

4 Urban Art Images and the Concerns of Mainlandization in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Shaped in the shadow of colonialism and post-colonialism, visual arts in Hong Kong have wrestled with issues of identity, locality, and international recognition. The lengthy process of the transfer of sovereignty, initiated in 1984 by the signing of the Joint Declaration, inspired contemporary artists in Hong Kong to assert their locality. In the 1990s in particular, since the trauma of the Tian'anmen Incident in 1989, '[a] psychic decolonization occurred which marked out a distance from both of these larger contexts [Western and Chinese art] without simply denying either' (Clarke 2001: 8; also pp. 38-69). The ideological struggles were visible in architecture and official public art too, which celebrated the reunion both during and after the Handover in 1997. It can also be argued that official public art in Hong Kong to a certain extent marks an ongoing cultural *mainlandization* of the urban space by the People's Republic of China (PRC). But how do urban art images, such as street art and contemporary graffiti, survive the discourses of post-colonialism in its specific forms of de/recolonization and mainlandization, and debates of cultural heritage and indigenous identities? How do they engage with the complex situation?

I seek to explore these questions by modifying Henri Lefebvre's (1991) definition of space as a continuous process in which the physical, mental, and social aspects of the space are intertwined.¹ In this process of creating the space of urban art images, we need to consider the agency of the creators of urban art images as constructors of the space and its norms, the nationality/ethnicity of the creators, as well as the contextualized formal analysis of the images and the site-responsiveness.² Based on intensive periods of fieldwork research in Hong Kong since 2012, extensive

¹ This approach was initially introduced in my conference paper in the Joint Conference of AAS and ICAS '70 Years of Asian Studies', Honolulu (Valjakka 2011b).

² In order to emphasize the actual interaction between the site, the work(s) and the creator(s), and the continuous impact of this interaction on the meaning of works through a visual dialogue (where one work is created as a response to an already existing one), I prefer using the concept of 'site-responsive' instead of site-specific (cf. Kwon 2004/2002 and Bengtsen 2013, Bengtsen 2014: 134-135). For more see Valjakka 2015c.

photographic documentation, and frequent meetings and in-depth interviews with more than sixty local and non-local creators of urban art images, my aim is to provide a different perspective to the usage and understanding of urban public space at the grassroots level. As I have come to understand, while following the creators throughout the alleys, streets, canals, rooftops, and abandoned buildings, the urban public space appears very different in the eyes of the creators of urban art images.

Creating space for urban art images

There is no consensus on what graffiti or street art is, and the two concepts are continuously contested. The understanding of the phenomenon is further obscured by the unfocused use of the English concept of 'graffiti' to denote anything and everything scribbled, written, drawn, smudged, or incised on any surface.³ To regard all the markings as part of the same phenomenon is likely to create confusion rather than clarity, because this approach often ignores the obvious differences in style, format, materials, language, content, and intentions as well as the varied understandings of the phenomenon, which depend on the socio-political and cultural contexts. Further elaborations, such as 'ancient', 'traditional', 'gang', 'contemporary', and 'subway' graffiti can serve as useful tools to start opening up the phenomenon.⁴

In Hong Kong, disagreement on the formats and contents of 'graffiti' and 'street art' is seen, for instance, in the new, emerging self-identities that can be categorized into five broad groups: first, 'graffiti writers', who are closest to the old-school definitions; second, 'graffiti artists', who primarily but not solely use spray paint and writing and wish to emphasize the artistic process, placing more value on the pictures and the message; third, 'street artists', who primarily use formats other than spray paints; fourth, those who are fine with any of these three identities; and last, those who do not consider themselves part of the first three groups but would prefer other

3 For a further discussion on the conceptual challenges of 'graffiti' in the Chinese cultural context, see Valjakka 2011a; Valjakka 2012; and Valjakka 2015a. A detailed discussion on the variety of 'traditional graffiti' is provided in Stewart 1989: 15-147. See also Reisner 1971. For 'graffiti' as writing in premodern times, see e.g. Plesch 2002 and Gordon 2002.

4 For a discussion of the 'ancient graffiti' of the Greek and Roman worlds, see Baird and Taylor 2011. The main differentiation of 'traditional' and 'subway graffiti' was suggested by Stewart (1989), but he also employs further categories, such as 'gang', 'agnomina', 'political graffiti', and so on.

concepts, such as 'spray painter', 'mural artist', 'mural painter', 'artist', 'street photographer', or just a 'player' –or no definition at all. In reality, some creators change their primary media during their period of activity or use a variety of formats and/or mixed techniques throughout their oeuvre. They find it even more challenging to identify with the two major concepts of 'graffiti' or 'street art'.

It may therefore be more beneficial to examine the complex contemporary scene in Hong Kong through the broader concepts of 'urban art images' and 'creators of urban art images', rather than simply through 'graffiti' or 'street art'. 'Urban art images' and 'creators of urban art images' allow us to explore more open-mindedly what is happening today – without limitations of the format, content, style, or language employed in the works.⁵ Inspired by James Elkins's (1999: 82-89) suggestion of a trichotomy of an image as writing, notation, and picture, I define *urban art images* as creative action that leaves a visible imprint, even a short-lived one, on urban public space. They can include *numbers and writing* (in any language), *pictures*, and *three-dimensional objects and materials*, or any combination of these three (Elkins 1999: 82-89).

Urban art images can be legal or illegal, commissioned or voluntarily made, resulting from private or collective actions. Focusing only on illegal actions would limit the understanding of the scene, as the notion of 'illegal' is complicated in Hong Kong: some sites and formats are semi-il/legal or even legal.⁶ A clear majority of the creators are willing also to accept legal commissions, as far as the emphasis in their oeuvre remains in illegal works. Also, urban art images are not necessarily anti-institutional but they are nevertheless primarily non-institutional, having been created without support from an institution or organization. Through this broader approach, the aim is to allow the possibility of varying notions to exist and new formats to emerge within these two 'umbrella' concepts. When writing on the individual creators, I will use the concepts preferred by the creators themselves.

