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Italian Association for Chinese Studies. Selected Papers 3, 2020

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ISBN 978-88-7543-475-5

This volume of Selected Papers has adopted the method of double-blind peer review. All manuscripts have been accepted after a rigorous peer reviewed process.

Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina srl
Dorsoduro 3259 - 30123 Venezia
www.cafoscarina.it

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Published March 2020

Summary

CHIARA PICCININI ELISA GIUNIPERO <i>Preface</i>	7
MIRIAM CASTORINA Some Observations on <i>De Lingua Sinensi</i> : A Forgotten Work of Chinese Grammar	11
ORNELLA DE NIGRIS The Introduction of the Words <i>Měishù</i> and <i>Měishùguǎn</i> into the Modern Chinese Lexicon: some Preliminary Findings	26
NAZARENA FAZZARI Xi Jinping and the Tabooing of Names: a Sociolinguistic View on Anti-Censorship Strategies on the Internet in China	42
GLORIA GABBIANELLI The Acquisition of Chinese Noun-Classifiers by Italian Learners	59
BEATRICE GALLELLI Poverty Alleviation Under Xi Jinping: Official Narratives and Political Legitimacy	73
ADRIANA IEZZI “Sinization” Against “Westernization” in Beijing Contemporary Graffiti? A Comparison between the Kwan-Yin Clan and the Abs Crew	92
CHIARA PICCININI Analysis of the Pragmatic Uses of the Discourse Markers <i>na</i> 那 and <i>ranhou</i> 然后 in a Corpus of Radio Conversations in Chinese Language Recorded in Taiwan	107
GIULIA RAMPOLLA Fragments of History: Individual Memories in the Works of Three Contemporary Chinese Women Writers	121
ANDREA SCIBETTA The Promotion of Chinese in Italian Primary Schools: a Study Based on Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Praxis	135

GABRIELE TOLA	
Origin, Role and Use of Chinese Classifiers: Linguistic Observations from Late Qing Western Grammars	156
ALESSANDRO TOSCO	
“To Repay Grace Is No Madness”: Fathers Sacrificing Sons in Chinese Dramas of the Yuan Dynasty	168
CRISTIANA TURINI	
Ethnicity and Tradition in the Upper Mekong Region: Mapping the Other China at the Turn of the XIX Century	183
SERENA ZUCCHERI	
The Misuse of Medical Language in Health Professionals and Non-Experts’ Communication: An Analysis of an Italian-Chinese Information Booklet	204
<i>Abstracts</i>	219
<i>Contributors</i>	227

“SINIZATION” AGAINST “WESTERNIZATION”
IN BEIJING CONTEMPORARY GRAFFITI?
A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE KWAN-YIN CLAN
AND THE ABS CREW

Starting from the US in the 70s,¹ “graffiti art” (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术) appeared in China in the 90s but it was only in the early 21st century that it became a noticeable artistic phenomenon visible in the main Chinese cities (Valjakka 2011, 71-74).² In mainland China “contemporary graffiti has its own characteristics” (Valjakka 2015, 263), which differ from the rest of the world.³ One of this main characteristics

¹ For more details about the birth and the evolution of the phenomenon in the US and abroad, see: Drogheria 2015. For more details about the actual situation of graffiti in the world, see: Ross 2016.

² Graffiti art was introduced to China in 1995 by Zhang Dali (see *infra*) and by other writers who were active in Hong Kong in the 1990s (Valjakka 2011, 73-74). According to Lu Pan, their work was fundamental “in introducing Western-style graffiti into mainland China in the late 1990s” (Lu 2015, 31). Starting from Hong Kong, and then from Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, graffiti began to spread all over China, especially in minor cities, such as Wuhan, Shenzhen, and Chengdu (Hassan and Sanada 2011, 11). Then, in the mid-2000s, also thanks to the wide spread of the underground culture (De Kloet 2010), it extended its field of action in all major Chinese cities, and became popular especially in Beijing and Shanghai (Valjakka 2016, 357-371).

³ These characteristics can be summarized in ten points: 1) graffiti is not considered as a form of vandalism, a criminal act or a manifestation of class struggle as it is in Euro-American cities: Chinese graffiti is usually defined as “half legal, half illegal” (Bidisha 2014) and there are certain areas called “semi-legal walls” where it’s okay to do it; 2) graffiti has always been primarily regarded as a form of art supported by the contemporary art scene (Valjakka 2011, 78); 3) its primary aims are beautification of urban space (not rebellion), and self-expression (*ibid.*, 75); 4) “the majority of unauthorized urban art images are apolitical [...]; and political graffiti art can also be created to support the establishment” (Valjakka 2015, 265); 5) graffiti is primarily a short-lived hobby by young people from the middle classes or wealthier families and the creators may turn to something else within a year or two (Valjakka 2016, 367); 6) the majority of Chinese writers have an artistic background (Valjakka 2011, 80); 7) “the attitude towards commissioned and paid graffiti is usually more positive among Chinese writers, as opposed to claims of some Euro-American writers that only illegally created graffiti is true graffiti” (*ibid.*, 82); 8) graffiti has remained a small and undeveloped phenomenon (for a total amount of around 250-350 active writers), although some creators are technically very skillful (Valjakka 2015, 263); 9) there are also foreign writers (*e.g.* Zyko, Aigor, Sbam and Zato in Beijing, and Dezio, Fluke and Diase in Shanghai) who contribute to create an international graffiti scene in China; 10) despite this international atmosphere, a question on the use of “Chineseness” and of the development of a specific “Chinese style” emerged in mainland China since the beginning of the diffusion of graffiti.

