



NUL - New Urban Languages
Conference Proceedings
Milan, 19-21 June 2013

Planum. The Journal of Urbanism, n.27, vol.2/2013
www.planum.net | ISSN 1723-0993
Proceedings published in October 2013

The spread of Street Art in the South of China

Reflecting on the first Chinese generation
subject to the cultural processes of globalization

Francesco M. Terzago

Politecnico di Milano

DASStU - Department of Architecture and Urban Studies

E-mail: francesco.terzago@gmail.com

In this research Chinese Street-art is described through urban Sociology and Philosophy point of view. The city is the place of intellectual activity (Simmel), thus the Street-art represents the tool for artists' spirit affirmation. The survey is a qualitative data collection and describes: Chinese legislative context which favours Street-art spread, if we compare it to the ones of other countries. The linguistic context, where English is used by young Chinese artists to gain access to Western knowledge. The economic context, PRC is aware of nowadays Consumerism habits. This work ends by proposing the Street-art as one of emerging evidences of a new *kultur*, which is inseparable from globalization processes. In order to write the essay, I spent two years in the Guangdong area, thanks to a scholarship of the University of Padua.

Keywords: Street-art, China, Globalization

1. Introduction

This paper will deal with the following topics: 1) The Chinese legislative context, which favours the spread of Street Art, compared to the situation in other countries. 2) The linguistic context, where English is used by young Chinese artists to gain access to Western knowledge. 3) The economic context: the People's Republic of China is aware of nowadays consumerism habits. 4) This work ends by proposing Street Art as one of the emerging evidences of a new *kultur*¹, which is inseparable from the process of globalization. This research describes the spread of Street Art in the People's Republic of China. Street Art in China is a marginal phenomenon and concerns, in particular, the most important cities on the East coast, as well as

¹ According to Spengler we can believe that Western Countries have gone through the zivilization Era (or are experiencing it) and the contemporary phase of history is the rising of a kultur (or the overlapping of this kultur to our zivilization) that I call globalization kultur. In this case, determining the characteristics of that same kultur is difficult because, in Spengler's philosophical theory, only during the zivilization Era it is possible to describe the kultur that has caused, originated the same zivilization «[...] mentre tramontiamo, vediamo il nostro declino. Il nostro sguardo è rivolto alla storia, la nostra capacità di scrivere storia, sono segni rivelatori del fatto che il cammino scende verso il basso» «While we fade we see our decline. Our eyes are turned to history and our ability to write history are telltale signs of the fact that our path goes down» Spengler O. (2008, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* 1918), *Il tramonto dell'Occidente (Decline of the West)*, Longanesi, Gravelona Toce.

the largest economic centres of the country: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Beijing, Guangzhou and Chongqing are some considerable examples.

2. What is Street-Art?

It is well known that Street Art was born in the U.S.A. around the end of the Seventies and in the first decade of the Eighties in New York. The most important artists of this season were Keith Haring, Paolo Buggiani, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Ken Hiratsuka [2].

To understand the spread of Street Art in China we have to consider that Street Art is the artistic phenomenon that has changed the look of the city, yet its positioning and its production weren't decided by the city government, nor the politicians or the urban planners. For a better understanding of the definition of Street Art I'm going to propose two different examples: on the one hand Banksy's career that, in general, is the career of a proper Street Artist because it has been, in most cases, characterized by deliberate disregard of authorities' restrictions; on the other hand we have a case of ambiguity, the requalification project of the Corvetto flyover «Corvetto Square flyover in Milan has changed its look with [...] the decoration made by Dutch Street Artist Zedz. [...] The work has been carried out through a series of innovative coats of painting developed on a surface of 1,500 square metres, in Japan. The paint used, for which Milan town council allocated 50 thousand Euros, creates a repellent graffiti-proof effect and makes surfaces unassailable and easily washable. Renovation works lasted eight months.»² The expressive language adopted by artist Zeds is the language of Street Art, but his intervention was decided by the urban government, according to the urban plan. We can consider the first case, Banksy's, as a proper case of Street Art, and the second, Zedz's, as a commissioned intervention of Public Art or, according to Kwon's definition, as a case of «“mainstream public art” [...] the specific category of art that is typically sponsored and/or administered by city, state, or national government agencies, in whole or in part. It involves bureaucratized review and approval procedures that are outside the museum or gallery system and often engage numerous non-art organizations, including local community groups, private foundations, and corporations.» (Kwon M., 2002).

