelligible of the five fundamental styles of Chinese calligraphic art. As per traditional calligraphy, the characters are written vertically and the variation in the thickness of the strokes determined by the different brush pressure applied on the paper is here achieved through the skilful use of spray paint. We have the illusion of being in front of a genuine traditional calligraphy. What is not traditional is the presence of the names of the crew members, written horizontally and in Latin letters at the bottom: on the left, Quan, EricTin, Yumi, Apart, Jer, Nato, Scar and, on the right, Joey, Keno, Pluto, Viga, Ctn, Kwanyin.
The simultaneous use of Latin letters and Chinese characters is a recurring

motif in the Kwanyin Clan works and embodies the blend of elements from China (vertically written characters) and the West (horizontally written Latin letters), both traditional (use of calligraphy) and modern (tags of the crew members).

The second inscription, on the upper left-hand corner, is a long calligraphy written in a highly stenographic cursive style (*caoshu* 草书), in which the strokes of the characters are merged sometimes, impairing their recognisability. It is written in vertical columns to be read from right to left and from top to bottom, as is customary in classical Chinese, and is embellished by a pronounced dripping effect, which seems to simulate ink drippings on paper. According to EricTin's statement (interview, 2016), the content of the calligraphy was inspired by a poem by Teng Zijing (990-1047), a famous Song dynasty poet, entitled *Immortals on the Riverbank* (*Lin jiang xian* 临江仙). In the poem, Teng Zijing describes the enchanting landscape surrounding Dongting Lake (near the city of Yueyang, South China's Hunan Province) on a foggy autumn morning and evokes a deep melancholy atmosphere, recalling the ancient legend of the gods of the Xiang River (E Huang and Nü Ying, the two wives of the mythical emperor Shun, died of grief at the death of their husband). Legend has it that the emperor Shun (2294-2194 BC) travelled to a village near Shunyuan Peak (in the Jiuling mountains in Hunan) to fight a dangerous snake and set the village free. Unfortunately, the snake bit him to death near the Xiang River. His two wives, E Huang and Nü Ying, daughters of the first emperor Yao, set out to find their husband. When they arrived where he had been killed, being unable to find his body, they were consumed by grief: dying, they turned into two mountain peaks (Ehuang Peak and Nüying Peak). For this reason, the two women have been remembered ever since as "The Ladies of the Xiang" or "The Gods of the Xiang River". Teng Zijing's poem referring to this episode reads as follows:

> Lake water embraces the sky,
> Glows brightly in crystal autumn.

Jun mount is a piece of paradise
And a mist from the Yun and Meng Marshes
Has beleaguered the city of Yueyang.

Xiang River Goddesses play the lute
Ancient memories sad hearts lacerate
Orchid's whispering delicately scented
No one can be found whence the melodies ended
On upper river verdant peaks silently stand.

The use of a "poem" (*shi* 诗) as the content of a "calligraphy" (*shu* 书) to enhance the depiction of a "painting" (*hua* 画) suggests the so-called "three perfections" (*san jue* 三绝): the indissoluble artistic trinity of poetry, calligraphy and painting (*shi shu hua* 诗书画) that every literate and erudite person had to be able to practise and master in imperial China and that was often employed within the same artwork, making it a true masterpiece (Sullivan 1980). The choice of poetry is not accidental. EricTin stated:

> First, I thought of including a poem from the Song dynasty that consisted of a description of a landscape, and then I chose *Immortals on the Riverbank* because it expressed both of the concepts I wanted to convey, namely the description of a landscape and the sense of desolation and loneliness after a joyful encounter. This is also what happens with graffiti art works: they are short-lived and all that remains are photographs saved in one's computer. Few people are lucky enough to see the original works. (Interview, 2016)

In *Shanshui PIC*, innovative elements with respect to this traditional layout are the large tags of the six members of the crew (Yumi, EricTin, Quan, Scar, Jer, Viga), which stand out among the mountains and have been transcribed through an accentuated use of 3D style and wildstyle, and the enormous live motion figure of a graffiti writer portrayed in three different poses between the two calligraphies. He is creating a piece before him, and rep-

resents the alter ego of the crew members and of any graffiti writer. In fact: he is wearing hip-hop urban clothing (a pair of large pants, big hoodie, cap, and sneakers); he holds a spray can in his right hand, which represents his "artistic weapon"; and his movements resemble those of a *b-boy* (break-dancer). He is the connection between the entire piece and American hip-hop culture, of which graffiti is an important part. At the same time, he can be compared to a modern-day calligrapher, who, instead of "dancing with the brush while the traces of ink record his movement"[22], dances with his spray can, while the paint records his action on a hall of fame.

Thus, by mixing traditional and modern elements, in *Shanshui PIC* the Kwanyin Clan has successfully created what can be described as a Chinese landscape painting in the form of contemporary graffiti.

Bamboo painting and graffiti writing

The piece entitled *New Style* (Pic. 6) relates to bamboo painting (*zhuhua* 竹画), a type of art that has always played a leading role in China, being second only to landscape painting. In painting bamboos, which represent the scenic backdrop of the work, EricTin and Natuo, the authors of the piece, were strongly influenced by traditional canons that tend to emphasise "the lithe grace of its stalk and the dashing sword-point of its leaves" (Sullivan 1967, p. 215). The bamboos do not, however, constitute the core of the composition, as one would expect, but are replaced in their pre-eminent function by a lettering piece placed at the centre. Still, there is a significant correspondence between the lettering piece and the bamboos in the background: the shades of green used for the lettering are the same as the bamboos; the four interlocking letters KYGS (the acronym for KwanYin Graffiti Studio) are reproduced through extreme (almost indecipherable) wildstyle and numerous 3D effects, with the sole intention of reproducing the knottiness of the bamboos; the sphere has the same colours as the thin stems sprouting from the letters, resembling the stylised foliage of the bamboos immersed in a thick mist.

The colours and the angularity of the central writing also recall the green-

ish patina and the typical protruding and richly worked surface of ancient Chinese ritual bronze vessels, which, as EricTin explains in his blog, are the real source of inspiration for the piece. The presence of mist is another reference to traditional Chinese painting, but here it is painted in the colour white instead of being rendered through the whiteness of the background. The format of the work, reminiscent of both Chinese handscroll papers[23] and big western canvases, and the use of both letters and characters, represent points of contact between the Chinese and western traditions. In fact, in the bottom left-hand corner, the name of the two authors (EricTin and NaTuo) and of the crew (Kwanyin) are written horizontally in Latin letters; while vertical Chinese characters are used in the top left-hand corner for the group's tag (*Guanyin* 觀音), inside the yellow sphere at the centre (*Guan* 觀), and finally on the right edge in the calligraphic inscription. The latter is written in cursive style (*caoshu*) on the right side of the work and displayed in two vertical columns to be read from right to left and from top to bottom, like the calligraphy of the previous work. The content is a couplet entitled *The Bamboo* (*Zhu* 竹) composed by Zheng Xie (1693-1765), a famous Qing dynasty (1644-1911) poet, painter and calligrapher who was particularly skilled at drawing bamboos combining painting and calligraphy. The couplet reads:

> Buried in the earth it already has a culm,
> reaching into the sky it is still open-minded[24].

The short poem is a hymn to the qualities of the perfect gentleman (*junzi* 君子), of whom the bamboo has always been the personification. The modesty, honesty, uprightness and open-mindedness of the perfect Chinese gentleman are expressed by the straightness, flexibility and malleability of bamboo, its ability to resist the elements, bend and never break, and its "hollow structure" (*xu xin* 虚心, lit. empty heart). In the Chinese philosophical meaning, such hollowness is the absence of ties and desires, and thus indicates inner peace and humility; the readiness of mind needed to

understand the world, without constraint and according to the principle of spontaneity (Illouz 1989, p. 57). The purpose of using Zheng Xie's poem is to create an ideal connection between the ancient Chinese literati – the perfect gentlemen – and contemporary graffiti writers, here represented by the members of the Kwanyin Clan.

"Divine" charactering

Alongside its references to traditional Chinese painting, the Kwanyin Clan was one of the first Chinese crews to experiment with the use of Chinese characters instead of Latin letters in its artistic creations. In this sense, the most emblematic work is *Shengong yijiang* 神工意匠 (*Ars divina*, 2010, Pic. 8). In the words of EricTin, author of the piece:

> *Shengong yijiang* was created in 2010, when I started experimenting with the use of Chinese characters as the main element in writing pieces. Until then, most of the styles I had employed belonged to the so-called old school and involved extensive use of English. *Shengong yijiang* was my first successful attempt at a systematic study of the use of Chinese language in graffiti. (Interview, 2015)

The piece clearly follows the European, and more precisely the German, style and use of colour: there is a slight tendency towards wildstyle where the characters are still readable, and a significant use of 3D. The fill-in colours are very simple yet embellished with geometric decorative inlays. The first outline and the thickness of each character are black, the second double outline is red with glow effects, and the final fragmented outline is yellow. The yellow lines suggest the spiral movement of the clouds in the background, which reproduces the *yunwen* (clouds pattern), a Chinese traditional decorative pattern to which the artist added stylised drips. A dark grey shadow contours the writing and creates a three-dimensional effect through a technique that recalls chiaroscuro. Thus, from a stylistic point of view, this work perfectly imitates the Euro-American graffiti manner, while

its composition reproduces the structure of "big character calligraphy" (*dazi shufa* 大字书法) written on traditional Chinese horizontal handscrolls. This structure is usually composed of a large calligraphy in the middle, a poetic inscription on the right, a colophon on the left, and the artist's red seals as signatures (Li 2009, 158-71). *Shengong yijiang* has the same layout*:* a large Chinese character piece stands out in the centre, with a calligraphic inscription of poetic content on the right, the name of the crew written vertically on the left, and the signatures of the author (EricTin) and the crew tagged all around the central writing.

The four characters in the middle*, Shen gong yi jiang* 神工意匠[25], are the main point of interest of the whole composition and give the title to the work. They form a so-called *chengyu*[26], which is a prefixed idiomatic expression composed of four characters and generally originating from ancient quotes, mottos and proverbs, frequently used in modern Chinese to concisely convey broader concepts of any nature. This *chengyu* describes the sublime beauty of works of art (e.g., architectural buildings, paintings, etc.) that cannot (only) be created by human capacities and labour. It reproduces the last verse of a poem by Zhao Puchu (1907-2000), a well-known social activist, Chinese Buddhist leader, and distinguished thinker and calligrapher. The poem is entitled *The Byodo-in Temple* (*Pingdeng yuan* 平等院), a famous Buddhist temple established in 1052 in the Kyoto Prefecture (Japan). In this poem, Zhao Puchu describes the ecstatic sensation derived by contemplating the sublime beauty of the main pavilion of the temple. According to the author, such excellence cannot merely be the result of human ability but must have been inspired and surrounded by the divine breath. The poem reads:

> Gasp in awe,
> Like never before,
> In front of the Phoenix Hall,
> One look
> And I am back to a thousand years ago.

Buddhism
Alone
Equates the Tang's glow,
And passes on
The sublime beauty of the divine (*shengongyijiang*).

Another key element of the piece is the calligraphic inscription in the top-right corner. At first sight, it seems a traditional calligraphy written in the running or semi-cursive style (*xingshu*), but it was not created using the classic tools of Chinese calligraphy: the writers employed spray cans instead of brushes; the ink is replaced by black spray paint; the support is a white wall, instead of paper. The text quoted in the calligraphy is the second stanza of the ancient poem *Rouged lips* (*Dian jiangchun* 点绛唇). It was composed by Wang Yucheng (954-1001), a famous scholar of the Song Dynasty, during one of his exiles in the South of the Empire, after being dismissed from his government position due to strong criticism against the policies of the time. In the poem, he expresses his sadness and despair, with nature becoming the mirror and voice of his deepest feelings: empathy with nature, pain for the unjust exile, pervasive loneliness and idyllic scenes are the central themes of the poem. These are recurrent themes in China's lyric poetry of all times, and through this work they are revived in a fragment of contemporary urban art. The poem reads as follows:

Laden with frowning cloud and steeped in tearful rain,
The southern shores still beautiful remain.
In riverside village flanked with fishermen's fair,
A lonely wreath of slender smoke wafts in the air.

Afar a row of wild geese fly,
Weaving a letter in the sky.
What have I done in days gone by?
Gazing from the balustrade,
Could I weave my way as far as they?[27]

The two poems (*The Byodo-in Temple* and *Rouged Lips*) have opposite functions: the first is to create a parallel between graffiti art and the other forms of art pervaded by the "divine breath"; the second is to narrate the loneliness and sadness that the artist himself is experiencing, as the crew will shortly afterwards begin to split up.

In addition to the use of poems, Chinese characters and calligraphy, a red decorative motif in the bottom-right corner also makes reference to traditional Chinese models. Its outline recalls the swirling and sinuous "turbulent ocean waves" (*ping shui* 平水) that usually decorated the hem of imperial court robes of the Qing dynasty, while the web of lines within evokes the motif of "vertical waters" (*li shui* 立水), rising from the deep sea right beneath the waves, composed of zigzagging coloured strips that started from the hemline of the robe. Moreover, the obsessive repetition of tags has the main purpose of balancing Chinese traditional aesthetics with western graffiti culture. With its five different tags, EricTin's work fits perfectly in the Euro-American graffiti writing tradition, of which the obsessive repetition of tags is a hallmark (Mininno 2008, p. 10). But in writing these tags (three in letters and two in characters), EricTin counterbalances the use of different forms of writing with the aim of balancing the two hemispheres: the three letters of the "TIN" tag are intermingled with Chinese characters, thus creating a visual fusion of Chinese and western cultures.

Graffiti for sports

Between 4 and 6 February 2008, EricTin, Nat, Yumi and Quan reunited at the Nike 706 Art Space in the 798 Art District to work on a Nike-commissioned piece entitled *Shirupozhu* 势如破竹 (*With Irresistible Force*, 2008, Pic. 9). The Nike 706 Art Space was established by Nike China in January 2007 in the 706 plant of the former industrial complex of District 798, with the aim of fostering creativity, sport and self-expression.

Marked by extensive use of charactering and Chinese calligraphy, the piece created by the Kwanyin Clan is part of a major project entitled the *Lebron Experience Center*, sponsored by Nike China to promote the game of basket-

ball in the country through outstanding American basketball figures. The project consisted in turning Nike 706 into a modern interactive basketball court where the brand's latest products could be displayed, and videos of the famous American basketball player LeBron James, represented by a 3D hologram, could be shown. In these video projections, the athlete described his six signature moves (dunk, steal, post-up, pass, fade away and drive), explaining how they had helped him become a champion.

For the opening ceremony of the *Lebron Six Experiences* event, a huge hall of fame was mounted on the external wall of the art space to host six graffiti pieces. Each piece was created by a famous Chinese crew – Xianggang Fengwei, FLB crew, Kwanyin Clan, ABS crew, Beijing Penzi and NGC crew – and had one of Lebron's six signature moves as its main subject. The subject of the Kwanyin Clan piece was the post-up, in Chinese *tupo* 突破. Since the primary meaning of *tupo* is "to make a breakthrough, break through a defence", the Kwanyin Clan chose the expression *Shirupozhu* 势如破竹 (*With Irresistible Force*) as the title of their work. The central piece of this graffiti is composed of the four characters of the *chengyu*, written in an extreme wildstyle that makes them almost indiscernible.

Among the characters, the tag "Natuo" creates an interesting interpolation between opposite writing systems. The characters are also surrounded by other rather extreme wildstyle pieces, probably made by EricTin (top) and Yumi (bottom). As EricTin explained (interview, 2015), the *chengyu* included in his works are not causal: they transcend their literal meaning, they tell stories. In this case, the expression *Shirupozhu* tells the story of one of the most glorious generals of the Chinese army, Du Yu (222-285). In 280 he succeeded in reuniting the empire and pronounced this expression, which literally means "with enough force to split bamboo", to encourage his troops during the crucial battle before reunification. His speech produced the desired effect. Using this *chengyu*, the Kwanyin Clan thus wants to connect Du Yu's story with LeBron's. In their different ways, both succeeded in "breaking through" due to their overwhelming force.

Another reference to battles and to the tenacious stubbornness of soldiers

is the long calligraphy on the upper right, written in *xingcao* 行草 style, halfway between the semi-cursive and the cursive style, in vertical columns displayed traditionally, from right to left. According to EricTin, the content of this calligraphy is inspired by the poem *Full River Red* (*Man jiang hong* 满江红) composed by the General Yue Fei (1103-1142), who wrote it during one of the last battles against the northern barbarians, before the final withdrawal of his imperial army. In the poem, Yue Fei expresses his anger and wrath towards the enemy, as well as his regret for the emperor's decision to withdraw his troops on the verge of reconquering lost lands:

My hair bristles in my helmet.
Standing by the balcony as the rain shower stops,
I look up to the sky and loudly let Heaven know
The strength of my passions.
My accomplishments over thirty years are mere dust.
I travelled eight thousand *li* with the clouds and the moon
Never taking time to rest,
For a young man's hair grows white from despair.
The humiliation of the Jingkang period
Has not yet been wiped away.
The indignation I feel as subject
Has not yet been allayed.
Let me drive off in a chariot
To destroy their base at Helan Mountain.
My ambition as a warrior
Is to satisfy my hunger with the flesh of the barbarians,
Then, while enjoying a rest,
Slake my thirst with the blood of the tribesmen.
Give me the chance to try again
To recover our mountains and rivers
Then report to the emperor.
(Translated by E.A. Buckley 1993, pp. 169-70)

The connection between the poem and the theme of the work is clear: the attitude of a basketball player in a post-up position, trying to shoot the hoop while contrasting the opponent, is as combative as that of Yue Fei, determined to face his enemies, shield the territories he has reconquered with his army, and continue his advance as far as ultimate victory. The choice of colours (black, white and red) recalls the white paper and the black ink of traditional Chinese calligraphy, with its different shades of grey, and the bright red of the seals creates a contrast of tones that balances the entire composition. In this case, red is used both to display the tags of the crew and the writers in the left corner of the work (*guanyin* 观音 vertically and Erictin/Nat/Yumi/Quan Er horizontally) and to recall the title of the poem (*Full River Red*) and its content: the tumultuous battles and the meaning of the four-character *chengyu* that stands at the core of the entire work. The red flames at the bottom of the writing, from which the whole piece seems to arise, emphasise the fierce atmosphere of the battle.

In this piece, the Kwanyin Clan created genuine cohesion between form and content: the upheaval of the battle and the burning passion expressed in the *chengyu* and in the poem are equally evoked by the rapid and passionate style of the calligraphy at the top, the use of the colour red, and the same style used in the colophon at the bottom, as well as by the blazing flames and the impenetrable entanglement of wildstyle characters. White, black and red are also the colours of the basketball court in Nike 706 and of the Nike clothing worn by LeBron in the videos[28]. The colours, shapes and contents of the graffiti thus transport us into a new battlefield, one of new heroes and products breaking into the Chinese market and society.

Collaborating with commercial brands like Nike is not uncommon for the Kwanyin Clan and, indeed, for most Chinese crews, who, as we have seen previously, consider it as a way to financially support their work. Although it may seem contrary to the spirit of rebellion and denunciation that characterised graffiti culture from its very beginnings, it should not be forgotten that this phenomenon is framed within the Chinese context, where graffiti art is part of the artistic sector and the "art market", and thus not a mere

form of youthful expression and rebellion. Moreover, the Kwanyin Clan started out as a "graffiti studio" (*tuya yishu de bangongshi* 涂鸦艺术的办公室). Their headquarters used to be a bus completely covered in graffiti, parked in the 798 Art District. This functioned as a workshop, where they created not only graffiti but also graphic/digital design works, a type of art specifically designed to be commercialised. The crew has produced numerous posters to promote hip-hop, breakdancing and graffiti events. Since 2006, they have been merchandising their custom-made T-shirts with writers' caricatures, Chinese characters and restyled *majong* tiles, and in 2007 they designed the cover of a Mongolian hip-hop music compilation. Even in these graphic works, the Kwanyin Clan often incorporates traditional Chinese elements (e.g., pagodas, Chinese unicorns or *qilin* and Taoist deities) and makes use of Chinese writing and calligraphy, always striving for an overt "Chineseness".

With regard to graffiti works, the crew engaged in frequent commercial collaborations, especially with sports (Kappa, Lotto and Nike) or electronics brands (Nokia, Dell and HP) and with private clubs (VICS, master club, KTV, gaga club, underground club and golf club). In these cases, their pieces were usually made on removable panels (once even on paper boxes, for iMART in 2008)[28] or indoor walls (of clubs or shops) using Latin letters[29] and old school Euro-Americans styles. These works are usually composed of a central writing piece of the name of the brand/club or the crew/writer who created it, often combined with amusing puppets.