concerns graffiti style and aesthetics. In fact, even if from the beginning “Chinese graffiti has been based on Euro-American graffiti” (Valjakka 2011, 84) and “even today the majority of the styles echo the tradition of Euro-American scenes” (Valjakka 2016, 368), a searching for Chineseness and an attempt to develop a specific “Chinese style” is evident in many local creators (Valjakka 2011, 84). Especially in Beijing, where graffiti was introduced in People’s Republic of China in the first place, an attempt to balance Euro-American influences with Chinese cultural references is evident in the works of almost every graffiti crew. Among them, the Kwanyin Clan and the ABS crew are representative examples of completely different ways of balancing those opposing forces: the first one wants to manifestly express its Chineseness, while the second one is deeply influenced by the Euro-American tradition and aims at being part of the global competition.

Beijing graffiti

Contemporary graffiti was introduced in Beijing by Zhang Dali 张大力 in 1995 (Valjakka 2016, 359), when he started to spray giant silhouettes on Beijing hutongs scheduled for demolition (Wu 2000, 749-768). Even if he is widely regarded as the “Godfather of Beijing graffiti” (Bonniger 2018, 21), someone affirms that the first graffiti writer in Beijing is not him, who was a “street artist” for a period of his career and then moved on, but the first real graffiti writer in Beijing is Li Qiuqiu 李球球, known as 0528 (Crayon 2012; Huang 2016; Mouna 2017).⁴ Li Qiuqiu started doing graffiti in 1996 and in 2006 he founded the first graffiti crew in Beijing, the “Beijing Penzi crew” (BJPZ). After a decade of the undisputed and solitary activity of Zhang and Li (Valjakka 2016, 361), a new generation of graffiti writers began to emerge in the Chinese capital, also thanks to the institution of the first Beijing’s officially sanctioned graffiti wall in 2005 – “The Great Wall of Beijing,” located along the south wall of Renmin University and inspired by the Olympic Games (Bonniger 2018, 22). As a consequence of the success of that large-scale graffiti project, a positive ‘graffiti wave’ affected public opinion and artistic circles. By 2006, individual graffiti writers had begun to group together, forming the first Beijing’s graffiti crews: in addition to the aforementioned BJPZ, also the Kwanyin Clan was founded in the same year (see *infra*). Other individual writers like ‘HADES’ and ‘The Little Mushroom’ decided instead to go it alone (*ibid.*). Around 2007, a growing number of foreign writers started to come to Beijing, introduc-

⁴ This different attribution of authorship is due to the fact that Zhang Dali’s work had no impact on the next generation of graffiti writers because he did not interact with other creators, worked individually and saw graffiti only as a phase of his artistic career (Crayon 2012; Valjakka 2016, 361); Li Qiuqiu’s work, instead, had a great impact on the next generation of Beijing’s writers, he interacted with them and was part of one of the most important crew in Beijing (BJPZ), so “he is considered by many Chinese writers to be the one who started it all” (Mouna 2017).

ing new styles and techniques and influencing massively the graffiti scene (*ibid.*, 23). More crews started to form and even if some soon disappeared, like the *Jiu Men* 九门 (Nine doors) that was founded in 2007 and disappeared the next year (LLYS 2015), others are still active today, such as ABS (2007, see *infra*), KTS (2009), DNA (2010), TMM (2011), the all-girl TUNS crew (2013), and YDS (2016), one of the most recent (Bonniger 2018, 23). The period between 2009 and 2013 was a “Silver Age” for Beijing graffiti: Beijing was a virgin territory for a small group of Chinese and foreign writers that worked together and the numerous graffiti pieces and tags would stay up for weeks or months at the time before they were covered (Crayon 2017). 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 (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit in that year (*ibid.*). In particular, in recent times the intensification of the government initiative of the “Beautification of Beijing” is promoting continuous campaigns of ‘sanification’ of the public walls by the *chengguan* 城管 (city inspectors), who now usually paint over the graffiti with gray paint. Today the scene of graffiti in Beijing is small, the total number of writer is less than a hundred⁵ and there are a very small number of crews (Bonniger 2018, 25). But despite this limited scene, some creators are technically very skillful and are opening up new possibilities for Chinese graffiti, like for example the Kwanyin Clan and the ABS crew.