Although the importance of styles and aesthetics has been occasionally brought up also in academic research,⁷ a focus on sociological or criminological aspects has been especially evident in the earlier studies on the

5 For a more detailed discussion on the history of urban art images in Hong Kong, see Valjakka 2015b. See also Chang and Kao 2012.

6 Valjakka 2014. On legal graffiti in New York since the 1990s, see Kramer 2010.

7 See, e.g. Stewart 1989; Austin 2001.

Euro-American scene.⁸ While many more scholarly publications in recent years have discussed on graffiti art or street art, the usage of visual analysis has been incorporated only by some.⁹ For any deeper appreciation of the scenes of urban art images, it is vital to employ a formal analysis of the visual features of the works, including the contents, styles, compositions, colours, materials, and languages. It is equally crucial to pay attention to the nationality of the creators and the site-responsiveness of the images so as to contextualize the images within a broader set of historical, socio-cultural, and political circumstances of the city/country in question. One also needs to take into account the developments and trends of the urban art images in these cities/countries as well as globally. Only through this multidimensional approach are we able better to explore the complex layers and features of this phenomenon, which carries references to and borrows from current social and political issues and other forms of popular culture, such as cartoons, films, music, and design. As Iris Rogoff maintains, the multilayered meanings of the images are constructed in the intertextual sphere where images interact with sounds and spatial delineation (Rogoff 2002: 24).

Rogoff's insight resonates with Henri Lefebvre's perception that space is produced in ongoing interaction with social relations and in representations of this interaction. Lefebvre's space has three aspects: spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces. Spatial practices denote the production of physical space, the built architectural sites and how the society is perceived through them. Representations of space refer to the conceptualized ideas of the spaces and their status conceived by the educated elite in the society. Representational spaces are lived and used by people in relation to symbols and associated images. According to Lefebvre, such representational spaces are connected with the underground of social life and art. They can act to negotiate or even challenge the representations of space by the powerful elite (Lefebvre 1991: 11-12, 15, 26-27, 32-34).

Based on this theoretical framework, the creators of urban art images can be regarded as representatives of a representational space, the scene(s) of urban art images. They act in the built urban environment, violating and negotiating the norms set by the spatial practices and representations of the space. However, urban art images today do not necessarily attack the established spatial practices, but they can also be an accepted part of the

8 See, e.g. Lachmann 1988; Ferrel 1996; Macdonald 2001; Rahn 2002.

9 See, e.g. Gottlieb 2008; Waclawek 2011; Bengtsen 2014.

social place or can even be created in co-operation with the owners of the space, youth associations, or with the city authorities.

It is even more interesting to adapt Lefebvre's theoretical framework to the scene of urban art images itself, as 'new social relationships call for a new space, and vice versa' (Lefebvre 1991: 59). In other words, the creators of urban art images need, and have created, a space for themselves in the urban environment. The reclaimed spaces vary greatly from one city to another in terms of location, accessibility, physical structures, historical and monetary values of the buildings. As we know, the subway trains and tunnels became a primary site for graffiti in New York in the 1970s. The graffiti writers transformed the subway cars into a subway graffiti space, producing this specific space through spatial practices. The graffiti writers themselves formulated the representations of the space by showing how *they* conceived this new space of subway graffiti. Not only were they contradicting the authorities' representations of the space, but they were also creating new representations of this new space – both for themselves and gradually also for a larger audience. The space of subway graffiti was directly lived by the writers themselves through their own symbols and associated images, and it was lived by the citizens of New York in their daily lives when they became passive 'users' of the space of subway graffiti. The same process of producing and negotiating the space of urban art images has been going on in Hong Kong since the earliest known examples in the early 1980s, although the characteristics of the scene, including transculturality and transnationality, make it quite different from, for example, of the early stages of subway graffiti in New York.¹⁰

The King: from anticolonial to decolonial

Tsang Tsou-choi (1921-2007), 'the King of Kowloon', is a key figure in the history of urban art images in Hong Kong. For decades, well before the new form of graffiti emerged in the United States (Clarke 2001: 177), Tsang would write with brush and a mixture of black ink and paint on any surface all around Hong Kong. His materials make him a calligrapher rather than a graffiti writer, but as art historian Frank Vigneron elucidates, no definition

10 Valjakka 2015b.

really captures Tsang and his works (Vigneron 2014: 315).¹¹ What he does represent is the indigenous form of writing in public space.

Tsang's texts typically argued that the land which had originally belonged to his family in Kowloon had been taken by the British government wrongly and without compensation. His anticolonial works occasionally included defamation of the Queen, and he would also select surfaces close to government offices (Clarke 2001: 175-181). Occasionally, Tsang also modified the content of the text to echo the physical site and the office next to it.¹² After the Handover in 1997, the ideological context of Tsang and his works shifted remarkably, and small changes emerged also in his oeuvre. He started to target surfaces close to Chinese power symbols, such as the Bank of China (Clarke 2001: 180-181). Gradually, he also introduced new themes of social criticism and ambiguous references to 'the rulers', which could pertain to the Chinese leadership: Deng Xiaoping's name appeared in Tsang's writings at least once.¹³ The more evident change was, however, in the medium and status of the works. In the wake of his deteriorating health and move into elderly care, Tsang would write on paper and objects instead of public surfaces.

Tsang's oeuvre was site-responsive at three levels. First, in a phenomenological sense: occasionally the content and the meaning derived from and resonated with the actual physical location in the public space. Second, the original message was indivisible from the colonial context of Hong Kong: the written text could only have been created in Hong Kong. And third, Tsang also considered the national context after the Handover, which transformed Hong Kong into a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China.¹⁴

The ideological change had a remarkable impact on the status and evaluation of Tsang and his works. The prolonged Handover period between 1984 and 1997 stirred debates also on Hong Kong's cultural identity. Artists affirmed a Hong Kong identity through a variety of linguistic and visual connotations in their art works. Hong Kong art 'often used the strategy of disaffirming notions of Chinese national identity in order to open up an alternative space of Hong Kongness' (Clarke 2000: 91). The distancing itself

11 A growing amount of literature has been published on Tsang. See, e.g., Lau 1997; Chung 2010; Clarke 2001, 175-183; Vigneron 2014; Ho 2014; and Spalding 2014.

