Article

Creative hubs in Hanoi, Vietnam: Transgressive spaces in a socialist state?

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Abstract

Vietnam's capital city has recently witnessed the emergence of a new type of cultural space akin to what have been labelled creative hubs in other contexts: that is, locales that foster creation, collaboration, community engagement and business development in the cultural sector. During the 2010s, Hanoi saw a proliferation of small-scale, art-oriented creative hubs, most of them community-led and developed without state funding. In a context marked by a government historically wary of contemporary and experimental arts, these spaces face various forms of state control ranging from the censorship of events, to stiff fines or even closure. Despite these barriers, creative hubs have become important sites for the gathering and formation of Hanoi's contemporary arts scene and countercultures. Based on over 80 interviews conducted in 2019, this paper investigates the motives behind the rise of these spaces in Hanoi and the political engagement techniques their founders, operators and users employ to remain in operation. Drawing on the notion of 'informal life politics', we argue that creative hubs seek to provide spaces of (partial) autonomy from governmentality in Hanoi. We further find that artists, intellectuals and other creative individuals use these spaces to challenge state controls. They do so not by lobbying formal institutions for policy changes, but instead by enacting the more open and free socio-cultural milieu they seek, from the bottom up.

Keywords

creative hubs, cultural spaces, Hanoi, informal politics, resistance, Vietnam

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摘要

越南首都最近见证了一种新型文化空间的出现，类似于在其他情况下被称为创意中心的地方：即促进文化领域的创造、合作、社区参与和商业开发的场所。在 2010 年代，河内经历了以艺术为导向的小型创意中心的激增，其中大多数是由社会主导的，并没有国家的资助。在政府历来对当代和实验艺术持谨慎态度的背景下，这些空间面临着各种形式的国家控制，从事件审查到严厉罚款甚至关闭。尽管存在这些障碍，创意中心已成为河内当代艺术场景和反主流文化聚集和形成的重要场所。基于 2019 年进行的 80 多次访谈，本文研究河内这些空间兴起的动机，以及它们的创始人、运营商和用户为保持运营而采用的政治对话技巧。借鉴"非正规生活政治"的概念，我们认为创意中心寻求在河内提供（部分）自治的空间。我们进一步发现艺术家、知识分子和其他创意人士利用这些空间来挑战国家控制。为达此目的，他们不是通过游说正式机构来改变政策，而是自下而上地开创他们寻求的更开放和自由的社会文化环境。

关键词

创意中心、文化空间、河内、非正规政治、抵抗、越南

Introduction

A new type of cultural space is on the rise in the Vietnamese capital city. Over the last decade and a half, Hanoi has witnessed a multiplication of small-scale locales dedicated to creative activities. These 'creative spaces' (*không gian sáng tạo*), as they are called in Vietnam, share key characteristics with creative hubs documented in other contexts (e.g. Gill et al., 2019; Virani, 2015). That is to say, Hanoi's creative spaces gather creative activities and people in one place; they act as local nodes in their respective sectors; and they support their members through information exchanges as well as mutual social support (Pratt, 2021; Virani, 2015).

Hanoi is not the only city within East and South-east Asia to be experiencing a rapid emergence of creative hubs. Over the last two decades, other large cities in the region have seen the formation of a variety of creative hubs, districts and clusters (e.g. Hee et al., 2008; Huabcharoen and Ellsmore, 2017; Kong, 2012). While the scholarship on creative spaces in the region has expanded rapidly over the last decade, it has remained predominantly focused on the relationships of these new spaces with creative city policies adopted by national and local governments. This policy lens is important. It has contributed notably to revealing how governments in the region are trying to put creative spaces in the service of city branding and economic development (e.g. Kong, 2012; O'Connor and Gu, 2014). It has also brought to light tensions around gentrification, commodification and social exclusion generated by the implementing of creative policies (Hee et al., 2008; Lin and Chiu, 2019). A focus on policy, however, has left the discourses and actions of the individuals who run and use creative spaces in the region largely unattended, along with the roles of these spaces in ongoing socio-cultural and socio-political urban transformation processes.

