

Graffiti in Shanghai and Chengdu

Looking for Chinese writing, symbols and calligraphy along the streets

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After a brief introduction to the origins and development of graffiti in China, this paper first examines the graffiti scene in Shanghai through two prominent figures. On one hand, the analysis focuses on 1. the OOPS crew—Shanghai’s most renowned and influential graffiti crew, composed of both Chinese and Western members. The crew merges the Western graffiti art movement with Chinese artistic and cultural traditions, incorporating Chinese characters, calligraphy, and ancient symbols into their work. On the other hand, within this same international context, the paper considers; 2. Dezio, a French graffiti writer highly regarded in Shanghai, who integrates Chinese characters and employs a Chinese tag in his creations. These two actors exemplify the cultural cosmopolitanism and intercultural dynamics that make Shanghai fertile ground for creative expressions born from cross-cultural ‘contamination.’ To further explore the diffusion of graffiti art in China, this paper also investigates the graffiti scene in Chengdu. The analysis focuses on two case studies: 1. GAS, one of Chengdu’s most prominent graffiti writers, who expresses his identity and artistic intent through his Chinese tag (*qi* 氣). His works are centered on Chinese script, frequently utilizing traditional characters and drawing inspiration from Chinese calligraphy to create a distinctive, locally oriented graffiti style; 2. Fan Sack, who began his career as a graffiti writer in Chengdu and now resides and works in Paris. Transitioning from graffiti writing to figurative paintings inspired by Buddhist themes, Fan Sack has developed a more representational artistic language, spreading his work throughout Europe.

Keywords: Chinese graffiti, Shanghai graffiti, Chengdu graffiti, Chinese contemporary art.

1. Introduction

Graffiti writing is a social, cultural and artistic movement spread across the globe. Starting in the US in the 1970s, this phenomenon is a spontaneous expression of a heterogeneous group of people belonging to the hip-hop¹ culture. As a complex and structured form of visual expression in constant evolution,

¹ Hip-hop (*xīhā* 嘻哈) is a cultural movement that emerged during the late 1970s in the Afro-American and Latino communities of the NYC Bronx ghettos. The four main elements of the hip-hop culture are ‘speech,’ ‘music,’ ‘sign’ and ‘movement.’ the

graffiti writing represents an act of interpreting and evolving letters—giving birth to a proper tag, or signature²—using spray paint or markers in public spaces (Fig. 1).³

After an initial phase in which the dominant element was represented by letters, contemporary graffiti culture has moved towards wider horizons: the post-graffiti movement. Post-graffiti is based on stylistic trends that have their roots in the culture of graffiti writing and street art, flourishing in multiple disciplines such as painting, sculpture, graphics, design, illustration, fashion, photography, architecture, video art and calligraphy. While graffiti writing was born and developed in the US to impose its model on a planetary scale, the post-graffiti movement has risen and spread in a global world, insofar as it lives through the Internet (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 20).



Figure 1. Graffiti (throw-up, bubble style, puppet, tag), September 2014, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. © Marta R. Bisceglia

In China, ‘graffiti art’ (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术) appeared in the 1990s, but it was only in the early 21st century that it became a noticeable artistic phenomenon visible in the main Chinese cities (Valjakka 2011: 73). The late advent of the graffiti movement in China—already contaminated by new experiments related to post-graffiti—led to the blossoming of a hybrid form of graffiti art. This kind of

MCing (*shuochang* 说唱), also known as rap music, introduced by Afro-Americans (MC stands for Master of Ceremony); Djing (*dadie* 打碟), introduced by Jamaicans; graffiti writing (*tuya shuxie* 涂鸦书写); and breakdancing (*diban wu* 地板舞 o *pili wu* 霹雳舞), introduced by Puerto Ricans (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022 211).

² A tag (*qianming tuya* 签名涂鸦) is the pseudonym of the writer, a stylized signature of the ‘nickname’ of the graffiti artist (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 214).

³ For more information about the birth and development of the phenomenon of graffiti writing see Mininno (2021).

art not only echoes the fundamentals of American graffiti, but also blends with street art in a broader sense (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 20). According to Adriana Iezzi:

Graffiti art was introduced in China by contemporary artist Zhang Dali in 1995 and by some other writers living and working in Hong Kong in the early and mid-1990s. Starting in Hong Kong, and then in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, graffiti began to spread all over China, especially in minor cities, such as Wuhan, Shenzhen and Chengdu. Then, in the mid-2000s, also thanks to the wide spread of the underground culture, it extended its field of action to all major Chinese cities and became popular especially in Beijing and Shanghai (Iezzi 2019, 396-397).

