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# Public Surfaces Beyond the Great Wall: Communication and Graffiti Culture in China

| Edit

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The Great Wall of China is an iconic and complex sign that has been used by both state officials and Chinese avant-garde artists since the end of the Cultural Revolution to make claims about and on behalf of Chinese society.<sup>1</sup> This state/artist confrontation around a singular, fixed object contributes to an oppositional reading of China's public sphere, a standoff between a monolithic state and a monolithic society around a singular symbol of antiquity. Graffiti in Beijing and Shanghai complicates this reading, and throws into sharp relief China's status as a fraught territory trying to navigate the dual tides of globalization and cultural nationalism.<sup>2</sup> Projects like Zhang Dali's *Dialogue/Duihua* endeavor in Beijing and multiple graffiti interventions like those along Moganshan Road in Shanghai highlight the development of an emerging revision of Chinese public culture, with graffiti art acting as both *evidence* of and communicative *infrastructure* for often subtle but significant changes. Rather than mere embellishment, graffiti is a composition in traces: an enigmatic address by an author who is absent to an audience of unpredictable strangers. In contrast to models of "democratic" dialogue that are rooted in abstract claims to rights, practices of polemic and confrontation, and clear identities and interests, graffiti points to another idea of democratic communication. This alternative culture is always in process, based on affiliation between strangers with temporary bonds, and advanced by strategic use of available artistic resources in response to threats to shared living space such as urban renewal, cultural engineering, and national identity promotion.


This essay will proceed in two movements. First, I will analyze Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* project with attention to the way that the work both functioned to generate visibility for public spaces and places being erased by nationally-led urban renewal policy, and brought into being a provisional public through the dialogue it generated about itself. I will then turn my attention to television interviews with Shanghai graffiti artists Popil, Mr. Lan, and HKer to think through the more local interactions and communicative practices generated by a growing graffiti youth movement. Finally, I will conclude with suggestions for critical inquiry regarding visual arts and urban citizenship.


## BEIJING, ZHANG DALI, AND AMBIGUOUS PROVOCATIONS


There are three spheres of art in China: official art, non-official art, and unofficial art.<sup>3</sup> Official art is monitored through artists' associations, publications, and state-sanctioned exhibitions; non-official art is regulated through markets and private consumption, and not subject to state checks precisely because it is not typically threatening to state legitimacy; and unofficial art challenges state and market authorities either through its content, mechanisms of distribution, or both.<sup>4</sup>

Both state-sponsored and unsanctioned forms of graffiti art exist in Beijing. State sponsored graffiti is usually paired with advertising campaigns. Olympics wall murals and a 1.25-kilometer stretch of wall in the Chongqing sponsored by the municipal government are two examples of the former category.<sup>5</sup> The Olympics graffiti exemplifies the way art can be marshaled into the service of affirming the incontestability of a unified, historically continuous urban public sphere, and a particular narrative of nationhood.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the 2008 summer Olympics, Beijing's Spiritual Civilization Office and Radio Beijing sponsored a competition on the topic of the Olympic Games.<sup>7</sup> Over 10,000 square meters of graffiti was painted all over Beijing, and artists had to submit an outline of their pieces prior to painting to the organizers, thus ensuring that their pieces conform to strictures that would prevent "vulgar words and pictures" according to Radio Beijing worker Wang Chong.<sup>8</sup> Both individual participants (mostly college students) and more experienced graffiti crews took part, generating over 100 art works.<sup>9</sup> On June 8, 2009, one such event occurred on a 500-meter wall of the Beijing Institute of Technology. Graffiti crew ABS painted a 30-meter piece entitled *Duo Nan Xing Bang* (Trials and Tribulations Serve Only to Revitalize a Nation) to commemorate China's difficulties after the Sichuan earthquake: Premier Wen Jiabao lauded the piece as a "boost" for those who suffered.<sup>10</sup> While images of pained earthquake victims *could* be

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used to criticize the government's neglect and slow response time, the *framework* for the graffiti work—in the context of a contest about images affirming national unity under strict censorship—allowed Wen to predetermine the image's meaning, short-circuiting critique.

The arrest of James Powderly, activist and leader of the American new media group Graffiti Research Labs, when he was trying to project laser graffiti in downtown Beijing after being excluded from the state-sponsored new media exhibit at the National Art Museum of China attests to the existence of a continued divide between official and unofficial art spheres. At the same time, Robin Peckham's framing of the event in *Artforum*, that "the failed attempt speaks powerfully to political miscommunication and the growing irrelevance of political art in China," still conforms to a centralized interpretation of political practice in which artistic interventions "succeed" or "fail" instead of being part of a more complex formation of an emergent, youth-based, culturally transmitted public.<sup>11</sup>

According to Wang from Radio Beijing, Graffiti is also used as a promotional mechanism by businesses and the government for "city beautification." This combination of non-official and official sponsorship demonstrates how privatized art practices can depoliticize what might otherwise be incisive critiques of official policy: a logic of appropriation.<sup>12</sup> Song Wei, a graffiti artist, explains how official graffiti writing is a double-edged sword: participating in commercial graffiti contests allows his work to endure longer, helps to make graffiti more widespread and socially legible, and provides him with scarce and often prohibitively expensive graffiti materials. At the same time it is interpreted as an advertisement, not self-expression, and the content of his pieces is pre-determined by corporate sponsors.<sup>13</sup>

Graffiti artist Seven criticized corporate sponsorship and the way that graffiti is used to market urban renewal:

Graffiti has nothing to do with city beautification, and shouldn't be used as advertising. . . . It's self-expression and personal art practice. Western graffiti might bomb the streets with tags and fiery speeches, but it is just a new form of painting for China's artists and young people. . . . Rather than vent anger, I paint for art's sake.

He adds with a laugh: "Maybe calling graffiti 'art' satisfies my vanity."<sup>14</sup>

These complex constellations of official, non-official, and unofficial graffiti art where artists often voice their desire for a space between official regulation and artistic production in the name of "art's sake," while at the same time denying that it is "oppositional" or "fiery," were prefigured in the discussions that surrounded Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* project over a decade ago. With this recurrence in mind, the body of this essay will map different kinds of graffiti art to illuminate the contours of emergent and complex publics, with varying connections with state, corporate, and social organizations.

