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### Graffiti Beijing 12 min read

December 20, 2017 Lance Crayon

#### ***A once-flourishing street art has been scrubbed out – Lance Crayon***

In preparation for the 2014 APEC economic summit in Beijing, a city-wide cleanse was underway. Street workers armed with grey paint covered every piece of graffiti they could find. Even the sanctioned graffiti area at Renmin University, known by locals as the “Wall of Beijing”, wasn’t spared. Within a week, most of what remained from the city’s budding graffiti movement was gone.

“The rapid development is so out of whack and the population has become too saturated, just living here is overwhelming,” said Wreck, a graffiti writer born and raised in Beijing.

When he was in college, Wreck joined KTS (Kill the Streets), a graffiti crew that has since become one of the most respected in the country. Their tags used to be ubiquitous in the capital. Nowadays, he might throw up a piece once a month.

Due to the lack of transparency of graffiti laws, some artists are reluctant to paint. Legal procedures and protocol on graffiti violations have yet to be established. The penalties and fines are unknown, which works as a deterrent. Another obstacle is money, especially for Chinese artists. The cost of living in Beijing has skyrocketed while Chinese working class salaries haven't budged. When Forbes released this year's list of the world's **most expensive cities** to live in, Beijing was number three. A decade ago it wasn't in the top 20.

Every encounter Wreck has had with the police has been different. "They get to decide on the spot what the punishment will be," he said. The police might release a graffiti writer before processing in the morning, or for the right amount of money, they'll pretend nothing happened.

*SBAM and ZATO graffiti at Gongti Nanlu, Beijing, 2014*

Young Chinese graffiti artists refer to the period from 2009 to 2013, as the "Silver Age." Beijing was virgin territory for a small group of Chinese and foreign graffiti artists – including those from France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Australia and the US who were living and working in Beijing – and they were all active. When Wreck was in college he painted all the time. Graffiti pieces and tags would stay up for weeks or months at a time before they were covered.

“New crews surfaced, graffiti events were held, and foreigners painted beautiful pieces, it was a dazzling time,” said Liu Yuansheng, a photographer known in graffiti circles as Liu Laoshi, who at the age of 64 continues to update the graffiti blog he launched a decade ago. “I started following graffiti in 2004, and I’ve always remained a distant observer,” he told me.

But by the end of 2014, Beijing’s graffiti movement had cooled. And now the city has become too expensive and graffiti removal efforts haven’t slowed since the APEC summit. That has had a discouraging impact on Chinese graffiti writers who can barely afford to live let alone paint. If the city has an anti-graffiti initiative, it is modernization.

“There are maybe 30 graffiti writers in Beijing, and only 15 are active,” said GIANT, a member of YDS (顿顺), a graffiti crew whose name means “always stealing.” The graffiti documentary *Style Wars* influenced the nineteen-year-old’s decision to pick up a can of spray paint. “I needed a tag name so I found a book titled *Giant* and chose that as my name,” he explained. “My favorite graffiti writers here are WRECK, SBAM, and ZATO,” he said, naming three established graffiti writers in Beijing.

*ZATO van tag in Chaoyang District, Beijing, 2013*

Now several of the players from that period moved home or studied abroad. EKSAS, a founding member of KTS, went to New York City for school. “I couldn’t do anything too complicated or intricate because [in New York] I never had more than ten minutes to throw something up,” he said, comparing graffiti cultures. “In Beijing I didn’t care who was watching me because when I painted I felt like a god.”

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The Chinese word for graffiti is *tuya* (涂鸦). It can be used to describe “scribble,” or the markings unsupervised children make on any variety of surfaces. The closest China has come to experiencing a graffiti epidemic has nothing to do with graffiti, but rather is a byproduct of its tourist industry: the defacement of the country’s landmarks and temples by visitors who want to augment their experience by leaving behind evidence they were there. National uproar is ignited when Chinese media reports on the rampant defacement carried out by Chinese and foreign visitors who scrawl their initials on one of the world’s Seven Wonders.