The Kwanyin Clan

The Kwanyin Clan was founded in June 2006 in the 798 Art District in Beijing by EricTIN, YUMI, QUAN and JEV, and then in 2007 it was joined by NAT, AP, KENO, VIGA, JAK and SCAV (Valjakka 2016, 361). The most active period of the crew lasted until 2010, and, after a period of inactivity, in 2016 they restarted to work together, even if very sporadically.⁶ The crew’s main aim is the development of a notion of Chineseness in contemporary graffiti (*ibid.*), as they have repeatedly stated (*e.g.* Flickr 2008) and as their name dedicated to the Chinese “Goddess of Mercy” (Guanyin) alludes.⁷ Their art, in fact, is usually defined as *Zhongguo tese de tuyu yishu* 中国特色

⁵ The exact total number of writers is unknown. According to ZEIT, a Beijing graffiti writer, “there are 70-80 writers here in Beijing, but only about 30 are writing regularly” (Mouna 2017); GIANT, a member of YDS, says that “there are maybe 30 graffiti writers in Beijing and only 15 are active” (Crayon 2017); ANDC, a member of ABS, affirms that “there are less than 10 active graffiti artists in Beijing now” (Yau 2018).

⁶ The reason for the reunion in 2016 was the participation in the most important exhibition on street art held in China in the last decade, entitled “Street Art: A Global View” (CAFA Museum, July 1 - August 24, 2016) (Danysz 2016, 154-157).

⁷ Kwanyin Clan’s artistic aim is to present graffiti art in China as an *alter ego* of the Bodhisattva Guanyin: as it has happened for Guanyin, graffiti art came from abroad, and if it wants to become popular it has to sinicize its forms, undergoing deity own metamorphosis (Flickr 2008).

的涂鸦艺术“Chinese Style Graffiti” (Youtube 2008, Tudou 2015), better translated as “Graffiti art with Chinese characteristics”, because they really borrow lots of elements from the Chinese cultural background.

In China, the expression of “Chineseness” among local writers usually means the use of Chinese language and/or other visual references that are easily recognizable as Chinese, such as dragon, lanterns, pandas etc. (Valjakka 2016, 368). In particular, the use of Chinese language is a distinguishable feature (Valjakka 2011, 84): texts are so more easily comprehensible for the Chinese audience, even if in the Chinese characters the number of strokes and the need for more specific positioning and alignments can make it difficult to create a unique style (Mouna 2017). In Beijing, most of the crews and single writers have experimented with the use of both Chinese writing and Chinese visual cultural elements, such as BJPZ crew, KTS crew, DNA crew, TUNS crew, CAMEL from the TMM crew, ZEIT, and even the foreign writer ZATO. The Kwanyin Clan is not an exception: they usually use Chinese language to write their tags (especially in the forms of “Guan” 观 [觀] or “Guanyin” 观音 [觀音] characters) as well as to create elaborate “charactering” pieces, like for example in *Shirupozhu 势如破竹 (With Irresistible Force, 2008)*, and *Shengongyijiang 神工意匠 (Ars Divina, 2010)*.⁸ Also the insertion of visual elements that are easily recognizable as Chinese is a constant in the Kwanyin Clan’s works: pandas, dragons, bamboo and rocks, lotus flowers, pagodas, red fishes, Taoist deities, ping pong, mahjong, fans, etc. are extremely common in their oeuvres.⁹ Unlike the other crews, however, in addition to the use of Chinese writing and Chinese visual cultural elements, the Kwanyin Clan also tried to merge Euro-American graffiti practice with Chinese traditional aesthetics and, in particular, with the ancient traditional arts of the Chinese literati (calligraphy, poetry and painting). This is a distinguishable feature of their art and perhaps one of the best interpretation of the notion of “Chineseness” in Chinese graffiti.

One of their best examples in that sense is one of their first “masterpieces” entitled *Shanshui PIC 山水 PIC (Landscape painting PIC, fig. 1)*.¹⁰ This was the first mas-

⁸ For a detailed analysis of this work, see Iezzi 2017, 134-141. *Shengongyijiang* is one of their best examples of the use of Chinese characters in a graffiti piece.

⁹ For example, they employed a big panda in *Guanyin jie 观音街 (Kwanyin Street PIC, 2007)* and in the graffiti made for the *The Clash Show New Design Exhibition (2007)*; bamboo, pagodas, ping-pong players, traditional decorative patterns in *Olympic Beijing (2008)*, a dragon and an imperial guardian lion in *Shijulongpan 狮踞龙盘 (Where tigers crouch and dragons coil, 2008)*, an auspicious red fish in *Passage of time (2010)*, bamboos and rocks in *Bamboo (2011)*, etc. To see these works, look up the official blog of the crew (Sohu 2006).

