



“People want good graffiti”: Tensions, contradictions, and everyday politics surrounding graffiti in Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract

Graffiti has become an omnipresent feature of urban landscapes, with sprawling words and images on public and private surfaces triggering heated debates on the meaning, implications, and legality of these urban inscriptions. Yet, to date, there has been little academic research conducted on graffiti and street art in the Asian context, and none that we could find on the burgeoning scene in Vietnam. In the context of a socialist state, with little tolerance for public dissent, we investigate how, and by whom, graffiti is created, and to what degree it transgresses public space norms in the country's capital city, Hanoi. We analyse how young graffiti writers negotiate the social, physical, and cultural boundaries which serve as either deterrents or catalysts for graffiti creation, and consider whether strategies of compliance or everyday resistance are employed in order to create their work. With the effects that globalisation and urbanisation have had on the Asian region, and the tactics citizens employ to negotiate state-imposed censorship and restraints having been studied closely, we position our work within these broader debates.

KEYWORDS

ethnography, everyday politics, graffiti, Hanoi, Vietnam, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

The sun beats down on the bustling streets of Hanoi's Old Quarter, a touristic neighbourhood lined with traditional shop-houses. A roll-up door covered in a collection of tags serves as the backdrop for a discussion between a street vendor and customer over the price of fresh pineapple. From observations around Hanoi, it is clear that graffiti, in the shape of tags, throws, and pieces, has become an omnipresent feature. This would be unsurprising in many other cities around the world, but our interest was piqued by the fact that this is a socialist state where the central regime is known to closely monitor public space use, while relentlessly pushing a “civilised city” discourse (Coe, 2015). “Tags” – often executed quickly in mono-colour with spray paint or paint marker – are the most prevalent and fundamental form of graffiti in Hanoi (and worldwide), a stylised signature that engraves a writer's chosen name on the urban landscape (Brewer & Miller, 1990). Larger “throws” are slightly more time-consuming outlines of a writer's name in bubble-style letters, often using two contrasting colours for outline and fill, while “pieces” involve intricate designs including cartoon-like characters, three-dimensional effects, and colour transitions and can take several hours to complete (Macdonald, 2001). These

sprawling words and images serve as an entry point for our investigation into the relationships between space, aesthetics, and politics in Vietnam's capital city (Figure 1).

Hanoi's landscape has undergone rapid transformations since the implementation of *Đổi Mới* socio-economic reforms began in 1986 (Geertman and Le Quynh Chi, 2010). These reforms shifted the country towards a market-oriented economy, while the political sphere remained firmly socialist (Drummond, 2000). These economic reforms affected every aspect of social life, transforming Vietnam "from a relatively closed society with a centrally planned economy to a rapidly urbanising one with a globalising cultural outlook" (Drummond & Thomas, 2003, p. 1; see also Koh, 2006; London, 2014). Although no official cultural policies accompanied this shift, the government allowed for a greater degree of personal freedom as a result of increased foreign influence and to attract foreign investment (Diamond, 2012). This freedom, however, remained bounded by the government's anxious censorship and surveillance to forestall the "menace of foreign cultural pollution" (Diamond, 2012, p. 65).

Studying graffiti in such a context offers insights into how urban space has "become emblematic of changing discourses of individual rights, urban aesthetics, and the practice of citizenship" (Lee, 2013, p. 304). Graffiti is argued to serve as an aesthetic representation of the self, "a visible element in the formation of urban ... subjectivities", even if its creators are embedded in state-imposed "moral and cultural frameworks" (Lee, 2013, pp. 307, 311). Notwithstanding the influence of predetermined rules and ways of being, this understanding of graffiti emphasises that "there is a point and purpose behind what graffiti writers do" (Macdonald, 2001, p. 2).

Graffiti and street art in Asia has received limited scholarly attention, and we have found no literature on Vietnam's burgeoning scene. However, the effects of globalisation and urbanisation, and the tactics citizens employ to negotiate state-imposed censorship and restraints have been studied, positioning this paper within broader conceptual debates. In the context of a socialist state, with little tolerance for public dissent and where urban spaces are subjected to state surveillance and the enforcement of "order" (Koh, 2006), we wanted to find out how and by whom graffiti is created, and to what degree it can transgress public space norms in the country's capital city. By transgress, we mean public behaviour going against the assumed and normalised rules of a given space, thereby infringing or violating the status quo (Cresswell, 1996). In the context of Hanoi, these normalised rules are defined by the party-state and encompass strict policies for the planning and everyday use of public space (Geertman et al., 2016; Koh, 2006). These uphold a state-endorsed development discourse for the city to become ever more "green, clean, civilised, and modern" (*xanh, sạch, văn minh, hiện đại*) (Coe, 2015; Turner et al., 2021).

