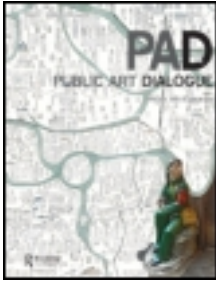


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WRITING AT THE END OF HISTORY: REFLECTIONS ON TWO CASES OF GRAFFITI IN HONG KONG

Lu Pan

IS HONG KONG AT THE END OF HISTORY?

The history of Hong Kong officially began in 1868, when Britain occupied the little town located at the southern tip of the Qing Chinese territory. During and after the second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the Civil War (1945–49), thousands of refugees from Mainland China swarmed to the relatively safer colony in a move which they thought would be only temporary. However, when the British colonial government set up a strictly controlled border between Hong Kong and Mainland China to resist the city from the increasing communist influence from the North, many people began to realize that they might have to spend their rest life in Hong Kong. Thus, what we know today as “the identity of Hong Kong” came at a fairly late point in its 100-year colonial history. More precisely speaking, the idea of “Hong Kong identity” was formed after a leftist riot swept the city in 1967, after which time the British colonial government implemented a series of reforms that propelled the economic, legal, and cultural modernization of the city. By the early 1980s, for those who had come to Hong Kong as refugees and their Hong Kong-born children, China was a remote and even mysterious place. This situation changed with enactment of the Sino-British Declaration in 1984, which enveloped the city in an extremely uncertain future. The assertion of Hong Kong citizens’ identity as Hong Kong-ese, rather than Chinese (under the rule of the P.R.C.), can be said to have reached its full completion five years later when they witnessed on T.V. the massacre on Tiananmen Square in Beijing. As a result, a general fear and disillusionment prompted members of the wealthy class to avoid its “Chinese future” by migrating to Western countries, leaving those who had to stay behind in a state of deep distrust and pessimism. In 1997, when Hong Kong returned to China, and the national policy “One Country, Two Systems” was implemented, Hong Kong and its citizens saw it as a final chapter of the city’s history because it marked the time when its capitalist, highly developed, society governed by the rule of law was taken over by a communist and undemocratic regime. In the official Chinese narrative, however, the history of Hong Kong ended with the happy

reunion of the long lost son and the grieving mother, who had been waiting for almost 100 years.

Now, after more than a decade, Hong Kong's new history continues to evolve. In 2003, for example, Article 23 of the Hong Kong Basic Law (a quasi-"Constitution" of the Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China) faced heavy opposition because it was seen as a potential tool for the Chinese Communist Party to suppress freedom of speech and assembly. A total of 675,000 Hong Kong citizens allegedly participated in the demonstration on July 1, a public holiday celebrating the return of Hong Kong to China. In recent years, conflicts between Hong Kong and the Mainland have even permeated everyday life. For example, pregnant women from the Mainland began to flood Hong Kong, taking up public medical resources from the Hong Kong locals; luxurious brand-name stores discriminated against Hong Kong customers while prioritizing those from the Mainland; and protests emerged against communist "brainwashing" in school textbooks. Against this backdrop, the desire among Hong Kong citizens to be recognized not as "Chinese" but as "Hong Kong-ese" has never been stronger. Some nativist cultural critics have even proposed that Hong Kong must instead be an independent polis, free from the evil hand of Communist China though without losing its commercial connection with it.¹ In narratives such as "forget China, Hong Kong comes first," the history of Hong Kong has yet to be concluded. Ideas of collective memory, locale, "the core values of Hong Kong," and even nostalgia for the British colonization are not only frequently heard in the media and used by the population to reiterate the unique past (and therefore future) of Hong Kong, but political terms, such as "identity," "democracy," "revolution" and "political autonomy," have also permeated the psyche of this once highly depoliticized city.

Given all of these factors, one is prompted to ask: Is Hong Kong standing at the end or at the beginning of history? Without war, revolution, or any subversive political event that can cause large-scale social disruption, is Hong Kong really going to embrace the beginning of a new history beyond linguistic exercises? Before we answer this question, we should first ask how one could formulate the idea of the "end of history." Here, I use the notion of "The End of History" first proposed by Russian-French philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1980).² For Kojève, "the end of human time or history, that is, the definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called or of the free and historical Individual, means, quite simply, the cessation of Action in the full sense of the term. . . . Man no longer changes essentially, there is no longer any reason to change the (true) principles which are at the basis of his understanding of the world and of himself."³ He adds, "In the 'Realm of Freedom,' men (mutually recognizing one another without reservation) no longer fight, and work as little as possible."⁴ Although the state may not yet be a reality, the absence of revolutions endangers new forms of history. This view of the

contemporary state of history can be contrasted with the much more widely known definition of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history,” which claimed that the fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the end of three ideologies — monarchy, fascism and communism — to give way to liberal democratic capitalism. As a secular form of Christianity, capitalism would prevail since it recognizes every human as equal. In comparison, Kojève thinks the end of history had taken place prior to the division of these ideologies, which could date back to the time of Napoleon and Hegel, when the battle of Jena established the course of history toward a universal and homogeneous state. In Kojève’s interpretation, the Cold War binary between communism and capitalism is false: they are only two different styles of ending both history and humanity.

