10 Translocal Site-Responsiveness of Urban Creativity in Mainland China

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Abstract

The forms of urban creativity mediated to Mainland China since the 1990s are reshaping cityscapes. The contributions of foreign artists and practitioners are facilitating the rise of novel subjectivities, sites, and interventions. Inspired by discussions on interrelations of art and street art with site (Kwon 2000, 2004; Bengtsen 2013, 2014; Valjakka 2015) and translocality (Low 2016; Brickell and Datta 2011), I propose the framework of *translocal site-responsiveness* to deconstruct local/global dichotomies and to contribute to a more rounded understanding of artistic and creative practices. The analysis of selected examples reveals the interdependence between the varied forms of agency, manifestations, and site/place/space and contextualizes these negotiation processes in local and global discourses. I posit that urban creativity, whether created by foreigners, locals, or in collaboration, can provide a meaningful engagement with urban environments.

Keywords: translocal site-responsiveness, urban creativity, street art, contemporary graffiti, site-specific

> Each time we enter a new place, we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity, which is really what all 'local places' consist of.
> – Lucy Lippard (1997: 6)

In 2008-2010, the *Urban Carpet* (都市挂毯) project resonated in the alleys of Beijing. By bringing a novel method to envision a neighbourhood, the project inspired residents to share their individual and collective memories of the local

area (Figure 10.1).[1] The residents were mesmerized by interventions engaging directly with their communities because they lacked previous experience of such meticulous maps and, more importantly, because of the unusual form and aesthetics. The first maps that Italian architects Marcella Campa (b. 1974) and Stefano Avesani (b. 1977) used for their project were provided by their Venetian university because similar records were not readily available in Mainland China at that time. With the support of the Italian Cultural Institute, movin'UP, and the Pollock Krasner Foundation, Campa and Avesani commissioned eight maps of particular old residential areas (*hutong*s 胡同) in Beijing to be hand-embroidered on large canvases. To emphasize the characteristics of each community, the carpets were made in different colours although without any specific relation between the colour chosen and the area in question. Each map depicted a district of around one-square kilometre and about 25,000-30,000 residents, a community of its own within the capital. After the first layer of coloured embroidery was made by women who specialize in tapestry weaving, Campa and Avesani added a second layer of intermittent, white woollen parts and threads to transcend simple depiction of spatial relationships. Without any official authorization but with a respectful attitude to the local settings, Campa and Avesani displayed the carpets first in the neighbourhoods in question and later collectively in a vacant house in the southern part of the city.[2]

Urban Carpet demonstrates how creative agency, not limited to contemporary artists and their art projects, can form what art historian Grant Kester (2011: 152) regards as a 'generative, improvisational relationship to the site' in urban public space. At the same time, *Urban Carpet* also challenges the prevailing perception that local artists are an assurance of successful engagement with the local communities. Admittedly, the global allure of new collaborative art practices may result in a kind of provincialism where artists rely 'on a generic set of creative solutions and a priori assumptions that are imposed indiscriminately onto each site of practice' (Kester 2011: 135), but this is not always the case. As this chapter exemplifies, foreign artists, practitioners, companies, organizations, state-led initiatives, and institutions[3] can bring forward innovative ways to renegotiate urban environment

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1   This chapter develops further the conceptual analysis of site-responsiveness proposed in an earlier article (Valjakka 2015).

2   Marcella Campa and Stefano Avesani, in interview with the author, Beijing, 18 September 2015. Campa and Avesani started to investigate urbanization in China in 2003, while still studying at the Venice Institute of Architecture.

3   The understanding of 'foreign' is highly debatable and problematic. Put bluntly, here it denotes people whose ethnicity and/or nationality is not 'Chinese', as well as companies, institutions, NGOs, and NPOs established, owned, managed, and/or registered by non-Chinese.

Figure 10.1   Three of the eight *Urban Carpets*, 2009. Courtesy of *Instant Hutong*.

through aesthetic strategies and spatial practices that may result in col-
laborations with or forms of inspiration to local artists and residents alike.
While so doing, they challenge to a certain extent the dominating urban
aesthetics which are controlled by the officials, as Stefan Landsberger
elaborates in his chapter in this volume.[4] Novel forms of urban creativity
may employ methods of counter-visuality through subversive messages,
but even more importantly, the phenomenon is creating sites, places, and
spaces for especially young urbanites to mitigate the growing anxieties of
alienation in the city.

The forms of engagement with urban public space, such as contemporary
graffiti and street furniture, are not easily understood as 'art' in Mainland
China today. As discussed in the previous chapter by Elizabeth Parke, the
same perception applies to some forms of public writing. In recent Euro-
American discourses, the term 'urban art' has been increasingly applied
to art based on graffiti or street art styles and techniques but presented
and sold by art institutions (Young 2014: 3). The understanding of 'urban
art' as commercial art does not yet apply to Mainland China, where art
markets for contemporary graffiti and street art are undeveloped despite
the efforts of both local and international galleries. Instead, similar to
other parts of East Asia, 'urban art' usually refers to events including
contemporary graffiti and street art or public art projects organized
by companies in urban space. Although graffiti art (涂鸦艺术) is still
the most-often employed concept in Chinese, street art (街头艺术) and
urban art (城市艺术) are gradually emerging, too, in (social) media. These
shifting implications and novel forms of self-expression were missing from
Robin Visser's (2010) otherwise insightful study on post-socialist urban
literature, film, and art. For her, the undefined concept of urban art seems
only to include Chinese contemporary arts and artists who address issues
of urbanization, some of which were created in urban public space but
many of which were not.

I propose that the more comprehensive concept of 'urban creativity'
can include a great variety of different (sub)categorizations depend-
ing on a given city and the varying perceptions of the people involved
(Figure 10.2).[5] With urban creativity, I denote (un)authorized artistic
and creative practices that emerge in urban public space by urbanite(s)

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4   Forms of urban creativity, such as contemporary graffiti and street art, are also employed
for official purposes (Valjakka 2015: 258-260).
5   This approach aims to be more comprehensive than my previous takes on the topic (cf.
Valjakka 2015).

Figure 10.2   Urban creativity as an umbrella concept to include artistic and creative practices in urban public space. Copyright by the author.

