

The Kwanyin Clan: Modern Literati Graffiti Writers

An Aesthetic and Text Analysis of their Main Artworks

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Abstract After illustrating the varied artistic production of the Kwanyin Clan, one of the most important Chinese graffiti crews, this paper analyses six of their main artworks in detail (styles, techniques, aesthetic conceptions and artworks texts). In these artworks, the Kwanyin Clan tried for the first time to merge Euro-American graffiti practice with the ancient traditional arts practiced and appreciated by the Chinese literati (calligraphy, poetry, painting, seals and ceramics). Comparing the Kwanyin Clan members to 'modern literati writers', the present article shows how this crew succeeded in reinventing ancient Chinese art forms using Euro-American graffiti vocabulary, paving the way for a new development of graffiti art in China.

Keywords Kwanyin Clan. Graffiti. Contemporary Chinese art. Chinese literati. 'Three perfections'.

Summary 1 Introduction: the Kwanyin Clan in Beijing. – 2 'Modern Literati Graffiti Paintings' by the Kwanyin Clan: *Shanshui PIC* (2007) and *New Style* (2008). – 3 'Modern Literati Calligraphy Graffiti' by the Kwanyin Clan: *Shirupozhu* (2008) and *Shengongyijiang* (2010). – 4 'Modern Literati Graffiti Ceramics' by the Kwanyin Clan: *Blue and White Porcelain* (2009-2010) and the *Artwork Made for the Exhibition 'Street Art, a Global View'* (2016). – 5 Conclusion: the Kwanyin Clan as 'Modern Literati Graffiti Writers'.



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1 Introduction: the Kwanyin Clan in Beijing

'Graffiti art' (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术)¹ appeared in China in the nineties, when Zhang Dali (Harbin, 1963) embarked on an artistic project entitled *Dialogue and Demolition* (*Duihua yu chai* 对话与拆, 1995-2005), which consists of more than 2,000 images of bald big heads sprayed on the walls of the ancient city doomed to be demolished, accompanied by the tags² AK-47 or 18K³ (Wu 2000, 749-68; Marinelli 2004, 429-62). In those years (and even before), other writers were active in Hong Kong, such as MC REN⁴ and the King of Kowloon.⁵ According to Lu Pan, their work was fundamental "in introducing Western-style graffiti into mainland China in the late 1990s" (Lu 2015, 31). Starting from Hong Kong, and then from Shenzhen,⁶ and Guangzhou, graffiti began to spread all over China, especially in minor cities, such as Wuhan, Shenzhen, and Chengdu (Sanada, Hassan 2010, 11). Then, in the mid-2000s, also thanks to the wide spread of the underground

1 In Chinese the word 'graffiti' has been translated in different ways. As Minna Valjakka points out: "Graffiti is usually referred to using the colloquial word *tuya* (涂鸦), [...] in the local press, contemporary graffiti is quite often referred to as 'graffiti art' (*tuya yishu* 涂鸦艺术), or occasionally, 'graffiti painting/drawing' (*tuya huihua* 涂鸦绘画) or as a form of 'street art' (*jietou yishu* 街头艺术) [...] and it is even referred to as 'psoriasis' (*niupixuan* 牛皮癣)" (Valjakka 2011, 77). Other possible translations of the word 'graffiti' are *tuya shuxie* 涂鸦书写 (graffiti writing) and *jietou tuya wenhua* 街头涂鸦文化 (street graffiti culture). The wording usually used in Chinese legalisation is *tuxie* 涂写 and *kehua* 刻画 (Valjakka 2014, 98). The most common expression used by the artists is *tuya yishu* (graffiti art). This is because in China there is a close interaction between contemporary art and graffiti culture, and graffiti "has come to be regarded primary as a form of art" (Valjakka 2011, 78).

2 'Tag' is a stylised signature of the 'nickname' of the writer, normally done in one colour ("Writer's Vocabulary", URL <http://www.at149st.com/glossary.html>).

3 AK-47 is the name of the assault rifle developed in the Soviet Union in World War II and represents the "violence of a community being ripped apart"; 18K is the abbreviation of the term '18-karat gold' and represents a symbol for the "economic life of the city" (Marinelli 2004, 434).

4 According to Minna Valjakka: "Zhang might not be the first [writer in China] because before him there was a writer called MCRen active in Hong Kong [...] and according to the documentary, *Great Walls of China* (Pearl Channel 2007), there might have been some writers active in Hong Kong even before the mid-1990s" (Valjakka 2011, 73-4).

5 King of Kowloon (*Jiulong huangdi* 九龍皇帝) is the nickname of Tsang Tsou-choi/Ceng Zaocai 曾灶財 (1912-2007). He worked in the city of Hong Kong since 1954, when he started to cover the streets with injurious writing using brush and black ink (Clarke 2001). Since he did not use spray painting, his works are not real graffiti writing and they are usually called 'calligraphy graffiti' (*shufa tuya* 书法涂鸦) (Zhao 2012). Even if his work influenced the artistic atmosphere on the streets of Hong Kong, in fact, some scholars do not regard him as a real writer and do not consider his graffiti as contemporary graffiti "because they lack both the aesthetic intention and renaming oneself" (Valjakka 2011, 74).

6 In the documentary *Graffiti Asia* a writer from Shenzhen says: "Many Hong Kong writers come to Shenzhen because after '97 the border is open, so they come to Shenzhen and find some nice walls" (Hassan 2009).

culture,⁷ it extended its field of action in all major Chinese cities, and became quite popular especially in Beijing and Shanghai (Valjakka 2016, 357-71). Even if from the beginning “Chinese graffiti has been based on Euro-American graffiti” (Valjakka 2011, 84) and even if “today the majority of the styles echo the tradition of Euro-American scenes” (Valjakka 2016, 368), a searching for Chineseness and an attempt to develop a specific ‘Chinese style’ is evident in some local creators, especially in the city of Beijing.

In Beijing, the first graffiti crews have not been established until 2004-2007. Among them, the most important are: the Kwanyin Clan, the Beijing Penzi 北京喷子 crew (BJPZ),⁸ the ABS crew (Around Bohai Sea),⁹ the KTS (Kill The Street),¹⁰ the TMM (The Management),¹¹ the DNA, and the most recent TUNS crew and YDS.¹²

The Kwanyin Clan was one of the first crews to be found, in June 2006. It was set up by TIN (a.k.a. EricTin), YUMI, QUAN, and JEV in

7 For a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of the underground culture in China, see: De Kloet 2010, and Baranovitch 2003.

8 The BJPZ crew was founded in 2006 by 0528, MORE, SOOS, and ALS. “It was one of the first known crews in Beijing, focused on both pictures and writings and developed a style that reflected their Chinese origins. The name of the crew literally means ‘sprayers’ (*penzi* 喷子) of Beijing” (Valjakka 2016, 361). *Penzi* is equivalent to ‘writer’ in English. Other translations of the word ‘writer’ in Chinese are: i) *tuyazhe* 涂鸦者 (a person involved in graffiti or graffitist), ii) *tuya yishujia* 涂鸦艺术家 (graffiti artist) (Valjakka 2011, 77), and iii) the more recent and most common *xieziren* 写字人 (a person who writes characters) (Valjakka 2016, 369).

9 The ABS crew was founded in 2007 by SCAR, SEVEN, ANDC, and NOISE. In 2010, they moved to Beijing where they established their first studio. They are one of the best-known current crews in mainland China and focus on artistically skillful, large works, favouring wildstyle but also employing comic and funky style (Valjakka 2016, 361-2). As ANDC explained in an interview, the acronym ‘ABS’ refers to the fact that the members of the crew come from different cities around the Bohai Sea (Qin 2010). Other meanings of their name are ‘Active, Brilliant, Significant’ (Fitch 2012) and ‘A Brand new Star’ (ANDC, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda, 2015-11-12).

10 KTS was founded in October 2009 by MES and BOERS, and then joined by WRECK and EXAS. They are mainly active in ‘bombing’ (*beng* 崩) in the Haidian district (Valjakka 2016, 362). ‘Bombing’ is the act of covering an area with your tag, throw-ups, etc. ‘Throw-up’ is a name painted quickly with one layer of spray paint and an outline. For these two meanings, see: “The Words: A Graffiti Glossary”, URL <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>.

11 TMM was founded in 2011 by CLOCK and DIOS; GAN, CAMEL and 525 soon joined. Another meaning of their acronym is ‘The Marginal Man’ (Valjakka 2016, 362-3).

12 The first five crews of this list are named in the most important documentary on graffiti art in Beijing, entitled *Spray Painting Beijing. Graffiti in the Capital of China* (Crayon 2012). For more details on this documentary, see its official website: *Spray Painting Beijing*, URL <http://www.spraypaintbeijing.com/> (2017-01-24). The last two crews of the list (together with the ABS, KTS, and TMM) are named in: Bonniger 2018, 23. The DNA was founded in 2010 and it is composed of 3 members (the leader is DA-BOO); the TUNS crew (*tunshi tuya tuandui* 吞噬涂鸦团队), an all-girl crew, was founded in 2013 and it is composed of 3 members (ZHAO, FATSO, and MAGE); and the YDS (*Yi dun shun* 一顿顺 ‘Always stealing’) was founded in 2016 and it is composed of 6 members.

the 798 Art District in the northeast of Beijing. In 2007, NAT (a.k.a. Natuo), AP, KENO, VICA, JAK, and SCAV joined the crew (Valjakka 2016, 361).¹³ The main aim of the crew “is committed to the dissemination and development of graffiti art in China” in order to “explore the fusion of graffiti art with Chinese culture” (“Kwan-yin Clan (觀音) – Beijing” 2008). For that reason, their art is usually defined ‘Chinese Style Graffiti’ (*Zhongguo tese de tuya yishu* 中国特色的涂鸦艺术)¹⁴ because it blends together the style of Western graffiti and the traditional Chinese aesthetics.

The name of the crew is significant because it clearly reveals the deep meaning of their art: ‘Kwan-yin’ explicitly refers to the ‘Bodhisattva Guanyin’ (*Guanyin Pusa* 观音菩萨), one of the most popular and well known deity in China. The crew itself points out that the story of the Bodhisattva was fundamental for the choice of their name (cf. “Kwan-yin Clan (觀音) – Beijing” 2008): Guanyin, in fact, was introduced into China via the Silk Road and was initially presented in a male form, but when Buddhism rooted in China, the Bodhisattva was sinicized and subsequently transformed into a Chinese female form, which later became extremely popular all over the country. Kwanyin Clan’s artistic aim is to present graffiti art in China as an *alter ego* of the Bodhisattva Guanyin: as it had happened for Guanyin, graffiti art came from abroad, but if it wants to become popular in China it has to sinicize its forms, undergoing deity own metamorphosis.¹⁵

This Buddhist echo reverberates also in the logo of the group [fig. 1], where they reiterate the Buddhist symbol of the lotus flower twice: on the right, it is designed meticulously, evoking its traditional form, while on the left it is stylised in a geometric shape. In the centre of the two loti, there is not the figure of a meditation Buddha, as we would expect, but the name of the crew: on the right, it is written in the Chinese traditional character *Guan* 觀 as an abbreviation of *Guanyin*, while on the left it is completely written in Latin letters, ‘Kwan Yin’, as a graffiti ‘tag’. This dual ‘signature’ is extremely com-

13 Actually, the number of the crew components has been extremely changeable. In 2008, they were 12 writers: Daiyan 戴燕 (Quanr 圈儿), Liu Zheng 刘峥 (Guantou 罐头, Eric TIN), Song Tongshu 宋童述 (YUMI), Zheng Xuezi 郑学志 (APART), Jianshu 简杰 (Jer), Lu Daning 陆大宁 (Natuo 那七), Xu Yan 许岩 (SCAR), Lu Jiayin 路佳银 (Joey), Tang Mi 汤米 (Keno), Xu’ou 徐欧 (Pluto), Xue Wenhao 雷文浩 (VIGA), and Jitou 纪续 (CTN) (cf. “Guanyin 观音(KWAN-YIN) crew -- Chinese Style Graffiti” 2008). In 2009, instead, the crew was composed of 8 members: AP, KENO, SCAR, JER, TIN, YUMI, VIGA, and NAT (cf. EricTin 2009b).

14 The definition ‘Chinese Style Graffiti’ is used, for example, in the most important video about the crew entitled “Guanyin 观音(KWAN-YIN) crew -- Chinese Style Graffiti” (2008).

15 This idea is confirmed in the Flickr page of the crew (“Kwan-yin Clan (觀音) – Beijing” 2008) and in the video “Guanyin 观音(KWAN-YIN) crew -- Chinese Style Graffiti” (2008).

mon in the Kwanyin Clan's works and always epitomises their creative mission: the creation of a bridge (their graffiti) to bring China (the right lotus) and the West (the left lotus) closer in order to "push forward with an overwhelming momentum".¹⁶



Figure 1 Kwanyin Clan, *The Logo of the Kwanyin Clan*. Digital design work. Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/137172601.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

The most active period of the crew lasted until 2010 when most of the crew members, who were art academies students,¹⁷ graduated from university and "the competitive everyday life in Beijing has forced the members to focus on their daily jobs in order to support their families" (Valiakka 2016, 361). From 2006 to 2009, the Kwanyin Clan mainly worked in Beijing, even if the crew also created some 'pieces'¹⁸ in Langfang (Hubei), Chongqing, Tianjin, Guilin, Wuhan, and Shenzhen. Then, from 2009, each member of the crew started to work more individually: Jer, for example, has been mainly active in Wuhan, KenoTang has focused on the embellishment of the hutong in Beijing (especially from 2011), and EricTin has concentrated his

16 This is the motto of the crew and it is also written in the right bottom corner of its logo (see fig. 1).

17 As Valjakka (2011, 80) affirms: "A majority of [the Chinese] writers are art students, designers or otherwise connected with the creative industries".