If so, then the paradox for Hong Kong today is that, on the one hand, revolution is imminent — as implied by the bombardment of outrageous media representations in local intellectual and public discussions, theoretical “innovations” and partisan polemics. On the other hand, the end of history seems to have arrived in Hong Kong, which to a certain extent is already practicing liberal capitalism and democracy. Curiously, the end of history seems to have arrived prematurely before the Hong Kong people have truly experienced the struggles of history in progress, regardless of its decolonization, nationalism, democratization movement, or other revolutionary movements. The history of Hong Kong has not been perceived as having ended under the threat of an “invasion” by the large threat of Communist China. Instead, Hong Kong still urgently needs to initiate its own new history. Thus, Hong Kong finds itself in a dual temporality, simultaneously in and after the end of history.

GRAFFITI IN HONG KONG: WRITING AND MEMORY

If this dilemma is true, then how can one comprehend the current Hong Kong that is perhaps unconscious of this polarized existence? In this article, I will try to illustrate this paradox through an exploration of the relationship between the graffiti culture in Hong Kong and the formation of its culture and identity. Within the existing literature of graffiti, few have investigated the realm of everyday cultural production and its implications. This article, therefore, aims to understand the cultural psyche of Hong Kong from a new perspective. As it turns out, graffiti, a largely overlooked subculture in Hong Kong, actually reflects several key issues in the making of Hong Kong’s history.

In reality, the Hong Kong public pays little attention to graffiti. There is tight control over scribbling on private properties, and low tolerance by authorities for any form of unsanctioned “art.” Business tycoons control real estate and, therefore, control unwanted appearances on the surface of such representatives of

global capitalism. Furthermore, Hong Kong's public spaces are visually dominated by images for commercial purposes at an extremely high density. Graffiti could hardly compete with these images in terms of visibility because of the relatively low number of graffiti found in Hong Kong. Finally, the Hong Kong public, as in many other Asian cities, shows indifference, if not ignorance, toward graffiti. The high price of real estate in Hong Kong has long been condemned as a barrier for nurturing the cultural vitality of the streetscape. One of the most prominent underlying results of this monotonously commercialized visual environment is that the public has become used to neglecting other cultural forms that lie outside of the mainstream commercial ones.

Yet, even under such circumstances, graffiti has managed to draw the attention of a larger public and the authorities during some specific moments. I will use two specific cases of graffiti in contemporary Hong Kong: the "Graffiti Girl" incident and the "King of Kowloon," both of which expose some of the neglected origins of cultural anxieties in Hong Kong. The two cases combine to unfold the real tension and dilemma of Hong Kong today: a tension not only between a free Hong Kong versus a totalitarian P.R.C. but, more acutely, a tension between a Hong Kong that believes it is making/experiencing history and a City that has already passed the end of history. In examining the relationship between graffiti and graffiti artists on the one hand, and the public, cultural institutions and the authorities, on the other, we can see the impact of aesthetic forms on society. According to French philosopher Jacques Rancière, politics does not refer to specific institutionalized activities that involve the bureaucratic system, parties or identity groups, but to any apparatus that disturbs the previously stable consensual system. The ability and inability of what is to be seen and what is to be heard in time and space thus implies "an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics."⁵ In this vein, the purpose of the current paper is to compensate for the inadequacy of studying Hong Kong and its visual culture from an overly "matter-of-fact" way, which usually focuses too much on the agencies of politics.

HONG KONG MARCHES FORWARD! AI WEIWEI AND THE "GRAFFITI GIRL" INCIDENT

The increasing tension between Hong Kong and Mainland China today is often reflected in moments when graffiti catches the attention of the public. One of the most notable cases is the "Graffiti Girl" incident, which occurred after the arrest of the world-famous Chinese artist Ai Weiwei by the Mainland Chinese police in April 2011 when numerous stencil graffiti of Ai's portrait with a line underneath saying, "Who is afraid of Ai Weiwei?" were found in the street corners of Hong Kong

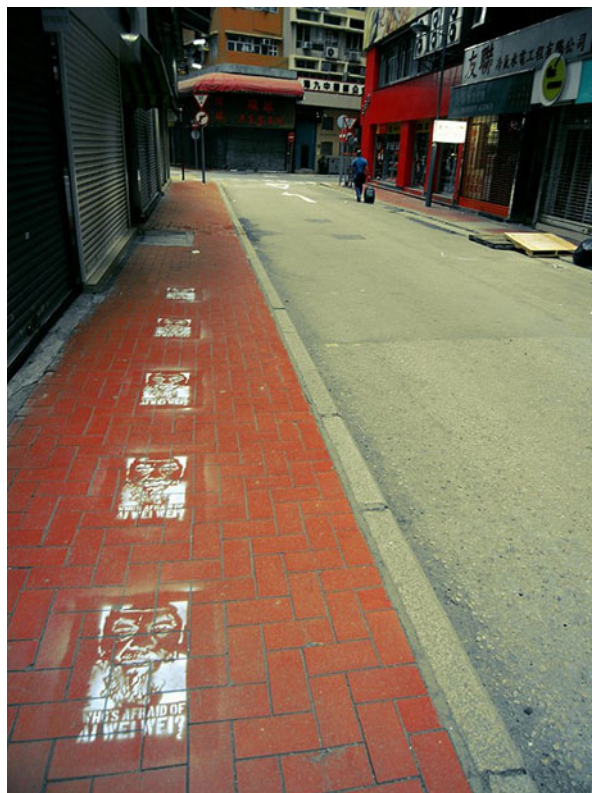


Figure 1. “Graffiti Girl.” *Who is Afraid of Ai Weiwei?* Hong Kong pavement. Date unknown. Stencil. Courtesy Jiruan through Creative Commons.

