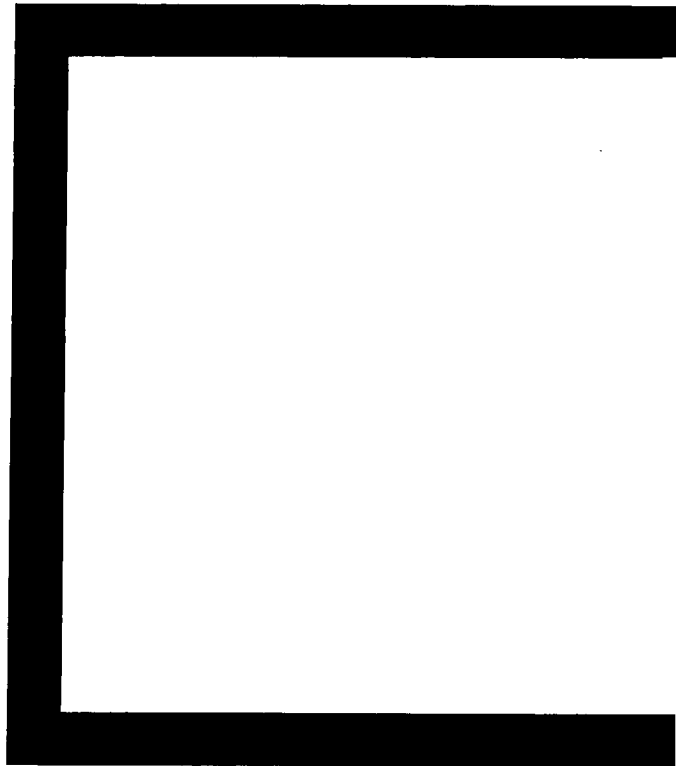


new writing



graffiti beijing

CHRISTEN CORNELL

— GENESIS

‘There must have been a moment, at the beginning’, says Guildenstern in the Stoppard play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, ‘where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it’.¹ Himself a spin off from another story, which might itself have been spun off from another, Guildenstern struggles to find a starting point to the narrative that brought his and Rosencrantz’s parts into existence.

Like these fictional characters, I too find it difficult to identify the first moments of my encounter with China, the crucial point at which I made, succumbed or arbitrarily happened upon the decision to study this culture and its official, national language of Mandarin. That moment a product of the last, delivered from the one preceding. I can’t get a hold of the one loose end with which this story commenced, the original beginning from which this particular hybridity was formed. There must have been a day when I ticked a box to enrol to study Chinese, a day that I finally decided against other options, but unable now to identify this moment, I can’t help querying just how significant it could have been. My memories of China the idea, or story, extend to the vanishing point of earliest childhood, through celestial stereotypes in storybooks, through the smell of incense in Chinatown, through stories of ‘The Orient ... almost a European invention’,² culminating in a myriad of stimuli.

I do know, however, that in my early twenties when I began attending Mandarin classes, I wanted to study a language as challenging to my reasoning as possible, a system as foreign as I could find, something to keep me braced and on my toes for years,

tweaking and interrupting my assumptions with alien sensibilities. My reasons for wanting this had their own origins: my previous, uncommitted study of Italian, too familiar to sufficiently capture my attention; my protracted playing of eggs-in-baskets, changing jobs every few months, terminally dissatisfied with anything I thought facile and too close to home. The relative privilege of my background would have added to this itching as well. Predating and predating one another, the causes of my hankering for the strange, of this recurring thirst for new versions of self-appraisal, propelled me into the future—explaining not the starting point, but the continuum of my interminable movement from the known into the new, this expansionistic urge to script the yet unscripted.

On my first day in China, in a relatively small south-western city called Kunming, in March 2001, I buried myself face-first into a pillow and cried. It was too much, too far, too odd, as weird and difficult as I had ever asked it to be and without the merest salve of the exotic. Everywhere was kitsch and cuteness, reminders of the West emptied of the meaning they held for me—tinny pop music tinkling in the streets, cartoon characters on clothes and decor, on the towel and alarm clock in my guest room, and on the fluffy slippers I had been given to wear in my billeted household. Chinese people considered me lucky to be assigned to this family, not only because of their high standing at the university, but also because of their wealth, which provided both family and friends access to those things considered to be the privileges of a Western lifestyle. Imported sportswear, to be worn on special occasions; bottles of Johnny Walker, bought duty-free and kept unopened for display only; a sit-down toilet, used squatting with the seat up; a cordless telephone; an oversized television in the living room and another in my bedroom; a piano in the study with sheet music by *Bei-tuo-wen*—these symbols of materialism, convenience and status were presented to me on my arrival with such pride, each one supposed to surpass the last in satisfying my assumed expectations of a civilised and ‘modern’ domesticity. Foreign without seeming mysterious, ‘other’ without seeming ‘Oriental’, this emulation of a West I neither recognised nor felt drawn to alienated me more than any alterity I could have imagined. It confronted me with a Chineseness at once unconcerned and incompatible with my reasons for studying China and Mandarin, which were about abjuring this, my own culture, in the search for something ‘new’.

