

## THE ARTS ABROAD

# 'China's Zorro' makes his mark with graffiti

It's risky to do in Beijing, but Zhang Dali goes to the wall in defying the state

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

BEIJING

**U**NDER THE cover of darkness and armed with a can of spray paint, Zhang Dali pedals his bicycle around the quiet Beijing streets with the intention of giving the city a new face, sometimes two or three.

For the last five years, this rogue photographer, performance artist and painter has left his unique mark on the walls around Beijing. It is his mission to highlight the systematic demolition of the capital's old city, and by default, put to the test the words of China's most famous cadre.

"There is no such thing as art for art's sake," according to Mao Zedong. "Proletarian literature and art are ... as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine."

There are a few words on just about anything in Mao's Little Red Book. It's

a piece of history filled with a medley of contradictions that, nevertheless, offer insight into this restless giant China. A giant in the midst of a massive renovation.

Part of this effort is leaving some areas of the Chinese capital in pieces, as old buildings are scrapped to make way for the new. "The general features of Chinese cities are becoming the same," laments Dali, his graffiti the most visible statement against the ministry of construction's wrecking crews and bulldozers.

"This process is actually destroying the city's memory, and in a sense, the memory of its people."

Dali has made his mark in Beijing by tagging buildings, some of which are slated for demolition. His signature is a facial profile with exaggerated lips and chin, appearing in either

red or black and usually accompanied by AK-47, Dali's pen name.

When he has more time, he actually carves his design into the wall, a method reminiscent of original graffiti, which was carved into the plaster of buildings in ancient Rome.

Tuya is the Chinese equivalent of graffiti, and examples exist dating from the prehistoric period. Tuya refers to informal writing and was commonly found on restaurant and wine-house walls dating back to the seventh century.

Dali derives his influence more from Western modes. "I got my inspiration from living in Italy," says Dali. "Black and red chalk were used to make the first scrawlings on the ancient monuments of Egypt, and so I use those colours, as well."

While Dali has gained some acclaim through exhibitions in Asia, North America and Europe, it is his graffiti project in Beijing that has attracted the most attention.

"He is China's Zorro," writes New York art critic Mathieu Borysevicz in *Art Asia Pacific*. "(Zhang's) image is found in an environment where conformity rules, once through political ideology, but now in the global forces of market and fashion trends."

Global economic forces are the prevailing winds in China these days. The International Monetary Fund predicts that China's economy will be the world's largest by 2007. The International Olympic Committee is considering Beijing as a host for the 2008 Olympic Games, and foreign investors are scrambling to get a foot in the door.

New assembly plants, shopping streets, hotels and office towers are sprouting up in places where old neighbourhoods used to be, some of which contained homes and shops dating from the Ming dynasty (the 14th to 17th centuries).

The marked transformation of Beijing and perhaps the upheaval Dali has witnessed in his own lifetime have been catalysts for his graffiti — his desire for the inevitable change to take an alternate direction.

China's northeast province of Heilongjiang, which borders Russia, is where the 38-year-old Dali began life in 1963, the son of warplane factory workers.

In 1969, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, his family was sent to live for seven years in Jianxi prov-

ince, 2,000 kilometres to the south.

"When I think of the Cultural Revolution, I associate it with violence, the red colour, the monolithic idea of being a collective," recalls Dali. "I use AK-47 in my graffiti because it represents violence in each corner of society, written on the face of the people and controlling their thoughts."

In 1983, Dali was accepted at the Central Academy of Art and Design in Beijing. In a rigorous environment, he studied traditional Chinese art and contemporary design and was also trained in serigraphy for work prospects in a publishing house.

"We were forced to follow a precise pattern in lectures and in formal training, with no freedom at all."

When he graduated in 1987, Dali set up what he describes as Beijing's first artists' village with former classmates. Shocked and terrified by the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, he left China to spend some time in Italy. He was allowed to leave the country only because he was married to an Italian woman, otherwise it would have been impossible for him to obtain a passport.

Upon his return to Beijing in 1995, he couldn't believe his eyes. "For a while, I had this idea in my mind of making graffiti in Beijing, but there was no focus," he explains.