In mainland China, “contemporary graffiti has its own characteristics” (Valjakka 2015: 263), which differ from the rest of the world:

1. Control and censorship: graffiti are not considered a form of vandalism, a criminal act or a manifestation of class struggle, as they are in Euro-American cities. Chinese graffiti are usually defined as ‘half legal, half illegal’ (Bidisha 2014), and there are certain areas called ‘semi-legal walls’ where it is possible to do graffiti.
2. Commercial purposes: in China, it is very common for writers to collaborate with local or foreign commercial brands so as to promote their advertising campaigns, or to paint for the opening of stores, tattoo and graphic design studios, etc. “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” (Valjakka 2011: 82).
3. Importance of web and social media: Chinese writers use web and social media to discover new graffiti models and to publish their works.
4. Writers’ artistic background: most Chinese writers have an artistic background (Valjakka 2011: 80) linked to the traditions of their family or academic studies, which they experiment with and develop on the streets to open up job opportunities.
5. Chinese graffiti style: although, since the start, “Chinese graffiti has been based on Euro-American graffiti,” a search for ‘Chineseness’ and an attempt to develop a specific ‘Chinese style’ is evident in many local creators (Valjakka 2011: 84). Many crews use and redraft Chinese characters and traditional cultural elements (i.e., calligraphy, painting motifs, Buddhist figures, Taoist principles, etc., Fig. 2) in their graffiti, in order to create a ‘Chinese graffiti style’ (*Zhongguo tese de tuyu yishu* 中国特色的涂鸦艺术) (Iezzi 2019: 398).



Figure 2. EricTin (Kwanyin Clan), Shengong yijiang 神工意匠 (Ars divina), June 2010, spray paint on wall, Peking. Courtesy of the artist.

After examining the birth, the development and the peculiar characteristics of the Chinese graffiti art movement, this paper will focus on four representative artists belonging to different contexts and nationalities, coming out in Shanghai and Chengdu. Through the analysis of some selected artwork, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate the Chinese writing, symbols and calligraphy appearing on the streets of Shanghai and Chengdu, providing an overview of the graffiti scene in contemporary China.

2. The Shanghai graffiti scene

Shanghai is the most populous urban area in China and the most populous city proper in the entire world. Considered the economic capital of the country, Shanghai is a city of contradictions, where East and West, past and future coexist harmoniously. The cosmopolitan nature of Shanghai began to take shape in the mid-19th century, with treaties that granted foreigners the possibility of settling and operating in China. The Chinese and Western culture began to merge inextricably, forming a unique *mélange* that still persists. The eclecticism of Shanghai's urban landscape is also reflected in the mixture of tradition and modernity, as well as in the extravagant stylistic fusion between West and East (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 125-127).⁴

Like the city itself, Shanghai's graffiti are also eclectic, cosmopolitan and intercultural in nature. According to Minna Valjakka:

While urban art images came to Shanghai only around 2005-2007 – later than they did to Beijing – the Shanghai scene has been more international since the very beginning. The oldest of the known Shanghai crews is the Paint Every Night (PEN) crew, founded in 2005 by SAIL and Mr. Lan, both

⁴ For more information, see also Greenspan (2014).

from Changsha, Hunan province. SAIL and Mr. Lan still occasionally put up their works, which represent their own unique styles, on the streets of Shanghai (Valjakka 2016: 363).

The most important place for graffiti in Shanghai was on the Moganshan Road (*Moganshan lu* 莫干山路, Fig. 3), not far from the M50 art district, along the Suzhou creek, between the Putuo and Jingan districts. The history of this wall—the city’s most colorful and incredible *hall of fame*⁵—spans from 2006 (the year of the birth of graffiti in Shanghai) to 2018 (the year of its removal) and is fundamental in order to understand the history of graffiti in Shanghai. According to Kenrick Davis:

The area proved to be the perfect location for graffiti: a post-industrial dead zone on the border of three separate districts – Zhabei, Jing’an and Putuo – that was rarely frequented by police. Even better, one side of the street was lined by a huge, bare concrete wall, built to fence off some wasteland awaiting development (Davis 2019).

In its heyday, the wall on the Moganshan Road attracted tourists and international artists, and some major brands, like JD.com, Nike, and even the video game League of Legends (Davis 2019), filmed photo shoots or music videos here. The Moganshan Road allowed locals to be exposed to the art of graffiti and it was a safe haven for novice graffiti writers. On this wall it was possible to admire works by resident artists (Chinese and foreigners, i.e., the OOPS crew) as well as visiting foreign artists (i.e., Dezio). The presence of so many foreign artists in the Shanghai graffiti scene reflects its intercultural and transnational nature: foreign writers make use of Chinese elements and Chinese writers use Western fundamentals in their works (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 133). In 2018, the wall was demolished to build the 1,000 Trees complex, a futuristic, flora-covered building by the Heatherwick Studio set to open in 2020. Kenrick Davis continues: “Its destruction and an increasingly rigid atmosphere in Shanghai are resulting in a declining street art scene, with artists struggling to find places to paint” (Davis 2019).