18 A 'piece' is "a graffiti painting, short for masterpiece. It's generally agreed that a painting must have at least three colors to be considered a piece" ("The Words: A Graffiti Glossary", URL <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>).

attention on design works.¹⁹ Nevertheless, they occasionally continue to work together, as it happened in 2016, when they took part in the most important exhibition on street art held in China in the last decade, entitled *Street Art, a Global View*. This exhibition was held at the CAFA Art Museum in Beijing from July 1st to August 24th. Street artists from Brazil, China, France, Italy, Portugal, Senegal, the US, and the UK showcased their works. The Kwanyin Clan was one of the few Chinese crews that took part in the exhibition²⁰ as an indication of the importance of the crew in the Chinese panorama. In addition to this fundamental exhibition, from 2007 to 2009 the crew took part in the most important Chinese graffiti exhibitions and competitions: e.g. *China's First Graffiti Exhibition* (Beijing, 2007), *'Re-dressed Vehicles Exposition'* (Beijing, 2007), *'Motor Trend' Magazine Graffiti Exhibition'* (Beijing, 2007), *798 Art District Graffiti Festival* (Beijing, 2007), *'The Clash Show' New Design Exhibition* (Beijing, 2007), *The Great Way of Graffiti Cultural Festival* (Beijing, 2008), *Beijing Happy Valley Hip-Hop Festival* (Beijing, 2008), *China International Cartoon & Game Expo (CCG EXPO) - Shijingshan Cultural Festival Graffiti Show* (Beijing, 2008), *The 3rd China Beijing International Cultural & Creative Industry Expo - The 2nd Graffiti Art Exhibition* (Beijing, 2008), the *Wall Lord Graffiti Battle*²¹ (Wuhan, 2009), the *Action for Seed Graffiti Jam* (Shenzhen, 2009), etc.²² In these exhibitions, the Kwanyin Clan usually created outdoor large pieces on walls or panels (once also on a plastic sheet, [fig. 2])²³ with the names of the crew and/or the crew members written in big capital letters or Chinese characters, embellished with bright colours, decorative elements (clouds and flowers) and/or comic figures (big pandas, Chinese faces, FEE puppets, etc.).

19 EricTin, e-mail to the author and M. Merenda (2015-12-20).

20 For more information on the group exhibition entitled *Street Art, a Global View*, see: Wang S. 2016 and Danysz 2016.

21 The 'Wall Lord Graffiti Battles' are the largest graffiti battles in Asia organised during 2008-2012 by XEME and SINIC, two Hongkongese writers. The 'graffiti battles' are annual contemporary graffiti competitions on national and international levels.

22 For more information on their participation in all these exhibitions/competitions, see the most important blog of the crew: *Kwanyin Clan (EricTin)* 2006.

23 For more information about this work, see: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/101605412.html> (2019-01-16). This piece was made for the *China International Cartoon & Game Expo (CCG EXPO) - Shijingshan Cultural Festival Graffiti Show*, held at the Shijingshan Sculpture Park in Beijing from 1st to 5th November 2008.

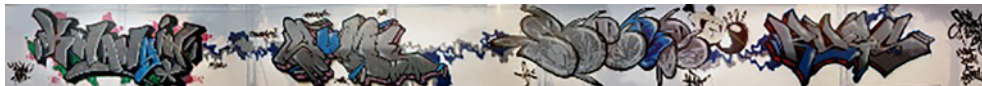


Figure 2 Kwanyin Clan (Nat, Yumi, Ap, Tin), *Graffito for the 'Shijingshan Cultural Festival Graffiti Show'*. 1-5 October 2008. Spray-painting on a plastic sheet, Shijingshan Sculpture Park, Beijing. Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/101605412.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

Their first documented 'mural'²⁴ and their first recorded piece²⁵ were made in December 2006. From that moment onward they created more than one hundred graffiti works and lots of graphic/digital design works (advertising posters, logos, books and CDs covers, prints on T-shirts, etc.).²⁶ As usual for Chinese graffiti writers, the Kwanyin Clan engaged frequent collaborations with Chinese and foreign brands, especially with sports brands (e.g. Kappa, Lotto, Nike), electronic brands (e.g. Nokia, DELL, HP), and private clubs (e.g. VICS, Master Club, KTV, Gaga club, Club underground, Golf club, etc.).²⁷ In these cases, their graffiti works were usually made on removable panels (once even on paper boxes, for the iMART in 2008)²⁸ or indoor walls (of clubs or shops) using Latin letters²⁹ and 'Old school' Euro-Americans styles.

The Kwanyin Clan also collaborated with the Chinese government for the beautification of the metropolitan environment³⁰ or to promote the image of a prosperous country in international competitions, as it happened in 2008 for the Beijing Olympics Games. On that occasion,

24 A 'mural' is "a large-scale type of piecing, done top to bottom on a wall" ("The Words: A Graffiti Glossary", URL <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>). To see the first mural by the Kwanyin Clan: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/28476317.html> (2018-09-07).

25 To see the first piece by the Kwanyin Clan: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/28477622.html> (2018-09-07).

26 The creation of graphic/digital design works is a very common practice among Chinese writers. In fact, most of Chinese writers are not only 'writers' but also 'digital/graphic designers' and they use their design expertise to earn money.

27 As Valjakka (2011, 82) affirms: "The attitude towards commissioned and paid graffiti is usually more positive among Chinese writers, as opposed to claims of some Euro-American writers that only illegally created graffiti is true graffiti".

28 To see the work made for iMART: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/102388327.html> (2018-10-30).

29 There are only two exceptions: 1) *Shirupozhu* 势如破竹 (With Irresistible Force, 2008), which was the first attempt to use 'charactering' in this type of work (EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda, 2016-12-20), 2) and the numerous graffiti created in November 2008 for the 'New Silk Bay Media' (*Xin si wan chuamei* 新丝湾传媒) on the inner walls of the company headquarters in Beijing.

30 The primary aims of the graffiti art in China are in fact beautification of urban space (not rebellion) and self-expression because it has always been primarily regarded as a form of art (cf. Valjakka 2011, 75, 78).

in fact, the Kwanyin Clan realised a graffiti work entitled *Olympic Beijing* [fig. 3]³¹ near the Beijing Institute of Technology for the ‘Beijing Olympic Cultural Wall Creative Design Campaign’. Co-sponsored by the Beijing Olympic Committee and Beijing People’s Broadcasting Station, that campaign was carried out with the hope that “[t]he Olympics evokes the creativity of the artists. Art lends further splendor to the Olympic culture” (Lu 2015, 49). In that particular event, “we can see a return of the narrative of mass participation in art production in the communist vein” (Lu 2015, 49) and the graffiti works “serve as a new tools of visual propaganda in urban public spaces” (Valjakka 2015, 259), becoming an instrument of China’s soft power.³²



Figure 3 Kwanyin Clan, *Olympic Beijing*. April 2008. Graffiti: spray-painting on wall. West wall of the Institute of Technology, Weigongcun, Beijing. Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/86027853.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

Adhering to the spirit of the campaign, in this long graffiti work made by the Kwanyin Clan we can recognise many typical Chinese elements (calligraphic inscriptions, bamboo, pagodas, ping-pong players, traditional decorative patterns, etc.) that evoke the past and present greatness of China, as well as explicit references to the Beijing Olympics (the central writing in Latin letters ‘Beijing Olympics’, the Olympic torch, the Olympics logo, the Fuwa mascot, etc.). Moreover, the extensive use of the red colour, that is China’s colour, gives the impression of being in front a nationalist propaganda poster of modern times.

31 To see the photo frames of this graffiti work: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/86027853.html> (2018-11-08).

32 Several academic researches demonstrated that the soft power mechanisms affect the development of Chinese contemporary art (Barr 2011; Gladstone 2014; Yao 2015, 2017). These researches demonstrated how i) the role of contemporary art as a focus for social intervention in the People’s Republic of China is increasingly subject of government recuperation (Gladstone 2014); ii) Chinese contemporary art has been regarded as a key factor of China’s soft power in exercising China’s cultural influence in the face of Western cultural imperialism in the post-Mao era, in asserting China’s position on the global stage and in holding its own world view (Yao Y. 2015); iii) the fluid construct of Chineseness is successfully promoted through the government’s support of contemporary Chinese art (Yao Y. 2017). These three aspects perfectly fit the aim of the collaboration between the Chinese government and the Kwanyin Clan in the beautification of Beijing streets with graffiti works.

Another important example of the collaboration between the Kwanyin Clan and the Chinese local government was the embellishment of a tower in the 'Guanyintang Art Avenue', a new art street opened in Beijing in 2008. The tower was 20 meters high and the Kwanyin Clan shaped old-school graffiti pieces along the outer surface of the tower (from top to bottom) using free style: this tower is the highest graffiti work in mainland China.³³

In addition to these legal activities for private companies and public institutions, the Kwanyin Clan was also involved in illegal bombing on the streets, especially in the 798 Art District and in Sanlitun in the city of Beijing. Their first documented bombing activity took place in April 2007 in the 798 Art District.³⁴ This kind of activity usually consists of 'tagging up'³⁵ and/or 'throw-ups' made in 'bubble letters'³⁶ filled with one or maximum two colours.

Because of their relevance in the Beijing graffiti panorama, the Kwanyin Clan is also the author of numerous murals and pieces in spray painting made on the most important 'halls of fame' in Beijing: i) in the 798 Art District, ii) in the neighborhood of the Today Art Museum, and iii) near the China-Japan Friendship Hospital and the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, along a street that they named 'The Kwanyin Street' (*Guanyin Jie* 观音街) because of the high number of pieces they made there. Rather than 'halls of fame', these walls can be more appropriately considered 'semi-legal sites' where "no official authorization is granted but no consequences result from painting, even in the daytime" (Valjiakka 2015, 246).³⁷ The presence of these 'semi-legal sites' is a peculiarity of Chinese graffiti and in these areas "even large and complex pieces, requiring hours to finish, can be created without fear of being caught" (Valjiakka 2015, 246). In those areas, in fact, the Kwanyin Clan usually created large and complex pieces composed of 'wildstyle'³⁸ writings in Latin letters and/or Chinese characters, figurative and decorative elements, and calligraphic

33 To see the graffiti work on tower along the 'Guanyintang Art Avenue': <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/90376211.html> (2018-07-09).

34 To see the photos of their first bombing in 798 Art District: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/41918956.html> (2018-12-07).

35 'Tagging up' is "the act of writing a signature with marker or spray-paint" ("The Words: A Graffiti Glossary", URL <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>).

36 'Bubble letters' are "a graffiti type of letters [...] often used for throw-up letters because of their rounded shape, which allows for quick formation" ("The Words: A Graffiti Glossary", URL <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>).

37 In China graffiti is usually defined as "half legal, half illegal" (Bidisha 2014) and officials are usually tolerant toward graffiti writers.

38 'Wildstyle' is "a complicated construction of interlocking letters. It is a hard style that consists of lots of arrows and connections. It is considered one of the hardest styles to master and pieces done in wildstyle are often completely undecipherable to

inscriptions, using lots of colours and different styles. In these pieces, ‘Chineseness’ is extremely more evident than in commissioned and illegal works [fig. 4].



Figure 4 Kwanyin Clan (and MAX), *Shijulongpan* 狮踞龙盘 (Where Tigers Crouch and Dragons Coil). 1 March 2008. Graffito: spray-painting on wall. Cherry Blossom Street (between the China-Japan Friendship Hospital and the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology), Beijing. Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/81097067.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

Like most of the Chinese crews, the primary aim of their art is the beautification of urban space (not rebellion), and self-expression.³⁹ The majority of their unauthorized graffiti are apolitical or they are created to support the establishment and not to criticise it.⁴⁰ Their attitude towards commissioned and paid graffiti is extremely positive and, in fact, they usually engage collaborations with foreign and domestic brands to promote their commercial campaigns. In their art (as in most of Chinese local creators), the paradox of turning an artistic language (graffiti art) that is expression of subcultures into mainstream, or even a commercial product, is evident.

Examining the crew artistic production, it is possible to distinguish a good number of oeuvres characterised by the use of both Chinese and Western elements and/or techniques, exploring the fusion of graffiti art with China traditional aesthetics. With the exception of bombing activity and most of their commercial works, the use of Chinese characters together with Latin letters is a *leitmotiv* in their artistic production from their first mural onwards. From the beginning of their activity, Chinese characters are usually used for writing Chinese tags (especially in the forms of *Guan* or *Guanyin* characters), and from 2008 they have experimented with the use of Chinese

non-writers” (“The Words: A Graffiti Glossary”, URL <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>).

39 According to Minna Valjakka: “The new generation of [Chinese] writers mainly uses the walls as canvas for artistic self-expression, creating graffiti images that often depict imaginary characters, such as ghosts, friendly dragons, animated mushrooms and cartoon characters. The majority of graffiti images, especially in Beijing, are primarily pictures” (Valjakka 2011, 75).

40 As Minna Valjakka points out: “In mainland China, the majority of unauthorized urban art images are apolitical, because directly targeting sensitive issues or the establishment would bring about a swift official response and could cause severe problems; however, political graffiti art can also be created to support the establishment” (Valjakka 2015, 265).

characters instead of Latin letters in the creation of very elaborate 'charactering' pieces.⁴¹ Another characteristic of their works is the presence of other visual elements that are easily recognisable as Chinese (such as pandas, dragons, bamboo and rocks, lotus flowers, pagodas, red fishes, Taoist deities, etc.),⁴² usually painted in form of comic puppet.⁴³

But, in addition to the use of Chinese writing and Chinese elements (common to other Chinese crews too),⁴⁴ the peculiarity of the Kwanyin Clan is that in some particular works they also try to merge Euro-American graffiti practice with the ancient traditional arts of the Chinese literati (calligraphy, poetry, painting, and seal carving) or with uncommon media, for example ceramics, that are traditionally Chinese and highly appreciated by the Chinese literati. A selection of the most representative artworks where graffiti art and the arts of Chinese literati are perfectly combined will be analysed in detail in the next paragraphs (§§ 2-4). The works entitled *Shanshui PIC* 山水PIC (Landscape painting PIC, 2007, [figs. 5-11]) and *New style* (2008, [figs. 12-14]) respectively combine the aesthetics of traditional landscape and bamboo painting and the artistic taste of world-wide contemporary graffiti writing, creating what we can define as 'modern literati graffiti paintings'. In *Shirupozhu* 势如破竹 (With Irresistible Force, 2008, [figs. 15-18]) and *Shengongyijiang* 神工意匠 (2010, [figs. 19-20]), the Kwanyin Clan creates graffiti pieces using Chinese characters, treating public walls as they were horizontal calligraphic scrolls and writing semi-cursive poetic calligraphies in spray-painting, shaping what we can define as 'modern literati calligraphy graffiti'. The series *Blue and White Porcelain* (2009-2010, figg. 21-24) represents the best example of the adaptation of graffiti to a surprising support, such as ceramic, that is really 'Chinese' and tradition-

41 *Shirupozhu* (With Irresistible Force, 2008) is the first 'charactering' piece made by the Kwanyin Clan: EricTin, e-mail to the author and M. Merenda (2015-12-20).