Apart from *Shirupozhu*, the crew's most successful experiment with distinctly Chinese yet modernised elements in a work commissioned by a foreign brand was *The Entire World Celebrates* (*Putian tong qing* 普天同庆, Pic. 10). It depicts a football fully hand-painted with tempera and marker, made on commission for Adidas for the 2010 FIFA World Cup advertising campaign. Yumi and Nat, the creators of the piece, covered the entire surface of the ball with traditional Chinese motifs, reworked in very personal ways. A curved line divides the ball into two parts and recreates the *Taijitu* 太极图, the Taoist symbol par excellence, consisting of the stylised shape

of a black and a white fish, intertwining in a whirling embrace. It represents the concept of the Tao (*Dao* 道), the source of being that regulates the development of the universe through the alternation of two complementary elements: *yin* 阴, the dark-negative polarity represented by the black fish, and *yang* 阳, the light-positive polarity represented by the white fish. The two sections of the ball are filled with opposing motifs: one recalls the Euro-American graffiti tradition and the other the traditional Chinese culture, and these intertwine just like Yin and Yang, in a perfect fusion. On one side, Yumi creates an extreme grey and white wildstyle, while on the other, on a red background, Nat draws the zoomorphic image of the *taotie* 饕餮, an archaic decorative motif typical of ritual bronzes from the Shang (c. 1600-1046 BC) and Zhou (1046-221 BC) dynasties, representing a frontal, symmetrical mask with various parts of different animals. In the words of EricTin:

> Since, in the Chinese tradition, football – or *cuju* 蹴鞠 – evoked a Zen meditative act, we instinctively thought of the image of the *Taijitu*, consisting of the stylised form of two fish, one white and one black, intertwining with each other, surrounded by the Eight Trigrams. This design formed the basis of the work, to which we then added the zoomorphic image of the *taotie*, which is a traditional Chinese decorative motif I am particularly fond of. (Interview, 2016)

Interestingly, this work is intended to recall the ancient Chinese game of football, *cuju* (lit. kicking a leather ball). According to FIFA, *cuju* is the earliest attested form of football in the world, and its invention dates from the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). Initially, it was slightly different from the modern game: there were six holes on each side of the pitch with six goalkeepers, and each team, composed of six players plus the goalkeepers, had to score the highest number of goals. In the Tang dynasty, the holes turned into two goals on opposite sides of the field and the game resembled the current one. The Eight Trigrams mentioned by EricTin in the inter-

view are figures composed of three parallel lines, surrounding the *Taijitu* with a perfect octagon, each aligned to a cardinal point. The lines can be continuous or broken, indicating positive (*yang*) or negative (*yin*) polarity respectively. Each trigram corresponds to a natural element or phenomenon (sky, swamp, fire, thunder, wind, water, mountain and earth), and all together they symbolise the contents of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), one of the fundamental texts of traditional Chinese knowledge. The wildstyle within one of the two sections of the ball recalls the linearity of the trigrams. Reference to the World Cup in the image is evident: the two sections of the *Taijitu* ideally represent the two football teams (the *yin* and the *yang*) that share and mix on the same pitch (the circle), thus generating a continuous action (the Tao).

Porcelain, marker and spray

A further occasion in which the Kwanyin Clan experiments with the use of innovative media is the series dedicated to blue and white porcelain realised between 2009 and 2010 (Pic. 11). The crew transposes graffiti art styles and techniques onto artefacts of diverse and extremely unique shapes (plates, vases and brush pots) through traditional cobalt blue decorations. In these works, the Kwanyin Clan creates a modern version of the iconic blue and white Chinese porcelain, combining a traditional type of art with contemporary writing techniques. For instance, in the piece *Heqi* 和气 (Peace, Pic. 11), Nat used a blue marker to write, in wildstyle, the two characters of the title on a white porcelain plate, with arrows and zigzagging lines that perfectly combine a traditional approach with contemporary execution. EricTin explains:

> For us, using Chinese characters in graffiti form as decorative motifs for porcelain artefacts means experimenting with new patterns of decoration. Since the motifs used in porcelain are rather standardised and most of them are not compatible with today's aesthetic models, we tried to create new ones. It was simply a matter of changing the support material for

> the writing piece: resorting to porcelain added a further oriental and traditional touch to our style, which, however, remains unchanged. In this specific case, the choice of the *Heqi* 和气 characters stemmed from the fact that decorative motifs in Chinese artistic handicrafts are always linked to auspicious and good luck messages, so we chose to focus the piece on these two characters. Indeed, they are indeed present in a *chengyu* used as a wish of happiness, which reads *Heqi shengcai* 和气生财 (Amiability begets riches). (Interview, 2016)

The Chinese elements in this work are numerous: blue and white porcelain, Chinese characters, the *chengyu* inspiration for the title, its auspicious meaning, the decorative "clouds pattern" (*yunwen*), and the motif of the "turbulent ocean waves" (*ping shui*) within the central part, all transposed in a modern key. This series is one of the preeminent examples of the Kwanyin Clan experimental power expressed by reworking traditional patterns.

The reference to porcelain, an art for which China has been renowned worldwide for centuries, can also be found in the work created by the crew in 2016 (Pic. 12) for the exhibition *Art from the Streets* (*The History of Street Art - from New York to Beijing*) held in the spaces of the CAFA Art Museum in Beijing (1 July - 24 August 2016). The exhibition was the first opportunity to showcase pieces by foreign street artists in China, generating both a geographical and temporal comparison of the street art phenomenon in its globality (Danysz 2016). The Kwanyin Clan was one of the few Chinese crews invited to participate in the event, proving the group's fundamental importance within the art scene in mainland China and abroad.

The work they produced for the occasion fits perfectly into their framework of research. The core of the composition is a green *celadon* glazed ceramic vase. This recalls the Jun-type celadons made in China during the Song Dynasty, considered one of the finest forms of Chinese art. The explosive force of the elaborate wildstyle lettering pushes onto the thin walls of the vase and disintegrates it, representing the forces of modernity that break and over-

comes tradition. In the lower right-hand corner, the usual semi-cursive style calligraphic inscription consisting of two *chengyu* on vertical columns serves as a double warning. The first states that "observing a person's failings you know what he really is" (*guanguozhiren* 观过知仁), while the second affirms that "when we receive positive influences, we can change our old habits" (*panlingeyin* 泮林革音). Next to the inscription, there is the typical real seal with the name of the crew, but unlike the traditional canons, it is in Latin letters and not in characters.

It can thus be declared that all the works analysed so far highlight how the Kwanyin Clan was able to create an artistic language in which graphic and calligraphic signs, images and references, both ancient and modern, gave life to a new type of aesthetic; one that is extremely contemporary yet deeply rooted and immersed in traditional Chinese culture. This created a new strand within the collective and universal art form of graffiti, capable of conveying a widespread cultural need for the construction of a global identity with local peculiarities. Indeed, the Kwanyin Clan has not simply used Chinese characters or avowedly "Chinese" visual elements, but has taken the Chinese artistic tradition as its starting point, reworking and updating noble art forms, including landscape painting, bamboo painting and calligraphy, as well as manufacturing arts, like blue and white porcelain, and ancient decorative motifs, like *taotie*, cloud motifs and turbulent waters. To this, they frequently add erudite poetic references, which contribute to making their art unique in the contemporary Chinese graffiti scene.

The ABS crew, between business and internationalisation

ABS is one of the most eclectic and comprehensive crews in mainland China today and certainly the best known and most active in Beijing. It was founded in 2007 by Scar (a.k.a. Smer), Seven, Andc and Noise, and joined in 2015 by Goes, a writer from Chengdu. Scar and Seven, the veterans of the crew, started as writers in 2005, Andc, the social soul of ABS, in 2006, and Noise the following year, when the four decided to

create the group (Valjakka 2016, p. 361). The name ABS is an acronym that has acquired several meanings over the years, the first of which is *Around the Bohai Sea*. The Bohai Sea is the innermost gulf of the Yellow Sea on the northeast coast of China, very close to the city of Beijing. It was chosen because the founders of the crew come from cities near the gulf, also known as Bohai Bay: Andc from Beijing, Seven from Tianjin, Noise from Dalian in the Liaoning province, and Scar from Shijiazhuang, the capital of the Hebei province (Wu 2014, p. 1). The second meaning is *Active, Brilliant, Significant* (Fitch 2012), referring to the qualities the crew seeks for their works. *A Brand New Start* is the third meaning, and the group's greatest wish: a new mode for graffiti art to be created in China that represents the union of American and Chinese culture (2015 interview with Andc). The fourth and final meaning is *Anti-lock Braking System* (Valjakka 2016, p. 369) or *Anti-skid Brake System* (Wu 2014, p. 1) which implies the intent to follow the original idea of graffiti and standing firm on that path.

In 2010, the members of the crew moved to Beijing and established their studio in the 798 Art District. In 2012, they opened China's first graffiti store, called 400ML, where they sold imported spray paint cans, books, graffiti-related items and their own original products, but most importantly, they created a hub for the promotion and spread of Chinese graffiti culture. The name of the shop was chosen because the standard capacity of the spray cans used for graffiti is 400 ml, but also because it stands as an acronym for "4" young Chinese people (the founders of the crew) who wish to be called Mr. Letter – "ML" – and dedicate "100" per cent of their time and skills to the art of graffiti (*ibid.*). The crew decided to open this commercial space after a trip to Europe during which they first had the opportunity to use European paints and realised the poor quality of the Chinese spray cans which, according to them, "smelled like industrial paint and had a much smaller variety of colours" (*ivi*, p. 3). Thus, they decided to start selling European cans in China in order to offer better quality products for the creation of successful graffiti.

This trip to Europe, forming part of the *2011-12 EU-China Hip-Hop Communication Project*, an exchange project between China and Europe dedicated to urban culture, marked a breakthrough for the crew. They were able to participate after winning the 2011 *Wall Lords Asia Graffiti Battle*, Asia's greatest graffiti competition, held in Taiwan and attended by the main crews from the major Asian countries (Philippines, Singapore, Japan, Korea, People's Republic of China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Taiwan). Here, the crew was noticed by a German judge who invited them to participate in the exchange project (*ivi*, p. 2). Andc describes the overseas experience as follows: "In 2012, we travelled to Germany and Holland. We left by car from Berlin and drove through ten cities, finally arriving in the Netherlands. During the trip, we engaged in a rich intercultural exchange, sharing experiences and making pieces together with other local artists" (interview, 2016).

In thirty days, the ABS travelled from Berlin to Rotterdam and painted countless walls in the ten cities they crossed, together with other European writers, learning the German writing style and techniques. This was the turning point for the art of the ABS crew, who had originally worked with Chinese characters following the US styles. From this point on, they firmly changed course, abandoning charactering in favour of lettering, and searching for their own personal writing style, which became increasingly internationalised without every entirely losing sight of their Chinese origins. "In the beginning, we just imitated overseas styles. But after taking part in the international exchanges, we started to develop our own styles and incorporate Chinese elements – like calligraphy and the national flag – into our graffiti" explains Andc (Yau 2018).

For him, whose real name is Chen Chuang and whose tag derives from the expression "And-Chen", his approach to the world of graffiti derived from American writing. As he himself recounts, his first encounter with graffiti came through two documentary films on hip-hop culture: *Wild Style* (1983), which tells the story of New York's street culture in the early 1980s, and *Style Wars* (1983), about a young graffiti artist from

Fig. 9. Andc (ABS crew), *Tuo qi xiwang* 托起希望 (*Raising Hope*), 2009, spray paint on wall, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.

New York who used to paint underground cars in those years. From then on, Andc started painting graffiti together with a few friends, earning money from it and thus deciding to continue this rather fulfilling activity. From merely imitating American writing, Andc evolved to creating works in Chinese characters through which he could express its distinctive style. Examples of these early attempts are *Zhanzheng wuqing* 战争无情 (The Ruthlessness of War) and *Tuo qi xiwang* 托起希望 (Raising Hope, Fig. 9) of 2009, produced in memory of tragic events in recent Chinese history, respectively the Nanjing Massacre of 1937 (a series of atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese army against the Chinese civilian population at the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War) and the Sichuan earthquake of 12 May 2008, which claimed approximately seventy thousand victims[30]. The two pieces are wildstyle renderings of the four characters of the title inspired by a *chengyu*, a common pattern with other crews (e.g. the Kwanyin Clan). The writing style is very edgy and basic, consisting of one or two fill-in colours spread evenly, a single outline, and only occasionally a hint of 3D. The result is somewhat "rigid" and reveals the embryonic state of his personal stylistic research, centred on the attempt to reshape Chinese writing by imitating American styles.

In search of a personal international style

After this first phase, however, the crew almost completely abandoned charactering in favour of the Latin alphabet and English language. Andc says:

> I don't need to use Chinese characters to show where I come from; I use the English alphabet, because that is where graffiti writing was born. Graffiti knows no national boundaries. What I do know is that it conveys strength and vital energy to me, therefore I do not slavishly use Chinese writing in my style, because that is not what I am interested in. Instead, I focus on increasingly improving my style, so that it can be representative of the country and the place where I come from, and eventually become a distinctive style of that place. (Interview, 2015)

This gave rise to works of a completely opposite nature to the earlier ones, but in which the western influence continued to be very present and almost "oppressive". One example is *Poseidon* (Pic. 13) created by the ABS crew in 2011 during the *China Wall Lords Graffiti Battle* in Chengdu, in which nothing seems to lead back to their Chinese origins. This is how Andc recounts the crew's participation in the competition:

> In 2011 and 2012, we participated in the *Wall Lords Graffiti Battles* and won both the Chinese and Asian competitions. In 2011, the theme of the Chinese graffiti battle was classicism. We therefore chose to portray Poseidon, to recall the peculiar traits of ancient Greek mythology. (Interview, 2016)

In this work, the central character of the graffiti is the Greek god of the sea, Poseidon, portrayed according to classical iconography: a muscular man with a beard, long white hair, armed with a powerful trident that he uses to rule over the sea. Other references to ancient Greek culture are the Ionic capitals (lower-right corner) and the hourglass (lower centre of the inscription), which in Greece was usually filled with water and used to measure

time. The inscription is the most interesting and unusual part of the piece, because it offers different readings. The central part clearly shows SOP, which becomes POS: *Poseidon* if read backwards, from right to left, according to traditional Chinese practice. The divinity's pitchfork, however, seems to point at another letter, a swirling A, followed by a B linked to the letter S. The letter P, the final letter of the inscription SOP, seems to hide a darker, barely visible part in the background – it could be read as an R which, combined with the other letters, composes the inscription ABS CR: ABS crew.
We are facing two opposite poles: on the one hand, charactering works in a Euro-American style (Fig. 9); on the other, lettering pieces with western visual references (Pic. 13).
Later, mainly due to their participation in the *2011-12 EU-China Hip-Hop Communication Project*, the crew shifted to mostly lettering works, possibly featuring elements that plainly recall the group's "Chineseness", like dragons, pandas, pagodas and small calligraphic inscriptions, and certainly seeking a manifest stylistic recognisability. One of the earliest examples of such works is a graffiti created in Berlin by Andc, Redy from Hong Kong, and the German Mo (Fig. 10), during the 2012 project. It is composed of the two tags, "ANDC" on the left and "REDY" on the right, in soft 3D style with a three-colour-band fill-in (pink, white and green) in different sizes, featuring glow effects and a big rooster in the middle. In addition to this unique general layout, there are several elements of "Chineseness", especially on the left-side of the piece made by Andc: the panda, the Beijing skyline with the Great Wall, the Temple of Heaven, the lion figures typically protecting the imperial entrances, and the chopsticks held by the rooster in tailcoat. Chinese writings are also used as a corollary to the work in the colophon on the left and for the names of the Chinese and German capitals in the upper part of the work, *Beijing* 北京 (Beijing) on the left and *Bolin* 柏林 (Berlin) on the right. The contrast between the two cities is the very theme of the graffiti: the Beijing skyline is counterbalanced by that of Berlin; on one side is the panda, symbolising China, while on the other is the bear, symbolising Berlin; in the centre, the rooster holds chopsticks in its left wing and a fork

Fig. 10. Andc (Cina), Redy (Hong Kong) and Mo (Germany), *The ABS crew in Berlin – 2011-12 EU-China Hip-Hop Communication Project*, 2012, spray paint on wall, Beijing. Courtesy of the artists.

in its right, while the sign above indicates Beijing on the left and Berlin on the right. This graffiti clearly shows Andc's personal and recognisable tag style, which strongly differs from Redy's and employs figurative, decorative and writing elements that highlight his origins. This is an example of the constant alternation, in the ABS crew's works, between the desire for internationalisation, also evident in the composition of the team of writers who created the piece, and the desire to emphasise their "Chineseness".

This piece gave rise to other works, like the one made in 2018 by the entire crew together with numerous Chinese and foreign writers at the *Berlin Mural Fest*, one of the world's most important international festivals (Pic. 14). In this huge graffiti, the lettering part, with the tags of some of the artists in yellow in the lower section, is counterbalanced by a gigantic and fierce red Chinese dragon, represented according to classical iconography (crocodile head, catfish-like whiskers, mane and deer horns, sinuous snake-like body

swirling in the background, chicken legs with sharp claws, and a flaming tail). This is depicted in the act of spitting fire on sea waves, over which float inscriptions that seem to emerge from the flames. The piece is scattered with calligraphic inscriptions in characters, alongside reproductions of Chinese seals with the names of the various authors of the work in Latin letters or characters. From the inscription *Po fanlong* 破樊笼 (The birdcage has disintegrated) emerges a majestic dragon, "haunting" the walls with its writings. Next to it the English phrase *Joy in bottle* recalls the name of one of the writers of the piece (Joybo), while on the right a bottle spills water that floods the bottom of the piece.

Compared to the previous graffiti, here the crew widely refined their technique, although the mode of action remains unchanged, if more complex. In fact, in both graffiti there are various juxtaposed wildstyle tags, distinct elements of Chineseness (bear, Beijing skyline, chopsticks, dragon, calligraphy, seals), Chinese writing and/or inscriptions (from simple names of capital cities to actual inscriptions), and various puppets that animate the piece (rooster, bear, panda, dragon and a bottle full of other puppets). In addition, both graffiti are the result of international collaborations (the number of writers increased from three to about ten) and were created in Berlin (the first during the exchange project, the second for an invitation to a festival). From 2012 onwards, plainly "Chinese" graffiti alternate with pieces in which "Chineseness" remains completely opaque, if not invisible, and which seem to aim for a very personal and recognisable style that clearly defines the identity of the ABS crew, regardless of its origin. Examples include the two graffiti pieces created for the *Wall Lords Graffiti Battles* in 2012, both the national (Pic. 15) and the Asian one, shortly after participating in the exchange project with Europe. As evidenced by these pieces, since then the art of the ABS crew has focused particularly on large-format and artistically elaborate works, mainly in wildstyle, with strong funky hints and comic-cartoon style references (Valjakka 2016, p. 362).

The layout of their pieces has also become more and more defined and consolidated: in most cases the pieces consist of large alphabetical inscriptions

on kaleidoscopic backgrounds, mainly featuring the tags of some of the crew members (Wu 2014) and animated by amusing puppets placed in the centre of the composition. The piece *The Original Canster* (2012, Pic. 15) is one of the earliest examples and created a template for later ones. With this piece, the ABS crew won the 2012 *China Wall Lords Graffiti Battle* in Shenzhen, a city close to Hong Kong in the Guangdong province. The piece consists of two large tags of two crew members (SMER on the left and ANDC on the right) on a multicoloured background. The two wildstyle tags are painted with bright, highly shaded colours (orange, yellow, green and blue) rich in glow effects, bubbles and inlays, surrounded by glittering stars and flaming meteorites. At the centre, between the two tags, are three cartoonish puppets: two anthropomorphised spray cans dressed like the Flintstones, chased by a square-shaped policeman with a moustache. The bigger spray can is the protagonist; its appearance is a mixture of a pirate (wearing a one-eyed patch), a thief (carrying loot on its shoulder), a caveman (holding a club and wearing leopard skins) and a hip-hop writer (holding a spray can in one foot and listening to music from a ghetto blaster, an audio-cassette recorder with a built-in speaker, popular in the New York ghettos of the 1980s). This is the "original canister" mentioned in the title, the alter ego of a primordial writer who storms the streets like a pirate and is chased by the police like a thief. Since graffiti in China is not fully illegal, as we previously mentioned, the work is probably intended as a tribute to the original forms of graffiti, when writers were seen as street thugs and chased by the police for their activity, which is still considered illegal in the rest of the world. The canister is thus original in both senses: it represents the earliest form of graffiti art from the early days in the United States, and, at the same time, it embodies a brand-new form of graffiti. The title also plays with words: the word *canister* (container, jar, can) becomes *canster*, a term that does not exist in English and apparently seems a mistake, but was purposely chosen by the crew because it contains the word *can*, used in graffiti jargon.

This graffiti lacks references to China. Everything seems to belong to the western universe: the Latin alphabet used to write the two large tags; the

English title and the numerous small inscriptions disseminated in the piece; the puppets that recall figures belonging to western culture, like the Flintstones, pirates and graffiti writers chased by the police; the wildstyle and the cartoon-like style, which belong to the Euro-American style category, although rendered here with personal flair.

As mentioned above, the layout of the piece divided into two large letterings (usually SMER and ANDC) with puppets in the middle to break their continuity; the multicoloured and glittering background; the use of the Latin alphabet and English language; images with strong western references (e.g., cowboys, zombies, Christmas decorations, Halloween characters and Greek mythology); wildstyle lettering and a cartoonish style for the figures, are all *leitmotifs* of the ABS crew's murals. The same approach can be found, for example, in the work *Rock da Party*. It was created by the crew in 2012 and won the second place at the *Asia Wall Lords Graffiti Battle* in Taipei, which the ABS crew entered after winning the national competition with *The Original Canster*. The theme is more festive: balloons, streamers, lights, stars and sugary cream scattered all around act as a frame for a festive moustachioed spray can followed by a candle who is in love with her loot; together, these two animate the two large signatures at their sides.

While in these pieces any "Chineseness" is completely eluded, in other – rarer – charactering pieces it is overtly evident. While these use Chinese characters for the central writing, in the same manner as the 2009 works, the charactering style is completely different and tends to resemble that of the two pieces analysed above. One such example is the graffiti created for the opening ceremony of the 400ML graffiti store in 2012, which still occupies one of the exterior walls of the shop with the four Chinese characters *Dajidali* 大吉大利 (Good Luck and Great Prosperity, Fig. 11).