(Figure 1). The case stirred heated discussions regarding the self-positioning of Hong Kong in relation to the P.R.C. and the accompanying anxieties of the public.

Ai Weiwei is arguably the most famous Chinese figure in the contemporary art world. His father, Ai Qing, a well-known modern Chinese poet, was sent to exile in the remote areas of China and condemned to forced labor for his participation in the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957–59) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). After China opened up in 1978, Ai Weiwei left the country and stayed in New York from 1981 to 1993. Now based in Beijing, the younger Ai’s worldwide fame came largely from art projects that are considered as outspoken criticisms against the Chinese government. For example, in his retrospective exhibition, “So Sorry” (October 2009 to January 2010, Munich, Germany), Ai created the installation “Remembering” with 9000 children’s backpacks on the façade of the Haus der Kunst, an obvious call for attention to the deceased children buried under the poor-quality school buildings that collapsed during the Sichuan Earthquake in 2008 and, in turn, to the serious corruption and irresponsibility of the Chinese government.

In early April 2011, Ai Weiwei was arrested for “economic crimes” at Beijing airport before his departure for Hong Kong. Authorities did not immediately explain the exact nature of these crimes. The news shocked the world; many artists, organizations, and art institutions in Hong Kong and abroad expressed anger towards his arrest, accusing the Chinese government of suppressing freedom of speech and threatening its political dissidents. His situation remained uncertain until May 16 of the same year — when his wife and his friend, an attorney, were allowed to visit him; not in jail or in hospital, but while he was under house arrest.⁶ On June 22, 2011, Ai was released and his Beijing-based company, FAKE Design, was ultimately charged for tax evasion.

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, public reaction to Ai’s arrest was unsurprisingly outspoken. Not only did his dissidence echo the repulsion of Hong Kong against China; his arrest also attested to the totalitarian nature of the Chinese nation-state, which has cast an ominous shadow over the future of a free and democratic Hong Kong. Except for a few pro-China newspapers, such as *Wen Hui Po* and *Tai Kung Po*, which reiterated the criticisms of the Mainland party-newspaper against Ai, other major media outlets in Hong Kong reported news stories that supported Ai’s case with a vengeance. On April 24, thousands of Hong Kong artists participated in a street protest that declared a search for Ai. Reports from the artists showed that the Hong Kong Police force indirectly obstructed their protest by restricting them from using the slow lane, thereby causing a massive traffic jam on the day of the protest.⁷

Under such circumstances, the “Graffiti Girl” incident left an impact on the City and its residents. In the morning of April 13, after Ai Wei’s arrest, numerous stencil images of the artist — apparently created overnight — appeared with text underneath asking, “Who is afraid of Ai Weiwei?” in both English and Chinese. The graffiti could be found all over town, especially in the Sheung Wan area, a district known for its art gallery clusters and antique shops, and Central, the financial center of the City. The image of Ai, with a stern face staring straight into the eyes of its viewers, recalls the famous *OBEY GIANT* figure created by Shepard Fairey. In a city that is relatively unfamiliar with graffiti, the stenciled images of Ai scattered throughout the main streets proved to be very effective in gaining attention for the plight of Ai. Anyone could have been responsible; and despite the anonymity of the graffiti artist, such images resonated with any viewer who was similarly feeling the oppression of the Chinese government. The rhetorical question that was posed “artistically,” which ridiculed the legitimacy and weakness of tyranny, was also strongly expressive. Of course, local media coverage of the case emerged due to the visually strong and politically sensational images. Soon after the media reports, the Hong Kong police decided to investigate the “unusual” case in an unusual way: instead of a standard fine and a three-month detention for “graffiti” or vandalism, the artist — who turned out to be Tangerine, a 22-year old

female — was investigated by a serious crime squad that usually dealt with rape and murder. The overreaction of the Hong Kong police towards the case of “Graffiti Girl,” a name given by local media, further fueled the public’s anxiety toward the suppression of freedom of speech, the erosion of the core values of Hong Kong, and the eminent fall of the City. “Graffiti Girl” said in an interview that her aim was to warn “Hong Kong people that Ai Weiwei’s detention does affect them.”⁸ Her graffiti unusually and successfully led to public discussions on the threatened situation of human rights in Hong Kong. The adverse reactions of the authorities further increased this feeling of “history-making.”

Three prevalent viewpoints illustrate the shaping of Hong Kong’s historical status. The first is a consensus that the people of Hong Kong should fight for democracy and stand together in solidarity when faced with threats from the Chinese government. Some even believed that a takeover by totalitarian China would force the Hong Kong people to act beyond their current abilities. As “Graffiti Girl” explained, she acted to protect Hong Kong and its people:

He’s [Ai] one of the most prominent contemporary artists in the world right now. ... And if he can be arrested, then there’s no identity we can hide behind: Being a Hong Kong citizen doesn’t help anymore; being rich or [one’s] social status doesn’t help. There’s no shield any more against this very naked power that’s trying to engulf us.⁹

Local artist Ger Tsoi said,

Hong Kong has always been [a] law-managed and non-violent society. What if it was no longer the case anymore, how shall we evaluate our actions? Everyone [should be an] artist, if there are three hundred people, each of whom would try to produce a poster or stencil and spread them around the street to resist the black smoke of the white terror, real revolution could eventually come!”¹⁰

The call for revolution seemed to be filled with a fearless spirit willing to fight for radical change. After the spread of the spray-painted images by “Graffiti Girl,” more graffiti appeared in support of Ai by other artists who created both image and text which were found on street corners all over Hong Kong. By the end of April, “flash graffiti” of stenciled images of Ai were projected on the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Forces Building in Hong Kong,¹¹ on the Wanchai Police Station, and on several police cars as demonstrations of dissent.