3. The Chinese legislation

The interviews that I collected³ during the last two years I spent in the Guangdong Province tell a story where Street-Art artists are not frightened by police intervention while they are bombing [6]. They explained to me that the only thing that a Street-Art artist cannot do is describe, with his work, the political and social issues of the People's Republic of China of today. However, also in democratic Hong Kong, whoever promotes the use of Street-Art to disseminate critical political contents in regard to positions and choices of the Chinese Communist Party — it was the case of the “Free Ai Wei Wei Campaign” - could get into trouble with the law enforcement and arrested for soiling. This was the case of two Leagues of Social Democrat protestants that, on the 8th May 2012, were arrested⁴. In the Chinese mainland, soiling usually involves only the payment of a fine, according to what American Street Artist Mels said on the official Sydney University blog “Art Space China” of the China Studies Centre: «There's technically no law that says you can't do graffiti. As long as the graffiti is not political I don't think there are ever extremely dire consequences, and the way the police will act towards you all depends on how they're feeling that day. If they want to power trip on you, you'll have to pay 1,000 kuai or something, which is like US\$150. The repercussions here are nowhere near those in the United States. So it's easier to get involved in the scene» (Cornell, 2012).

²Anon. (2011) La Repubblica Online
http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2011/12/01/foto/corvetto_la_street_art_colora_il_cavalcavia-25932003/1/ last visit 25/04/2013

³The Street Artists that I have interviewed asked me to be protected by anonymity

⁴Anon. <http://news.sina.com.hk/news/20110509/-1-2096489/1.html> last visit 26/04/2013.

Hence, as an example, I will quote the Italian and the US cases: in the United States, repression goes hand in hand with the spread of Street Art and graffiti; in Italy during the last Berlusconi's legislature we have seen tougher sanctions for those who used the street as a place of their expression, as well as the walls of cities and trains. The Italian Law forbids graffiti, tags, vandalism on public or private walls, buildings and goods: «Decree-Law No. 92 of 23 May 2008 (Maroni Decree) – converted into Law No. 125 of 24 July 2008 - “Urgent measures for public security” 1. With immediate effect, it is forbidden to create graffiti, paint, damage or commit acts of vandalism on walls and buildings, on private or public properties, like, for instance, cabins, gardens, benches, signage, urban equipment, vehicles, monuments, sports facilities. 2. With immediate effect, it is forbidden for all commercial actors and sellers in both private and public areas to sell spray paint cans to people under 18 (eighteen) years. These actors will have to note on an ad-hoc register, that will have to be shown to the judiciary police on request, the personal details of all of those who buy spray paint cans or similar goods that can be used to write on walls»⁵.

At this point it is necessary to mention the example of the city of New York, which, just thirty years before the last Berlusconi's Government, was endowed with the same juridical instruments and proposed politics that are comparable to those described in the articles I previously quoted. In addition, with regard to the activities of Street Artists at the expenses of train carriages, already in 1977 the Metropolitan Transportation Authority adopted a system for cleaning train carriages using an acid solution. The plant, which cost 400.000\$, caused the closing of a school - students accused severe breathing problems - and in 1985 the workers employed in that plant received, directly from MTA, compensation for \$ 6.3 million for health problems caused by exposure to these solvents. Again in 1985, in the whole territory of New York State, it was decided to ban the sale of spray cans to people under eighteen, and earlier in 1981 MTA had fenced in its yards, providing them with vigilantes⁶ (Mininno, 2008).

This attitude - which is on the one hand purely repressive, and on the other represents an attempt to institutionalize artistic Street-Art episodes by making them converge into specific paradigms - demonstrates that Street Art and graffiti are, nowadays, true artistic phenomena that have become part of the mainstream culture. In the eyes of the politicians they represent something that cannot be ignored, and that - especially when they multiply and become uncontrollable - must be brought under the authorities' control (in a mainstream public art path). Perhaps it is for this reason - for the great ability of Street Art to modify the look of the places where we live - that its suppression proves harder in those countries where the culture of private ownership is more consolidated and the authorities embody the values of conservatism. Thus, Urban Art, in its traditional conception, would bear the aesthetic of authorities, as well as that of the dominant culture: «The identity and effectiveness of public art may be formulated starting from a number of remarks concerning the deficient critique outside art institutions [...] as well as the lack of evaluative reactions from the public in the areas where public art works are installed. As a consequence, in many public spaces we see both a decline of artistic practices, as well as the public art's failure to create a public. “Public art” is also examined from the perspective of the establishment of the dominant culture by national galleries and modern art museums, which, through their own programmes, try to model the public's reception of art. As a consequence, most commissioned public art in the West has privileged modernist and minimalist projects which would express “the freedom of thought and expression” of artists in an advanced liberal society.» (Gheorghe C. 2010).