42 The insertion of visual elements that are easily recognisable as Chinese is a constant in the Kwanyin Clan's work; for example, they employed a big panda in *Guanyin jie* PIC 观音街PIC (Kwanyin Street PIC, 2007) and in the graffiti made for the 'The Clash Show' *New Design Exhibition*' (2007) and for the *Shijingshan Cultural Festival Graffiti Show* (2008, fig. 2), a dragon and an imperial guardian lion in *Shijulongpan* (2008, fig. 4), an auspicious red fish in *Passage of Time* (2010), bamboos and rocks in *Bamboo* (2011), etc. To see these works, look up the *Kwanyin Clan Blog* (EricTin).

43 The presence of Chinese writing and other visual elements that are easily recognisable as Chinese is extremely common also in their graphic/digital works.

44 The use of Chinese language and other visual references to Chinese culture is the distinguishable feature of the artworks made by some local and even foreign actors. According to Minna Valjakka, the most representative examples of this kind of experimentation are by the Kwanyin Clan and the Beijing Penzi crew in Beijing, and French Dezio in Shanghai (Valiakka 2015, 271). Other examples, in particular of the use of Chinese language, are: ZATO, MES, EXAS, Camel, ZEIT, and MAGE in Beijing, the OOPS crew in Shanghai, Touchy in Shenzhen, Xeme and Sinic in Hong Kong, the Kong2 crew in Changsha, Moon in Quanzhou, Mora in Canton, and Gas in Chengdu.

al, but extremely innovative for graffiti: a perfect example of what we can define as ‘modern literati graffiti ceramics’.⁴⁵

2 ‘Modern Literati Graffiti Paintings’ by the Kwanyin Clan: *Shanshui PIC* (2007) and *New Style* (2008)

EricTin, the leader of the crew, says: “We draw nourishment from Chinese painting. [...] Our big works are essentially based on Chinese elements” (“*Guanyin* 观音 (KWAN-YIN) crew -- Chinese Style Graffiti” 2008, author’s transl.). An example of this assumption is one of their first ‘masterpieces’ entitled *Shanshui PIC* [fig. 5].⁴⁶ This opera represents a programmatic manifesto of the Kwanyin Clan and its analysis requires special attention.



Figure 5 Kwanyin Clan (Quan, EricTin, Yumi, Jer, Apart, Nato, Scar, Joey, Keno, Pluto, Viga, Ctn). *Shanshui PIC* 山水PIC (Landscape Painting PIC). 8-11 November 2007. Graffiti: spray-painting on panels. L 42 m, ht ca. 2 m. International Exhibition Hall Square, Beijing. Source: https://www.graffiti.org/kwanyin/kwanyin_clan200710beijing2md.jpg (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

This huge graffiti work is 42 meters long and it was created in 2007 during the ‘China’s First Graffiti Exhibition’ (*Zhongguo shoujie tuyu meili yishuzhan* 中国首届涂鸦魅力艺术展) held at the Beijing International Exhibition Hall Square from 8th to 11th November.⁴⁷ As Eric-

⁴⁵ The artworks named in this paragraph and analysed below were selected after a detailed analysis of more than one hundred works of the crew (stored in their blogs, Flickr and Facebook pages) and using information gathered during a period of fieldwork in Beijing, interviews with EricTin (the leader of the group), and social media consultation.

⁴⁶ “In mainland China ‘pic’ is a common abbreviation of piece, but is easily confused with picture. This ambiguous abbreviation might have facilitated the understanding of ‘graffiti piece’ as a large picture than writing” (Valjakka 2015, 263). This definition perfectly describes the analysed work.

⁴⁷ This first graffiti exhibition aimed to introduce graffiti to the general public. The exhibition was part of the China International Cultural and Creative Industry Expo. There was a 300-metre-long wall outside the exhibition hall, and a special Olympic-themed graffiti wall was put up on the square. Professional graffiti artists have been invited to give an on-spot demonstration for visitors, who will even be able to paint by themselves. Cf. “China’s First Graffiti Exhibition opens in Beijing” 2007.

Tin explains,⁴⁸ *Shanshui PIC* was a collective work: all members of the crew were involved in this work, and it took five days to finish it.⁴⁹ The landscape scenery in the background was painted by VIGA, NATO, YUMI, JOEY, and CTN; the long calligraphy on the upper left by EricTin; and the lettering 'pieces' nested in the mountains (from left to right) by YUMI, EricTin, APART (a.k.a. ZXZ), QUAN, SCAR, JER, and VIGA (EricTin 2007).

At a first glance, this work seems to be a traditional ink painting landscape [fig. 6], characterised by mountains in the background and a long river in the foreground (*you shan you shui* 有水有山), a thick mist where mountain contours disappear, a lush vegetation (trees and bushes) on the river banks, and fishermen on small boats and huts at the foot of the mountains, indicating the presence of humans. The colours are typical of Chinese 'ink wash painting' (*shuimo hua* 水墨画): the black of the ink in various concentrations (up to grey) and the white of the paper (up to light ochre as age-yellowed paper). The format is similar to a 'horizontal scroll' (*hengfu* 横幅).



Figure 6 Kwanyin Clan. *Shanshui PIC*. 8-11 November 2007. Graffiti: spray-painting on panels. L 42 m, ht ca. 2 m. International Exhibition Hall Square, Beijing (central section). Source: https://www.graffiti.org/kwanyin/kwanyin_clan200710beijing2md.jpg (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

As EricTin points out:

Many features of Chinese classical culture can be transposed into contemporary graffiti [...]. Just think about the arrangement of a composition: because of the horizontal support, the arrangement of a graffiti piece on a wall is very similar to traditional Chinese painting. So we can use Chinese traditional painting composition

⁴⁸ EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2015-12-20).

⁴⁹ See the two videos of the realisation of the work from the *Kwanyin Clan Blog* (EricTin): 1) "Guanyin tuya 2007 观音涂鸦 2007" 2008; and 2) "Guanyin tuya gongzuoshi Tuya shipin 观音涂鸦工作室涂鸦视频" 2008.

to arrange a graffiti piece, and it will look like a classical landscape painting. [Then,] we can also add some elements of traditional landscape painting into our works, like for example mountains and rivers. [Moreover,] we can use the typical colors of traditional Chinese painting (black, white, and grey), [not only for painting landscape but] also for writing characters and letters (in our tags and lettering pieces). [As a consequence,] the bottom color tends to reproduce the texture of 'rice paper' (*xuanzhi* 宣纸). ("Guanyin观音 (KWAN-YIN) crew -- Chinese Style Graffiti" 2008;⁵⁰ Author's transl.)

Using these words, EricTin explains why the main elements, the compositional arrangement, the colours, and the format of *Shanshui PIC* are so similar to tradition landscape painting.

In another interview, he also underlines how the reference to this kind of painting is even deeper and more specific, because the source of inspiration for this work is landscape painting from the Song Dynasty (960-1279). He argues that:

When we were shaping *Shanshui PIC*, we wanted to reproduce the arrangement of Song Dynasty landscape paintings, like for example *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* (*Xi shan xing lü tu* 溪山行旅图),⁵¹ *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* (*Qianli Jiangshan tu* 千里江山图),⁵² and *Dwelling in the Mountains* (*Shanju tu* 山居图).⁵³ Chinese landscape painting reached its peak in the Song Dynasty. Personally, I do like landscape paintings of that period, so in *Shanshui PIC* we tried to use a similar ink technique, leaving empty spaces to shape water, fog and clouds.⁵⁴ (Author's transl.)

The 'spray-painting' technique used by the Kwanyin Clan in this work is in fact very similar to the ink technique of *cunfa* 皴法 that is the

50 Youtube video, from 1'06" to 1'49".

51 The Author of *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* is Fan Kuan 范宽 (ca. 950-1032), one of the most important Chinese landscape painters during the Song Dynasty. This painting is considered one of the finest monumental Chinese landscape paintings. It also became a model for later Chinese painters. Fan Kuan based his painting on the Daoist principle of becoming one with nature.

52 *A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains* was painted by Wang Ximeng 王希孟 (1096-1119), one of the most renowned court painters of the Northern Song period (960-1126). This painting is one of the largest in Chinese history, and the only Wang's surviving work. The painter used blue and green mineral colours for decoration, so this genre of painting is known as 'blue and green landscape' (*qinglü shanshui* 青绿山水). This technique was a recognised form of painting as early as the seventh century.

53 The Author of *Dwelling in the Mountains* is Qian Xuan 钱选 (1235-1305), a Song loyalist painter during the last period of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) and of the first period of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

54 EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2016-10-01).

traditional method of painting stone textures in Chinese art. This method is clearly illustrated in the most well-known Chinese traditional landscape painting pattern book entitled *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden (Jieziyuan Huazhuan 芥子园画传)*, a step-by-step guide to brush stroke types and techniques highly popular in the early eighteenth century and influential ever since. There the *cunfa* technique, based on particular brush strokes, is broken down in order to have five steps: ‘outline’ (*gou* 勾), ‘texture’ (*cun* 皴), ‘rub’ (*ca* 擦), ‘render’ (*ran* 染), and ‘dot’ (*dian* 点) (Illouz 1989, 104-13). Even if in *Shanshui PIC* graffiti writers did not use the brush, but spray cans, they adopted an analogous methodology: in the first step they transferred the ‘outlines’⁵⁵ of the sketch to the wall (*gou*); then, they filled the shapes with the appropriate colours (*cun*), using different caps to vary the width of spray (*ca*); finally, they wrote the ‘final outlines’⁵⁶ around shapes (*ran*), adding dripping and dot effects (*dian*).

In addition to a revised version of the traditional *cunfa* technique, the Kwanyin Clan also reproduces the classical brush method of framing space through the so-called ‘three distances’ (*san yuan* 三元).⁵⁷ This is a methodology theorised during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) by the famous painter Guo Xi 郭熙 (1020-1090) in order to create the illusion of space and distance in landscape painting. In *Shanshui PIC*, as well as for *cunfa* technique, this effect has been recreated through the skillful use of spray cans and caps and by particular painting techniques, like for example ‘cutting lines’⁵⁸ and ‘fade’ (blended) colours.

The final result is very similar to a traditional landscape painting thanks to the introduction of traditional landscape elements (mountains, river, greenery, fishermen, etc.) and the ‘graffiti adaptation’ of Chinese ink painting techniques (ink colours, empty spaces, *cunfa*, ‘three distances’, etc.).

Then, if we look at it more carefully, we will notice that *Shanshui PIC* is also punctuated by two calligraphies. The presence of callig-

⁵⁵ ‘Outline’ is “the skeleton or frame work of a piece” (“Writer’s Vocabulary”, URL <http://www.at149st.com/glossary.html>).

⁵⁶ ‘Final outline’ is the outline re-executed to define the letters, after fill-in and designs have been applied (“Writer’s Vocabulary”, URL <http://www.at149st.com/glossary.html>).

⁵⁷ The ‘three distances’ are ‘high distance’ (*gao yuan* 高远), ‘deep distance’ (*shen yu an* 深远), and ‘horizontal distance’ (*ping yuan* 平远). The ‘high distance’ is used to create the height of a peak and to view from the bottom of a mountain looking up toward to the top; the ‘deep distance’ is used to create layers and to view from the front into the back; and the ‘horizontal distance’ is used to view the mountain which is far away from the nearby mountain.

⁵⁸ ‘Cutting lines’ is “a painting technique used on inside fills of letters and characters to get thin lines, thinner than thin tips” (“The Words: A Graffiti Glossary”, URL <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>).

raphies is another reference to traditional landscape paintings that are always embellished by calligraphic inscriptions. The first inscription is in the centre of the scroll, written in ‘big characters’ (*dazi* 大字) and in ‘regular script’ (*kaishu* 楷书), while the second one, much longer, is in the last section of the scroll written in ‘cursive script’ (*caoshu* 草书).⁵⁹ The first calligraphy [fig. 7] is composed of only two traditional Chinese characters, *Guan Yin* 觀音, the Chinese name of the crew. As it is usual in Chinese calligraphic work, they are written vertically (from top to bottom).