¹⁰ The crew usually refers to this work as one of their most representative work (Youtube 2008, EricTin 2008, and EricTin, e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, January 10, 2016). This artwork was selected after a detailed analysis of more than one hundred works of the crew (stored in their blogs, Flicks and Facebook pages) and using information gathered during a period of fieldwork in Beijing, interviews with EricTin (the leader of the group), and social media consultation.

terpiece in China where the ‘Chineseness’ was so evident because it deeply linked to Chinese traditional art and culture. This huge graffiti work is 42 meters long and it was created during the “China’s First Graffiti Exhibition” (*Zhongguo shoujie tuyi meili yishuzhan* 中国首届涂鸦魅力艺术展) held at the Beijing International Exhibition Hall in 2007.¹¹



Figure 1. Kwanyin Clan (Quan, EricTin, Yumi, Jer, Apart, Nato, Scar, Joey, Keno, Pluto, Viga, Ctn), *Shanshui PIC*, 8-11.11.2007, graffiti: spray-painting on panels, L. 42 m, ht. c. 2 m, International Exhibition Hall Square, Beijing.

As the title suggests, in this work, the crew took inspiration from the Chinese traditional landscape painting. The whole composition, in fact, is characterized by typical elements and arrangement of landscape painting: mountains in the background and a long river in the foreground, a thick mist where mountain contours disappear in the middleground, lush vegetation on the river banks, and fishermen on small boats and huts at the foot of the mountains. Also the colors (black, white and grey) are typical of Chinese “ink wash painting” (*shuimo hua* 水墨画), and the format of the composition is similar to a “horizontal scroll” (*hengfu* 横幅), the typical format of this type of painting.¹² According to EricTin, the leader of the group, the source of inspiration for this work is landscape painting from the Song dynasty (960-1279) and three famous landscape artworks of that period¹³ have been used as models (EricTin, e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, January 10, 2016).

The “spray-painting” technique used by the Kwanyin Clan is also very similar to the ink technique of “*cunfa*” 皴法, which is the traditional method of painting stone texture in Chinese art. The five steps that characterize “*cunfa*” technique (“outline” *gou* 勾, “texture” *cun* 皴, “rub” *ca* 擦, “render” *ran* 染, and “dot” *dian* 点:

¹¹ See the video of the realization of this work: EricTin 2008.

¹² The choice of employing these landscape elements, compositional arrangement, format, and colours was confirmed by EricTin (Youtube 2008).

¹³ The landscape paintings named by EricTin are: *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (*Xi shan xing lü tu* 溪山行旅图) by Fan Kuan (c. 950-1032), *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* (*Qianli Jiangshan tu* 千里江山图) by Wang Ximeng (1096-1119), and *Dwelling in the Mountains* (*Shanju tu* 山居图) by Qian Xuan (1235-1305).

Illouz 1989, 104-113) are replaced by an analogous spray-painting methodology: first, the outlines of the sketch are transferred to the wall (*gou*), then the resulting shapes are filled with appropriate colors (*cun*), using different caps to vary the width of spray (*ca*), finally the final outlines are written around shapes (*ran*), adding dripping and dot effects (*dian*). In addition to a revised version of the traditional “*cunfa*” technique, the Kwanyin Clan also reproduces the classical brush method of framing space through the so-called “three distances” (*san yuan* 三元). This illusionary effect (of space and distance) has been recreated through the skillful use of spray cans and caps and by particular painting techniques, like for example cutting lines¹⁴ and “fade” (blended) colors.

The presence of two calligraphies (one in the middle and one on the upper left) is also another reference to traditional landscape painting that is always embellished by calligraphic inscriptions. The first inscription in the center of the work is written in “big characters” (*dazi* 大字) and “regular script” (*kaishu* 楷书), while the second one is composed of 45 columns of Chinese characters written in “cursive script” (*caoshu* 草书). “Regular script” and “cursive script” are two of the five styles of Chinese calligraphy and, using both of them, Kwanyin Clan’s members show their acquaintance with calligraphic art. Also the vertical writing direction of the two inscriptions (from top to bottom) recalls the strict rules of Chinese traditional calligraphy. The two traditional characters of the first calligraphy (*Guan Yin* 观音), the Chinese name of the crew, are easily recognizable. In writing them, the variation of the width of the strokes, produced by a skillful use of the spray-painting, is a contemporary expedient to create the illusion of being in front of a classical calligraphy written with ink brush.¹⁵ Only the presence of the tags of all the components of the crew at the bottom of the two characters recalls the Euro-American graffiti tradition because they are written horizontally in Latin letters. In the second calligraphy, the variation of the width of the strokes, the illegibility of the characters (that is typical of cursive script), and the reading direction (from right to left) follow the traditional calligraphic manner, while the widespread “dripping” effect underlines the graffiti taste. According to EricTin, the content of this long calligraphy is inspired by a poem entitled “Immortal at the River” (*Lin jiang xian* 临江仙) composed by the Song poet Teng Zijing 滕子京 (990-1047) (EricTin, e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, July 1, 2016). In this poem, Teng Zijing describes the delightful landscape surrounding the Dongting Lake (prov. Hunan) during a misty autumn morning, evoking a melancholy atmosphere. In this poem, Teng Zijing wrote:

Lake water embraces the sky,
Glow brightly in crystal autumn.