4. The study of the English language in the People's Republic of China

Since the end of the Seventies, the English language has become one of the pillars of Chinese Education (Boyle J. 2000). This was due to Zhou Enlai's economic reforms carried out by Deng Xiaoping, named Four Modernizations (Joochul K., 1988): agriculture, industrial development, defence and scientific research. These reforms envisaged to guarantee a long and durable economic growth. Therefore, for this

⁵ Official Gazzette of the Italian Republic (2008) n. 173 del 25 luglio

⁶ sempre nel 1985 nello stato di New York venne vietata la vendita delle bombolette spray ai minori di diciott'anni

⁷ To guarantee a B1/B2 (advanced low/advanced mid) level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

reason, the Chinese establishment decided to concentrate its efforts in the field of instruction to generate an élite of engineers and technicians able to understand the scientific code par excellence: the English code. This literacy process has started its fourth phase with the scholastic reform occurred in the Nineties of the last century: «The Ministry of Education launched a new campaign to reform EFL⁷ education at the turn of the 21st century. The reform aims at modernizing EFL teaching on campuses, pushing it out of its traditional track and equipping it with a better technology. Great importance is given to communicative proficiency in cross-cultural exchanges. EFL national certificates are still important, but no longer a strict criterion for students to gain a degree. The situation has improved quite a lot, with better-equipped language labs for all regular classes and the invitation of more native-English-speaking teachers to help students with authentic spoken and written English.» (Zuo Lianjun, 2008). At this point it is indispensable to highlight that almost the totality of the interviewed Chinese Street Artists have an age included in the generation of those who were born from the end of the Eighties and the first half of Nineties (Jianxiu Kang, 1999). Therefore, for a birth right, they are included in a set that we can call: first global Chinese generation. In this paper this expression refers to those people who were born in the Eighties and Nineties and, as a result, nowadays we can benefit from the outcomes of the school reform of the Nineties. Unfortunately we have to exclude from this same set the rural population for which a certain level of education is still precluded.

Instead, we have to consider that this fourth phase of dissemination of the English language knowledge was the first one ever to imply the study of American culture and, as a consequence, the approach of school children to both the literature and history of that country. Over the last few years, more and more Chinese televisions have enriched their daily schedule with films in English and documentaries with subtitles in English, in Chinese or both (Boyle J., 2000). Considering all this, it is easier to understand what was one of the factors that caused the spread of Street Art in China. Another equally important observation is that English is considered, by the Chinese school, as one of the main subjects of instruction, like Mathematics and the same Mandarin. English, Mandarin and Mathematics are the three most important subjects of university entrance examinations.

5. Consumerism in China

The spread of Street Art in China is one of the symptoms of the participation of this country to the process of globalization: it is due, on the one hand, to the unique urbanization process that China has been undergoing over the last forty years⁸ comparable to the one that had distinguished the European countries during the years of the reconstruction after the Second World War⁹; on the other hand, it is due to the characteristics of the Chinese society – and more precisely to the weakening, started in the Eighties, of the *hukou* system and of the economic reforms. The household registration system (*hukou*) has been, from the end of the Fifties to present days, one of the main internal migration control strategies of the Chinese government. However, thanks to the economic reforms of the Eighties and Nineties, its power to control the movements of the Chinese population diminished: before the Four Modernizations Era and the liberalization¹⁰, *hukou* was the system used to chain citizens to their birthplaces and to guarantee to the Government of the People's Republic of China, in a Planned Economic context, the opportunity to plan the work career of its own citizens and, for the same reason, divide the population in two different macro-

⁸ According to Kim Joochul China was characterized by: first urbanization phase (1949-1955), second urbanization phase (1958-1960), first anti-urbanization phase (1961-1965), second urbanization phase (1966-1971); and then a new urbanization phase that is ongoing. Kim Joochul (1988), “China's modernizations, reforms and mobile population” in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, December, Vol. XII, Issue 4, pp. 595–608.

⁹ Lyotard J. (1984) (first French edition 1979) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* - University Minnesota Press, Minneapolis. «Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age. This transition has been underway since at least the end of the 1950s, which for Europe marks the completion of reconstruction».