This graffiti in Chinese characters is much more complex than the previous ones. The charactering is more eye-catching and dynamic, the wildstyle has been abandoned (although some arrows still recall it) in favour of a 3D style with easily recognisable characters; the fill-in colours are

highly shaded and range from red to brown, distancing themselves from the original monochrome or two-tone. The piece is also enriched by several cartoonish puppets: a spray can and a firecracker in the centre, and a beer mug holding a spray can on the right. The background is filled with multicoloured bubbles, sparks and bursting firecrackers. The writing *Opening Party* in the centre and the colophon on the right listing the participants in the party are in English, while the central writing, the name of the location of the event (*Beijing* 北京, top right) and the theme of the party (*Zhongguo tuya* 中国涂鸦, lit. Chinese graffiti, top left) are in Chinese. Thus, there is clearly a gulf between the charactering graffiti of 2009 and 2012: the latter reveals meticulous research and a considerable evolution of style, and can be compared with works like *Rock da Party* and *The Original Canster*. In a 2012 interview, Andc reiterated: "I have been making graffiti for eight years. In the beginning I wrote wildstyle pieces in Chinese characters. Now my pieces have turned into expressions of my daily life. My style is constantly evolving and challenging me to reach new limits" (see section Video, *ABS crew 2012*, 2012).

Fig. 11. 400ML graffiti store, 798 Art District, Beijing. On the left wall, the ABS crew graffiti piece *Dajidali* 大吉大利 (*Good Luck and Great Prosperity*) made in 2012. Courtesy of the artists.

A mode of expression akin to that of *Dajidali* was also used in 2013 for the street graffiti *Beijing Air Toxicity* 北京有毒 (2013), an exposé against heavy pollution in Beijing, where the four bubble-like characters, *Beijing you du* 北京有毒 (Beijing is polluted), alternate with the English words of the title. Another example is the 2018 *Naigao* 耐高 advertisement for Nike, in which the Chinese name for Nike is written in bubble style on a colourful background. Although these creations also use Chinese characters, they are much closer in style to the two *Wall Lords* works of 2012 than to the more "Chinese" ones of 2009. This passage is well explained by Andc: "Many years ago I wrote some pieces in Chinese characters, then I travelled to many cities and countries, and developed the idea that graffiti are a way to express a personal style" (interview, 2015).

Therefore, in terms of writing, the ABS crew significantly prefers to use the Latin alphabet, while in terms of puppets and decorative elements, they combine references to Chinese and western characters, as well as to the hip-hop culture. Indeed, b-boys (breakdancers), skateboarders, graffiti writers and guys wearing hip-hop clothes are recurring figures. References to "Chineseness" are more frequent in foreign works, while those in characters are only created on Chinese soil (since they would be incomprehensible outside).

Despite all these distinctions, the style of the crew has gradually been shaped and defined since 2012, becoming more recognisable, regardless of the type of writing and puppets used. It is a very "international" style, easy to read and appreciate even abroad. This desire for "internationalisation" is visible not only in the crew's style but also in the way they operate. Since their participation in the *2011-12 EU-China Hip-Hop Communication Project*, the crew has engaged in frequent collaborations with foreign writers in China and abroad. In Beijing they worked with the Italian Sbam and the German Zyko. They have also participated in worldwide graffiti art festivals (especially in Europe and the United States, like the *Berlin Mural Fest* in 2018), and organised international graffiti-related events, including *Graffiti On* and *Meeting Neighbourhood*, an annual

non-commercial event organised in Beijing in collaboration with the local government, which attracts graffiti writers from all over the world and aims to introduce graffiti to a wider audience. Their blog pages are filled with photos of trips to the United States and Europe (Crayon 2017), especially those of Andc, who visited Germany twice in 2018 (Yau 2018). This tells us a lot about the crew's desire for "internationality", while always remaining faithful to their culture of origin.

Brand, public art and social commitment

The internationalisation of graffiti carried out by the crew goes hand in hand with its commercial breakthrough. It can be affirmed that "the ABS crew led the way veering towards the commercial side of graffiti" (Bonniger 2018, p. 24), and it is no coincidence that they have a business development director, Wendy (Valjakka 2016, p. 369), who takes care of the growth of their brand and relations with potential clients. The commercial success of the crew is not only linked to the 400ML shop, but also to numerous collaborations with famous brands, like Red Bull, Adidas, Puma, Nike, Audi, Volkswagen, TAGHeuer and Ispo, for which they create works on commission.

However, the crew strongly emphasises that these collaborations do not affect their creative activity in any way and should therefore not be seen in a negative light. Andc explains:

> Collaborations with foreign brands increased our ability to influence the general public, which is a very positive thing for us, as it gives more and more people the opportunity to discover and understand graffiti. This is just business and does not affect the creative part of our work at all; on the contrary, it serves to finance our activity and inspire us with new ideas. The money we earn is reinvested on the street to create illegal graffiti. Furthermore, it allows us to sponsor and organise graffiti-related events such as, for example, the annual *Neighbourhood Meeting*, which gathers plenty of graffiti and hip-hop culture enthusiasts with no commercial aims. (Interview, 2015)

As Andc explains, in China "[…] there are no solid economic foundations to support graffiti. Many young people do not have the opportunity to engage in this kind of activity because they have to look for jobs so as to make ends meet. I have met many talented graffiti writers who eventually had to stop making graffiti as it did not allow them to earn a living" (interview, 2016). Thus, finding a way to earn money through creative activity is a blessing. In fact, it is no coincidence that the ABS is the longest-running crew in Beijing, as its members have managed to turn graffiti into a job. Even though this may be controversial, one should understand the peculiarities of the Chinese environment, where young people are subjected to heavy family pressures, society is extremely competitive, and most people do not even know what graffiti is.

The crew is uncompromising about respecting their creative freedom in these collaborations. Although these works advertise brands or products and writers have to adhere to the theme of the piece, they must feel free to paint and represent whatever they want, choosing their desired style.

> We have never asked for help from commercial brands on our own initiative, but they contact us because they hope that, through the creative freedom they give us, the quality of the pieces will be even higher. If clients tried to limit our artistic freedom, we would immediately stop the collaboration. This is not about works that we make illegally, but about brands that give us the opportunity to create pieces that are still our own, and I think that this is not at all bad – says Andc. (Interview, 2016)

Among the countless works commissioned by famous brands, some are particularly successful because the goal of the crew to preserve their creative freedom and create something original and clearly recognisable was perfectly achieved. One example is the work commissioned by Red Bull in 2012 (Pic. 16) to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the *Red Bull Nanshan Open*, the most important international snowboarding competition held in Asia, which took place at the Nanshan Ski Village in Beijing.

The piece consists of the yellow Red Bull inscription, created through elaborate wildstyle with 3D rendering. At the centre stands the face of a red dragon, depicted according to the typical Chinese iconography previously illustrated, and two chicken legs harpooning the inscription and a shiny pearl. Traditionally, Chinese dragons breed by fertilising a pearl that they usually hold in their jaws. In classical iconography, the pearl is sometimes flaming and is a symbol of wealth, prosperity and good fortune; the pearl here is not flaming but shiny, and contains the letter A, standing for ABS. We often find this kind of crew logo in their work. Although not flamboyant, the pearl is meaningful: two arrows on its sides respectively point at the official website of the crew and the names of the writers who created the piece: Seven, Noise, Andc, Smer.

By portraying a dragon the crew wanted to celebrate the upcoming beginning of the Year of the Dragon. The competition was in fact held between 14 and 15 January and the Year of the Dragon, which was about to start on 23 January. According to the traditional Chinese calendar, consisting of twelve-year cycles, each year is associated with a different animal – mouse, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. The Chinese New Year does not coincide with the Gregorian calendar, but falls on the first new moon after the Sun enters the sign of Aquarius (between 21 January and 19 February).

The famous slogan "Red Bull gives you wings" also certainly influenced the choice of the dragon as a puppet: the ABS crew decided to portray the creature that above all in their tradition flies with strength and vigour, with the intention of conveying the idea of power and robustness embodied by the dragon (and by the effects of Red Bull). In addition, the colours used in the graffiti – the yellow writing and the red dragon – are reminiscent of the colours of the Red Bull logo portrayed at the top left-hand corner of the work. The blue background evokes the idea of ice smashed by the might of the dragon, as well as the glacial and snowy landscape that frames the event; but is also a reference to the colour of the Red bull can. The horizontal progression of the writing and its rounded edges recall the shape of the

snowboard, which formed the basis of the sketch for the piece, as shown by one of the writers in the video on the making of the work. This is how Andc recounts this experience:

> Red Bull has always supported our creative activity. The idea for the graffiti was ours, and Red Bull gave us a lot of creative freedom. […] In this case, Red Bull contacted us because they were looking for someone who had graffiti in their blood and would bring this out in their creative work. To us it sounded exciting to say the least, and therefore we accepted! […] The piece we made on that occasion was used as the backdrop of the stage at the awards ceremony. (Interviews, 2015, 2016)

Other occasions for the ABS crew to collaborate with major brands often fall in conjunction with 'breaking battles' – breakdance competitions mostly sponsored by the brands themselves – for which the group is asked to create works on panels that serve as backdrops to the competition. "I have a lot of b-boy friends who participate in breaking battles every year. I love the art of breaking so much, that's why I frequently attend such contests, which are often also an opportunity to make graffiti" says Andc (interview, 2016). One such opportunity came a few years ago through Puma. Andc was called in by the brand to create the competition backdrop, for which he painted a colourful graffiti featuring a central piece of writing in wildstyle and 3D style that bore his tag along with two b-boy puppets in Puma sweatshirts on either side. Collaborations with important brands relate not only to the creation of graffiti but also of graphic works. In 2015, for instance, ABS designed a calendar with images of their graffiti, in collaboration with TAG Heuer.
The crew can also rely on government support to obtain spaces where they can create graffiti legally and organise the annual art festival *Meeting Neighbourhood* in the 798 Art District. "[…] The government supports our work, helps us find the necessary spaces to organise graffiti-related activities, and orders the police to ensure security on the days of the events," Andc affirms (interview, 2015).

The crew also collaborates with the government on specific projects: in 2014, for example, they painted ten city shuttle buses during the government-sponsored art festival in Beijing's Central Business District (CBD). "We know the government leader for the festival and he's very young, he's not an old man, so we were talking with him about how to do fresher projects [and he agreed]," explains the writer (Bidisha 2014). This kind of collaboration may seem contradictory in the graffiti context, but again we have to make an effort to identify with the background in which the group operates.

Even though the crew has its own shop with branded products, collaborates with famous brands, can count on government support, and participates in public art commissions, they have never stopped making illegal graffiti on the streets of the city. On the contrary, as the ABS has repeatedly pointed out, all these jobs largely serve to finance activities on the fringes of legality and to get more liberty to "bomb" the streets of Beijing with their tags. Andc constantly mentions the ABS's "obscure" work. This takes place "at night on the streets" (*ibid.*) and stems from the desire to cover the city with their tags, to "say something to people and make works that are comments on society" (*ibid.*). There are several tags, throw-ups, blockbusters or even more elaborate pieces created on abandoned or soon-to-be-demolished buildings. Some members of the crew even write on train cars, a real rarity in China where graffiti of this kind is not allowed and thus extremely dangerous.

Of equal importance are their works serving as a social exposé. Among them, the most representative is undoubtedly *Inflation* (*Tonghuo pengzhang* 通货膨胀) from 2012 (Pic. 17). The graffiti was created as an act of protest against the rise in inflation and the cost of pork that occurred in Beijing that year (Valjakka 2015, p. 271), bringing a large part of its citizens, particularly the underprivileged, to their knees. The piece hinges on the central figure of a huge pig, with a cigar in its mouth, sliced by a large butcher's knife. To his left and right respectively appear the multi-coloured elaborate wildstyle inscriptions SCAR and ANDC, surrounded by coins, cash, diamonds and gambling dice on a kaleidoscopic background.

On either side, two vampire-like pigs with partially stripped flesh ferociously gaze at the large central puppet. This piece depicts the "animal" brutality of financial speculation and the economic careerism of modern society, where money happens to be the last (dis)value left, while the population is "sliced up" and "stripped of its flesh" like the puppets depicted. The graffiti was created along the Jingmi Road hall of fame. This is a particularly significant location for the crew because they were the first to paint it in 2010 and since then have been frequently making graffiti there, attracting more and more graffiti writers, making it the longest hall of fame in the capital in 2012. They benefit from the fact that Jingmi Road is part of a district in the northeast of Beijing that does not fall under any jurisdiction, and therefore graffiti cannot be removed either by the "workers in charge of cleaning and sanitation of the environment" (*huanweigong*) nor by the "workers in charge of keeping the highways clean" (*gongluyanghugong*) (Llys 2015).

Another social battle pursued by the crew is against pollution in the capital, which has reached intolerable levels over the years, making the air truly unbreathable. Among the works that address this issue, *Beijing Air Toxicity* (2013), in characters and bubble letters on sheet metal, and *Dirty City* (2015) are certainly worth mentioning. *Dirty City* was created on the door of a lorry and portrays two zombie-like men in the centre, forced to wear gas masks due to the toxicity of the surrounding air. The background is the ash-grey skyline of an industrialised city made up of menacing smoking chimneys, disrupted by two large wildstyle letterings in the foreground. This apocalyptic scenario foreshadows a not-so-distant future in which humankind will be deprived of one vital asset: the air we breathe.

In conclusion, it emerges that the ABS is an extremely multifaceted crew, and indeed the most versatile in Beijing. Its creative activity ranges from illegal street bombing to collaborations with famous commercial brands; from work on halls of fame granted by government authorities, to the creative assault of abandoned buildings on the outskirts of the city; from exposé pieces on skeletons of industrial archaeology, to design works for merchandising

products. Their style is strongly influenced by the Euro-American tradition and steeped in hip-hop culture. It is characterised by strong wildstyle accents and funky notes, and mostly eschews the use of Chinese characters, although at times it presents references to their culture of origin, especially in the choice of puppets and decorative motifs. The crew is increasingly opening its style to the world, also thanks to its international vocation. However, its focus remains firmly on Chinese soil, and its ultimate aim is to promote and spread graffiti culture in China. According to Andc, the main intention for the future is to put "all possible energy into making graffiti an increasingly popular art form and to involve more and more young people in this activity" (interview, 2015).

CHAPTER IV

SHANGHAI, A COSMOPOLITAN AND INTERCULTURAL TREND

Marta R. Bisceglia

Shanghai is the most populous urban area in China and the most populous city proper in the entire world. Considered the economic capital of the country, it is one of the world's preeminent financial, commercial, technological and communications centres following its development in the last two decades. Known as the "Oriental Pearl" due to the sparkling and iconic Oriental Pearl Tower – the television tower rising up from the skyline of the financial district of Pudong – and as the "Paris of the East" due to the European-style architecture of the French Concession district and the Bund boulevard (Agliardi, Gennari 2018), Shanghai is a city of contradictions, where East and West, past and future coexist in perfect harmony.

It covers an area of 6,340.5 km^2 and has about 27 million inhabitants (Tonarelli 2017). Its official language is standard Chinese, or *putonghua* 普通话, but many residents, especially from the Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces, speak a variant of the Wu language, the second most spoken dialect in China after Mandarin. In Chinese, Shanghai 上海 literally means "on the sea", in reference to the city's geographical location, overlooking the east coast of the East China Sea and stretching along the banks of the Huangpu River at the delta of the Yangtze River. This ideal location makes it one of the busiest commercial maritime ports in the world. The Huangpu River divides the city into two macro-areas, namely Pudong 浦东 and Puxi 浦西,

whose names reflect their geographical locations: on the east bank of the river lies the Pudong area, which is home to the city's financial district, while on the west side lies Puxi, the old town. Pudong is commonly regarded as the Shanghai of the future and Puxi as the Shanghai of the past (China in Italy 2019).

Shanghai is modern, innovative, with a slight European feel but rooted in history. Although partly outclassed by the advancing future, this history coexists peacefully with the skyscrapers that reflect their lights onto the Chinese Sea (Agliardi, Gennari 2018). The history of Shanghai, however, has not always been so bright. On the contrary, it was often tinged with gloomy grey and blood-red shades. In 1075, during the Song dynasty (960-1279), Shanghai acquired its current name and was elevated from the status of village to that of merchant city. In 1554, the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) erected a 5 km long and 10 m high wall around the old city centre to protect it from the attacks of Japanese pirates. Next, with the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), Shanghai started to see the first important results of its port activities. This stemmed from two major political changes: the first occurred in 1684, when the Kangxi Emperor (1661-1722) lifted the existing ban on ocean ship sailing, and the second in 1732, after the Yongzheng Emperor (1678-1735) moved the customs office for the Jiangsu Province from the capital of the prefecture Songjiang to Shanghai, giving the city exclusive control over foreign trade customs operations. As a result, the city's fate changed radically, with Shanghai becoming the primary gateway to China's maritime trade with the West, thus catalysing the attention of the leading world powers.

During the first Opium War (1839-1842), the city of Shanghai was occupied by the British army. The war ended in 1842 with the Treaty of Nanking, which opened up five ports to international trade, including Shanghai. In the second half of the 19th century, Shanghai was the battleground of a civil war known as the Taiping Rebellion, during which the city was attacked and destroyed. In the early 1900s, it became the destination of migrants from all continents, especially Russians and Jews

fleeing the newly established Soviet Union. In 1936, Shanghai was the sixth biggest harbour in the world and the major financial, commercial and manufacturing centre in the country. In May 1949, the People's Liberation Army seized control of the city. Even after the Communist regime came to power, Shanghai remained China's main industrial and research centre and underwent significant changes throughout the following decade, including the relocation of most foreign businesses to Hong Kong. However, in 1991 Shanghai began undertaking new economic reforms that significantly increased its development to a degree still visible to this day (China in Italy 2019). The cosmopolitan nature of Shanghai began to take shape in the mid-19th century, with treaties that granted foreigners the possibility of settling and operating in China. The Chinese and western culture began to merge inextricably, forming a unique mélange that still persists. Today, Shanghai is one of the largest cities in the world and constantly undergoes fast-paced transformations: even if the traditional urban and architectural structure is in danger of disappearing, the one thing that does not change – and in fact, reinvents itself – is the city's cosmopolitan nature, a one-of-a-kind experiment in the name of "contamination", which is the key word for understanding its essence (Salviati 2004). The eclecticism of Shanghai's urban landscape is also reflected in the mixture of tradition and modernity, as well as in the extravagant stylistic fusion between West and East: on one side, the futuristic skyscrapers of Pudong, on the other, the ancient *lilong* or *longtang* alleys (similar to Beijing's *hutongs*) and the *shikumen*-style residences (traditional dwellings, similar to European terraced houses). Another extravagant feature of the city is the presence of Buddhist temples, such as the Jing'an, Longhua and Jade Buddha temples, nestled among ultra-modern buildings. Finally, it is worth mentioning the remarkable contrast between the stunning, everlasting Yuyuan Garden and the bustling, overcrowded Nanjing Road, the famous shopping street glowing with neon signs, which runs from the Bund to People's Square. In this square, once the site of the hippodrome of the English Concession, stands another newly erected building whose

function best symbolises the link between old and new: the Shanghai Museum, one of China's most important in terms of the number and quality of its exhibits. Here, over 120,000 artefacts span the entire chronology of the development of Chinese civilisation, from the Neolithic age to the 20th century. Founded in 1952, the museum was reopened to the public on 12 October 1996 in a new venue designed by architect Xing Tonghe, whose idea for the shape of the building was to have it resemble an ancient bronze vessel (Salviati 2004).

Moganshan Road, the Shanghai hall of fame

The city of Shanghai showcases a continuous series of events, exhibitions and vernissages, which give the Chinese metropolis a stimulating and constantly expanding cultural fervour. Creative spaces like the M97 Gallery, Rockbund Art Museum, Art Labor Gallery, Power Station of Art, MoCA, Shanghai Gallery of Art, Oriental Vista Gallery and Leo Xu Projects stand as a demonstration of this. The heart of the contemporary art scene is above all the M50, a large community of urban artists who have long occupied an abandoned industrial district near the Suzhou River and transformed it into a complex of galleries, studios, workshops, art spaces, bars and restaurants. This is an inspiring place where artists like Xue Song have moved their studios, giving birth to a neighbourhood where people have been living and making art since 2000 (Bini 2016). Every metropolis worth its salt has a so-called artistic district reflecting the city's most inspiring contemporary art scene: Greenwich Village in downtown New York, 798 in Beijing, Pigneto in Rome, and so on. With Moganshan Road, Shanghai holds its ground in this regard. An excessive amount of so-called "Chinese-style art villages" in Shanghai had resulted in a decline in genuine interest in art itself: some such places were merely glorified gift shops, displaying art alongside neo-pop merchandise and brightly coloured designs of doubtful aesthetic and artistic value. However, Moganshan Road, commonly referred to as the M50, remains the hub of metropolitan art life. New museums and galleries do not

disdain these outwardly pseudo-degraded post-socialist corners of the city with a somewhat hipster charm. The M50 (where 50 is the house number) hosts a collection of fascinating new and old realities. To name a few: the Vanguard Gallery, which has been exhibiting up-and-coming artists in its contemporary white-cube environment since 2004; the ShanghART Gallery, one of the largest and liveliest spaces, with an extensive bookshop that is well worth a visit, which has been home to some of the most exciting exhibitions of recent years; and the artistic collective Liu Dao, founded by Frenchman Thomas Charvériat in 2006, situated at the Island6 Gallery (one of the many galleries of the collective). Liu Dao is an artistic group that creates impressive artistic-technological works now featuring in museums and collections all over the world. The small square at the entrance also serves as a background to the various artistic initiatives and parties that animate this space every month. This urban area is worth exploring: the old industrial buildings create an intricate itinerary, where visitors can roam freely and stumble on exhibitions of stimulating emerging artists. If you are ever passing through Shanghai, even for a few days, it is definitely worth taking the time to visit (Rubini 2016).

The history of the M50 District follows that of Beijing 798 Art District. Both were established in abandoned industrial areas, converted and revived by artists in search of affordable spaces for their ateliers. Over time, these workshops have fascinated fans and reached international fame, turning into galleries and must-see destinations for art-loving tourists. Interestingly, the buildings at Moganshan Road 50 are still the property of Shangtex, a state-run textile group that also owns the Chunming Slub Mill plant, formerly located at Moganshan Road 50. The history of this district is also significant in relation to the changes experienced by Chinese society, with manufacturing being replaced by high-level artistic production. This shift in artistic taste was accompanied by a rise in the bourgeoisie, whose domestic and international financial investments took over a sector based on cheap labour. Art and business in Shanghai go hand in hand (Piotr 2015).