Derivative of abstracted, and particularly Chinese, impressions of ‘the West’, such triumphs of order and hygiene glittered against the backdrop of this society’s own history, each whitegood so much brighter and more ‘Western’ for the stained and grubby traditional houses down the road, each Tweety Bird bedspread all the more golden for its

contrast to khaki uniforms and the blue of the once ubiquitous Mao suit, each cheap mushroom air freshener all the more chemically advanced for the stench of human effluents hovering in communities that still relied on public toilets. Multistorey apartments towered proudly above crumbling medieval architecture whose days were more and more numbered; eight-lane boulevards charged defiantly through areas that, until recently, had been tangles of markets and alleyways. Oblivious to Western fantasies of archetypal Asias, the picturesque was being replaced by the bombastic, the ancient by the self-consciously ‘modern’. Chinas of old and new offset, opposed and spurred one another on into ever varying visions of the country’s reimagined future, and with constant reference to its own dreaming of ‘the West’—a fairytale land told on billboards; a utopia of health and happiness, of pink formula-milk babies, white brides, swarthy men and sports cars; a land to which my presence below, on a little Chinese bicycle, seemed apparently somewhat irrelevant.

At first I thought these people had missed the point, were hopelessly off the mark, had misunderstood Western philosophies, especially its own critiques of modernism, and that they’d be curious to have this explained. It took me a while to realise that my opinion, or any information I may have about what life was really like overseas, was as incomprehensible and uninteresting to the majority of people here as their hunger for symbols of the West was to me. I was not, at least not by virtue of my being a Westerner, in any position to consider China’s imaginings of the West naive. On the contrary, for the majority of the Westerners working in China, those experiencing it through the overlap of business, this enthusiasm for a capitalist utopia was far from misguided or strange. I saw a boy one day on a bicycle, the wheel of which had been *handpainted* with the insignia of Coca-Cola. I remember it striking me that in that place and time, the red-and-white sign, for me so redolent of phoney individualism, corporatism, commodified ideas of freedom or just retro style, may here have a meaning as yet beyond my comprehension, may speak of something as yet, and possibly infinitely, untranslatable to me. Regardless of whether this society’s ideas of American or European culture accorded with or in any way grasped what I might have argued as their reality, the appropriation of iconography such as this, the swirl of Coca-Cola, reflected the dynamics of its own status quo, China’s own remaking of itself with relation to the rest of the world.

Siegfried Kracauer writes, ‘The goal of modern travel is not its destination but rather a new place as such; what people seek is less the particular being of a landscape than the foreignness of its face’.³ Unreliant upon the specificity of a location, this search for a kind of foreignness suggests, ultimately, more of a desire for the discovery of something in oneself than the thirst for knowledge about others. It’s commonly said that when travelling ‘you take yourself with you’, your focus still set primarily on the mirror before

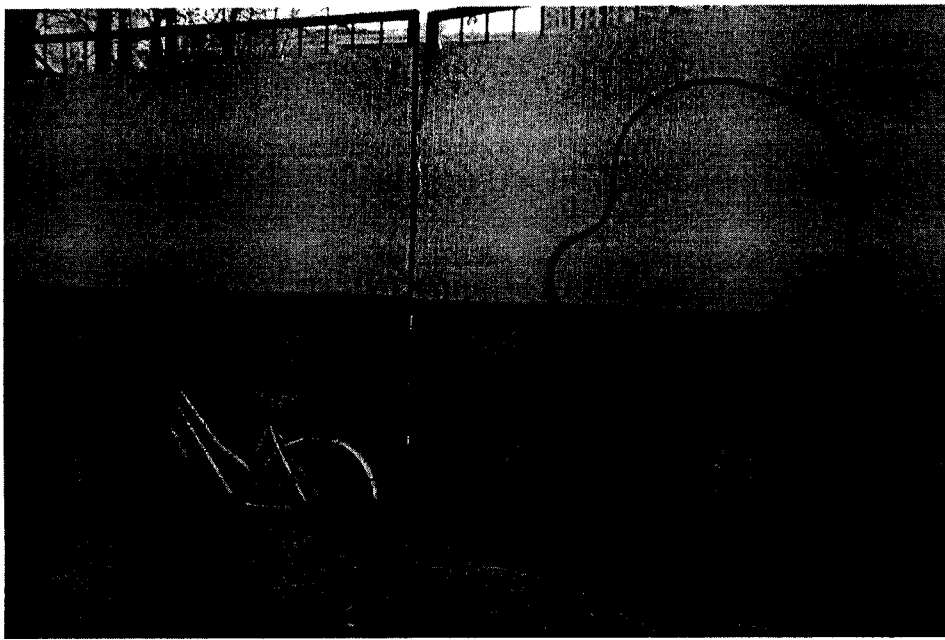
your own eyes, inevitably restricted to re-creations of yourself in the appraisal of another. Me on the streets of China, China enthralled in its visions of the West, each new identity was incited by a sense of travelling through the yet unknown from which new localised knowings were forged. Difference spurred translation, galvanising particularised differences. In contrast to the commonly held idea of Asia being especially vulnerable to Western cultural imperialism, I found myself confronted in China by a people self-focused and confident, distinctive not only in their assertion of their own, ever more reified, traditional values, but also in their telling of the character, purpose and necessity of 'Western modernisation' with a self-assurance that eclipsed my own.

One year later I was back in Sydney, putting together an application for the Australia-China Council residency at the Redgate Gallery in Beijing, writing about my plan to 'conduct research for a critical piece on graffiti'. As I struggled to convince myself as much as the envisaged reader, this certainty of purpose felt closer to a suspension of disbelief or of mystification about just why I was studying China. Like Paul Virilio's conception of stability as only movement indefinitely slowed down,⁴ here again, as occurred every time I had to write a proposal of some kind (or even answer somebody's question), ambivalence was arrested for a period long enough to construct a mission statement, to hold a semblance of an opinion, to produce with language a structure to this formless and ambiguous journey, as if I really were its one author.