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For those who are caught leaving their mark on the Great Wall, fines start at \$30 and max out at \$60. The low figure functions more as an invitation or a price tag, rather than a prohibitive measure. Last year a pagoda in Shandong Province was defaced with Chinese messages scrawled over it. Officials from the Chinese Base Camp at Mt. Everest announced that anyone caught defacing the area would be “publicly shamed.” But the pandemic at the Great Wall reached its apex when authorities announced in 2014 a “graffiti zone” would be established for those who wanted to leave their mark. Plastic screens visitors could write on were placed over areas in the Badaling section of the Wall, but it didn’t go over too well. Today, the same areas are monitored by 300 security cameras.

When Chinese media alerts the nation about heritage defacement, they use “graffiti” as a verb, a characteristic influenced by US journalism. Graffiti is a noun, just like “art” and “music.” As careless as it is, often the misuse is intentional as it helps influence public perception of graffiti as a crime, not a form of art. But more importantly, when a person scrawls their initials on any surface, the result is not graffiti, it’s *tuya*.

*A 1,000-year-old pagoda in Shandong Province defaced by Chinese visitors (November 2016) – en.chinaculture.org*

Chinese graffiti writers also endure accusations of copying, because they use Latin letters rather than Chinese characters. Some are perceived as identity-scrub victims of social media platforms like Instagram and Flickr. But Chinese artists use English tag names because of graffiti’s source, America. They recognize its modern-day birthplace and adhere to that characteristic, just like graffiti writers all over the world.

Today, international brand presence in China has created revenue streams for the country’s top crews. Product launches and corporate events stage graffiti exhibitions to appeal to younger generations who will take photos and then upload them to social media. At 400ml, the graffiti store run by ABS (Active Brilliant Significant) in Beijing’s 798 Art District, they sell their own brand of spray paint, and their Weibo page reveals photos of trips to the US and Europe.

It was around 2010 that ZYKO and AIGOR discovered San He, a local spray paint brand sold at hardware stores. A can of silver went for ten yuan, and red, blue and black cans went for eight yuan. “I was forced to revisit fundamental styles because of the cans we were using,” said ZYKO, who has since moved back to Germany. The cans were cheap, so the quality wasn’t good which meant it took longer to fill in a piece. But back then it didn’t matter. “It was pure graffiti, no gimmicks.”

*ZYKO painting during Chinese New Year, 2012*

When ZATO arrived on the scene, graffiti was advancing and younger artists were finding their way to the art form. Street workers also weren’t as aggressive about

covering the work up. Social media has since drawn back the curtain on many artists, making it easy to find someone's identity. But not so with ZATO.

"I personally think of people not knowing who you are as central to graffiti," he said. Written with English letters or Chinese characters, his name has appeared on roll-downs, walls, and rooftops of gutted restaurants. "I don't want people to know my face," he said, "just my name. That's what's important. My face is ugly anyway."

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While the halcyon days of graffiti in Beijing are over, traces remain, both on the Beijing's walls and in its memory.

As thorough as the city's graffiti removal efforts were three years ago, Beijing's street cleaning crews managed to miss a spot. Jingmi Lu is a road connecting the city to the airport, and home to China's biggest graffiti wall. Divided into three parts and stretching two kilometres, pieces from Chinese and foreign graffiti writers, such as US graffiti pioneer T-Kid, still remain. During the city's beautification campaign, the Jingmi Lu graffiti wall went unnoticed.

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Nobody could figure out why, except for Liu Laoshi. Apparently, it was the result of how the city's urban management system functioned. The graffiti wall falls under the jurisdiction of the Airport Expressway Administration, but their main concerns are traffic and safety. The street below it is the responsibility of the Jingmi Lu administration, but even though their maintenance crews could see the graffiti, they weren't going to do anything about it because the walls are connected to the highway and therefore out of their jurisdiction.

Liu used the Chinese expression *san buguan diqu* to describe the situation, meaning "something nobody is responsible for."