Before 2018, the most colourful and vivid hall of fame in the city – indeed, the only one – stood 200m to the right of the M50: the glorious wall of *Moganshan lu* 莫干山路 (Moganshan Road, Fig. 12).

> For over a decade, the dusty lane running along the southern bank of the Suzhou Creek was the center of Shanghai's street art scene, famed for its long, serpentine "graffiti wall." But last year, the wall finally came down, and with it went the city's only remaining haven for graffiti writers. (Davis 2019)

The aim was to make way for the Heatherwick Studio's majestic *1000 Trees Building* project, a futuristic plant-clad building complex whose first section opened in late 2021. The M50 district thus became crowded with massive housing projects and luxury residences that increased its real estate value. Consequently, it was constantly threatened with the risk of dismantling due to rapid urban change and gentrification despite its growing artistic prominence (Bruce 2010), up until the dismantling became a sad reality accentuating the precariousness of graffiti art, a fact which is well known among writers. Before venturing into the story of Shanghai's and China's most celebrated hall of fame from 2006 to 2018, we should start with the present day, or rather with 2019, the year after the wall's removal.

From 9 to 15 November 2019, through an *Urban Art United* (UAU) initiative, more than thirty artists filled a plastic slatted fence along Moganshan Road with their graffiti. The festival *1000 Trees Symbiosis Exhibition collaborated with SUSAS 2019*, sponsored by the 1000 Trees Building's real estate promoters and the Shanghai Urban Space Art Season (SUSAS), hosted most of the artists who made the history of the wall and some great names of the world's urban art stage, including VHILS[31], DALeast[32] and Mode2[33]. "For the organizers, the event was a chance to add a splash of color and hype to the 1,000 Trees complex – a futuristic, flora-covered building set to open in 2020. But for the artists, the gathering represented something else entirely: a final chance to paint on their beloved street, Moganshan

Fig. 12. Graffiti in Moganshan Road, 2014, Shanghai. Photographed by M. R. Bisceglia on 1 September 2014.

Road" (Davis 2019). The festival lasted about one week, but the graffiti remained for about six months, until the construction was completed; the greatest artists' works at the top of the building, instead, are permanent. The event also included workshops for the district residents, who had the opportunity to decorate the slats together with graffiti artists. The creations ranged from traditional graffiti lettering to murals of dragons, flowers, and a zombified Michael Jackson. "One piece, however, did not survive long. Within a week, a shadowy image of a woman wearing a gas mask while covering her eye with two fingers to make a loaded gun gesture, with "Moganshan 2006-2019" written in the corner, was covered over" (*ibid.*). Jin Ye 金烨 (who over the years went by the names Hur(r)i, Read and recently Hali)[34], a member of the Oops crew and active on Moganshan Road since 2006, thinks that the removal was a laughably petty act that encapsulated how the area has become commercialized and controlled, and stated: "for so many years, no one cared what you drew there, then suddenly they do this event and are restricting people from drawing things. Moganshan Road is no longer the real Moganshan Road: It's become plastic. They want graffiti, but also don't want it" (*ibid.*).

Dezio, a French graffiti writer who has been writing since 1994 and who co-founded *Urban Art United* (UAU) in 2017, began making graffiti at the wall in 2006. He witnessed its birth, saw it thrive and become one of the most famous in the entire country, and then watched it fall. During the event he painted three sections of the fence, two of them with large format flowers from the Suzhou River (*Symbiosis*, Pic. 19). In the first section, the flowers were red and yellow on an orange background. Their shading created three-dimensionality, and, despite the use of bubble style, the petals looked like they were moving. In the second section, the tone was significantly colder: the two flowers in the foreground were pale orange and yellow, while those on the background, in "bombed" style, were pink and purple. The stems and leaves were dark purple, and their square shape was reminiscent of the thin blades of a fan, perhaps to express the idea of a breath of fresh air. The last section, which most epitomised his art, displayed a yellow background with a red oblique brushstroke on the left and a pink horizontal one and a blue bubble style one above, symbolising the course of the Suzhou River through the city. Finally, a thin black line stood as a hint of his tag, almost like a ghostly presence. This last feature sums up the nature of graffiti artists, which is to be there without being there: it is far easier to see a piece than the artist at work.

The Russian artist Feat – a habitué at the wall – painted a 9 m long piece during the festival, mixing Chinese and western elements, including a traditional fishing boat and a Roman bust (Davis 2019; Pinheiro 2019). The presence of such a multitude of international artists in Shanghai manifests its cross-cultural and transnational nature: foreigners making use of Chinese elements and Chinese writers employing western cornerstones in their works.

> In its heyday, Moganshan Road's long wall drew tourists, introduced locals to street art, and provided a safe stomping ground for budding graffiti artists. But its destruction and an increasingly rigid atmosphere in Shanghai are resulting in a declining street art scene, with artists struggling to find places to paint. (Davis 2016)

To understand how things got to this point, we have to go back in time to 2006: "The area proved to be the perfect location for graffiti: a post-industrial dead zone on the border of three separate districts – Zhabei, Jing'an and Putuo – that was rarely frequented by police. Even better, one side of the street was lined by a huge, bare concrete wall, built to fence off some wasteland awaiting development" (*ibid.*). The M50 district provided further protection, since the residents of Moganshan Road assumed that the tags were somehow associated with the art district on the other side of the street. To be fair, the M50 probably played a much more important role in protecting the wall. About this, Dezio recalls that police officers often threatening to arrest him in the early days. Then, one day, a director from M50 passed by while him and a few other artists were painting and told them how much he appreciated their work. Handing over his business card, the director told the artists to show it to the police next time they hassled them. They did it, and the graffiti writers were never prevented from painting at Moganshan Road ever again, "the wall got 'legalized' at that point" (*ibid.*).

In the following years, Moganshan Road saw its golden age, attracting many tourists and artists of great fame, such as the German writer Cantwo or the British Roid. In this regard, Jin Ye recalls his surprise at discovering that art schools were bussing their students to Shanghai to study his work: "Graffiti went from being this thing that us kids were playing around with, to something popular that people would go see and discuss: it suddenly went up a level" (*ibid.*).

The wall became evermore colorful as artists from a variety of backgrounds tried their hand at painting or "wheat pasting" – sticking up paper wall art using a wheat flour and water solution – on its concrete canvas. Brands including JD.com, Nike, and even the video game League of Legends also started flocking there, doing fashion shoots, filming music videos, and creating their own art. Dezio is particularly moved when he recalls the reactions of the neighbourhood's inhabitants at that time: children would sit next to him and watch him paint, and teenage girls inspired by his work

would try graffiti themselves; but what struck them the most was that he was creating art for free and even paid for his own spray paint!

And yet, from 2015 onwards, the graffiti art scene in Shanghai began to dissolve, even though the wall was still standing. Increasing control and fewer spots available meant that artists began moving to other cities or turned to more lucrative activities like graphic design or tattoos. According to Dezio, there is no large place left in the city to make graffiti, because there is no place like Moganshan Road, and therefore the art of graffiti has been severely jeopardised. Even the M50 artists and gallery owners are worried that great commercial developments will continue to inflate the already high rental costs and make the neighbourhood a place for shoppers and tourists rather than real art collectors, thus damaging its bohemian atmosphere. Jin Ye claims to have mixed feelings about the end of Moganshan Road. He was devastated when he first heard the wall was slated to come down, but over the years he became resigned to its destruction. Jin's art studio is in distant Songjiang District – a one-hour drive from downtown – where he's found new walls on which he can paint. Though fewer people will see these murals in person, thanks to social media platforms like Instagram, his street art reaches a greater audience than ever. "If we're just talking about the reach of graffiti art, right now it doesn't matter too much that we don't have Moganshan Road," says Jin. "If you have a good hashtag, a good social network or marketing thing, you can broadcast much farther" (*ibid.*).

It is therefore common practice among the "new school" of Chinese graffiti artists to be more present on the internet than on city walls. Spreading tags everywhere, with the risk of being sued or put in prison, is no longer a requisite, nor is favouring quantity at the expense of form: graffiti artists now prefer one meticulously executed piece that can be immediately photographed and posted on social media. Acknowledging the rapid evolution of technology and media, many street artists around the world have conformed to this new philosophy, but in so doing, the very essence of graffiti writing – throwing your tag wherever and whenever you can to mark your presence in the city – has been lost. This is the first of three factors that

have led to the decline of graffiti in Shanghai over the years. The second determiner is linked to control and censorship, as is often the case with art. As Dezio points out:

> The city's artists also have to deal with an increasingly controlling environment. When new galleries open, the venues often want graffiti writers to come work their magic – but only if they first get approval for their designs. When French artist Julien Malland, also known as Seth, painted a series of murals of an innocent child playing on some Shanghai ruins in 2017, the dash of art was initially welcomed. But after a viral article interpreted the paintings in a political light, many were painted over. Donghua University had a free wall for several years, but it was also painted over in white earlier this year. (*Ibid.*)

The third factor concerns a growing commercial offering: local authorities, property developers and entrepreneurs commissioning projects to street artists with the aim of embellishing the urban landscape. Even Dezio, who would never have worked on commission in the past so as not to betray the free spirit of graffiti, softened his stance and started accepting projects for profit, provided he was free to maintain his own personal style. Jin, meanwhile, says that the rise of hip-hop culture in China is providing him with ample business opportunities, due to the high demand for graffiti-style designs. He received a commission from the NBA to create urban-looking T-shirt designs featuring U.S. star Stephen Curry. Lastly, Jin still feels grateful to Moganshan Road: because of it, the former engineering student found his passion and made a career in art. From graffiti, he has moved on to tattoos, graphic design, and canvas painting. "From the moment I first encountered graffiti, my life was never the same again," says Jin (*ibid.*).
And so we have reached the end of the history of the wall. But how did it all start? How and when did graffiti arrive in Shanghai? In an interview, Dezio explained that graffiti came to China from Hong Kong. In 1998 it arrived in Canton and spread to the big cities within a few years. The Shanghai art

scene remains relatively new: it is not a widespread phenomenon, but rather an "underground thing" that people don't know much about except what they see in American rap videos. There is no bombing, because everything is cleaned in a matter of days, if not hours. In a big city with skyscrapers everywhere, it's arduous to write your name and stand out. What I hate is the constant buff and the stereotyped idea of graffiti being "a hip-hop cool thing" (Sanada, Hassan 2010).

To be more precise, graffiti spread to Shanghai around 2005-2007. One of the first and foremost crews to paint in the city was P.E.N., founded in 2005 by Mr. Lan and Sail, both natives of Changsha in the Hunan Province (Valjakka 2016). The crew's name is both the acronym for Paint Every Night and a reference to the Chinese character *pen* 喷 (to spray). Zhang Lan, Mr. Lan's given name, was one of the first active writers in Shanghai. He is a multidisciplinary artist who ranges from graffiti writing to design, from sticker to tattoo art (Bruce 2010). Talking about tattoos, he has stated that his "canvas" is the skin, and that fine graffiti has a lot in common with first-rate tattoos – both have been and will always be his greatest aspiration in life (Shapiro 2009).

Among the forerunners of graffiti art in Shanghai we must include Alex Chou (Mr. Zhou). It is actually unclear whether he should in fact be given credit for the spread of graffiti in Shanghai, since he probably founded the Reload crew in 2004, one year before the P.E.N. crew was established. He too started making illegal graffiti in abandoned or soon-to-be demolished areas, and later agreed to work on commission for companies like Nike, Converse and Calvin Klein. He lived in Germany for years, where he came into contact with the art of graffiti. Once back to China, he left his job to practise what he had learned abroad. For him, graffiti is purely western in culture and tradition, and therefore he does not include traditional Chinese elements or characters in his works.

Another noteworthy artist is Popil, one of the few female representatives of the movement in China. She started her activity in 2009 using nothing but

brushes, and currently focuses primarily on commissioned projects. Born in 1985, Popil is a cross-media illustrator from Canton. Like many other Chinese artists, her skills range from drawing and painting to digital design, 3D mapping, and more besides. Her eclectic style includes a multitude of techniques. In her works she uses vivid colours and creates captivating puppets, including her iconic letter girl (in her lettering pieces, she always inserts the figure of a girl next to or in between the letters). Her mastery of these techniques has influenced other artists, making her a point of reference in the world of illustration. In an interview, she states that in her works she simply writes her name – Popil – together with a few Chinese elements that are representative of herself and her style: a young woman, a cat, clouds – simple and amusing things, like her. According to Popil, graffiti is not a political act but a means of personal expression; her art has to do only with her individuality, her loved ones and her expressiveness. Making graffiti is a way of asserting some kind of ownership of the public space, turning it into a subjective space of representation. She also talks about the difference between tag and piece, defining the former as a mere mark of one's presence and the latter as a more elaborate and demanding artistic effort that expresses something, rather than defining it (Bruce 2010).

The Oops crew, between futurism and tradition

One of the most influential crews in Shanghai, and the one that best summarised the concept of contamination, is the Oops crew. The OOPS crew was and still is the most famous and respected crew in Shanghai. It embodies the cosmopolitan and transcultural trend of the city in which it was born, combining the Western graffiti art movement with many aspects of Chinese culture. About the crew, Dezio states: "This is one of the preeminent active crews in the city. It concentrates its activity at Moganshan Road and Rucker Park[35], but you can occasionally find their tags and throw-ups in the rest of the city as well" (Dezio in Sanada, Hassan 2010).
Founded in 2007, the Oops had four official members[36]: Jin Ye (a.k.a. Huri,

Read or Hali), already introduced in the previous pages, Reign (or Lame), Snow, and Tin.G (the only female writer of the crew, who will be discussed later on in the chapter). The birth of the Oops crew again demonstrates the importance of the Internet for Chinese writers, as the four components met through a blog and not directly on the streets.

> We met on the Internet in a graffiti bbs forum where everyone could share pictures of their work and comment on each other's. We began sharing photos of our pieces and talking about the passion we shared, and we quickly became great friends – says Tin.G. (Interview, 2017)

The crew has since welcomed other members, including Moon, Aekone (a.k.a. Aek), Redim, Kite, and two European artists, Diase (Italian) and Storm (French), highlighting how there are many foreign writers operating in China who actively collaborate with Chinese crews and writers, contaminating both themselves and each other. The crew combines the western graffiti art movement with the Chinese artistic and cultural tradition, using characters, calligraphy and ancient Chinese symbols, and represents the transcultural and transnational trends in Shanghai (Valjakka 2016, 363). When asked why so many different writers gathered to form a crew, Tin.G responded: "We paint together because we share the same passion, and if we paint together our graffiti will be way bigger and more powerful. Even when we sign one of our own pieces with the name of the crew, we are immediately recognised and respected" (interview, 2017). Forming a crew, therefore, means combining multiple tags to create a much larger one and thus gain greater visibility, not only as a group, but as individual artists as well. The crew's name Oops refers to the classic onomatopoeic sound uttered when people realise they have done something wrong or incorrect, a subtle interjection the members found funny and adopted as their official designation. In terms of style, the Oops crew's pieces refer to the Euro-American tradition, using, specifically, wildstyle with 3D effects, often enriched by a background or figurative elements from the Chinese painting tradition. Their

lettering and charactering draw inspiration from the new school (in China this term also refers to a particular writing style, which aims to modernise those of the so-called old school) and employ the three-dimensional wildstyle, often enriched with backgrounds and figurative elements.
Within the Oops crew, Jin Ye is regarded as the leader, as well as an expert and prolific author of the 3D wildstyle: "Letters are the soul of the wall, and for me there is no difference between Latin letters and Chinese characters. 'Graffiti' is an art that belongs exclusively to the street, not to galleries or institutions, although sometimes it is necessary to work on commission to earn a living" (interview, 2014). His first tag, Hur(r)i, is a diminutive of his favourite film *The Hurricane* (1999), based on the life of the boxer Rubin Carter. Jin Ye approached the world of graffiti at the age of twenty, watching videos of other writers on YouTube. He never joined the hip-hop culture, as he believed that listening to rap music is not a prerequisite for being a writer. He preferred to paint undisturbed in Moganshan Road, searching for an ever more original style, rather than bombing, which is why he used to do sketches and drafts of his pieces before painting them on walls. Jin Ye was part of three different crews: the Oops, the CLW with Dezio, Nine, Fluke and Storm, and the BMC with Mels. The acronym CLW has several meanings: *China's Least Wanted*, *Colouring Local Walls*, and *Can't Let'm Win*, while BCM's acronym means *Beast Mode Crew.* As we are about to see in the section dedicated to Tin.G, a writer may belong to more than one crew over time, and even at the same time. Within the landscape of Chinese graffiti art, Jin Ye's experience, his inimitable style, and the endless number of pieces he painted in the city make him an undisputed king and a guide for all the other writers on the Shanghai scene.

Shanghai jianqiang: Shanghai be strong

Among the numerous artworks of the OOPS crew, *Shanghai jianqiang* 上海坚强 (*Shanghai be strong*, Pic. 18) is one of the best examples of "contamination" between the Western graffiti art movement and the Chinese artistic and cultural tradition. It was painted in memory of the victims of the 2010

fire that destroyed an entire building near Jiaozhou Road in Shanghai, taking the lives of about fifty people (Shi, Wu 2010). Given the fleeting nature of graffiti, which can be documented only through photography, this piece once located on the Moganshan Road hall of fame, no longer exists. Part of the charm of this art form is linked precisely to its transience – the life of pieces on the street depends on institutions, private individuals, or other writers as in the case of halls of fame. Visiting Moganshan Road multiple times in 2014, one could see that many graffiti pieces were regularly replaced, even in the space of a few days[37].

Shanghai jianqiang drew inspiration from the artistic trend known as "Chinese Style Graffiti", which uses Chinese characters instead of Latin letters, reworking the calligraphy in a modern key and adding traditional Chinese symbols. The main theme of the piece revolved around the words *Shanghai* 上海 and *jianqiang* 坚强 (fortify, be strong) which are represented through two different styles of charactering, perhaps with the intention of emulating the brush stroke through different degrees of thickness. The part dedicated to the *Shanghai* 上海 characters was painted by Huri in a calligraphic style reminiscent of semi-cursive or running script (*xingshu*). The semi-cursive script is one of the five fundamental scripts used in the art of Chinese calligraphy. In contrast to traditional calligraphy, the characters are written horizontally instead of vertically. Here, it was possible to see a sort of crack in three different parts of the calligraphic writing, to make the piece more innovative and probably symbolise the emotional and physical injury inflicted by the fire. To enhance the characters' three-dimensionality and dynamism, the piece was surrounded by a shadow rendered through a technique similar to chiaroscuro. The *jianqiang* 坚强 characters were painted by French writer Storm. His participation in the piece and the use of Chinese characters by a non-Chinese artist strengthened the idea of cross-cultural contamination. The *jianqiang* 坚强 characters were probably made using a paint roller and tempera or a fat cap (in reference to the spray can cap, which may differ in size; a fat cap allows the thick and fast release of paint and is used to make backgrounds and strokes of a 12 cm thickness and

more). As a result, the stroke appeared significantly more pronounced and the style seemed to recall the *kaishu* (regular script), clearer and easier to read, but heavily reworked.

The piece also made references to the Chinese cultural and artistic tradition. At the centre stood an incense jar and four yellow chrysanthemums. Incense refers to the ritual of the funeral wake in honour of the dead, while the yellow chrysanthemum is one of the "four nobles" plants (bamboo, orchid, plum, and chrysanthemum) which, in traditional Chinese painting, represent the four seasons and the four ages of Man; in particular, chrysanthemums symbolise autumn. At the top, an orange horizontal scroll banner read: *Rest in Peace 11.15* (referring to the date, 15 November), *R.I.P.* (acronym of *Rest in Peace*), and *Shanghai be strong*. At each side of the scroll there was a small drawing: a black funeral ribbon on the left, a symbol of mourning, and a white peace dove on the right with a bubble style outline, a signature of the old school style. The accurately coloured letters looked like soap bubbles with a large outline. The inline (fill-in) of the letters was generally white or of a lighter shade of colour to increase the sense of depth. The dove was probably chosen to evoke hope and peace. Lastly, at the bottom were the tags of the Oops crew members: Huri and Storm (right and left side respectively), Ting, Snow, Aek, Reign and Redim (in the centre).

Tin.G: post-graffiti with an "ultrafeminine" aesthetic

In addition to being the Oops crew's sole female writer, Tin.G is also Shanghai's most prolific graffiti artist, famous for her surreal puppets and the use of bright, cheerful colours. But above all, she is China's most distinguished female graffiti art representative. She was born in 1986 in Shanghai, where she still lives and works as an illustrator and cartoonist. "I started making graffiti in 2006. At that time, I used to listen to hip-hop music, and although I don't do that anymore, I still love graffiti. It was only after graduating that I chose to become an illustrator, and recently I focus primarily on comics," she recounts (interview, 2017).

She approached and learned about graffiti writing on her own, mainly out of boredom while still at school. She was 18 when she first decided to hit the streets with a spray can, and she chose a wall in the Minhang district for her debut, a residential neighbourhood near her house in south-western Shanghai. She recalls thinking: "'I have to try!' I was excited and scared at the same time, but once I finished my first piece I was over the moon and felt like I had lost my right-hand fingers!" (interview, 2013). Her tag, Tin.G, is nothing more than the transliteration into the Latin alphabet of her Chinese name, Tingting 婷婷.

