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‘Thousands of hate messages’: Chinese artist behind London’s Brick Lane street art scandal reveals his work’s true meaning and his frustration over the response

Wang Hanzheng says his graffiti of Chinese political slogans on London’s Brick Lane ‘raises strong doubts about the Western rule of law and democracy’

He is frustrated people aren’t seeing the work’s deeper purpose, saying he has received hate messages from both patriotic and anti-China communities



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The graffiti wall in East London’s Brick Lane seen in August 2023 after it was entirely covered by artist Wang Hanzheng’s “East London Socialist Core Values”. Photo: courtesy of the artist

With relations between China and the West as fraught as they are today, the [August 4 spraying](#) of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda slogans over one of the most public symbols of artistic freedom in London was never going to pass unnoticed.

While the Chinese characters denoting “socialist values” are no longer visible on the large graffiti wall in Brick Lane – the local authority promptly had them covered up – the artist behind the provocative work continues to suffer online abuse after images of the stencilled words spread around the world.

Everything that has happened since August 4 will simply become part of the artwork, titled *East London Socialist Core Values*, says its 28-year-old creator Wang Hanzheng, a graduate student at London’s Royal College of Art who goes by the alias Yi Que.

Whether the work is considered a prank or an ingenious piece of public art, the self-proclaimed troublemaker says he was going for an “intense impact with the environment”.



Wang's spray-painted Chinese characters denoting the CCP's 12 "core socialist values" are seen on a 100-metre-long graffiti wall in East London's Brick Lane in August 2023, before authorities painted over them. Photo: Yi Que

He and his friends whitewashed the busy 100-metre-long wall – which included much-loved graffiti works, including a tribute to the late street artist Marty – and stencilled large red simplified Chinese characters denoting the CCP's 12 "core socialist values" – such as freedom, prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony – that are seen displayed everywhere on the streets of mainland China.

Having created so much attention, he is frustrated that people still can't look beyond the surface to see the work's deeper purpose: to destabilise firm beliefs through "dialectic" confrontation.

"The work raises strong doubts about the Western rule of law and democracy, which is something that a lot of people don't see," he says, referring to the angry responses.

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The work – which used the rigid, square font favoured by Chinese officialdom, in sharp contrast to the dishevelled charm of East London – was quickly covered in messages expressing support for Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet, while someone added the word "no" in front the word "freedom".

"The artwork's reflection of issues in China was too apparent," Wang says. "With the [response] on the wall later, do I still have to say? I don't think I have to at all."

He adds that the piece also reflects the "unequal" treatment of graffiti on the street – the Tower Hamlets council painted over it two days after it was spotted – and the "lack of legal means" to combat online violence in England.



Graffiti including one slogan reading “Free Xinjiang” covers Wang’s Chinese characters, before ultimately authorities painted over everything. Photo: TNS

Wang has previously created interventional public art in London and his hometown Hangzhou, in China’s Zhejiang province, and aspires to “reflect on the absurdity and human existence in the post-industrialisation era”, according to his website.

In March, he dressed like a swan and fed the birds at Hyde Park’s Serpentine lake in London with a metre-long loaf of bread shaped like a penis.

He says he became fascinated with how swans fought over the food thrown at them by park visitors, and how the scene reflected human behaviour in a society where the elite dominated the means of production and had ownership of basic resources.



Wang dresses as a swan to feed the birds at Hyde Park’s Serpentine lake. Photo: Yi Que

He also set up a bed in public spaces in Hangzhou and London’s busy Piccadilly Circus and invited people to lie on it in an attempt to challenge what employment means under capitalism, and compare the different ways that people responded to his invitation in the two countries.

Xiang Biao, an anthropologist specialising in Chinese diasporas in the West, says the format, colour and size of the characters used in *East London Socialist Core Values* would have come as a “punch in the face” to many overseas Chinese in the local community, one that reminded them of China’s authoritarian regime.

At the same time, the impersonal appearance of “state” language created a situation that prompted “a very ideologised judgment”, he adds.

“[The personal attack on Wang] is wrong because we should focus the discussion on the manner of communication, rather than ... simplifying the matter to a black-and-white political battle,” Xiang says.



When there are thousands of [hate] messages sent to you every day, you feel like the whole world is hostile to you
Artist Wang Hanzheng

Another academic says the Brick Lane episode highlights broader aspects of street art.

“Graffiti art gives the impression of artistic freedom in public. But in practice, it’s subject to quite significant constraints,” says Paul Gladston, the chair professor of contemporary art at the University of New South Wales in Australia.

“I don’t just mean by local authorities, or the police ... but broader social and cultural constraints about what can and can’t be said,” he says.



Wang (left) and a friend hold up two of the stencils used in making “East London Socialist Core Values”. Photo: Yi Que



Artists whitewash the graffiti wall on Brick Lane to create the new work “East London Socialist Core Values” on August 4, 2023. Photo: Yi Que

The covering of someone else’s work with a political slogan is not particularly controversial and, in fact, entirely within the expectations of how street art works in the Brick Lane neighbourhood, but geopolitical tensions – including negative views of China – aggravated the reaction to Wang’s project, Gladston says.

Social media also extends the life of graffiti art, which is usually ephemeral, Gladston adds, and the spread of the images online led to more people giving their opinions on the matter.

Unfortunately for Wang, that resulted in thousands of hate messages, with his family in China threatened and personal details doxxed.



Wang's Chinese characters before they were painted over.

Photo: Yi Que

Wang says he received hateful messages on Instagram and WeChat from both patriotic and anti-China communities, with one side blaming him for shaming the image of China and the other accusing him of promoting Communist Party propaganda and for covering existing street art.

“When there are thousands of [hate] messages sent to you every day, you feel like the whole world is hostile to you,” Wang says.

Still, he enjoys revisiting the Brick Lane site - where new, colourful graffiti works have appeared on the whitewashed walls - to see how *East London Socialist Core Values* has “evolved”.

“It has gotten prettier than before,” he says.