12 The relation between the content and the site was made clear to me by creators who have studied Tsang's works.

13 Robin Peckham, founder of Saamlung gallery, interview, 19 June 2012.

14 For a discussion on site-specificity in street art and its dependence on the format of the work and the institutional/ideological site, see Bengtson 2014: 134-135; Bengtson 2013.

from both Chinese and Western art discourses can be seen as a decolonization of arts (Clarke 2001: 8). In relation to this project, Tsang was transformed 'into a signifier of a local' already during the pre-Handover (Clarke 2001: 183). From an old, despised man with a mental health condition, Tsang was elevated to the realms of fashion and 'contemporary art' through repeated exhibitions since 1997, inclusion of his works in the 2003 Venice Biennale, and sales through Sotheby's. Tsang's value as a nostalgic signifier of a Hong Kong identity for middle-aged people and non-locals is also evident in the production of souvenirs by Goods of Desire (G.O.D.) since 1997 and in the interior design of Starbucks in Mong Kok in 2012.¹⁵ According to Oscar Ho, Tsang and his work were betrayed in the end and because the works were detached from the public space, they gradually lost their meaning (Ho 2014).

Besides the artification and productization, appeals are getting louder to regard the few surviving works by Tsang in urban public space as cultural heritage to be protected by the city of Hong Kong.¹⁶ A remaining piece, written on a pair of doors at Silver Theatre in Kwun Tong (see Figure 4.1) was collected by the new museum for visual culture M+ (Chow 2012). Tsang and his works are indeed a telling example of how the understanding of cultural heritage in a postcolonial urban public space (which, as was pointed out by Gregory Bracken in his introduction to this book, has more theoretical implications than the merely 'post-colonial', a term I will be using below) is not necessarily limited to architectural buildings, landmarks, and memorials but extends to other forms of visual culture with a significant legacy. Tsang's case also reminds us to question who has the right to define what constitutes cultural heritage, what values underlie the understanding of heritage, and how it should be further investigated.

Tsang has become an appreciated figure among creators of urban art images in Hong Kong as well. At the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Culture Hall in Taiwan, Hong Kong graffiti writer XEME and graffiti art maker SINIC, originally from mainland China, organized the *Kowloon* exhibition in August 2011 to show their respect for Tsang's work.¹⁷ Tsang's legacy is also kept alive in the urban public space. Shortly after Tsang's death in 2007,

15 David Young, the founder of G.O.D, regards Tsang as a great and much-undervalued calligrapher. At Starbucks' request, David Young, the founder of G.O.D., made a concept proposal for the interior design. Stanley Wong (a.k.a. another mountainman) drew on this proposal to create the texts in a slightly modified version of Tsang's originals. David Young, e-mail correspondence, 18 April 2013; Stanley Wong, interview, 17 April 2013.

16 Ngo and Chow 2012; Wong 2012; Chow 2013a; Chow 2013b.

17 XEME, interview, 31 May 2013.

Figure 4.1 Tsang Tsou-choi (King of Kowloon), untitled (pair of iron gates), ink on iron gates, 200 cm x 270 cm



Figure 4.2 MAIS, ORSEK and JAMS, a spray-painted commemorative piece for Tsang in Fotan, 2007



Copyright by MAIS

European graffiti writers MAIS and ORSEK created a commemorative piece together with the local graffiti writer JAMS close to Fotan MTR station, with two facial portraits of Tsang (see Figure 4.2).¹⁸

One of the most active artists to keep Tsang's memory alive in the urban public space is Joel Chung. In 2010, Chung wrote a Tsang-style text – originally created by Tsang himself – on the windows of the abandoned ATV studio building in Sai Kung, turning it upside down. Chung did this for an exhibition which featured a photograph of the text reflected from water.¹⁹ A more controversial project followed in 2011, when Chung decided to cover Tsang's deteriorating works with white paint. In Kennedy Town, Chung went one step further, using masking tape to create the cityscape and the words 'Art is not everything but we need it' on a wall where Tsang's original work had already been almost completely painted over (Chung 2010:

18 MAIS, e-mail correspondence, 23 August 2013; JAMS, e-mail correspondence, 24 August 24, 2013; ORSEK, e-mail correspondence, 16 September 2013; Sun et al. 2007.

19 Joel Chung, interview, 1 May 2013.

207-241). With this project, Chung sought to make the people realize what the city would look like if all of Tsang's works were painted over. The third project is spray painting stencils of Tsang's portrait twice a year around the city.²⁰ Chung's intentions can, however, be questioned. Painting over some remaining works in public space makes the collectable private works more exclusive and therefore his actions can be regarded to include monetary considerations.²¹

The elevating of Tsang and his oeuvre as fine art and cultural legacy can be seen as a continuum of the cultural decolonization process initiated by the contemporary artists. But as the growing number of both scholarly and popular publications shows, identity formation in post-colonial Hong Kong is a highly complex and debated issue. Ackbar Abbas argues that the unusual history of Hong Kong implies

a more complex kind of colonial space produced by the unclear breaks and unclear connections between imperialism and globalism, which is how colonialism in Hong Kong must now be considered. This in turn has important consequences for the study of Hong Kong culture: culture in Hong Kong cannot just be related to 'colonialism', it must be related to this changed and changing space, this colonial space of disappearance, which in many respects does not resemble the old colonialisms at all. (Abbas 1997: 3)

For Abbas, disappearance is 'more of a question of misrecognition' rather than non-appearance. It problematizes both representation and self-representation and is visible through a host of techniques used in cultural works.²² This new subjectivity 'is coaxed into being by the disappearance of old cultural bearings and orientations,... it is a subjectivity that develops precisely out of a space of disappearance' (Abbas 1997: 11). Almost two decades have passed since Abbas's perceptions, and although the circumstances in Hong Kong are changed to some extent, his observations lay the basis of exploring cultural discourses in particular.²³

20 Ibid.

21 Ho, e-mail correspondence, 19 and 22 July 2014.

22 This is only a short summary of the main points. For a detailed explanation of disappearance, see Abbas 1997: 7-11. To emphasize the peculiarities of Hong Kong cultural development after Handover, Abbas further suggests the concept of postculture instead, e.g. post-colonial (Abbas 1997: 145-146).

