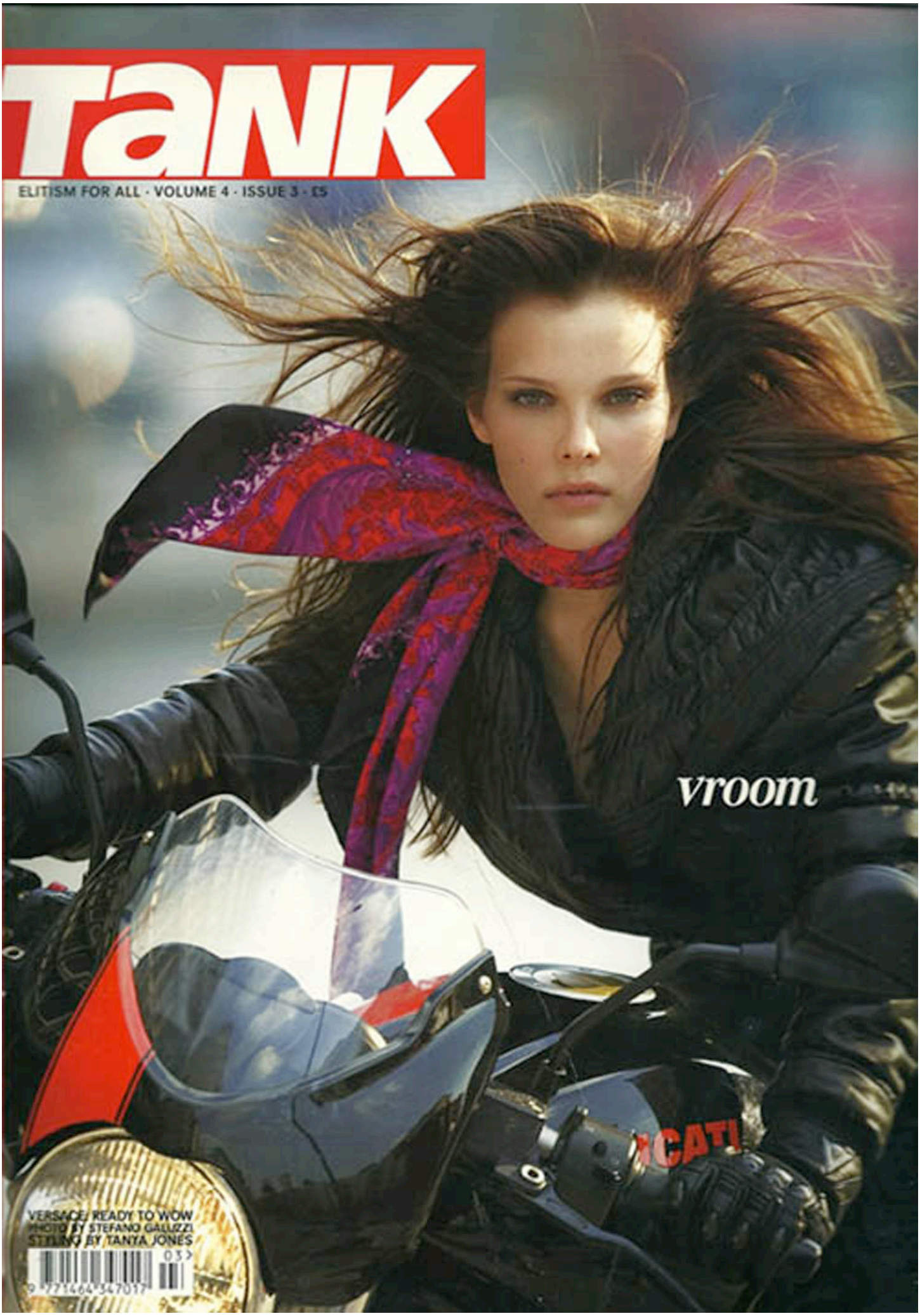
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VERSACE: READY TO WOW
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AS BEIJING LOOKS AHEAD TO THE 2008 OLYMPICS, WHAT ARE CHINA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD CHALKBOARDS TRYING TO TELL ITS CITIZENS? AND ARE ANY OF THEM LISTENING ANYWAY?

text and photography by Caroline Cooper

the writing on the wall

I bicycled through Beijing on a blustery spring day. The sun shone through breaks in the dense foliage overhead, revealing deep motes of yellow dust in the air. Spring is Beijing's dust-storm season and the city roils under a thick coat of powdery Gobi. I was on the lookout for the neighbourhood chalkboards bearing messages of communist glee even as the modern city passes by, largely oblivious. The boards are thick, heavy, virtually indestructible and artfully legible. They're a state-sponsored medium for the communication of information to citizens at the most gritty, street-by-street level. They have existed in their current form for almost half a century and today are maintained by proud local committees across the country.