This paper begins to fill this gap by exploring the emergence of Hanoi's creative hubs from the viewpoint of the individuals who have established, run, and use them. We further situate the rise of creative spaces in Hanoi within the particular socio-political context of urban Vietnam, one marked by the absence (up to very recently) of state-

directed creative city policies and by a government historically wary of contemporary and experimental arts. Taking inspiration from Pratt et al. (2019: 8), we ask: 'What are creative hubs the answer to' in Hanoi? More specifically: What triggered their emergence during the 2000s? What are the motivations and aspirations of their founders, operators and users? And how do they navigate the Vietnamese state's conservative cultural policy and repressive governing practices?

This paper answers these questions by conceptualising Hanoi's creative hubs as instances of what Morris-Suzuki (2017) has called 'informal life politics' (or 'living politics'). Moving away from Western-derived notions of civil society, the concept of informal life politics refers to a form of political engagement wherein groups of people try to address a particular issue, not by protesting or lobbying formal political institutions for policy changes and action, but by trying to reshape their own life and milieu. In conceptualising Hanoi's hubs as living politics, this study responds to calls to broaden the research on creative hubs beyond the Global West and to provide more situated accounts of the ways in which these formations interact with their socio-normative and socio-political milieu (Dinardi, 2019; Pratt, 2021; Pratt et al., 2019). The case of Hanoi's hubs further contributes to the research on the less visible aspects of urban politics in Vietnam.

Our analysis draws upon a case study of 10 creative hubs active in Hanoi between 2009 and 2019. Based on recent mappings of Vietnam's creative spaces (Truong Uyen Ly, 2014, 2018), we selected a cross-cutting sample of spaces in terms of sizes, foci and periods of existence. Two of the 10 hubs studied are large, complex-type, multi-functional structures. The other eight are much smaller spaces focused on a single activity or discipline. All of these hubs are (or have been) engaged in non-mainstream cultural practices,

particularly contemporary and experimental art, and to lesser extent traditional arts forms. During the summer of 2019, we conducted 83 semi-structured interviews with founders and operators ($n = 21$), tenants ($n = 21$), and users ($n = 36$) of these creative hubs. The interviews centred on respondents' experiences of establishing, running and/or accessing creative spaces. We explored the roles these spaces play in the city, the socio-political constraints they face, and the tactics deployed to deal with these constraints. To understand the environment in which hubs operate, we further interviewed five representatives of state agencies and of international organisations active in Hanoi's cultural sector ($n = 5$). Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese or English with or without the help of a translator. We coded the data using both the a priori interview themes listed above and emergent themes identified during the coding process. Due to the political sensitivity surrounding this study, the creative spaces studied remain anonymous here.[1]

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Part 2 introduces the notion of 'informal life politics' and situates it within debates about forms of citizen-led political engagement in non-Western contexts and notably in Vietnam. Part 3 contextualises the emergence of creative hubs within different political periods of restrictions and 'easing'. Part 4 unpacks the 'informal life politics' practised by hubs in Hanoi. It starts by discussing a perceived 'cultural crisis' which triggered the emergence of these spaces in the Vietnamese capital during the late 2000s. We then look at how members of Hanoi's creative community use these spaces to embody the more open socio-cultural normative milieu they deem necessary to fix this 'crisis'. Part 5 discusses the specific political engagement techniques and resistance tactics deployed by hub founders and operators to advance their life politics experiment, in spite of the Vietnamese state's repressive governing practices.