¹⁴ “Cutting lines” is “a painting technique used on inside fills of letters and characters to get thin lines, thinner than thin tips” (Art Crimes, n.d.).

¹⁵ In calligraphy writings, it is fundamental to vary the width of the brushstrokes to produce a valuable effect (Li 2009, 38).

Jun mount is a piece of paradise
 And a mist from the Yun and Meng Marshes
 Has beleaguered the city of Yueyang.

Xiang River Goddesses play the lute
 Ancient memories sad hearts lacerate
 Orchid's whispering delicately scented
 No one can be found whence the melodies ended
 On upper river verdant peaks silently stand.¹⁶ (Author's translation)

According to Chinese classical aesthetic principles, in *Shanshui PIC* the use of Teng Zijing's poetry (*shi* 诗) written in calligraphic style (*shu* 书) to enhance the depiction of a landscape painting (*hua* 画) suggests the reference to the so-called "three perfections" (*sanjue* 三绝), the Chinese indissoluble artistic triad of "poetry, calligraphy, and painting" (*shi shu hua* 诗书画) that represents one of the basis of Chinese traditional culture (Sullivan 1974, 7). In this work, in fact, the binomial between poetry and painting was realized by Teng Zijing's verses that are a vivid representation of the scenery and by the landscape painting that can be described as being "poem-like" (*shi yi ban de* 诗一般的. Qi 1991, 14); the binomial between calligraphic technique and literally content has been restated by the use of "cursive script": its fastness embodies the fleeting nature of the joy of the encounter described in Teng Zijing's poem. The binomial between calligraphy and painting is realized by the use of the same artistic instrument: traditionally it was the brush (*ibid.*, 13), here is the spray can that is employed to shape both calligraphy and painting producing similar effects. Crossing these three binomials, *Shanshui PIC* is a worthy example of the perfect triangulation of the "three perfections" in a contemporary graffiti artwork.

However, in addition to all these Chinese traditional references, there are also two important elements that conform to graffiti conventions. These elements are: i) the enormous figure of a graffiti writer portrayed in live motion in three different poses between the two calligraphies, and ii) the six graffiti pieces nestled in the mountains with the names of six members of the crew shaped in elaborate lettering styles. The graffiti writer represents an *alter ego* of all the members of the crew and is depicted in a realistic style: he is wearing hip-hop urban clothing, holds a spray can and looks like a "b-boy" (break-dancer) who seems to dance while writing a piece. The graffiti lettering pieces with the names of six writers of the crew (Yumi, EricTin, Quan, Scar, Jer, and Viga, respectively) are characterized by a marked tendency toward wildstyle (especially in the first piece) and use of 3D effects.

In *Shanshui PIC*, the Kwanyin Clan demonstrates the ability to use Euro-American graffiti styles and techniques as well as the unprecedented capability to adapt Chi-

¹⁶ For the Chinese version of the poem, see: Gushiwen, n.d. The text of the poem was confirmed by EricTin in an e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, January 9/10, 2016.

nese traditional forms and classical aesthetics to contemporary graffiti. *Shanshui PIC* is only an example of the expression of their “Chineseness”,¹⁷ but it clearly shows the *modus operandi* of the crew. In their artworks, in fact, i) the use of calligraphic inscriptions is a recurring element;¹⁸ ii) the reference to Chinese classical poetry and “sanjue” notion is not rare (see e.g. *Shirupozhu*, *Shengongyijiang*,¹⁹ and *New Style* 2008); and iii) in addition to landscape painting, other Chinese traditional art forms has been reinterpreted, such as bamboo painting and archaic bronze vessels in *New Style*, bamboo and rocks painting in *Bamboo*, ceramics in *Blue and white porcelain* (2009-2010) and in *Artwork made for the exhibition ‘Street Art, a Global View’* (2016), paper-cutting in *Passage of time*, and jade disks carving in *Situanheqi* 四团和气 (*Four-cluster harmony*, 2010).²⁰ For them, the “sinization” process of graffiti art means not only the use of Chinese language and other Chinese visual elements but also drawing from China’s classical tradition: this is their innovative notion of “Chineseness”.

However, even if the development of a “Chinese Style” is the main aim of the Kwanyin Clan, as has just been demonstrated, especially in their commercial works and illegal bombing this kind of research (and the use of Chinese references) is much less noticeable. In those cases, in fact they usually use Latin letters and “Old-school” Euro-American styles.²¹

The ABS crew

The ABS crew was founded in 2007 by SCAR (a.k.a. SMER), SEVEN, ANDC, and NOISE.²² The acronym of the crew means “Around the Bohai Sea”²³ because all the members of the crew come from different cities around the Bohai Sea (ANDC,

¹⁷ In this work, the notion of “Chineseness” means the reference to monochrome landscape painting, the use of Chinese painting techniques and format, the use of Chinese language, calligraphy and calligraphic styles, the references to Song painting, Song poetry and “sanjue” notion.