## DIALOGUE

Zhang Dali's *Duihua* project provides a clear example of unofficial art that departs from a programmatic model of direct confrontation. In 1995, an outbreak of thousands of spray-painted silhouettes of Zhang's head covered the walls of Beijing. His first painting was placed at the Deshengment flyover in central Beijing, and it was signed "AK-47," after the Soviet assault rifle. In an interview, Zhang described walking by a portrait and seeing the words "What the hell are you doing? Who are you?" written underneath. He took a photo, and titled it "Dialogue."<sup>15</sup>

The name of the project reflects its aim to produce dialogue about transformations taking place in Beijing. Typically placed adjacent to *chais* symbols, which signal a building's impending demolition, the placement of the raw-looking heads was intended to spotlight the rapid destruction and rebuilding that was taking place at the time without much public discussion.<sup>16</sup> The figures are ambiguous:<sup>17</sup> an abstract, empty human head without any captions or other interpretive aids that creates an affective jolt for the passerby, creating a sense of strangeness in an increasingly rationalized and modernized Beijing cityscape.<sup>18</sup> Zhang has painted over 2,000 two-meter high images of his bald head on dilapidated buildings, walls, and highways since 1998.

Demolition and rebuilding have been rhythms central to major cities in China since the 1990s. Beginning with post 1989 reforms and the commercialization of the urban landscape in 1992 via Deng Xiaoping's reforms, the Chinese state has attempted to link the "market" to a "socialism market economy."<sup>19</sup> Since China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, Chinese cities—its largest cities in particular—have undergone accelerated economic and social change. Beijing and Shanghai are experiencing a large influx of migrants due to increased foreign investment and economic growth, and since the economic openness policy of 1999, the two cities have been the main locations for multi-national corporation (MNC) relocation to China, only increasing since 2001.<sup>20</sup> As the hinge between state power and national image promotion, the urban built environment in China is a space where the workings of state power and capital are highly visible.

In China, the concept of *mianzi*, reputation and prestige (literally: "face"), is crucial. There exists a strong concern with international recognition, and "keeping face" requires constantly policing image and identity in both the individual and collective registers.<sup>21</sup> Urban renewal is a powerful mechanism for image control. It is both a technique for modernizing spaces, and for rationalizing them to promote an immense faith in the power of architecture and design to generate progress, even if it occurs at the expense of displacing already-existing populations who employ different representations of space and thus have different lived experiences.<sup>22</sup> While

“face” is obviously important to all cities globally, in China—and in Beijing and Shanghai in particular (the former being understood to be an imperial city and the latter being a metonym for China’s growing “cosmopolitanism”)—how these cities are managed and designed crucially impacts the way that China is understood as a nation, both domestically and internationally. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to explain the history of national or municipal image-construction, the ideologically-based apparatus of state power, and their control over the urban built environment, these relationships are crystallized in moments such as the dramas of international *refusal* of recognition to China prior to Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit and the importance of propaganda in Maoist China for maintaining political control, as well as the way trade recognition makes foreign direct investment more or less likely, demonstrating that image construction has meaningful material stakes in terms of state power and economic inflows.<sup>23</sup>

Symbolic value and the representation of city space are thus intimately linked to the production of economic value and the control of the image of a city.<sup>24</sup> There is a strong relationship between promoting a certain representation of local culture (i.e., carefully managing it), economic and property value, and physical construction in cities. Spectacular urban design that promotes an image of a coherent and harmonious city is used to legitimize state policy,<sup>25</sup> and street movements like Zhang’s *Duihua* project disrupt these image management endeavors.<sup>26</sup> Graffiti challenges purely state or market-driven cultural and symbolic flows by positing a model of public policy ratified by diffuse networks of value-creation rather than centralized legislation. Graffiti takes place in the spaces of representation—the lived spaces of urban citizens—in a less direct way, shaping their experience of the everyday and challenging the top-down production of urban identity through stylistic engagement and affective suggestions. By engaging a public through the production of images that serve as an alternative to shiny state-modernization representations, directing attention towards marginal parts of the city instead of economic centers, graffiti makes abandoned factories and brown-fields the place for an alternative “cultural policy.”<sup>27</sup>

It is not a surprise then that Zhang’s *Dialogue* project inspired negative reactions at first, since it intervened into the state’s hegemonic hold on the city image. The Beijing municipal government initiated an intense cleanup campaign to erase Zhang’s faces from walls, and police questioned him until he made it apparent that the project did not advocate government subversion.<sup>28</sup>

More broadly, the presence of the majority of his heads were met with silence instead of “Dialogue,” and according to Wu Hung, the early phase of *Duihua* should instead be called “Lack of Dialogue,” since “Beijingers do not speak the language of graffiti art.”<sup>29</sup> This frozen response in 1995 marks graffiti as an aesthetic and language of incommensurability and illegibility. As a result, Zhang loitered around his pieces anonymously to eavesdrop on reactions, hearing his pieces called a “Mafia symbol like those in Hong Kong kung-fu movies,” and observing them cause anxiety that they might be demolition symbols or merely be witnessed by a blank gaze. The latter was captured in pictures Zhang took of two young boys walking by one of his heads.<sup>30</sup> Only a year after the project began did Zhang’s work begin to receive media coverage. Many early local newspaper reports conjured a unified “public opinion” that Zhang’s street-level voyeurism indicates did not exist.<sup>31</sup> The project was dismissed as a meaningless, effusive act by statements like: “Encountering it for the first time you wouldn’t take it seriously. . . . But this is far from the truth, because when you go out again the same day or a few days later, the same monstrosity boldly greets you in another location, and you repeat this disturbing experience over and over. This ghost-like face seems omnipresent and to be chasing you around, and you feel powerless to avoid it,” or that it was a poor imitation of Western graffiti art, or merely ugly.<sup>32</sup> Wu suggests that these articles are interesting because there is an attempt made to create space between public opinion and official reactions, citing a diverse array of individuals, including middle-aged professors, local restaurant owners, a construction worker that used to be a farmer, “a college freshman, an American art student, an architect, an ‘old Beijing guy,’ a member of the local residential committee, and a policeman ‘who happened to be at the spot.’”<sup>33</sup> However, in all their diversity these sound-bites formed a unified reaction of confusion, rejection, and dislike, and no alternative views were presented.<sup>34</sup>