Conceptual framing: Informal politics from below

An important body of work critiques the application of standard concepts of civil society to authoritarian contexts (Cavatorta, 2013). Such critiques highlight that, in such contexts, collective organisation and action are often limited or impossible, that voluntary groups are rarely completely autonomous from the state, and that the upholding of Western notions of the 'common good' can be difficult or dangerous. To take a case in point, in Vietnam the government strongly discourages (or prohibits) the forming of associations independent from the party-state;[2] the boundaries between state, society and economy are blurred; and the promotion of democratic values and open critiques of the party and government are strongly repressed (Hannah, 2009; Kerkvliet, 2019; Wells-Dang, 2014).

Relying on Western-inspired definitions of civil society might further result in overlooking the variety of situations, places, and ways in which individuals and groups express themselves politically in a less democratic context (Cavatorta, 2013). Writing about Vietnam, Wells-Dang (2014: 164) thus suggests to 'move away from firm definitions of what type of organization should or should not be included in civil society to focus on what various actors actually do'. Hannah (2009: 87; our emphasis) similarly argues that, '[b]y asking questions about what civil society does rather than what it is or how it is structured [...] we make our inquiries much more nuanced. We begin to look for state-society interactions that accomplish civil society functions in places where we might not have... '

Taking stock of these debates, we find ideas put forth by historian Morris-Suzuki (2017, 2020) useful to understand the civil society practice of Hanoi's creative hubs. Echoing the work of Scott (1986), Morris-Suzuki stresses the importance of broadening conventional understandings of the political to include the full range of ways in which people might act politically, including less visible forms of political engagement.

In what follows, we draw more specifically on Morris-Suzuki's (2017) concept of 'informal life politics' (or 'living politics'). This notion refers to attempts by groups of people 'to act out aspects of the change they seek in their everyday lives, through autonomous collective responses' (Morris-Suzuki 2017: 2). According to Morris-Suzuki, this particular form of everyday politics tends to occur when groups of people are confronted with economic, social, or environmental problems which they deem formal political institutions unable or unwilling to deal with. The key idea here – and highly relevant to our case study – is that, in responding to these problems, life politics groups do not focus on 'lobbying or campaigning to persuade governments, local authorities or international institutions to change policies or make new laws or regulations' (Morris-Suzuki, 2020: 13–14). Rather, they try to carve out spaces of autonomy from governmentality wherein they can directly enact the changes they seek, from the bottom up.

Core elements of informal life politics include networking, improvisation and alternative value creation (Morris-Suzuki and Wei, 2018). With regard to networking, life politics groups often bring together individuals from different socio-economic classes and with diverse skills and experiences. Concurrently, improvisation allows the groups to modify their approaches as strengths and weaknesses become evident, a critical ability in contexts wherein political and socio-economic challenges evolve rapidly. Alternative value creation can also be an underlying project with life politics groups rejecting a lifestyle or set of values or searching for new ethical values.

Ultimately, Morris-Suzuki (2017: 1) argues that although life politics groups do not behave in an overtly political way, the 'small experiments in "politics from below"' they conduct 'are part of an invisible politics that is quietly transforming aspects of life in Northeast Asia today'. We argue that creative hubs are conducting such a 'small experiment' in Hanoi. Drawing on the concept of 'living politics' we endeavour to shed light on forms of political engagement located in the interstitial zone between Western-defined expressions of civil society and the oft-well-hidden infrapolitics deployed by subaltern groups (Scott, 1990). We focus on creative hubs as collective forms of political action (something the conventional infrapolitics scholarship tends to overlook), albeit forms that are less visible and structured than conventional civil society actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Before looking at the techniques and tactics on which creative hubs rely as they try to 'take things in their own hands', let us look at the socio-political context which they must navigate.

Context: Hanoi's (emerging) civil society and creative hubs

From the mid-1950s until the mid-1980s, Vietnam's socio-political system restrained the ability of its citizens to create or run groups, organisations, or associations autonomously from the party-state. With few exceptions, the only organisations permitted during that period were those established by the party-state.