¹⁸ Besides *Shanshui PIC*, other Kwanyin Clan’s works with calligraphic inscriptions are: *Shirupozhu*, *Shengongyijiang*, *New Style*, *Olympic Beijing*, *Shijulongpan*, *THE BJC KWAN-YIN CREW* (2007), *Lanfang University PIC* (2008), the work made for the exhibition *Street Art: A global View* (2016), etc.

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of the use of Chinese poetry and “sanjue” notion in *Shengongyijiang*, see Iezzi 2017, 135-139.

²⁰ To see these works, look up the official blog of the crew (Sohu 2006).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² According to Valjakka, “SCAR and SEVEN started to paint in 2004, while ANDC took up painting a year later. NOISE [...] started to paint in 2007, the same year when the four writers set up a crew” (Valjakka 2016, 361). In 2015, GOES, a writer from Chengdu, joined the team.

²³ Other meanings of their acronym “ABS” are “Active, Brilliant, Significant” (Fitch 2012) and “A Brand new Star”. This second meaning wants to express the desire of the crew to create a new model for graffiti that represents the fusion of American and Chinese cultures (ANDC, e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, December 20, 2015). Their acronym “also refers to the Anti-lock Braking System, implying the quest to keep things on track and to follow the original idea of graffiti” (Valjakka 2016, 369). Also Wu Jie refers to an “Anti-skid Brake System” (Wu 2014, 1).

e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, December 20, 2015).²⁴ In 2010, they moved to Beijing where they established their first studio in the 798 art district. In 2012, they opened the China's first graffiti store named as "400ML,"²⁵ selling spray-painting and other related street art products. The ABS crew is "one of the best-known current crews in mainland China" (Valjakka 2016, 361) and one of the most active in Beijing. One of their main aims is to promote the diffusion of graffiti culture all over the country, involving an increasing number of young people in this activity (ANDC, e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, November 12, 2015). For that reason, every year they organize a big graffiti-themed event in Beijing called "Meeting Neighborhood" (*Linli xiangju* 邻里相聚) with no commercial implications and in partnership with community-level government, where gather people interested in graffiti and hip-hop (Wu 2014, 3). The hip-hop culture and the Euro-American tradition strongly influenced their art.²⁶ ANDC in an interview said that in the beginning they just imitated overseas styles, and only after taking part in the international exchanges, they started to develop their own styles (Yau 2018). The ABS desire of going beyond national borders and thinking more "globally," in fact, is mostly due to the opportunity they had to travel abroad and to have a worthwhile exchange with foreign writers (*ibid.*). In 2011 they won the Wall Lords Asia Graffiti Battle²⁷ in Taiwan, so they were selected to take part in the "2011-12 EU-China Hip-Hop Communication Project", an exchange urban cultural project between China and Europe. During this project, the ABS crew visited 10 European cities from Berlin to Rotterdam in 30 days and wrote lots of walls with European writers, learning German style and techniques (Wu 2015, 2). From that moment onwards, they started to do lots of works with foreign writers both in China and abroad (see *e.g.* the frequent collaboration with SBAM from Italy and ZYKO from Germany),²⁸ to join graffiti festival around the world (the last one was in Berlin in May 2018)²⁹ and to organize international graffiti meeting (*e.g.* the above mentioned "Meeting Neighborhood"), being part of the global graffiti panorama.

²⁴ Minna Valjakka affirmed that SCAR, SEVEN and ANDC come from Shijiazhuang (Hebei), while NOISE comes from Dalian (Liaoning) (Valjakka 2016, 361). According to Wu Jie, instead, they come from Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei and Dalian (Wu 2014, 1).

²⁵ ANDC explained the meaning of the name of the shop as follows: "A regular can of graffiti spray paint is 400ml. To set "400ml" apart, it stands for "4" Chinese young men, who prefer to be called "Mr. Letter," dedicating "100" percent of their attitude and capacity to graffiti art" (Wu 2014, 1).

²⁶ As explained by ANDC in an interview (ANDC, e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, November 12, 2015), their first approach to graffiti was with American graffiti by means of two famous documentaries entitled "Wild Style" (1983) and "Style Wars" (1983).

²⁷ "Wall Lords is the largest graffiti battle in Asia, established by the Hongkongnese XEME and SINIC. During 2008-2012 they organized annual contemporary graffiti competitions on national and international levels around Asia" (Valjakka 2016, 369).

²⁸ To see some examples of the works made with SBAM and ZYKO, see: Flickr 2009.

²⁹ They took part in the "Berlin Mural Fest" (May 19-21, 2018).