In 1998, however, many cultural newspapers and magazines engaged in a debate over graffiti, generating articles such as: “Someone’s Graffiti on Ping’an Avenue,” “Beijing Youth Daily,” “Exclusive Interview with Graffiti Artist,” “Why Draw a Portrait on the Wall?,” “Street Portraits—Are They Art?,” “Marks on Walls,” and “Cultural Logic of Outdoor Art.”<sup>35</sup> Increasingly charitable readings of Zhang’s work were offered, and larger social issues about urban development, violence, performance, and the role of the artist were raised; Zhang even gave up his anonymity to join in the discussion, via a newspaper interview in March 1998.<sup>36</sup> The Beijing press’ outrage, characterizing Zhang as a vandal, and the faces as a kind of pollution, gave way to the larger 1998 discussion, wherein Zhang was given accolades for inspiring civil dialogue on public art, urban renewal, violence (state sponsored and otherwise), and other issues.<sup>37</sup> In the interview, Zhang responded warmly to the press and used it as a mechanism for communication with Beijing publics.<sup>38</sup> The fact that Zhang sparked a dialogue rather than censorship has created new possible fields for discourse and alternative possibilities for collective affiliation—the potential for meaningful interaction at a horizontal level instead of deferring to vertical urban planning mechanisms to dictate social relations.

The Western press read Zhang’s project through the lens of a repression hypothesis, interpreting resistance within a vocabulary of Western protest movements instead of contextualizing them within specifically Chinese histories.<sup>39</sup> The indirect and non-argumentative element of graffiti relates to broader practices of political dissent in China, which depend on irony, metonymy, and indirection, wherein low-level protest does not use Western social movement-based framings (targeting an explicit enemy, suggesting a solution, and involving a definitive public) but rather allusion and evocation. One example of this practice is the doorway couplet (*menlian*), a two-line poem written on paper and hung to frame a house’s front door. It may include political content but usually does so within the guise of purely poetic, aesthetic description.<sup>40</sup> Understanding Zhang’s

project as part of a growing Chinese public may help challenge scholarship that overly radicalizes or freezes Chinese publics.<sup>41</sup>

Zhang's work has brought into relief Beijing's complexity—its fraught status as an imperial, historical city that is rapidly modernizing—and he has inspired copycat graffiti artists, providing a context for the circulation of the *chai* symbol with a layered meaning (not just relating to demolition, but also articulating resistance to new buildings).<sup>42</sup> Zhang's project, and the broad exposure it has received nationally and internationally, has re-signified the *chai* symbol from being a largely indicative sign to one which also includes a reference to Zhang's own critique. It is thus a way to evoke references to other instances of displacement without making explicit criticisms about dominant powers. Students of the Central Arts Academy (which was relocated because of renewal policies) have painted red *chai* symbols on new buildings that they dislike, using what had been an official discourse as a method of resistance.<sup>43</sup> These acts create a symbolic terrain for Beijing inhabitants to participate in the production and reproduction of contemporary Beijing.

The project contains an awareness of its own conditions of circulation and inter-textual relations. The term *duihua* had been used frequently in the 1989 democracy movement during negotiations with the government. It was employed as an alternative to *jianghua*, or top down political discourse, and suggested that in the future, dialogue between the state and its citizens might be more symmetrical.<sup>44</sup> The resurgence of the language of specifically Chinese protest suggests that Zhang's work, if not immediately successful in changing the spatial arrangements of the city, may at least function as a site for activating collective memories, awareness, and affective investment in the street as a site for mass communication.

International readings of his work often deploy analytic categories that frame his intervention as a dramatic stand taken by a lone citizen against a repressive state. All of these reactions, mixed and contradictory as they are, remind us of the impossibility of *directing* and *controlling* dialogue, and force us instead to pay attention to circulation, citation, and intertextual negotiations (for example, the way his street art was taken up by other artists who transformed it into newspaper form, how Zhang himself photographed not just his art but the *reception* of his art).

Zhang's shift from location-based visual dialogue (waiting for reactions on street corners) to media event was mirrored in the increasingly doubled character of his work. This includes not only interventions of "deconstruction/construction" at the level of the street, where he would spotlight abandoned areas and create something new, but also the fact that his painting was done with the intention creating a mobile, circulating photographic image.<sup>45</sup> Wu Hung suggests that this is evidence of Beijing's (and unofficial Chinese art's) growing cosmopolitanism.<sup>46</sup> Instead of cosmopolitanism alone, I would suggest that Zhang's project *produced* and is the *trace* of a nascent public that is created through multiple media (newspapers, photographs, street reactions, magazine articles) and communicates through what Michael Warner calls "stranger-relationality."<sup>47</sup> Here, the public is brought together for discussion by drawing attention to shared conditions of public space such as rapid destruction/reconstruction of older Beijing neighborhoods.

Because Zhang and his addressees do not know each other in advance, the only way to generate commonality is by *paying attention*, since the artist's connection to the reader is mediated by the text of the work, or by other texts citing, quoting, and circulating the work.<sup>48</sup> The anxiety produced by the silhouettes—the various readings of them as gang signs, demolition signs, or mere childish play—demonstrates that there were multiple meanings that could be ascribed to the project, and that it was not a one-to-one dialogue but rather an elliptical, poetic kind of public expression that avoided direct argument or polemic.<sup>49</sup> The fragmented discussions brought into being indirectly through Zhang's project alongside the unified "public opinion" constructed by media outlet highlights the complexity of an emergent public sphere that is not reducible to being anti-state or anti-corporate, yet contains varying ideas about how public space should be used and what the function of urban aesthetics should be. Zhang's politics is not about taking over the government for some "people" or even representing those denied representation, but instead is founded in articulating the way that urban space shapes social possibilities, and how spatial practice, not direct argument, is crucial to urban citizenship.