INDIGENOUS FORMS IN MAINLAND CHINA	CONTEMPORARY ART IN URBAN PUBLIC SPACE	NEW / MEDIATED FORMS
– Street calligraphy – Advertisements of services – Murals and wall paintings – Big character posters – Street furniture	– Performance art – Happenings, events – Sound art – Site-specific installations – Participatory art – Environmental art	– Contemporary graffiti – Train/ subway graffiti – Tags – Street art – Urban art – Wheat pastes / posters – Stencils – Stickers – Murals (spray painted) – Installations – Interventions – Street photography – Urban knitting – Light art / projections/ laser graffiti – VJing

and practitioners from varied professional backgrounds. While urban creativity may also include indigenous forms and contemporary art, my research focuses on the new forms that have been mediated from other cultural contexts, and mainly from Europe and the US to Mainland China since the 1990s.

Urban creativity is an umbrella concept aiming for more inclusive understanding of urban aesthetics as well as artistic and creative practices in urban public space. The forms and concepts employed are *not* exclusionary but rather overlapping and occasionally even interchangeable. Some of these forms, such as urban knitting,[6] have not yet gained popularity in Mainland China but are already visible in Hong Kong. Instead of defining the varied forms, my primary aim is to enable more detailed recognition of the complex dynamics of agency, manifestations, power relations, and value structures in urban creativity. The seminal commingling of both concepts and forms of artistic and creative practices in urban public space is richly symbolic of the vibrant interplay between the local and the global that continuously manifests itself in the streets in culturally fascinating ways.

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6   Urban knitting (aka yarn bombing) employs knitted or crocheted yarn or fibre on public structures.

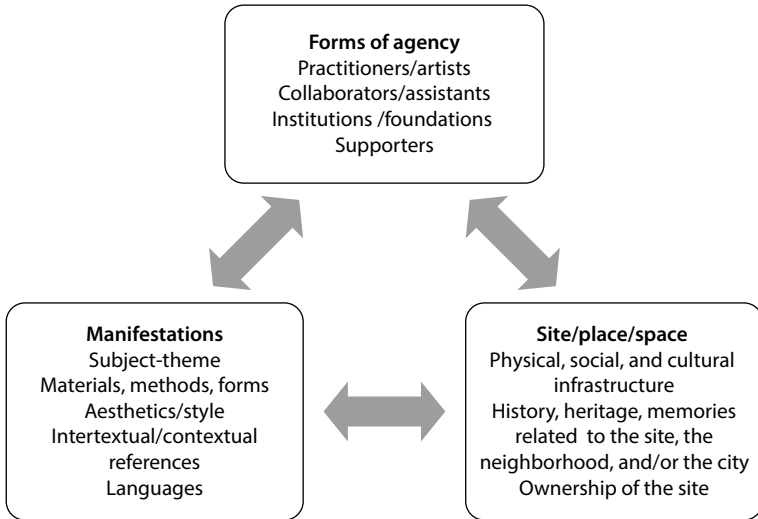## Translocal Site-Responsiveness of Urban Creativity

As the *HomeShop* project discussed in the introduction indicates with the multicultural background of its founding members, Campa and Avesani are not alone as foreign practitioners examining Chinese urbanization through artistic and creative practices. I argue that translocal and multilayered mediation is also an essential part of ongoing transformations of new post-socialist urban aesthetics proposed by Visser (2010). Since 2005-2007, Chinese cityscapes have been significantly reshaped by translocal trends and agency in artistic and creative practices although the contributions and potential of foreign artists, architects, gallerists, film-makers, graffiti writers, graffiti artists, and street artists have remained largely unacknowledged.

The significance of translocality is especially visible in the new forms of urban creativity emerging gradually in Mainland China since the 1990s. While the individual impact of a single work or practitioner might be rather short lived, as a whole the phenomenon is opening up new possibilities and subjectivities, especially among younger-generation Chinese citizens interested in interacting with urban public space. New forms of urban creativity that challenge the prevailing conceptualization of the urban as a fixed and regulated space are unfolding around the world, advocating the importance of art, creativity, and aesthetics in reformulating not only the urban public space but also envisioning it (Grierson and Sharp 2013; Klanten and Hübner 2010). These reverberations are gaining ground in Chinese cities, too. For instance, a growing number of graffiti and street art events, projects, and festivals are being organized and their impact on urban aesthetics cannot be ignored.[7]

Based on ethnographic research since 2006 in various cities in East Asia and benefitting from a comparative perspective across regions, I propose a more rounded investigation through the conceptual frame of *translocal site-responsiveness* in relation to urban creativity. This perspective not only incorporates an aesthetic, temporal, and spatial analysis but also takes into account forms of agency and manifestations as well as the cultural and social flows and networks, situating them in the context of local, regional, national, and global discourses. I posit that the understanding of urban creativity as an organic process of translocal site-responsiveness and the detailed analysis of multilayered interactions between the three main variables – *forms of agency*; *manifestations;* and *site, place, and space* (as multilevel physical and

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7   For a brief historical study of urban creativity in Beijing and in Shanghai, including Zhang Dali's (张大力, b. 1963) limited contribution, see Valjakka (2015, 2016).

Figure 10.3   **Urban creativity as an organic process of translocal site-responsiveness: the multilayered interactions between the three main variables, namely, forms of agency; manifestations; and site, place, and space (as multilevel physical and conceptual contexts); and their varying features. Copyright by the author.**

Forms of agency
Practitioners/artists
Collaborators/assistants
Institutions /foundations
Supporters

Manifestations
Subject-theme
Materials, methods, forms
Aesthetics/style
Intertextual/contextual
references
Languages

Site/place/space
Physical, social, and cultural
infrastructure
History, heritage, memories
related to the site, the
neighborhood, and/or the city
Ownership of the site

conceptual contexts); and their features – provides an illuminating starting point for further analysis (Figure 10.3). More importantly, because all these aspects can have a different and continuously changing degree of translocality and locality, the analysis benefits more nuanced comprehension of both urban aesthetics and social engagement. Indeed, in the midst of global artistic and creative practices travelling across the continents, questions of how to differentiate local from global, and whether such separation is even feasible, have become ever more challenging.