By exploring the motivations behind the creation of graffiti and street art in Hanoi, we aim to determine how places are understood and contested by young graffiti writers in this political context. We begin by outlining and situating our conceptual framework within debates raised by graffiti in the broader Asia region, and state regulation of contemporary



FIGURE 1 Throw on Private House in Tây Hồ District. Photo by Michelle Kee

art in Hanoi. We then analyse the motivations and tactics used by graffiti writers in Hanoi to create their visual messages, noting differences between local and foreign artists, before focusing on how these tactics can be considered forms of compliance or resistance.

Fieldwork for this study was completed in summer 2019. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 33 individuals: 19 graffiti writers; five key informants from organisations involved in public art projects in Hanoi; and ten urban residents not associated with the graffiti subculture (to gain insights into public attitudes and perceptions). Twelve graffiti writers were Vietnamese and identified as male, aged between 17 and 32. One considered street art their full-time job, frequently painting commissioned pieces for cafés and bars, with the others considering it a hobby or passion. We also interviewed seven expatriate or foreign writers who identified as male, aged between 22 and 35. Interviews often lasted over an hour, conducted in English, or in Vietnamese with an interpreter.

2 | CONCEPTUALISING GRAFFITI AND TRANSGRESSIONS IN EAST ASIA

In 1974, Ley and Cybriwsky analysed graffiti as an expression of territorial markers in Philadelphia. “Wall-marking,” they suggested, “permits inner city teenagers who are denied access to legitimate mastery over space, to claim control of a more ephemeral and chimeric nature” as “each makes a public claim to space through an open declaration on the walls” (1974, pp. 495, 504). Cresswell (1992) furthered these ideas in his analysis of media and government reactions to graffiti in New York City, suggesting that graffiti is a transgressive reclamation of space. This transgressive character, Cresswell argued, “lies in [graffiti’s] refusal to comply with its context; it does not respect the laws of place which tell us what is and what is not appropriate” (1992, p. 337). By rooting graffiti debates in discussions of transgressions, these contributions highlighted how graffiti upsets the geographical doxa, or the unquestioned and assumed structures that govern everyday actions.

While the conceptualisation of graffiti as a form of transgression and contentious political participation is founded in contemporary Western graffiti culture (Pan, 2015), Lee’s (2013) ethnographic work on graffiti in Indonesia contends that, in contrast to perceptions of graffiti as abnormal and transgressive in the Euro-American context, a history of official painted signs on urban walls helps to naturalise the presence of graffiti in Indonesian cities. This raises interesting possible parallels with the Vietnam case, given Vietnam’s history of propaganda murals in public spaces. Lee adds that Indonesian street art has entered the mainstream as a highly technologised cultural trend, being more a reflection of the country’s political deregulation and loosening of central control than an expression of class-based youth resistance.

Investigations of graffiti and contested uses of public space in contemporary China (Pan, 2015), Hong Kong (Valjakka, 2010), and Singapore (Chang, 2018) complement these findings by highlighting important citizen–state dynamics. Pan (2015) finds a less confrontational attitude towards graffiti in China than in the West. The Chinese public, she argues, often see graffiti “as something novel or even mysterious” rather than problematic (2015, p. 139), while the state has even co-opted graffiti as a solution: the visual marker of an “open and tolerant society” (2015, p. 143). Echoing this idea, Valjakka contends that by selectively accepting graffiti, Hong Kong’s “officials are promoting a more flexible and tolerant image of themselves regarding self-expression and urban youth cultures” (2010, p. 84). Nonetheless, the precise form and content of “state-approved” graffiti reflects a pragmatic attitude, with Chang noting with regards to Singapore that “as long as art is aesthetically pleasing and serves a positive purpose, it is permissible” (2018, p. 1055). Graffiti with overt political denunciations in China or Singapore rarely exists and is swiftly erased when it surfaces (Pan, 2015).