⁵ Hall of fame (*tuya qiang* 涂鸦墙) refers to a space where painting is allowed (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 211).



Figure 3. Graffiti (wildstyle, tag), September 2014, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road.

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3. The OOPS crew: between tradition and interculturality

The OOPS crew is the most famous and influential crew in the city. It combines the Western graffiti art movement with the Chinese artistic and cultural tradition, using characters, calligraphy and ancient Chinese symbols, and represents the transcultural and transnational trends in Shanghai (Valjakka 2016: 363). The crew was founded on a blog in 2007 by Jin Ye (Hu(r)ri, Read or Hali), Reign (or Lame), Snow and Tin.G. The birth of the OOPS crew on a blog demonstrates the importance of the Internet for Chinese writers, as the four members did not meet directly on the street. Actually, the crew has hosted other members over the years, including two European artists: Moon, Aekone (a.k.a. Aek, from Yangzhou), Redim, Kite (from Guangxi); and Diase (Italian writer) and Storm (French writer). This highlights how there are many foreign writers operating in China who actively collaborate with Chinese crews and writers, contaminating both themselves and each other. The OOPS crew was and still is the most respected crew in Shanghai because it embodies the cosmopolitan and transcultural trend of the city in which it was born, blending the Euro-American graffiti writing tradition with many aspects of Chinese culture (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 138-139). According to Minna Valjakka:

The crew cultivates varying perceptions and self-identities in their work, but they are as a whole known for their elaborate pieces combining alphabets, Chinese writing and characters. Currently, many of the local members are occupied by their everyday work and seldom have time to paint (Valjakka 2016: 363).

In terms of style, the OOPS crew's pieces refer to the Euro-American tradition, using, specifically, wildstyle⁶ with 3D effects, often enriched by a background or figurative elements from the Chinese painting tradition (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 139-140).

Among the numerous works of the OOPS crew, *Shanghai jianqiang* 上海坚强 (*Shanghai be strong*, fig. 4) is one of the best examples of 'contamination' between the Western graffiti art movement and the Chinese artistic and cultural tradition. This graffiti was painted on the Moganshan Road in memory of the victims of the fire that destroyed a building on the Jiaozhou Road (Shanghai) in 2010. The main theme of the piece consists of the words *Shanghai* 上海 and *jianqiang* 坚强 ('fortify, be strong'), which are represented through two different styles of *charactering* with the intention of emulating the brush stroke through different thicknesses. The first two characters 上海 (Shanghai) were painted by Huri in running script (*xingshu* 行书). The other two characters *jianqiang* 坚强 ('fortify, be strong') were painted by Storm (French writer) in regular script (*kaishu* 楷书). Because of their uniform thickness, maybe painted using a pasting brush or a paint roller, the *jianqiang* 坚强 characters might also call to mind the great seal script (*dazhuanshu* 大篆书).⁷ Both parts have a thin black outline that grants a tridimensional effect. This artwork is characterized by the presence of some Chinese traditional elements: an incense pot and four yellow chrysanthemums. The incense pot is a symbol of the funeral wake ritual, while the yellow chrysanthemum forms part of the 'four nobles' (bamboo, orchid, plum tree and chrysanthemum), which, in traditional Chinese painting, represent the four seasons and the four ages of Man; among these, the chrysanthemum is the symbol of autumn. In the artwork there are also, some Western visual elements: a scroll banner, a peace dove and a black funeral ribbon. At the bottom, there are also eight tags: Huri (under the characters 上海), Storm (under the characters 坚强), Ting, Snow, Ake, Reign, Redim and OOPS (in the center; Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 140-142).⁸

⁶ Wildstyle (*kuangye fengge* 狂野风格) is a complex construction of letters or characters that are distorted and interlocked, and sometimes embellished with three-dimensional effects, tribal arrows and puppets. This intricate form of graffiti is considered one of the hardest styles to master, and pieces done in wildstyle are often completely undecipherable to non-writers (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022 214-215).

⁷ 'Running script' (*xingshu* 行书), 'regular script' (*kaishu* 楷书) and 'seal script' (*zhuanshu* 篆书) are three of the five styles of traditional Chinese calligraphy; the other two are: 'cursive script' (*caoshu* 草书) and 'clerical script' (*lishu* 隶书). For more details about Chinese calligraphy see Li (2009).