Over the years, Tin.G has been a member of two major groups: the Oops crew and the all-female CGG crew. She does not consider herself a bomber and does not like to paint graffiti at night or on trains. She has a proclivity for artistic research and prefers to paint in safe, quiet places, such as the Moganshan Road hall of fame. Along with masterpieces and throw-ups, Tin.G also creates stickers with which to spread her quirky illustrations, thus in some way breaking her vow of "not wanting to be a bomber" (Pic. 22). Stickers are tags made on computer-printed labels. They can either just contain signatures and logos, or be more elaborate. In a 2017 interview she confirmed: "In recent years I have travelled a lot around Asia, where I took every chance to place my stickers on streetlights, walls, road signs, anywhere. Quick and painless. I did it to tell the world 'Tin.G was here'". She is the only one, among the artists we selected, to have adopted this peculiar artistic practice, an example of which is the sticker she affixed on a lamppost in 2016 (Pic. 22): a logo-illustration of a somewhat clumsy schoolgirl tripping on a paint container. She is depicted wearing large headphones and carries a paint roller and two spray cans in her backpack. Tin.G places her tag in a little balloon on the right, while in the lower left balloon she writes the exclamation "Oh! Shit!". Behind the girl's head, a third balloon contains a musical note. On her sticker, Tin.G also includes two QR codes than can be scanned for easy access to her blogs. The clumsy girl (like nearly all the puppets created by Tin.G for her sticker series) is the artist's alter ego: she wears casual clothes, listens to hip-hop music, always carries

a roller and spray can in her backpack, and clumsily trips over paint, proving that painting – and art in a broader sense – impregnates and pervades her every movement and her entire existence. Sticker art is a quick form of image-focused communication, the aim of which is to achieve great visibility and make the observer remember the design, logo or symbol depicted, arousing curiosity about the meaning that the sticker carries, thus bringing it close to post-graffiti. This is an evolution of the graffiti form and culture, which distances itself from traditional perceptions in order to better adapt to the new 21st century media. It first spread through the stylistic trend of the graffiti-logo, in which the artist associates his or her name to a logo reproduced in series in public spaces through stickers, stencils and posters; but it can also cover a variety of more innovative techniques and art forms, such as painting, sculpture, graphics, design, illustration, fashion, photography, architecture, video art and calligraphy. Post-graffiti is the brainchild of a global world, living and spreading over the World Wide Web.

Chinese writers, as explained by Jin Ye and confirmed by Tin.G, share real-time photos of newly painted pieces on social networks, so that they can be instantly found through internet sites or QR codes alongside their graffiti. In this way, graffiti is not only a means for recognition, but an actual springboard that can open up many new life and work opportunities.

About the origin and evolution of graffiti writing, Tin.G says:

> I think graffiti landed in China around 2000, first in Hong Kong and then in Canton, but I'm not sure. The graffiti pieces in Hong Kong outnumber those in mainland China, because here writers have far more freedom of expression in public places; as a matter of fact, it is not so unusual to see graffiti on trains or building cornices. The spread of graffiti in China was only made possible by the internet: after seeing videos and photos of graffiti by western writers, young people took to the streets and tried to imitate them. The hip-hop culture has also played its part, since almost all Chinese writers began painting graffiti because they listened to hip-hop music or participated in contests (legal battles or competitions between breakers, DJs, MC or

> writers) like the *Wall Lords*. This competition arrived in Shanghai only in 2010, fostering many Asian artists with exceptional styles and unusual creative techniques. However, I think street art in the West is way more mature than its Asian counterpart, perhaps because of its cultural open-mindedness and great artistic tradition. (Interview, 2013)

Defining Tin.G's style is difficult, as she herself affirms she sets no limits to her art and does not want to box her creations into specific categories: "I don't know how to define my style; I think classifying an artist's style is the beholder's job. While painting, writers simply do what they like, without worrying about belonging to the old or new school" (interview, 2017). However, it is quite clear that the artist's relentless intention is to lead the spectator into an imaginary world, a magic wonderland populated by bizarre fairy-tale puppets. Two distinctive elements can be identified in her pieces: the use of bright colours and the presence of figurative elements. In the former case, the warm and bright shades of the letters' colouring contrast with a lighter or much darker background, conferring unique dynamism to the piece. This juxtaposition between the background and the letters gives greater depth to the graffiti, turning it into a sort of dimensional gateway capable of transporting the spectator into an alternative universe. The eccentric colours of the letters – ranging from red to orange and from light pink to fuchsia and purple – is also quite unusual. These are by no means random; rather, they reflect the idea of femininity and romance that Tin.G sets out to show through her creations. The second distinctive feature is the inclusion of puppets. Puppets or characters are figurative elements – human-like figures or fantastic animals – of a comic or cartoonish nature. In her early works, the puppets were just corollaries to the letters, whereas in her recent pieces, lettering has almost completely disappeared: these pieces are incorrectly referred to as graffiti, when in fact they are illustrations linked to street art. Among her figurative elements we can find a few *leitmotifs*, such as little hearts, flowers or geometrical patterns that evoke a stereotyped idea of femininity. However, given the structural complexity

of her works, the style of her intricate lettering could be considered akin to the three-dimensional wildstyle. Unlike other artists, Tin.G does not always employ the classic shading or chiaroscuro technique to grant depth and substance to a piece; instead, she achieves three-dimensionality by turning the whole piece into a 3D element or placing letters and figurative elements on different levels, always taking the background into consideration. The individual letters, sometimes nestled in other independent elements, are so distorted, intertwined and overlapping that they become indecipherable. However, this is the very challenge facing those who take on a "wild" piece: that of being recognised not only for their name, but also for their own unique and inimitable style. Tin.G's mode of expression is only partly ascribable to "Chinese Style Graffiti" because the artist does not employ Chinese characters in her pieces, but she does include – at times covertly – numerous elements of Chinese culture and tradition.

An example that perfectly sums up the artist's style as we have just described it is *The Lotus Boy*, which openly evokes Chinese symbolisms. This graffiti was painted by Tin.G on the walls of Moganshan Road in the summer of 2009: "*Lotus Boy* is one of my first pieces and the one I'm most attached to: it is dedicated to my favourite mythological character, Nezha. This deity is also known as the 'Lotus God', which is why the letters are painted in pink and you can see lotus leaves all around them" (interview, 2017). Nezha or Na Zha (*Nezha* 哪吒) is a patron deity of Chinese folklore. His official name in Taoism is the "Marshal of the Central Altar" (*Zhongtan yuanshuai* 中坛元帅), but he is also known as the "Third Lotus Prince" (*Lianhua santaizi* 连花三太子). The entire graffiti is linked to the theme of the Lotus. In Chinese culture, the Lotus has multiple meanings inspired by its features and properties. In Buddhism, its symbolism ranges from divine purity to enlightenment. For the Asians it carries a strong spiritual significance due to the fact that it sinks its roots into muddy water, sprouting in all its immaculate beauty to rest on stagnant waters: for this reason, it symbolises those who live in this world without being contaminated by it. In Tin.G's piece, the colour of the letters, the leaves in the outline, and

the background all make reference to the lotus flower in their own special way. The rather wildly tangled lettering replicates the word Nezha, and its fill-in (the painted area inside the letters) plays with the different shades of pink (from purple to fuchsia and white) of the Lotus flower's petals. Then, the first magenta outline of the letters is flanked by a second green outline made using a much thicker stroke. Green lotus leaves are placed around it, resembling Pacman-like figures from the popular video game. Finally, the chromatic contrast between the pink letters and the black background is probably a reference to the unusual hydrophobic ability of this wonderful flower, which manages to remain clean despite growing in stagnant waters. In this graffiti, we even catch a glimpse of loops, decorative elements often used in wildstyle to join letters and add dynamism to the piece.

The work entitled *Pink Africa* (Pic. 20) is also rooted in the theme of femininity, albeit linked to a social message. Like *Shanghai jianqiang* (Pic. 18), *Pink Africa* is dedicated to the victims of the 2010 fire in Shanghai. The central lettering is made up of the word *Belief,* perhaps to solace the victims' families and loved ones. Around it, Tin.G places three balloons with the wordings *Oops*, *Mourning for 11.15 Victims R.I.P.* and *TIN.G*. Her tag is repeated twice more, on the lower right and left respectively; Tin.G paints the three tags in three different styles, possibly to highlight her closeness to and emotional support for the victims of the fire. From a purely stylistic point of view, the piece could be said to fall within wildstyle graffiti, the originality of which may be attributed not only to the bold interlocking and overlapping of the letters, but also to the use of a paint drip pattern and cracks between the letters. The brown and beige background reproduces an African landscape on two levels – presumably a reference to the heat of the fire, also evoked by the cloud of smoke above the letter E. To brighten the piece, the artist adds a "broken" yellow outline to the first one in black, as well as shades of white inside the corners and curves of the letters. The fill-in is bright pink, with light and dark pink maculated spots on a red background in three letters. The maculated pattern resembles the leopard's fur, a plausible nod to the African theme, and stretches all the way to the double outline.

In *The Rabbit Year* (Pic. 21), Tin.G refashions elements of Chinese folklore. This graffiti portrays the word *Love* and five white rabbits on a background depicting an enchanted forest. The artist painted this piece in 2011 in Moganshan Road, as her personal wish for a happy Chinese New Year (the Year of the Rabbit) and Valentine's Day (the Lunar New Year is usually celebrated around the 14th of February). In addition to the word LOVE, the *leitmotif* of the heart is also present, as an explicit reference to the day of lovers. The lettering is barely readable, and therefore similar to wildstyle, but with a very bright fill-in colour that plays with different shades of yellow, red and orange. The thin white outline above the main black one and the white shaded corners and curves of the letters add brightness to the piece. The puppets consist of five white rabbits timidly and fearfully emerging from the letters. They represent one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac and, in this particular case, are linked with the year 2011, when the piece was made. The Chinese zodiac is based on 12 cyclical years; each year of the cycle is associated with an animal: mouse, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. The rabbit (*tu* 兔) is the fourth animal in the 12-year cycle. According to traditional Chinese astrology, the rabbit is cautious, quiet, reserved, self-absorbed, contemplative and lucky. The artist also fits a small heart within the letter E, while on the outside she places her tag and that of the Oops crew, of which she was a member at the time. The piece's three-dimensionality is achieved by transforming it entirely into a 3D element by means of a chromatic contrast within the letters, without actual shading, and through the use of perspective in the background, where the lettering almost looks like it is comfortably "seated" on the lawn. The cartoonish rabbits have pink eyes like the White Rabbit of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, symbolising the dreamlike dimension that leads Alice into an unrestricted world in which irrationality reigns supreme. Possibly, the aim of these five rabbits is to lead us, the viewers, into Tin.G's wonderland. The choice of the number five might be linked to the "five elements" (*wuxing* 五行): wood, earth, water, fire and metal. These are core concepts of Chinese culture, also applicable to medicine, dictating the

pace of nature and mankind. This hypothesis is perfectly in line with the idea of a ubiquitous, universal love, and links to the concept underlying all of Tin.G's work.
In 2013, the artist joined CGG (which stands for China Graffiti Girls), China's first all-women crew currently comprising six artists: Rainbo (from Hong Kong), MT (from Hainan), Mizi, 399diskr and Satr (from Canton), and Tin.G:

> China Graffiti Girls was founded in 2013 by six female writers living in China and Hong Kong. The graffiti scene in Asia has grown significantly over the past decade, but street art remains a predominantly male art form. In the past ten years an increasing number of female artists have started to stand out and receive the attention they deserve. (Interview, 2016)

The CGG crew's aim was to paint fresh, delicate pieces imbued with femininity, in response to the enduring male dominance in Chinese urban art. The colours, the style of the lettering and the puppets used show the "ultrafeminine" nature of their aesthetic: one that is far more delicate, soft and emotional than its male counterpart. The choice of the crew's name is also fully in line with this approach. As stated by Tin.G, their work as a crew belongs to street art in a broad sense, although all the members debuted with the illegal bombing of writing pieces. Their artistic practice fluctuates between collaborations with famous brands and participations in urban decoration works coordinated by the local authorities. The crew has taken part in many graffiti-related events, such as the *Meeting of Styles*[38], and their first exhibition, the *Yo Girls Graffiti Exhibition*, opened in Hong Kong in 2015. This was set up inside and in the vicinity of the art gallery Part of Gallery, in Sik On Street, Hong Kong. From 31 August to 4 September 2015, the CCG crew painted five pieces on the street, while in the gallery visitors could admire and buy sculptures, photographs, paintings on canvas, and various gadgets made by the artists.
Although all the members of the crew are worth analysing, the leader Rainbo

deserves a special mention. Born in the Hunan Province, she now resides in the city of Hong Kong. She is also one of the founders of the AWS crew (an acronym for After Work Shop), along with Uncle, a Hong Kong writer and artist with whom she very often paints. Like many Chinese graffiti artists, over the years Rainbo has experimented with several artistic mediums, from oil painting to sculpture, graphic design, ceramics, model building and illustration. She has painted at the halls of fame of every major city in China, including 798 Art District in Beijing and Moganshan Road in Shanghai. From a stylistic point of view, Rainbo predominantly employs her own bubble style, in which letters come to life and become puppets with eyes, arms and legs. The colours in her pieces are bright and eccentric, and often enriched with colourful backgrounds. The parallelism with Tin.G is therefore immediate: on a stylistic level, both Rainbo and Tin.G usually prefer cheerful, feminine colours, giving their creations a fun yet elegant vibe. Likewise, albeit in different ways, they both paint puppets and figurative elements, the quality of which have turned them into acclaimed professional illustrators. Ultimately, throughout their careers both have revealed an urge to broaden their creative horizons by switching from writing to other artistic forms, and vice versa, something quite common among post-graffiti Chinese artists who seek to move beyond and modernise traditional writing.

In China, renewal is constant; things die and rise again in the space of a night (including skyscrapers). The urban fabric is subject to continuous changes, and street art is no exception. In big cities, particularly in Shanghai, this factor has allowed for lightning-quick development. In the same vein, graffiti is as fleeting as the canvas it is painted on; it can only be immortalised by photography and new online platforms. Nearly all writers have artistic backgrounds, and use the streets to reinforce their image as urban underground artists and create new job opportunities. Finally, it is evident that the cosmopolitan and multicultural soul of the city of Shanghai has allowed a sort of contamination between local and foreign artists, providing fertile ground for creativity.

This new trend is embodied to perfection in the figure and work of Tin.G: her early adhesion to the hip-hop culture, the visual propaganda of her stickers, her evolution of puppets into out-and-out openair illustrations, and the use of QR codes alongside her works, are just a few examples of the new way of conceiving graffiti art in China. An analysis of her works also reveals another peculiar element: a sharp contrast between the boldness and excellent mastery of the wildstyle used for her lettering, and the marked delicacy of the figurative elements that accompany it, as if she wishes to leave a feminine, romantic impression at all costs. In this regard, Tin.G is the forerunner of an exquisitely "ultrafeminine" aesthetic in Chinese graffiti art, which makes use of vivid colours, female stereotypes, and pop references to brighten up an otherwise grey urban jungle.

CHAPTER V

THE CHENGDU CASE: STARS AND TRENDS

Martina Merenda

Chengdu is the capital of the Sichuan province, located in southwestern China. This territory is also known as "The Land of Abundance" (*tianfu zhi guo* 天府之国) due to its mild climate and generous harvests:

> Thanks to its fertile soil, humid climate and abundant rainfall, and particularly since the construction of the ancient Dujiangyan irrigation system during the Qin Dynasty, Chengdu has been named "The Land of Heaven" (or abundance). Its people know no anger as they can control drought and humidity. For this reason, Chengdu is the ideal land for artistic growth – Fan Sack explains. (Interview, 2019)

With an ever-growing population of about 14 million, in the last few years Chengdu has undertaken an extraordinary process of development, constructing numerous large flyovers, countless skyscrapers, shopping centres and an underground network that covers the entire city. Despite its strong economic, political, and industrial development, the city still retains instances of traditional architecture, local food and culture that preserve its historical Chinese atmosphere and typical Oriental flavour. Chengdu is in fact one of the 24 cities the State regards as forming part of China's historical and cultural heritage. The dialect spoken in Chengdu

is Sichuanese, also called the "Sichuan dialect". To be more precise, however, and to distinguish between the diverse accents spoken in the areas of Sichuan, it is preferable to speak of a fully-fledged Chengdu dialect.
The city's name has never changed over the centuries, and since its founding Chengdu has always been the most important city in the Sichuan Province, of which it has been the capital for more than two millennia. The first ethnic group to settle in the territory about 5,000 years ago was the Shu (221- 264), which established its kingdom along the Chengdu Plain, creating the greatest civilisation Sichuan has ever witnessed. Chengdu has hosted literary giants like Sima Xiangru (around 179-117 BC) and Yang Xiong (53 BC-18 AD), authors of descriptive prose and poetry from the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). Likewise, it has been the artistic homeland of important literary figures, such as Li Bai (701-744) and Su Shi (1037-1101), the most eminent poets of the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties respectively, along with Zhao Chongzuo (934-965), the Shu-era (221-264) poet and author of *Among the flowers*, the first *ci* 词 anthology in Chinese history (Jiang, 2021). *Ci* is a Chinese poetry genre, also known as *changduanju* 长短句, ("made of verses of irregular length") and *shiyu* 诗余 ("comparison, outline poetry"). *Ci* were originally composed to be sung following a precise rhythm, rhyme and tempo.
Du Fu (712-770), another important Tang-dynasty poet, was also based in Chengdu and lived in the "Dufu Cottage" or "Dufu Hut", now converted into a museum dedicated to his life. Wang Wei (700-761), the administrator of Chengdu during the Han dynasty, established the first local public school, whose location has remained unchanged for more than 2,000 years (Pang 2021): the *Shishi zhongxue* 石室中学 (Shishi Institute). As early as 938 AD, Emperor Meng Chang (919-965) founded China's first royal art academy in Chengdu. The decorative style of the palace that housed it was achieved through flower and bird painting (*hua niao hua* 花鸟画), inspired by the founding fathers of this technique: Xu Xi (886-975), Huang Quan (903-968) and his son Huang Jucai (933-993)

(Johnson, 2017). Flower and bird painting is distinctive of 10th-century China. Xu Xi and Huang Quan were masters of two different schools: the first was led by Huang Quan and marked by the "outline" brushwork method, with meticulous, bright coloured fillings. The second was led by Xu Xi, and favoured techniques associated with ink wash painting (*ibid.*). Sichuan's capital is also home to numerous Buddhist temples. These are places not only devoted to prayer but also to recreational activities. Their courtyards and gardens become gathering places to eat vegetarian food, drink tea, play cards, sing local opera songs, or challenge each other at *mahjong*. A typical example is the Wenshu Monastery, the best-preserved temple in the entire city and the headquarters of the Buddhist Association of the Sichuan Region and the City of Chengdu. The Monastery's ancient art treasures are its crowning glory: more than 500 paintings and calligraphy works of famous artists have been collected here since the Tang and Song dynasties. Its chambers also house precious relics, and about 300 Buddha statues made of various materials, including iron, bronze, stone, wood and jade (Tay 2019).

An important part of the city's culture is the Sichuan Opera, one of China's oldest regional operas. Chinese opera differs from its western counterpart in several ways, but mainly in the fact that in China stories are rarely told from beginning to end, with theatre-like dialogues or monologues (except perhaps in the Peking Opera). Instead, it consists of stand-alone parts which may be accompanied by circus performances (acrobats, fire-eaters and clowns) or, like any other opera in the world, by fully sung narrative parts. Sichuan Opera's chief feature is its circus elements: the actors are often experienced acrobats, excellent illusionists, skilled fire-eaters or clowns – a category of performers in which the city of Chengdu excels. The mesmerising art of "face changing" or *bianlian* 变脸, which involves the use of multiple masks (layered on top of each other), is practiced at outstanding speed and was developed about 300 years ago, during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795) of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The techniques used to swap these masks

are a closely guarded secret, handed down by theatrical families from generation to generation. In ancient times, the faces of the performers would change colour by blowing powder on them, which would adhere to their skin, moistened and greased by makeup. Modern-day actors use painted silk masks, which cover the entire face and can be layered up to a maximum of 24. Today's actors can change up to 10 masks in 20 seconds, and detecting the precise moment when the mask is swapped is virtually impossible.

Contemporary artistic turmoil

The Chengdu art scene has only flourished in recent decades due to the opening of contemporary art galleries and public museums. Chengdu's atmosphere differs greatly from that of the bustling cities of Beijing and Shanghai, and it presents a more regional insight into contemporary Chinese art. Two examples are the Sichuan Art Museum, the largest professional art gallery in southwest China, with six exhibition halls housing works by classical and contemporary Chinese artists and boasting a collection of nearly 8,000 printed works, and the Wuhou Art Gallery in the garden of the historic Wuhou Shrine, founded in 2013 and committed to preserving and promoting art and culture in the region.
The Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu (MOCA) is another vibrant example of artistic excellence. Opened in 2011 within the Chengdu Tianfu Software Park, MOCA houses entire collections of contemporary artworks from across China and around the world, as well as numerous collections by western artists, including Tony Cragg and Picasso. The Thousand Plateaus Art Space is a professional gallery founded in 2007, also committed to presenting and promoting contemporary Chinese art. Its exhibition hall and the room dedicated to video projections are primarily intended for researching experimental works and projects pertaining to China's contemporary art and culture. On top of that, the gallery actively carries out national and international cooperation projects. Par-

ticularly noteworthy within the Chengdu cultural scene is the Chengdu Art Academy, one of the most preeminent in the Sichuan capital. Founded in 1980, it is the first nationwide professional art organisation established by the government and is involved in the creation of paintings and calligraphy, art theory research and academic communication. The academy currently coordinates cultural exchanges and hosts delegations of artists, art historians, renowned calligraphers and painters.

Given its artistic and cultural scene, graffiti art spread in Chengdu much more rapidly than in Beijing and Shanghai, where authorities exercised greater control. "In Chengdu there are plenty of places where graffiti can be brought to life. As far as I am concerned, every main street, public place or empty space is suitable for graffiti pieces", says Gas (interview at Creative Warehouse, 2016).

