



Contemporary Chinese Art  
and the Literary Culture  
of China

Zhang Dali

Zhang Dali, born in 1963 from a younger generation, is a graffiti artist. In Beijing, Zhang was infamous for spray painting his profile on public buildings after the Tiananmen events. The government sought him out but, like Robin Hood, he was able to stay one jump ahead for quite a while. Finally, importuned by his pregnant Italian wife, he left to live in Italy until things calmed down. In 1997 when he returned,

Zhang Dali, Dialogues:  
Beijing, 1997



he had become an Italian citizen. He still spends considerable time in Italy. A gifted photographer, Zhang made a record of his more ephemeral graffiti works which he sends to be processed in Italy. Important concerns for Zhang are the places where he has chosen to spray paint, the images over which he paints, and the context--both iconographical and artistic. The number of times he paints the profile varies from one to four or more in a horizontal series. Using cartoon images for political commentary in public space is most often associated with Keith Haring's work. For Zhang, however, political commentary is inherent in the street scenes and the incongruous couplings of political slogans from the government's outdoor wall campaigns and new advertisements with his idiosyncratic profile.

Zhang has explored several variations by using a number of materials and techniques. He has sculpted his profile out of neon tubing for an over 1 00 cm. tall installation in Beijing. The interior space and background are covered with drips of black paint on a white surface. He has also created a series of light boxes using transparencies of the images. And, since his return to China, his outrage at the decay of urban existence and the thoughtless demolition of the city has led to a new technique. Seeking out shattered buildings, he paints his profile and excavates the interior of the image to create a window through which the encompassing area is viewed.

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Even in these modern images, glimpses of ancient Chinese artistic traditions can be seen. The architectural graffiti frames hewn from urban architecture recall a full moon-shape and other decorative cut-out windows of literati gardens through which the surrounding landscape is viewed. So too, the cut out profile renderings resemble the popular paper silhouette art, hawked at tourist sites in the 70s to 80s. In Western nineteenth century tradition, these artisans in moments rendered their clients' profiles with scissors and black paper.

Similar to literati art, the graffiti paintings inevitably involve writing; in this case it is the commercial advertisements and political slogans which occupy the walls. But Zhang also has written critical pieces that continue the long history of social commentary (more strongly represented in literature than in the visual arts). In the wake of the great literati poetry of social conscience brought to perfection during the Han and Tang dynasties, Zhang describes the abuses of everyday life in *Dialogue* from February 1998.

Just as my performance, many things are happening in the city: demolition, construction, car accidents, sex, drunkenness, and violence infiltrate every hole. In the vastness of the city, many occurrences are not clear, nor do we know the ultimate result as people are made nervous, scattered, insecure. Water builds up in every corner of the city. People eat, defecate and sleep in garbage, Children look for toys in garbage. The water running through the city is black and stinking. On the grass or hanging from tree branches, plastic bags dangle, moving with the wind as heads without souls or gashed hands. People wearing suits walk into the main entrance of hotels and exit through the back door onto dark muddled lanes. They resemble the deer and snake in the way they chose to avoid the dirt. I chose these walls. They are the screen onto which the show of this city is projected. The screen becomes a normal realistic working place, nothing else. To the sound of the hammer and chisels, bricks fall stirring up clouds of dust. Behind the wall a modern neo-classical, shiny mansion appears.

Thus through the simple scrawl of a profile, Zhang has created a multivalent image that challenges the government in Beijing with its mindless expansion, rampant commercialism, and insensitivity both to freedom of expression and the problems plaguing the inner city.