With no scholarly attention paid to graffiti or street art in Vietnam, we ground our analysis in the broader Asian context, drawing particularly on research regarding China, given political regime similarities. Long-standing advertising and propaganda practices in China and Vietnam create an urban visual context that provides graffiti with quite different entry points than in the West. For example, 拆迁 signs (Eng: demolition) are commonly painted on walls in Chinese cities advertising small demolition businesses, also reflecting the sheer scope and pace of urban renewal and redevelopment projects underway (Pan, 2015). These wall markings resemble the colourful stencilled wall inscriptions, *KH Cắt Bê Tông* [Eng: drilling and cutting concrete], found across Vietnam’s urban landscape advertising small-scale demolition services (Figure 2). Political public writing, notably state propaganda, is also prevalent in Chinese and Vietnamese cities. Wall writing has therefore long been integral to urban public life and, as in Indonesia (Lee, 2013), underpins public and even official perceptions of graffiti, distinct from those in the West. Numerous urban renewal projects in Chinese and Vietnamese cities have also provided abundant half-demolished or abandoned urban structures, supplying graffiti writers “many opportunities to slip in their pieces among these urban ruins” (2013, p. 28).



FIGURE 2 KH Cát Bê Tông and Tags in Hoàn Kiếm District, Hanoi. Photo by Michelle Kee

Valjakka (2010, p. 84) has argued that most graffiti writers in China deliberately avoid creating graffiti as a political statement or transgressive act, hence their motivations are quite different from the majority of graffiti writers in the West. In landscapes where urban public space is subject to scrutiny and control, the aim of graffiti – for some – moves from rebellion and transgression towards the beautification of the environment, with a new generation of writers in China mainly using “the walls as a canvas for artistic self-expression” (2010, p. 75). This draws on the concept of site-responsiveness, whereby “street art responds to the environment of a city inasmuch as it partakes in the creation of visual culture” (2010, p. 255). This is a fairly controversial argument that requires further scrutiny in the Vietnamese context. Drawing on the conceptual debates outlined above, we are thus interested in whether graffiti writers in Hanoi create their work as transgressive acts of resistance, or whether they consider themselves improving the city’s aesthetics. We also want to delve into state reactions to determine whether graffiti is a fairly accepted art form, as suggested in some writings on China, Singapore, and Indonesia, or whether the typical reaction of Western officials and public normative assumptions are more common in the Hanoi context.

Although Vietnam has opened its economy following a stricter socialist period, its social and political realms remain subject to “a dated yet effective communist matrix of control” which extends to the media and art spheres (Kerkvliet, 2019; Libby, 2011, p. 209). All public art exhibitions must obtain an official permit from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, which vets and censors any content deemed to contradict the state’s values and interests (notably works critiquing the state or featuring nudity or sexuality) (Libby, 2011). However, this censorship is often disorganised, allowing artists to carefully navigate it by creating works that are subtly subversive. While other forms of expression are rigidly censored, the conceptual and abstract nature of contemporary art has created an environment where, some argue, “the contemporary artist in Vietnam is freer to examine and question his [*sic*] society than a writer, activist, politician or journalist” (2011, p. 213). Yet even for contemporary artists, knowing which boundaries to push, and which to comply with, is essential to navigate state censorship (Kerkvliet, 2019; Libby, 2011). Given the Vietnamese state’s ongoing attention to public dissent, the potential and subtle ways that graffiti might be utilised to extend boundaries of contemporary art are an important consideration in this study (see also Lombard, 2013).

3 | GRAFFITI AND HANOI: SELF-EXPRESSION AND THE STATE RESPONSE

The graffiti writers we interviewed drew on varying creative strategies. Some focused on producing commissioned and legal street art pieces, while others preferred to go “bombing,” illegally covering multiple surfaces with quickly executed throws. Practices also varied across the city, responding to local socio-spatial circumstances and attitudes toward graffiti. Most writers preferred to tag or create quick throw ups in the Old Quarter given the busyness and high presence of ward officials there, making more time-consuming works difficult (Iz, local writer).¹ Larger and more detailed pieces were generally produced in Tây Hồ, a fairly upmarket area with expatriate and diplomatic accommodation, where a number of condominium construction sites resulted in abundant corrugated iron fences (Figure 3). In this area, and on such surfaces, it appears that graffiti was viewed as more socially acceptable (Meva, local).