The new manifestations of urban creativity are based on a reciprocal relationship between them and the city – and even a specific neighbourhood of the city – but are not limited to the issues of 'localness.' New global dynamics across, within, and beyond the city produce several multiscalar and contextual levels with which urban creativity can resonate. Simultaneous and often contingent translocal flows, and how they interact with characteristics of the site in question through artistic and creative practices, underlie my conceptualization of translocal site-responsiveness. I posit that urban creativity, whether created by foreign or local forms of agency or both in collaboration, bring forward meaningful ways of engagement with and

envisioning urban environments. The approach offers new insights and enables alternative readings of the interdependences of visual arts and urbanization in Mainland China. Sharing the need for a broader understanding of current translocal artistic practices, I also aim to contribute to critical and comparative art research that examines local, regional, national, and global agency, manifestations, trends, and discourses.

Deconstructing 'Local' Engagement

The definition of 'translocal' has been widely appropriated after it was introduced, among others, by Arjun Appadurai (1996) in his investigation of local disjuncture amidst global flows. 'Translocality' is often perceived as an element of spatial processes and identities created by agency of mobility in different scales. It is constructed in 'simultaneous situatedness across different locales' (Brickell and Datta 2011: 4) and by people experiencing multiple places which results in 'linking of localities through space-time compression' (Low 2016: 174). The value of this concept lies in its intermediate potential to enable further recognition of 'the diversity of Asian and African experiences and agency in the transformatory process often subsumed under the blanket term of globalisation' (Freitag and von Oppen 2010: 3). My understanding of translocality draws from this emphasis of socio-spatial and cultural processes that interlink both people and spaces, but I adapt the approach to investigate the reciprocal relationships resonating between manifestations of urban creativity; the varied forms of agency involved; and the sites, places, and spaces employed.

   In her discussion on causes, possibilities, and outcomes of translocal spaces, Setha Low further elucidates how, through affective processes and exchange of information, translocality can become collective experience and translocal space 'a network of multiple localities shared by families, neighbourhoods, groups and communities' (Low 2016: 174). In urban creativity, the acknowledgement of affective processes, along with the shared knowledge exchange, and how they enhance solidarity and participation, is an essential starting point. Through this acknowledgement, it becomes possible to decipher the complex negotiation processes because the translocal networks and spatiotemporal experiences are the prerequisite for the vibrant existence of the phenomenon. Hence, instead of focusing on translocal flows and networks among Chinese people in China in terms of place and identity making (cf. Oakes and Schein 2006), I take 'translocal' to denote more multilayered mediation processes which also include transnational

agency and transcultural forms, trends, styles, and images transcending the national borders.

Chinese cities are not immune to translocal flows of information, and their urban planning is engaged with foreign expertise and capital. The translocal manifestations and agency in contemporary art have challenged the definitions of 'contemporary Chinese art,' 'contemporaneity,'[8] and 'Chineseness,' especially among diasporic Chinese artists across the globe.[9] Even if some scholars of Chinese art history, including Craig Clunas (2009: 234), have argued in favour of 'art in China' to evade 'the flattening effect of "Chinese art,"' and others have urged the need of 'deconstructing the global/ local dichotomy' in favour of more heterogeneity (Wu 2008: 291), existing research continues to focus on Chinese artists in China or abroad while not taking into account foreign artists working in China. The dominating emphasis based on artists' nationality is intriguing not least because illuminating studies address transcultural flows in the visual arts in premodern and modern eras.[10] Admittedly, the focus on Chinese artists has been well justified because of the need for detailed art historical research and because of these artists' unquestionable prominence in shaping contemporary art in China. Concerns of 'Western hegemony' in global art discourses – valid as such – may nevertheless have led to an unjustified exclusion from the discussion of foreign stakeholders and their practices.

As indicated by the *Urban Carpet* (Figure 10.1), the neglect of foreign agency and mediations in terms of artistic and creative practices in Chinese cities hinders a deeper understanding of the multileveled interactions between local, national, regional (Asian), and global practices, some of which restore the sense of place and foster a meaningful engagement with the city. The appreciation of the *Urban Carpet* project naturally varied among the Chinese residents: some claimed that the carpets appeared like they were made by Chinese artists and were surprised to learn they were made by

8   Debates on definitions of modern, contemporary, avant-garde, experimental, and conceptual art have been abundant. See, e.g. Gao (2008: 133-145); Wu (2005: 13-16); Lü (2013: 202-203). Also what constitutes the contemporaneity (当代性) in Chinese contemporary art has been debated. Wu Hung (2008: 291) maintains that contemporaneity 'must be understood as an intentional artistic/theoretical construct, which asserts a particular historicity itself.'

9   As Melissa Chiu (2006, 2011) has analysed, Chineseness as a self-identity is a contested concept, dependent and modified by different cultural environments for different purposes by Chinese artists living abroad.

10   Among the most extensive studies of mediated discourses in visual art are Clark (1998), Clarke (2011), and Lü (2010). In his recent study, Lü (2013) wields an informative discussion throughout the book on the agency of Western collectors, gallerists, and researchers in contemporary art in China, but omits foreign artists.

foreign architects; others argued that because of their innovativeness, such works could *not* have been created by Chinese artists. Despite the different takes on the agency, the majority of the local residents clearly enjoyed the possibility to reflect on and share their insights and memories of the local area with each other and the practitioners. For Campa and Avesani, this social process – *sharing the experiences* – is the essential outcome of the project. *Urban Carpet* is one of their many 'micro-urbanism interactions' included in the *Instant Hutong* project, launched in 2005 when Campa and Avesani moved to Beijing to deepen their investigations of urbanization in China. For them, 'micro-urbanism interactions' are based on 'the sense of small-scale urban spaces with the possibility to temporarily use them as a public stage on which the audience's response becomes the main event.'[11]

The elements that made *Urban Carpet* well received among the Chinese residents as a form of micro-urbanism interaction include the employment of materials not commonly available for the locals, transformation of these materials into a visually intriguing form, and making them directly accessible to the residents in their community instead of displaying them in an art institution. Breaking through both the temporal and spatial constraints with an innovative engagement was the cornerstone of the project that enabled it to enhance belonging to a specific place and a shared local identity. As such, the project directly deconstructed the local/global dichotomies called for by Wu Hung, although diverting his advocacy of an artist 'simultaneously constructing his or her local identity *and* serving a global audience' (2008: 291). Instead, *Urban Carpet* benefitted from the translocal agency and materials of the work, including the possible surprise regarding the nationality of the practitioners. The ethnicity and/or nationality of the foreign architects or their lack of fully fluent Mandarin did not prevent the interaction of the locals with the work or obstruct the outcome as dialogical process as a whole. Campa and Avesani were not interested in documentation or translation of the narratives. Neither were they keen to transform the collected stories into an art project to be exhibited in an art institutional context because that would have altered the dynamics of the whole engagement into a more structured and monitored project, possibly preventing the local residents' open-minded participation.[12] *Urban Carpet* is an illuminating example of a timely translocal site-responsiveness, challenging the prevailing assumption that 'successful' social engagement depends on local expertise and agency or acceptance of the contemporary art scene: re-creating the project in the

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11   Campa and Avesani, interview. For more information, see also Instant Hutong (2017).
12   Ibid.