Figure 7 Kwanyin Clan. *Shanshui PIC*. 8-11 November 2007. Graffiti: spray-painting on panels. L 42 m, ht ca. 2 m. International Exhibition Hall Square, Beijing (detail of the big calligraphy in the centre of the work). Source: https://www.graffiti.org/kwanyin/kwanyin_clan200710beijing2md.jpg (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

At the bottom of the two characters, we can see the tags of all the components of the crew (*Quan, EricTin, Yumi, Apart, Jer, Nato, Scar* on the left; *Joey, Keno, Pluto, Viga, Ctn, Kwanyin* on the right). Differently from the two characters *Guan Yin*, they are written horizontally from left to right in Latin alphabet, recalling Euro-American graffiti tradition. This hybridisation of ‘lettering’ and ‘charactering’ is a *leitmotiv* in Kwanyin Clan’s works and it is an example of the captive use of intermixed elements that are both Chinese (vertical Chinese characters) and Western (horizontal Latin writings), both traditional (calligraphy) and modern (graffiti tags). In the two big characters, also the variation of the width of the strokes produced by a skillful use of the spray-painting is a contemporary expedient to create the illusion of being in front of a classical calligraphy written with the ink brush. In calligraphy writings, in fact, it is fundamental to vary the width of the brushstrokes, and “even when writing a straight line,

59 ‘Regular script’ (*kaishu*) and ‘cursive script’ (*caoshu*) are two of the five styles of traditional Chinese calligraphy; the other three are ‘seal script’ (*zhuanshu* 篆书), ‘clerical script’ (*lishu* 隶书), and ‘running script’ (*xingshu* 行书). For more details, see: Li 2009, 100-56. Using these two styles, the Kwanyin Clan members show their acquaintance with the art of Chinese calligraphy. According to the calligraphy master Silvio Ferragina: the first calligraphy seems to reproduce “the classical standard calligraphic form of the Northern Wei Dynasty [386-534/535]” while the second one “gives the feeling of the cursive form (amplified by the dripping effect), even if it presents an overall regularity in the verticality of its execution” (e-mail to the Author, 2019-01-20).

one needs to vary the thickness of the strokes” (Li 2009, 38).⁶⁰ Furthermore, if we look at the arrangement of this written section, we will notice that it also reproduces a traditional calligraphic pattern: the main text (the two big characters) is in the centre of the work, occupying a commanding position, while the inscriptions with the name of the artists are written on the sides in smaller size (even if horizontally and in alphabetic letters).⁶¹

Also in the second long calligraphy [fig. 8], the calligraphic style (*caoshu*), the variation of the width of the strokes, the arrangement of the text in vertical columns, and the reading direction (from right to left) follow the traditional calligraphic manner, but here a wide-spread ‘dripping’ effect underlines the graffiti taste.



Figure 8 Kwanyin Clan. *Shanshui PIC*. 8-11 November 2007. Graffiti: spray-painting on panels. L 42 m, ht ca. 2 m. International Exhibition Hall Square, Beijing (detail of the long calligraphy in the last section of the work). Source: https://www.graffiti.org/kwanyin/kwanyin_clan200710beijing2md.jpg (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

The content of the calligraphy is inspired by a Song poem entitled *Immortal at the River* (*Lin jiang xian* 临江仙) composed by Teng Zijing 滕子京 (990-1047), as EricTin declared.⁶² This poem is the most representative example of the use of literary tradition in the Kwanyin Clan’s works. For this reason, it will be analysed in detail (Author, context of composition, inspiration, meaning, English translation, text quotations, etc.). Text analysis will reveal important connections of this work with the world of ancient Chinese literati. The choice of

⁶⁰ The variation of the width of the strokes depends on the pressure that the calligrapher applies to the brush or lifts it up. “In fact, calligraphy writing can be seen as a process of alternately lifting up and pressing down of the brush” (Li 2009, 38).

⁶¹ A calligraphy piece usually has three main components: 1) the main text, 2) inscriptions/colophons, and 3) seal/s. The main text is the main point of interest and the inscriptions and seals play a balancing and secondary role. Inscriptions usually consist of the date when the work was done, the name of the artist, and the location. The seal with the name of the artist is like an official signature (Li 2009, 157-67). Even if there is not seal in this work, the tags of inscription have the same function.

⁶² EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2016-01-07).

this poem and this poet is extremely significant. Teng Zijing, commonly known by his courtesy name as Teng Zongliang 滕宗谅, was an official and a fellow of the great reformer Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989-1052), who was the Chancellor of the Song Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Renzong (1010-1063). Teng Zijing was famous because in 1045, when he served as local prefect of Yuezhou 岳州 (present Yueyang 岳阳 - Hunan province), he restored the famed ancient Yueyang Tower,⁶³ a city gate by the side of the Dongting Lake, enlarging its scale and engraving on it the complete anthology of the Tang (618-907) and Song Dynasty poems written in that place. To commemorate this event, Teng Zijing invited Fan Zhongyan to write a descriptive prose entitled *Yueyang Lou Ji* 岳阳楼记 (On Yueyang Tower), his most famous literature work (Murck 2000, 107). In this text, Fan Zhongyan depicted the breathtaking landscape surrounding the Yueyang Tower.⁶⁴ Deeply affected by this beautiful scenery, also Teng Zijing decided to compose a poem entitled *Lin jiang xian*. In this poem, he firstly focused on the most charming part of the delightful landscape, the vast Dongting Lake (l. 1), which dazzled in the morning sun of an autumn day (l. 2). The well-known Junshan Hill with its 72 peaks stood in the middle of the lake, and it is compared to the legendary island of Penglai 蓬莱, a mountain where the Taoist Immortals were said to live (l. 3). In the distance, a grey evening mist was emerging from the Yun and Meng Marshes (l. 4), and slowly faded the city of Yueyang (l. 5). The view of Junshan Hill recalls to poet's mind the famous legend of the Xiang River Goddess (l. 6). Legend has it that 4,000 years ago when Emperor Shun toured in South China, his two concubines E Huang 娥皇 and Nü Ying 女英 (also called Xiang Fei 湘妃 and Xiang Jun 湘君) went to search for their husband. When they got to the Junshan Hill, they knew he was dead. They wept so long that the bamboos on which their tears dropped changed into mottled bamboos. Later they passed away and were buried on the hill, and to memorialise these two soulful lovers, the mountain was renamed Junshan 君山. In the second stanza of the poem, Teng Zijing commemorated this event evoking a melancholy tune played by the spirits of the Xiang River Goddesses (ll. 6-7). The song permeated

63 Yueyang Tower (*Yueyang Lou* 岳阳楼) was known as one of the three great towers in Southern China, due to their association with famous literary works. The other two are: Huanghe Tower (*Huanghe Lou* 黄鹤楼) and Tengwang Ge 滕王阁.

64 When Fan Zhongyan wrote this essay both of them were in exile following their failure to persuade the Emperor to implement the Qingli reforms (Murck 2000, 107). The Qingli reforms took place from 1043 to 1045 and they were an attempt to innovate the traditional way of conducting Chinese government, discouraging corruption and ensuring that officials were drafted more on the basis of their capabilities. However, many of these reforms met with the opposition of conservative ministers so that the Emperor rescinded them in 1045. Nevertheless, they inspired the revolutionary reforms promoted later by Chancellor Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021-1086).

the hearts of the listeners while a breeze was spreading the scent of the orchids (l. 8). But when the tune came to an end, people went away (l. 9), disappearing among the green mountains (l. 10). In his poem, Teng Zijing wrote:

Lake water embraces the sky,
Glow brightly in crystal autumn.
Jun mount is a piece of paradise
And a mist from the Yun and Meng Marshes
Has beleaguered the city of Yueyang.

Xiang River Goddesses play the lute
Ancient memories sad hearts lacerate
Orchid's whispering delicately scented
No one can be found whence the melodies ended
On upper river verdant peaks silently stand.⁶⁵
(Author's transl.)

In this poem Teng Zijing quoted two other poems of the Tang period: i) the fourth and the fifth lines of his poem coincides with the third and the fourth lines of a poem by Meng Haoran's 孟浩然 (689-740) entitled *Gazing at Dongting Lake, Presented to Prime Minister Zhang* (*Wang Dongting hu zeng Zhang chengxiang* 望洞庭湖赠张丞相);⁶⁶ while ii) his last two lines correspond to the last two lines of a poem by Qian Qi's 钱起 (ca. 722-785) entitled *Musical soul of the Xiang River* (*Xiang ling guse* 湘灵鼓瑟).⁶⁷

In *Shanshui PIC*, the choice of writing the Teng Zijing's poem *Lin jiang xian* is also a way to reactivate a chain of literary quotations, as it had already happened for the choice of depicting landscape scener-

⁶⁵ For the Chinese version of the poem: <https://bit.ly/2JEFTy1> (2018-11-16). The text of the poem was confirmed by EricTin in an e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda, (2016-01-09/10).

⁶⁶ The text of the whole poem is: "In the eighth month, the lake is calm | Submerging an empty blue sky | Vapors rise from the Yun and Meng Marshes | and waves lap at the Yueyang's wall. | I want to cross but have neither boat nor oar | Afraid to face the Emperor, I lead my peaceful life | So I sit and watch the fisherman, vainly longing for his catch" (Murck 2000, 107).

⁶⁷ The text of the whole poem is: "The booms of her drum harmonize with the zither to please the clouds | From yonder the Saintly Emperor's soul is aroused | Dances the Water Goddess so gay | Southerners listen in daze | Her performance induces metal and stone to sing drearily | The clear tones fuse with echoes in space merrily | The old plane tree is moved to express its admiration | Scented white reeds release perfume for saturation | The music flows with the Xiang River to its extent | Then veers across Dong Ting Lake raising a whirl of desolation | No one can be found whence the melodies ended | On upper river verdant peaks silently stand" (Jiang 2009, transl. by Jiang Shaolun). The English translation of the last two lines by Jiang Shaolun is quoted by the Author in the above translation.

ies inspired by Fan Kuan, Wang Ximeng and Qian Xuan's paintings. The use of quotations is very common in Chinese classical poetry. In this specific case, the transcription of Teng Zijing's poem activates the quotations' mechanism in six different ways. In fact, i) in *Lin jiang xian*, other poems have been quoted (Meng Haoran's and Qian Qi's poems); ii) Teng Zijing mentions a famous scenic spot, the Junshan Hill, that since ancient times has been filled with legends, including the most popular of the Xiang River Goddesses recalled in the second stanza; iii) the poem takes inspiration from a place (the Yueyang Tower) that since Tang Dynasty had become a popular place for literati to compose their poems; iv) most of these ancient poems were engraved by Teng Zijing himself on the Yueyang Tower in 1045; v) the Yueyang Tower named in the poem also inspired the descriptive prose entitled *Yueyang lou ji* written by Fan Zhongyan and commissioned by Teng Zejing; iv) the title of the poem is the same as other famous Song poems;⁶⁸ all these poems express similar emotions and recall Teng Zijing's poem, even if with different words. Among them, the most significant were composed by Su Shi 苏轼 (1037-1101), Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修 (1007-1072), Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-1115), Yan Jidao 晏几道 (1038-1110), and Chen Yuyi 陈与义 (1090-1138).⁶⁹ The poem by Su Shi, which is the most famous one, is a cry of despair and loneliness:

Drank tonight at Easter Slope, sobered up, drank again;
got home somewhere around third watch.
The houseboy by now is snoring like thunder:
I bang the gate but nobody answers.
Leaning of my stick, I listen to river sounds.

Always it irks me - this body not my own.
When can I forget the world's business?
Night far gone, wind calm, the river's crepe of ripples stilled:
I'll leave here in a little boat,
on far waters spend the years.
(Transl. by Burton Watson: Watson 1984, 368)⁷⁰

68 This is due to the fact that Teng Zijing wrote a *ci* 词 poem and *Lin jiang xian* is only the name of its *cipai* 词牌, one of the around 800 poetry patterns that define the prosody of a *ci* poem. *Ci* was the most popular poetic form during the Song Dynasty, so it is very common that many poems have the same *cipai* ('title/tune'). This means that all the poems entitled *Lin jiang xian* have the same prosody: they are composed of two stanzas, and each stanza has five lines of 7-6-7-5-5 syllables, for a total of 60 characters. For more details on this *cipai*, see: Stirpe 2015, 140-1.

69 For the Chinese version of all the most important Song poems entitled *Lin jiang xian*, see: <https://bit.ly/2LOUM9R> (2019-01-12).

70 To compare this translation to other English translations, see among others: Barnstone, Chou 2005, 252 (translator Tony Barnstone); Liu, Irving 1990, 351 (translator

The poem by Ouyang Xiu is a description of a rainy landscape and of the loneliness of his viewer (Tseng 2011, 40); the poem by Li Qingzhao, which begins with the same words as a line from a poem written by Ouyang Xiu, is a description of the returning of the spring in her courtyard and a moment for the poetess to recall happy days in the past when her husband was still alive (Wang 1989, 67); the poem by Yan Jidao is a sensual reminiscence of a love encounter, where the author expresses the sense of sadness for the absence of his beloved woman (Tseng 2011, 58); and Chen Yuyi's poem is a remembrance of a joyful party with old friends in Luoyang, permeated with a deep sense of nostalgia (Liu, Irving 1990, 372).

Among all these poems, the choice of Teng Zijing's poem was determined by a specific purpose. The Kwanyin Clan want to write a poem able to communicate the feelings of loneliness and sadness following a joyful reunion and at the same time able to evoke the landscape scenery painted in the background of their artwork.⁷¹ Teng Zijing's poem best achieves both these goals, even if the themes of loneliness, melancholy, and nature description are in common with all the listed poems. Because of this similarity, here the quotations' mechanism is particularly suitable for the crew's intentions because it refers to hypertexts that share the basic themes of the source text, but amplifying their possible meanings. According to EricTin, in fact, the main function of Teng Zijing's poem is to describe the content of their artwork and at the same time to express not only the sense of happiness experienced in the encounter with a graffiti work, but also the feelings of loneliness and sadness following this encounter. EricTin explains that this encounter usually 'lasts very briefly' (*tan hua yi xian* 昙花一现) because of the ephemeral and localised status of any graffiti piece. Very few people can see their originals and, at the end, only some photos stored in a computer remain as their records.⁷² So the joy of the meeting is replaced with the pain of the parting and the melancholy of the oblivion, as all the 'quoted' poems have already testified.

According to Chinese classical aesthetics principles, in *Shanshui PIC*, the use of Teng Zijing's poetry (*shi* 诗) written in calligraphic style (*shu* 书) to enhance the depiction of a landscape painting (*hua* 画) also suggests the reference to the Chinese indissoluble artistic triad of 'poetry, calligraphy and painting' (*shi shu hua* 诗书画). From the eighth century onward, in China these three art forms have been known as the 'three perfections' (*san jue* 三绝), and they have been

Michael E. Workman); Yip 1997, 431 (translator Yip Wai-lim); Mair 1994, 325 (translator James Robert Hightower).

⁷¹ EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2016-01-10).

⁷² EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2016-01-10).

intimately connected in the minds of the ‘Chinese literati’ (*wen ren* 文人), representing the basis of traditional Chinese culture (Sullivan 1974, 7). The strict link among these three art forms is composed of three different aspects: the relationship between poetry and painting, calligraphy and poetry, and calligraphy and painting. To properly evaluate any Chinese ‘literati’ artwork, including *Shanshui PIC*, all these perspectives have to be explored.