Zhang argues that his was a way of spotlighting the rapid change occurring on the urban landscape.[ 50. Zhang had left the country in 1989 and returned in 1995, when Deng's economic reforms were in full swing.] Zhang notes:

Walls seal off the Chinese. . . . They are afraid of others entering into their life. I go on these walls and enter their life. I open a dialogue with people. I assault them with the knowledge that this city is changing. I don't care if you take part or if you don't take part, you still have to look at me.<sup>50</sup>

Zhang's statement constitutes an emergent urban public based on attention and a kind of stranger-sensibility. He does not require institutional action, external mediations, or immediate structural changes to create political change, only that the passerby pays attention. The introduction of a human head into urban spaces that are increasingly places of *non*-encounter makes a demand for attention to *fraying* public social networks, which are mirrored by the decaying and vulnerable architectural forms marked by the *chai* symbol. The act of looking then creates a kind of epistemic community. Life is entered into through a spatial relationship; the graffiti mediates the relation between Zhang and an anonymous Chinese other, and that relationship produces knowledge of the change inscribed on the environment, itself experiencing urban renewal.

Zhang is not criticizing the Chinese government, but rather the passivity of the Beijing populace and its failure to

position itself as an engaged public that is sensitive to how transformations to built space change lived space. His heads are an assault on alienation from other citizens, and on an ephemeral space (placed on buildings to be demolished).<sup>51</sup> The site-specificity of his art is indeed a political specificity that puts a face on the future displacement that will be caused by the demolition that precedes gentrification. The empty faces that he inscribes onto buildings constitute a local face, in contrast to the notion of *mianzi*, which is concerned with international prestige instead of local standards of living. Instead of calling on solidarity borne out of an abstract nationalism, Zhang invokes historical and temporary affiliations, based on momentary attention and the dynamic and affectively shaped experience of embodied urban subjectivity (the woman who was made anxious by the belief that they were demolition symbols being one example of this).<sup>52</sup> Zhang advocates a politically optimistic vocabulary for the social imaginary by spotlighting the greed of developers and city planners who speak on behalf of the nation. He argues:

Much like generations of emperors before them, present-day leaders transform the urban environment for their own personal benefits and their unquenchable thirst for power. In their desire to impress the world and leave their mark upon China, they sponsor the construction of colossal monuments celebrating their own glory but whose oppressive monstrosity crushes the hopes of anyone spirited enough to say: "I am an individual and I can influence my environment."<sup>53</sup>

Zhang's argument reveals the way that urban renewal both takes over territories where people can live and colonizes imaginative and emotional geographies: the hope and energy necessary to imagine oneself having agency, and to make things otherwise. This demonstrates the importance of graffiti as an index of a nascent public that creates spaces for imagination, slowing down the collapse of local lived-in spaces into abstract, nationally marketed images. Anne-Marie Broudehoux suggests that, following Henri Lefebvre, this opposition between "representation of space," or a "concept city," and its lived-in, physical image, understood as "spaces of representation," reveals the importance of the materialities and lived experience of architectural realities in shaping place-based identity, "self perception," and "collective consciousness."<sup>54</sup> In other words, the rhetorical techniques of place-based marketing have material effects on both the built environment of the city and the self understanding of its inhabitants, and graffiti practice functions as a way to drive a wedge between top-down "concept cities" and their full integration into "spaces of representation" by activating a space for creativity, imagination, and personal expression. Zhang's project displays an understanding of the relationship between official semiotics and control over material landscapes. His interventions highlight the need to interrupt discursive practices like urban branding, which facilitate top-down urban renewal projects, in order to create the conditions of possibility for individuals to have the political and social energy to collectively transform their lived material realities.

Furthermore, the appearance of thousands of heads on at-risk structures brings the body and the relationship between urban residents' bodies and public space to the attention of passersby who otherwise might not think about these issues consistently. The construction of business improvement districts like Wanfujing, which is functioning as the model for redevelopment in Beijing, has serious social and cultural costs. Already, the Dong'an Market and the Jixiang Theater, an opera house with a rich history and dynamic community role, have been demolished, and the Xinhua Bookstore and China Central Academy of Fine Arts, which was the "cradle of modern Chinese painters" and a hot-bed for intellectual activity, have been closed to make room for a retail center.<sup>55</sup> The eradication of the network of neighborhood alleys, *hutong*, and hundreds of homes that served as a key part of central Beijing's architectural identity to make way for rationalized street systems displaced hundreds of elderly and poor. This occurred without any consultation of the public, and with limited monetary compensation for the displaced, disproportionately eliding the needs of the elderly, as their limited mobility rendered mere cash insufficient to compensate for the destruction of decades of social networks.<sup>56</sup> However, these processes are depoliticized through the language of "local identity preservation": the discourse of historical preservation is often marshaled in the service of producing the cultural capital that draws in tourists and investors interested in an "authentic" cultural experience.<sup>57</sup> Making complex histories palatable to outsiders, so that they meet the expectations of first world tourists, requires streamlining history and its spatial evidence into an orderly narrative: this is manifested empirically in the construction of business improvement districts as such the one in Wangfujing, where undesirables that pose "threats" to the urban environment are excluded, unsightly architecture is demolished, and a rigorously sanitized and policed mall is left in its wake.<sup>58</sup> Urban experience is reduced to "shopping experience," and foreign-investment oriented urban renewal reduces the level of dialogue, contact, and stranger sensibility that can occur in the street.<sup>59</sup> Yuezhi Zhao notes that radical social inequality is reinforced through market-state practices like privatization, commodification, and reinforced divisions between different kinds of people.<sup>60</sup>

However, these processes are largely invisible, and the rapid temporality of urban renewal makes histories of displacement merely spectral. Zhang's inscription of faces on vulnerable building sites thus makes these urban ghosts visibly present, highlighting the frailty of any cohesive notion of a Beijing "public" on whose behalf redevelopment purportedly serves.