Moreover, while Ai’s image became an iconic figure of the dissident voice against Communist China, “Graffiti Girl” herself became a “countercultural” icon. When talking about the possible punishment for her acts that may carry a sentence of imprisonment for 10 years, she expressed the view that “I have to thank the

police for drawing so much attention to this issue. . . . Even if I have to go to jail, I think that would be a very, very [worthwhile] price to pay.”¹² In relation to my discussion, her willingness to sacrifice echoes Kojève’s definition of the desire of humanity — the desire to be recognized as a human who negates the given safety and freedom of others. On Facebook, an online community was also established to endorse “Graffiti Girl” and oppose authoritative powers.¹³ Without any media exposure of her real name and appearance, the ambiguous identity of a young girl fighting the battle against the authorities alone further added to her popularity.

Finally, Hong Kong has been recognized as a place of enlightenment and truth for those in Mainland China. The media reported that some Mainland tourists, usually described as uncivilized barbarians in many Hong Kong media, have already come to understand the meaning of freedom upon knowing the story behind the “Graffiti Girl” incident. One tourist was moved to tears when she knew about the situation in Hong Kong and declared the need for freedom and truth; another admitted that Hong Kong was still much freer; and some others took photos of the graffiti only out of curiosity, oblivious of Ai Weiwei, whom they had never heard of before this incident.¹⁴ How tourists from the Mainland reacted seems to further enhance the contrast between a closed China and an open Hong Kong. A local organization, Art Citizens, announced their position on Ai’s case, stating that “The so-called freedom in contemporary China is only an illusion. As the only place in China where people can talk about Ai Weiwei and other sensitive issues in the public freely, Hong Kong should continuously send out [the] voice of freedom.”¹⁵

The illegal nature of the graffiti is wedded to Ai Weiwei’s efforts to produce a new legitimacy in Hong Kong. Hence, Ai, along with the stenciled images of his likeness found all over Hong Kong, has become an icon of resistance against dictatorship. Knowing and supporting Ai Weiwei also indicates that you are an enlightened individual, recognized by others as abiding by the principles of justice and freedom. The media has depicted a consensus where the people of Hong Kong fight for recognition from the Hong Kong government, the Chinese government, and the Mainland Chinese who have not yet gained access to the truth. Ai Weiwei, in this sense, is simultaneously a random and a necessary choice: random because Ai can be replaced by anyone who is critical of China; however, he is a necessary element because his worldwide fame would resonate more with the public and even give international attention to Hong Kong, whose position might be misunderstood by those who are unfamiliar with the history of the City. The emphasis on the exceptionality of Hong Kong in the Chinese context underscores the dangers of a crackdown by the Chinese government.

In contrast, Ai’s supporters in Mainland China were less visible because of government control over the media. Many supporters had to use subtle signs to indirectly address the issue, reflecting one of the most interesting features of

contemporary Chinese society. Through the use of the Internet and some alternative methods of public expression (e.g., printed T-shirts, self-made posters, and graffiti), a cat-and-mouse game emerged between the parody-ridden, sarcastic, and euphemistic folk language of protest and public discussions on politically sensitive issues. Echoing Ai's image spray painted throughout Hong Kong, were graffiti of Ai sprayed by unknown people spread in some cities in Mainland China. On April 18, 2011 more than 70 stenciled images of Ai appeared with the statement, "This is the best era" (这是最好的年代), spray-painted overnight in an underground pedestrian tunnel in Hefei, Anhui Province. A local newspaper reported that passersby were shocked by these images — allegedly not because they were images of Ai, but because these unfamiliar images appeared in an unfamiliar manner. This incident was reported in a newspaper without even mentioning the name of Ai and the spray-painted statement, which was actually taken from the song "People Don't Need Freedom (人民不需要自由)," written by independent folk singer Li Zhi.¹⁶ However, the incident was reported in great detail, which made it easy for readers already familiar with Ai to associate the incident with him. Within several hours, though, the stenciled images were washed away from the tunnel walls. The whole discussion then became a debate on the preservation of graffiti in cities.¹⁷ Although newspapers might avoid reporting directly on politically sensitive news, they could indirectly point to such issues by bringing public attention to the graffiti.

Meanwhile, Ai's stenciled graffiti images continued to appear all over China (Figure 2). Two days later, a missing person notice with a stenciled image of Ai was found at the Beijing subway station exit. On April 25, a similar graffiti was found in an art village near the university town of Guangzhou, Guangdong Province. Compared with the strong reaction of the police force in Hong Kong toward the "Graffiti Girl" incident, these graffiti, which endorsed the image of Ai in Mainland China, were not eradicated immediately, if at all, by the authorities.¹⁸ One may argue that these graffiti were ignored simply because the majority of the Chinese public was unfamiliar with Ai. Therefore, such graffiti was not seen as effective mobilization tools for the public.