Their art is appreciated more widely and focuses on artistically skillful, large works, favoring wildstyle and also employing comic and funky styles (Valjakka 2016, 362). According to Wu Jie, “the common look of a piece of graffiti [by the ABS] is big alphabetic variants floated on a kaleidoscopic background” (Wu 2014, 4), with funny puppets and figures usually put in the center of the composition.³⁰ The work entitled *The Original Canster* (2012, fig. 2) is a representative example of this type of works and a model for their future masterpieces.³¹ This work is representative of the “international” style of the crew that is evident especially after the “2011-12 EU-China Hip-Hop Communication Project” and still endures today.



Figure 2. ABS crew, *The Original Canster*, June 2012, mural: spray painting on panels, winning piece at the China Wall Lord Graffiti Battle, Shenzhen.

This piece is composed of two big lettering pieces (the names of “SMER” on the left and “ANDC” on the right) on a multicolored background. They are written in wildstyle and brilliant colors, and are surrounded by many stars and flaming meteorites. Three comic puppets are placed at the center of the composition: two anthropomorphic spray cans wearing Flintstones clothes are chased by a mustached squared policeman. The biggest can in the middle is something among a pirate (he is wearing a pirate’s eye bandage), a thief (he brings booty on his shoulders), a caveman (he is holding a club and wearing a leopard skin) and a hip-hop writer (he holds a spray can with his foot and is listening to music from a ghetto blaster). He is the main character of the mural and represents “the original canster,” an *alter ego* of the “primordial” writer that assaults the streets like a pirate

³⁰ Important artworks that follow this arrangement are e.g. *Close Shave* (2011), *Rock da Party* (2012), *ABS crew x Redbull* (2012), *Space Cowboy* (2014), *The most wanted* (2014), *Last Xmas* (2015), etc. See: Flickr 2009.

³¹ This artwork was selected after a detailed analysis of more than one hundred works of the crew (stored in their blogs, Flicks and Facebook pages) and using information gathered during a period of fieldwork in Beijing, interviews with ANDC (the leader of the group), and social media consultation.

and is recruited by the police as a thief. In China graffiti is not really illegal³² and arrived only later, so this “original canster” is not ‘Chinese’ but represents an *alter ego* of its first “original” form in the US. This work can be seen as a homage to the US graffiti tradition as a whole because here everything is an echo of that tradition: i) Euro-American styles (wildstyle, comic and funky styles), ii) Latin letters (in the two big lettering pieces, in the title at the top and in the numerous tags around the work), iii) English language (in the title, also characterized by a pun: the word “canister” became “canster” to underline the importance of the word “can” in graffiti), and iv) puppets and figures strongly “Western” (Flintstones and pirates) or strictly connected to the hip-hop culture (ghetto bluster and spray-can). The use of these four elements (Euro-American styles, Latin letters, English language,³³ and “Western” or hip-hop figures³⁴) is not just a feature of this piece but is a *leitmotiv* in the ABS artworks, sticking their art with the graffiti “Western conventions” (Valjakka 2016, 368). As in this work, in most of their artworks there are no elements that refer to China and their stylistic and formal analysis does not allow to understand that their authors are Chinese writers: everything comes from the West (style, letters, language and figures) aiming at a “Westernization” process of graffiti art. In addition to stylistic/formal elements, in their works, other references to the “Western” world and the graffiti tradition are: i) the frequent collaboration with foreign brands like Puma, Adidas, Red bull, Nike, Audi, etc.; ii) their regular bombing activity on the streets and trains;³⁵ and iii) the creation of socially-aware elaborate works.³⁶

However, even if the ABS crew’s main aim is the development of a personal style influenced by “Western conventions” in the global graffiti scene, as has just been shown, they sometimes express their Chineseness. As they have declared, Chinese elements, such as temple, dragon, and phoenix or like calligraphy and the national flag have been occasionally incorporated into their graffiti (Wu 2014, Yau 2018).

³² For more information on the question of legality/illegality of urban art images in China, see Valjakka 2014, 97-116.

³³ They chose Latin letters and English language instead of Chinese writing because they focus on developing a personal style instead of a “Chinese style” (ANDC, e-mail message to author and M. Merenda, December 11, 2015).

³⁴ As to the use of “Western” characters, for example, the works dedicated to “Poseidon” (2011) and “King Kong” (2017) are particularly significant. Also allusions to Western festivals (e.g. Halloween and Christmas), cowboys and zombies are very frequent as well as the depiction of b-boys, skaters, young guys wearing hip-hop clothes, graffiti writers and spray cans. See: Flickr 2009.

³⁵ Works on trains are a real rarity in China and link the ABS crew illegal activity to the customary activity of first graffiti crews in the US and every graffiti writer in the world.

³⁶ According to Bidisha: “While ABS Crew may be pursuing a lucrative corporate strategy these days, ANDC still makes sly reference to their shadier work, done ‘on a real street, in the night. It’s about wanting to tell people something. We do artwork that’s a social commentary and we add our crew’s name’” (Bidisha 2014). The most representative example of socially-aware works made by the ABS crew is entitled “Inflation” (2012, Jingmi Road); in this work the ABS mocked the inflation and the price hike of pork in Beijing in 2012 (Valjakka 2015, 271).