The situation began to change in the mid-1980s with the adoption of Đổi mới reforms,[3] paving the way for the emergence of creative hubs in urban areas such as Hanoi. In the following years, scholars reported the forming of various autonomous, 'non-state' organisations which, taking advantage of the

loosening of the party-state's control on society, sought to advance their interests, test new ideas and – in rare cases – engage in political dissent (Kerkvliet, 2003; Wells-Dang, 2014).

New possibilities similarly opened up in the cultural sector, on which the Vietnamese state had previously maintained a tight grip. Before Đổi mới, the party-state had been the sole sponsor of art works, running cultural training institutions and confining cultural activities to state-managed associations and venues. This system allowed the party-state to use art to legitimise its authority while also containing potential threats of subversion (Healey, 2014). Yet in the 1980s, it began to relax its control over cultural production, rather surprisingly admitting that it had been 'undemocratic, authoritarian and overbearing' and promising new creative freedom (Healey, 2014: 121).

As the stifling atmosphere which had permeated the cultural sphere prior to Đổi mới eased, Vietnamese artists, curators, collectors and gallerists began to experiment with new ideas and forms of expression. Foreign cultural material started to circulate in Vietnam, new possibilities to travel abroad opened up access to world art, and a 'freer' market took form in which art works could be bought and sold legitimately (Healey, 2014; Nualart, 2016; Taylor and Corey, 2019). Alongside new commercial galleries and cafés holding public exhibitions, an alternative art scene emerged quietly through contemporary art exhibitions and performances held clandestinely in private home-studios (Taylor, 2007). These spaces became 'a site for experimentation outside of the more "public" spaces that the galleries and government-sponsored spaces provided' (Taylor, 2007: 117–118).

Hanoi's creative spaces took form in the wake of this movement, set in motion by individuals and groups seeking to 'push art

out of the galleries and into semi-public places' (Taylor, 2007: 110). As will be discussed in more detail below, financial and political support from foreign embassies and international cultural centres in Hanoi played a key role in the emergence of the first hubs.[4] Starting in the early 2010s, this contributed to the rapid proliferation of alternative cultural spaces run by locals and the holding of activities and events open to the public. Illustrating this, between 2014 and 2018, the number of creative spaces active in Hanoi more than doubled, rising from 22 to 60 (Truong Uyen Ly, 2014, 2018).

These spaces correspond to one of two broad models that emerged simultaneously and still coexist in Hanoi. The first model corresponds most closely to the international definition of a creative hub (e.g. Pratt, 2021). Epitomised by the now defunct Zone 9,[5] it consists of a large building or complex that brings together multiple foci and groups under 'one roof'. These larger hubs include a mix of functions such as artist studios, galleries, co-working spaces, cafes and shops. Three such spaces emerged in Hanoi during the 2010s, with two still running at the time of our fieldwork. The second and predominant model consists of much smaller spaces focused on a few functions. Such hubs typically have no more than two or three multi-functional rooms, which they use for exhibitions, performances, talks, screenings, training or workshops. In this model, there are no tenants and the artists showcased vary from event to event. While the larger creative hubs survive through charging tenants rent, the smaller ones sustain their activities through a combination of grants, admission and course fees, and/or operating a small business such as a shop or café. The administrative structure of these smaller hubs is correspondingly very simple, often consisting of one manager, a handful of paid employees and groups of volunteers

who support the organisation of occasional events (Truong Uyen Ly, 2018; interviews).

According to the mapping survey mentioned earlier (Truong Uyen Ly, 2018), in 2018, over three-quarters of Hanoi's creative spaces (46 out of 60) were located within a radius of less than 6 km from the historical centre, with half in inner-city districts. Interviewees explained that the preferred location for a creative hub is in a central district, due to a higher volume of passersby, and accessibility. As observed in other urban contexts (e.g. Dinardi, 2019), certain hubs in Hanoi have been set up in old, sometimes dilapidated, buildings including a colonial-era post office and an old country-house. Yet contrasting with the international trend, only one derelict industrial compound had accommodated a creative hub in Hanoi at the time of this study (Zone 9), and this, for only a few months.