2010s would not have the same impact because different map applications have already made geographic/visual representations of the neighbourhoods more accessible for urbanites.

The Impact of Translocal Agency

The role of foreign agency in the contemporary art scene in China remains an understudied phenomenon and is beyond the scope of this chapter. For the sake of more nuanced contextualization, it is nevertheless relevant to bring forward examples that indicate how the varied commitments have inevitably contributed to the diversity in contemporary art. For instance, the Red Gate Gallery opened in 1991 by Brian Wallace was a pioneering art gallery to operate in Beijing and has actively continued to provide new platforms for artists from China and abroad, and since 2001, a residency programme.[13] At the other end of the spectrum are the state-sponsored exchange programmes, such as the Austro Sino Arts Program funded by the Austrian government which has organized numerous exhibitions featuring Austrian artists in China (Austro Sino Arts Program 2014). Chinese curator Tang Zehui, who has started to pay attention to foreign artists working in China, represents a more recent form of translocal agency. In 2015, Tang curated an exhibition, *Reverse the Perspective*, which toured from Beijing to Tianjin in order to promote more extensive perceptions of the contemporary art scene.

In urban creativity, despite the groundbreaking practices of the Big Tail Elephant Working Group in the 1990s discussed in detail by Nancy P. Lin in her chapter in this volume, the translocal mediations are a prominent part of the phenomenon. Although Zhang Dali's (张大力, b. 1963) experiments with spray-painted silhouettes in Beijing for his *Dialogue* series (1995-2005) have been repeatedly examined (including by Maurizio Marinelli and Elizabeth Parke in this volume), what is usually ignored is that they were inspired by his translocal experiences in Bologna,[14] as also mentioned by Jiang Jiehong in Chapter 3. However, Zhang Dali's impact on the development of contemporary graffiti and street art in China can be questioned because he did not collaborate with any other graffiti writers or artists or technically advance the scene (Valjakka 2016). As Zhang Dali's case nonetheless indicates, the history of urban creativity in China cannot be written without

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13   John Lui, director of the Red Gate Residency programme, email communication to the author, 18 January 2016.
14   Zhang Dali, in interview with the author, Beijing, 13 August 2009.

acknowledging the complex mediation processes across national borders since the 1990s. The flows of exchange vary significantly from one city to another and are in continuous flux. While Guangzhou and Shenzhen have clearly benefitted from the closeness of Hong Kong and its international take on contemporary graffiti and street art, the translocal atmosphere of Shanghai has contributed to the development of urban creativities, too.

The first known practitioners of contemporary graffiti and street art in Beijing in the late 1990s were locals, whereas in Shanghai, the presence of foreign practitioners has been significant since the emergence of contemporary graffiti around 2005-2007. Some artists and designers have lived in China for years while actively contributing to urban creativity. One of the best-known protagonists is Dezio, a French graffiti artist who for over ten years has been active in Shanghai.[15] Besides polishing his own distinguished style of lettering, Dezio has often explored with Chinese visual elements and Chinese language, and has even chosen the Chinese characters (度西奥) for his name.[16] Dezio's work fulfils the notion of translocal at several levels because he is a French graffiti artist living and creating his work in China, occasionally in Chinese and with contextual references to Chinese culture and society. Furthermore, his work, including the experimentation with Chinese characters, is appreciated by Chinese graffiti writers and graffiti artists and has encouraged them to further explore the possibilities of their own language. Besides his own participation in building up the scene, Dezio's interconnectedness with many international graffiti writers, graffiti artists, and street artists has brought a vast number of them to visit and paint in Shanghai, transforming the long wall along the Moganshan Road leading to the contemporary art district, M50, into an informal but seminal site of translocal exchange. His long-term presence and impact on urban creativity as a source of inspiration transcends Low's (2016) perceptions on how translocality can be transformed into an affective process and exchange of information spreading into the community. In the case of Dezio, he has also brought about physical change to urban aesthetics and spatial politics in Shanghai.

The definition of 'local' agency is further complicated by forms of collaborations. Although many contemporary graffiti crews in Mainland China today are either all-Chinese or all-foreign, there are a growing number of translocal crews both in terms of the members' nationality and also their place of residence across the borders. As an example, the best-known crew

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15   To protect their identities, the birth years of creators involved in urban creativity are revealed only with permission.

16   Dezio, French graffiti writer, in interview with the author, Shenzhen, 23 March 2013.

in Shanghai, the OOPS crew, represents the many levels of translocal site-responsiveness through agency, subject matters, use of languages (English and Chinese), styles, and trends. Established in 2007 by Shanghainese Tin.G, REIGN, and READ (aka HURRI), the crew expanded to include SNOW from Shanghai, KITE from Guangxi, AEKONE from Yangzhou, and two Europeans, STORM and DIASE.[17]

Another feature that adds translocal layers in terms of agency are projects commissioned, funded, or supported by transnational organizations, institutions, or companies which employ both Chinese and foreign creators to work around China. Individual practitioners can also initiate translocal collaborations with official support. The most extensive example so far is the series of graffiti workshops, events, and exhibitions organized by German graffiti writer Akim Walta (aka ZEBSTER) in collaboration with local graffiti writers and various institutions in several cities. In 2009, Walta launched the *Shanghai 2010: German Chinese Hip Hop Project*, which consisted of fifteen events over two years (workshops, talks, exhibition, live painting, and the finals of the Wall Lords graffiti competition) in Wuhan (2009), Shenyang (2009), Guangzhou (2009 and 2010), Beijing (2010), Shenzhen (2010), and Shanghai as the main site of events in connection with the Shanghai Expo 2010 and the German Pavilion Day in 2010. The core participants included Chinese, German, and Hong Kongese graffiti writers, graffiti artists, and street artists. Although the majority of the sites were local, the translocal space of the Shanghai Expo 2010 and especially the events organized in relation to the German Pavilion increased the exchange project's degree of translocality.[18]

