

# Chinese Street Artist Zhang Dali Evolves in New York

July 8, 2014

by [Daniel Genis](#)



*Zhang Dali with one of his sculptures. All exhibit photos by Petra Szabo*

"I stopped spray-painting the Beijing streets in 2006," says Zhang Dali, China's best-known graffiti artist. "Graffiti is the fashion in China these days and has lost its meaning as protest."

Zhang is answering my questions from Italy, where he sometimes lives and first discovered graffiti. His opening in a Chelsea, Manhattan, gallery in the early days of summer was just too hectic for all the heady stuff I needed to ask him. Not only was the space filled with gallery hoppers, art students, and a few serious collectors doing some shopping, but a crew of legit taggers had shown up as well. In book bags and street wear, they roamed the space looking for the artist while slurping up free wine. The internet has broadened the street into a global neighborhood, and graffiti artists from one city can know the work of a fellow spray-painter in a different country—even an authoritarian one. That's quite different from even my own youth; as a teenager, my friends and I wanted our tags on every bus and train just to spread our names locally,

around New York. One enthusiast I knew bought a cheap copy machine and stole post-office stickers to be able to reproduce his tag at a digital rate.

These days, local graffiti heads are aware of the explosive work Zhang Dali bombed Beijing with a few years back. Citywide recognition is nothing compared with the power of intercontinental street art. As a result, I was jostled around the crowded gallery between Zhang Dali's 3-D printed doves, cyanotypes, and sculptures of anonymous workmen hanging upside down.

"Collectors and fans enjoy my work because they can interact with it on an intellectual level, but also because it is seen as being positioned at the intersection of hip and political," Zhang tells me.



The kids in camouflage wearing bags clinking with spray cans were eager to see the master's work. Of course, Zhang Dali's art doesn't come cheap; that night the most you could spend was \$30,000 on a sculpted workman, while a cast dove went for an 'introductory' \$1500. Meanwhile, vandalism is still a crime in New York; spray paint is illegal for those under age 18 to possess, as per laws regarding the defacement of property. In Mayor Rudy Giuliani's day, the NYPD was tasked with purging the city of "vandals," and there is still an anti-graffiti task squad roaming around. (Maybe Banksy's visit to New York last year will have some kind of lasting impact, but I'm not holding my breath.) In any case, the crew of taggers in Chelsea that day were not your typical

admirers of fine art. In fact, I felt compelled to ask the gallerist, an old friend named Eli Klein who has been featured on the Bravo reality show "Gallery Girls," whether he had hired these kids to drive up the 'authenticity' factor. (He had not.)

The exhibition will remain in the US until August 30, and eventually move on to China—which is where Zhang Dali could run into some trouble. Instead of kids with a generous enthusiasm for international street art, Communist Party stooges might be the ones snooping around his openings. Zhang has had many problems with the authorities before; after all, this new piece is called "The Square" in honor of a seismic historical event that the Chinese internet still doesn't acknowledge even happened.

Zhang Dali fled China in July of 1989, after participating in the Tiananmen Square protests that ultimately resulted in massacre. In his own words, "I thought that there was no hope in China, and I lost any confidence. The biggest pain was to be forced to give up the place where I lived. No one likes to do that. At that time many artists and intellectuals felt the same and couldn't help but leave the country, there was nothing else we could do. In 1992, China took the road of more reforms and more opening to the external world. In 1995, I returned to Beijing to live there."

But after leaving China in the midst of its most renowned totalitarian outrage (and waiting it out in the West), he was not too pleased with what he saw upon returning home. The Communist Party had become a shell corporation with slogans blaring and international bank accounts brimming; meanwhile, developers who suddenly saw the value in Beijing real estate were haphazardly tearing down the old to make money building the new. The Forbidden City was open for business, a desecration of a public monument beloved by the people (and an ideological opposite of the huge Square where doves don't fly but tanks can roam). Even though Zhang Dali had been trained in the Central Academy of Art and Design, he became a street artist. As he puts it, "I wanted my art to enter into the public space. There were great changes going on in China in those years. They were demolishing the old Beijing, and I was angry about the destruction of old buildings and neighborhoods. Taking my art to the streets was a way to express my opposition."



A reprint of Zhang's graffiti from Beijing. Photo via Flickr user [Alexander](#)

In New York, during the bad old 80s, there was plenty of discussion about graffiti, as it had just become a fad and the streets and subways were covered in the stuff. The old guard despised it, but the art community embraced it with open arms. Hollywood used graffiti as a visual image of decay and crime. But judging by the prices Keith Haring's and Basquiat's work now fetch, as well as the international success of artists like Banksy and Zhang Dali, I'd argue that the issue is pretty much settled in the West—at least when it comes to the art world.