The traditional relationship between poetry and painting is skillfully described by Su Shi, when he praised the Tang poet/painter Wang Wei 王维 (701-761) using these words: “There is poetry in his painting and painting in his poetry” (*shi zhong you hua, hua zhong you shi* 诗中有画, 画中有诗) (Qi 1991, 11). In *Shanshui PIC*, this binomial was realised by two elements: the first one is Teng Zijing’s poem, which is a vivid representation of scenery and fuses scene and mood; the second one is the landscape painting that can be described as being ‘poem-like’ (*shi yi ban de* 诗一般的). In addition, according to ancient aesthetics principles, in this work:

Poetry and painting are siblings from the same womb [the artistic production of the Song Dynasty]; both emerge from the emotions and the environment of daily life [the emotions of happiness, loneliness and sadness for an encounter with a graffiti work on the street], and both have beauty and power to move people. (Qi 1991, 14)

The strict relationship between calligraphic technique and literally content has been restated by the use of ‘cursive script’ (*caoshu*). Cursive script is faster to write than other styles, so in *Shanshui PIC* (and in particular in the long calligraphy written by EricTin) it embodies the fleeting nature of the joy of the encounter described in Teng Zijing’s poem and it is an echo of the brief meeting between the graffiti work and the people walking down the street experimented by the writers themselves while shaping their piece.

In *Shanshui PIC*, the relationship between calligraphy and painting reproduces classical patterns too. In Chinese traditional art, in fact, “the brush, the instrument of the calligrapher, is also used by the painter, and the results produced by the use of dots and strokes are similar” (Qi 1991, 13). Similarly, in this work, the spray can, the instrument of the graffiti writer, is used for shaping both calligraphy and painting and the result produced by dripping and outlines techniques is equal. So, we can affirm that, in this graffiti piece as well as in any traditional painting, ‘calligraphy and painting have the same source’ (*shu hua tong yuan* 书画同源).

In *Shanshui PIC* there are also innovative elements that transformed this work into a beautiful ‘street scenery’ of contemporary times. These elements are the enormous figure of a graffiti writer in

live motion portrayed in three different poses between the two calligraphies [fig. 9], and the six lettering works nestled in the mountains [figs. 10-11].

The first element (the graffiti writer in the left section) is the most important figurative element of this graffiti work. This figure represents an *alter ego* of all the members of the crew (fig. 9).



Figure 9 Kwanyin Clan. *Shanshui PIC*. 8-11 November 2007. Graffiti: spray-painting on panels. L 42 m, ht ca. 2 m. International Exhibition Hall Square, Beijing (detail of the graffiti writer in live motion in the left section of the work).

Source: https://www.graffiti.org/kwanyin/kwanyin_clan200710beijing2md.jpg (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

The young man can be considered as the prototype of any graffiti writer; in fact: i) he is wearing hip hop urban clothing (a pair of large pants, a big hoodie, a snapback hat, and a pair of sneakers); ii) in his right hand, he holds a spray can, which represents his 'artistic weapon'; and iii) he looks like a 'b-boy' (breakdancer or breaker) dancing in the street while writing on a wall a piece of graffiti. The depiction of this character has a multiple function: i) it underlines the strict relationship between graffiti and hip-hop culture⁷³ in China, and consequently interconnects the Chinese graffiti movement

73 The Hip-Hop culture in the late seventies and early eighties "spawned the graffiti culture as we know it now, breakdancing and hip-hop music, which has since turned into modern rap music" ("The Words: A Graffiti Glossary", URL <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>).

with all the other graffiti movements that are characterised by the same strict relationship (first of all the American one) all over the world. ii) Thanks to the live motion and the b-boy features, the figure of the graffiti writer can be compared to a ‘calligrapher’ of contemporary times. As we know, “the [Chinese] calligrapher is like a dancer, dancing with the brush while the traces of the ink record his movement” (“Qiu Zhijie at work”, 2008).⁷⁴ Similarly, the b-boy painted in this work is ‘dancing’ with a spray can while the traces of its spray painting record his movements on a graffiti wall. iii) Opposite to traditional canons, however, the dynamics of his movements is also used to contrast the static nature of the classical landscape painting in the background in order to capture (and reproduce) the contrastive speed of life in modern times. iv) The size of the character, extremely big if compared to the rest of the work, is also an expedient to mark the difference between graffiti and classical landscape paintings. According to Chinese classical standards, and in particular to Northern Song style, in fact, the presence of human actors (such as scholars admiring the beauty of nature, travellers in the middle of a journey, and farmers and fishermen engaging in everyday labour), even if is an integral component of the whole composition (because nature was conceived to be a place of wonder in its own right and a space where human beings live, work, and seek spiritual learning and regeneration), it is diminutive in its scale, because Chinese philosophy stresses how the human presence is minor in the vastness of the cosmos (Wang 2015, 124). v) The big size of the human actor contrasts not only with the classical standards but also with the canons of contemporary Chinese landscape paintings. In contemporary Chinese landscape paintings, in fact, there is usually no place of human presence because of the anti-humanistic nature of Chinese recent urban development (Wang 2015, 125, 223, 231). In this graffiti work, the choice of depicting an overstated human figure dressed as a graffiti writer is a way to highlight the main aim of the crew (and of graffiti culture in general), that is a re-appropriation of the urban spaces by the writers themselves, presenting themselves as ‘modern graffiti painters’.

The second innovative element is composed of six graffiti works nestled in the mountains: each of them represents the transcription of the names of six members of the crew (Yumi, EricTin, Quan, Scar, Jer, and Viga, respectively) shaped in an elaborate lettering style [figs. 10-11].

⁷⁴ For further information about the relationship between calligraphy and dance, see: Kao 1991, 74-83.



Figure 10 Kwanyin Clan. *Shanshui PIC*. 8-11 November 2007. Graffito: spray-painting on panels. L 42 m, ht ca. 2 m. International Exhibition Hall Square, Beijing (detail of the two lettering piece by Yumi and EricTin in the left section of the work). Source: https://www.graffiti.org/kwanyin/kwanyin_clan200710beijing2md.jpg (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

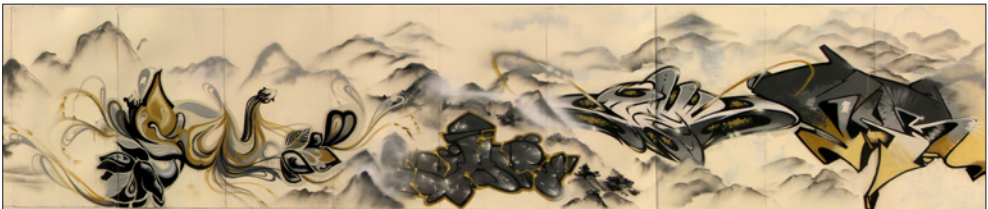


Figure 11 Kwanyin Clan. *Shanshui PIC*. 8-11 November 2007. Graffito: spray-painting on panels. L 42 m, ht ca. 2 m. International Exhibition Hall Square, Beijing (detail of the four lettering pieces by Quan, Scar, Jer, and Viga in the right section of the work). Source: https://www.graffiti.org/kwanyin/kwanyin_clan200710beijing2md.jpg (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

In all these works, there is a marked tendency toward wildstyle, especially in the first three of them that are completely undecipherable. The use of '3D'⁷⁵ is also visible and it is emphasised by the black thickness of the 'outlines'⁷⁶ and by the chiaroscuro effects. Even if their colours are the same as in the landscape painting (black, grey, ochre,

75 '3D' is "a three-dimensional style of letters, used for added effect on basic letters, sometimes applied to wildstyle for an extra level of complexity" ("The Words: A Graffiti Glossary", URL <https://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>).

76 'Outline' is "the skeleton or frame work of a piece" ("Writer's Vocabulary", URL <http://www.at149st.com/glossary.html>).

and white), they clearly emerge from the background as distinguishable elements and distinctive features of a modern urban landscape.

In conclusion, in *Shanshui PIC* the Kwanyin Clan succeeded in combining the aesthetics of traditional landscape painting and the artistic taste of contemporary graffiti in a perfect fusion of literati tradition and modern graffiti mood.

In the work entitled *New Style* [fig. 12] the reference is to bamboo painting.



Figure 12 Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, NaTuo). *New Style*. July 2008. Graffito: spray-painting on wall. Beijing. Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/90485372.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

The work was made by EricTin and NaTuo, and it took three days to complete it (EricTin 2008). The choice of bamboo as a fundamental element of the composition is determined by the importance of ‘bamboo painting’ (*zhuhua* 竹画) in traditional Chinese art. The bamboo was in fact the favourite natural subject for the proud and independent Chinese literati.

To them, indeed, the bamboo was itself a symbol of the true gentleman (*junzi* 君子), pliant yet strong, who maintains his integrity unsullied no matter how low the adverse winds of circumstance may

bend him. The light grace of its stalk and the dashing swordpoint of its leaves offered the perfect subject to his brush (Sullivan 1967, 215).

Even if in drawing bamboo EricTin and NaTuo have been strongly influenced by traditional canons, by emphasising “the light grace of bamboo stalk and the dashing swordpoint of its leaves” (Sullivan 1967, 215), they do not follow traditional standards in the compositional arrangement. In *New Style*, in fact, the core of the whole composition is not the bamboo, but it is the lettering piece placed at the centre of the work; bamboos are only the scenic backdrop that frames the main subject. However, there is a very important correspondence between the lettering piece and the bamboos in the background: the lettering piece is written in a very complex wildstyle, with lots of 3D effects, that seems to reproduce the knottiness of the bamboos. The interlocking letters involved in the piece are KYGS (‘KwanYin Graffiti Studio’) and also their colours (from light green to very dark green) are very similar to bamboos. Furthermore, at the centre of the piece, EricTin inserted a yellow sphere with the traditional character *Guan* (the first character of *Guanyin*), a recurring element in his pieces. The sphere has the same colours as the ones of thin pinnacles sprouting from the green letters: they seem to replicate the stylised ‘foliage’ of the bamboos. So even if the lettering piece in the foreground is much more important than the bamboos in the background, similarities between these two elements tend to merge them into a single entity.

The use of green colour helps to create this unity but it is very unusual in this kind of painting. In traditional bamboo paintings, in fact, the artists always used monochrome ink in order to shape an ‘ink bamboo painting’ (*mozuhua* 墨竹画). The use of monochrome ink in this kind of painting is crucial because it “brought the painter closest to that most difficult of arts, calligraphy” (Sullivan 1967, 215).⁷⁷ In *New Style*, the use of green recalls another artistic tradition, not Chinese but Western, the tradition of Western realism, based on a steadfast devotion to colour truth. At the same time, the various shades of green also remind the greenish patina of ancient ‘Chinese bronze vessels’ (*qingtongqi* 青铜器). According to EricTin, in fact, “the source of inspiration of *New Style* is ancient Chinese bronze ware” (EricTin 2008, Author’s transl.). This is evident not only in the choice of colours, but also in the ‘angularity’ of the lettering piece ‘patterned with ridges’ that replaces the typical ribbed surface of bronze vessels.

⁷⁷ As Sullivan explains: “In bamboo painting, the form and place of every leaf and stalk must be clearly adumbrated; [...] the gradations from black ink in the near leaves to pale in the distance must be precisely judged, the balance of stalks to leaves, of plants to empty space, exactly struck. Having achieved this the painter must still know how the bamboo grows, and give to his own the springing movement of living plant. A great bamboo painting is a virtuoso performance of high order” (Sullivan 1967, 215-6).

The presence of the mist is another element that simultaneously recalls Chinese traditions as well as diverts from it. The mist usually never fails in Chinese paintings, but here: i) it is painted in white colour and without leaving empty spaces as usually happens in traditional artworks; and ii) it hides the awkward junctures of bamboo, the opposite of what used to happen in painting bamboo where “the awkward junctures of bamboo cannot be hid in mist as in landscape painting” (Sullivan 1967, 215).

The format of the work and the concurrent use of letters and characters for writing names or inscriptions are other two important elements that represent common points of meeting between East and West. The format of this work, in fact, can be simultaneously compared to a large album leaf, one of the main format of Chinese painting,⁷⁸ as well as to a big canvas, the typical support of Western art (especially if you see the work from a long distance **[fig. 13]**).



Figure 13 Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, NaTuo). *New Style*. July 2008. Graffito: spray-painting on wall. Beijing (view of the artwork from a long distance). Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/90485372.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

78 The main formats of Chinese paintings are hanging scroll, handscroll, fan, and album leaf.

At the same time, the concurrent use of letters and characters creates a counterbalance between East and West. In fact, on the lower left, the name of the two authors of the work ('EricTin' and 'NaTuo') and of the crew ('Kwanyin') are written horizontally in Latin letters and the year of the execution ('2008') is reported in Arabic numbers, while on the upper left, the Chinese name of the crew (*Guanyin*) is written vertically in Chinese characters.

The use of Chinese characters is also reiterated in the calligraphic inscription on the right edge [fig. 14].

The inscription is written in *xingcao* 行草 style, a style of handwriting between the 'running' (*xing* 行) hand and the 'cursive' (*cao* 草) hand.⁷⁹ The content of the calligraphy is a couplet:⁸⁰

Buried in the earth it already has a culm,
reaching into the sky it is still open-minded.
(Shinewind 2012)⁸¹

The two lines quoted by EricTin are from a poem entitled *On Bamboo* (*Zhu* 竹).⁸² The author of this poem is Zheng Xie 郑燮 (1693-1765), commonly known by his pseudonym as Zheng Banqiao 郑板桥, a famous poet, painter and calligrapher of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).⁸³ He was particularly able to draw bamboos and his unique technique

⁷⁹ According to the calligraphy master Silvio Ferragina, this inscription seems to reproduce "running script tending to cursive forms because of the presence of long traits linking successive characters" (e-mail to the Author, 2019-01-21).

⁸⁰ The two verses of the couplet are: *Wei chutu qian xian you jie | lingyun shen chu zong xuxin* 未出土前先有节, 凌云深处总虚心. EricTin quotes these two verses in: EricTin 2008.