¹⁰ The PRC economic system is defined: Socialist Market Economy.

groups: the rural population and the urban population. This has caused, for example in the Guangzhou area, a unique urban evolution that, in turn, has caused « a great number of villages at the fringes of the city to be swallowed up by urban development» (Yanliu L., de Meulder B, Wang S., 2011) . This rift survives in the present - the division between rural and urban population¹¹ - , a present where the liquefaction of society¹² (Bauman Z.,1998; Dawes S., 2011) has increased the economic differences between rich and poor people. About this issue it is important to say that the Chinese Gini coefficient was one of the highest in the world for the NBS¹³: in 2012 it was 0.474 according to the China Daily, «An index reflecting the gap between rich and poor reached 0.474 in China in 2012, higher than the warning level of 0.4 set by the United Nations»¹⁴. «In the People's Republic of China (PRC) the incredible economic growth hasn't had any impact on the human development yet: great part of the population hasn't received any benefit from the so called "economic miracle". Since 1990, China has witnessed an increase in the disparity between urban and rural areas and within urban areas, as well as a low human development in large part of the rural population.» (Biggeri M., Gambelli H., 2008). In 2012, the urban population represented over half of the total population for the first time (Kam Wing Chan, 2012) China is experiencing nowadays what Europe had experienced at the beginning of the last century and at the end of the Nineteenth century and is described by Georg Simmel in "The Metropolis and The Mental Life" (Simmel G., 1900; Simmel G., 1976). The Chinese Street Artists that I met over the last two years are part of the urban middle and lower-middle classes and, at the same time, they are citizens of the most important economic centres of China. They got in touch with Street Art during their studies at the School of Fine Arts or during the last years of high-school. In Guangzhou, for example, the School of Fine Arts represents the place where young adults – who come here from different cities - have the opportunity to compare their own different experience and tradition. These additional pieces of information may allow us to observe closely the social and cultural phenomena that concern China nowadays. The final goal of this paper is to propose a first overview of the phenomenon of Street Art, trying to understand the paradigm where Street Art could be collocated, and trying to comprehend differences and similarities between the two different realities represented by the Western and the Oriental worlds and, in the case of similarities, to understand their common origin: the processes of globalization.

6. Conclusion, Street Art in China and a new global *kultur*

The spread of Street Art, in the case of China, is then a synonym of the country's opening to the rest of the world and to the processes of globalization. Moreover, the artists who practice Street Art in the PRC use their imagination according to the customs of the artistic field in Western Countries, because they belong to the first Chinese global generation I described above. In a season when Nations, the old institutions and their own narratives are going through a crisis, a rising *kultur* - the *kultur* of globalization – can meet the need for social belonging of young adults. Thus, the 'museification'¹⁵ process that

¹¹ Ibidem «[...] redistribution in China is modulated by the dual hukou system, which registers people by their birthplace with an urban or a rural hukou status. Citizenship/ villagership is the condition for accessing public/collective facilities in cities/villages. In other words, urban facilities are for citizens, not for 'villagers'».

¹² Zygmunt Bauman: «Martin Jay [...] is of course right. The advent of 'liquid modernity' is anything but globally synchronized. Passage to the 'liquid stage', like any other passages in history, happens in different parts of the planet on different dates and proceeds at a different pace. Also, what is crucially important, it takes place each time in a different setting since the sheer presence on the global scene of players who have already completed the passage excludes the possibility of their itineraries being copied and reiterated [...]. China is currently preoccupied with the challenges and tasks of the 'primitive accumulation', which are known to generate an enormous volume of social dislocations, turbulence, and discontent as well as to result in extreme social polarization. Primitive accumulation is not a setting hospitable to any kind of freedom whether of the producer, or of consumer variety. The course things are taking cannot but shock its victims and collateral casualties, and produce potentially explosive social tensions, which the up-and-coming entrepreneurs and merchants need to suppress with the help of a powerful and merciless, coercive state dictatorship».

¹³ National Bureau of Statistics of China.

¹⁴ Xin Hua (2013) China Daily. China Gini coefficient at 0.474 in 2012, January. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2013-01/18/content_16140018.htm

¹⁵ From the Italian 'museificazione'

characterizes civilizations gives space to oblivion and to new generating forces. This process is clearer in the cities, the intellectual places par excellence (Simmel G., 1900; Simmel G., 1976), where the marketing strategies and the language of advertising (Borghini S., Visconti L., Anderson L., and Sherry J. F. 2010) are more evident, and this is true also in China. There, whoever decides to start an artistic path in the field of Street Art will be influenced by this context. When I asked Chinese Street-Art Artists if they recognized Shufa¹⁶ as a viable form of Street Art, according to the definition of the second character of this paper, they would answer “no”, because they consider Street Art as something that belongs to the West. However, to be more precise, we can add that Street Art belongs to a global *kultur* that is deeply rooted in the soft-power preponderance of the Anglo-American culture «*Much graffiti, particularly the tradition of tagging originating from New York...* provides a model for an individualised, highly mobile, geographically engaged subject that is not dissimilar from an ideal, late-capitalist consumer» (McDowell L. 2005) and in the spread of consumerism habits. Moreover, in China, the new generations are experiencing (someone of them since birth) this kind of conditions. At the same time the spread of Street Art can co-exist with an increased freedom of expression, and, in the case of China, with a private property culture that is not mature (constitutionally guaranteed only in China since 2004¹⁷).