23 Carolyn Cartier (2012) has recently criticized interpretations of Hong Kong culture based on Abbas' notion of disappearance as untenable. She has instead advocated the idea of precariousness as a cultural strategy, and inspired by Rancière's (2009) often cited insights, maintains that

The management and creation of the urban public space through legislation, architecture, and official public art contributes to the complex discourse of 'Hongkongness'.²⁴ What Tsang did was to negotiate this official rhetoric. He was active mainly during the colonial period, but also came to play a role in the decolonization processes – especially because he was part of the disappearing cultural bearings. In terms of urban art images today, Tsang provides a crucial historical basis on which creators of urban art images can mirror themselves. His oeuvre already shows how important it is to take into account the ethnicity/nationality of the creator as well as the language, content, format, and site-responsiveness of the works in order to fully comprehend how they reclaim the usage of urban public space and participate in the current discourses.

Emerging urban art images and the question of the local

Because urban art images are essentially ephemeral, it is impossible to reconstruct any comprehensive description of the development of the scene, and especially of its initial stages. But one of the keys to the Hong Kong scene is the transnationality and transculturality which occasionally hinders clear definitions of the 'local': crews have members from different nationalities and across borders, people have ethnically mixed backgrounds, and/or they were born elsewhere but have lived most of their lives in Hong Kong.²⁵

The first known examples of contemporary graffiti, inspired by the new, international graffiti which started to develop in the United States in 1960s, appeared in Hong Kong during the 1980s. In 1982, ZEPHYR, Dondi, and Futura from The Death Squad (TDS), a crew from New York, were commissioned to paint in the I Club (Witten and White, 2001: 160–161). In 1983, THREE, a British citizen living in Hong Kong, started to write his SØS tag. In the following

the problem of Hong Kong identity is interrelated with the politics of aesthetics, that which can be said or made visible. As 'two simultaneous but unconnected events' (Cartier 2012: 6), Cartier has analysed the exhibition on Tsang Tsou-choi and street art by Chin Tangerine. Unfortunately, Cartier fails to provide any information of the most important and interrelated context, the scene of urban art images, which these examples are part of, although she emphasizes the importance of understanding integrated relationships that exist between art and daily life in an urban sphere.

²⁴ For a discussion on how the local government's cultural strategy that has aimed to absorb the colonial into the local and then extend it into the global, thus reflecting and contributing to a lack of critical colonial consciousness, see Ku 2002.

²⁵ For more on historical developments see Valjakka 2015b.

years, a few other foreign youngsters made some tags too, but they remained scarce.²⁶ Some local contemporary graffiti apparently emerged in the late 1980s,²⁷ but no visual evidence nor detailed information has so far surfaced.

The contemporary graffiti scene gradually started to arise in the mid-1990s. International creators kept passing through or were invited to specific events by shops targeting younger customers. Local creators and crews known today also appeared. The first known piece by a local graffiti writer in Hong Kong, SYAN... (who prefers his tag name to be written to include the ellipsis at the end, and is known as MC Yan or MC 彡 as a musician), dates from 1994. With 3DOM, REALM, and SPOON, SYAN... established the Chinese Evolution Aerosol (CEA) crew in 1997. They remained active all around the city for a few years. SYAN... still makes the occasional work both legally and illegally.²⁸

Apparently, the only active known crew during the Handover in 1997 was CEA. They admit tagging, bombing, and creating commissioned paintings but their actions were not related to contemporary political events.²⁹ By the turn of the century, other creators and crews had emerged. For instance, in 1998, a skateboarding team of several members started to bomb under the name of freeS. In 1999, three members from this team, KDG, GRIV, and GHOST 2 (KOSTWO) formed a crew, Fuck Da Cops (FDC) and were active around the city.³⁰

Although evidence remains scarce, it is not unthinkable that actions against the official symbols of the People's Republic of China power were made during or after the Handover. One of the examples that caught media attention is the tagging of the flagpole next to *Forever Flowering Bauhinia*³¹ in 2000 but the person responsible was never caught.³² In order to interpret the level of this action in terms of political subversiveness, we would need to

26 THREE, street artist, interview, 3 June 2012.

27 Friendly, one of the three founding members of *Invasian Magazine*, interview, 21 May 2012. Since August 2011, Friendly has been in sole charge of *Invasian*, which focuses on Asian graffiti and urban culture.

28 Syan..., interview, 13 March 2013.

29 SPOON, e-mail correspondence, 18 August 2013.

30 KDG, graffiti writer, interview, 25 March 2013.

31 Bauhinia is the symbol of Hong Kong. The golden statue was a gift from the Central Government to celebrate the handover of Hong Kong.

32 Mentioned in Clarke 2001: 175. Eleven local newspapers reported the event and two returned to it in 2001. Three newspapers claimed the action was politically motivated, while four denied it. The content was described as being English words or signatures and numbers written in black marker pens. One tag apparently contained swear words. See, for example, Apple Daily 2000: A04; Ming Pao Daily News 2000: A05. Thanks to for Ma Iris Choi Tung Chan for media survey and translations of Cantonese.

know the exact content of the tag and the ethnicity/nationality of the person who wrote it. Targeting this central political site is, indeed, subversive action in itself, but marking one's initials or tag is not as politically pronounced as a text with an anti-PRC message. Also, whether the tag was made by, for instance, by a British or Hongkongese person could slightly alter the tone of the subversiveness. The mere site is not enough for an accurate interpretation of this action although it is a necessary starting point.