Black, covered in chalky flowers and blocky characters, the boards have become especially fetching in recent months. Since President Hu Jintao's call to "civilise" China ahead of the 2008 Olympic Games, the public boards have taken on special hues, a new set of pinks, whites and yellows with spectacular decorative touches. The drive to prepare for the Olympics is now the dominant message writ large on China's chalkboards.

To civilise China: it's a big idea that has spawned not only a great outpouring of bright chalk, but also a five-point strategy of decorum to be pushed upon the citizenry. As of 2005, to be civilised in China means never to indulge in name-calling, casual spitting, littering, disorderly queuing or not smiling. Some blackboards run though all these points, listing them neatly. But elsewhere, a riot of bougainvillaea will run rampant up the side of one board, while decorative curls cascade down another. Others eschew such visual flourishes for stabs at the literary. One such specimen concludes, "ren ren shi chuan kou" ("we are all windows"). Lu Xun, China's master of literary realism who saw literary possibility and potentially subversive interpretations everywhere despite the fact that his oeuvre had been co-opted by the state, would have smiled coyly considering the many meanings of such a phrase.

In late spring I met Mr. Zhou Li, 63, a long-standing neighbourhood committee member in Beijing's Dong Cheng district. He wears his hair in a scraggy crew cut ("trimmed locally," he reminds me) and his white button-down shirt is untucked in the heat of the oncoming summer. He looks after some of the chalkboards off Di'an Men Street, which are among the most creative in central Beijing. "They're beautiful and expressive," he says, sweeping his hand over an especially decorative board urging pre-Olympic civility. "The messages are clear and simple but they look best when stylishly created. I like this one," he said, pointing to a detailed lion standing guard over one message. "It's a Chinese lion. A great lion."

Mr. Zhou earns the equivalent of $50 per month monitoring government messages, commissioning the boards and maintaining them, in addition to other responsibilities that seem to include copious *pu'er* tea drinking and occasional card games. "The money is enough for me and the messages are important, so I feel good about my work. This is a good job," he chuckled, before meandering home for lunch.

I returned to see Mr. Zhou in late June. It was during the run-up to International Anti-Drug Day and new messages had started to appear on the boards. He was in good spirits and wore a jaunty straw hat against the strong summer sun. "Look at this new board," he said, waving me over. It was a complex, heady work that balanced wordy statements about the evils of drug use with a smattering of animal life thought to represent said evils. A large green snake, blood dripping from its fangs, clutched a small man rendered in white.

"That snake is the drug. The blood is from shooting up the heroin, but also shows the devouring of human life," explained Mr. Zhou. A smaller snake, still hatching from its shell, was shown nearby. "That little one is the life of crime," he said, bending to point it out.

In the upper corner of the board sat a bowl of talking fish. The bowl teetered on the edge of a stool as the fish lamented their fate. "That shows the danger of taking drugs. You don't know what will happen!" warned Mr. Zhou with a gruff touch to my shoulder. The stool had been drawn with exacting edges and looked sturdy. "We had a retired arts professor do it. He lives in the neighbourhood," he explained. "How long will this advertisement remain here?" I asked Mr. Zhou. He looked at me with a sense of bewilderment, crestfallen. Had I offended? "This is no simple *guang'gao*," he huffed. "A guang'gao is like, 'Look, I have something, maybe you want to buy it, maybe you don't, either way, now you know.' This is a public notice for the ages. This is real propaganda. Yes, this we call propaganda."

"How long will it stay here?" he continued, adopting the reflexive question-and-answer conversational tic built into Chinese. "Hard to say. Drugs are a real problem. Leaving this board up for only a short time will not help to solve the problem. We need to leave this board up for a long time to have an effect."

Most citizens pass the chalkboards without a second glance, discarding an empty Popsicle packet in front of a snippety, "Littering is not civilised" message, or dashing past a reminder to, "Love the country, love the people, love the neighbourhood committee" on the way to meet friends. Some of the messages are simply, neatly done and get to the point in clipped, sharp characters that end at exacting staccato points. Many boards are completed with little thought and are just as soon wiped clean, but others have clearly been approached as blank canvases. With just a few details and a careful eye for proportion, such boards reveal a deep reverence for the artistry of the message. These chalkboards stand as impermanent love letters to the cities, the public and the Party. They are the last truly beautiful public service announcements.

Chinese streets have sported organised public messages for centuries. During the Zhou Period (1027-221 BC; the earliest recorded period), local officials frequently posted announcements on tax collection and grain harvest in public spaces, and methods of mass communication grew increasingly sophisticated. Mao published his first essay in the Chinese Communist Party's *New Youth* broadsheet in 1917. During the chaotic 1920s, as the country struggled to regain its footing following the fall of the Qing Dynasty, public broadsheets utilising a new, pared-down Chinese vernacular filled the streets and became the preferred mode of public discourse for many influential intellectuals.