Just how and when the interest in graffiti emerged, and why it stayed and made such distance, is something else I find myself at a loss to definitively pin down. I know an awareness of this word and of graffiti culture began consolidating at a time when, working as a research assistant, I was taking photographs of graffiti memorials in Sydney, spending hours on trains across suburbs reading the *liumang*, or 'hooligan' literature, of Chinese writers Wang Shuo and Wei Hui. When prompted to state a research focus for the Australia-China Council application, I reached at the world described in this sub-cultural literature, at a China I thought I might finally relate to, and drew what I'd heard might be an emerging culture of graffiti in the country's larger cities to the surface of my application. Attracted by the possibility of China's alternative to those I had known in Kunming, by critiques that I may understand given by Chinese people themselves, I became focused on what seemed the dissident, the impertinent and the underground in contemporary Chinese culture, lines other to those official or of the mainstream. I was drawn consciously (and yet despite myself) to the chance now of a possible affinity, to a difference with which I was consonant.

The international Chinese artist Zhang Dali was my first key to this anticipated unconventional China. A Chinese friend in Sydney told me of his existence and of the image of his heads, simple one-line spray-paintings seeking to expose the violence of China's current modernisation, what he saw as its fixation with wealth and power at the expense of civil liberties and tradition. Most specifically concerned with the destruction of old Beijing, Zhang Dali had left his signature head in profile across building sites, to haunt half-demolished houses or the walls around new construction. The tags AK-47 or 18K often accompanied the images, AK-47 indicating China's fervent modernisation with a reference to third world violence, and 18K standing in for eighteen-carat gold, mocking the city's new 'get rich quick' mentality. Punching his name into a search engine, I unlocked the story of Zhang Dali and his artwork from the Internet. Pages and pages of URLs popped up like monkey bars for me to climb on—critical essays, magazine interviews, gallery catalogues—articles written in familiarly Western idioms and contexts, those of contemporary art, graffiti sub-culture, urban identity, democracy and political protest.

Married to an Italian, Zhang had lived in Bologna for six years, emigrating as many artists and intellectuals of his generation did, after participation in the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Zhang's period in Europe not only exposed him to its intellectual and artistic traditions, but apparently struck some kind of chord, leaving him convinced of the wisdom and even universality of certain liberal discourses, especially those of human rights and democracy, and of the potential of contemporary art to speak politically, and directly, to the public. Inspired by the graffiti work of American artist Keith Haring and by the anonymous street art of Bologna, Zhang started to leave his own marks on the walls of Europe, writing anti-Gulf War protest in Chinese, and testing out a progenitor of the now identifiable image of the head. Responses to this graffiti in Italy were immediate: some, apparently taking it as a territorial challenge, covered it with the words 'fuck off'; others covered it with the communist hammer and sickle, possibly identifying Zhang's image with that of the shaved head of Nazism. Excited by the spontaneity of this exchange, Zhang titled the project *Duihua*, or *Dialogue*, and began revisiting the graffiti days later to photograph it in its ever-transforming state. Returning to China in 1995 with his wife and two daughters, Zhang began spraying the same image of the head across Beijing, introducing what seemed potentially a universal culture to his homeland, as yet unfamiliar with its form. Maintaining both the title and the expectation of *Dialogue*, Zhang Da¹ suggested with his image a forum and a language for expression,



hoping to generate the kinds of conversations in Beijing that he had seen and experienced in Europe.

Both local and literate in aspects of European, now cum international, cultures, Zhang's work seemed to me to provide access to a China comprehensible to foreign journalists, academics and art dealers. Admired far more overseas than within China itself, his work was popular for discussion and purchase in Europe and America, most probably for its deployment of visual and political vernaculars developed and forged in 'the West'. The work's translatability for an international audience is made most explicit in the comments of Meg Maggio, who writes that:

When we see Dali's silent silhouettes scrawled on half torn-down buildings, city walls, and other public spaces we breathe a sigh of relief, safe in the knowledge that Beijing—like all modern cities—has finally been tagged by the urban language of graffiti.⁵

The almost palpable sense of gratitude that an aspect of China might be told in a language intelligible to herself speaks as much here of Maggio's expectations as it does of the graffiti and, perhaps most of all, of the shared ground upon which they converse. The pleasure in what seems to have been perceived as Beijing's final involvement in an international conversation suggests a satisfaction in the city's exposure, in a cultural 'opening up', a decoding of the enigma that was previously read as silence.

Other writing on Zhang Dali, such as that of Maurizio Marinelli, laments the loss of China's traditional communities and architecture, 'of its previous identity and its

individuality'.⁶ Describing the presence of McDonalds at Tiananmen Square as 'sinister', and the ubiquity of the character 拆 (*chai*), which means 'to tear down', on buildings earmarked for demolition across Beijing 'like a sinister omen of death', Marinelli sees Zhang Dali's protest against such development as that of a true Chinese artist, expressing as he says, 'deep "Chinese traits"'. These Chinese traits are apparently some with which Marinelli feels a particular affinity, a fact made patent in the emotion of his tone, in his sentimentality about a China he feels slipping through his fingers, just as I felt the loss of a China irretrievable watching the demolition of old Kunming—a China I'd inherited as part of Western mythology, disappearing beneath an escalating skyline of towers.

The Chineseness Marinelli enshrines may indeed be one agreed upon and even disseminated by other artists and writers, one definitive in a number of situations depending on speaking or receiving position. Like one of a thousand or even an infinite number of plateaus, it is justified by its own possibility, but requires translatability with another party in order for transport and its continued means of expression.⁷ Mathieu Borysevich is accurate in his assessment that 'Zhang Dali's story is one of disillusionment, and it is this disposition that predominantly informs his work'—this sense of disillusionment, I would argue, explaining to a significant extent Zhang Dali's relative popularity overseas.⁸ Describing a Chineseness based on an opposition to the state and to contemporary Chinese society, Zhang Dali's expression is instantly intelligible within societies whose very conceptions of identity have pivoted for centuries on tropes of the individual versus the state, of suspicion of authority, and of personal subjectivities as necessarily in conflict with hegemony. Conversing with relation to these familiar dialectics, Zhang Dali's work has both clarity and credibility for a Western audience, a fact evident in its success and institutionalisation within the international art world.