When speaking about his creation strategies, Zeph (local) explained:

Vietnamese [graffiti writers] aren't naughty ... it always depends on attitude and the place, always on the place. And it's about quality, if the quality is good, even for bombing, even for throw ups – with good colours, people like it. I saw people with a throw up in front of their house, taking pictures. It was chrome and fine line, beautiful, it was okay [for the owners].

Then again, Nyet (local) emphasised that he tended to avoid private property altogether, stating that he did not “see the point in going out to paint throw ups that people don't appreciate, it's too expensive ... I'd prefer to save to buy more paint and do a beautiful piece that people won't hate.” Indeed, all Vietnamese writer interviewees noted that paint was expensive (about VND85,000–90,000 [~US\$3.50–4.00] a can), with Zaers – recognised as one of the pioneer graffiti writers in Hanoi – estimating that a large detailed piece cost around VND2,000,000 (US\$85).

All the Vietnamese writers we interviewed spoke of finding freedom through graffiti creation, with it allowing them to engage in artistic self-expression and break from the rigid rules and regulations they associated with the mainstream art world. Donr, a local artist, talked of graffiti as a way of “finding freedom.” Another local, Iz, echoed this sentiment:

I define my art as something you can find chill in ... There's a lot of pressure already, so why make my art another one ... why not make a place where you can just sit down, look at some beautiful art, smoke a cigarette and chill? That'd be better for everyone.

Despite Vietnamese graffiti writers framing their work in positive ways, it did not always have a positive reception. As local artist Zaers remarked: “Vietnam society isn't open like in the West. Graffiti is about freedom, and this is very



FIGURE 3 Piece in Tây Hồ District, Hanoi. Photo by Sarah Turner

opposite to the system in Vietnam.” Local artists explained that they therefore tried to keep their graffiti as inoffensive as possible; “we’re already painting illegally somewhere, so we don’t touch politics” (Zeph, local).

The discourse of expatriate graffiti writers differed in a number of respects. Although expatriate writers also spoke of graffiti as a form of self-expression, few defined their works as primarily artistic. “It’s like an addiction,” foreign writer Daes explained; “after a week, it’s almost like I haven’t done it at all. It’ll lose its newness and I’ll have to do more.” Vietnamese writers explained that they became frustrated when their work was either “crossed” (painted over by another writer) or “buffed” (removed by locals or authorities) as they had spent substantial time and resources on its creation. To avoid this, many Vietnamese writers tried to cater to the public’s taste as a means of remaining “up” (visible), being careful with the kinds of graffiti they created and where, so as not to provoke its removal. In comparison, expatriate writers such as Daes and Ouzo spoke of the minimal buffing in Hanoi with a degree of boredom. “I wish they kind of buffed more, to be honest,” Daes exclaimed. He added that the lack of buffing “alters the game,” changing the unspoken rules, since there ceases to be a need to paint in order to remain visible in the city. “I’m getting bored painting here,” Ouzo commented, “there’s not enough excitement, the cops don’t care or stop you.” For thrill-seeking foreign writers, Hanoi lacked the adrenaline rush they sought from doing graffiti back home. “The rules in Asia are definitely different than the traditional rules of graffiti, especially if you’re a foreigner. You kind of get a free pass as long as you don’t cross any hard lines” (Daes, foreigner).

Despite this desire for more excitement, many foreign writers reported a change in their mentality regarding graffiti since arriving in Asia. Daes explained: “The massively different culture makes it a kind of neutral ground; it definitely mellows people out. Everyone’s so different, even guys that I can tell would’ve been d**ks back home.” He added that when he was younger he “was looking for beef, and got into fights over it, but now it’s kind of like ... I try and be a lot more respectful, I’m not coming at it like that towards other writers here.” Foreign writers whose practices centred essentially on bombing reflected that they had gained an appreciation for the more artistic side of graffiti, despite not giving it much thought in the past.

3.1 | State sanctions

Of the 12 Vietnamese graffiti writers interviewed, only two had never been caught and punished by local Hanoi authorities or private security guards. Rakt, one of these two, explained that he only painted “walls that are old and dirty” and made sure to create beautiful works (7 August 2019). He added that people “see a lot of dirty bombing in the streets, and they don’t like this kind of graffiti ... they want nice colours, nice flow, ones that take time.” Seus, the other Vietnamese artist to have avoided trouble with authorities, echoed this sentiment. “There are two kinds of graffiti,” he explained, “vandalism, which is underground, dirty graffiti, and artistic graffiti, which is above ground, clean, and artistic. Police care about the vandalism style,” but not, he added, about artistic graffiti that he defined as attempting to cater to the themes of the place and desires of local residents (Figure 4).

