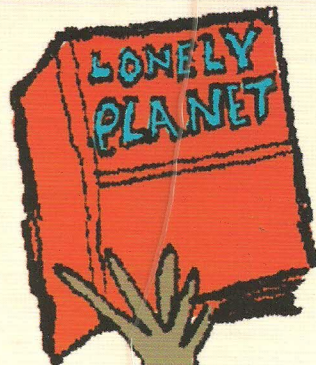


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The Art of Wall

By Justin Bergman
Photos by Wang Gang Feng

Graffiti makes its mark on Shanghai's spotless streets

The writing has been on the walls for years. So to speak.

Like many other innovations of the modern age – artistic and otherwise – graffiti finds its roots in ancient China (though the word comes from the Italians). People have been putting their thoughts and messages on display for centuries – be it in the form of government slogan, Confucian sentiment or simple advertisement.

Now China – and particularly Shanghai – is starting to see a new kind of “art” grace its buildings and walls: the bright tags and scrawlings born on the streets of urban America some 30 years ago.

Granted, Shanghai's street writers aren't as artistic, brazen or prolific yet as their counterparts in the West, or even in Japan, Korea or Beijing for that matter. But the random messages popping up on Shanghai's streets prove that something is afoot in China's squeaky-clean commercial centre.

Just as modern-day graffiti began in New York City in the 1970s, with simple signatures and insignificant scribbles, so it has here in Shanghai. Much is unsurprisingly innocent, such as declarations of love or holiday greetings (“Marry Christmas” has been sighted repeatedly). But in the true spirit of street art, other messages are a trifle more risqué. One appearing on Zhao Jia Bang Lu this summer told off the Almighty Creator in a very explicit way. Another on Huai Hai Lu inverted the same common English phrase to say “You F***.”

English seems to be the language of choice for graffitists in Shanghai. The reason? Could be a sign of respect for graffiti's adopted homeland, America. More likely, though, it goes along with the feeling of creative expression graffiti gives a young punk with a spray-can. Why vandalise in just one tongue when you could say so much more in your second language?

China's Graffiti Poster Boy

Interview by Meady Tang

Beijing's most renowned graffiti artist used to live in relative obscurity. Then the world began to take notice of his art.

Now, with fame as a protection of sorts, Harbin-born Zhang Dali canvasses the streets of the capital, spraying his trademark empty heads on condemned buildings, the walls of the hutongs and the underpasses of the ring roads. His aim: to bring art into people's daily lives (the people, he says, would never visit an art gallery) and to call attention to the rapid disintegration of Beijing's old buildings.

that's: When did you start marking up buildings?

Zhang: I started in 1995, when China first produced its own paint spray guns. For this type of art, you must have good materials because it's instant art.

that's: Where's the most bizarre spot you ever put a head? Most dangerous?

Zhang: This is a difficult question. I once sprayed a head on my friend's living room wall. That's probably the most bizarre place. Another time, at an old apartment complex that was being torn down, I sprayed a head around a hole that had been knocked through a wall and a moment later a truck came through and knocked the whole thing down.

that's: Why do you do it? What do you want your graffiti to say?

Zhang: My purpose is to show people how culture influences their daily lives. Maybe people aren't aware of it, people who go through their lives with the same daily routine, but things are changing very quickly in China.

that's: When do you usually do your art?

Zhang: I go out quite a lot with friends to have a few drinks and, afterwards, I'll paint one or two heads. Right now I'm doing alleys once or twice a week.

that's: Have you ever been caught?

Zhang: Never. I'm too fast. You count “one,” and I'm done.

that's: Do you think your kind of graffiti could spread to Shanghai?

Zhang: Beijing's got many artists, but in Shanghai there doesn't seem to be much of an interest [in graffiti]. It's just people doing it without a purpose – when they feel like it, they'll do it. It's not really art.



Courtyard Gallery, Beijing