⁸ Under the white background of the piece there are some Chinese characters: *Xin ya jituan - Shanghai xinya dabao youxian gongsi - heixin chufang* 新亚集团 - 上海新亚大包有限公司 - 黑心厨房 (New Asia Group - Shanghai Xinya Large Packaging Co., Ltd. - Black Heart Kitchen). The choice of the surface is casual, as it is just a wall of Moganshan Road's hall of fame.



Figure 4. Oops crew (Huri, Storm, Tin.G, Snow, Aek, Reign, Redim), Shanghai jianqiang 上海坚强 (Shanghai be strong), November 2010, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. © Imaginechina Limited/Alamy Stock Photo/IPA.

According to Minna Valjakka:

The transcultural and transnational impacts are not limited to the OOPS Crew. Numerous foreign creators have either visited Shanghai or lived there for a while, shaping the scene. Short-term residents usually remain members of their original crews in their home cities and paint mainly as individuals when in Shanghai (Valjakka 2016: 363-364).

4. Dezio, the French writer who uses Chinese characters

Dezio, a French writer highly respected in Shanghai, started painting in 1994 in a little town in France called Le Mans when he was only fifteen years old. He continued ceaselessly to paint walls and in 2006 he moved to China, where the graffiti scene was basically just starting out. His first 'international' crew was the CLW crew (acronym for 'China's Least Wanted,' 'Coloring Local Walls' or 'Can't Let'm Win'), founded with Jin Ye, Nine, Fluke and Storm. The crew also had other members in many different cities of the country like Nanjing, Wuhan, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Beijing and Honk Kong. The main aim of the crew was to combine writers from all over China and the world, who shared the same passion and vision of graffiti, under one 'big family.' Now Dezio lives and works in Shanghai, where he co-founded

Urban Art United (UAU), an urban art agency based in Shanghai since 2017 that connects people with art in China.⁹ According to Minna Valjakka:

He has had a recognizable impact on the development of contemporary graffiti in the city. His works have exhibited playful yet skillful engagement with contemporary graffiti for around two decades. Dezio is known not only for his accomplished alphabets but also for his elaborate Chinese writing, which he uses even for his own name (*Duxi'ao* 度西奥) (Valjakka 2016: 364).



Figure 5. Dezio, *Duxi'ao* 度西奥 (Chinese name tag), spray paint on wall, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artists.

Before following the post-graffiti trend and becoming a well-rounded artist, Dezio often used Chinese characters in his works and signed with his Chinese tag (*Duxi'ao* 度西奥).

Duxi'ao 度西奥 (Fig. 5) is one of several examples of his Chinese name tag pieces. This artwork was painted in a bubble style with 3D effects, embellished with two lightning bolts and a puppet¹⁰ on a blue background. The character *xi* 西 (West, Western) in the center of the piece is shaped like a yellow sullen face. It is interesting to note how the puppet *xi* 西 meaning 'West, Western' is interlocked between two red colored Chinese characters that are not puppets.

In a recent interview,¹¹ Dezio said that he and Xeme (a Hong Kong based graffiti artist) were the first artists in China to paint Chinese characters in their pieces. The artwork in collaboration with Xeme (Fig. 6)¹² comprises two big tags, *Duxi'ao* 度西奥 (Dezio's Chinese name tag) on the left and *Yuehang* 月

⁹ Dezio, Instagram messages to author Marta R. Bisceglia, May 6, 2020.

¹⁰ Puppet (*tu'an* 图案) is usually a figurative element that complements graffiti. It may be a human figure, a monster with animal features, a comic or cartoon character (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 213).

¹¹ Dezio, Instagram message to author Marta R. Bisceglia, November 10, 2021.

¹² This is the same wall where Oops crew made the artwork *Shanghai Jianqiang*. See footnote no. 8.

航 (maybe Xeme's Chinese tag) on the right on a black background. The Dezio tag was written in a still fairly legible wildstyle, while Xeme's characters are hardly comparable to traditional graffiti styles or traditional calligraphic scripts (perhaps only with regular script for its readability). Both artists chose for their characters a silver color fill-in with shades of white within the corners or curvatures of the character strokes to give the piece greater brightness and shininess. Finally, the two pieces are surrounded by many tags and writings.



Figure 6. Dezio and Xeme, Duxi'ao 度西奥 & Yuehang 月航, 2008, spray paint on wall, Shanghai, Moganshan Road. Courtesy of the artist.

In the same interview, Dezio said that Chinese local artists believed it was impossible to write with Chinese characters, and yet, despite being French, Dezio proved them wrong. He explained how any character or letter can be divided into strokes and each stroke can be reworked in a personal style. Then, that “personalized stroke” can be combined with others to make a piece. In fact, every time he travels in Asia, Dezio always tries to paint in the local language, even if he doesn't know how to write it, reproducing this “strokes re-combination” concept. This highlights a very intercultural way of doing graffiti which allows a true dialogue with diversity, giving new life to walls in which the only protagonist is Art.