The total impact of the project was immeasurable because of the large number of people taking part throughout the events that varied from dozens to thousands. Although the singular events might have been short in duration, each added to the public acceptance of contemporary graffiti as part of youth culture and urban aesthetics. One of the most tangible results was visible on Huachi Road in the Tielu residential area in Shanghai. In a local school, some German graffiti artists and street artists took part in a painting workshop which gradually spread to nearby houses – because the residents had asked the visitors to paint on their walls. However, because the residential committees had not approved this intervention, the works were soon threatened to be painted over. The residents' desire to defend the works and their right to decide about their own property won support from the local

17   Tin.G, Shanghainese street artist, in interview with the author, Shanghai, 20 April 2015; HURRI, Shanghainese graffiti writer, email communication to the author, 12 May 2012.
18   Akim Walta, graffiti artist, in interview with the author, Berlin, 18 July 2016.

media, whose coverage made the officials back down.[19] Although the project did not evolve to include participation by the local residents in painting, it did inspire engagement and ownership with the works. The locals' willingness to voice their own aspirations and resist the official perception indicates their commitment to and awareness of defending their use of public space. At the time of writing, the area has been partly demolished and many works have disappeared because of unauthorized structures built by and overpainting by the development company. Nonetheless, for a moment, the translocal urban creativity enlivened and empowered an unprivileged residential area and made it more inspiring, especially for children. Furthermore, it inspired local interventions. After the area had started to be torn down, a Shanghainese man, 50 to 60 years of age, came and painted a few works in a traditional Chinese style with ink and brush on the walls, adding his own layer to the translocal urban aesthetics of the neighbourhood.[20]

These examples, from individual long-term commitment to forms of collaboration between locals and foreigners, demonstrate how translocality in relation to agency can occur in varying degrees through physical presence and participation of a practitioner, translocal networks, cross-border collaborations, financial and/or institutional support, and as a mediated source of inspiration. All of them have the shifting potential to contribute to the transformation of perceptions and practices regarding urban public space and how it can be employed for urban creativity. Whether long-term processes or one-time events, what the diversified forms of translocal agency share in common is both a tangible and an intangible impact through affect, knowledge, inspiration, and reclamation of sites for urban creativity.

The Interdependence of a Site and a Manifestation

Even though urban public space is managed mainly by the government and global companies (Visser 2010: 4), vast areas of Chinese cities provide potential sites for urban creativity. Questions about how the spatial politics are (re)negotiated and when, where, and by whom are relevant to all forms of urban creativity. Officially, both writing and drawing in urban public space are banned by law,[21] but in practice the general attitude has been fairly

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19   Ibid.; Loomit, German street artist, in phone interview with the author, 5 July 2010.
20   Information obtained from fieldwork, August 2015.
21   Surveys conducted with English word 'graffiti' and Chinese words 涂鸦 and 涂写 in the Peking University law database (2013); China Law Info (2013), and HKSAR law database (2013).

lenient. The interpretation of spatial strategies of urban creativity depends directly on the sociopolitical and cultural contexts in question. For instance, because of relational tolerance towards urban creativity in China and its lack of residential areas reserved for ethnic minorities, the features of spatial analysis of graffiti in New York City in terms of racial segregation and ethnic identity (see e.g. Anderson 2012) are not applicable. In Mainland China, the act of urban creativity itself is not necessarily considered subversive, but the evaluation depends mostly on the site and content.[22]

As elaborated in previous chapters, creating site-oriented art in urban public space is a prominent method for contemporary Chinese artists to explore the characteristics of a particular site or space in the city. For new forms of urban creativity, however, the multilevel engagement with the site, place, and space is both a premise and a defining factor. Each particular intervention is created in a specific physical site for a reason (e.g. visibility, accessibility, cultural, and architectural values *or* the lack of them). The interdependence between forms, content, language, style, visual and textual reference, materials, size, agency, and speed of the action in urban creativity is, nonetheless, often highly organic and spontaneous. Interaction with the site, place, or space cannot be limited only to the conscious examination of a site.

Scholars on street art have touched upon the interconnectedness of the site and the street artwork but fail to provide any comprehensive analysis that could apply to all forms of urban creativity. The urge to rigidly define the existing plurality of urban creativity into smaller categories causes limited perceptions. For instance, Nicholas Alden Riggle's attempt to demand that '[a]n art work is *street art* if, and only if, its material use of the street is internal to its meaning' (2010: 246) fails to give any pragmatic analytical tools for examining the intertextuality that he calls for. As Peter Bengtsen observes, Riggle's interpretation is problematic. How can we define when 'the use of the street is indeed essential to the meaning of a specific artwork' (2014: 132)? According to Bengtsen, the interrelation of street art and site varies depending on the use of pictorial space, the medium, and the placement of the work (2014: 132-135; 2013: 252). Anna Wacławek maintains that any analysis must examine how the urban artwork interacts with its environment, including 'the media, architectural forms and signage that envelop it' along with 'local history and contemporary issues' (2011:

For the regulation concerning the cities in Mainland China, see especially article 17 in State Council (2011).
22   For a more detailed discussion on the changing understanding of il/legality, see Valjakka (2014).

139). Although I agree with Bengtsen and Wacławek, my fieldwork in East Asian cities leads me to argue that the interconnectedness with the site is far more complex. First, when would a site *not* be essential, even for the meaning and value of a tag, a seed bomb, or urban knitting?[23] Second, in today's global world, the intertextuality goes clearly beyond the particular site and local discourses. References are frequently made by the local and the foreign artists to national, regional (Asian), and global issues, as well as to traditions and popular trends. A primary example of this kind of deconstruction of local/global dichotomy is the above-mentioned wall on Moganshan Road that has (art) historical relevance as the translocal site for urban creativity. Third, instead of directly referencing the locality, translocal site-responsiveness can be expressed through aesthetic and conceptual *juxtaposition*, as Kaid Ashton,[24] a Canadian photographer and visual artist, does in his interventions in Asian cities.