China is not so simple. Because of the limited public forum for discussion, the authorities play a major role in every debate. Zhang Dali had three tags he worked with. One was simply an outline of his bald head, representing himself as well as an abstract person. With it he bombed the buildings about to get torn down in the old Forbidden City. He also used "AK-47" as a tag to express violence and "18K" to symbolize wealth. Zhang saw the people of the city being assaulted by new money and callous power brokers, and called their attention to it. Most of these tags were put on walls that were about to be bulldozed, which did not mollify the Beijing police in the least. The political implications of the images and their interaction with the cityscape meant that the cops came looking for Zhang Dali many times. There were more than 2,000 of his pictures up in Beijing and it was [speculated](#) that this was the mark of a "punk" or "gang member" before Zhang revealed his identity. Early in

his career he was considered a criminal for doing contemporary art; now he was classified as one for pointing out the crimes of others. Vandalism was another accusation thrown at Zhang Dali by the Beijing authorities, despite the fleeting nature of the work. In fact, as the artist puts it, "I used these three tags to spray on walls to be demolished, to express the situation of Beijing at that time. I knew they were ephemeral, they were not going to last... The bulldozers would come and destroy any trace of it. Of course I would like to keep them, but this out of my power, nothing is lasting, life or art."

New York City taggers see it the other way around. A few days ago, a 42-year-old graffiti artist named Jason Wulf, whose tag "DG" can be seen throughout the city, was [found electrocuted](#) in the subway system. The quest for immortality can be deadly, while embracing the temporal nature of life is not just an expression of some obscure Eastern philosophy but of an artistic point of view, like Tibetan mandalas drawn in sand only to be swept away. The ephemeral interests Zhang. The artist's "A Second History" was completed in 2010; this later work used the ideologically retouched photographs of Chairman Mao that once covered every wall in China. The collection symbolized his step from the street into the studio.



But artists need to eat, too. Before he died, Wulf sold canvasses that looked like his street work. In his own street art days, Zhang Dali sold beautifully rendered photographs of his tags to those who were willing to pay for the

pleasure of holding on to them. Now Zhang has many collectors—most of them in the West. The political nature of his recent material continues to stir up controversy: Tiananmen Square was an architectural intruder forced onto the city, a giant, erasing blot that mimicked the parade grounds of Moscow. And no doves fly over its expanse, which is partly why Zhang Dali crafted them—to highlight their absence. In the West, doves represent peace, as Picasso used them in his famous work. But in Zhang's art, which is now produced with a cutting edge 3-D printer instead of primitive spray-paint, "the doves are the souls of the people sacrificed and they also are the holy light brimming there."

The holy light that Zhang Dali sees in Tiananmen Square is also expressed in the cyanotypes depicting the birds. The sculptures represent the earthy and human element that life depends on. I asked Zhang about calligraphy, the traditional Chinese writing form that he studied when at the Academy. While some of his older works contain elements of ink calligraphy, the process did not inform his style of graffiti. The elite nature of it—calligraphy was the art of both the ancient emperors and Mao Zedong—made it unsuitable in essence to his outsider approach. Having grown up under Mao, social realism and Communist Party ideology are inescapable influences on Zhang, and he acknowledges it. Of course, he would rather be known as an artist who happens to be Chinese than a Chinese artist, but with the awfully heavy weight of the opening of China to the West to contend with, his roots cannot be ignored.

In a sense, the New York graffiti enthusiasts who love Zhang Dali from afar understand all this—they get a kick out of seeing and even meeting the first tagger of Beijing. But some of the newer work also seemed to confound them, as Zhang feels that the street art was just one period in his career. A 54-year-old dreadlocked man who came to see the exhibition insisted there's no moving beyond the cult of the spray can, apparently unsatisfied with Zhang's progression. A tag was left up on the bathroom wall of the gallery, where it will have to be scrubbed off—arguably an act of aggression. Then again, street artists usually feel they enshrine their subjects by painting on them. So perhaps the anonymous fan who left his mark at the show was just doing what Zhang Dali himself once did. The first and best Beijing tagger got tagged himself. I'm confident he didn't mind.

*[Daniel Genis](#) is the author of the novel *Narcotica*, as well as many translations from the Russian. He began his career with a rather classical education, and finished it off with a decade in prison. These days he is concentrating on reconciling the subtleties of the Brooklyn scene with the requirements of parole.*