⁸¹ The translation of these two lines is from the third and fourth verses of the poem by Xu Tingyun quoted by EricTin.

⁸² There are slight differences between the original poem by Zheng Xie and the Kwanyin Clan version. The original couplet is: *Wei chutu shi xian you jie | ji lingyun chu shang xuxin* 未出土时先有节, 及凌云处尚虚心. So, in the Kwanyin Clan version, i) the fourth character *shi* 时 (when) has been replaced by the character *qian* 前 (before); ii) the character *ji* 及 (and), that is the first character of the second verse, has been deleted; iii) before the character *chu* 处 (place), the character *shen* 深 (deep) has been added; and iv) the character *shang* 尚 (esteem) has been replaced by the character *zong* 总 (always). Despite these differences, the content of the two poems is very similar. Kwanyin Clan probably changed these few characters because they wanted to underline its intention to create a personal style deeply rooted in the past tradition.

⁸³ Zheng Banqiao was one of the 'Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou', a group of eight painters known in the Qing period for rejecting the orthodox ideas about painting in favour of a style deemed expressive and individualist. He is famous for his traditional paintings of bamboo, rock, and orchid. The composition of his painting is usually very simple, with a few bamboos, a rock, and a couple of orchids, but at the same time delicate: with intricate ink shading, the single lined bamboos and orchids seem vivid and vigorous. As calligrapher, he created a new calligraphic style influenced by his orchid drawings. He was also very interested in literature and poetry. For more details about his life, see: Matthyssen 2013, 219-44. For more details about his calligraphy, see: Hammer 2016.

usually combines painting and calligraphy. According to the content of this poem, in his paintings, the bamboo trunks, stems and leaves are usually lean but strong, so embodying the playfulness and spontaneity of a 'man of letters'.

The couplet by Zheng Xie is paraphrased from the third and fourth lines of another poem composed by the Song poet Xu Tingyun 徐庭筠 (1095-1179) entitled *Ode to Bamboo* (*Yong zhu* 咏竹).⁸⁴ As it is in *Shan-shui PIC*, also in *New Style* the quotations' mechanism has been reactivated by a 'calligraphic poetry'.

Even if there are also some little differences among the three versions of the couplet,⁸⁵ all of them focus on the qualities of the perfect literati (*junzi*) symbolised by the bamboo.⁸⁶ The bamboo, in fact, grows straightly and keeps green in winter (*wei chutu qian xian you jie* 未出土时先有节), which is an indication of its firm and tenacious character; it is hollow inside (*wu xin* 无心 'without a core'), so it is regarded as 'honest and upright' (*xu xin* 虚心); and even in winter, its leaves rustle in the wind, 'reaching the clouds' (*lingyun* 凌云), while it still stands straight on its deep roots (*shen chu zong* 深处总), symbolising great modesty (*xu xin*) (Illouz 1989, 57).

The depiction of the bamboos and the transcription of the couplet are two expedients to create a connection between the ancient Chinese literati-painters, who were used to painting bamboo and composing poems on his gentleman qualities, and the contemporary Chinese graffiti writers (such as EricTin and Natuo), who can do exactly the same things (as demonstrated in *New Style*), but using different modern tools (spray painting on wall). Viewed in this light, also the chain of citations triggered by the couplet is another erudite device to link the past to the present.

In this work, the link to the past tradition is also underlined by the simultaneous use of painting, calligraphy, and poetry, the so-called 'three perfections'. In the past, bamboo painters were accustomed to i) inscribing a poem that accompanied the painting and further elucidated its motif; ii) shaping calligraphy and painting with the

84 The third and fourth verses of the poem by Xu Tingyun are: *Wei chutu shi xi-an you jie | bian lingyun qu ye wuxin* 未出土时先有节, 便凌云去也无心. For the Chinese original text of the whole poem by Xu Tingyun, see: <http://sou-yun.com/Query.aspx?type=poem&id=194299&lang=t> (2019-01-15).

85 For example, some differences among the three versions of the couplet may be seen comparing the characters of the fourth verse of the poem by Xu Tingyun and the corresponding verses by Zheng Xie and EricTin: the only two characters equally shared by these three verses are *lingyun* ('reach the clouds'), while the others are different in shapes but similar in their meanings.

86 In fact, as Shinewind points out: "By writing that the poet wants to highlight the virtue of acting low and humble. Think about how bamboo sprouts out of the earth (acting low) and remain hollow (open-minded) whatever it grows into, and you may get the point" (Shinewind 2012).



Figure 14 Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, NaTuo). *New Style*. July 2008. Graffito: spray-painting on wall. Beijing (detail of the calligraphic inscription on the right edge of the work). Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/90485372.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

same brushstrokes; and iii) reflecting in calligraphy similar moods and states of awareness expressed in poetry. According to this past tradition, in *New Style*: i) the content of the poem referred to the symbolic meaning of the painted bamboo; ii) both calligraphic inscription and lettering piece are shaped with entangled lines, and because of their complex styles (cursive style and wildstyle, respectively), they are equally incomprehensible; iii) the vertical columns of the calligraphy and its cursive 'brushstrokes' respectively reproduce the straight stalk of the bamboo and the dashing swordpoint of its leaves described in the poem. So, here the traditional triad of poetry, calligraphy and painting was perfectly recomposed in a contemporary framework, using a 'new style', as it has been declared in the work's title.

3 'Modern Literati Calligraphy Graffiti' by the Kwanyin Clan: *Shirupozhu* (2008) and *Shengongyijiang* (2010)

The use of Chinese characters and the reference to the art of calligraphy are two distinctive features of the Kwanyin Clan's works.⁸⁷ In some of their artworks these two aspects represent the focus of the whole composition and directly connect their art with the art of the Chinese literati. In Imperial China, in fact, "brush writing was a skill every educated man had to master" (Li 2009, 10) and calligraphy was the emblem of the cultural and political power of this important élite (cf. Ledderose 1986).

The work entitled *Shirupozhu* (With Irresistible Force, fig. 15) is a perfect example of the use of calligraphy and Chinese writing in a Kwanyin Clan's work: the crew shaped a graffiti piece in Chinese characters embellished with calligraphic inscriptions and painted with the typical colours of traditional calligraphy (white, grey, black, and red - the colour of seal/s). The central part of the work is composed of the four characters of the title (*shi ru po zhu*) written in a very hard wildstyle. They form a Chinese 'four-character idiom' (*chengyu* 成语) and are surrounded by other two wildstyle pieces:⁸⁸ the first one, on the upper left, is probably by EricTin, because of the *leitmotiv* of the sphere with the traditional character *Guan* in the centre, and of the thin pinnacles sprouting from the intricate characters; the second one, on the lower right, is by Yumi (the small tag written in red confirms his authorship) and its undecipherable forms suggest a big fire whose flames burn and generate the whole artwork. The central piece is by Nat, because the letters of his name ('NaTuo') are intermingled and blended into the strokes of the Chinese characters. In addition to the diagonal stripe composed of these three pieces, there are two other important elements in this work: the long black calligraphy in the top right corner [fig. 17], and the red colophon in the bottom left corner [fig. 18].

⁸⁷ The forerunner in the use of calligraphy in graffiti practise in China is Tsang Tsou-choi (Clarke 2001). Even if he was not so influential in mainland China, he still represents an important figure when dealing with the connection between calligraphy and graffiti art.

⁸⁸ These statements were confirmed by EricTin in an interview: "The piece has a tripartite structure. The core of the piece is composed of four characters *Shi ru po zhu*, which form a Chinese *chengyu*. Around these characters, we freely developed other wildstyle pieces" (Author's transl.): e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2015-12-20).



Figure 15 Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, Nat, Yumi, Quan). *Shirupozhu* 势如破竹 (With Irresistible Force). 4-6 February 2008. Graffiti: spray-painting on panel. L 6 m, ht 6 m. Nike 706 Gallery, 798 Art District, Beijing. Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/110281893.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

The insertion of the *chengyu* 'shirupozhu' in the central piece of the work has a specific purpose. As EricTin explains:

I like using four-characters *chengyu* as the basis of my works, because there is always a story behind them that exceeds the literal meaning of the four characters.⁸⁹ (Author's transl.)

The literal meaning of *shirupozhu* is 'having a power (*shi*) to (*ru*) cut down (*po*) a bamboo (*zhu*)'. It originally refers to the act of smashing into enemy territory "like splitting a bamboo" (*Han-Ying cidian* 2004, 1125).⁹⁰ This expression comes from the *Book of Jin* (*Jinshu* 晋书): it is quoted in the fourth chapter of the third section about

⁸⁹ EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2015-11-04).

⁹⁰ "This idiom refers to the traditional way of splitting bamboo by cutting a slit on the top of it in such a way that it splits in two halves. The idiom describes incisive and overwhelming power" (Detweiler 2009, 230). This reference to an 'overwhelming power' is probably an indirect quote of the motto of the crew 'push forward with an overwhelming momentum' recorded in their logo.

'Biographies' (*lie zhuan* 列传) of the Book, that is the 34th 'volume' (*juan* 卷) of the whole text. The second half of this chapter focuses on Du Yu 杜预 (222-285), a military general of the Wei state (220-265) in the late Three Kingdoms period (220-280) and early Jin Dynasty (265-420). In 265, the ruler of the Wei state abdicated in favour of the Prince Sima Yan 司马炎 (236-290), who ended the Wei state and became the first emperor of the Jin Dynasty. Du Yu became one of his most powerful general and he led an army in the conquest of the Wu state (222-280), their bitter rival. In 280, before the last and crucial attack against the Wu army, Du Yu pronounced the four characters of the *chengyu* ('*shi ru po zhu*') to incite the troops, reminding them that until that moment they had smashed into enemy territory without difficulty 'like splitting bamboo', so they must not be afraid to join the battle. His speech produced the desired effect: his army won the battle, the Wu state was conquered and the Chinese territory was reunified (Heng 2015).

Using this *chengyu*, the Kwanyin Clan wants to connect Du Yu's story with the main theme of the artistic project that inspired its graffiti work.⁹¹ According to EricTin, in fact, *Shirupozhu* was shaped from 4th to 6th February 2008 at the Nike 706 Art Space in the 789 Art District (EricTin 2009a).⁹² This art space was established in January 2007 in the subfactory 706 by Nike China, so it was called 'Nike 706'. The main aim of this cultural experience centre is to promote Nike brand and to ignite Chinese athletes, leveraging the power of creativity, sport, and self-expression.⁹³ In 2008, the Kwanyin Clan joined a project entitled *Lebron Experience Center*, one of the two projects sponsored by Nike China to explain and promote the game of basketball to the Chinese public through a series of pieces showing the history and the future of the game, which is personified by Michael Jordan and Lebron James. The first event connected to the *Lebron Experience Centre* was entitled *Lebron Six Experiences*. For its launch, "the art space was transformed into an adaptable space that combined a digitally augmented Lebron coaching exhibit and professional basketball game court in one" (Yehenala 2010).⁹⁴ Lebron teaches about the six aspects of this game that help him become a very good player: DUNK, STEAL, POST UP, PASS, FADE AWAY, and DRIVE. Spaceships like mechanical cylinders were hung from the ceiling according to the zones and could be elevated or relegat-

91 EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2015-12-20).

92 In this blog page, EricTin uploaded lots of photos about their work and its creative process.

93 For more information about this space, see: <https://coolhunting.com/design/best-of-the-bro/> (2019-01-18).

94 In this web article, lots of photos about the project have been uploaded.

ed to transform the space into a basketball court or training exhibit. Lowering the cylinders would activate Lebron's 3D hologram giving a face to face coaching experience to each basketball fan.⁹⁵ For the opening ceremony of that event (the night of 6th February), on the external wall of the art space, a huge hall-of-fame was mounted to host six graffiti pieces [fig. 16].



Figure 16 View of the hall-of-fame mounted on the external wall of the Nike 706 Art Space in the 789 Art District painted with graffiti pieces by famous Chinese crews. The graffiti piece in the centre is *Shirupozhu* by the Kwanyin Clan. Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/110281893.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

Each piece was shaped by a famous Chinese crew. The invited crews were: the Xianggang Fengwei 湘港风味, the FLB CREW, the Kwanyin Clan, the ABS CREW, the BJPZ CREW, and the NGC CREW (cf. Li H. 2009). The six Lebron's signature moves (DUNK, STEAL, POST UP, PASS, FADE AWAY, and DRIVE) respectively became the main subjects of their graffiti pieces. The subject of the Kwanyin Clan piece was the 'post-up' (*tupo* 突破).⁹⁶ In Chinese, *tupo* literally means "make a breakthrough, break through a defence" (*Han-Ying cidian* 2004, 1250) so the Kwanyin Clan chose the expression *Shiripozhu* (With Irresistible Force) as the *fil rouge* of its work, linking Lebron's and Du

⁹⁵ To see the trailer of the project entitled *Nike Lebron Six Experience at 706 Beijing* and uploaded on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/31898113> (2019-01-07).

⁹⁶ 'Post-up' is "to establish your position at an area near the basket, usually just outside of the key. To post up, the player has his back to the basket, shielding his defender behind him with his body so that he can receive the pass with ease" ("Post up", *Sporting Charts*. URL <https://www.sportingcharts.com/dictionary/nba/post-up.aspx>, 2018-11-01).

Yu's stories. However, the connection activated by the Kwanyin Clan concerns not only the meaning of the basket position and the story of this *chengyu* but also the meaning of the *chengyu* and the title of the inaugural party of the 'Lebron Six Experiences' event. This inaugural party was called *Quanliyifu*. *Quanliyifu* is another *chengyu* which means "go all out, spare no effort" (*Han-Ying cidian* 2004, 1009). For the Lebron's party it was translated into English with the phrase 'Bring Everything' that can be easily linked to the concept of 'with irresistible force' conveyed in the title of the Kwanyin Clan's work.

In *Shirupozhu*, another reference to the concept of arduous and tenacious struggle is in the long calligraphy on the upper right [fig. 17].