Kaid Ashton uses two major visual strategies to create translocal juxtapositions: he puts up portraits of people and photographs of urban or natural landscapes from abroad. The power of the contrast is directly based on the translocal site-responsiveness of the subject theme – displaying, for instance, the portraits of impoverished Indonesian urbanites in the midst of the affluence of Hong Kong with texts explaining their stories. In 2011-2013, the artist hung up large colour photographs of unspoiled Saskatchewan nature in Manila, Sri Lanka, Dhaka, and Guangzhou, where they were readily appreciated by the locals – even in derelict neighbourhoods. He found similar positivity in Guangzhou in March 2012. The discrepancy of the images in the industrialized and polluted urban environment was extreme, to say the least. While he was putting up one of the works in a residential area, people gathered to defend his right to make art and improve the area when a military representative in a camouflage-patterned outfit tried to stop him (Figure 10.4). Echoing the contemporary graffiti in the Tielu residential area in Shanghai, Kaid Ashton's photographic intervention encouraged the people to care about their right to decide on urban aesthetics.[25]

During his one-week trip to Beijing in August 2011, Kaid Ashton put up the series *Dignity in Labour*, depicting the variety of labourers he has

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23   A seed bomb is a small package of seeds and fertilizers which can be strewn on public or private land to plant seeds.
24   Kaid Ashton is a pseudonym chosen by the artist.
25   Kaid Ashton, in video call interviews with the author, 14 May 2013 and 30 November 2015. See also Kaid Ashton (2012).

Figure 10.4   A local person defending Kaid Ashton's right to put up a photograph in Guangzhou and the result of the negotiation. Courtesy of the artist.

encountered in different Asian countries. With the help of a friend fluent in Mandarin, the stories of the people were translated and a bilingual text appeared next to many photographs. For residential buildings, permission was always asked from and given by the inhabitants. In a demolition area, the family of the last house standing approached the artist and asked to have one photograph for their house, which he allowed them to choose

**Figure 10.5   Family choosing a photograph for their house in Beijing and the
              outcome. Courtesy of the artist.**

(Figure 10.5). In Kaid Ashton's own experience, Beijingers were intrigued
by the series and read the stories of the people depicted.[26]

Through a translocal site-responsiveness, Kaid Ashton's works obviously
raised interest and gave a chance to simultaneously connect with different
countries and nationalities. Even if his practice does not fulfil Kester's (2011)
perceptions of an artist-led collaborative art project, the photographs and the
process of putting them up established engagement with the local people.
The depth of the impact on the audience of this exchange of knowledge
cannot be demonstrated; but, similarly to many other events of urban
creativity, the photographs have brought forward possibilities to use the
walls of private houses for non-commercial and non-official purposes,
challenging the current urban aesthetics dominated by advertisements
and official imaginaries. Given the ephemerality and discontinuity of the
project, the effect of these interventions on urban creativity in Mainland
China could be criticized, but we have yet to see another experiment with
a translocal subject matter, conceptual and aesthetic juxtaposition through

26   Kaid Ashton, in video call interview with the author, 30 November 2015. See also Kaid Ashton
(2011a, 2011b). The date in the posting does not correspond with the actual date of the trip.

colour photographs and with bilingual texts contextualizing the pictures as an art exhibition on the street.

As Kaid Ashton's works indicate, a more nuanced analysis is needed than the site specificity suggested by Miwon Kwon (2004). Although in her earlier work, Kwon (2000) investigates site-oriented works by itinerant artists and how the narrative trajectories resonate with previous projects in other sites, her analysis remains too static for grasping the translocal and often-contingent aspects of urban creativity. As Bengtsen maintains, Kwon's focus on site-oriented art that consciously explores the site's role is not fully applicable to street art, in which 'site specificity is not dependent on such conscious deliberations' (2013: 252). My findings in urban creativity resonate with Kwon's perception that it is not only physical locations that can function as sites and be reflected in the content of the artwork but, instead, various cultural, theoretical, institutional, societal, political, and historical debates, issues, and events can also perform this role (2004: 26-30). However, the processes of resonating with the physical and conceptual features of site, place, and space in urban creativity go beyond conscious deliberations and are far more organic, spontaneous, and complex than previously acknowledged.

Many forms of urban creativity, such as Kaid Ashton's projects, are (re)created in multiple sites around the globe as a continuing, multi-sited project. Some works are deliberately moved from a place to another *without* the work being destroyed. As a result, urban creativity's interdependence with the site is clearly more multileveled, flexible, and translocal. Because the physical and conceptual contexts inevitably vary when the work is moved or re-created in different sites, the layers of meanings are increased: the work resonates differently in each particular site, which adds to the interpretations of the whole series of works across the national borders. In Kaid Ashton's work, the simultaneous situatedness is transformed to apply the works themselves instead of people.[27] The photographic series becomes part of the translocal knowledge exchange and affective processes that have the possibility to provide new perceptions not only by reflecting the local characteristics but also juxtaposing them through materials, forms, and aesthetics. Hence, they may inspire innovative methods to envision the city and people's relationship to it and even spark civic participation.

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27   For a detailed analysis of simultaneous situatedness in terms of movements of people across specific locales and different scales, see Brickell and Datta (2011).

Figure 10.6   Julien Malland's partially demolished painting, Shanghai, September 2015. Photograph by the author.

Manifold Translocal Site-Responsiveness

An even more multi-layered example of a transcultural site-responsiveness is provided by Julien Malland (aka Seth Globepainter, b. 1972), who started as a graffiti writer in the 1990s but gradually became more interested in forms of street art. In recent years, he has been painting around the globe, with or without authorization. His interest lies in building a dialogue with the

people through his works despite the language barriers. During his visits to Shanghai in 2013-2015, Malland painted ephemeral human figures at demolition sites that caught the eye of the local media and raised popular interest among a Chinese audience. The works reveal the scars left on the urban environment and in the urbanites themselves because of the alienation and rootedness caused by the ongoing urban redevelopment. The domicide, as Qin Shao (2013) describes destruction of homes with severe repercussions to communities and the whole city, is a commonly known phenomenon among Shanghainese and is visually captured in Malland's paintings. While *Urban Carpet* represents the historical significance of the *hutong*s to their residents, the graffiti workshop in Shanghai transformed the everyday space, and Kaid Ashton's photographic juxtapositions emphasize the shifting realities of the urban environment, Malland's ephemeral paintings epitomize both the material and immaterial destruction of cityscapes. It could be argued that Malland's paintings merely regress to indexical employment of the ruins echoing the artistic practices among the contemporary Chinese artists in the 1990s,[28] but the use of abandoned buildings and demolition sites is also characteristic of urban creativity in Mainland China and elsewhere.