The ethnicity/nationality of the creator is relevant also in questions of redefining and reconstructing the local identity, even if it is continuously complicated by features of transculturality and transnationality. While local creators have been known to use visual and linguistic connotations in urban art images to convey a Hong Kong identity, this is not usually a major aim of their work. Because urban art images are self-expressions reflecting the thoughts, everyday lives, experiences, feelings, and styles of the creators, it is only natural that the created images echo the cultural and socio-political context they are part of. It is also important to bear in mind that developing a personal, unique style is an essential aim to urban art creators around the globe and in Hong Kong alike.

Expressing a local identity and/or developing a local style in urban art images is not related to the decolonization process in the same way as it has been in other forms of visual arts. This is mainly because the urban art scene in Hong Kong only started to take off around the mid-1990s, and the first known tags and works were unrelated to the political events. The scene also developed earlier in Hong Kong than in mainland China, so there was no similar need to distance the Hong Kong conventions from those in mainland China. But a need emerged locally to define what kind of urban art images and norms were – and are – acceptable. In keeping with the Euro-American traditions of the 'old-school graffiti', the illegal bombing and tagging by putting up one's name (in alphabets) has remained the most appreciated format among some of the creators, while others have aimed to develop new methods, such as including the use of Cantonese in their works or even as their tag names. Also, a growing number of creators are more inspired by the Euro-American street art trends, exploring a variety of formats from wheat-pasting to three-dimensional sculptures and urban knitting.

Mainlandization and urban art images

Fears of the growing impact of the People's Republic of China on Hong Kong are commonly expressed and can be regarded as a reflection of the

ever-changing culture of disappearance and of the problems of representation and self-representation articulated by Ackbar Abbas. Anxieties of recolonization and mainlandization are voiced by scholars, media, and citizens alike with varying denotations and usually without much specific differentiation.³³ Sonny Lo, a researcher of Hong Kong politics, has suggested that 'recolonization' is understood as policies either by the local government of Hong Kong or the Central Government in Beijing aimed at strengthening the 'mainlandization' of Hong Kong SAR (Lo 2007: 179 (footnote)). Mainlandization entails growing political dependence on or similarity to Beijing, economic and legal reliance, and socially more patriotic notions towards the People's Republic of China (Lo 2008: 42-43; Lo 2007: 179 (footnote)).

Recolonization and mainlandization are now commonly understood in broader terms. Recolonization is used to denote the transfer of colonial power from the British to the Chinese (Carroll 2007: 215; Law 2009: 175), while mainlandization usually implies the strengthening impact of the PRC on any social and cultural sphere. It can result in self-censorship or in the weakening of Hong Kong's uniqueness (Lo 2008: 42-44). Research on the impact of mainland China on Hong Kong cinema, for example, discusses mainlandization as 'the tailoring of cultural content to what SARFT [the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television] perceives as acceptable or not in mainland China' (Szeto and Chen 2012: 120).

The understanding of mainlandization as a process of tailoring the cultural content by Hong Kong creators to be *accepted* by any supervising office in mainland China does not apply to urban art images. Neither are there any notions of adjusting the content or style to please mainland Chinese peers or apprehensions of the growing impact of mainland Chinese creators on Hong Kong. Collaboration and visits across the border are common among both the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese creators, and some crews have active members in both. Competition and criticism on developing new styles and creating the best pieces is part of the phenomenon – especially among graffiti writers and artists – but, at least so far, they have *not* been influenced by anxieties of mainlandization.

Mainlandization appears to employ other forms and methods when it comes to urban art images. The effectiveness of these images has also caught the attention of Hong Kong's city authorities. An illuminating example of an official commission was the results of the Handover graffiti competition organized by the Wan Chai District Youth Programme Committee

33 For media usage of the concepts see, for example, Chugani 2012; Lai 2013; and Staff Reporters 2013.

(WCDYPC) of Wan Chai District Office in 2012. 'The Competition aimed at commemorating the 15th Anniversary of the Establishment of Hong Kong SAR and providing a platform for youngsters of the district to showcase their creativity and design talent.' The representatives of the office claim that the project was positively received by the local people.³⁴ The project had a mixed public reception, and critical comments were published in the media, because the homeless who used to live in the subway were asked to leave and make room for the painting of the panels.³⁵ Also creators of urban art images have expressed criticism about the content and quality. Although commissioned works with deliberate commercial or official messages are not unknown in Hong Kong, the 'glorification' of the reunion was regarded as an unacceptable crossover. The event itself was nevertheless an indisputable example of the growing mainlandization of the urban public space in conveying the policies of the PRC to the citizens of Hong Kong and to the youth in particular.

This is all more evident if we consider how the construction of the urban public space through official public art, buildings, and monuments clearly reflects the ideological change in the governance of Hong Kong. Both during and after the Handover period, official public art and architecture celebrated the reunion and strengthened the Chinese national sentiments.³⁶ As Jacob Dreyer claims, '[i]n contemporary China, the most forceful language that the government can speak is the language of controlling the urban space itself' (Dreyer 2012: 50). The premeditated control of visibility in the urban public space can therefore be regarded as an indicator of the level of cultural mainlandization of Hong Kong by the PRC's policies. Official and commissioned works have their place, but what else is allowed to appear in urban art images – and what is *not* – is important to follow.

As the case of Tsang illustrates, expressing subversiveness through urban art images is not unknown in Hong Kong.³⁷ Indeed, political expressions in urban art images in Hong Kong are usually far more tolerated than in mainland China. Roughly speaking, there is apolitical contemporary graffiti but not much street art in mainland China, because posters and

34 Wan Chai District Office, e-mail correspondence, 8, 11, and 18 March 2013.

35 Lam 2013.

36 For an insightful discussion of public art and architecture in Hong Kong, see Clarke 2001: 100–150. See also Oscar Ho's recent observations on the quality of official public art (Ho 2013).