Figure 17 Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, Nat, Yumi, Quan). *Shirupozhu* (With Irresistible Force). 4-6 February 2008. Graffiti: spray-painting on panel. L 6 m, ht 6 m. Nike 706 Gallery, 798 Art District, Beijing (detail of the long calligraphy in the right corner of the work). Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/110281893.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

The calligraphy was written in vertical columns from right to left, following the traditional manner. According to EricTin, the content of this calligraphy is a poem entitled 'Full River Red' (*Man jiang hong* 满江红) composed by Yue Fei 岳飞 (1103-1142),⁹⁷ an officer of the Northern Song army. In 1127, when the Northern Song Dynasty came to

⁹⁷ EricTin, e-mail to the author and M. Merenda (2016-01-07).

an end as the Jurchen-Jin conquered northern China and the Song retreated south in the face of their attacks, he opposed the retreat. He continued, however, to serve the emperor of the Southern Song (1127-1279), engaging continuous battles with the Jurchen. He experienced success in his campaign against the Jin in 1140, but the Southern Song Gaozong Emperor (1107-1187) sought to make peace with the Jin, and ordered Yue Fei to withdraw, dashing in one moment all his achievements of ten years (Buckley 1993, 169-70). Yue Fei composed a poem entitled *Ma jiang hong* during one of his victorious campaigns against the Jin. In this poem, he describes his strong efforts to recover the lost territory, to fight against the barbarians and to persuade the emperor to support his army. He wrote:

My hair bristles in my helmet.
 Standing by the balcony as the rain shower stops,
 I look up to the sky and loudly let Heaven know
 The strength of my passions.
 My accomplishments over thirty years are mere dust.
 I traveled eight thousand *li* with the clouds and the moon
 Never taking time to rest,
 For a young man's hair grows white from despair.
 The humiliation of the Jingkan period⁹⁸
 Has not yet been wiped away.
 The indignation I feel as subject
 Has not yet been allayed.
 Let me drive off in a chariot
 To destroy these base at Helan Mountain.
 My ambition as a warrior
 Is to satisfy my hunger with the flesh of the barbarians,
 Then, while enjoying a rest,
 Slake my thirst with the blood of the tribesmen.
 Give me the chance to try again
 To recover our mountains and rivers
 Then report to the emperor.
 (Buckley 1993, 169-70)

The junction between Yue Fei's brave behaviour described in the poem and the 'post-up' movement recorded in the graffiti work depends on the four-characters of the *chengyu* depicted in the centre. In fact, the attitude of a basketball player in a post-up position and of a general while contrasting his enemies is equally characterised

⁹⁸ The 'Jiangkan period' is the last reign-period of the Northern Song, the period in which the Northern Song Dynasty was defeated by the Jurchen and retreated to the south (Buckley 1993, 169).

by 'irresistible force'. To post-up the player has to shield his defender behind him with his body so that he can receive the pass with ease; similarly, Yue Fei wants to shield the territories he had reconquered with his army and continue his advance so that he can give them back to the emperor.

As it is in *Shanshui PIC* and *New Style*, also in *Shirupozhu* the mechanism used for quotations has been re-activated. And as in the two works above mentioned, also here the relationship among the 'three perfections' is clearly evident and extremely strict. In fact, i) in the long calligraphy, the 'running script' (*xingshu*), that is characterised by a very 'tangled' and tense style,⁹⁹ reproduces the tumultuous battles evoked in the poem and the burning passion expressed in its lines. ii) In the 'charactering painting', that is both a calligraphy in 'big characters' (*dazi*) and a graffiti painting, the burning passion is symbolised by the flames and the red colour, and the tumultuous battles are represented by the inextricable tangle of characters and unintelligible signs. iii) The content of the poem is also recalled by the meaning of the four-character *chengyu* that is the core of the whole work and of the 'painted' piece.

The presence of a red inscription on the lower left also suggests the use of red seals in traditional art [fig. 18].



Figure 18 Kwanyin Clan (EricTin, Nat, Yumi, Quan). *Shirupozhu* (With Irresistible Force). 4-6 February 2008. Graffiti: spray-painting on panel. L 6 m, ht 6 m. Nike 706 Gallery, 798 Art District, Beijing (detail of the red inscription in the left corner of the work). Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/110281893.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists

⁹⁹ This is a suggestion confirmed by the calligraphy master Silvio Ferragina (e-mail to the Author, 2019-01-21).

In this inscription, Chinese characters and Latin letters are juxtaposed, like in other Kwanyin Clan's works: the two characters *GuanYin* are written vertically in *xingcao* style, in the form of a traditional colophon with the signature of the artist (Kwanyin) near the main calligraphy (the four characters *shirupozhu*); while the four tags of the members of the crew, who were the authors of the artwork (ERICTIN, NAT YUMI, QUANER), are written horizontally from left to right, as it is in every graffiti piece. Even if in these two lines (vertical and horizontal) the writing systems are different (Chinese characters vs Latin letters), the writing style (of both characters and letters) is identical, so that the two inscriptions seem to be the same thing, merging Chinese and Western traditions into one.

Another representative example of the use of Chinese characters and calligraphy in a graffiti piece by the Kwanyin Clan is the mural entitled *Shengongyijiang* (*Ars divina*¹⁰⁰ 2010, [fig. 19]).



Figure 19 Kwanyin Clan (EricTin). *Shengongyijiang* 神功意匠. June 2010. Graffiti: spray-painting on wall. Beijing. Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/154679171.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artist

As to the compositional structure, in fact, *Shengongyijiang* seems to reproduce the typical arrangement of a 'big character calligraphy' (*dazi shufa* 大字书法) written on a traditional Chinese 'horizontal scroll' (*hengfu*). This kind of arrangement is usually composed of three main elements: i) the large calligraphy made up of few characters and well-positioned in the centre of the scroll; ii) other inscriptions and a colophon respectively on the right and left sides written in small characters; iii) the artist's red seal(s) that balances the composition (for its colour and position) (Li 2009, 158-71). The graffiti work *Shengongyijiang* reproduces this arrangement: i) the most im-

¹⁰⁰ The Latin translation of the title is by the Author.

portant element is the graffiti piece composed of four big characters and well-positioned in the centre of the horizontal wall; ii) the secondary role is played by a poetic inscription on the top-right corner and by a colophon on the top-left corner both written in small characters; and iii) the balancing role is played by many tags shaped in different colours and positions.

The four characters in the centre of the wall (*'shen gong yi jiang'*) are the main point of interest of the whole composition. They are a *chengyu* and give the title to the work.¹⁰¹ This *chengyu* is an idiomatic expression used to “describe the sublime beauty (exquisite conception and compositional structure) of a work of art (e.g. architectural buildings, paintings, etc.) shaped not only as a result of human capacities and labour, but also thanks to divine intervention” (*Hanyu da cidian* 2004, Author’s transl.). This *chengyu* has taken inspiration from the last verse of a poem composed by Zhao Puchu 赵朴初 (1907-2000) entitled *Byōdō-in Temple* (*Pingdeng Yuan* 平等院). Zhao Puchu was a well-known social activist and a Chinese Buddhist leader, accomplished in classical poetry and calligraphy (a modern literatus)¹⁰² and he wrote this poem when he visited the Byōdō-in Temple, a famous Buddhist temple in the city of Uji in Kyoto Prefecture (Japan).¹⁰³ In this poem, Zhao Puchu describes the ecstatic sensation (l. 1) while contemplating the sublime beauty of the most beautiful building in the temple, the ‘Phoenix Hall’ (*Fenghuang Tang* 凤凰堂) (l. 2), built about a thousand years before (l. 3).¹⁰⁴ He compares its solemn beauty to the literary peaks reached during the period of full literary grandeur in the Tang Dynasty (l. 4). In the poet’s vision, Buddhism overloaded those peaks, because the ‘divine breath added something that goes beyond what human nature requires’ (*shengongyijiang*, l. 5).¹⁰⁵

In this work, the strict relationship between calligraphy and poetry is highlighted also in the calligraphic inscription on the top-right corner [fig. 20].

101 EricTin confirms the content of the *chengyu* in: Kwanyin_Tin 2010.

102 For more information about Zhao Puchu, see: Fu H. 2011.

103 Byōdō-in Temple was originally built in 998 as a rural villa and then transformed into a Buddhist temple in 1052.

104 The Phoenix Hall was constructed in 1053. It is the only remaining original building of the Byōdō-in Temple.

105 For the original poem in Chinese, see: *Hanyu da cidian* 2004.



Figure 20. Kwanyin Clan (EricTin). *Shengongyijiang*. June 2010. Graffito: spray-painting on wall. Beijing (detail of the calligraphy on the top-right corner). Source: <http://erictin.blog.sohu.com/154679171.html> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artist

According to the calligraphic aesthetics principles, the text was written in a style between ‘regular script’ (*kaishu*) and ‘running script’ (*xingshu*),¹⁰⁶ in five vertical columns, from right to left; it was shaped using black colour on a white support, and its content is a poem. The text quoted in the calligraphy is:

Tianji zheng hong | yao ren xing ru zhui. | Ping sheng shi | cishi ning di | shui hui ping lan yi.

天际征鸿/，遥认行如缀。平生事，此时凝睇，谁会凭栏意。

This is the second stanza of an ancient poem entitled *Rouged Lips* (*Di-an jiangchun* 点绛唇).¹⁰⁷ The poem was composed by Wang Yucheng 王禹偁 (954-1001), a famous poet/scholar of the Song Dynasty, during one of his exiles in the South of the Empire.¹⁰⁸ In the poem, he expresses his inner emotions through a rich imaginary that allows him to skillfully establish similarities with nature: empathy with nature, pain for an unjust exile, pervasive loneliness, and idyllic scenes

106 This suggestion about the calligraphic style is confirmed by the calligraphy master Silvio Ferragina (e-mail to the Author, 2019-01-20).

107 EricTin quoted the whole text of the poem in: Kwanyin_Tin 2010.

108 “He was three times banished to the provinces because of his outspoken criticism of court policy” (Liu, Irving 1990, 593).

which are the central themes of the poem.¹⁰⁹ These themes are recurrent in Chinese literati poetry of all times and through this work they are reactivated in a fragment of contemporary urban art. Wang Yucheng wrote:

Laden with frowning cloud and steeped in tearful rain,
The southern shores still beautiful remain.
In riverside village flanked with fishermen's fair,
A lonely wreath of slender smoke wafts in the air.

Afar a row of wild geese fly,

Weaving a letter in the sky.
What have I done in days gone by?
Gazing from the balustrade,
Could I weave my way as far as they?
(Transl. by Xu Yuanchong: Xu 2005, 4)

Even if this graffiti work perfectly adheres to Chinese classical aesthetics principles, the style of the graffiti piece in the centre belongs to a completely different world: it clearly follows the European graffiti style, especially in the use of colours. It seems to be influenced by the 'German school',¹¹⁰ a fundamental 'graffiti school' for the Chinese writers.¹¹¹ In *Shengongyijiang* piece, there is a slight tendency towards wildstyle, even if the characters are still readable. The use of 3D is definitely visible. The inner colours in the text are very simple but embellished with geometric decorative inlays. The first outline and the thickness of each character are black, the second double outline is red with glow effects, and the final interrupted outline is yellow. The yellow line shape suggests the spiral movement of the clouds in the background, which reproduces the Chinese traditional decorative pattern called *yunwen* 云纹 (clouds pattern). Stylised drips are drawn into the clouds to add a graffiti effect to the whole composition. A dark grey shadow is finally drawn at the back of each character in order to underline the illusion of three dimensional shape

109 For more details on this poem, see: Li J. et al. 2009, 210, and Chen H. et al. 1988, 290-1. In general, "his own poetry shows the influence of both Tu Fu [Du Fu] and Po Chü-yi [Bai Juyi], the former in the matter of diction and syntax and the latter in the choice of theme and general attitude toward poetry" (Liu 1990, 593).

110 This is a suggestion of the Italian writer Nevla Alven: Nevla Alven, Facebook message to the author (2015-07-31).

111 The influence of the 'German School' on Chinese graffiti is underlined by Valjakka when she wrote: "Because of the numerous interactions and visiting German creators, the German styles have also had a fairly heavy impact on the Chinese scene, visible even today" (Valjakka 2016, 368).

and space.¹¹² So, from a stylistic point of view, this work perfectly imitates the Euro-American graffiti manner.

However, the decorative motif in red on the lower corner also imitates Chinese traditional patterns. Its profile recalls the turbulent waves that usually decorated the hem of imperial court robes of the Qing Dynasty, while the web of redlined within its profile evokes the motif of *li shui* 立水, which is composed of diagonal strips in five colours rising from the hemline of the robe and representing deep, standing water.¹¹³

In the continuous struggle between Chinese traditional aesthetics and Western graffiti culture, the obsessive repetition of tags has the main function to realise a perfect counterbalance. Writing six different individual/crew tags,¹¹⁴ EricTin links his work to the Euro-American graffiti writing tradition, where obsessive repetition of tags is a hallmark of the whole movement (Mininno 2008, 10). But in writing tags, he pondered the use of Latin letters and Chinese characters in order to balance the two hemispheres. EricTin uses Chinese characters for the tag of the crew, *Guanyin*, written in simplified characters and in running script on a vertical column in the top-left corner, and also for the shorten tag of the crew, *Guan*, written in traditional characters and in regular script on the bottom right of the central graffiti piece. Instead, he uses the Latin letters for the extensive tags of the crew 'Kwanyin' and of the writer 'EricTin' written symmetrically in yellow capital letters below the graffiti piece, one on its bottom right and one on its bottom left; and also for the shorten tag of the writer 'Tin' written in thick white capital letters on the top-right corner of the central graffiti piece. The 'TIN' tag written in Latin capital letters is also intermingled with the big characters of the central piece, thus creating a visual content that shows a real fusion between Chinese and Western cultures and between traditional and modern patterns.¹¹⁵

¹¹² To see the photos of all stages of the creative process: EricTin 2010.

¹¹³ For more details on these decorative patterns, see: Garrett 2012, 15-6.

¹¹⁴ There are two different types of tags: i) the 'individual tag', which is the signature of the writer, and ii) the 'crew tag', which is the rapid transcription of the name of the crew.