The conviction that Zhang Dali's heads had been largely ignored in the streets of Beijing, however, was one common to each of these writers and, apparently, to Zhang Dali himself. Graffiti, as it appeared in Europe, had not been added to Zhang Dali's spray and it was concluded, with a disappointment almost adding to the power and pathos of the work, that the only visual responses had been the censure of the Chinese authorities, who, arriving with buckets of cement had tried repeatedly to cover up the image.⁹ Commonly discussed as 'Beijing's lone graffiti artist', Zhang Dali was understood to be speaking boldly 'in an environment where conformity rules', the repetition of his heads '[indexing] the asphyxiation of individuality in society'.¹⁰ While conferring a certain heroism upon his practice, this emphasis on the solitude of Zhang Dali's graffiti suggested ultimately its lack of resonance with those in its urban environment, an inability to translate locally to the point of inertness. By this reasoning, the work was dead in the streets of Beijing,

and in a capital of apparently arbitrary scribbles, we grabbed
onto one another, as flints to kick against,
or certain interpretive ballasts,
needing meaning.

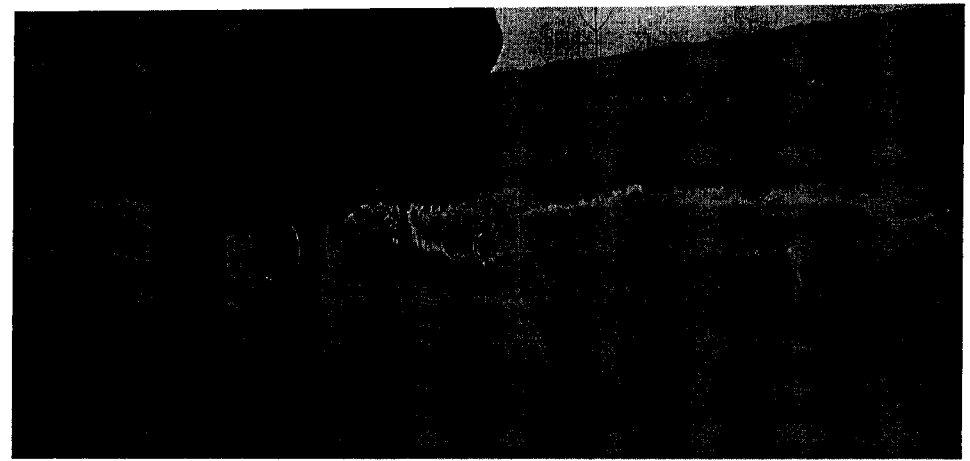
From my first day in Beijing, I began asking taxi drivers if they knew of the spray-painted heads, and if they could show me a place I could find some. Most didn't understand what I was talking about, partly perhaps, because the Chinese word for graffiti is still so embryonic as to be confusing. More than one person told me that graffiti was a phenomenon of 'the West', something extraneous to Chinese culture, and that I should give up on hoping to find some.

In my second week, however, I hit upon a taxi driver who knew exactly the symbol I meant and who took me to where some had been sprayed. Just around the corner from my apartment in the expensive expatriate part of town on a red brick wall surrounding a construction site was a row of Zhang Dali's profiles, each a two-metre-tall echo of the last. They looked listless, half-asleep, as if queuing up for something unspoken, insistent in the very silence of their presence. A pair of teenagers cuddled, whispering just beside the graffiti, apparently unaware of their surroundings until I got out my camera, at which point they became interested in me. While Zhang Dali's graffiti had opened the street up for my interpretation, loosened its tongue, it was my interest in the graffiti that spoke more eloquently to the locals, the fact of my curiosity more curious than the outlines themselves.

Wu Hung's primary interest in Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* is precisely in what he sees as the lack of dialogue it has inspired with locals. In an essay considering the graffiti's delivery and effect (rather than its meaning in the paradigm of the art world), Wu concludes that the project has seemingly failed in its original objective of sparking a visual exchange, the presence of the heads remaining unanswered in their context on the streets of Beijing. He writes:

Although Zhang eventually did get reactions to his art on the street and through the media, these were verbal responses, not visual communication ... A dialogue it may have been, but it was only a one-sided dialogue, as it merely consisted of a reaction, not an interaction.¹¹

Zhang Dali himself shared exactly this opinion, expressing disappointment to me in an interview that in the seven years he had been painting graffiti in Beijing, 'there hasn't been



a second or a third person, who's come and painted more'.¹² With the project apparently disregarded by its civic audience, he was compelled to evolve it himself, taking photographs of its public presence (many of which reveal again, the greater interest of passers-by in the camera than in the picture it is taking), transferring these images onto light boxes with the view to installing these back on the streets among the advertisements they resembled. Extending the artwork into a spin-off project called *Demolition*, Zhang also began knocking holes the size and shape of the heads out of already half-demolished old buildings, revealing skyscrapers on the other side, framing images of new Beijing with the destruction of the old. Against a sounding-board of perceived silence from the broader community, Zhang Dali turned the work in on itself, into a dialogue with itself and its environment, redeeming the meaning of the project in this way by ensuring a certain translation.