37 Globally, political expressions are quite common although clearly not the majority of urban art images. For an illustrative study of how both the state and the collectives have effectively employed a variety of street art forms in the Hispanic world for political communication, see Caffee 1993.

wheat-pastes get cleaned up quickly. For instance, when Hong Kong street artist Dom, the founder of Start From Zero (SFZ), visited Shanghai, he posted some of his apolitical works with a local friend. They were soon stopped by the civilian police, who took them to the police station for questioning. The main concern was whether there was any political message hidden in the works. When the police were convinced there was not, Dom and his friend were allowed to leave. However, all the works were cleaned away during that night.³⁸ If a similar attitude towards urban art images spreads to Hong Kong, mainland Chinese policies will clearly have had their day. Changes in the level of tolerance towards the contents of the urban art images can reveal intriguing details of the mainlandization of the urban public space in future.

Visualizing concerns: resisting mainlandization

While political themes currently represent a clear minority in both commissioned and unauthorized urban art images in Hong Kong, some of the works qualify as markers of resisting mainlandization. This notion was already implied by Tsang's later works close to mainland Chinese premises and by the unknown person tagging of the flagpole in the vicinity of *Forever Flowering Bauhinia*. To emphasize how the actual interpretation is dependent not only on political content, the following discussion also includes one example where the primary intention is not related to mainlandization issues. The rest reflect *varying levels* of concern of and/or opposition to mainlandization. The main trend is to target: 1) the leaders and policies of the People's Republic of China in the mainland or in Hong Kong SAR 2) the policies and leaders of the Hong Kong SAR sympathetic to the People's Republic of China. Occasionally, these two targets can be combined.

In the context of the 1 July protest, organized since 1997 on the Hong Kong SAR establishment day, the concerns about the strengthening impact of the PRC are often expressed visually, too. Most recently, in 2014, two locals who prefer to be unnamed, created seven to eight designs to express their anxieties. The images were printed out as stickers, and more than a hundred were put up during the day at several MTR stations and on some trains. Most of the images implied forbidden signs, carrying a red circle with a diagonal line. The one exception was a sign exhorting people to keep Hong Kong tidy: it told them to bin the 'white paper' (白皮書) (see Figure 4.3). This refers

38 Dom, interview, 2 June 2013.

Figure 4.3 Anonymous local artists, a sticker in MTR station, 2014

Copyright by anonymous artist

to the white paper issued by the Information Office of the State Council on 10 June 2014 concerning the 'One Country, Two Systems' policy in Hong Kong SAR.³⁹ The paper caused anger in Hong Kong and caught global media attention by re-affirming the total control of the PRC.⁴⁰

The rest of the designs bear different, multilevelled meanings based on the interaction of the picture and Cantonese language but they all shared anxiety of Hong Kong's future in the face of increasing PRC impact. For instance, one design decried the five stars used in the national flag and emblem of the PRC (see Figure 4.4).⁴¹ In English the text claimed not to need the Communist Party but in Cantonese the message created a double meaning. The message (嚴禁亮星) literally translates to 'strictly prohibit bright star', referring to the Communist Party, but the last two characters refer also to Ng Leung-sing (吳亮星, b. 1949), Chairman of the Legislative

39 Anonymous graffiti artist, e-mail correspondence, 22 July 2014. The full paper is published in English on the website of the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. Available: <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zxbd/wz/Document/1372867/1372867.htm>. Last accessed: 20 July 2014.

40 BBC 2014.

41 The largest star represents the Communist Party of China, while the smaller four stars refer to the four social classes living in harmony under guidance from the Party.

Figure 4.4 Anonymous local artists, a sticker in MTR train, 2014



Copyright by anonymous artist

Council's Finance Committee, who has been criticized for incompetence.⁴² On the one hand, changing the colour of the stars from yellow to black is a powerful statement in the Chinese reading, where black is the worst colour, symbolizing the bad and the vicious. On the other hand, the design's black and red imitates the existing warning notices and integrates more easily into its surroundings. It is a safer choice for the creators putting them up.

Even more straightforward resentment of the PRC leadership emerged in April 2013, when a local man in his forties aimed at the current leader of the People's Republic with words 'Xi Jinping, go to hell' and got arrested. He was later released on bail⁴³ but netizens expressed concerns about the harshening policies of limiting the freedom of speech in Hong Kong and compared the case with Tsang Tsou-choi's anti-governmental writings.⁴⁴ Another example relating to the leaders of the PRC, but expressed in a very different way, is a wish by local graffiti writer SYAN...: for him contemporary graffiti is, like music, a form of freedom of expression which people can and

⁴² Anonymous graffiti artist, e-mail correspondence, 22 July 2014.

⁴³ Apple Daily 2013.

⁴⁴ Lam 2013.

Figure 4.5 Street artist Death, *Mao with a Yellow Bowtie*, stencil, 2012



Copyright by Minna Valjakka

should employ. The site he would prefer to write on is the physical face of the living Chairman of the People's Republic of China today.⁴⁵

While such examples indicate notions of the locals' resisting mainlandization, not all the urban art images targeting the PRC leaders have the same intentions. Stencils of Mao with a yellow bowtie, created by street artist Death from New York, stayed uncovered at least for a year (see Figure 4.5).⁴⁶ As such, they indicate the level of tolerance compared to Taiwan, where a similar portrait of Mao in the vicinity of the Chiang Kai-shek memorial hall got cleaned up the very next day.⁴⁷ It is not likely that a sarcastic image of the previous, or current, leader would remain uncovered in mainland China, either. Although a satiric portrait of Mao could hastily be interpreted as an anti-PRC image in Hong Kong, the intentions deriving partially from the nationality of the creator prove different: as an American tourist, Death's primary motivations did not pertain to the relationship between Hong Kong and the PRC. Instead, Death used Mao's portrait because of Mao's history, the relation with the United States, and because Mao's portrait had also been used by Andy Warhol.⁴⁸

