

Graffiti (and worse)

Many of you have had the good fortune of visiting places beyond Hong Kong. Some of you may have even ventured as far afield as Europe, North America and Australia. Trips to these countries are always exciting and I'm sure that those of you who have been to these distant places would have taken many wonderful photographs of the landscapes, buildings and people that you came across on your journeys. Some of you might even have kept a diary with notes outlining where you had been and what you had seen and describing the experiences you encountered along the way. It is said that travel broadens our horizons allowing us to open our eyes to life beyond Hong Kong.

There is a feature of cities like London, Melbourne and New York that is not often captured in photographs or written in travel diaries. Yet this feature strikes you immediately on arrival in these countries particularly if you are driving along a major road or using the railway network. That feature is all around and cannot be missed. I'm talking about graffiti. Any surface, be it a wall or a fence, is the target for somebody with a can of spray paint. I am not talking about an occasional drawing or name or tag but complete landscapes of spray paint that in the case of railways tracks extends for kilometre after kilometre. You cannot help but think about the people who climbed down to the railway tracks and left their mark, sometimes in seemingly impossible places and at great risk to their lives from the electric wires. I also think about the cost of the thousands of cans of spray paint purchased and how the paint manufacturers must welcome those taking part in this activity.

To the person holding a spray can they might consider themselves to be a 'graffiti artist' expressing their opinions and talent in a public place. To government officials and the police the person is a 'graffiti vandal' who creates criminal damage rather than a work of art. It is interesting to note that in Athens, the capital of Greece, there is probably more graffiti than in any city in the world. In Athens, the birthplace of democracy, people believe they have the democratic right to draw on any wall they wish including churches and ancient monuments. In Athens the police appear to ignore the spray painter and turn the other way.

Unfortunately in recent years the work of the graffiti artist or graffiti vandal, depending on your point of view, has moved to a new dimension that can only be described as outright vandalism. Today as you walk the city streets of London, Melbourne and New York you will notice that many shops, office

windows and car doors have been scratched with a coin. Sometimes a name or symbol is clearly identifiable. In most cases, however, the scratch is simply a line winding a path across the surface. The result is unsightly for the public and costly for the shop or car owner who cannot afford to keep repairing the damage due to higher insurance payments. The practice of scratching panes of glass with a coin has become a major problem in many cities that in recent times has extended to windows in buses and trains.

Why is it that we do not have the same degree of graffiti and glass scratching in Hong Kong? Indeed, I have seen very few cases of graffiti in Hong Kong and when I have come across an example it is using an isolated incident and certainly not entire walls stretching far into the distance. The only graffiti near my home is painted on the retaining wall of an apartment block. Written in English, not Chinese, the author names his girlfriend and favourite football team. On a regular basis the apartment managers paint over his sayings only for the perpetrator to return, presumably at night, to re-spray his messages. As for window scratching, I have seen few cases in Hong Kong.

This raises the question of why Hong Kong is seemingly different to other large cities in the world. The answer might be that the authorities act quickly to cover up graffiti when it is reported and keep doing so each time graffiti reappears. The answer might be that the police take a dim view of this practice and that the judicial system is prepared to hand out tough sentences to offenders. There might be a degree of truth in both answers. I would like to suggest a third reason why the problem is not as prevalent in Hong Kong and that relates to you, the young people in our city. I imagine that very few of you, if any, would think of taking a can of spray paint, walking up to a wall and leaving your mark. I would sincerely hope that none of you would ever use a coin to scratch a window or the side of a car. Each of you come from a good home with supportive family members and attend a school that teaches you what is right and wrong and how to treat other people and property. That is clearly not the case for a large number of young people in many other cities.

The riots in London over the summer brought to the surface the significant problems presented by young people who have no respect for other people and property. In the London summer of 2011 the painting of walls and scratching of windows paled into insignificance alongside the looting and the burning of shops and homes. As Hong Kong citizens, however, we should not be complacent and view what is happening in other parts of the world as simply 'their problem'. It is essential that families, schools, government and other

agencies work together to help Hong Kong's young people understand what is right and wrong and to respect private and public property. I am sure that none of you would want to see widespread graffiti in Hong Kong let alone looting and street violence.

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