For weeks I saw things similarly. This attempt at a visual dialogue appeared most striking in the absence of response, the way that it haunted public spaces, solo and outwardly ignored, indicting the passivity of its audience, or simply enunciating its own redundancy. Over time, however, I started to notice tiny visual interactions with the work, so incoherent as to be like static, characters scratched in its spray paint, phone numbers written within its outline, the words 'big nose' scraped into the bulb of one of the profiles—scribble as irreverent as, albeit less formalised than, the illustrations of Zhang Dali himself. I had even heard of imitations of the profile, and seen such a squiggle, possibly that of children attempting a replica, yet falling well short of a direct facsimile

and in doing so creating a new image in the act of accident, establishing another base from which the shape could now evolve. Eliding Zhang Dali's and conventional Western definitions of graffiti, these markings seemed to receive and to respond to the heads at a number of unpredictable frequencies, at pitches imperceptible to Zhang Dali himself, making audible the work's infinite spectrum of resonance with an anonymous and visual white noise. Unordered by any system of language, the majority of these traces were incapable of engaging in dialogue as defined by Zhang Dali, were simply babble, expressing systems in the process of emergence, rather than those already established and termed.

In this way, these haphazard, almost invisible attestations on Beijing's walls demonstrated graffiti in its most exemplary form: spontaneous, nascent, fragmented and completely unsystematic. They were like the writing of the New York graffiti artists in the 1970s that was confrontational not only for its use of a public canvas, but also for its very illegibility, articulating or unleashing a chaos latent within the system, a cacophony of voices bubbling above ground from the subway in the emergent iteration of names. 'It is a plague that never ends', says the narrator of the documentary *Style Wars*, 'a symbol that we've lost control'.¹³ The choice of trains as a canvas allowed these graffiti writers not only visibility across the city, but also a slipperiness of movement, the image of their tag always sliding away from view, incapable of being pinned down. The ultimate goal to 'destroy all lines' referred at this time to those of the subway system, but may as well have meant those of a text. The dissonance of the many voices competed both internally and with those of the establishment, challenging and fracturing definitions, dislocating meaning and almost precluding the possibility of coherence.

In wading into a new environment with his image, Zhang Dali was as I was in China, testing the universality of his own personal idiom as had been formed within a matrix of identifiable cultures, attempting conversation with an unknown in a language known by himself. The very presence of his heads, just like my camera in the presence of locals, or representations of 'the West' on billboards, began ripples throughout Beijing, had effects not only beyond Zhang Dali's control but also beyond his own comprehension. These waves, these alternative interpretations, flowed outward from Zhang Dali's grasp, making visible the excess beyond his own system, answering his call to dialogue in languages either so foreign as to be indistinguishable or so embryonic as to simply confound.

The struggle to understand or simply to accept as meaningful what seemed meaningless to me had always been my most challenging task in China, especially in Kunming where, living without affinities for a whole year, the broadening of my parameters for common sense and value became necessary as a means of survival, imperative in keeping my spirits up in what seemed to me a shapeless and indefinite

landscape. Meeting Zhang Dali in 2003 in Beijing, I found his outlook comparable to my own. Frustrated with the decisions of his government, bewildered by the complicity or support of the mainstream, perplexed at the shapelessness of the local responses to his work, he told me of his sense of isolation and confusion within China. The difference here was that Zhang Dali was Chinese, an outsider with an insider's authority, and so offered the potential for my communication with an otherwise inscrutable other, on the basis of mutual incomprehension. In simpatico both with his work and with Zhang Dali himself—who, over time, became my good friend—I could begin now to afford to discriminate, relying on the commonality of our reference points to navigate, to make tracks in, a land that had previously seemed disturbing, misty with unclassifiable difference.

— TUYA

It's indicative of the concept's odd place in the Chinese context that the Western idea of graffiti has no firm translation in the Chinese language. *Luantu*, *luanhua* (which literally means 'messy drawing, messy picture') and *qiangbi dengchu de luantu* ('messy picture drawn on a wall') are descriptive but unwieldy, juvenile and unintegrated phrases, seemingly constructed to explain the very surface theory or even visual appearance of graffiti to those unfamiliar with the tradition, with little poetic purchase and or suggestion of longevity. The word recognised and employed by Chinese artists and those writing on Chinese graffiti is *tuya*, interestingly, a recycling or reincarnation of a word traditionally used to describe children's bad calligraphy, the components of which translate literally into English as 'crow picture' or 'chicken tracks'. The use of the word crow, also in that for opium, gives *tuya* already a certain illicit shimmer, a suggestion of the potentially sinister, resonant with the notion currently potent in China of a spiritual or moral pollution blowing in from 'the West'.

This word *tuya* is not at this stage widely recognised as referring to the pictures on walls around Beijing, many of which are perhaps simply too extraneous to the system of everyday life in Beijing today even to be noticed by the majority of those who live there. Most people I asked didn't know what this word meant: taxi drivers were blank, university students thought I had my pronunciation wrong, and a Chinese teacher from the prestigious Qinghua University insisted that I'd been misinformed and that *tuya* could only be used in its original and specific circumstance. He tried to find a word more appropriate, but couldn't, and ended up by telling me that there just wasn't any graffiti in China and so its discussion was ultimately impossible.

An early newspaper article about Zhang Dali's heads, written before he was identified as the artist, did however use this term, and so, as Zhang Dali himself told me, *tuya* is now

the definitive translation, even if only by virtue of the fact that there is no other. At least, unlike English—which apparently found the concept untranslatable and so imported the idiom *graffiti* wholesale from Italian—the Chinese language (as is currently deployed in art discourse and social commentary of the West) has found a resonance within its own language with which to convey this concept, tapping into, perhaps, something of the ‘pure language’ inexpressible without this encounter between two cultures, and expressing it in the sense that milk is expressed, with a little extra help from another party.