References

- Bauman Z., (Referring to) (1998), *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Biggeri M., Gambelli H., (2008), *Studi e note di economia. L'altra Cina*. September, pp. 265-298.
- Borghini S., Visconti L., Anderson L., and Sherry J. F., (2010), “Symbiotic Postures of Commercial Advertising and Street Art” in *Journal of Advertising* vol. 39, no. 3, September, pp. 113-126.
- Boyle J., (2000), “A Brief History of English Language Teaching in China” in *LATEFL*, n. 155, pp. 147-155.
- Cornell C., (2012), “Beast Mode Studios: graffiti China-style” in *Art Space China*, The University of Sydney <http://www.artspacechina.com.au/?p=1314> - last visit 26/04/2013.
- Dawes S., (2011), “The Role of the Intellectual in Liquid Modernity: An Interview with Zygmund Bauman” in *Theory, Culture & Society* Vol. XXVIII, May, Issue 3 pp. 130-148.
- Gheorghe C., (2010), *Theories and Uses in Common: Responses of Art in the Public Sphere*, META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy, vol. II, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University Press, Iasi, Romania.
- Jianxiu K., (1999), “English everywhere in China” in *English Today* Vol. XV, issue 2, April, pp. 46-48 (published online October 2008).
- Joochul K., (1988), “China's modernizations, reforms and mobile population” in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 4, n. 12.
- Kam Wing Chan, (2012), “Crossing the 50 Percent Population Rubicon: Can China Urbanize to Prosperity?” in *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Bellewether Publishing, Ltd. Volume 53, number 1, January-February pages 63-86.
- Kwon M., (2002), *One Place After Another, Site-specific, Art and Locational Identity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Kim Joochul (1988), “China's modernizations, reforms and mobile population” in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, December, Vol. XII, Issue 4, pp. 595–608.
- Lin Y., de Meulder B., Shifu W., (2011) “Understanding the Village in the City in Guangzhou: Economic Integration and Development Issue and their Implications for the Urban Migrant” in *Urban Studies* Vol. XLIX (XVI), March, pp. 3583-3598.

¹⁶ Traditional Chinese calligraphy, usually performed in the common place: squares, streets, parks etc.

¹⁷ Art. 13, Constitution of People's Republic of China «The state protects the right of citizens to own lawfully earned income, savings, houses and other lawful property. The state protects by law the right of citizens to inherit private property.»

- McDowell L., (2005) "Graffiti-media: How graffiti functions as a model for new media futures" in *Proceedings of the Vital Signs Conference - National Conference of the School of Creative Media*, RMIT, September pp. 6.
- Mininno A., (2008), *Graffiti Writing*, Electa Mondadori Arte, Milano.
- Official Gazzette of the Italian Republic (2008) n. 173 del 25 luglio.
- Simmel G., (1900), (1976), *The Metropolis and Mental Life The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, New York: Free Press, New York.
- Seno, E. (editor), (2010) McCormick C., Schiller Marc & Sara (collaborators), Wooster Collective (in collaboration with) - *Trespass, a History of uncommissioned Urban Art*, Taschen.
- Various Authors, (2003) *Style: Writing from the underground, (R)evolutions of Aerosol Linguistics*, Nuovi Equilibri, Viterbo. «Saturating trains/other places abundantly with ones name».
- Zuo L., (2008), "A recent history of teaching EFL in China" in *Tesol Jurnal Vol. V, Issue 2, June*, http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/sec_document.asp?CID=1901&DID=11103 last visit 26/04/2013.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Professor Giangiorgio Pasqualotto of Padua University who was my mentor for my bachelor degree in Fine Arts, with a thesis of Aesthetics of the Oriental world concerning the spread of Street Art. In order to understand the meaning of Street-Art phenomena, I contacted Professor Alessandro Mininno of Politecnico of Milan and the author of GRAFFITI WRITING, Mondadori Electa, as well as Paolo Buggiani, Street Artist who worked in New York, close to Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Ken Hiratsuka. To understand the Cantonese area, Chen Rui was a good guide: he is a Chinese Street Artist, he showed me the most important Street-Art Hall of Fame in Guangzhou and he introduced me to the Street-Art community of that city.