Apart from the PRC leaders, the policies of PRC in Hong Kong have been targeted, too. The Anti-High Speed Rail Movement demonstrations were supported by local creators through various means, such as Start From Zero, put up posters on the streets.⁴⁹ Even a more ephemeral medium,

45 Syan..., interview, 31 March 2013.

46 Personally documented in June 2012 and June 2013.

47 Death, e-mail correspondence, 12 February 2013.

48 Ibid.

49 Dom, interview, 2 June 2013.

Figure 4.6 Street photographer Cpak Ming, '*Modern VIIV spirit*', photograph, 2011



Copyright by Cpak Ming

a photograph, was chosen by street photographer Cpak Ming to express same the apprehensions (see Figure 4.6). On 2 June 2011, Cpak reflected the world-famous photograph, the man trying to stop the tanks approaching Tian'anmen Square in 1989, on a stone wall in central Hong Kong. In the background glimmers the Elements shopping mall, which will be the terminal station of the high-speed railway in Hong Kong. Cpak titled his work as *Modern VIIV Spirit* because he wanted 'to use the tank man's spirit to face the problems of Hong Kong'.⁵⁰ In Cpak's work, only the man is visible, standing determined, legs apart, and facing the Kowloon side – behind which lie the New Territories and the border to mainland China. The structure of the cross and the flat rocks add a grim notion to the image.

Cpak's work is also related to another case that keeps inspiring creators of urban art images. The memory of the Tian'anmen Incident has been kept alive in Hong Kong especially by the annual commemoration of the Victoria Park candle vigil on 4 June. Images on the Incident and a replica (or two) of the Goddess of Democracy are displayed both at and outside the vigil. Urban art images use pictorial connotations and linguistic references

50 Cpak Ming, e-mail correspondence, 3 September 2013.

alike to remind people of the Tian'anmen Incident, such as the demand not to forget the 4th of June.

Commemorations of the Tian'anmen Incident relate to the need to defend freedom of speech and expression in Hong Kong. Concerns of the possible limitations and growing censorship in mainland China gained more strength in the aftermath of the detention in April 2011 of Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), contemporary Chinese artist and social activist. Many artists, political activists, and average citizens of Hong Kong joined forces in producing urban art images to express their anxiety about Ai Weiwei's well-being. The first one to win media attention was Chin Tangerine, who spray-painted stencils asking 'Who's Afraid of Ai Weiwei?' and including a facial portrait of Ai (see Figure 4.7). The image and the reporting went viral, which probably also invoked police attention to investigate criminal damage charges. Although harsh punishment of a maximum of ten years in prison was plugged in media (Cartier 2012: 14-16; Lim 2011), Chin Tangerine was not caught. She also suspects that even if she would have been, the punishment might have been limited to fines. For Chin Tangerine, the event was a turning point in her personal life because she got to know people working in local social movements and learnt, for instance, not to place hope in mainstream media. She also had a chance to rethink 'what constitutes an action, how all kinds of "awareness" raised can be seamlessly absorbed in the status quo as a cute tailor-made anecdote' and how easily people place hope anywhere else but in themselves, which 'helps us to delay working on ourselves and the neighbourhood we live in, which is the only place genuine changes can be brought about'.⁵¹

The stencil inspired other people to follow suit. For instance, two members of Hong Kong's pro-democracy party, the League of Social Democrats (LSD) were detained for spraying pro-Ai Weiwei slogans. The party Vice-President Avery Ng denounced the arrests, claiming that '[t]he graffiti are a form of freedom of expression'.⁵² Cpak Ming also experimented with flashing the image on different buildings and premises, but apparently he did not know the image was Chin Tangerine's stencil when he first used it. For Cpak, the main purpose was not the projection but shooting a photograph of a giant image on the wall in public space. In addition, he did not consider his works 'street art' until the media started to report them as such.⁵³ Although a projection of an image does not damage the building and therefore cannot be regarded as vandalism – at least in the traditional sense of physical

51 Chin Tangerine, e-mail correspondence, 29 July 2014.

52 BBC 2011.

53 Cpak Ming, e-mail correspondence, 30 August 2013.

Figure 4.7 Chin Tangerine, *Who's Afraid of Ai Weiwei?*, stencil, 2011



Copyright by Chin Tangerine

damage – flashing Ai Weiwei's huge portrait on the Chinese People's Liberation Army barracks caused the Army to view the act as 'a breach of law'.⁵⁴

The Ai Weiwei incident exemplifies how Hongkongese who are not actively involved in creating images in the urban public space, can still be inspired to do so when an event makes them feel the need to participate in a debate and other means are not powerful enough. Such creators who act on the spur of the moment are not necessarily familiar with the norms of the scene of urban art images. This can cause criticism from the active creators, as happened with Tangerine, too. Allegedly, she broke the norms of the urban art scene by targeting established buildings and sites which were usually left untouched by the creators so that they would not raise a public outcry.⁵⁵ In informal discussions, some creators have also criticized her for wanting to be famous in a quick and easy way.

⁵⁴ Lim 2011.

⁵⁵ The physical site of the creation has a great impact on the understanding of the levels of il/legality of the work. See Valjakka 2014.

Figure 4.8 Artist Kacey Wong, 'Attack of the Red Giant', 2014



Copyright by Kacey Wong

Occupying the streets through arts is also occasionally done by contemporary and visual artists, such as Kacey Wong (b. 1970), who has actively used art as a means of participating in the protests. For the protest on 1 July 2013, Wong created a large red robot from cardboard boxes, joining the protest with his creation and a push cart. Decorated with symbols referring to the PRC and holding two small dolls in his hand, he made the meaning of the art action entitled 'Attack of the Red Giant' (進擊的共人) amply clear (see Figure 4.8).