However, the consensus toward Ai might not have been formed in China. In Hong Kong, the name "Ai Weiwei" is typically associated to his "political" activism and his anti-Chinese government stance rather than to his equally, if not more, provocative artworks, designs, and videos. In her documentary on Ai entitled *Never Sorry* (2012), Alison Klayman focused on his conflict with and resistance against the state, the police, and the Great Fire Wall, and mostly depicted him as a social activist with a good conscience. In contrast, Ai was treated in Mainland China as a much more complicated figure, as reflected in his relationship with the Chinese government and the intellectual/artistic circles he belongs to. For one thing, Ai was being monitored by the state for a long time and was criticized for



Figure 2. Artist Unknown. Ai Weiwei Graffiti in Renmin University, Beijing, China. Image captured on 13 May 2013. Stencil on wall. Photograph by the author.

and charged by the state media of plagiarism. For another, considering his family background and international fame, Ai was also invited by the government to design the National Stadium — known as the “Bird’s Nest” — for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, a project from which he later withdrew. Also, shortly before his arrest, Ai was allegedly offered a membership in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (C.P.P.C.C.).¹⁹ If one takes Ai’s family background and his fame as a respected international artist into consideration, it might be too simplistic to say that he is treated by the state only as a political dissident and troublemaker.

Evaluations of Ai are also divided in the art circles of China. On the one hand, he has gained sympathy and endorsement from Chinese intellectuals for this activism. During the third-year anniversary of the Sichuan Earthquake in May 12, 2011, when Ai “disappeared” for more than a month, the *Southern Daily*, arguably the most outspoken party newspaper based in Guangzhou, published an editorial criticizing the arrest of Ai that was later censored.²⁰ On the other hand, as an artist, Ai was criticized by many other Chinese artists, who, with no intention of following

the party line, also occasionally charge him of plagiarism in his artworks. As film critic Shelly Kracier wrote in his review of *Never Sorry*, “It was initially startling to me that many of my most liberal Chinese friends (i.e., those critical of the Chinese government and system, and who are anti-repression and pro-free speech) and colleagues think very little of Ai. They consider him a grandstanding showman who acts out, famously raising his middle finger at the Tiananmen Gate, to court Western adulation.”²¹ While most Western media outlets reported Ai’s heroic demonstration in Chang’an Street on the Tiananmen Square against the forced demolition of their studios in an artist village in Beijing, there are still those who disagree. In the documentary directed by Chinese independent filmmaker Zheng Kuo, *The Cold Winter*, which demonstrated the power struggles among artists who participated in the protest, some artists expressed through interviews their displeasure toward Ai, whom they believed unduly received all the credit for the protest because of his fame, even when there were many other artists who made heavier contributions to the protest, such as those who risked their lives guarding their studios overnight from being demolished.²²

For the Western media, the graffiti of Ai in Hong Kong “form[s] a continuous assertion of freedom, a daring, tension-filled construction of liberated space, and a sustained act of performance.”²³ But as Kracier warns, “This standard image, a media-designed shortcut that obscures more than it elucidates, can be so conveniently embodied by Ai Weiwei. All this does is to avoid grappling with the essential details of complex, often contradictory Chinese realities.” Kracier argues more bluntly, “Ai Weiwei’s creativity lies in manufacturing freedom in the face of a seemingly monolithic (but actually quite complex, porous, and inefficient) state apparatus that is pretty effective (but not perfect) at denying it to people like him. Ai manufactures this with his art and his activism.”²⁴ This means that if his art is considered inseparable from his life or politics, Ai’s arrest could also be seen as his masterpiece.²⁵

Thus, the labeling of Ai as an “Anti-Government Dissident by a Freedom-Seeking Artist”²⁶ rendered the actions of “Graffiti Girl” and other graffiti artists in Hong Kong as uni-dimensional because, ironically, their actions had straightforward meanings and receptions, which made them more monolithic in Hong Kong than in the Mainland. This could also explain why the Hong Kong authorities reacted more intensely than those in the Mainland. Therefore, the case of “Graffiti Girl” should be approached from a slightly different perspective.

KING OF KOWLOON: A POST-HISTORICAL WRITER IN HONG KONG?

If “Graffiti Girl” made Hong Kong believe that history can be made by sacrificing ambiguity, the second case of graffiti in Hong Kong, in contrast, shows the

ambiguous and ambivalent relationship among the graffitist/graffiti, the public, the authority, and history. In my opinion, the “King of Kowloon” best illustrates the post-historical temporality of Hong Kong. Probably the most well-known Hong Kong graffitist, Tsang Tsouchoi (1921–2007) was an old, crippled waste collector who wrote with ink and brush on whatever surface he found in the public spaces of Hong Kong, leaving numerous details on his familial story and the history of Hong Kong (Figure 3).