One of Chengdu's most eye-catching and distinctive graffiti sites is Fuqing Road (*Fuqing Lu* 府青路). This street is almost 200 metres long, and its red brick walls are decorated with splendid graffiti. In addition to traditional bright red and yellow dragons, it is possible to admire depictions of the cars, buildings and bridges of Chengdu, along with murals dealing with the contemporary themes of industry and progress, and general reflections on city life (Luo, Gao, 2018).

Another example of graffiti invasion in the city is a 400 metre long construction site on Dongda Road (*Dongda Lu* 东大路), which has been entirely covered with murals and has become a particularly appealing and popular destination for young graffiti enthusiasts. Subtle lines, intense colours and marked creativity make this site a new "art sanctuary" located in the southwest of the city. Among the most frequently represented themes are traditional elements such as giant pandas and cranes, together with abstract concepts and indefinite lines that bring colour and enliven the district, previously referred to as grey and dull by its residents (*ibid.*).

The most fascinating art space of all, entirely dedicated to graffiti, is a small area nestled in the heart of the city and hidden by residential sky-

scrapers in the urban district U37 Creative Warehouse (Fig. 13). This is a gathering place for artists of all kinds, from writers to musicians, literature enthusiasts and lovers of eastern culture.

> Given its geographical location nestled among the mountain ranges, the city of Chengdu offers a quiet, somewhat protected lifestyle. It possesses numerous peaceful places, in absolute contact with nature and its elements. Buddhism and Taoism fully embrace the city's daily culture, and such rich traditions allow artists to cultivate their passion peacefully and serenely, immersed in their inspirations – Fan Sack explains. (Interview, 2019)

Chengdu has several art centres and clubs. Every year city life is enriched by new festivals and events, so numerous and disparate that "it becomes almost impossible to list them all" (*ibid.*). Thanks to the huge success

Fig. 13. Graffiti at the U37 Creative Warehouse, 2016, Chengdu. Photographed by L. Di Labio and M. Merenda on 26 November 2016.

of hip-hop culture and the increasing popularity of graffiti, every year new rappers and young writers approaching the world of street art flock to this city. The *Chengdu International Landscape Graffiti Festival* held on 19 June 2019 showed vividly how different artists and artworks can coexist in a single setting. The event brought together a vast number of renowned artists from all over the world to create 3D graffiti at 14 tourist spots in the city, including Chunxi Road, Taikoo Li and Lan Kwai Fong (Yaobin, 2019).

In essence, Chengdu is a suburban city with a flourishing graffiti culture. Among the many graffiti writers operating here, special attention should be paid to Gas and Fan Sack, considered by the public and the media as the two best-known and internationally recognised writers. Their conception of graffiti is rooted in very different perspectives: Gas is a Chengdu-based graffiti writer who works tirelessly in the city and feels the call of his native culture; Fan Sack was born in Chengdu, where he began his artistic career as a graffiti writer, but currently lives and works in Paris with the goal of spreading his art – which has shifted to a more figurative language – all around Europe. His works range from graffiti writing to street art and painting, and he is the emblem of a migrant writer who has managed to maintain a purely eastern identity within his pieces.

The "eastern breath" of Gas

Chen Zhipeng 陈志鹏, better known as Gas (in Chinese *Qi* 氣), but also by his life-long nickname *Shui Gui* 水鬼 (Water Ghost), was born in 1989. He is originally from Chongzhou, a town not far from Chengdu. His Chinese tag with the traditional character *qi* 氣 is a translation of the word "gas" and comes from the eastern philosophy of tao (Pic. 25). He explains:

> When I started graffiti, I simply wanted to become famous. The first tag I chose was Code321, but after a couple of years I realised that no one would remember me because I was just a "code". So, I changed my tag

> to something that could truly identify my work […]. The tao symbol is half white and half black. In the tao, the greater the white, the lesser the black, and vice versa. *Qi* means "breath", so for me *qi* is the "eastern breath," the essence of everything. The spirit of *qi* is everywhere, even in this very moment between you and me. (Interview, 2016)

In the history of Chinese thinking, *qi* generally means "vital energy". *Qi* is split into *da qi* 大氣, meaning "great energy" or "energy of the macrocosm", and *xi qi* 吸氣, meaning "breath". Originally, *da qi* was thought to have condensed and descended, giving rise to the earth – hence rain is the *qi* of the earth; by rarefying, it then rose, giving origin to the sky – hence wind is the *qi* of the sky. Human beings, who stand between heaven and earth, have both manifestations of *da qi* within them: the heavier forms the body, the lighter forms the heart (Pasqualotto 2007, pp. 108-110). Gas' choice of the character *qi* as his tag, therefore, has a higher meaning, profoundly bound up with the history of Chinese thinking. The idea of *qi* is also closely related to another fundamental concept in Chinese culture: the *xing* 行 (stage, process). The notion of the *wu xing* 五行 (lit. the five elements, but more precisely the five processes) describes nature as a set of five founding elements (fire, water, metal, wood, and earth) and as the outcome of their interconnections. By picking these two fundamental concepts of Chinese culture (*qi* and *xing*), Gas highlights his intention to infuse his art with the "eastern breath", starting from his very tag.

The artist came into contact with the hip-hop culture at the age of 12 through magazines and websites, and was particularly inspired by the SUKs (Stick Up Kids). This is a crew founded by Cantwo, a writer from the Bronx active since 1983, and the MSK (Mad Society Kings), a crew that operates in various parts of the world, particularly in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Brighton, Bristol, Atlanta, Bangkok, Oakland and Houston. Gas became passionate about underground culture and three years later decided to start his activity. Although he enrolled in an art academy

at the age of 19, he does not like to define himself a fully-fledged "artist", but rather as a writer (*xieziren*): "I remember when I first picked up a spray can at the age of 15 and started painting on a wall. I would watch the graffiti take shape and be literally in awe" (Charlie 2011a).
Young Chinese writers were still technically novices at that time. Many of them came from art academies and had a purely "scholastic" background and experience. This meant they were able to learn quickly, were great scholars, and were generally highly knowledgeable about art, but they were still unpractised in the field of graffiti:

> I think young Chinese people learn fast – progress and industrialization are advancing at an unimaginable pace here – but they lack cultural knowledge. For me it was different. I discovered hip-hop culture at the age of 12. At 15 I embarked on street art by painting on walls, and at 19 I entered the academy. One could say mine was pretty much a reverse path, from the street to the academy. At that point I ended up falling completely in love with the art world, but I was actually already totally immersed in it. (*Ibid.*)

The essence of *qi* is everywhere, in the same way as Gas' intent is to take his tag, and spread his art, everywhere. To do this, he has chosen the Chinese language as the dominant element of his works: he exclusively uses traditional Chinese characters, instead of their modern, simplified form as one would expect from a contemporary writer: "I am Chinese; since childhood, I have always expressed myself through the Chinese language, and therefore I would not know how to shape my art except through my mother tongue. Americans speak American and express themselves in their language, I do the same with mine. I find it absolutely natural" (Interview, 2016).
The work *Feng* 風 (*Wind*, Pic. 23) is a clear example of how the Chinese language, and traditional characters in particular, are a recurrent feature of Gas' works. It demonstrates the extent to which traditional culture is

important to him and how much he wishes to spread the main principles of Buddhist philosophy through his art. The piece consists of the traditional non-simplified *feng* 風 character, the shapes of which have been reworked and restyled in the spirit of contemporary graffiti. It is painted in a typical 3D style, with three-dimensionality conferred through a thick dark purple outline and fading shades of colour within, ranging from brick red to straw yellow.

The large character is surrounded by several inscriptions: on the top left-hand corner, there is the tag of the artistic-collaborative duo between Gas and Seve (or Seven) from the Beijing's ABS crew, *Hao Qiao* 好巧 (*How Chill*); on the top right-hand corner, the year in which the work was executed (2016); on the bottom left, the title of the work *Feng* 風, written in non-simplified characters. In the bottom centre is the tag of the KB crew from Hong Kong, with whom Gas often collaborates when in Chengdu. Finally, on the right is the artist's tag GAS, in Latin letters. The choice of the traditional *feng* character has a double meaning: firstly, it is one of the 214 radicals of the Chinese language. In Chinese, a "radical" (*bushou* 部首) is a graphic component within each character that classifies and sorts it in the dictionary index (Abbiati 1992, p. 32). They are interpretive keys that identify the semantic class of each character, and usually retain a certain ideographic value. Secondly, choosing the traditional form of the *feng* character could be an evident reference to the Buddhist philosophy. As Gas explains, "Buddhist philosophy influences my art, and is the only thing that really represents me" (interview, 2016). In Classical Chinese, the word *feng* also means "to influence", "to get someone back on track when he has lost his way" (Arcodia 2008, p. 57), and possibly denotes the artist's desire to spread his culture and breathe new, contemporary life into classicism. Using traditional characters is a way of recapturing the artistic splendour of Chinese classicism or, more specifically, of its ancient writing system, and revitalising it through graffiti writing.

Although Gas loves painting alone and being totally independent, he also enjoys working with other writers and undertaking collaborations (inter-

view, 2016). When in Chengdu, he often teams up with the KB crew, an acronym for Kong Boys, in which "Kong" stands for Hong Kong, where the crew generally operates. In Buddhism, the meaning of the word *kong* 空 is associated with the concept of *shunya*, "bare essence", or the "emptiness" that softens ideologies, allowing things to be seen for what they are and as they appear, in their pure essence (Arena 2016, p. 14). Another meaning of *kong* is "free space", perhaps to emphasise the crew's desire to fill every possible place with their works. The crew is often bestowed the title of *gancai* 干才 (people with special aptitudes and abilities) for their impressive skills. Its exact number of members is impossible to determine since, as Gas explains, writers do not give official interviews: "This is part of the game: you know me, you know who I am because you find my signature on my works, you find traces of me, but you will never see my face. It is difficult to establish precisely who and how many we are. It would be like 'unmasking' our identity" (interview, 2016).

In 2009, when street art and graffiti in China were still at their early stages, Gas met He Li, better known as Seven (or Seve), a member of the ABS crew in Beijing (see Ch. III). When the ABS participated in the famous Asian competition *Wall Lords Graffiti Battle* in Chengdu in 2011 and won the first place (Pic. 13), Gas was the one who presented the award (Charlie, 2011b).

The collaboration between Gas and Seven resulted in the tag *How Chill* (in Chinese *hao qiao* 好巧, lit. ingenious, skilful). It is possible to get a taste of their joint work in the piece created in 2019 in Kuixinglou (Pic. 24), a famous street in Chengdu where many graffiti artists have left their mark, including Fan Sack. The work is divided into two markedly distinct parts: on the left stands the Chinese word *Chengdu* 成都, created by Gas in wildstyle. The *Chengdu* 成都 characters are orange, yellow, and white, with black and dark blue outlines that confer three-dimensionality. Dark and light blue shades are used in the background and give the piece even more vibrance and an almost flickering motion, while creating a stark contrast with the right side of the work created by Seven. An

S-shaped chain separates the two parts of the piece. On the right, we find the initials LA (Los Angeles), painted by Seven in 3D style, with various puppets representing figures of the Chicano (or Chicana) community. Chicano is a term Mexican Americans use to assert their identity, and appears in the background of the piece. According to Gas, this American ethnic group is highly valued by Seven. In the 1960s, this community developed a veritable lifestyle and, above all, a dressing style sublimating their desire for social vindication: baggy clothes, flat hats, chains (which we actually find in the piece), watches, and particular tattoos (we see a tattoo studio in the lower right corner). Seven's images are mostly black-and-white, while the golden outlines of the LA acronym make the letters stand out, enhancing their three-dimensionality and immediately capturing the viewer's attention. In the upper left-hand corner stands a message in English, alongside a blue clover representing a clear community call: *If I had an end in my heart, I would prefer that I should never arrive*. The inscription is accompanied by a car whizzing through the clouds. As Gas says, "I had the opportunity to collaborate with brands for advertising campaigns, but that was limited to the purely commercial sphere. It's not art, it's business!" (interview, 2016). Indeed, *How Chill* represents a collaboration aimed at raising funds to promote the spread of graffiti art. Through commissioned pieces for brands like the National Football League (NFL) and Nike, as well as luxury restaurants and gyms, the *How Chill* duo invests its earnings in training young writers and spreading underground culture. The main channel through which Gas and Seven conduct this project is Still Writing, a spray paint shop inside the Red Star 35 cultural and creative industrial park in Chengdu. Although the shop has recently been going through a bad spell, the writers are happy to have created a hub where young street artists can collect and purchase materials for their pieces, which they consider a service of the utmost importance. Even though collaborations with big brands are vital for writers and allow them to create a market where they can find the right equipment for their art, Gas has never given up the pure and simple pleasure

of painting. To this end, he makes agreements with the government to create open legal spaces where artists can express themselves freely:

> In Chongzhou, where I come from, there is a 100-metre-long road covered with graffiti on both sides. I did that myself, perfectly legally. I spoke to the city officials beforehand. They know I am a good person, that I don't go against the government. That is why I have been granted permission to use the space. Some people are really stingy when it comes to their art, they just want to make money out of it. For me, it all starts with the pleasure of expressing myself. Before making money out of your work, you must improve your skills. This is what I feel. […] The real essence of writing and street art in general is painting so that the public can be entertained and admire what you do. Taking pictures of graffiti and sharing them online is nice, but that's not the point. I don't make graffiti to collect images; the primary goal for me is to display them in the street. I want to paint on large streets, I want to fill them with my art. Big corners, noticeable places. I want to take my art to the streets. I hope Chengdu will grow to embrace street art in all its forms. That is what I hope for the future. (*Ibid.*)

Fan Sack: from graffiti writing to Buddhist-inspired painting

Chengdu's urban landscape has considerably changed over the last two decades and every year new artists like Pang Fan 庞凡, better known as Fan Sack, enter the street art scene. A native of the city of Chengdu, later active in Paris from 2008, Fan Sack started his activity as a writer back in 2003, at the age of 15:

> Even when I was very young and couldn't read, I would flip through books and comics, and the pictures really spoke to me. But I never thought I would become a cartoonist or a writer. Growing up, when I

> was about 15, I met skaters in Chengdu. Back then this kind of sport was rather frowned upon. I thought it was cool, and there were graffiti pieces as a backdrop. So, I started myself. We were a very small group of five young people in a city of several million, sharing the same tastes and passions. We painted in the streets because, at the time, our culture considered graffiti as vandalism. We had troubles with the police and with our own fellow citizens because what we were doing was absolutely new and obscure to the public. No one had ever seen it before. Until then, our public space, our walls, had been occupied exclusively by advertisements or official government and communist party slogans. (Boraccino, 2019)

The choice of his tag, Fan Sack, dates to his early career: "I have always used this name since the very beginning of my artistic life. When I moved to Paris, I couldn't help but notice how tags are everywhere; how they are a highly visible trademark of the artists themselves. I thought it would have to be the same for me" (interview, 2019).
Having painted traditional Chinese and oriental-style graffiti from a very young age, Fan Sack declares his passion for street art and especially his desire to expand graffiti through his own Sichuanese culture:

> I think creating graffiti was and still is a completely natural process for me. I started drawing and painting when I was only a child. Like everything in my life, it was a discovery, a search for something new to experience. I have always opened my heart and mind to new experiences, and this probably enabled me to build my artistic career […]. Basically, I want to express myself. My mind is full of ideas, and I need to find a way to communicate them to others. I want my graffiti to show the culture of Chengdu, the lifestyle and essence of my city, like the art of drinking tea, eating hot pot[39] and playing *mahjong*. These are the stories of Chengdu. What I really hope is for graffiti art to develop in my city. To achieve this, it is important to let people know what you are painting. Hence, my idea is to paint their lives. I study many techniques and various painting

> styles, but I think graffiti is the best way to show my work to the public. I don't want to paint at home, where no one can see what I'm trying to communicate. By doing it outdoors, everyone can appreciate it. (*Ibid.*)

At the start of his career, Fan Sack devoted himself to bombing the streets of Chengdu with his tag and experimenting with various forms of writing, from simple tagging-up to the creation of more complex pieces, restyling and renovating the old school patterns. An example of this type of work is a spray-painted piece made in Chengdu during his early career. In it, he depicts his tag SACK in a rather articulate wildstyle and making skilful use of 3D. The letters are completely white and surrounded by a thick black outline that gives them three-dimensionality. The colours are very bright, and the style is purely western; only small details such as tiny lotus flowers or bamboo leaves inside the letters bring up the "Chineseness" of the piece. The central piece with the inscription SACK always comes with the word *Yan* (eye) written differently near or within the piece. This word has accompanied the artist throughout his career, although acquiring different forms in recent times.

In another work from 2008 (Pic. 26), for instance, *Yan* is repeated several times, thus confirming its importance for Fan Sack from the very beginning: around the elaborate tag SACK in wildstyle with hints of 3D, the word *Yan* is repeatedly written with typographic-like lettering in white on an orange background. This is the prelude to the artist's future iconic tag (an eye inside a sun), employed in all his more recent works (cf. *Rupa* Fig. 14). In this piece, Fan Sack also inserts two puppets: the first, on the right, is a cartoon-style writer with a spray can in his hand. The can's jet originates a white cone with the wildstyle tag SACK (the actual piece) on the inside. On the left of the writing is the second puppet, in realistic form: it is a self-portrait of Fan Sack, depicted from behind with a spray can in his hand, busy bringing his work to life. In the bottom right-hand corner, the date of the piece is written in Chinese format, that is, following the year-month-day order (2008-08-11), together with the

name of the city of Chengdu in characters (成都), the piece's only trace of "Chineseness".

Although Fan Sack has become a famous, internationally renowned artist, combining his street pieces with studio works for exhibitions and galleries, he knows exactly where he comes from and always remembers where he started out. This is why he often returns to Chengdu, to devote himself to street works and promote their diffusion:

> I have made graffiti in many areas of the city, such as Jiuyanqiao, known for its many live music events; but one of my absolute favourites is Chengdu's newest pedestrian street, Kuixinglou. It is very popular among young people, with lots of trendy clubs and typical hot pot restaurants. Kuixinglou is a great place to bring one's creations to life, also because it is right next to Nu Space, an innovative venue in Chengdu for live performances and film screenings. […] I largely promote hip-hop culture and the spread of graffiti in China. Every time I go back to Chengdu, I like to witness how writing is constantly evolving. As a result, I love taking part in events and festivals, especially those involving young people who make me proud to contribute to the spread of graffiti. (*Ibid.*)

Recently, the artist participated in the initiative *Simple Urban Plus Festival*, a music and art festival dedicated to young people and held in Chengdu on 2 and 3 November 2019. The event, which took place in the Chengdu Tianfu Furong Garden, involved young, talented musicians like the new rap generation idol Jackson Wang[40], as well as a contest for creating street art. Fan Sack participated in the festival with the piece *Fu lu shou xi* 福禄壽禧 (Pic. 28). The four characters composing the piece and giving it its title are positioned next to each other on individual panels and are to be read from right to left, in the traditional Chinese manner. In China, it was common practice for a building to have its name written in calligraphic style on a sign placed at the main door, to be read from right to left. Such signs can still be found on temples

or important public buildings. In this work, Fan Sack drew inspiration from this Chinese custom. For the characters, he was inspired by the folklore trend of traditional Chinese culture. *Fu lu shou xi* 福禄壽禧 is a widely used auspicious expression meaning "Luck, Longevity, Prosperity and Happiness". Likewise, the *Fu* 福 (happiness) character often recurs in popular culture, on the doors of houses as well as in many aspects of everyday life. Fan Sack's is probably a message addressed to young Chinese people entering urban life and in particular street art, which aims at evoking and giving voice to that very popular culture from which the phrase originates. The piece resembles a work of calligraphy: the strokes set out to reproduce those of a brush on paper, and the style is very similar to *kaishu*, with accents of the running or semi-cursive style (*xingshu*) in some of the junctions between the strokes of each character. The large format of the writing recalls that of classical calligraphies (*dazi shufa*). In contrast to traditional monochrome calligraphy, in which the only colour is the black of the ink on white paper, each character is here arranged within a series of multicoloured concentric circles that constitute the background and give three-dimensionality to the character itself. The shading ranges from bright green and yellow to black and purple, enriching and enlivening the piece.

There is another work, created in 2011 in Hong Kong (Pic. 27), in which Fan Sack explicitly refers to Chinese calligraphy, this time drawing on the history of Chinese graffiti and one of the most emblematic figures who attempted to combine calligraphy with graffiti: *King of Kowloon*. In it, Fan Sack decided to portray the artist Tsang Tsou-choi (Ceng Zaocai), better known as King of Kowloon (1921-2007), famous for his 51 years of activity on the Hong Kong street art scene. The background is filled with calligraphies that explicitly replicate those by Tsang Tsou-choi, following his same style and idea. Meanwhile, in the centre of the work appears the King of Kowloon himself, bent over, writing his calligraphies. In the last years of his life, Tsang Tsou-choi could no longer maintain an upright posture, and yet kept producing his calligraphies. To the right is

an electricity counter, also covered in calligraphic symbols imitating the style of the King of Kowloon. The King is surrounded by a circle with a dragon in the background, a traditional Chinese symbol of wisdom, power and luck. Unlike pure graffiti writing, this piece adds figurative elements and was not executed on the streets but painted with acrylic colours on canvas in a studio, in order to be displayed in an exhibition. Although not a graffiti piece in the strict sense, its calligraphic-style characters and the explicit reference to one of the first Chinese writers mark a strong connection with the idea of street art inspiring the work.

Although Fan Sack also makes pieces for the art market, the ultimate goal of his activity is to communicate, to create, everywhere. Not only in his hometown: "I want to share my works with as many people as possible because I believe in karma. For me, when you open up to the world, you necessarily get something back. That is why public places are the most beautiful spaces for creation: the paintings can reach everyone. It is very different to private galleries, which are only visited by those with an interest" (*ibid.*).