Here we see that the urban terrain is a space for social action, and that agency is possible outside of formal legal avenues. Zhang's critique is not a simple claim about the need for a more open society, or a democratic versus undemocratic government, but instead communicates that profit motives, combined with a lack of dialogue, produce an imagined community with tenuous links to human geographies on the ground in Beijing, and creates a sense of collective disempowerment. The inscription of a human face appropriates the concept of *mianzi* from government and corporate control, giving it to the hands of a broader, complex public.<sup>61</sup> And here we must think back to how the urban "face" is crucial to attract foreign investment, establish a national image, and justify urban renewal projects.



## SHANGHAI

Similar to Beijing, Shanghai faces a great deal of urban renewal and transformation, along with its vibrant street art scene. Reading Zhang's *Duihua* project alongside graffiti work in Shanghai suggests that while graffiti functions as a local communicative practice it also enables inter-city and international linkages.

Using place and product promotion (venue promotion, event organization, investment attraction, and renewing the built environment), state officials have set Shanghai on a trajectory, augmented by various cultural strategies, to become an economic leader.<sup>62</sup> Shanghai of the future must be a metropolis equal to New York or London. “[Cultural strategies link global integration to modernization by creating an architectural ecosystem attractive to foreign capital precisely by using a modern aesthetic. Cultural events, venue growth, and investment boosts are linked to transformations in the physical urban space, with the three most heavily promoted industries all being cultural: TV and film production, publishing, and the arts and entertainment industries.<sup>63</sup> However, while there is a large amount of investment in hardware, the artists themselves are not supported, and all art is overseen by Shanghai art bureau censors, meaning that graffiti is posed as a definitive challenge to institution-based cultural strategies.<sup>64</sup>

## GRAFFITI—M50/MOGANSHAN ROAD

Moganshan Road, or M50, is the hub of the Shanghai contemporary art scene.<sup>65</sup> It is a street filled with abandoned factories and workshops, one being the Chunming Slub Mill.<sup>66</sup> Moganshan is located along the Suzhou River, adjacent to gargantuan real estate projects and luxury condominiums that have increased property values in the area. Despite the increasing fame and notoriety of the district, M50 is threatened by the rapid rate of urban change and gentrification, and is perpetually at risk of dismantlement.<sup>67</sup>

The large amount of graffiti found in Moganshan can be linked to the level of city censorship, which is lower than in Beijing. In June 2008, Adam Schokora, American native, Shanghai resident, and producer of an online Internet community that promotes cultural events in Shanghai, interviewed three Shanghai-based graffiti artists on the television program *Shanghai Beat*.<sup>68</sup> The show is directed towards both Western and non-Western audiences. The narration is in English, interviews are in Mandarin, and subtitles shift between Chinese characters and English. Schokora asked three artists, Popil, HKer, and Mr. Lan, about where they graffiti, about their interactions with police authorities, and how they feel their work is received by the Chinese population at large. The interviews take place in different settings. Popil's occurs in an apartment interior, while Mr. Lan's occurs at Rucker Park, a skate park, and HKR's occurs at a brownfield while he works on a new piece.

Speaking first with Popil, a young Chinese woman who had recently graffitied on Moganshan Wall, Schokora asks what she painted. She responds: “It's just my name [POPIL], and I've included some Chinese elements that make up me and my style: a young woman, a cat, some clouds, happy stuff . . . like me . . . I'm trying to channel my feelings into a uniquely Chinese-style graffiti piece.”<sup>69</sup> When asked if the piece was painted at Moganshan, Popil silences the interviewer, saying: “Shhh! You can't say that!” Schokora responds that it is obvious, and Popil agrees, noting that everyone knows about the area. She adds that she does not recommend painting in other areas of Shanghai, because Moganshan is unique in how it is “very open and the police don't pay it much attention.” When asked if she paints elsewhere Popil responds: “Well, I have, but it's probably best for me not to mention where.” When asked if she has had problems with the police she says, “Yeah . . . sure. But actually it's not a big problem. They don't really know or understand what we're doing anyway. The worst they ever do is make you clean up the wall. The police in Shanghai won't lock you up just for painting graffiti.”

As Popil indicates, graffiti writing has an intimate relation to law and legibility, and what is permissible and impermissible. Graffiti is not subject to intense state backlash precisely because it is not read as outright dissent, and yet there is still a necessity to maintain secrecy; as Popil relates, it is “best not to say” exactly where less tolerated graffiti occurs. This contradiction does not necessarily suggest a confusion about what graffiti denotes, but a lack of consensus over how it ought to be judged, and whether it is a legitimate form of public expression or not. Its unintelligibility can be discerned then from its outsider position in community population flows—in the program's scenes of the graffiti, it is only artists who engage with the walls (look at them, manipulate them, gesture towards them), while passersby keep walking, without stopping to contemplate or respond to the work.

Graffiti is not an explicitly political act: Popil says that it is “pure personal expression” for her, insisting that her art remains on the level of the individual, the affective and expressive.<sup>70</sup> However, even though it is not polemical, it is communicative and expressive. It is a way for Popil to inscribe, to state a kind of ownership over a public space, which makes it a space of representation and not just a “concept space.”<sup>71</sup> Popil's artistic intervention functions as an example of “cultural policy” made from below, where local spatial imaginaries can be used to reframe and redefine the image that state and market institutions attempt to impose from above.

Finally, the differences between Chinese and foreign graffiti is articulated by Popil as a difference in style. Chinese graffiti is “bomb style” (quickly writing a name or pseudonym), whereas foreign artists do more “legitimate” (meaning institutionalized) graffiti, painting more time consuming and detailed “pieces.”<sup>72</sup> Popil claims that many Chinese artists have the wrong “objective,” being preoccupied with writing their names “randomly.” She suggests that mere tagging is not graffiti (which she defines as self expression and affective expenditure). She states: “graffiti is in life and life in graffiti.” The difference between “tags” and “pieces” is a difference both in addressivity and grammar. A tag is a way of merely marking presence, while a piece is a more extensive and elaborate endeavor, presumably more aesthetically appealing or demanding, and functioning to

communicate something: to *express* rather than merely *denote*. Tags and pieces both occur in public places, but they operate with different kinds of publicness. Popil's concern about "backwards," ego-driven taggers who do not develop their art resonates with my earlier discussion about "face" and "saving face," and the importance of recognition. The fact that such negotiations can be seen at the micro-level in a young woman's musings about graffiti as a national art demonstrates the way the visual imaginaries and representations of the city (place based identities) function to produce certain types of subjectivity.