Targeting local leaders and policies

The other major trend in political urban art images relates to local politicians and their pro-PRC mentalities. Both the former Chief Executive Henry Tang and the current one, Leung Chun-ying, have been targeted several times. For his part, Leung Chun-ying has often been labelled as a wolf. This connotation was made visible both in stencils and in graffiti pieces. One better-known example is a poster on Henry Tang created by Start From Zero around 2010. A visual pun refers to Shepard Fairey's famous poster *Hope*, which supported Barack Obama's presidency campaign in 2008. Opposing the

original message, SFZ's poster depicts Henry Tang as a devil with a character signifying 'to kill / a killer' printed on his forehead. A four-character slogan of 'killer of political reform' is written on the right-hand corner (see Figure 4.9). Although visually targeting the local leader, the poster was originally made to support the resistance of the high speed train.⁵⁶ The poster was further printed on T-shirts, which found favour among the younger generation.

Instead of creating new visual images to criticize politics or politicians, local graffiti artist, RST2 has decided to borrow the banners advertising the party representatives, paint them over and put them up on the streets as remodified versions. In this specific set of three, created in March 2013, the graffiti artist used banners of the Democratic Party (not pro-China) and the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (pro-China) (see Figure 4.10). Although the Democratic Party is not seen as a pro-China party, RST2 has been displeased with their activities. He clearly finds them turning towards mainland China. Because the graffiti artist wanted to emphasize his dissatisfaction and anger with the current politics in Hong Kong, he decided to use the Angry Bird theme to give his visual message more emphasis.⁵⁷ What is surprising in this creation process employing political banners is that his actions caught very little attention from passers-by. Obviously, few people seem to be really looking at political banners anymore.

Urban art images can also be used to convey support for local policy makers. In June 2014, political activist and member of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong Leung Kwok-hung (梁國雄, b. 1956), also known as 'Long Hair' (長毛), was convicted because of his actions in a public forum in 2011 and his hair was cut.⁵⁸ To voice his concern about the fate of Leung, RST2 took the liberty of creating posters of Leung in the style of Che Guevara's (1928-1967) famous image (see Figure 4.11). The text below the facial portrait proclaimed that 'Long Hair is not completely cut, righteousness will grow again' (長毛剪不盡, 公義吹又生). In the middle of the text, a single character standing for 'boisterous' (鬨) appeared in larger size. Of the 500 printed posters, about half were put up and intriguingly, many of them appeared inside official announcement boards.⁵⁹

56 Katol, e-mail correspondence, 7 August, 2014.

57 RST2, interview, 10 March 2013.

58 Chu 2014.

59 RST2, e-mail correspondence, 24 July 2014; see also On.cc 2014.

Figure 4.9 Street artists Start From Zero (SFZ), poster of Henry Tang, 2013



Figure 4.10 Graffiti artist RST2, spray-painted banners of local parties, 2013



Copyright by Minna Valjakka

Conclusions

The examples discussed in this chapter have been chosen to indicate the variety of urban art images related to issues of mainlandization in terms of content, format, and the intentions and self-identities of the creators. While the urban art images created to support the Handover were institutionally initiated, others were non-institutional and many even anti-institutional: not only were they unauthorized, but they also targeted the policies and premises representing the establishments of both the People's Republic of China and Hong Kong SAR.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to include all relevant cases in a detailed discussion, but what these images already show is that the urban public space in Hong Kong is not controlled as strictly as in mainland China. Instead, a continuous negotiating process between officials, political parties, companies, institutions, media, advertising, citizens, political activists, and the creators of urban art images – including active, long-term creators as well as one-time participants working independently or on commissions – constantly shapes the norms of how urban public space is being used and how it is employed for visual self-expression. As was elucidated by Tsang and his works, despised visual pollution can even be transformed into cultural heritage.

Despite internal disagreements, the scene of urban art images usually has standards deviating somewhat from the common social rules. For instance, gaining fame quickly with media help and not through long-term

Figure 4.11 Graffiti artist RST2, poster of Leung Kwok-hung, 2014

Copyright by RST2

engagement on the streets may be disapproved. Also, graffiti writers in particular promote an appreciation of illegal action and unimportance of any message. While graffiti artists, street artists, and other creators of urban art images usually share their admiration for unauthorized creation, they occasionally aim to express their notions through more socio-politically related contents. Although the motivations for creating urban art images are often a complex combination of personal life experiences and feelings as well as a coming together of current issues and trends in a given socio-political and cultural context, the examined cases reveal that a part of the urban art images articulate concerns and anxieties of Hong Kong's mainlandization.

The subject matter and the imagery employed are often related to the People's Republic of China itself. Local topics and leaders have been examined less. As Professor Chin Wan-kan pointed out, local creators often rely on existing imagery and even on resistance movements which derive from the mainland itself, as is the case in support for Ai Weiwei and in remembering the Tian'anmen Incident. The local creators could and should search for more local themes and visuality to truly develop a meaningful discussion.⁶⁰

60 Chin Wan-kan, e-mail correspondence, 14 July 2014.

Figure 4.12 Graffiti artist Pibg Gantz, a spray-painted piece, Macau, 2012



Copyright by Pibg Gantz

Are these examples enough to show that the phenomenon has a relevance to the scene of urban art images or to the development of civic society in Hong Kong? The numbers may be limited, but we also have to bear in mind the ephemerality and disparagement of urban art images, which makes it impossible to provide a full account from the past decades. But even one short-lived example can reveal that there is, at the very least, an urge to employ urban art images to participate in discussions of mainlandization. This urge must be acknowledged and followed, as is shown by this last example from Macau. The image is the first political one by a local graffiti crew, Gantz 5 (see Figure 4.12). They did it on a temporary wall, choosing the red colour and the chicken to represent mainland China. The next day the city officials called one of the crew members, Pibg, to ask him to cover up the sentence 'Don't wash our B'. When Pibg refused, the image was removed from the urban public space by the authorities.⁶¹ The mere existence of this example shows that the notion of mainlandization is also felt in Macau. Even more importantly, the reaction from the city authorities proves that the concern is relevant.

61 Pibg, graffiti artist, interview, 22 March 2013.