Also the use of Chinese writing is not a taboo for them: they experimented with “charactering” pieces at the beginning of their career³⁷ and since their first experience abroad in 2011–2012 they have employed Chinese words/writings/cultural elements especially in the works made outside China.³⁸

Conclusion

The Kwanyin Clan and the ABS crew are representative examples of two different ways of balancing local and global in Beijing contemporary graffiti. The Kwanyin Clan has developed a unique “Chinese” style, promoting not only the use of Chinese characters and Chinese visual cultural elements, but also the reference to traditional art forms and aesthetics. In their main artworks, in fact, they usually refer to Chinese literati arts (landscape painting, bamboo painting, calligraphy, and classical poetry), ancient art (jade carving and bronze vessels), Chinese artifacts (white and blue porcelain) and even folk art (paper-cutting) in order to “sinicize” (their) graffiti grammar.

The ABS crew, instead, is deeply influenced by Western conventions and traditions: in their main artworks, they promote the use of Latin alphabet, English language, Euro-American styles and Western visual elements. The use of Chinese language is extremely rare, and usually limited to some works made outside China; “charactering” pieces are an ancient memory of the past; Chinese tags are never used and also the references to Chinese visual cultural elements (dragons, pandas, pagodas, chopsticks, almond eyes etc.) are usually conventional and easily recognizable abroad. The ABS crew aims at developing an international style and vision, and in order to do that they also engage frequent collaborations with foreign writers and take part in (or organize) international events.

The Kwanyin Clan and the ABS crew seem to be main actors of processes of “sinization” (the first one) and “westernization” (the second one) of Chinese contemporary graffiti. However, nothing is ever clear-cut as it seems to be, and, in fact, some degrees of hybridization between local/Chinese and global/Euro-American elements are visible in both crews. As to Kwanyin Clan, for example, the use of Latin letters and “Old-school” Euro-American styles is a constant in their commercial works or in their bombing activity. As to ABS crew, instead, the use of Chinese

³⁷ Examples of their first “charactering” pieces are: *Zhanzheng wuqing* 战争无情 (*Was is ruthless*, 2009), *Tuo qi xiwang* 托起希望 (*Lift up hope*, 2009), and *Xunchou ciji* 寻求刺激 (*Sensation seeking* 2009). “Charactering” pieces made after 2009 are extremely rare: see *Dajidali* 大吉大利 (*The most favourable auspices*, 2012), *Beijing you du* 北京有毒 (*Beijing Air Toxicity* 2013), and *Naigao* 耐克 (*Nike*, 2018). See: Flickr 2009.

³⁸ See e.g. the works made during the “2011–2012 EU-China Hip-Hop Communication Project” (Flickr 2009) and the last one made at the “Berlin Mural Fest” (2018) with an enormous dragon, calligraphic inscriptions, and seals.

writing and Chinese visual cultural elements is frequent especially in commercial works for Chinese brands and in works made abroad. In the first case, this is due to the fact that also for the Kwanyin Clan the first approach to graffiti was with American graffiti (EricTin, e-mail message to author, February 23, 2018). In the second case, this is due to the fact that the ABS crew veers towards the commercial side of graffiti (Bonniger 2018, 24): their main aim is the creation of an innovative and original style that can be transformed into a brand that is easily recognizable abroad (Facebook 2012).³⁹

In both crews, we can so recognize what Wu Doreen named as a process of “glocalization” of a cultural discourse in contemporary China (Wu 2008, 3): a dialectical process between the global and the local forces that in graffiti art leads to cultural blending, reinvention and emergence of new discourses.

Adapting Maxwell’s theory about the development of Chinese “ink art” on their art (Hearn 2013, 13), we can affirm that the Kwanyin Clan tries to transform China’s cultural heritage “from within,” seeking to “modernize” Chinese art through references to Western models (Euro-American graffiti) but retaining the use of traditional Chinese aesthetics, while the ABS wants to do that “from without,” abandoning traditional Chinese formats and techniques to experiment freely with new media and postmodern strategies in pursuit of their expressive goals. The results of these two different approaches are always transcultural and hybrid products that testify that “cultural boundaries are socially constructed and will continually be defined and redefined, especially with accelerated global interactions when all cultures and communities of practice have become increasingly interconnected and interdependent, and that it is through the hybridization of foreign and domestic cultures that cultural development is achieved” (Wu 2008, 6).

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³⁹ In the video of the interview to the crew, Noise said: “We hope to build ABS crew Beijing into a brand that’s known worldwide for innovative design with a Chinese style” (Facebook 2012); and ANDC added: “We have had graffiti art exhibitions in China and abroad. We hope to do more jobs and exhibitions internationally” (“*ibid.*) These are proof of their international vocation”.

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