The other active Vietnamese writers had all been caught by private security guards or ward police. Nonetheless, Zaers emphasised that he had only been caught when he was younger, and not since he had become more focused on the artistic side of graffiti. Despite most local writers having had confrontations with an authority figure, these encounters did not always lead to a fine or arrest. Writers explained that it was easy to evade punishment by running away, negotiating with the authorities, or paying a bribe. When speaking of his Vietnamese writer friends, foreigner Bal noted that when they got caught “nothing happened to them ... one of my friends, I think a security guard caught him, and he said ‘oh I’m so sorry, I’ll go buy some paint and paint over my piece,’ and then he just bounced [ran away].”

Although no one we interviewed knew of a specific policy regarding graffiti, writers in a documentary on graffiti in Vietnam, *Spray It, Don’t Say It* (2011), mentioned being charged for “illegal advertising” and fined about VND200,000 [~US\$8.50] (Nam Phung, 2011, n.p.). Another graffiti writer in the documentary mentioned being fined the same amount for “dirtying the wall;” similar to being charged for littering (Nam Phung, 2011, n.p.). This documentary, our interviewees, and an extensive policy search revealed no specific law or municipal policy regarding graffiti in Hanoi. Instead, the punishments writers had received were for other misdemeanours, including illegal advertising, dirtying a wall, or incorrect motorbike parking. These were determined on a case-by-case basis, often through negotiations between writers, security guards, and local authorities.

Vietnamese interviewees estimated that when fined, they paid around VND1–2 million [~US\$42–150]. Local writer Zeph recounted a story of a drunken police officer who apprehend him and three friends for doing graffiti. “We had to write a paper about how sorry we were for being there. But in the police station there were two opinions – one opinion



FIGURE 4 Tags in the Old Quarter, Hanoi. Photo by Michelle Kee

was ‘ok, there’s no crime’ – because we were painting a music scene with a cat playing a guitar, it was so cute. So half the police said ‘ok, let them go’, but the drunken policeman tried to show off his power.” Eventually, the writers were collectively fined VND1,500,000 (~US\$64.50) for parking illegally and Zeph’s motorbike licence was briefly seized. Meanwhile, when local police caught local writer Iz, he explained, “I had to sit in the station for two or three hours until my dad could come pick me up and I had to apologise.” He added that if one is caught painting a private wall, “you’ll often have to paint it back to the original colour. I’ve done that twice – painted over my own work as public service.”

Only one foreign writer, Stryk, mentioned being apprehended by ward officials, including one instance when he was caught and beaten by officials. All the other foreign writers remarked how local authorities rarely paid attention to them, although most had been chased or yelled at by local residents, especially when painting on private property. Despite such altercations, all the writers noted that curiosity about their work was a far more common response than confrontations or disapproval. “It’s so different,” Daes (foreigner) noted, comparing people’s reactions to him painting in Hanoi with those in his home country:

It blows their mind, the concept of having a passion that would cost me so much money while they’re still trying to survive. They just think the joke’s on me, like we’re going to arrest him for that? What’s he doing, this guy needs mental help or something, I don’t know. It’s just a total different way of thinking.

4 | SOCIO-SPATIAL EVERYDAY POLITICS

During fieldwork it became evident that the more “destructive” graffiti practices sometimes found in the West, centring around overt vandalism and illegality (Lachmann, 1988; Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974), had been modified and/or censored by Vietnamese and foreign writers alike in Hanoi. This was demonstrated by many writers’ avoidance of private property, including easy targets like steel roll-up doors that often front private shops or houses, and the writers’ concerns with creating artistic pieces that the general public would appreciate. Wesa, a foreign writer, explained that he shunned painting on private roll-up doors to avoid upsetting local property owners: “I used to paint garage shutters [roll-up doors] but I don’t really anymore. I thought they were shops, but I realise now that they’re the front of people’s homes too, so I don’t want to paint there.” These socio-spatial negotiations of self-censorship and site selection were conducted to prevent officials and urban residents forming negative perceptions of graffiti, since acts considered to be vandalism could put writers at risk of punishment. Foreign writer Daes explained that the criteria for what “crosses the line” in Vietnam depended on how the act was perceived, “and graffiti could definitely cross it [if considered anti-state], so you do have to play the game to some degree.” Other writers, such as local Zaers, explained that when he painted he tried to “make a kind of gift

for the space, for people and the space,” hence complying with expectations from the general public and authorities to create “beautiful works,” and hence not straying too far from the state discourse to make Hanoi “green, clean, civilised, and modern.” By modifying their behaviour from the subculture’s Western-based transgressive ‘norms’, writers in Hanoi reworked their approach to – at least partly – evade censorship.