Mr. Lan is a young man interviewed at Rucker Park, an indoor/outdoor street ball building that is "hidden on the third floor of a defunct silk screening factory." Mr. Lan notes that the first piece he ever did was called "NO SARS," painted when the severe acute respiratory syndrome epidemic was in full swing. The camera shifts to the interior of the skate park, showing images of a red and green, approximately two-meter tall tag that reads "NO SARS." He then goes on to list the most prominent graffiti artists in Shanghai (Shi, AK, Kimi, Sim) and "newcomers"—a community that is relatively open and fluid, with membership that can increase at any point. There are resonances here of Michael Warner's definition of publics that emphasizes non-ascriptive, fluid modes of belonging based on shared objects of interest rather than thick enactments of identity. This evidence of a growing graffiti community is an index of an increasing youth culture finding alternative ways to participate in urban life. Mr. Lan paints at Moganshan Road, Nanpu Bridge, and Jin Sha Jiang Road. After offering this more expansive list, he characterizes the Shanghai police as "very reasonable," saying: "they typically just let us finish painting and even support us!" He relates an anecdote in which he and thirteen other artists were painting when a police officer asked them what they were doing. They told the officer that they thought "the wall was too dirty and we wanted to give it a make-over . . . make it pretty." The officer responded that it was fine, but if they returned and the artists "did a shitty job, I'm gonna take you in." Here, a playful relationship with authority is established, in which the artists use the vocabulary of urban beautification and cleanliness associated with urban planners to justify their work, while the police reply in kind, basing their treatment of the artists on the visual aesthetic quality of their work.

While the police, for Mr. Lan, are reasonable, most Chinese, he relates, "don't like" and "don't understand" graffiti, primarily because it uses mainly English words, and local graffiti writers rarely use Chinese characters. "Everyday people can not read the pieces, so most just think graffiti is messy and ugly with too many busy colors . . . and so it's deemed inappropriate for public environments." Mr. Lan positions the nascent graffiti public against the dominant Chinese public based on graffiti writers' stylistic uses of excess—they aesthetically contest the conventional architectural order and subsequently challenge the naturalness of a public environment that reduces decorum to the vocabulary of restraint. The public of graffiti writers—initiates who can decode the work and understand its artistic value—are contrasted with the majority of the Chinese population, which does not understand it as art and so interprets it as out of place in public space. By art, I understand Mr. Lan to be framing graffiti as intentional, communicative, and possessing its own grammar or hierarchies of aesthetic distinction. Art might also be understood as an institutionalized or, at least, permissible form of production and is thus opposed to vandalism, which is criminal. Instead of a different *style* of enacting citizenship, this second conception of art is what resulted in the officially recognized art from the Beijing's Olympics' graffiti contest.

It seems like Mr. Lan does not want to advocate for a model of graffiti which is disruptive, but rather one that resonates with a local culture: a site-specificity based on being legible, embedded, and in tune with its surrounding community.<sup>73</sup> Mr. Lan attributes the preponderance of English-based graffiti to the difficulty of making Chinese characters, but also suggests that he will in the future attempt to write in Chinese. He notes that Beijing graffiti is very "cultural" and has a "Beijing flavor or distinct Chinese style," potentially because of the city's greater isolation from foreign influence, or because there is some state-permitted graffiti, while in Shanghai the style is more "international" with American or French influences.<sup>74</sup> Finally, when asked about whether the commercialization of graffiti is desirable, Lan responds that it is desirable insofar as it increases education about graffiti and expands its potential public, but undesirable when people who do not understand or appreciate it use it purely for profit. This resonates with Sei Wang's comments about commercialization in Beijing that I noted earlier. Lan imagines an ideal future public for graffiti art that is both capable of reading graffiti, and of resisting its full integration into a system of pure profit, invoking instead a space where the market-state does not fully eviscerate the social, articulated here as non-instrumental expression.

Popular interpretations of Chinese graffiti as "non-artistic" should be placed within the context of the clashes between artists like Mr. Lan and HKer, and the effects of image-driven urban renewal based on intelligibility and marketability. Unofficial graffiti poses a challenge to the easy consumption and sale of Shanghai by making visible a variety of stakeholders who are impacted by urban design and who participate in shaping space by directly intervening on the surfaces of the built environment. It is an unofficial art and so, unlike in Europe or the United States, graffiti is not considered "real art" and has yet to be shown in galleries on Mainland China. Lan's diagnosis of graffiti being rejected as art might also be understood as a clash in values about city design, and about what public spaces should look like: whether they should be highly rationalized or acknowledge the excessive, spontaneous, temporary, and affective dimensions of urban citizenship that are represented by ephemeral, unofficial, emotionally-driven graffiti art.

The way that graffiti culture exposes the temporal frailty of the built city environment is further worked out in Schokora's interview with HKer. The interview takes place at an abandoned brownfield, a space to write that is not easily accessible to the general public. This is a venue for graffiti that attests to the scarcity of available spaces for public communication, as more and more of the city is colonized by business-friendly developments that are carefully designed through centralized institutional control. In contrast, HKer characterizes graffiti as a "free and liberating form of self expression." He paints around the Yangpu district, in Pudong around the Jin Mao Tower, and, like Mr. Lan, characterizes the police as relatively relaxed, himself telling a story about how, upon encountering police officers while painting, he was told that if he made the wall look nice there would be

no issue. However, HKer notes that his pieces are temporary, due to the majority of the population not “understanding” graffiti, with “average Chinese” thinking that it “negatively impacts the city’s appeal,” and “the government” [distinct from police in this instance it appears], when it notices pieces, destroying them, particularly in urban spaces.<sup>75</sup> We see a very local, personal experience with the effects of image-driven urban renewal, where the standards for the city are based on intelligibility and marketability. For the “average Chinese,” according to HKer, graffiti’s failure to be legible, and thus to serve as a commodity, is at fault.

