

China divided: HUANGJUEPING'S HOPEFUL SPLASH OF COLOR

Photographs and words

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I had been in China for two weeks when I watched, horrified, as three villagers tortured a small dog -- presumably with the belief it would yield better-tasting meat. Two held down the black dog as the third slowly inserted a wire deep into its rectum. As it yelped in agony, they laughed, kicking another dog in the face as it tried to impede them. Although equally appalled, my Canadian companion put it to me straight, "You can't expect them to have any respect for animals or animal rights when the people hardly have any rights themselves." The Chinese people suffered like that little black dog, agonizing for years under an unyielding, torturous dictatorship. Although the harsh red regime had been dissolved for decades, the resulting scars are thick.

Over a month later, my time in China was (thankfully) coming to an end. I had spent weeks surrounded by faceless strangers showing few smiles, and in that sea of millions, the mentality of every-man-for-himself prevailed -- a survival tactic no doubt required during the country's recent past. I decided to spend my last few days away from the grit, the dirt, loud noises, and overcrowding of the streets. The plan: to cruise for three days on the waters of Asia's longest river, the Yangtze; to replace buildings with mountains, people with trees and the sound of cars with lapping waves.

The cruise departed from Chongqing, a small city in southwestern China's spicy Sichuan Province.

Chongqing was bleak; dirty, polluted and overpopulated, yet lonely. Buildings were endlessly stacked on top of and flush against one another. The sky, never blue, created a thick brownish-yellow blanket over the city. People spat everywhere, on the ground, on poles, on other people's feet, on their own feet. Produce unfit to sell and placed in garbage bags on the street was rummaged and ransacked, spilling rotten lettuce leaves across the sidewalk just long enough for someone to spit on or grasp at. No matter what time of day, it was grey. The lifeless color permeated my disposition resulting in various shades of depression. I spent two days holed away in my room, unable to face the grimness of the city outside and mourning the future of humanity. Eventually, a South African woman named Lynn asked me to accompany her to Huangjueping, "this place totally covered in street art". Curious to see what spray painted rebellion from a heavily censored country looked like, I joined her outing to Chongqing's Jiulongpo District.

Lynn had not exaggerated. For 1.25 kilometers between the Huangjueping Railway Hospital and the 501 Art Gallery -- the largest stretch of graffiti street art

in the world -- nearly every building was covered in color. In a surprisingly government sanctioned project aimed at upgrading the area's environment and economy, 800 artists had splashed over 12.5 tons of much-needed hue across Huangjueping. Shops and apartment buildings were plastered from top-to-bottom with bright cartoons of animals, designs and murals. It was not the rebellious street art I was expecting, but I was thankful for the dose of creativity and the vibrant dash of individuality. For the first time in days, I smiled. For the first time in days, I took pictures.

Toward the end of the street, the 501 Art Gallery's unassuming exterior has an open door. Inside, warehouse-sized gallery walls displayed student work ranging from realism to abstract and a few students sat diligently in front of easels. Across the street, a more traditional piece of street art depicting a firefox, a man and the words "I'm back" stretched across the bricked wall. However, my favorite discovery along the tattooed stretch -- of which a photograph of hangs in my living room -- was painted on a small crumbling wall near a bend at the end of the road. Within the grey city of a scarred country, the bright, vivid colors of its pink, orange and yellow mural stood out. Its four powerful words read, "I Have a Dream", and for the first time in weeks, I felt hopeful.

PLACES

Top, left and right: Colorful cartoons covering apartment buildings at the beginning of the Huangjueping Arts District.

Bottom, right: Brick wall mural across from the art gallery.

Bottom, left: The provocative and bold mural found at the end of the Huangjueping Main Street.