Chinese orthography, once an incomprehensible mesh of lines and pictographs beyond the reach of most citizens, suddenly spilled out into the public domain. To write effectively of social problems, to air grievances, to explore leadership, to probe poetry and address an ever-expanding readership: all this was suddenly possible for the writing class whose ideas would change the nation. Simple and spirited language became a crucial means of cultural navigation in a country torn by civil war, Japanese invasion, Soviet manipulation, European trade interests and not a few episodes of famine. To write clear forceful messages in widely distributed broadsheets was to reach an otherwise bewildered readership.

Following the CCP's rise to power, the usefulness and comprehensibility of the Chinese language remained a central concern. Frustrated by still-high illiteracy rates, Communist officials in the early period of the People's Republic toyed with the idea of scrapping Mandarin and rendering the language in a Romanised, but no more familiar, alphabet. Ultimately, in 1950, Mao led the drive to simplify the characters, bringing *jiantizi* – the blocky, reduced characters now common throughout the mainland – into being. (That Taiwan, the old bastion of the Nationalist Party, has adhered rigorously to the traditional characters continues to drive a political, social and cultural wedge between the island and its giant neighbour.)

The chalkboards as we now know them started appearing in 1958, around the time of the first major drive toward organised agricultural communes in China. Huge, florid messages appeared above head height in public kitchens and canteens. But as the Great Leap Forward came around, bringing tremendous famine and


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an estimated death toll of 30 million, the chalk for the boards became more a part of people's diets than a Party communication tool. Starving Chinese preferred to crush pilfered sticks into their morning gruel rather than waste them on public messages.

The chalkboards enjoyed a renaissance during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76. Big character posters and chalkboards denounced capitalist running dogs, while espousing Mao Zedong's thought in loud characters. And paint became the new chalk. Often, these screaming statements were painted late into the night inside long-abandoned schools, students overrunning the empty space with buckets of paint, reams of cheap newsprint, bags of chicken feet for sustenance and clandestine romances for inspiration. It was, by all accounts, a heady, terrifying time where language remained supreme. To mistakenly slap down the wrong character, to accidentally denounce the wrong comrade in bold black paint, would mean certain persecution. Though the game changed, these rules held true through the major reform-era protests of 1978, 1987 and 1989.

Today, familiarity with Mandarin Chinese remains the key to cracking China. They say you need to know about 3,000 characters to read a Chinese newspaper unhampered. (It's an important activity in a place where stirrings in the press bear ever more curious relations to stirrings in the general public. China has cultivated increasingly free media in which incidences of unrest and social problems are being covered. Reading the papers, especially titles such as *Southern Weekend* or *Beijing Youth Daily*, gives a very good sense of what is going on in the country; this never used to be the case.) The intensity of the chalkboard campaigns has certainly lessened in recent decades, but the boards remain in use, regularly wiped and updated.

In a country where language remains so celebrated and feared, public chalkboards sometimes appear to have floated into modern China as if bearing lost messages from the past. They wear their characters proudly, with a confidence that recalls a time when just a few posted characters could change the course of the nation. Perhaps they still can.

In his comparative analysis of 1990s political behaviour in Beijing, Tianjian Shi writes, "The propaganda machine used by the regime to socialize people to conform to the party line can no longer prevent people from getting involved in semi-legal, elite-challenging political acts." That is, methods of mass expression for public control are becoming more and more unwieldy; orchestrating monolithic meanings for unmediated mass consumption is no longer feasible. Chalk cannot stand up to broadband. What are we left with? Perhaps new possibilities are afoot, new thoughts emerging in art's public space in China. With time, the boards may morph entirely, the messages falling away as space for leaner creativity emerges. Or the words could remain much the same, but find themselves ever more tightly enmeshed in, and overwhelmed by, the images that accompany them.

Kunming is the capital of Yunnan province in southwest China, bordering Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. The 40-hour train ride from Beijing arrives in Kunming by noon on the third day, providing plenty of time to stroll the city's cracked and watery streets.

Kunming's boards are slower than those in Beijing, unable to keep up with the changing winds of political campaigns. They feature, instead, the long-running messages of the Party. "One family, one child." "Love your country; love the environment." The characters are often rendered in a mix of paint and chalk, presumably to provide further protection against the constant rain.

Around the corner from one of China's best French cafés, the Blue White Red (where crepes are exquisitely thin and glasses of good red go for a dollar each), a neighbourhood committee member was touching up an extra-large chalkboard. Fitting all the characters of the complex, droning announcement on the board consumed too much space to allow for any extra decorative touches. I asked him about the text.

"This is a notice on government housing regulations in this area," he said. "Some people are not obeying them here."

I asked how the message would be received. "A few people will notice, but most will just walk by. It's just some government words. But it's my job in the neighbourhood committee to write this."

I asked him what exactly his job title was. "Beautiful pen," he responded with a sniff. He was growing tense. Who was this foreign woman? I decided to ask his name.

"What is this all about? What do you need that for?" he demanded. I smiled and asked him his name again. "Forget it," he said. "I am no longer happy with you."

He returned to his compact white characters.