Also important is the spread of graffiti writing skills. HKer’s discussion of the history of China’s graffiti culture exposes the transnational, circulatory element of graffiti publics at work. HKer was influenced by the Hong Kong-based graffiti and hip-hop artist MC Yan, who had learned about graffiti in France and in turn taught it to Hong Kong and Guangzhou crews. Even though the places in which graffiti appears are local, its derivation is global. Graffiti is still in its nascent stages in China, and HKer predicts an arc of improvement as local writers stop fully using European styles and start to use Chinese characters to develop a distinct style. HKer mentions MC Yan’s use of Chinese characters in Hong Kong, and observes that he is using increasingly more Chinese characters in his own work. HKer ends his interview with the comment: “Everybody, keep painting! . . . Grab a can and get on the street!” This injunction to an imagined public of both strangers and allies demonstrates the way that the dissemination of graffiti art and expansion of nascent graffiti culture depends on stranger-affiliations. As a transnational art, graffiti spreads not just throughout local urban walls but also through discourse, discussions about different artists, hype about them (in the form of digital photographic images), and in the spread of practices and techniques in the way that MC Yan learned from crews in Europe and then taught crews in Hong Kong and China. These affiliations are formed by hearsay on the street, and on the Internet through digital images and blogs. Graffiti is an international aesthetic that is also a marker of urbanity, and so it is fundamentally dependent on the anonymity, limited temporality, and density of urban environments.

The interviews discussed above demonstrate that Shanghai graffiti culture is not explicitly anti-state, but that it does inject a presence onto the street that is not readily accepted by “the government” or the “Chinese public” at large. Shanghai artists define graffiti as an art form, a mechanism of self-expression and a creative force that is radical only insofar as it does not fit into the gallery scene and is not fully intelligible and institutionalized. The content of graffiti is not polemical or argumentative, but based in expression and circulation through multiple cities, and addressed to known and unknown audiences. It is transferred through citation and copying, and by artists trying to get noticed. For example, the P.E.N. crew (standing for “Paint Every Night” and pronounced “pēn”) is a Shanghai-based group, whose name is taken from the Chinese character “喷,” which means “to spray.” The content of their pieces is not anti-government but is instead based on colorful tagging of monsters and cartoon characters.<sup>76</sup> Bright colors and chaotic, lilting English characters offer a visual jolt in comparison to the gray and white-toned boxed buildings that comprise their place of inscription. Graffiti currently operates in a liminal space where it is intensely local in terms of its site-specificity, but also global (especially as the still-dominant Roman alphabet is commonly used). The desire of the artists discussed earlier to use Chinese characters prompts one to ask whether graffiti will ultimately become the ideographic extension of official writing or if it is an assertion of non-reproducible individual *style* against such standardization (i.e., the standardization of the Chinese written language, or the state-sanctioned speech that similarly proposes a unified and coherent nationhood). Another way to think through this question is whether the adoption of a standard language will diffuse the effect of a minor writing form (in the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense of a minor literature) because of its increased transparency.<sup>77</sup> The excessive, unruly aesthetic of most graffiti and its ability to mark loss (to make visible papered over urban transformations that frequently end in displacement) is dependent on operating at the periphery of dominant codes of both national belonging and communicative practice.

## CONCLUSION

Graffiti in Beijing and Shanghai demonstrates the ways that local spectacles participate in problematizing binary logics of contestation that posit a strict divide between state, society, and market, or those that politicize and depoliticize urban renewal. By indexing an emergent public communicative framework based on citation, allusion, ambiguity, attention, and play, graffiti troubles the stability of these divides and brings attention to the dynamic and ephemeral nature of urban citizenship globally. Failure to analyze developing artistic or cultural publics within China makes it easy for debates to devolve into simple affirmations or condemnations of spectacles like the Beijing Olympics, creating insufficient oppositions such as state versus civil society or imperial versus communist regimes. Understanding the fraught, site-specific negotiations of urban transformations that are spotlighted by graffiti exposes the way in which markets, citizens, the city, and the nation are joined on the plane of the visual, through imaginary linkages. The stakes of recognizing graffiti as a growing art form are as simple as Zhang Dali’s gesture—it is a question of whether as visual scholars we let our attention (and our affiliations) be determined by grand, coherent spectacles, or an understanding of the personal inscriptions that hail us: the lived realities of urban space.

1. Gao Minglu, “The Great Wall in Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 12:3 (2004), 773. ↩
2. Anne-Marie Broudehoux, *The Making and Selling of Post-Mao Beijing* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 15. ↩
3. Taru Salmenkari, “Implementing and Avoiding Control: Contemporary Art and the Chinese State,” in *China: An International Journal* 2:2 (2004). ↩
4. *Ibid.*, 236. ↩
5. “Graffiti Artists Grapple with Bricks in the Wall,” in *Peoples Daily China* (June 6, 2009). ↩
6. Broudehoux, 279. ↩