¹¹⁵ For more details on this work, see Iezzi 2018, 76-80.

4 **‘Modern Literati Graffiti Ceramics’ by the Kwanyin Clan: *Blue and White Porcelain (2009-2010) and the Artwork Made for the Exhibition ‘Street Art, a Global View’ (2016)***

In the series entitled *Blue and White Porcelain* (2009-2010, figg. 21-24), “using traditional blue and white porcelain as a medium, Kwanyin Clan adds their own distinctive graffiti touch [to an ancient process, resulting in] modern, street art flair” (“Kwanyin Clan” 2011). In this series, in fact, the crew chose very typical pottery types, such as plates [figs. 21, 24], vases [fig. 22], and brush pots [fig. 23], and used very typical colours: the white of porcelain and the cobalt blue for decorations. This type of ceramics was common objects of the Chinese imperial upper class daily use in Imperial China,¹¹⁶ especially for literati. To revitalise this ancient form of art, the crew decided to decorate these porcelains using graffiti techniques and styles: they wrote lettering pieces [figs. 21-22], tags [fig. 23] or charactering pieces [fig. 24] in wildstyle, bubble style et sim., with lots of 3D effects and sometimes added figurative elements shaping in comic and funky styles [fig. 21].

The most important work of the series is entitled *Heqi* 和气 (‘Peace’, [fig. 25]). In this work, Nato used a blue marker to write in wildstyle the two characters of the title on a white porcelain plate. The choice of the characters *heqi* depends on the traditional use of auspicious phrases in Chinese art, and especially on ceramics. *Heqi* is in fact the first part of a famous *chengyu* that says *heqi shengcai* 和气生财 (‘amiability begets riches’) (“Kwanyin Clan” 2011). According to EricTin and adhering to the main concept of the whole series, the aim of this work is to renovate the decorative motives of the ‘blue and white pottery’ (*qinghua* 青花) using graffiti styles.¹¹⁷ In this work, Chinese elements are in fact numerous: the blue and white porcelain (material, technique, colours, and shape), the Chinese characters, the derivation of the title from a *chengyu*, its auspicious meaning, the decorative ‘clouds pattern’ (*yunwen*) and the motif of the ‘turbulent ocean waves’ (*ping shui* 平水) within the characters lines. But, all these traditional elements have been reinterpreted in a modern way using graffiti language: i) the two characters *heqi* became a complicated construction of interlocking and zigzag lines that consists of lots of connections and ends with an arrow; the result is a completely undecipherable piece that reflects all features of wildstyle; ii) the ‘clouds pattern’ is also used to create some ‘loops’, that are decorative elements used to combine letters in wildstyle, giving more dynamism to the piece; and iii) the use of 3D is emphasised by the dark blue thick-

¹¹⁶ In particular, blue and white decoration of *qinghua* pottery became widely used in Chinese porcelain in the 14th century and was widely exported also in Europe.

¹¹⁷ EricTin, e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2016-01-04).



Figure 21 Kwanyin Clan (KenoTang). *Blue and White Porcelain*. 2009. Porcelain plate with graffiti decoration in cobalt blue. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28329067@N06/6988321823/in/photostream/> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artist



Figure 22 Kwanyin Clan. *Blue and White Porcelain*. 2009-10. Porcelain vase with graffiti decoration in cobalt blue. Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/371969250444347907/> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists



Figure 23 Kwanyin Clan. *Blue and White Porcelain*. 2009-10. Porcelain brush pot with graffiti decoration in cobalt blue. Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/206602701626744667/> (2019-01-16). Courtesy of the artists



Figure 24 Kwanyin Clan (NatO). *Blue and White Porcelain - Heqi 和气* ('Peace'). 2010. Porcelain plate with graffiti decoration in cobalt blue. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28329067@N06/4116596848/> (2019-01-16) Courtesy of the artist

ness of the outlines and by the parallel short bars where characters strokes end. Because of all these features, this work is a perfect combination of ancient and modern elements and Chinese and Western traditions. In this round shape embellished with a geometric graffiti pattern the Kwanyin Clan has found its 'quadrature of the circle'.

Chinese pottery is also the source of inspiration of another artwork made by the Kwanyin Clan for the exhibition *Street Art, a Global View* held in 2016 at the Art Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing [fig. 25].



Figure 25 Kwanyin Clan. Artwork Made for the Exhibition 'Street Art, a Global View'. 2016. Spray-painting on panels. CAFA Art Museum, Beijing. Photo by M. Meccarelli. Courtesy of the artists and the photographer

In the centre of the composition there is a ceramic vase glazed in jade green celadon colour. This vase recalls the celadons made in China during the Song Dynasty that are one of the most beautiful ceramic ware of all time and were particularly appreciated among the Chinese literati. An elaborated lettering in wildstyle with its explosive force pushes on the thin walls of the vase and breaks it up into little pieces: it probably represents the forces of modernity that burst into tradition and exceed their limits. In the lower right corner, two calligraphic inscriptions are written in vertical columns in a style between 'regular script' and 'running script'. As usual in traditional colophon, next to the calligraphic inscription there is a real seal

with the name of the crew, but opposite to the traditional canons, the seal is in Latin letters and not in archaic characters. Both the calligraphic inscriptions on the bottom right are *chengyu*: the first one means ‘after observing a person’s faults and failings, one will understand what he really is’ (*guanguozhiren* 观过知仁), while the second one means ‘if we receive positive influences, we can change our old habits’ (*panlingeyin* 泮林革音). These two *chengyu* seem to be personal and artistic admonishments made by the crew. i) With regard to the personal sphere, the smashed vase represents the person’s faults and failing: when the person’s thin ‘glaze’ is smashed, one can show his real nature and change his old habits. ii) With regard to the artistic sphere, the content of the vase represents the real nature of the Kwanyin Clan’s art (graffiti), while the traditional art is only its cover (the glaze of the vase): when the power of graffiti smashes that cover, the traditional influences will be transformed into modern art.

5 Conclusion: the Kwanyin Clan as ‘Modern Literati Graffiti Writers’

The detailed analysis of the six Kwanyin Clan’s graffiti works illustrated above clearly shows the distinguishing *modus operandi* of the Kwanyin Clan and their wish to develop a specific ‘Chinese style’ starting from the reinvention of the Chinese past tradition.¹¹⁸ In their oeuvres, traditional Chinese elements, arrangements, techniques, supports, formats, colours, aesthetics conceptions, and especially language and texts have been borrowed from the classical context and translated in the language of worldwide graffiti. In fact, starting from the idea that ‘tradition makes modernity’, the Kwanyin Clan conforms and adapts not only the Chinese language (like other local creators) but also the Chinese overall traditional aesthetics to the artistic principles and tools of contemporary graffiti, taking inspiration from the ancient world of the Chinese literati.¹¹⁹ In their main pieces, this is particularly evident in their extensive reference to the so-called ‘three perfections’ (painting, calligraphy, and poetry), a *fil rouge* through the whole history of Chinese imperial art and a constant in the analysed works. As we have seen, in fact, in these

¹¹⁸ This intention was confirmed by EricTin in an e-mail to the Author and M. Merenda (2015-12-20).

¹¹⁹ As Valjakka affirms: “The question of ‘Chineseness’ is particularly important among the local creators. [...] Cultural references are expressed mainly through content, style, composition, imagery from Chinese visual culture, color and especially, language” (Valjakka 2015, 271). However, except for the Kwanyin Clan, none of the local creators mentioned by Valjakka have been able to reinvent Chinese traditional aesthetics using its literary heritage and being inspired by the figures of the Chinese literati.

oeuvres: i) Chinese painting was reshaped in the ancient forms of landscape and bamboo paintings¹²⁰ – the two genres that most identify the literati painting,¹²¹ and even in ceramic vases, plates and brush pots – arts and crafts decorative objects that were always present in the studios of the Chinese literati; ii) calligraphy, that is the chief of the arts in the literati pantheon, is everywhere reshaped as elaborate ‘charactering’ pieces (e.g. *Shirupozhu*, *Shengongyijiang*, and *Heqi*), copious calligraphic inscriptions,¹²² and Chinese tags (especially in the forms of *Guan* or *Guanyin* characters); iii) poetry was repeatedly quoted in a chain mechanism ranging from Tang echoes (see *Lin jiang xian*) to contemporary lines (see Zhao Puchu’s poem), the authors of these poems are always ‘Chinese literati’ and their contents are based on their cultural values. Furthermore, in the analysed artworks, a special attention was given to the Song Dynasty (even if in the Kwanyin Clan’s artworks we can retrace the whole history of Chinese art), because it represented a milestone in the development of Chinese literati art.

Another connection with the figures of the Chinese ‘literati’ is their relationship with the political power. As we have seen, the artistic production of the Kwanyin Clan is extremely heterogeneous and various both in style and ‘commission’. In fact, they occasionally produced graffiti for major public initiatives and advertising campaigns of big brands, and, at the same time, they did not forget the fact that graffiti artists tend to operate in the dark and against the established power. Their illegal bombing on the streets is a proof of this way of thinking and working. This problematic relationship with political power linked the figures of these contemporary writers with the traditional figures of the Chinese literati, who have always had a controversial relationship with political power. Influenced by the Weber’s doctrine of ‘moderate desire’, Chinese literati were inherently lacking in rebelling spirit; the maintenance of the original order and the established power could be regarded as their prime contribution (Murvar 1985, 149). However, according to Goldman, for China’s intellectuals, “to criticize government is not the literati’ right, as in the West, but their responsibility” (Goldman 1981, 3). This double function of the Chinese literati is a constant in Chinese history

120 Examples of bamboo (and rocks) paintings are frequent in Kwanyin Clan’s production, e.g. in *Bamboo* (2011), *Olympic Beijing* (2008, fig. 3), and *Four screens* (2012).

121 The Kwanyin Clan never experimented with bird-and-flower painting, portraiture, colour painting, etc., probably because these genres are usually associated with court painting.

122 Besides the six works analysed above, other Kwanyin Clan’s works where they wrote long calligraphic inscriptions are: *Olympic Beijing* (2008, fig. 3), *Shijulongpan* (2008, fig. 4), *Lanfang University PIC* (2008), *THE BJC KWAN-YIN CREW* (2007), etc. To see these works: “KwanYin Clan” 2009.

and reverberates also in the *modus operandi* of the Kwanyin Clan.

In all these references to the art of the Chinese literati (and their modernisation)¹²³ the desire of all members of the Kwanyin Clan to present themselves as ‘modern literati painters’, or even better as ‘modern literati graffiti writers’, seems to be evident. A similar case in the recent history of Chinese art is that one of the ‘New Literati Painting’ (*xin wenren hua* 新文人画).¹²⁴ This movement began in China in the mid-to-late eighties and reconnects the ideas of the crew to a modern artistic movement and to classical art.

[The ‘New Literati Painting’] saw a large number of painters rediscovering the artistic interests of the ancients as a cultural phenomenon within contemporary art [...], [so becoming] one of the most sober and outstanding mainstreams in the development of Chinese painting. (Lü 2010, 490-1)

Even if there are several differences between this movement and the Kwanyin Clan, both of them aim at a “reform that entailed a return to the ancients” (491). This means that even if both of them “did not deny their connection to the times in which they lived, they attempted to describe artistic issues using methodology and phraseology of the ancients” (494). As to the New Literati Painters, in fact, the Kwanyin Clan is “able to create an endless and individual language in their grasp of the various vocabulary system of Chinese painting, that could be found in ‘poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving’” (492). In the analysed works, the Kwanyin Clan demonstrated to know very well ‘the vocabulary system of Chinese painting’: poetry, calligraphy, painting and seals were never missed in these oeuvres. Just like the New literati painters, they “refer to the aesthetic formulations of the traditional culture such as ‘technique modes’, ‘the perfect harmony of breath quality’, ‘concept of shape and color’, and ‘mood real’, [...] under the influence of Western art and to rely on the experience drawn from their own self-cultivation” (493). The main differences between the New Literati Painters and the Kwanyin Clan are in the materials they use, which are “traditional and comparatively conservative” (495) for the New Literati Painters and extremely innovative (spray-painting and markers on walls, panels et sim.) for the Kwanyin Clan. Another important difference is the form of art they used: the New Literati Painters are obviously painters, while the

123 As to format, for example, they also prefer to be inspired by the horizontal scroll, not only because it is the most suitable for graffiti on wall, but also because it is the most ancient used by the Chinese literati. Also the recurrent use of ‘seal/s’ is a reference to the literati art of seal carving.

124 For more details, see: Lü 2010, 488-95.

Kwanyin Clan members are graffiti writers. However, in both of their artworks there is an “attempt [...] to fan the dying embers of the tradition and of the spirit of literati-artist painting back to life” (495).

In doing this, the Kwanyin Clan can be also included in the wide range of contemporary Chinese artists that focus their artistic research on the confrontation and reinterpretation of the past (Hearn 2013), and in particular to scholarly traditions (Chen 2011). Chen Anying identifies the discontinuous nature of contemporary Chinese society as the chief rationale for this tendency to ‘revert to tradition’. As to art, this means a special attention to literati painting. After the art boom, and in response to the overwhelming pace of social change and urbanisation, a re-examination of Chinese tradition effortlessly fuses a global contemporary practice with literati traditions.¹²⁵ In this perspective, the use of traditional forms, and in particular of the ‘three perfections’, is extremely significant and increasingly common among contemporary artists; their aim is to “marry past significances with a drive to subvert public expectations and communicate multiple meanings in works which appropriate, reinvent, recontextualize and reconsider the past” (Guest 2017). This idea perfectly fits the Kwanyin Clan’s spirit, the spirit of those we can define as ‘modern literati graffiti writers’.

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¹²⁵ The confrontation with rapid societal changes and urbanisation is a *leitmotif* in Chinese experimental art, and the use of urban spaces as working spaces is also a common practice for lots of Chinese performance artists and art collectives, like for example Li Yilin, Wang Jin, Zhang Wang, the Big Tail Elephant group, Liang Juhui, Song Dong, Xu Zhen, etc. (Costantino 2006, 152-9). The Kwanyin Clan is influenced by this kind of performative urban art and is part of this artistic experimentation.

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