Fan Sack, therefore, prefers to create outdoors, in the streets, although in recent years his art has increasingly shifted from simple writing to figurativism. This classifies him more as a street artist than a graffiti artist. An instance of this is the work *Wushen zhi shu* 無神之樹 (*The Tree of Atheism*, Pic. 29), created in 2015 on a wall in the 12th arrondissement of Paris. At the base of the piece is a monkey immersed in the sea, covering its eyes with a leaf. Despite being blindfolded, it marches straight ahead, guided from above by an erudite man, symbolising science and knowledge. Above him is the Lord of Heaven, the symbol of religion and of the creative power of *dao*, who is in turn surmounted by Picasso, symbolising art. Finally, at the very top is a brain crowned with a vibrant light, symbolising wisdom. The area around the monkey's eyes is magenta red and the leaf is bright green; these are the only two elements that stand out, catching the eye of the viewer, who is otherwise fully immersed in this ethereal, silent space. The image of the monkey is a signature element appearing in nearly all of Fan Sack's works. In traditional Chinese cul-

ture, this animal embodies intelligence and cunning, whereas in Tibetan tradition it is a bodhisattva, a being who seeks enlightenment by helping other sentient beings through the experience of supreme knowledge. It embodies sensitive consciousness, albeit dominated by inconstancy. With this image, in which Fan Sack superimposes Picasso and the human brain on the Lord of Heaven, the artist pursues an iconographic experimentation reflecting the unbreakable bond between art, science and religion:

> For me, art, science and religion are one and the same. As human beings, we want to know who we are, where we come from, why we are here and what the relationship between nature and the universe is. Although art, science and religion are three very different disciplines and each of them has a different application in the world, for me they all have a single point of origin. It is like imagining a tree: it all starts from the same trunk, with firm roots. From this large trunk, then, the three disciplines are born and become three different branches. My works speak of this. (*Ibid.*)

In this piece the three images of the Lord of Heaven, Picasso, and the brain, emerging from the figure of the monkey (symbolising human nature) and controlled by an astronaut (symbolising exploration), represent the indissoluble bond between the corresponding disciplines of religion, art and science. They all branch out of "one big tree" to provide humans with the essentials of life. Finally, the deep blue background dotted with stars symbolises open space and the universe. This piece is part of the series *Enter the oeil*, of which the monkey, the colour blue, and the triadic idea of the union of science, art and religion are distinctive features. Another work of this series, painted in acrylic on canvas, was displayed in the renowned exhibition *Dalí fait le mur* held from 11 September 2014 to 15 March 2015 at the Espace Montmartre in Paris. This exhibition creates a strong parallelism between street art and the surreal world mastered by Salvador Dalí. The 22 street artists[41] involved were given carte blanche to create works that followed the creative wave of the Spanish

surrealist artist. Like Dalí, street artists impose no limitations to their inspiration and the materials they employ. They also share Dalí's artistic means of revealing the world to their audience: provocative, iconoclastic, savage. The paintings of the surrealist genius and the multifaceted creations of the contemporary artists involved were thus shown to the public side by side, in a set-up that drew inspiration from their respective worlds. Starting from street art, the exhibition went straight to the beating heart of surrealism, following the common thread that bonds both styles through a natural proclivity for the unconventional (Hauer 2014). In Fan Sack's work on display, Salvador Dalí fulfils the role of Picasso in the previous piece. The artist depicts the body of an astronaut, symbolising science and offering a means of glimpsing the universe, dominated in sequence by a monkey, a Buddha and finally Salvador Dalí. Respectively, they incarnate human nature, religion and surrealist art. Above Dalí's head stands a heart with an all-seeing eye on the inside, from which coloured concentric circles radiate outwards. This is the "watchful eye", pointed straight ahead and looking to the future. This is how the artist describes his work:

> This is one of my favourite works, where my creation is displayed next to that of the legendary Keith Haring. It's an authentic thrill. This image is my way of disclosing my vision of religion, nature and science, bringing viewers into my imaginary world and giving them full freedom of interpretation and emotion. (*Ibid.*)

Although it is not a piece of graffiti, the connection with street art is highlighted by two elements: the work forms part of an exhibition dedicated to street art and attended by internationally renowned street artists; and, as a result of this exhibition, Fan Sack coined the concept of *graffuturisme*, a new form of graffiti art that looks to the future through the watchful eye he portrayed.

In addition to writing pieces, actual street art, and works on canvas re-

calling the idea of street art (such as those analysed so far), for years now Fan Sack has also been producing commercial works using the typical tools and media of graffiti (e.g., spray paint on walls), like many of his Chinese and non- Chinese colleagues. An evocative example is the large sleeping Buddha created in 2016 at the Masha Restaurant in Paris, near the Eiffel Tower. In this work, the Buddha's garment is covered all over by the well-known Louis Vuitton logo, along with a series of spheres that most likely symbolise the terrestrial planets. At Buddha's feet, a monkey musician is depicted on a trail of clouds, alongside other symbolic elements of human art. The dominant colour is red, with shades of powder pink through to deep purple. Buddha is wearing virtual reality glasses, a symbol of modern technology but also of optical art[42], in reference to the teaching of Buddhist scriptures whereby "everything becomes spirit after being possessed by evil forces":

> One of my influences, as is quite common among those considered "extravagant and out of the ordinary", is optical art from the sixties and seventies. It is so psychedelic. In China, this movement, with its spirit of freedom, is very interesting and extremely stimulating for my generation. Our parents had no idea of what was happening in the western world back then; they knew nothing about it. China was still closed at that time. (Interview, 2019)

In this work, Fan Sack blends the sacred with the profane, religion with business, East with West, art with the art market; and he does so rather provocatively, echoing the modalities of street art.

From graffiti writing to *graffuturisme*, via street art, and through to more refined experimentations in the field of art on canvas, over the course of his career Fan Sack has increasingly shifted his focus to purely Buddhist works, regardless of the artistic technique employed, depicting representative images of eastern culture. The work collection *Rupa* (Fig. 14), displayed in 2016 at the J Plus Hotel in Hong Kong, epitomises

Fig. 14. Fan Sack, *Rupa*, *Ape Karma* series, 2016, 100×100 cm, acrylic and gold leaf on canvas, Hong Kong, J Plus Hotel. Courtesy of the artist.

research and experimentation with art seen as revelation, with the artist explaining how religion, nature and science are not only part of a whole underlying human life, but even become a "universal law" capable of governing the entire world. *Rupa* is a Buddhist term which represents reality, existence, nature. Human nature is embodied by a bright red ape-like figure immersed in the tranquillity of the surrounding space. The monkey is the soul of the *dao*, wrapped in a fiery red aura. On the top left is the all-seeing eye, also known as the "eye of providence",

and on the right is an inscription in the Tibetan alphabet. A human is praying on the lower left, and in front of him, on the right, a scientist is holding an alms bowl. In Buddhism, the bowl symbolises the middle ground between rigour, frugality and attachment to life. It is also indicative of the lifestyle of monks who, every day, live off people's gifts. These three figures surrounded by a red aura also serve as incarnations of art, science and religion, immersed in an open and charmingly scenic space. Although this work seems to have nothing to do with graffiti art, there is a small detail – which Fan Sack seems unwilling to give up – that reminds us of it: the watchful eye, depicted in the top right-hand corner inside the sun, as a symbol of unity, balance, wisdom, spiritual awareness and, above all, enlightenment. This element is a reference to the YAN tag used in his early graffiti; as Fan Sack's art evolves, the tag evolves with him. This figurative "eye" becomes the artist's new tag and can be found in a great deal of his recent works as a sort of vigilant peephole that gives a new insight into the world. In the last few years, this eye has become the protagonist of some of his street art pieces, where the eyeball has been turned into a huge circle containing figurative references to Chinese tradition, as a means of reflecting upon the present.

Fan Sack is basically an ever-changing experimental artist. As he explains:

> I'm still testing and experimenting. I believe it's important for viewers to give their own interpretation of my works; I don't want to limit their perception. The advertising designs I create don't have a single, straightforward, identifiable message. I want to give people space to think, to interpret. People forget about advertisements in the blink of an eye. I would rather that those who see one of my works for the first time carry it with them, in their memory, without an immediate response. I would like them to analyse it afterwards, to form their own thought. With no interaction between me and the public, my work is only halfway valid. (Boraccino, 2019)

The dream of this Chinese artist based in Paris is to spread his art everywhere:

> Where do I come from? China, because I grew up and lived there until I was 20. Then, ten years ago, I planted my roots elsewhere, in Europe. How can I express both my identities? I believe artworks are part of the artist's soul and worldview. I want to do everything, experiment with everything; and, above all, I don't want to set limits. I am interested in all cultures, populations, social classes. I was born in China; but even before being Chinese, I am a human being. I moved to Paris in order to grow and gain experience. We only live once. We must do what we want and do it well. One day everything will be gone, for all of us. This is why I'd rather regret something I have done, instead of doing nothing. I chose adventure and, indeed, life goes on. (*Ibid.*)

Fan Sack is an artist *tout court* who, just like many other Chinese writers, started off bombing Chengdu's streets with his tag and experimenting with various forms of graffiti, until he found himself creating ever more elaborate pieces that transcend simple street art and have even made it into art galleries.

However, Fan Sack's artistic evolution still remains anchored to his origins: with references to calligraphy, he emulates those who have "marked" the streets before him, like the King of Kowloon, the iconic forerunner of writing; he participates in events that stimulate young writers to promote street art (like the *Simple Urban Plus Festival*); he uses spray cans for indoor and business-focused artworks; he adds sacred symbols of Buddhist art in his works, and coined the term *graffiturisme* to indicate an new, extravagant and unique art. These are all clear indicators of his constant focus on graffiti art and Chinese culture. In short, Fan Sack may be described as a complex, multifaceted artist, and perhaps one of the few, among his many Chinese colleagues who started out like him, to have embarked on a fruitful, ever-evolving career with an international scope.

Fan Sack concludes this excursus on Chinese graffiti art, an unstoppable phenomenon posing as a vehicle for new forms of expression.
We hope that our research has opened up a window onto the largely unexplored aspects of modern-day China, providing a deeper insight into its rich and profound culture, which invariably manages to convey its everlasting charm.

Notes

1. Interviews with artists were conducted from 2013 to 2021. Being one of the main sources of this monographic volume, we choose to include numerous excerpts within the text. Specifically, artists from the Beijing scene were interviewed by A. Iezzi and M. Merenda, those from Shanghai by M. R. Bisceglia, while those from Chengdu by M. Merenda.

2. As stated by graffiti writer Rae (See Mininno 2008, p. 166).

3. A documentary entitled Great Walls of China (Pearl Channel, 2007) highlights the presence of several writers in Hong Kong before the mid-1990s. (See Valjakka 2011, p. 74).

4. The competitions were held annually both at the national level, with the participation of Chinese crews only, and at the international level, with crews from the Philippines, Singapore, Japan, Korea, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Taiwan. The winning crew of the Chinese contest was entitled to participate in the international competition. The ABS crew's (see Ch. III) victory in the Pan-Asian contest in 2011 shows the high-level technical skills achieved by the Chinese crews.

5. *Art from the Streets (The History of Street Art - from New York to Beijing)* is the title of the exhibition by the Department of Mural Painting of the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) and the CAFA Art Museum, in collaboration with Shanghai's Magda Danysz Gallery, held at the 3B Exhibition Hall of the CAFA Art Museum from 1 July to 24 August 2016 (https://www.cafamuseum.org/en/exhibit/detail/530). Curated by Tang Hui and Magda Danysz, the exhibition welcomed international graffiti writers from Brazil, China, France, Italy, Portugal, Senegal, the United States and the United Kingdom and presented the catalogue *Street Art, a Global View* available at: https://issuu.com/magdagallery/docs/digital_catalogue_3.

6. The term *tuya* derives from the verses *Hu lai an shang fan mozhi, tumo shishu ru laoya* 忽来案上翻墨汁，涂抹诗书如老鸦 (And suddenly, the ink was poured over the table, and poetry was smeared in raven black).

7. Zhang Dali worked in several studios: first in Yuanmingyuan in Beijing, then in Bologna, and then again in Beijing in Dongsi Shier Tiao 34 (during his graffiti period), Liulitun, Maizidian, Caochangdi – which was one of the most important, Heiqiao and now in Zhubaotun 1-3: http://www.zhangdaliart.com/en/studios.html (last accessed in February 2024).

8. The wall was established on 11 December 2005. According to Lys, before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in 2014, it was entirely painted in red, covering all works created since 2005.

9. Lys affirms that the China-Japan Friendship Hospital became a graffiti wall in 2005. This is confirmed by an article about Su Bin 苏滨 in the art magazine Sculpture.

10. This can be read on their official website, while their ZCool page states that the Tuns crew was founded in 2014 and consists of Zhao, Mage, Fasto, Snake, Zstar and Joke. Consequently, according to this composition, it would not be all-female crew.

11. The running or semi-cursive script (*xingshu*) is one of the five fundamental styles of the Chinese art of calligraphy, along with regular script (*kaishu* 楷书), seal script (*zhuanshu* 篆书), clerical script (*lishu* 隶书) and cursive script (*caoshu* 草书).

12. In this *chengyu* the character *zhi* 志 (will, aspiration) was replaced by the homophone *zhi* 支 (to support, sustain, bear) precisely to emphasise the juxtaposition of intent and help.

13. The *Shehui* often collaborates with brands related to hip-hop, street culture and graffiti. The company organises independent concerts, promotes hip-hop music, designs skateboards, has recorded several music albums on skateboard culture in China and designs hip-hop themed clothing, CDs, billboards and other merchandise. Over time, it has become central to China's underground culture and its related brands: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ndjrivhNpMFqG9DzEOBFpg (last accessed in February 2024).

14. The studio is no longer active. However, Li Qiuqiu and other members of the crew have opened their own private studios where they continue to create graffiti for commercial purposes.

15. The record was surpassed in 2008 by a Kwanyin Clan work on a 20m high tower.

16. Furthermore, there was no reimbursement for the canisters, nor compensation for the work done.

17. An interview with Liu Qiuqiu reported by Wang 2016 reads: "Numerous times, he was stopped by the city's *chengguan* [city inspectors], fined, and ordered to paint over his tags."

18. In the same interview (Li 2016), Li Qiuqiu affirms that the comics of Otomo Katsuhiro and Kim Jung Gi were further sources of inspiration for his art. On the other hand, his music references are 2pac, Nan, Wu Tang, Bob Marley, Mozart and Paquito (D'Rivera), and he is a fan of the literary works of Wang Shuo, Jin Yong and Gu Long. His family and friends also had a strong influence on his style.

19. US journalist Lance Crayon, who was sent to report on the event in 2011, was so impressed that he came up with the idea of the first documentary on graffiti in Beijing: *Spray Painting Beijing. Graffiti in the Capital of China*.

20. This is the translation provided by Li Qiuqiu. As he stated in a WeChat conversation with A. Iezzi (16 March 2021), he usually transliterates the term first and then translates the meaning.

21. Rice paper (*xuanzhi* 宣纸) is used in traditional Chinese painting as canvas.

22. Interview with Qui Zhijie by Walter Romeo: "The calligrapher is, in fact, like a dancer dancing with his brush, while the ink stroke records his movement" in Qiu Zhijie at work, Youtube video uploaded by Walter Romeo on 31 May 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dtdbt4e68LM (last accessed in February 2024).

23. The main formats of Chinese paintings are hanging scrolls, handscrolls, fans and albums.

24. The couplet reads: *Wei chutu qian xian you jie* 未出土前先有节 / *lingyun shenchu zong xuxin* 凌云深处总虚心.

25. The *chengyu* was confirmed by EricTin on the web forum *Graffiti – Hip Hop* (*Tuya ba* 涂鸦吧): Kwanyin_Tin (2010), *Guanyin Kwanyin Clan Tin geng xin 'shengongyijiang' gengxin tupian* 观音 Kwanyin Clan Tin 更新"神工意匠" 更新图片 (The new piece by Kwanyin Clan member Tin, *Shengong yijiang*, new pictures), *Graffiti – Hip-Hop Web Forum*, 19 June, http://tieba.baidu.com/p/803633468 (last accessed in February 2024).

26. EricTin affirmed that the use of chengyu is a feature of Kwanyin Clan pieces (interview by M. Merenda, 4 November 2015).

27. Translated according to the annotated Chinese text found in Chen 1988, pp. 290-291, and the paraphrase of the poem in modern Chinese in Li Jing, 2009, p. 210.

28. Nike 706 Centre Lebron 6 Experience, *Bēhance*, 4 July 2010: https://www.behance.net/gallery/565889/Nike-Lebron6-Interactive-Basketball-Training-Centre (last accessed in February 2024).

29. The exceptions are *Shirupozhu*, the first *charactering* piece of this kind according to EricTin (interview, 2016), and the graffiti made in November for the New Silk Bay Media (*Xin si wan chuamei* 新丝湾传媒) on the internal walls of its headquarters in Beijing.

30. The Beijing Penzi and the Oops crew also created pieces inspired by this tragic event.

31. The Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto, aka Vhils, approached graffiti in 2000 and is now a world-famous street artist.

32. DaLeast was born in China in 1984 and started his artistic career as graffiti writer, joining the JEJ crew in Wuhan with the tag DAL. He currently lives and works in South Africa and is a world-renowned street artist. His nickname DALeast comes from the combination of "DA" and "east" (eastern).

33. Mode2 is a famous Mauritian artist who has been active since the 1980s.

34. Many artists use more than one tag: Jin Ye was formerly known as Huri or Read, while today his tag is Hali (interview by M. R. Bisceglia in Moganshan Road, 11 September 2014).

35. Rucker Park is a skate park in the Yangpu district, north-east of Shanghai.

36. In her e-mail interview with M. R. Bisceglia on 15 October 2017, Tin.G affirms none of them stopped their painting activity, but getting together became hard due to their respective schedules, therefore the crew temporarily split up.

37. It can be proven by another clue: it is common practice for graffiti writers to add the year in which the piece was painted. Most of the graffiti photographed by M. R. Bisceglia were dated 2014.

38. *Meeting of Styles* is a non-profit organisation that hosts and sponsors graffiti-related events around the world. The first Chinese event was held in 2011.

39. *Hot pot* is a traditional Chinese recipe. It involves a metal pot with boiling broth in the middle of the table, kept hot by a small cooker underneath. The pot may contain different types of broth separately, with various spices, and goes together with a variety of raw ingredients: meat, fish, greens, noodles and seasonings. Diners are supposed to cook the food the hot broth and then dip it in the seasoning, which is usually sesame oil.

40. Jackson Wang is a Hong Kong rapper, singer, dancer and tv host. He is a member of the Got7 South Korean band, and took part in South Korean reality shows like *Roommate*. He is also active in China as solo singer and tv host.

41. The exhibition displayed the works of 22 artists: Akiza, Artiste Ouvrier, Fred Calmets, Codex Urbanus, Btoy, Hadrien Durand-Baïssas, Jadikan, Jérôme Mesnager, Les King's Queer, Kool Koor, Kouka, Levalet, Thomas Mainardi, Manser, Nikodem, Nowart, Paella, Pioc PPC, Sack, Speedy Graphito, Valeria Attinelli and Zokatos.

42. Optical art, or opt art, is an abstract art movement that started around the 1960s and further developed in the 1970s.

Pic. 1. BJPZ Crew (0528, Soos, Mo), *Wo de lanqiu you jietou dazao* 我的篮球由街头打造 (*My way of playing basketball is born in the street*), 2007, 3×10 m, spray paint on panel, Beijing, Dongcheng District, Dongsi. Photographed by Llys. Courtesy of the artists and the photographer.

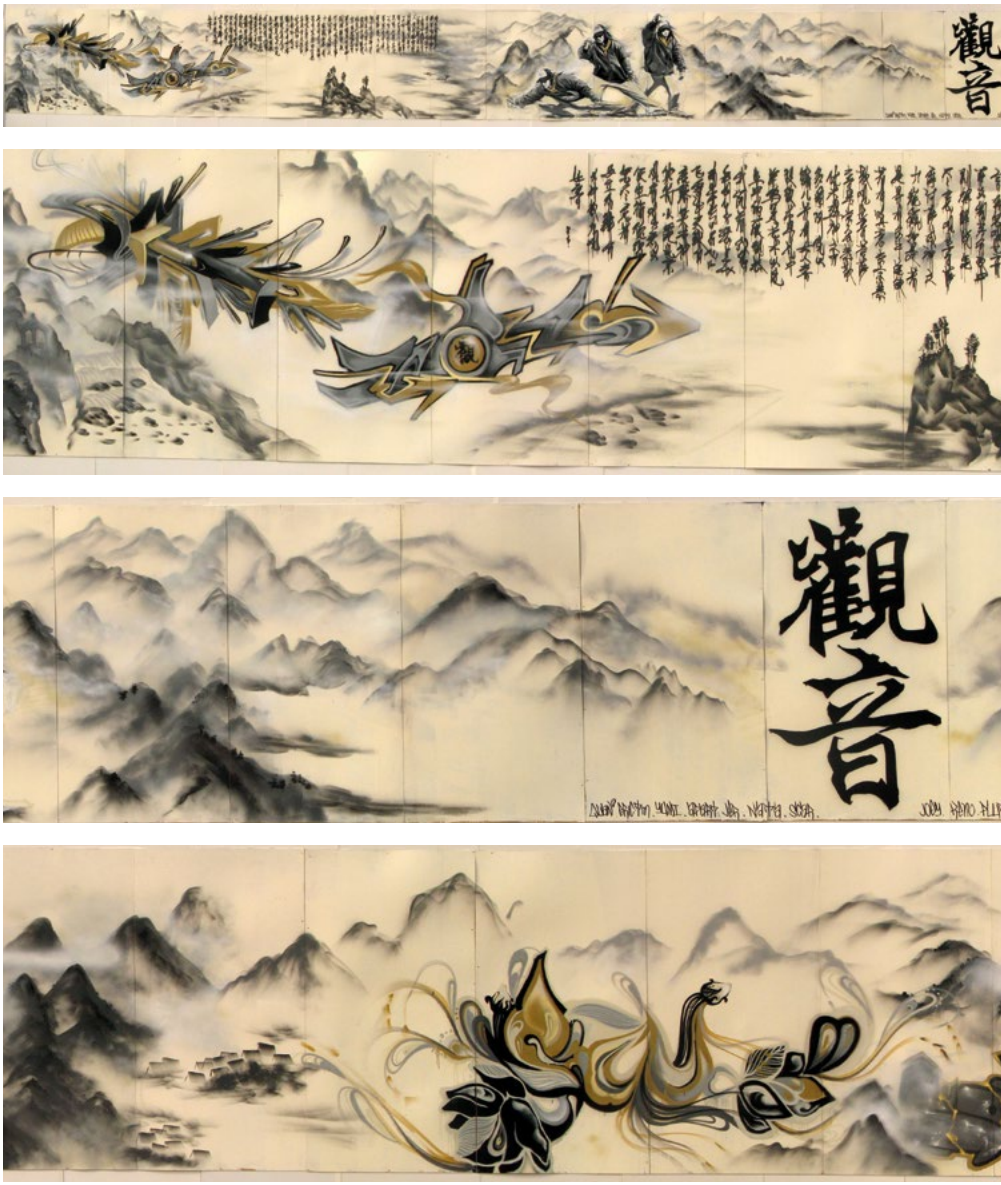
Pic. 2. Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528), *Shehui* 社会 (*Society*), 2005, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Wudaokou. Photographed by Llys on 7 May 2005. Courtesy of the artist and the photographer.