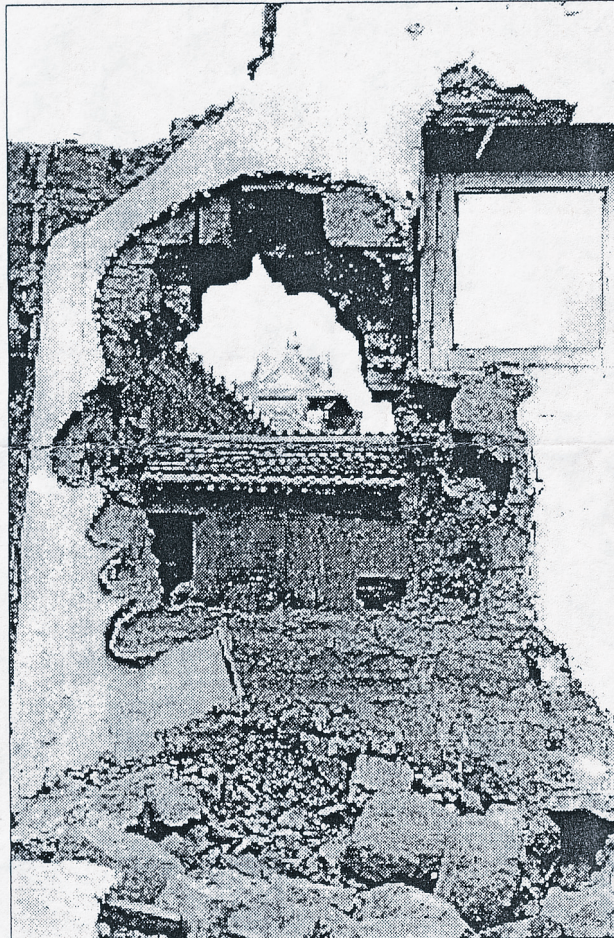
"When I saw the destruction occurring here and the effect it was having on the people, I knew I had to make my idea a reality."

Dali's endeavour is no casual matter. During the pro-democracy protests in 1989, three people lobbed black ink on to the giant portrait of Mao Zedong that looms above the entrance to the Forbidden City, his steely eyes surveying Tiananmen Square across the road.

As far as officials were concerned, this was vandalism of the highest order, and the perpetrators were sentenced to between 16 years and life imprisonment.

While Dali's graffiti is not as belligerent a statement against authoritarian rule, he is still putting paint in places where it does not belong. "Creating art is not against the law," he insists.

"I have had some scary experiences with the police (he could not elaborate for fear of reprisal), but I have had a lot of support from the artistic



**HEAD OF STATE:** When Zhang Dali has time, he carves his design in to a wall, a method reminiscent of graffiti in ancient Rome.

community and the community at large."

And it is the community at large that is most affected. If the ministry of construction issues an order to demolish an area, tenants are forced to leave even though they may have paid for the property.

"People can either move to another location arranged by the government, or they can receive financial compensation and find another place to live on their own, which is usually with relatives," explains Dali.

Like the buildings on which his work is adorned, his canvases are toppled and lie broken amid the scattered remnants of the deconstructed; history removed.

This situation reflects the opposite of the International Union of Architects' Beijing Charter, presented by Professor Wu Liang, at its 20th congress two years ago.

"On the aspect of urban settlement, factors such as planning, architectural design, historical preservation, adapted re-use of old buildings, urban rehabilitation, city renewal and reconstruction should be integrated into a dynamic circulation system," the charter states.

When asked to elaborate on this point in regard to the current state of Beijing, neither Professor Liang, nor the faculty of architecture at Tsinghua University where he teaches, had any comment.

Quite the contrary of Dali, who is as critical of the government's behaviour as he is of those under the government's thumb.

"I think my art shocks and maybe makes some angry, but hopefully it will make people use their brain," he scathes.

"The general public has been anaesthetized by the propaganda machine, and because they have accepted submission for so long, it is difficult for them to think independently and actively fight for their rights."

Dali's work is unique because, apart from copycats, it is the only graffiti in Beijing that is consistently recognizable. In fact, besides an advertisement for a plumber that was spray-painted beside one of Dali's faces, it is the only graffiti I saw while visiting there.

It cannot be compared to an impressive design, obscene drawing or scribbling that can be found in almost any other city. While his work has a certain shock value, that is not its sole function.

His graffiti serves as a reminder of the urban landscape's fate, before it disappears. It has a limited lifespan but, Dali hopes, a less limited impact.

At a small gallery catering to tourists east of the Forbidden City, 25-year-old Hopkin deals in "art for art's sake." He takes an English name because it is easier for foreign customers to pronounce and perks up when I ask him about the faces.

"I know Dali," he says. "He is what you call, a guerrilla artist."

Whether or not Dali's statement are going to be a large enough cog in the wheel of the revolutionary machine is anyone's guess.



ERICA SHINTAKU FOR THE TORONTO STAR

**FACE TO FACE:** Zhang Dali's signature is a facial profile with exaggerated lips and chin, appearing in either red or black. It is the only graffiti in Beijing that is consistently recognizable.

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