With Dezio, the use of Chinese characters is not limited to his tag but also to a series of works with Chinese characters, each time with a different intent. An example is the artwork *chai* 拆 (Fig. 7). He completed this work in 2008 as a reaction to the city's rapid dismantling and a protest against the demolition of historic, old buildings. De facto, the character *chai* 拆 means ‘to demolish a building and

relocate the inhabitants' and is basically used to mark an old building that had been scheduled for demolition. It is usually painted in red on house walls. In the *chai* 拆 piece, Dezio portrays his protest against the demolition of old buildings by personifying the *chai* 拆 character: on the left, the radical hand 扌 becomes a hand holding a hammer and 'hitting' the radical jin 斤 (on the right side), depicted as an old Chinese house in the process of demolition. The personified *chai* 拆 is painted with a white fill-in and a black outline and is bombed with lots of original Chinese *chai* 拆 characters, marked in red and circled.¹³



Figure 7. Dezio, Chai 拆 (To Demolish), 2008, spray paint on wall, Shanghai. Courtesy of the artist.

The OOPS crew and Dezio perfectly embody the cosmopolitan and intercultural nature of the city of Shanghai, whose artistic and cultural 'contamination' (between local and foreign artists, with the indistinct use of Chinese characters and Latin letters, etc.) make the city a fertile ground for creation.

¹³ Several artists have engaged with this character in the 1990s, i.e. Wang Jinsong with the project *Chai, demolish one-hundred signs of demolition* (1999): [Wang Jinsong. One Hundred Signs of Demolition \(Chai\). 1999 | MoMA](#)

5. The Chengdu graffiti scene

The city of Chengdu is the capital of the Sichuan province, a region located in the southwestern part of China. Chengdu is known as the ‘Land of Plenty’ or the ‘Celestial Country’ (*tianfu zhi guo* 天府之国), a pseudonym attributed to the territory due to its mild climate and generous harvests. Although the city is characterized by strong economic development and increasingly marked modernization, it still preserves typical examples of traditional architecture, local food and culture, maintaining its historical Chinese atmosphere (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 153). The art of graffiti spread into the city in the early 2000s, faster than the centres of Beijing and Shanghai, where control by the authorities was greater. For this very reason, Chengdu is the ideal land for artistic growth. The city has three main characteristic sites where graffiti may be admired:

1. *Fuqing Lu* 府青路 (‘Fuqing Road’). In this street, measuring almost two hundred meters in length, splendid graffiti appear on red brick walls. In addition to the traditional dragons with bright red and yellow colours, there are representations of Chengdu’s cars, buildings and bridges, murals that deal with the contemporary themes of industry and progress, and others dedicated to reflections on city life (Luo and Gao 2018).
2. *Dongda Lu* 东大路 (‘Dongda Road’). This is a building site measuring about four hundred meters, which has become a particularly attractive destination among young graffiti writers. Some of the most represented themes are various traditional Chinese elements such as giant pandas and cranes, or abstract concepts and indefinite lines which give life to a vivid and colourful area.
3. *U37 Chuangyi cangku* U37 创意仓库 (‘U37 Creative Warehouse’). This site lies in the Jinjiang district, a small area in the heart of Chengdu, hidden among residential skyscrapers. Today, it represents a meeting place for different kinds of artists, from writers to musicians.

6. The oriental “spirit” in the art of GAS

Gas is the most representative writer on the Chengdu graffiti scene. He is:

1. one of the precursors of graffiti writing in Chengdu;
2. one of the first writers in China to use Chinese characters in his works; and
3. an ongoing ‘king’¹⁴ for young writers operating in the city.

¹⁴ ‘King’ (*wangzhe* 王者) refers to a kind of guide for other graffiti artists. Generally, he is the most skilled and respected among all writers (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 212).

Gas' real Chinese name is Chen Zhipeng 陈志鹏. He was born in 1989 in Chongzhou, a small town near Chengdu. He joined the hip-hop culture when he was twelve years old, through magazines and websites. When he was fifteen, he started painting on walls, and at the age of nineteen he entered the 'Chengdu Vocational Art Academy' (Environmental Art Design). At an early age he was named Shui Gui 水鬼 (Water Ghost), but the tag he has decided to use is GAS, which the artist reproduces in both Latin letters and Chinese characters (*qi* 氣). His Chinese tag Qi 氣 is a translation of the word 'Gas' and relates to the Chinese cultural concept of 'vital energy,' 'vital force,' 'material energy,' or simply 'energy.' "Qi 氣 is everywhere, even while you and I are talking right now," he has been quoted as saying (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 160).