7. "Graffiti Artists Grapple with Bricks in the Wall." ↩
8. Ibid. ↩
9. Ibid. ↩
10. ↩
11. Robin Peckham, "Best of 2008," in *Artforum* (Chinese edition, December 10, 2008). (last accessed June 2010). ↩
12. See: Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 275. ↩
13. "Graffiti Artists Grapple with Bricks in the Wall." ↩
14. Ibid. ↩
15. Ibid. ↩
16. Ibid., 222. ↩
17. For an image of Zhang's work (photo also by Zhang), see: [www.wcma.org/...](http://www.wcma.org/) (last accessed June 2010) ↩
18. Broudehoux, 221. ↩
19. Yuezhi Zhao, *Communication in China: Political Economy, Power, and Conflict* (Lanham, MD: Rowmand and Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 4-5. ↩
20. George C.S. Lin, "The Chinese Globalizing Cities: National Centers of Globalization and Urban Transformation," in *Progress in Planning* 61 (2004), 144-145. ↩
21. Broudehoux, 29-30. ↩
22. See: Broudehoux's discussion of representations of space, concept cities, and spaces of representation. Ibid., 32-33. ↩
23. Ibid., 33. ↩
24. Zhao, 11. ↩
25. Broudehoux, 11. ↩
26. Brenda S. Yeoh, "The Global Cultural City? Spatial Imagineering and Politics in the (Multi) Cultural Marketplaces of Southeast Asia," in *Urban Studies* 42:5 (2005), 946. ↩
27. Ibid. ↩
28. Broudehoux, 222. ↩
29. Wu Hung, "Zhang Dali's *Dialogue*: Conversation With a City," in *Public Culture* 12:3 (2000), 754. ↩
30. Ibid., 756-757. ↩
31. Ibid., 758. ↩
32. Ibid. ↩
33. Ibid. ↩
34. Ibid. ↩
35. Ibid., 768. ↩
36. Ibid., 759. ↩
37. Broudehoux, 224. ↩
38. Ibid. ↩
39. Li Cheng and Lynne T. White III, "A Dialogue with the West: A Political Message from Avant Garde Artists in Shanghai," in *Critical Asian Studies* 35:1 (2003). ↩
40. See: Patricia Thornton, "Framing Dissent in Contemporary China: Irony, Ambiguity and Metonymy," in *China Quarterly* 21:3 (2002). ↩
41. Zhao, 14-15. Zhao reminds us that communication is central to China's social transformation, with uneven development being a crucial site for political contest, suggesting that art that makes explicit and politicizes unequal development can be an important tactic. Furthermore, he argues that the power of language, *huayu quan*, is critical for social struggle. ↩
42. Broudehoux, 225. ↩
43. Ibid. ↩
44. Ibid., 236. ↩
45. Wu Hung, 762. ↩
46. Ibid., 767. ↩
47. See: Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 74-75, 89. ↩
48. Ibid., 90. ↩
49. Ibid. ↩
50. This also should be read in light of the growing social inequality occurring in the wake of urban renewal, and suggests that we should understand his project as polysemous. It meant very different things to the housing committees who wanted to eliminate narrow, older buildings (*hutong*) in Beijing's ancient districts; residents who did not want to move because compensation was not enough for them to afford the houses replacing them; and developers, tourists, and city boosters who understood the *hutong* to be a kind of urban blight. See: Broudehoux, 130-131. ↩
51. Broudehoux, 222. ↩
52. In some respects the proliferation of empty faces Zhang inscribes on the Beijing landscape functions as a way to orient collective attention to the space of the city in the same way that widely distributed official pronouncements and newspapers orient and synchronize attention to problems facing the nation. This establishment of an "imagined community" uses fleeting responses, visually or textually based, to create a sense of community in a continually shifting present. See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 37. ↩
53. Quoted in Broudehoux, 222. ↩
54. Broudehoux, 26. ↩
55. Ibid., 125, 128. ↩
56. Ibid., 130-31. ↩
57. Ibid., 42. ↩

58. Ibid., 41. ↩
59. Ibid., 94-95. ↩
60. Zhao, 7. ↩
61. Broudehoux, 223. ↩
62. Weping Wu, "Cultural Strategies in Shanghai: Regenerating Cosmopolitanism in an Era of Globalization," in *Progress in Planning* 61 (2004), 167. Wu quotes Ju Huang, the former mayor of Shanghai: "[the ↩
63. Ibid. 167-68. ↩
64. Ibid., 174. ↩
65. Li Danni, "Shanghai's Blossoming Arts District," trans. Wei Ying, in *ArtZine: A Chinese Contemporary Art Portal*, 2008. For images of Moganshan Road graffiti see: Chris Osburn's article at <http://tikichris.blogspot.com/...>, and Adam Schokora's website. (all last accessed June 2010). ↩
66. Li. ↩
67. Ibid. ↩
68. Adam Schokora and Ginger Xiang, "The Shanghai Beat: Graffiti Shanghai" (June 9, 2008). (last accessed June 2010). All quotations from Popil, Mr. Lan, and HKer are from this source. ↩
69. For photographs of Popil's work, see: [www.fotolog.com/...](http://www.fotolog.com/...) (last accessed June 2010). Here we see an example of what Popil means by graffiti being used as "pure expression": "Dreaming of Being a Cat" is not an explicitly political claim, but it does exert a kind of collective ownership, or at least presence, on a space that is coded as public and nationally owned. In fact, the painting of a dream on a street makes explicit the ways that lived-in urban space and imagined urban space are mutually constitutive. For Popil's work in situ, see: Chris Osburn's photograph *Walking Along Moganshan Road* (2008). (last accessed June 2010). ↩
70. This individualist graffiti is in sharp contrast to Zhang's work, which directly engages in issues about social inequality and politics of representation. ↩
71. For an analysis of oblique dissent, see: Thornton, 662-666. I would suggest that, much like the public posting of "subversive doorway couplets" that Thornton discusses, graffiti here functions as a mechanism of social action—and potentially dissent—based on *indirection*, using "ironic, ambiguous and metonymic frames" that circulate in full public view, creating "free conceptual spaces" where new identities and potentials for collective action can be created, and "evocative transcripts" that evoke interpretations beyond their immediately visible meaning but which still "masquerade as politically irrelevant." This is more obvious in the case of Zhang's project. ↩
72. Popil's claim that graffiti in the west is more institutionalized is reflected in the large amount of media attention paid to Banksy's recent film *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, and his iconic status internationally. ↩
73. This might be contrasted with Miwon Kwon's definition of "site-specific discomposure," in which the work alarms and polarizes the community. See: Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). ↩
74. It is interesting to note that the relative sophistication of graffiti is here linked to its institutionalization—its sanction by the state, as well as its legibility in Chinese. This raises the question of graffiti's desired addressivity: whether it is communicating with an art-public (of international graffiti artists and supporters) or a specifically Chinese public and, thus, incorporated into the cultural fabric of the nation. For centuries there has been anxiety about language standardization, ethnic separatism, and the coherence of the nation. In the 1980s the People's Republic of China adopted an explicit policy of language standardization and assimilation (Mao of course made some of these moves earlier) and the dubious reception of graffiti is a historically contingent product of an intense sensitivity to language issues tying into social stability. ↩
75. See HKer's work at: <http://www.neochoa.com/HKer> (last accessed June 2010). ↩
76. Maggie Ma, "P.E.N. Every Night," in *Art Zine: A Chinese Contemporary Art Portal*, 2008. (last accessed June 2010). ↩
77. See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). ↩

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