Ben Kerkvliet’s work on everyday politics is useful here in interpreting the actions of graffiti writers in the city. Kerkvliet defines “everyday politics” as: “people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules ... and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct” (2009, p. 232). He proposes everyday politics be divided into four categories: “support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance” (2009, p. 233). It could be argued – despite the lack of specific anti-graffiti policies – that each time a writer ventures out to do graffiti on the streets of Hanoi, they engage in everyday politics by contesting and adjusting the rules and norms of public space (Kerkvliet, 2009). More specifically, graffiti writers’ avoidance of certain areas and surfaces, such as private roll-up doors, the frequency with which they ask for permission or avoid private property altogether, and their tendency towards artistic pieces rather than tags and throws, are all *modifications* that writers made to be able to continue their work. For example, to gain favour with local residents and ensure the longevity of his practice, local writer Rakt explained that he made sure to paint colourful, artistic pieces, adding “people want good graffiti, not dirty.” Hanoi’s graffiti writers – both local and foreigners – thus modified how they interacted with those they encountered while painting, and the ways by which they went about painting. Writers noted that they also presented graffiti as a form of “harmless” urban beautification when conversing with members of the general public, thereby distancing their practices from the subcultures’ oft-assumed destructive roots. Turning to political scientist James C. Scott’s notions of public and private transcripts, these actions by graffiti writers could be considered performances “shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful” and done out of prudence, fear, or to show subservience to societal norms (Scott, 1990, pp. 2, 3). This public transcript, or “impression management in power-laden situations,” is “one of the key survival skills of subordinate groups” and a form of everyday compliance (1990, p. 3). This tactic allowed graffiti writers to continue painting, shifting the public’s understanding of graffiti towards one of beautification and artistic expression, with graffiti writers able to “secure space and ... express their interests and identities” in Hanoi’s regulated urban spaces (Geertman et al., 2016, p. 608).

When writing about graffiti in Singapore, Chang noted that graffiti writers were “going legal as a way to prolong their practice without being criminalized” (2018, p. 246). While the writers we spoke with in Hanoi were not altering their practices to the same degree, they were certainly modifying their actions, while moving away from the transgressive norms of Western graffiti subculture. These modifications, such as self-censorship, site selection, and the reframing of graffiti to comply with local expectations, both contest and comply with people’s understanding of the il/legality of graffiti, calling into question what is, and what is not acceptable (Scott, 1990, p. 3). By modifying graffiti practices and contesting normalised rules of public space usage in Vietnam, graffiti writers “affirm their claims to what they believe they are entitled to,” namely the freedom of artistic expression (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 233). “We can do better than just trying to go against the government,” local writer Iz asserted; “maybe it’s more of a statement to say we’re still here, we’re still doing art, even if you oppress us, we still make it, because that’s what we’re good at, and it’s how we are free.”

5 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The perceived freedom that comes with writing graffiti appeared to be an essential motivating force behind its existence in Hanoi, with the creation of tags, throws, and pieces all part of writers’ developing their self-expression and identity (Valjakka, 2010). In Vietnam, where “the push and pull between modernity and Confucian and communist traditionalism can be felt in every corner” of society – with these values reinforced by state discourse, censorship, and surveillance – artistic self-expression, especially in public spaces, is no small feat (Libby, 2011, p. 210). In this context, both local and foreign writers have consciously modified “typical” transgressions of the Western graffiti subculture to retain access to the city’s walls and their ability to create. Thus, while many writers argued that their ultimate goal of creating graffiti was freedom, as “graffiti is the symbol for the free and the brave” (Zaers, local), the reality of its creation in Hanoi appears to be a carefully negotiated everyday politics that pushes the boundaries of what is socially acceptable and tolerated by local authorities, but not too much.

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Participants of this study did not consent to their data being shared publicly.

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ENDNOTE

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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