More importantly, the significance of Malland's work derives directly from translocal site-responsiveness that combines the local, regional, national, and international levels of the unavoidable challenges of urbanization to private citizens. Some of the human figures can be identified as Chinese, but occasionally Malland paints the figures faceless (e.g. depicting them from behind), a style that leaves the question of a figure's ethnicity ambiguous. Whether the 'facelessness' of the figure is a deliberate visual strategy by Malland or a contingent result of demolition (as in Figure 10.6), in either case it directly contributes to the degrees of translocal site-responsiveness. An unidentifiable human figure transcends the experience communicated to the viewer into a universal level of humanistic emotions. The painful dislocation caused especially by globalization and domicide is shared among the less privileged in cities around the globe, causing translocality among many without a choice. In here, too, the work itself becomes a vehicle of communication, and affective processes provide a discursive site for shared experiences across the borders.

The composition and colour choices add a notion of sadness to the human figures. The aesthetics of the works as well as the translocality of Malland and his works resonated well, especially with the commonly shared notions of nostalgia and cosmopolitan aspirations in Shanghai. The

28   The ruins provided an essential visual strategy for contemporary Chinese artists to approach the unseen urbanization (Wu 2012; Visser 2004).

works directly addressed the Shanghainese's mixed feelings regarding the continuous changes in the urban environment, and the wave of popularity they received in the Chinese media was not left unnoticed. The Japanese art supplier Nippon Paint contacted a local non-profit organization, Shanghai United Foundation (上海联动公益基金会), to find ways to collaborate. With the combination of both translocal and local support from Nippon Paint and Baosteel Group, the local foundation commissioned Malland to paint nine murals for its annual An Egg's Charity Walk (一个鸡蛋的暴走) around Fengjing. Since 2011, the charity walk has raised funds for improving children's living conditions around China. In 2015, teams of four to six people walked 50 kilometres in twelve hours. An estimated 3,300 participants raised 13.62 million yuan for the cause on 16 May 2015.[29]

As usual, Malland preferred to get to know the local ways of life before deciding what to paint and then apply them to make the works communicate to the people. Resonating with the main aim of the event, all the works depict children in peaceful compositions and bright colours. For instance, in Xinyi village, Malland incorporated a window frame as the cornerstone of the whole composition by turning it into a home. A local girl is hugging her village home while forced to move to the city to earn money, which is indicated by a fake Louis Vuitton bag with signs for yuan as the decoration (Figure 10.7). The visual metaphors of the painting were easily read by the villagers, the audience of the charity event, and foreigners alike. 'The respective site specificity,' suggests Bengtsen, 'is also conditioned by the way in which their non-material pictorial spaces interrelate with the surroundings' (2013: 252). By this statement, Bengtsen refers only to the pictorial space: in the case of a human figure, the subject is incorporated in a pictorial frame or cut by the outline of the figure. However, as Malland's works illuminate, site-responsiveness in urban creativity is conditioned by much more complex material interconnectedness of the work and the site, especially when physical features are employed in the compositions to emphasize the emotional message, as is the case with this girl positioned around the window.

Another practical method of translocal site-responsiveness for Malland is to collaborate with local artist(s). While in Fengjing, known for its peasant painting tradition, Malland grew interested in the traditional form of visual arts. The local officials turned to Cao Xiuwen (曹秀文, b. 1955), a peasant painter who had previously participated in mural

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29 Cao Haiyan, media representative of the foundation, in interview with the author, Shanghai, 21 September 2015.

**Figure 10.7   Julien Malland's painting in Xinyi village, September 2015.
Photograph by the author.**

Figure 10.8   Julien Malland and Cao Xiuwen, a sleeping girl in Xingta village,
September 2015. Photograph by the author.

projects in the town centre. In the Xingta village, Malland conceived
of an idea for a painting of a local girl sleeping and dreaming about her
home village and, while Malland painted the girl, Cao painted the village
(Figure 10.8). The result is an illuminating combination of both artists'
individual styles and perceptions highlighting the multileveled translocal
site-responsiveness of the work with the site (wall in a local house), the
place (a rural village), and the contextual space (An Egg's Charity Walk).
The hybrid forms of agency (local/French), styles (local peasant painting/
international street art), and techniques (brush/spray paint) advocate far
more intricate deconstruction of local/global dichotomies than called for
by Wu Hung. At the same time, the collaboration challenges any clear
definitions in visual arts today.

   Despite the notions of alienation and longing, the mural is aesthetically
pleasing without direct criticism of urbanization and globalization found
in many other works of Malland. As such, it can be interpreted to represent
apolitical beautification becoming close to officially sanctioned public art.
A farmer planting in front of the mural in the Xingta village claimed that the
art in the village created with the support of the local government lacked
impact. Inevitably, the mural brought more visitors and media, but because
there were no services available to the visitors to use, the village did not

directly benefit from the project.[30] Cao instead emphasized the positive effect of publicity raised in the local and national media,[31] but her view is likely to be shaped by the fact that she has her own studio in the 'painting village,' a tourist attraction built by the local government. According to the head of Fengjing's local government cultural section, Ding Yehong, the whole project was very successful, attracted visitors from all parts of the country, and let the people be proud of the villages.[32] The foundation was similarly pleased with the results: because of more works resonating with the main aim and a longer period to engage with them in open space, the works encouraged the participants to appreciate life and everyday things outside of the city centres.[33] Inevitably, the nine murals by Malland enhance the branding of Fengjing and nearby villages as an art area, and also through their re-use in various advertisements.

Compared to the existing murals of peasant painting in the area, Malland's works provide new methods, aesthetics, and perceptions in relation to urbanization and its outcomes even in rural areas. They highlight the individuals, their concerns, and hopes which resonate with the local and global audience and may hence inspire new trends in visual arts around Fengjing, too. For Cao, the mural represents peasant painting (农民画), although Malland is neither a peasant nor Chinese.[34] From the global perspective, the mural is an illuminating example of contemporary hybrid forms of street art that are becoming ever more accepted forms of contemporary art, especially in Euro-American contexts. While the work resonates with Jerome Silbergeld's (2009) notion that contemporaneity in Chinese art cannot be limited to Chinese artists focusing on novel forms of arts but should include Chinese art regardless of the method and style, it further challenges the interpretations of Chineseness in terms of agency, form, style, and aesthetics. To which extent, if any, could this collaboration, based on peasant painting and street art, qualify as Chinese contemporary art or, even, contemporary art in China?