— GREAT WALL OF CHINA

Returning to the thought of the graffiti on the Great Wall the other day, to those hundreds of thousands of people’s names scratched into the centuries-old brickwork of China’s most famous cultural icon, I couldn’t remember at first why I didn’t have any photographs of it. My few photographs of the Great Wall are almost the only pictures I took while in China that were not pointed directly at a wall’s surface. They were my only pictures of a recognisably Chinese landmark, almost as if, on this day, the colossal and archetypal representation of Chinese culture had me wooed, its authority of a distinctive narrative dominating enough to make me overlook the jostling of contemporary identities that actually gave texture to its surface.

But my lack of documentation of this graffiti wasn’t simply due to the irresistible distraction of the familiar, but more to the fact that the infinity of names etched into the wall were too small and indistinct to be visible to my automatic camera. I would need an SLR camera with a special zoom lens to make them perceptible to an audience elsewhere. My cheap snapshot box could only give a general impression of blurry bricks, perhaps a suggestion of some indecipherable sketches, a hint of some activity or plurality but with no focus or clear communication of specifics. My camera could understand and translate the grand and epic ‘Great Wall of China’, each watchtower repeating the last, curving over mountain after mountain in each direction as if confirming the existence of this ‘China’ as advertised on the posters on the China Tourist Bureau on George Street back home, but it could not make sense of the wall in close-up, of the individual markings made by Chinese tourists themselves.

On the day I was there though, breathing and talking with my friend beside me, answering a mobile phone call from a friend in another city and telling him about the snow that was freezing me to the innards, the names and half-written sentences that would elide the instant photograph were still wiggling constantly in my peripheral vision. Even to those who couldn’t read Chinese, these lines and cuts would obviously have been made in the present, whispering of the wall’s living history, of its continued symbolic significance as heard in the complex layering of these countless tiny pieces. This was the

breath still coming from the wall, like my own, white before me, evidence of the dynamic interaction that carries this structure always one day more into the future as long as names are continually etched into its stone. As Edward Scheer notes in his comments on the work of Michael Taussig, ‘defacement releases the power of the monument, making it visible perhaps for the first time’, just as these grooves here pierced for me any sense of the wall’s already decided historical significance, giving purchase to the emblematic.¹⁴

Chinese tourists seemed to see things differently though, since according to the common explanation for its abundance, this graffiti is not strictly defacement in the Taussigian sense. A famous quote of Mao’s says that those who have not visited the Great Wall have not lived a full life. And so anyone keen to see their efforts recognised will also leave their mark. To the Chinese then, these names resonate more with the fulfilment of a religious pilgrimage than with sacrilege or vandalism, crawling over one another for space, struggling to stake their claim not only for a piece of the wall or a place in Chinese history, but also to declare a life worth living, a life endorsed by evidence of this trace as prompted by Mao.

This Babel, this contest, is again the struggle to state one’s name, an attempt to reach the heavens with a tower instating identity. It keeps the wall alive, reinforced with the participation of contemporary Chinese lives, and although it may slide from the grip of lightweight cameras, its cobweb of contest offers access to the site as process, rather than estranging with the closure of a constructed cultural icon.

— THE RAIN WILL RAIN

In the weeks that I knew him, Zhang Dali remained adamant that there had been no interaction with his graffiti, no response to the call he had sent bowling down the blocks of Beijing to ‘Speak! And speak in the universal tongue I have mastered.’ He seemed to agree with the New York graffiti artist Phase 2, who believed that ‘You don’t even have to be able to speak English. All you gotta do is get a spraycan and paint something.’¹⁵ According to this reasoning, creativity and individual expression would make for a language outside the tangle of linguistic difference, a language comprehensible and accessible to all, the potential for which, if it existed in Beijing, would be tapped by the heads of Zhang Dali.

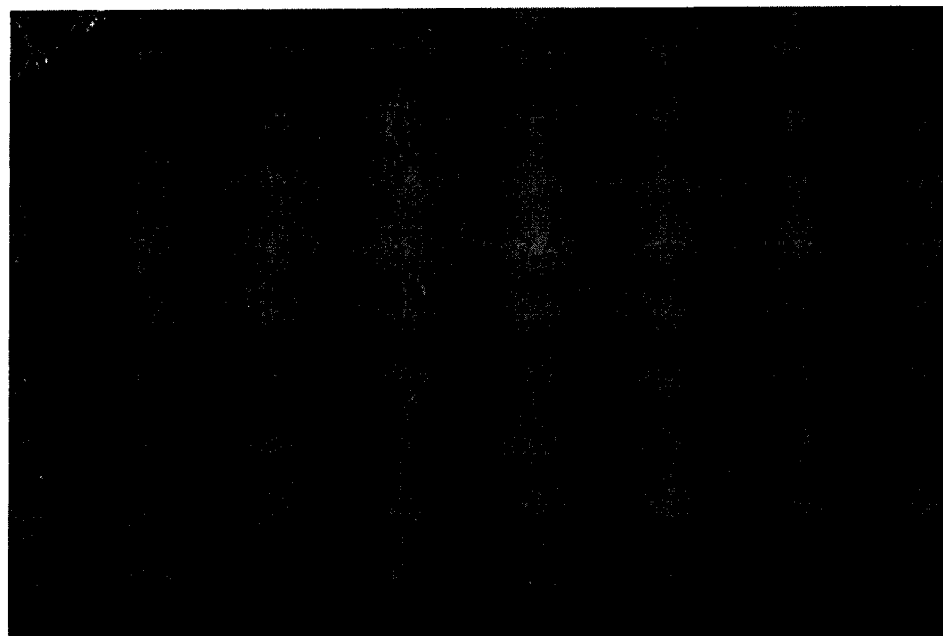
But the murmurings that did answer this call were inaudible to Zhang Dali, and to critics, such as Wu Hung, who have written on the eerie silence that supposedly hovers around Zhang’s work.¹⁶ This ‘universal language’ hoped to be latent in the city’s grid did not, apparently, yield up to the stain of Zhang Dali’s paint. The slurs that I saw scratched into the ink of his heads’ outlines, the imitations of its image I heard of and saw across town, as well as the rapt English half-words and sentences unrelated to his work,