The self-proclaimed King and his works have become controversial in Hong Kong. According to Abby Chen, it is very rare to see the “discourse of public intervention as an art form introduced or exercised in Hong Kong prior to the appearance of his work.”²⁷ The case of Tsang and the changes in how his works are evaluated reflect the most significant cultural moments during the handover period. From the 1960s, Tsang began to write on the surfaces of lampposts, electrical boxes, walls, or any other public or private surface he could find (Figure 4). Initially disparaged as vandalism by the Hong Kong police and dismissed by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department as harmful to the City’s image, the ravings of a “madman” were not given any artistic value and were soon mercilessly painted over. Since the public and the authorities gradually viewed him as a madman, Tsang’s art became a neighborhood spectacle and was even temporarily tolerated by the police. Out of shame, Tsang’s wife and children



Figure 3. Photographer unknown. *Tsang Tsouchoi at Work*. Date unknown. Photograph. Courtesy “Divine Rapier” through Creative Commons.



Figure 4. Tsang Tsauchoi. Tsang Tsauchoi's work on Kwun Tong Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong. Date unknown. Ink writing on concrete. Courtesy Anneke Coppoolse.

left him alone in a public estate, though they continued to visit him occasionally. Tsang's neighbors said they did not think of him as a madman because he spoke to them with much sense and logic; however, they admitted their dislike for his writings (or scribbling), which they never learned to appreciate.²⁸

In 1997, Hong Kong artist Lau Kin-Wai "discovered" Tsang and proposed a solo exhibition of his writings in his own art workshop. Tsang was soon named the "King of Kowloon." The exhibition was held in cooperation with the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, the Goethe-Institut Hong Kong, and the Hong Kong Arts Centre. In the exhibition catalogue and in the other articles of Lau and local artists or cultural critics, Tsang was transformed from being a grassroots outcast into a respected representative of Hong Kong culture. Lau refuted allegations of Tsang's madness by quoting Michael Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, using Tsang himself to criticize the general public's intolerance of cultural discourse in

Hong Kong. Lau also tried to re-position Tsang's writings as Chinese calligraphies, an assertion considered far-fetched by some, since his writings were too different from traditional calligraphies.

Still, Lau thought of Tsang as a genuine artist who persisted amid resistance. He said, "You may say his words are illegal, but he represents the fight of a minority to reality. He doesn't follow the academic way of calligraphy but found his own expression."²⁹ Such interpretations of Tsang's writings were deliberately made in the year of the handover, when many Hong Kong residents, particularly members of the cultural elite, were searching eagerly for materials to represent the integrity of Hong Kong's identity. Other critics directly connected Tsang with a historiographer, saying "By claiming to be the 'King of Kowloon,' Tsang wrote an alternative history of Hong Kong."³⁰

After the widespread media coverage on Tsang, his works evoked more public discussions and recognition, which gradually established the artist as a unique cultural phenomenon in Hong Kong. In 2003, Tsang's writings were exhibited in the Venice Biennale, which led many local artists to enthusiastically embrace his works. Aside from cultural critics, fashion designers also spoke highly of Tsang's writings and integrated his idiosyncratic characters into their designs to pay homage to his creativity.³¹ In 2004, Tsang's writings, now considered as "ink treasures" (*mobao*), were recognized as being among the 10 most representative designs of Hong Kong — even appearing in the catalogue of Sotheby's, which officially ushered his work into the art market.³²

Nevertheless, cultural institutions in Hong Kong expressed ambivalence toward Tsang's writings. On the one hand, the previously spontaneous form of public communication was preserved, whereas the "unsanctioned" street artworks were still considered as threats to the well-governed and clean image of Hong Kong (Figure 5). And the Hong Kong Museum of Art refused to display Tsang's writings because "his words are marginal and controversial."³³ Tsang's works also received no spontaneous endorsement from the public, whose opinions were subjected to the packaged opinions of the media, the authorities, and the cultural elite. Like many other objects of Hong Kong nostalgia after the handover, Tsang's writings were easily categorized under Hong Kong's ambiguous "collective memory."

Though the public refused to consider Tsang's writings as art, his importance in the modern history of Hong Kong was easily acknowledged.³⁴ Therefore, the attention given by the public and the authority toward Tsang's graffiti did not initially stem from the impulsive and autonomous consensus that discussed the right of citizens to the public space. As such, Tsang's writings became a local political agenda and a by-product of Hong Kong's self-narration or reaction to the global perception that sought to integrate a local narrative into a more universal one.



Figure 5. Tsang Tsauchoi. *Tsang's Writing at Star Ferry Pier, Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong*. Image captured on 16 October, 2005. Ink writing on concrete. Courtesy Wrightbus through Wikimedia Commons.

After his death in 2007, HK \$101,000 was paid for Tsang's writings on a Terracotta warrior statuette, and another example of his graffiti was sold at a charity auction.³⁵ Manyee Fung called Tsang "the last free man" in Hong Kong, and "to affirm the importance of the King of Kowloon is fundamental to [reviving] our culture. The meaning of the entire action is to educate the mass, to awaken the culture. This will be the propelling force to change the history."³⁶

Praising Tsang by placing him into the categories of madness, minority, and the postmodern celebration of irrationality has led critics into admitting the illegitimacy of Tsang's historiography. However, this hermeneutic trend was also criticized by Wang Hai, a Hong Kong-based painter from the Mainland, who argued that the exhibition of Tsang's works by Lau Kin-wai actually intensified Tsang's position as "the Other" and that of his writings as "the language of the Other." Wang also quoted Foucault, proposing that it was futile to establish Tsang as an author because the curator was doing all the speaking rather than Tsang himself.³⁷ This criticism echoed Tsang's denial of his identity as an artist and his

arrogant manner. The King once claimed in an interview, “I don’t care if they think it is art or not. I don’t think it is art, it is King’s writings, it is my complaints against the government.”³⁸ According to Hong Kong curator Oscar Ho Hing-kay, when Matthew Turner, a scholar of Hong Kong design history, approached Tsang in the early 1990s to organize an exhibition of his works, Tsang answered, “As a King, I can’t be in touch with you plebeians as you wish.”³⁹ The desire to be recognized by the art market, the institution, and the public was irrelevant to Tsang because, for him, the definition of art was not dependent on the spectators but on the social status of the writer.