In the traditional Chinese concept, *qi* is recognized as *da qi* 大氣 ('great energy' or 'energy of the macrocosm') and *xi qi* 吸氣 ('breath').¹⁵ Originally, the *da qi* would have descended, giving birth to the earth; so the rain is understood as the '*qi* of the earth,' which, becoming rarefied, would have risen, giving birth to the heaven. The human being, who is between heaven and earth, has both manifestations of *da qi*: the heavier one forms the body, the lighter one forms the heart (Pasqualotto 2007: 108-110). The idea of *qi* is also connected to another fundamental traditional Chinese concept, that of *xing* 行 ('phase, process'). The concept of the *wu xing* 五行 ('five elements,' more precisely defined as 'the five processes') describes nature as the set of the five elements that compose it (fire, water, metal, wood and earth) and as a consequence of the relationships that occur between them. Referring to these two fundamental concepts of Chinese culture (*qi* and *xing*), the artist highlights, in the choice of his very name, how his will is to instil oriental 'breath' in his art (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 161).

Gas mostly uses his Chinese tag Qi 氣 as the main piece for his works. The character is produced in various shapes, techniques, colours and styles. In the piece Gas created in the Jinniu District of Lin Xiang Zi (Fig. 8), for example, the large character Qi 氣 (Gas) is written in non-simplified form, in a Wild and 3D graffiti style. The piece has a thick white outline. Every stroke has various layers of colours, from dark to light blue, from dark to light purple, from dark to light brown, and from dark to light green. The character has two backgrounds: the first is a grey 'bubble-cloud,' the second is a black wall. This character seems to reproduce a calligraphic seal of contemporary times: like a traditional seal, it is the sign of the artist, and it is characterized by angular strokes. On the right side of the piece, the tag

¹⁵ For more information about this concept, see Ledderose (1986).

GAS is reproduced in Latin letters, as well as the tag KB (Kong Boys), a crew from Hong Kong with whom GAS often collaborates. On the left side, there are the two Chinese characters, *Hao Qiao* 好巧, which represent the tag ‘How Chill,’ an artistic-collaborative duo between Gas and SEVE (or SEVEN), a writer of the ABS crew from Beijing.

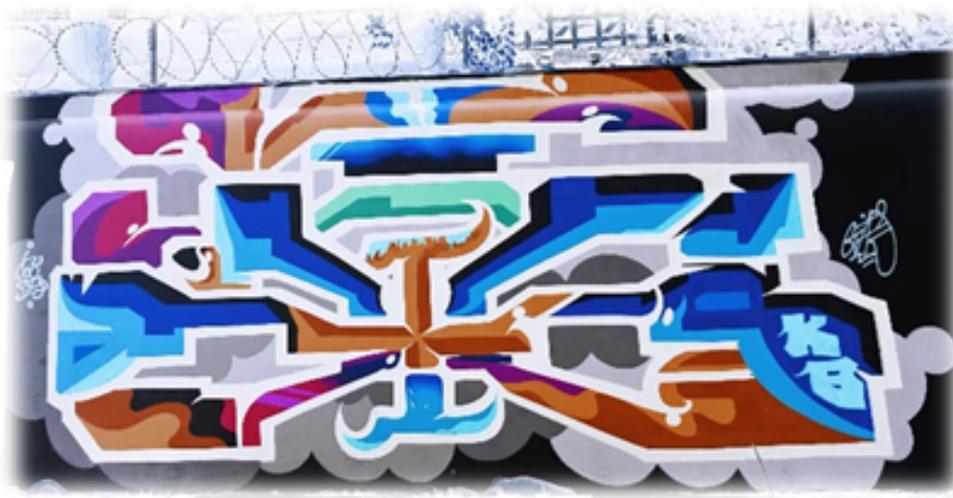


Figure 8. GAS, Qi 氣 (Gas), 2019, spray paint on wall, Chengdu, Jinniu District, Lin Xiang Zi. Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to the character *qi* 氣, Gas often uses other Chinese characters for his works, like *Yu* 雨 (‘Rain,’ Fig. 9) or *Feng* 風 (‘Wind,’ Fig. 10). In the work *Feng* 風, the character is displayed with a thick dark purple outline. The sloping shades of colours—from dark orange to straw yellow—give the character three-dimensionality. Around the character there are several writings and tags: top left there are the Chinese characters *hao qiao* 好巧, top right there is the date of execution of the work (2016), and bottom left there is the title of the work 風, written in non-simplified Chinese character. In the middle of the work, there is the tag ‘KB crew’ (Kong Boys). Finally, bottom right there is the tag of the artist written in Latin letters: ‘GAS.’