were thought to be too aimless, derivative or misconceived to substantiate themselves as graffiti or as constituent of any real response. 'That's not real graffiti', said Zhang Dali, 'not like in Bologna. It's not real graffiti art.'¹⁷

Although mimicry is in many cases considered the purest and most primitive of creative acts, it was the graffiti that attempted to copy or reproduce either the English language or the shape of his heads that was most derided by Zhang Dali. Straight imitation, and naive imitation at that, was to him neither personal nor innovative, and so was outside the possible framework of a graffiti exchange. To copy another's language in this way was, by this logic, to ostracise yourself from the imagined grammar of creativity, of independent conception, and, in doing so, to make your work invisible—to erase it while writing it on a wall. People had written: 'D.W.', 'I LOVE YCC', 'tonghunyu', 'sky and cat', 'Snow', 'rain', 'y' ... and *why*, Zhang Dali might well have asked. But as Dante described [the perfect language] as 'the speech that an infant learns as it first begins to articulate, imitating the sounds made to it by its nurse, before knowing any rule', so might we imagine these random imitations as an ever-replenishing source of new meanings, meanings borne of slippage, of impersonation, of misconstruction or of no more than a change in perspective, a pre-linguistic babble slowly taking form in the most unconscious and creative act.¹⁸

The tiny spidery characters etched into Zhang Dali's spray-paint were similarly regarded as simply too formless, too irrelevant to be counted as productive of any kind of communication. Just as my cheap automatic camera was incapable of reading anything beyond the large-scale tourist spectacle of the Great Wall, so too did Zhang Dali's lens remain suspended on the empty but familiar image of his own heads, standing solo, both obvious and ignored, missing the existence of any patois that might be developing in their grain. Zhang's terms for dialogue pivoted on the expectation of coherence, not only of an internal coherence in another's response, but also one consistent with the vernacular of his own work. To discover a communication articulate to the point at which it qualified as dialogue in Zhang Dali's and Wu Hung's terms would, however, mean that the eruptive spontaneity that first so impressed Zhang Dali in graffiti would be spent, solidified and classified, just as the words 'beat' or 'punk' now refer to identifiable music and literary genres rather than to the celebration of random lurches at the nonsensical.

As does all graffiti, Zhang Dali's original defacement began as a projective test within which likeness was soon after recognised, a destructive act from which resemblance was eventually born. Having its source in the collective production that Bataille called 'primitivism', that is, the production 'that ties together the first marks squiggled on the cave walls from twenty-five thousand years ago and the random traces made by contemporary children as they drag their dirty fingers along walls, doors for the



destructive pleasure of leaving a mark'¹⁹ it constructed in its act of destruction, in its attack on a pre-established order. These other desecrations, of either clean walls or Zhang Dali's graffiti, are a similar print of tentative presence, challenging in their anonymity and lack of clarity. As Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss point out, Bataille describes this desire to destroy or deface a surface as 'alteration':

relishing the fact that this word ... points in opposite directions simultaneously: both downward, to the decomposition of matter (as in a corpse), and upward, to its transcendence (as in the passage to an altered, sacred state, as for example, a ghost).²⁰

Unity is preceded by multiplicity, since as Jacques Derrida writes, 'the nonpresence of the other is [already] inscribed within the sense of the present'.²¹ The scribbles and scratches that landed on or around Zhang Dali's heads may not have made sense to him as author, but the pidgin they began with his mark gestured at the possibility of future Creoles, manifesting until that time the *différance* inherent in his artwork, languages he himself could not yet understand.

I've found myself that the best *staté* for a writer, the best state to write in, is this confusion, the 'permanent literary *flou*' which José Ortega Gasset says is translation.²² Trying not to know everything, analysing with your eyes half-closed and your lashes slightly getting in the way, is probably the clearest picture you'll get. You can freeze an image with confrontation, but its meaning will continue to change with the temporality of milieu, or the scrawl that gets added across; you may deface or add to the idea yourself soon after and deliver work through to new audiences. What comes out of words on a

wall—out of free-floating junk mail, emails, creating pathways as they go—will be named and codified at the point when its consistency as ‘dialogue’ can be read.