The self-proclamation of Tsang as the “King of Kowloon” and the “unauthorized” writing of history on unauthorized spaces re-invoked the Chinese tradition, in which the emperor’s handwritings were seen as an indispensable, valuable part of the natural and artificial landscape rather than a defacement of such structures. Tsang’s utilization of the sacred imperial Chinese language denied the language’s collapse after the advent of modern national imagination, which aimed for a universal and homogeneous state of the world. For example, Tsang’s criticisms toward the Queen of England, as expressed in his writings, might not only be demonstrating an anti-colonial sentiment, but also his dissent toward any nation and history established through external invasion, modern warfare, colonization, and sovereignty. Thus, Tsang’s writings and the discursive interpretations of them actually claim the end, rather than the imminence, of history.

CONCLUSION

Coming back to the idea of “the end of history,” I would like to conclude that Hong Kong’s paradoxical situation of being torn between the past and the future is reflection of Kojève’s end of history theory. While Kojève’s conjectures do not call for a universal and homogenous world, he does not necessarily exclude resistance, dissent, or inequality; on the contrary, these three elements help us quickly reach what the end of history has promised either in its communist or capitalist form. In this regard, the two seemingly unrelated cases of Hong Kong graffiti provide us with interesting examples of the production of iconic images and artworks after the “end of history.” Hong Kong’s intricate position in the history of colonization, Chinese modernization, and global capitalism has placed the City in an interesting “post-historical” era. Threatened by the half-communist half-capitalist “monster” of contemporary China, Hong Kong seems to have “returned” to a time before Fukuyama’s end of history. Many people in Hong Kong believe that history would continue dashing forward with possibilities of large-scale social movements or even bloody revolutions. By refusing to end history ideologically, the iconic image

of Ai Weiwei serves as the voice of resistance to the barrier, which hinders Hong Kong's progression toward Fukuyama's end of history. However, the iconic image itself, if understood as morally superior, leads only to another ideological homogeneity.

While the appearance of Ai's graffiti in public spaces, media, and the Internet reflects Kojève's end of history (wherein one's writing in any place could be recognized by everyone), the case of Tsang Tsoutsoi reveals another complication of the simple iconization of a political dissent in the production of post-historical art. The absence of desire from the "author" has spurred debates, discussions and interpretations of Tsang's public writings, which attempt to form a (mis-) recognition of an identity in both the individual (Tsang as an artist) and the collective (Tsang as a cultural representative of Hong Kong) forms. Although his madness helped rather than prevented him receiving such recognition, Tsang was labeled as a dissenting presence that can drive history forward. However, I argue that this situation precisely speaks to a post-historical condition wherein the public space is no longer considered a place for action or revolution, but a place where anyone, such as a self-proclaimed King, could display their writings that, given the change in time and space, may be considered legitimate artworks. Therefore, in this context, the "King of Kowloon" did not strive for a new revolution, but sought to "defend and reaffirm the historical project of the universal and homogeneous state."⁴⁰ Like the prevalent nostalgia for the old Hong Kong (no matter how radical it looks), graffiti precisely embody the lack of revolutionary impulses at the end of history. In this way, the puzzle of Hong Kong's dual temporality can be solved as a pseudo-proposition: the two cases in Hong Kong's graffiti culture illustrate that the end of history has already arrived while they have been reversely interpreted as the proofs of the opposite. However, the question that still haunts us is, "How can we free ourselves and continue to resist at the end of history?"

NOTES

¹ See Yun Chen, *On Hong Kong Polis* (Hong Kong: Enrich Publishing Ltd., 2011).

² According to Kojève, human beings have two kinds of basic desires in history. The first is the animal desire to survive, such as the desire for food and sex; the second is the desire to be loved by others, which is the desire of human cultural and symbolic forms. Individuals or collectives used to desire recognition by ultimately sacrificing for the progression of history — and therefore the nation — through revolution or for a historical cause. When a part of history ends with a clear vision of what comes next (e.g., American society is, for Kojève, a typical post-historical society with liberal democracy, an average affluent society, capitalism, free market, relatively sound legal system, etc.), such previously sacred desire to be fulfilled no longer exists even if conflicts, struggles, and unevenness remain. See more in Boris Groys, "The Photographer as the Sage," in *After History: Alexandre Kojève as a Photographer Exhibition* (Shenzhen OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, 2012), 31–32.

³ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 159 notes.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 159 notes.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum 2004), 13.

⁶ Michael Wines and Sharon LaFraniere. "China Allows Dissident Artist's Wife to Visit Him," *The New York Times*, 16 May 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/17/world/asia/17china.html?_r=0 (accessed 22 Sep. 2013).

⁷ "Thousands of Artists Protest In Search of Ai Weiwei" (藝術界千人遊行尋艾未未), *Apple Daily* [Hong Kong], 24 Apr. 2011: A2.