Figure 9. GAS, Yu 雨 ('Rain'), 2016, spray paint on wall, U37 Creative Warehouse, Chengdu. Courtesy of the artists.



Figure 10. GAS, Feng 風 ('Wind'), 2016, spray paint on wall, U37 Creative Warehouse, Chengdu. Courtesy of the artists.

GAS often creates works in collaboration with other artists, mostly for commercial purposes. In 2009, Gas struck up a friendship with Seven (or Seve), giving birth to an artistic-commercial duo named Hao

Qiao 好巧 ('How Chill'). Many of the collaborations between Gas and Seve are not necessarily for commercial purposes, but simply establish the artistic union between the two writers. An example of this collaboration is the graffiti 'HOW CHILL' created in 2016 (Fig. 11). The piece is divided into two distinct parts: the left part was made by Gas, who reproduced the two Chinese characters 成都; the right part was created by Seven and is separated from Gas' part by an S-shaped chain. Seven depicts the two Latin letters 'LA' (Los Angeles) in 3D style, 'contrasting' with the piece by Gas, who instead uses Chinese characters. In the background are various puppets representing some figures of the Chicano community, an ethnic group of Mexican origin that lives in the United States. Finally, there is an inscription in English that reads: 'If I had an end in my heart, I would prefer that I should never arrive' (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 162-165).



Figure 11. Gas and Seven, graffiti signed How Chill, 2019, spray paint on wall, Chengdu, Kuixinglou.
Courtesy of the artists.

Gas sends a message of hope and future wishes for graffiti art and for the city of Chengdu and states:

The true essence of writing and street art in general is to paint so that the public can have fun and admire what you do. Photographing graffiti and posting them online is nice, but that's not the point. I don't make graffiti to collect images; the primary goal for me is to show them on the street. I want to paint on big streets, I want to find big streets to spread my art, big corners, remarkable places. I want to bring my art to the street. I hope Chengdu grows to embrace street art in all its forms. This is what I hope for the future (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 166).

Gas' art fits perfectly with that vein of 'Chinese style graffiti' which is expressed using Chinese characters and/or references to Chinese cultural elements. In Gas' works, a search for 'Chineseness' and an attempt to develop a specific 'Chinese style is strongly palpable.

7. Fan Sack: from graffiti writing to Buddhist-inspired painting

An artist from Chengdu, also active in Paris since 2008, Pang Fan 庞凡—better known as Fan Sack—began his activity as a writer in 2003, at the age of fifteen. At the start of his career, Fan Sack started 'bombing' the streets of Chengdu with his tag and experimented with various forms of writing, from simple tagging-up to the creation of more complex pieces. Fan Sack is a famous artist of international repute; he has his own studio and often shows his works in exhibitions and galleries. Nevertheless, he often comes back to Chengdu to participate in events and festivals, especially involving young people, to contribute to the promotion of the hip-hop culture and spread the graffiti movement in China. For example, on November 2-3, 2019, Fan Sack participated in the Simple Urban Plus Festival, a music and art festival dedicated to young people which took place at the Chengdu Tianfu Furong Garden. For the occasion, Fan Sack produced an artwork composed of four characters (*fu lu shou xi* 福祿壽禧, Fig. 12), which form a popular auspicious phrase: 'Good fortune, long life and happiness.' Each character is placed on a single panel; the four panels are next to one another, and the four characters are read from right to left as usual in traditional Chinese calligraphy. In this work, Fan Sack was probably inspired by the big signs written from right to left in Chinese calligraphy on temples or public buildings. The artwork is made exactly like a calligraphy:

1. its format recalls the "big character calligraphy" (*dazi shufa* 大字书法) of classical tradition;
2. the artist seeks to reproduce brush strokes on paper using a paint roller and a brush;
3. the calligraphic script seems to reproduce regular script (*kaishu* 楷书), and the links between certain strokes of the characters recall running script (*xingshu* 行书).

In contrast to traditional calligraphy, which is always monochrome (black ink on white paper), in this work each character is painted a different colour and has a colourful kaleidoscopic circle in the background that gives tridimensionality and power to each character (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 166-170).



Figure 12. Fan Sack, Fu lu shou xi 福祿壽禧 ('Good fortune, long life, and happiness'), 2019, acrylic on panel, Chengdu, work created during the Simple Urban Plus Festival. Courtesy of the artist.