*DEZIO, AIGOR and ZYKO at the Jingmi Lu graffiti wall, (circa 2011)*

Other Chinese artists are commemorated elsewhere. The Guinness Book of World Records recognizes Qi Xinghua as painting the largest existing mural in the world ('Lions Gate Gorge' in Guangzhou, southern China). He refers to himself as "Graffiti Man," and is commonly known as Beijing's first 3D street artist. A UK newspaper dubbed him the "Banksy of China," but as he explained, "the label holds no meaning for me." One of his outdoor pieces, 'Sweetie, your bite is hurting daddy', depicted a cub lion

biting a grown lion. It was covered by street workers. Later, and in the same spot, a tag from the graffiti writer LIMP emerged.

*One of the last remaining Zhang Dali silhouettes under Xiaoyun Bridge in Beijing, 2013. It has since been covered.*

One of the most famous names to emerge out of Beijing's street art scene is Zhang Dali, who Western media routinely refers to as "China's first graffiti artist." He received world-wide attention for the giant silhouettes he left on Beijing hutongs scheduled for demolition. His appearance on the cover of *Newsweek* in January 2000 marked the first time a Chinese street artist appeared the cover of any major US magazine. When he ended his street art phase in 2006, there wasn't anyone behind him to take his place, although the street art of SHUO is a new arrival.

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Another new name is Ge Yulu, who was famous before he graduated from the School of Experimental Art at the China Central Academy of Fine Arts in 2017. The Chinese word for road is *lu*, and in 2013, he hung 'Ge Yu Lu' signs on a road in Beijing that didn't have signposts. Its correct name was Baiziwan Nanlu, but real estate developers had failed to hand over the proper signage to street authorities when the area's residential project was finished. Ge Yu Lu remained the street's unofficial name for roughly four years.

*Ge Yu Lu in Beijing (circa 2013)*

Ge radicalized the principles of geo-tagging when the street's name made it into the GPS mapping systems of Google and Baidu. Beijing authorities only became aware of it after photos from his graduate exhibition went viral. "Public spaces exist within natural settings and are filled with potential conflicts and new possibilities, and this why I prefer to execute and implement my work within public areas," said Ge.

The Chinese edition of *People's Daily* said the work was a form of "black humor" that also exposed a loophole due to the "inaction of relevant departments." CCTV suggested the area's residents should be allowed to vote on which street name they preferred. But critics thought the work was disrespectful to China's heritage.

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Media attention for Chinese street art and graffiti has led to a rise in demand for academic study. But legality issues still impede widespread acceptance at university level. Five years ago, at the height of the Silver Age, discussions were underway with Tsinghua University officials after the school had expressed interest in creating China's first Graffiti Studies program, but it didn't go any further.

In the US, [Jeffrey Ian Ross](#) (Ph.D.) at the University of Baltimore enlisted international scholars to contribute research and analysis for what would become the *Routledge Handbook on Graffiti and Street Art*. The handbook features two chapters on China, both penned by Dr. Minna Valjakka, Research Fellow at the University of Singapore. As a visiting scholar working on her Ph.D. on contemporary Chinese art in 2006, she was present during the early stages of Beijing’s graffiti movement. Discussing ABS crew and Kwanyin Clan, she said, “They experimented by combining new forms of contemporary graffiti and street art with Chinese art traditions.”

After Liu Laoshi retired in 2013, he also wrote a book on Beijing graffiti. He reached out to Chinese publishers, but they weren’t interested. They said they had concerns over the ~~potential copyright issues with the artists and their work. But Liu knew that wasn’t the~~ real reason. The lack of transparent graffiti laws again worked as a deterrent.

*Liu Laoshi in west Beijing during filming of the documentary Spray Paint Beijing*

“China doesn’t have a taboo against publishing books on foreign graffiti,” Liu complained. “A company in Shanghai has released four, and I have all of them.”

Rather than solicit foreign interest, he published it himself. *Beijing Graffiti* is filled with his photos and blog entries on the development of the art form spanning a ten-year period (2004-2014). Once it was printed, he gave copies away to friends and graffiti writers. He still has a few left, where they sit on a bookshelf at his home in west Beijing.

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*Further watching: For more on Beijing’s early graffiti scene, watch the author’s 2012 documentary [Spray Paint Beijing](#)*

*All photos are by the author, unless otherwise marked*

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