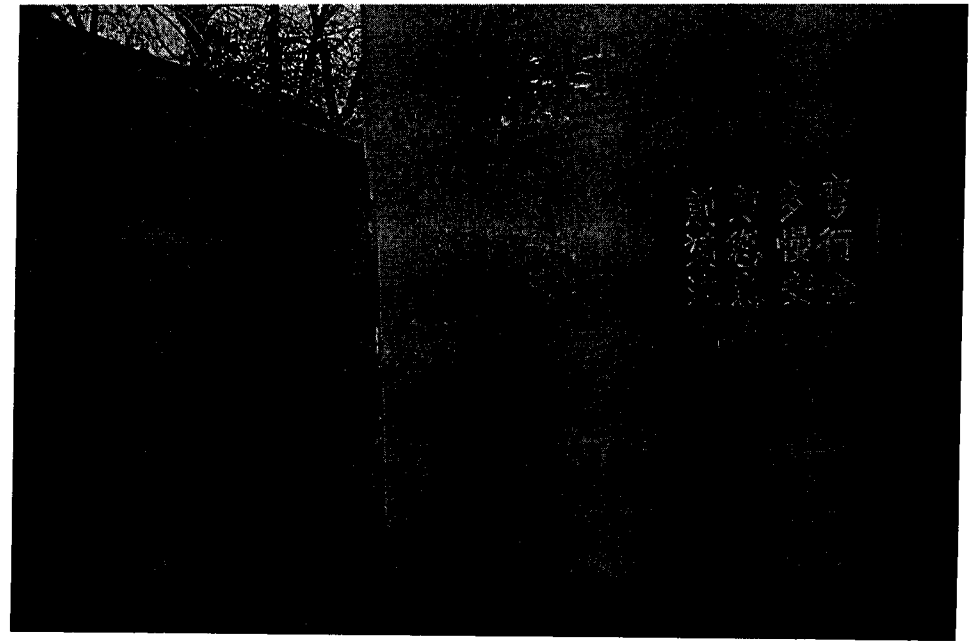
The dialogue that Zhang Dali’s graffiti has with the international art market is already fluent and lucid, reassuring in its own way that something in this fountain of Beijing babble has been notated, recorded and discussed. The alien language Zhang Dali’s work might be in the process of developing with the streets and people of Beijing is, however, something as yet as enigmatic and promising as the concept of morphic resonance, the only phenomenon to account for the fact that I came home from my time in Beijing to find an AK-47 of exact size and colour to those sprayed by Zhang Dali in the Summer Hill supermarket car park. So who’s imitating whose graffiti? What is independence, and how do we confer any scrawl on a wall with the legitimacy of ‘real graffiti art’?

— UREA BANAL

In an alleyway that turned about five corners in on itself, around courtyards and apartment blocks and then bending eventually to give back onto another street, I found a catchment of English banalities, swearwords, insignias, sprayed in red on a wall. ‘Damn’, ‘Fury’, ‘Punk’, a circled ‘A’ for anarchy, ‘Life is Rubbish’, ‘I love you’, all meaning the same thing, which might well simply be nothing. So many pieces of graffiti in the one spot, all chunks of untranslatables, idioms and obscenities, chipped somewhere off the English language and collecting like driftwood in this back lane of Beijing. Some of them were covered by council notices in Chinese (defacement attracting further defacement as motion spurs further motion—don’t stand too close to a moving train, you’ll be sucked in) but still with the original, obstinate and incongruous red lettering insisting on showing through.

But how does this work? How are these travelling as if impelled by some translatability that, as idioms, they supposedly do not possess? How is it that these words continue to bump about the world, unchanging? Insolvent and unable to be metabolised, they collect in places like this, like urea in the bladder, large particles to be passed exactly as they are from the system. Which I suppose they might do eventually, move through without moving much else on the way, passive and dumb, speaking of very little.

Except, that is, they speak of absolutely everything, just as silence speaks of everything, more eloquent than words, since as untranslatable elements these dullard idioms remind us once again of language’s inability to say it all, tweaking once more the thought of universality with a reminder of its inaccessibility. In the same way that Taussig describes negative defacement as ‘the closest many of us are going to get to the sacred in this modern world’, these spare parts or broken pieces that rattle about make audible



language’s structural limitations, sounding out its walls and dead ends, telling us where its outside begins, a place that still can be reached for, even if it cannot be reached.²³

Denis Hollier writes:

The dirty word is a word exposing its impropriety, but, rather than doing it by moving toward some desired proper name, it exposes what is not proper and unclean about the proper name, exposing the transposition every name, by itself, is already, the transposition betraying the unspeakable, that which cannot be named.²⁴

Just as the expletive strips the name of its propriety, so too is the cliché a kind of negative defacement, undressing the statement of its originality and exposing that which is derivative in every new idea. The dirty word finding its prime and most intimately related target in the unspeakable name of God (which is the most proper of all nouns, spoken again and again with the baptising of each new universal, and then uncovered in the event of each new blasphemy), banality strikes most significantly at the notion of unique creation, showing novelty up for its influences and removing copyright from claims of invention.

— HEURISTIC

How often I seem to end up at airports, killing time at the same bars, buying last minute toothbrushes from the same chemists, waving people good-bye behind the same glass screen, and still these places manage to represent finality and beginning, as if they weren’t

simply a thoroughfare, over and over again. I'm always slightly surprised to find myself still alive and inside the building when, after the grand farewell, I politely take my place in the queue for immigration, knowing exactly what next to do, still breathing, still thinking, half checking out the photo in my passport, making my way past another batch of duty-free shops identical to those left behind just five minutes ago. Going out, you're not sure whether you've already started travelling. Coming home, you not really sure whether you've yet arrived—there's always more awaiting, so and so to see, photographs to ponder and then memories to start remembering.

I've come home from China more than once now, each time with the thought of return, and each time to notice more than ever the number of Chinese people in Sydney. Mandarin, Chinese art and even friends of Zhang Dali get about in my own home city. Friends here do graffiti and I can't help drawing parallels. Simply *being* in Sydney prompts reflection on my time in China, keeps me travelling in its experience, keeps me returning to make new sense of it, always with relation to new environments and experiences. I don't know how many times a month I hear myself explaining to Chinese people who ask where I learnt Mandarin the year I spent in Kunming, and then the two months I spent in Beijing. It's like a baby I carry with me at all times, changing every moment, feeling its way for a place in the world that, really, it's already got.

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4. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, Columbia University, New York, 1986.
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