Throughout his career, Fan Sack has explored different forms of art, such as graffiti writing, street art and painting, creating artworks permeated with Buddhist influences. The artist's predilection is to make his creations outdoors, on the street, even though Fan Sack may be identified more as a street artist than a simple 'graffiti artist.' An example of his work as a street artist is *Wushen zhi shu* 無神之樹 ('The tree of atheism,' Fig. 13), created in 2015 in the 12th district of Paris. Fan Sack depicts different figures and images in which Chinese and Western traditional elements are blended:

1. a monkey at the base is immersed in a blue sea and covers its magenta red eyes with a bright green leaf, so that he walks without seeing. In traditional Chinese culture, the monkey is a symbol of intelligence and cunningness; in the Tibetan tradition, where it is considered a bodhisattva, the monkey is a being who seeks inspiration by helping other sentient beings;
 2. a scholar, a symbol of science and knowledge, acts as an astronaut and guides the monkey;
 3. above them is the Lord of Heaven, a symbol of religion and of the creative power of dao;
 4. the Lord of Heaven is dominated by the figure of Picasso, the symbol of art;
 5. finally, in the upper part, Fan Sack depicts a brain crowned by a vibrant light, a symbol of wisdom.
- The three images (the Lord of Heaven, Picasso and the Brain) represent the indissoluble link between the three disciplines of religion, art and science, which are all part of 'one big tree.' The entire piece features an intense blue background dotted with stars, symbolising open space and the universe.

This work is an iconographic experimentation reflecting the strong relationship between art, science and religion (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 172). As Fan Sack explained:

For me, art, science and religion are one and the same. As human beings, we want to know who we are, where we come from, why we are here and what the relationship between nature and the universe is. Although art, science and religion are three very different disciplines and each of them has a different application in the world, for me they all have a single point of origin. It is like imagining a tree: it all starts from the same trunk, with firm roots. From this large trunk, then, the three disciplines are born and become three different branches. My works speak of this (Bisceglia, Iezzi and Merenda 2022: 173).



Figure 13. Fan Sack, Wushen zhi shu 無神之樹 ('The tree of atheism'), Enter the Oeil series, 2015, spray paint and acrylic on wall, Paris, 12th district. Courtesy of the artist.

This work is part of a series entitled 'Enter the Oeil,' characterized by the presence of the image of the monkey, the colour blue and the triadic idea of union between science, art and religion. A work belonging to this series, in acrylic on canvas, was exhibited in an important exhibition entitled 'Dalí fait le mur' held from September 11, 2014, to March 15, 2015, at the Espace Montmartre in Paris. This exhibition, which creates a strong parallelism between street art and the surreal world of the master Salvador Dalí, takes its cue from street art and goes straight to the beating heart of surrealism,

following that common thread shared by both styles (Hauer 2014). It was following this exhibition that Fan Sack coined the concept of *graffuturisme*, a unique form of graffiti art that looks to the future. Fan Sack is a complex and multifaceted artist. He is perhaps one of the few—among the many Chinese colleagues who started out like him—to have embarked on a fruitful career in continuous evolution and on an international scale.

8. Conclusion

Since it is being described an artistic phenomenon that embraces the sphere of hyper-contemporaneity using hybrid, multimedia and ephemeral languages in constant evolution and yet still entirely unexplored, it will be necessary to use a specific methodology to approach graffiti in China. As the literature on the subject is poor and vague, the study has included field research, interviews with the artists and sources on websites, blogs and social media. Given these assumptions, it is very important to ‘photograph’ a frame that it will be not necessarily exemplifying, but could be an essential starting point for the study of this phenomenon. This analysis of four representative artists from Shanghai and Chengdu clearly shows different ways of re-elaborating tradition and a local-oriented attitude from a global perspective. All of them, in their artistic careers, have used or still use Chinese characters, cultural elements and calligraphy in distinct ways, methods and contexts. The artworks analyzed highlight four distinct yet ‘linked’ artistic trends:

1. the cosmopolitan OOPS crew blends Chinese tradition with Western graffiti fundamentals, perfectly in line with the eclectic nature of Shanghai;
2. the French writer Dezio redefines his personal style by combining Chinese characters with the Euro-American tradition in order to create a mutual artistic dialogue;
3. the Chinese writer Gas makes use of Western graffiti techniques and styles without ever losing sight of his ‘Chineseness,’ always using Chinese characters and creating an original, local-oriented graffiti trend;
4. finally, the Chinese-born, Paris-based artist Fan Sack spreads a new figurative artistic language (see his ‘graffuturisme’) also in Europe, while always remaining connected with his origins.

These four artistic trends analysed demonstrate how graffiti in China has a traditional but at the same time innovative nature: their diffusion and ‘fusion’ within the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai and their artistic-figurative drive with Chinese characteristics in the city of Chengdu, outline an art in continuous evolution and movement, capable of overcoming eastern borders but also of insinuating Chinese characteristics overseas.

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