Pic. 3. Li Qiuqiu (a.k.a. 0528), *Fangshen* 房神 (*Spirit of the House*) or *Fanxian* 梵仙 (*Celestial figure called Fan*), June 2020, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Courtesy of the artist.

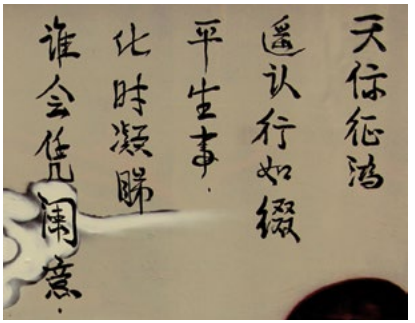
Pic. 4. BJPZ crew (Soos, 0528, More), *R.I.P. 512 Sichuan Earthquake*, 20 May 2008, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Renmin University. Courtesy of the artists.

Pic. 5. Li Qiuqiu and Corw, *Qingwu tuya* 请勿涂鸦 (*Please no graffiti*), 2020, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Jingmi Road. Courtesy of the artists.

Pic. 6. Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, Nat), *New Style*, July 2008, spray paint on wall, Beijing. Courtesy of the artists. At the top, the whole piece; on the lower left, the Chinese character calligraphy, with the couplet *The Bamboo* (*Zhu* 竹) by Zheng Xie (1693-1765); at the centre of the piece, the character *Guan* 觀 (*Kwan*).



Pic. 7. Kwanyin Clan (Quan, EricTin, Yumi, Jer, Apart, Nat, Scar, Joey, Keno, Pluto, Viga, Ctn), *Shanshui PIC* 山水PIC (*Landscape Painting PIC*), 8-11 November 2007, 42×2 m, spray paint on panels, Beijing, International Exhibition Hall Square. Courtesy of the artists.



Pic. 8. EricTin (Kwanyin Clan), *Shengong yijiang* 神工意匠 (*Ars divina)*, June 2010, spray paint on wall, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist. In the centre, the title of the piece in Chinese characters 神工意匠. In the calligraphy on the left, the second stanza of the poem *Rouged Lips* (*Dian jiangchun* 点绛唇) by Wang Yucheng (954-1001).

Pic. 9. Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, Nat, Yumi, Quan), *Shirupozhu* 势如破竹 (*With Irresistible Force*), 4-6 February 2008, 6×6 m, spray paint on panel, Beijing, 798 Art District, Nike 706 Art Space. Courtesy of the artists. The calligraphy in the bottom picture is taken from the poem *Full River Red* (*Man jiang hong* 满江红) by the General Yue Fei (1103-1142).

Pic. 10. Kwanyin Clan for Adidas (Yumi, Nat), *Putian tong qing* 普天同庆 (*The Entire World Celebrates*), 2010, marker and temper on leather ball, China. Courtesy of the artists.

Pic. 11. Nat (Kwanyin Clan), *Heqi* 和气 (*Peace*), 2010, blue cobalt graffiti on porcelain plate, China. Courtesy of the artist.

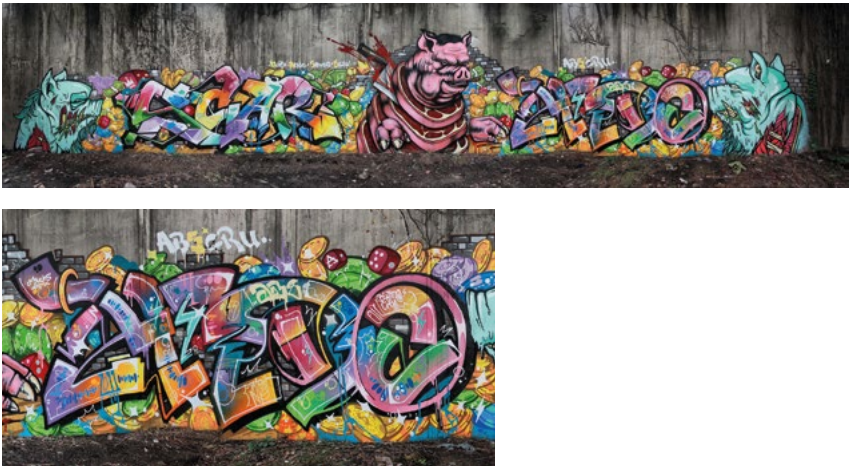
Pic. 12. Kwanyin Clan, artwork made for the exhibition *Art from the Streets (The History of Street Art – from New York to Beijing)*, 2016, spray paint on panels, Beijing, CAFA Art Museum. Courtesy of the artists.

Pic. 13. ABS crew, *Poseidon*, 10 September 2011, winner of the *China Wall Lords Graffiti Battle*, spray paint on wall, Chengdu. Courtesy of the artists.

Pic. 14. ABS crew *et al*. (Max, Jer, Way Fan, Bllod Bro, Spade, Kayo, Thorn Donis, Neon, Deb.Roc.Ski, etc.), *Joy in bottle*, 19-21 May 2018, spray paint on wall, Berlin, *Berlin Mural Fest*. Courtesy of the artists.

Pic. 15. ABS crew, *The Original Canster*, June 2012, winner of the *China Wall Lord Graffiti Battle*, spray paint on panel, Shenzhen. Courtesy of the artists.

Pic. 16. ABS crew (Seven, Noise, Andc e Smer), *ABS crew X Red Bull*, 14-15 January 2012, spray paint on panel, Beijing, Nanshan Ski Village. Courtesy of the artists.



Pic. 17. ABS crew (Noise, Andc, Seven, Scar), *Tonghuo pengzhang* 通货膨胀 (*Inflation*), 2012, spray paint on wall, Beijing, Jingmi Road. Courtesy of the artists. In the bottom picture, the wildstyle tag ANDC.

Pic. 18. Oops crew (Huri, Storm, Tin.G, Snow, Aek, Reign, Redim), *Shanghai jianqiang* 上海坚强 (*Shanghai be strong*), November 2010, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. Courtesy of the artists. © Imaginechina Limited/Alamy Stock Photo/IPA.

Pic. 19. Dezio, *Symbiosis*, November 2019, graffiti on plastic fence, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 20. Tin.G, *Pink Africa*, autumn 2010, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 21. Tin.G, *The Rabbit Year*, winter 2011, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 22. Tin.G, sticker on lamppost, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 23. Gas, *Feng* 風 (*Wind*), 2016, spray paint on wall, Chengdu, U37 Creative Warehouse. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 24. Gas and Seven, *How Chill*, 2019, spray paint on wall, Chengdu, Kuixinglou. Courtesy of the artists. In the second picture, detail of the *Chengdu* 成都 characters by Gas.

Pic. 25. Gas, *Qi* 氣 (*Gas*), 2019, spray paint on wall, Chengdu, Jinniu District, Lin Xiang Zi. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 26. Fan Sack, *SACK*, 2008, spray paint on wall, Chengdu. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 27. Fan Sack, *King of Kowloon*, 2011, acrylic paint on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 28. Fan Sack, *Fu lu shou xi* 福禄壽禧 (*Luck, Longevity, Prosperity and Happiness*), 2019, acrylic paint on panel, Chengdu, *Simple Urban Plus Festival*. Courtesy of the artist.

Pic. 29. Fan Sack, *Wushen zhi shu* 無神之樹 (*The Tree of Atheism*), *Enter the oeil* series, 2015, spray and acrylic paint on wall, Paris, XII arrondissement. Courtesy of the artist.

GLOSSARY

Marta R. Bisceglia

3D style (*litizi fengge* 立体字风格) - A three-dimensional style of letters, used to add effect on basic letters (enhancing depth and allure in the piece), sometimes applied to wildstyle for an extra level of complexity. In graffiti writing, the most widely used technique for 3D is chiaroscuro. To implement it, the artist first chooses the direction or vanishing point, then, starting from the edges of the letters, draws same-length guidelines following that same direction. Subsequently, the artist connects these guidelines, drawing lines that run parallel to the letter lines, and finally the area is filled with colour. The effect could be achieved by shadowing the letters, but this procedure is far more complex. This style was invented by Phase 2.

B-boy - Short for break-boy, or break-dancer. Over time, the term has been used to designate those who join the hip-hop culture. The female counterpart is b-girl.

Black book or book (*shougaoben* 手稿本) - The writer's draft book.

Blockbuster or block – This is a kind of graffiti that is easy to execute. It is made of large, square or rectangular block letters. It is generally two-toned: one colour for the fill-in (using temper, roller or paintbrush) and one for the outline. Mainly invented to cover over other people and to paint whole trains easily, but they are effective on smaller walls for maximum coverage. Blade and Comet claim to have invented these.

Bombing (*zhajie* 炸街 / *beng* 崩) – Filling walls and trains with illegal graffiti, typically throw-ups, tags, stencils or simple lettering pieces that can be executed quickly. This is the favourite practice of writers whose primary aim is quality, and who cover the city with their tag to attain the fame of king.

Bubble style (*paopaozi fengge* 泡泡字風格) – Rounded, old school style lettering, still extensively used in throw-ups due to its quick execution. The letters recall

soap bubbles and are painted with great precision. The outline is usually thick, with a white inline to enhance the depth of the lettering. Phase 2 originally created this style.

Buff or buffing system (*qinchu tuya* 书法涂鸦) – The removal of illegal graffiti, but also the act of writers when they cover other artists' tags with their own, or with any other sign.

Calli-graffiti or calligraphy graffiti (*shufa tuya* 书法涂鸦) – An urban art form that combines calligraphy and graffiti.

Cap (*pentou* 喷头) – The cap of the spray can (*penqi guan* 喷漆罐) is the interchangable spray-can nozzles fitted to the can to vary the width of spray. Its dimension may vary: *fat*, for large and quick spraying of backgrounds and thick lines; *superfat*, for ultra quick strokes and large surfaces; *soft,* or medium-sized, halfway between fat and skinny, for soft, versatile strokes perfect for backgrounds and edgings; *skinny*, for outlines; *superskinny*, for precision work and ultra-thin lines.

Character (*tu'an* 图案) – Animal or human figurative element but also a cartoon figure (usually, but not necessarily) taken from comic books, TV or popular culture to add humor or emphasis to a piece. In some pieces, the character takes the place of a letter in the word. At the early stages of graffiti, characters where corollaries of letters, but over time they have become a style in their own right (see **Puppet**).

Charactering – Term we have coined to designate the style of characters in writing pieces (see **Lettering**), or the use of Chinese characters in graffiti.

Contest (*duijue* 对决) – Competition or legal battle between breakers, djs, mcs or writers, the most important of which in China is the *Wall Lords Graffiti Battle*, or simply *Wall Lords* (*Zhanqiang* 战墙).

Crew (*tuandui* 团队) – In hip hop culture, a circle of people collaborating on artistic or cultural projects, e.g., a group of writers or dancers. In graffiti writing, a crew is an organised group of writers who paint together to create pieces. They are usually friends, meaning they share mutual esteem and respect. A writer may belong to more

than one crew over time, or even at the same time. The name of a crew is normally an acronym of two or three letters, possibly having multiple meanings. Like tags, crews' names are often written on the side of the piece, or they form the very core of the piece, with the name of the crew members dotted all around.

Crossing over (*gai* 盖) – Covering other writers' pieces with one's own or drawing crosses on other people's tags.

Fill-in (*tianse* 填色) – A painted area within the letters on a piece or throw-up.

Graffiti writing (*tuya shuxie* 涂鸦书写) – A worldwide social, cultural and artistic phenomenon born in the 1970s in New York ghettos as a spontaneous expression, with no declared intent, of a heterogeneous group of young people belonging to the hip-hop subculture. The etymology of the word *graffìto* derives from the Latin *gràphium*, or "style of engraving", which in turn stems from the Greek *gràphein* (*γράφειν*, to scratch, to hollow, to draw). The English term "writing", instead, stands for the act of creating one's tag in public spaces using spray paint or markers. It entails a study of lettering, namely the style of the characters that make up both simple tags and pieces. In China, the term "graffiti" does not only refer to the writing of letters or characters as in writing, and thus graffiti is also called *tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术 (lit. graffiti art), implying a wide range of artistic expressions on public soil (making it much closer to street art). Another term used is *tuya huihua* 涂鸦绘画 (lit. graffiti painting), which refers to graffiti containing puppets.

Hall of fame (*tuya qiang* 涂鸦墙) – A space where graffiti writing is (more or less) legal. Halls of fame are mainly popular with writers who aim to create artistic, sophisticated pieces, favouring quality over quantity and constantly searching for original styles.

Hip-hop (*xiha* 嘻哈) – A cultural movement that emerged predominantly in the Afro-American and Latino communities of the Bronx in New York, in the late 1970s. The four main aspects or elements of hip-hop culture are speech, music, movement and sign: *MCing* (*shuochang* 说唱), or rap music introduced by Afro-Americans (MC is the acronym of Master of Ceremony); *Djing* (*dadie* 打碟), introduced by Jamaicans; graffiti writing (*tuya shuxie* 涂鸦书写) and breakdance (*diban wu* 地板舞 o *pili wu* 霹雳舞), introduced by Puerto Ricans.

King (*wangzhe* 王者) – A sort of leader for other writers. Generally, the king is the best skilled writer most respected by everyone. A writer is deemed king only if another king recognises him or her as such. Factors taken into account for this title are the number of pieces made in a city, style, originality, and experience.

Lettering – The style of the letters, and the pivotal concept of graffiti writing. Writers first and foremost paint letters, which may differ in size and style: *block* consists of large, square or rectangular letters, usually filled with one colour; *soft* consists of round, soft, cloud-like shaped letters, usually of one colour within an outline; in *bubble style,* the letters look like soap bubbles, very precisely coloured and with a wide outline; in *wildstyle,* the letters are composed of intersecting three-dimensional arrows, which give the idea of movement and confusion. In the case of Chinese graffiti art, since many writers also use characters in their pieces, a new term was coined to indicate the style of the characters: **Charactering**.

Marker (*makebi* 马克笔) – The pen used to paint tags.

Masterpiece (*dafu de zuopin* 大幅的作品) – A piece of excellent quality, a particularly successful graffiti.

New school (*xinxuexiao* 新学校) – As opposed to old school, this term refers to the generation of writers that appeared after the 1980s. In China, it is also used to designate a particular style of lettering that aims to modernise the old school styles.

Old school (*laoxuexiao* 老学校) – "Slang" term referring to the subcultures of a discipline or school and its past generations. It is used to compare the current state of a discipline, subculture or movement with a previous stage. In graffiti, it refers to the early years of graffiti writing in the United States (more specifically, the mid 70s to 1983), when numerous styles were invented, making the first writers famous. The expression "back in the day" also relates to this period. Also may refer to hip-hop music of this period. Old-school writers are given respect for being there when it all started, and specific writers are remembered for creating specific styles. For example, Blade and Comet created blockbusters, Phase 2 created bubble letters, clouds, Skeme's "S", and so on.

Outline (*lunkuoxian* 轮廓线) – The letter outline, the contour line of the piece that defines and shapes its structure: the outline put on the wall and then filled, or the final outline done around the piece to finish it. Can also refer to the drawing done in a piece book (see **Black book**) in preparation for doing the actual piece (see **Sketch**).

Piece (*zuopin* 作品) – A graffiti painting, short for **Masterpiece**. It is also considered an enlarged tag executed with spray cans, composed of multi-coloured letters (it's generally agreed that a painting must have at least three colors to be considered a piece). The term is generally used to distinguish graffiti from simple tags. The piece is the third stage in the evolution of letters, after the tag and the throw-up.

Poster art (*haibao* 海报) – A form of street art created by joining sheets of printed paper together to compose a large advertising-style image that can even fill entire building facades.

Post-graffiti – A modern evolution of the graffiti culture. This first break away from tradition evolved into the graffiti-logo style trend, with artists associating their name to a logo reproduced in series in public spaces through stickers, stencils and posters. Subsequently, more innovative techniques and art forms were introduced, including painting, sculpture, graphics, design, illustration, fashion, photography, architecture, video art and calligraphy. Post-graffiti is the brainchild of a global world, living and spreading over the World Wide Web.

Puppet (*tu'an* 图案) – Figurative elements alongside the graffiti. These may be human figures, animal-like monsters, or comic or cartoon characters (see **Character**).

Sketch (*shougao* 手稿) – The draft of the piece. Usually, every writer has a sketchbook in which they practice before painting on walls.

Stencil art (*mubanhua* 模版画) – A widely used street art practice that allows shapes, symbols and letters to be reproduced in series by means of a stencil, cut in such a way as to form a physical negative of the image to be created. In short, it is a technique characterised by the use of a pattern cut out on cardboard (the stencil) that can be quickly reproduced on the wall with a spray can.

Sticker art (*tiezhi* 贴纸) – A form of tagging through computer-printed stickers that may contain only the writer's signature and/or logo or be more elaborate, including small fonts and decorations. Sticker art is quick to execute, cheap, and easy to disseminate, and is considered a sub-category of graffiti art, although some writers believe that this type of art is only for those who are afraid of using markers or spray cans.

Street art (*jietou yishu* 街头艺术) – A mass media term that tries to define all the art forms performed in public places, often illegally and using the most diverse techniques. Born from graffiti writing, it has developed and evolved into different practices over time: sticker art, stencil art, poster art, video projections, sculptures, installations and performances.

Tag (*qianming tuya* 签名涂鸦) – The pseudonym, stage name, or code name that every graffiti artist, mc and breaker uses to distinguish themselves, to stand out and highlight their presence in the city. Being the most basic form of graffiti, created with spray cans or markers, the tag is the backbone of the writing phenomenon. The evolution of the tag represents the personal style of its author. All pieces, even the largest, most colourful and elaborate ones, remain, in essence, signatures. The activity of marking a surface with a tag is called tagging-up, while tag bombing is the reproduction of one's tag on a large scale in a certain area of the city. Tags can also be representative of entire groups. Different writers or mcs who join together can decide to use one comprehensive tag, as a symbol of the group (see **Crew**).

Throw-up (*kuaisu tuya* 快速涂鸦 / *outu* 呕吐) – The first evolution of the tag; a stylised drawing of one's signature, quickly executed but on a large scale, with few colours that are usually sprayed roughly, even without fill-in. The throw-up is an art of its own: the style is immediate, often very simple and "rubbery", yet never banal. It only consists of an outline with a monochrome fill-in, but the term can sometimes also indicate any kind of bubble style, thus not necessarily monochrome. This technique is scorned because it is deemed unesthetic, but achieving a good throw-up, quickly and with a precise outline, is no easy task. The throw-up is also known as a flop. Throw-ups can be from one or two letters to a whole word or a whole roll call of names. Often times throw-ups incorporate an exclamation mark after the word or letter.

Toy (*xinshou* 新手) – A derogatory term referring to an underappreciated or novice graffiti artist, but also used to offend writers for reasons that are not strictly related to their activity. One old definition of "TOYS" is that it stands for "trouble on your system".

Wildstyle (*kuangye fengge* 狂野风格) – A complex composition of letters assembled to give a unique shape and dynamic to the piece. In this style, the letters are distorted and superimposed, and sometimes enriched with three-dimensional arrows, tribals, pikes, puppets and other decorative elements that give an idea of movement and confusion. This style can be straight or soft: the first is symmetrical, and the arrows forming the letters draw sharp angles; the second is asymmetrical, and the angles are replaced by curved arrows with rounded points. To increase the perception of depth, in addition to inserting junctions between characters, the entire word structure can be turned into a three-dimensional element. This complicated construction of interlocking letters is considered one of the hardest styles to master and the lettering of the pieces done in wildstyle is often completely undecipherable to non-writers.

Writer (*tuyazhe* 涂鸦者 / *penzi* 喷子 / *tuya yishujia* 涂鸦艺术家 / *xieziren* 写字人) – An artist who executes graffiti mainly based on lettering.

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Graffiti is a global art movement that is ceaselessly changing and developing. Landing in China only in the mid-1990s, it represents an almost unknown but extremely lively and vibrant phenomenon, capable of giving soul and voice to the anonymous neighbourhoods of China's megalopolis. Presenting the intense activity of some of the most famous writers and crews in China, this volume shows a form of art in constant evolution, yet still entirely unexplored. Chinese Graffiti lies between legality and illegality, free street art and commercial art, state support and social denunciation, revealing its all-Chinese uniqueness, along with the multifaceted artistic and cultural reality of contemporary China.

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