

# The Myth of Value: the Preservation of Street Graffiti

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## ABSTRACT

The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region preserved a piece of Tsang Tsou Choi's street writing in 2009 in order to meet the request of a particular group of people, including some local artists, individuals in the cultural sector, commentators and Tsang's admirers. However, the value of the piece is controversial and a dichotomy exists between the views of professionals or specialists, such as art historians, scholars and museum curators, and those of the stakeholders who own Tsang's pieces which were either free commissioned work or acquired free before Tsang's death. Similar debates also exist in many countries when dealing with graffiti or old buildings. This paper discusses how this group of stakeholders won the government's support for the preservation of Tsang's street writing. Prevailing social and political conditions are also examined.

## Introduction

In June 2009, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (Hong Kong Government) decided to preserve a piece of street writing on a latex painted concrete pillar at the infamous Star Ferry Pier in the Tsim Sha Tsui area. A transparent, water-repellent alkyl alkoxy silane (Funcosil WS) coating was first sprayed onto the surface to slow the effects of ageing and weathering and to help consolidate the flaking surface. Then a purpose-designed polycarbonate case was built to house the graffiti *in situ* to protect it from vandalism and the effects of ultraviolet radiation. A caption was also mounted on the side to introduce the street writing. It is the first modern graffiti officially preserved in Hong Kong (Figure 1).

The writing (Figure 2) was produced by a man named Tsang Tsou Choi (1921–2007). For more than half a century, from 1956 onwards, he wrote inscriptions using a brush and black ink on the walls of properties and structures, such as retaining walls, lamp posts and utility boxes in public places. His actions did not stop even though he was charged with vandalism a few times. His writings covered Hong Kong with the same content: his genealogy with a list of names of his family members, his claim that he was the rightful owner of Kowloon and the slogan “Down with the Queen of England” (Wikipedia, 2017). The preserved piece was no exception.

The decision to preserve an object or relic in the built environment may be easier if it has obvious value or meaning to society but what about the case of Tsang Tsou Choi's graffiti?

## Artistic value?

From a philosophical point of view, the intrinsic value of something is said to be the value that thing has “in itself”, or “for its own sake” (Zimmerman, 2014). In other words, a work of art may be considered to have an intrinsic value purely in its own right, which does not need to be justified in any other way nor can be valued by assessors. However, before discussing artistic value, one might first ask, “Can Tsang's street writing be considered art?”

The definition of art is controversial in contemporary philosophy. According to William Rubin, director of the Museum of Modern Art