'Contemporaneity consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity, and constancy of radical disjunctures of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world,' advocates Terry Smith (2008: 8-9). He further argues that the asynchronous temporalities, together with contingencies of

30 Local farmer, in interview with the author, Xingta village, 20 September 2015.
31 Cao Xiuwen, a peasant artist, in video call interview with the author, 7 November 2015.
32 Ding Yehong, local government representative, email communication to the author, 1 December 2015.
33 Cao Haiyan, interview.
34 Cao Xiuwen, interview.

cultural and social multiplicities, 'highlight the fast-growing inequalities between them and among them' (ibid.: 9). If we accept this perception of contemporaneity to apply also to discourses of art in China, as indicated by Maurizio Marinelli in Chapter 2, we can start to perceive the intricate inequalities indicated by the collaboration of Malland and Cao despite the positive effects aimed for and achieved. The translocal site-responsiveness of this project was formulated at the nexus of commissioned work for charity purposes through the collaboration of a local foundation and partially translocal funding along with intercontextual references to local traditions, the contemporary realities of everyday life permeated with translocal elements, and the physical sites – the local walls. Whether the villagers benefit from the project or not, the murals by Malland and their translocal site-responsiveness had a positive impact on the charity walk. They gave a reason to continue walking the whole route and added joy to the equation. The murals, nonetheless, raised unanswered questions regarding fluctuating and contextually based evaluation criteria and positions of different agency, forms, and aesthetics in today's global art world.

Conclusions: Transcending Dichotomies

Local and global are increasingly indistinguishable in visual arts in China today. As Robin Visser (2010) maintains, in Mainland China the post-socialist urban aesthetics enables new forms of civic agency to emerge while serving as a new realm in which to envision, experience, and assess the city. As I have shown in this chapter, these novel possibilities of civic participation apply also to foreign graffiti writers, local graffiti artists, street artists, architects, designers, and artists working individually or in collaboration with foreign or Chinese peers, organizations, companies, and institutions. Along with globalization of visual arts and urban space, urbanization and its implications, such as demolition sites, open up new physical and conceptual sites for urban creativity in Chinese cities. As Visser (2004: 277) advocates, 'an aesthetics of disappearance functions as a site of resistance while also working to reposition artists at the center of commercial culture.' Her emphasis on disappearance as an aesthetic strategy which resists simplified dichotomies as well as temporal, conceptual, and normative frames cannot be restricted to contemporary Chinese artists, though. As the examples discussed clearly indicate, the multiple flows of translocal ideas, materials, trends, forms, images, and agency increase the chances for urban creativity in China and its translocal site-responsiveness. The global networks, especially in

terms of trends, collaboration, and localities, are shared among the groups and communities interested in the novel forms of urban creativity. Their manifestations, events, and projects are negotiating the official discourse of urban aesthetics while the continuing exchange at various scales also enables the creation of translocal spaces in cities.

The understanding of urban creativity as an organic process of translocal site-responsiveness provides alternative readings of artistic and creative practices in urban public space and their contingencies as well as challenges in terms of contemporaneity, engagement, and civic participation. The more nuanced analysis of the varying degrees of translocality of main variables – the forms of agency; manifestations; and site, place, and space – and the aspects of these variables facilitate better understanding of interdependence between urbanization and visual arts in Chinese cities today. Not only foreign practitioners, but also crews, groups, foundations, companies, and institutions are transforming the cities and the use of urban public space. At the same time, through employment of selected forms, methods, and aesthetics in relation to specific sites (e.g. Moganshan Road), places (e.g. old residential neighbourhoods in Beijing) or spaces (e.g. demolition sites), they facilitate new subjectivities and possibilities for envisioning one's city, especially among the younger generations interested in reshaping the urban conditions. This more dynamic conceptual framework is especially helpful for examining the multilayered urban aesthetics and how it is de/reconstructed in Chinese cities. The cases discussed show the variety of potential forms and manifestations of translocal site-responsiveness that are challenging the common norms of urban public space while also opening up sites for engagement and civic participation. From conceptual juxtaposition to varied forms of engagement and collaboration, foreign creators have inspired locals to experiment with artistic and creative practices to voice one's concerns and hopes. As a long-term impact, Chinese artists, practitioners, and urbanites are being encouraged to proclaim spaces for urban creativity (e.g. walls of fame) and develop the forms to their own needs.

In relation to Yang Fudong's (杨福东, b. 1971) films, Craig Clunas maintains that the decision of whether to emphasize Chineseness or the contemporary and global connections of Yang's works 'is fundamentally a political one which has no easy, or indeed no definitive, answer' (2009: 234-235). Similarly, the evaluations on the translocal site-responsiveness in urban creativity and its varying degrees of 'locality' or 'translocality' can be seen as political ones, as was the case with *Urban Carpet*. However, for two main reasons, the story of urban creativity in Mainland China cannot be told without translocality: first, because of the inevitable impact of mediated discourses and trends of

European and American urban creativity since the 1990s in Mainland Chinese cities; and second, because of the active participation of foreign creators in major cities, especially in Beijing and Shanghai. This is not to belittle the Chinese creators' impact. Quite the opposite, their efforts to adapt and develop styles and forms for their own needs deserve much more research.

The focus on translocal site-responsiveness is also not to ignore the contradictions, issues, and unequal opportunities for projects and funding based on ethnicity and/or nationality for both Chinese and foreign artists and creators. The forces causing translocality are not necessarily positive (Low 2016: 202) and they may influence the complex dynamics of translocality in urban creativity, too: misinterpretations, frustrations, unjust treatment in terms of commissions, and questions of Western hegemony require more research in the future. As Low (2016: 203) rightfully maintains, translocality and translocal space nonetheless have the potential even to facilitate 'the emergence of new political practices and the expansion of the public sphere.' In relation to translocal site-responsiveness in urban creativity, the sites, works, and projects also become a vehicle of affective processes and knowledge exchange that broaden the understanding of the public sphere in Chinese cities today.

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