⁸ Louisa Lim, "Hong Kong Graffiti Challenges Chinese Artist's Arrest," *N.P.R. News*, 4 May 2011. <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/04/135985475/hong-kong-graffiti-challenges-chinese-artists-arrest> (accessed 21 Sep. 2013).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Jing Wang (王靜), "A Reflection from Ai's Incident, when Democracy Meets Arts" (民主對藝術的挑戰：艾未未事件的還原思考), *Hong Kong Economic Journal* (信報), 18 Apr. 2011: 48.

¹¹ Zhizuo, Zheng, "Image Projected onto Army Building, The P.L.A. Reserves the Right to Further Investigation" (圖像投影軍營 駐軍有權追究), *Wen Wei Po* (文匯報), 30 Apr. 2011: A15.

¹² Lim, "Hong Kong Graffiti."

¹³ See <http://www.facebook.com/supportaiweiwei?fref=ts> (accessed 21 Sept. 2013).

¹⁴ Junqian Lin and Weijun Huang, "Graffiti at Night, Protest at Day, Graffiti Artist Remains a Mystery" (凌晨出擊 下午遊行 - 塗鴉少女與警捉迷藏), *Apple Daily*, 24 Apr. 2011: A2.

¹⁵ Wang, "A Reflection," 48.

¹⁶ The line from the song was "People don't need freedom, this is the best time."

¹⁷ Huazhu Du, "Alas, is This Art or Rubbish?" *Jianghuai Morning Post*, 19 Apr. 2011: A16.

¹⁸ In a trip to China Renmin University in Beijing in June 2013, I also found some graffiti of Ai's images on and around the campus.

¹⁹ Staff Reporter, "Ai Weiwei Offered C.P.P.C.C. Role Before Arrest, Staff Say," *South China Morning Post*, 13 Apr. 2011: A4.

²⁰ "Commemorating them on the River of Time" (躺在时间的河流上怀念他们), *Southern Metropolis Daily*, original version censored. Online version available at <http://www.chinainperspective.com/ArtShow.aspx?AID=11155> (accessed 21 Sep. 2013).

²¹ Shelly Kracier, "Review for Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry," *Cineaste* (Fall 2012): 51.

²² See *The Cold Winter* (暖冬), directed by Zheng Kuo, Color / 102 min, Mandarin Chinese, 2011.

²³ Kracier, "Review," 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁵ At 2013's Venice Biennale, Ai Weiwei presented his installation named "S.A.C.R.E.D.," in which he reenacted some scenes of his detention with figures of himself and his captors in six dioramas in fiberglass and iron. This piece is seen as Ai's first response in an exhibition form to his incarceration in 2011.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Abby Chen, "Notes on Tsang Tsou Choi: Imperatives for Future Research," in *King of Kowloon - Tsang Tsou Choi* (Hong Kong: Saamlung, 2012).

²⁸ "The Death of the King of Kowloon" (九龍皇帝駕崩), *Oriental Daily News*, 26 Jul. 2007: A1.

²⁹ See Kinwai Lau, "Who is Mad? On the Words and Calligraphy of Tsang Tsou Choi" in *The Street Calligraphy of Tsang Tsou Choi Exhibition* (曾灶財街頭書法), ed. Kinwai Lau (Hong Kong: Kin Wai's Workshop, 1997), 35-42 and Sherry Lee, "Kingdom for a Verse," *South China Morning Post* [Hong Kong], 20 Oct. 2003: C5.

³⁰ See Lee, "Kingdom for a Verse."

³¹ See "The Death of the King of Kowloon."

- ³² Jian Xin, “Works of Hong Kong Street graffiti King Tsang Tsou Choi had debut at the Sotheby’s” (港街头涂鸦皇帝曾灶财作品首登苏福比), *China News Service*, 17 Oct. 2004. Online version available at <http://www.chinanews.com/news/2004/2004-10-16/26/495144.shtml> (accessed 19 Nov. 2013).
- ³³ Lee, “Kingdom for a Verse.”
- ³⁴ As a reader wrote to the *South China Morning Post*: “I am surprised that your newspaper has run a leader informing — or confusing — readers about what art is (‘King of Kowloon’s Legacy Must Not Be Erased,’ Nov. 1). We undoubtedly have a history of writing our grievances on walls and ‘the King’ deserves a place in the modern history of Hong Kong. But art? Please do not mislead our aspiring artists.” See *South China Morning Post*, 5 Nov. 2004: A14.
- ³⁵ Martin Wong, “HK \$101,000 paid for ‘King of Kowloon’ piece,” *South China Morning Post* [Hong Kong], 15 Aug. 2007.
- ³⁶ Manyee Fung, “King of Kowloon: In Memory of the Last Free Man in Hong Kong” (“九龍皇帝”街頭御筆捍衛記), *City Magazine* (May 2009): 180–181.
- ³⁷ Hai Wang, “Who Speaks For Him?,” in *The Street Calligraphy of Tsang Tsou Choi Exhibition* (曾灶財街頭書法), ed. Kinwai Lau (Hong Kong: Kin Wai’s Workshop): 1997, 55–56.
- ³⁸ Lee, “Kingdom for a Verse.”
- ³⁹ “The Calligraphy of the King of Kowloon”(皇帝墨宝), *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 26 Jul. 2007: 50.
- ⁴⁰ Groys, “The Photographer,” 31–32.

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