The vast majority of Vietnam's creative spaces are registered as for-profit micro-enterprises or household businesses. As independent art spaces, these locales tend to be economically fragile. Financial problems have forced many to close after a short period of operation. A common issue, in this regard, is the precarity of creative spaces' rental situations. Illustrating this, nearly half of the hubs that we studied had to move at some point because of sponsorship being withdrawn, the sale of a building, or lease issues. Mismanagement and internal conflicts have also caused creative spaces to close (interviews).

None of the hubs we studied had links to global hub networks. However, we noticed other types of international influence. Several founders of creative spaces in Hanoi are Vietnamese who studied or worked in the West for extensive periods before returning to the city. Others have worked for foreign embassies or international organisations based in Hanoi. Some of these individuals

explained that seeing creative hubs in action while living abroad, or having been exposed to Western discourses about creativity, factored in their decision to set up a hub in Hanoi.

Creative hubs face important sociopolitical challenges in Hanoi. While there are undoubtedly many more spaces and opportunities to pursue creativity in Hanoi than was the case twenty years ago, culture remains not only a loaded word but also a key focus of the party-state (see Gillen, 2011). As Lux (2007) explains, in Vietnam, culture 'in its contemporary or critical form is treated with caution by the authorities' (p. 324). This is especially evident in the case of public events such as the talks, exhibitions, concerts and screenings that creative hubs organise. Because these activities are open to the public, organisers are required to apply for an authorisation from the main cultural censorship body of the party-state: the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism.[6] This process is made extraordinarily complicated by the ambiguities, unpredictability and discretionary character of the Vietnamese state's cultural censorship and repression practices. To give just one example, Vietnamese officials sometimes claim that there is no list of forbidden topics as long as cultural works stay clear of opposing the party and government (Nualart, 2016). However, members of the Vietnamese art scene report a long list of topics that might lead to permission being denied or revoked. These range from the more obvious questions of national politics and representations, to sexual content, religion and any social concern deemed likely to provoke public controversy or disorder (interviews; Lux, 2007; Nualart, 2016).

This lack of fixed or transparent rules demarcating the acceptable from the unacceptable is a central characteristic of the Vietnamese state's governing practices in the cultural sector (Lux, 2007). It is also the political environment which creative hubs must navigate as they try to push sociocultural boundaries in Hanoi.

The living politics of Hanoi's creative hubs

As mentioned earlier, life politics tends to emerge when groups of people are confronted with a problem they deem formal institutions of politics unable or unwilling to deal with. This section discusses the problem that triggered the emergence of creative hubs in Hanoi: that is, a perceived 'cultural crisis'. We then turns to hubs' response to this crisis, explaining how they went beyond imagining solutions to it and instead tried to fix it by 'mak[ing] the world otherwise' (Morris-Suzuki and Wei, 2018: 9).

'I feel like Vietnamese art stopped 30 years ago'

A common motivation underlines the establishment of the hubs that we studied: the perception that culture and creativity are underdeveloped in Hanoi and that this needs to change. For some, this is a legacy of the pre-reform era: '60 years under communism', a hub founder remarked, 'art and culture have not been able to develop much'. Other participants reiterated the fact that the country was largely closed from the rest of the world during the second half of the 20th century and pointed to the state's tight grip over cultural production as stifling creativity and experimentation during that period. The problem, another participant noted, is that thirty years after the first reforms there remains a 'lack of a foundation and support for creativity' in Vietnam.

Most hub founders blame this stagnation on the Vietnamese state. Shortcomings of formal educational and cultural institutions with regard to new artistic ideas and practices are central to this critique. Some

interviewees linked the limited development of creativity in Vietnam to the lack of art-related content in the country's official school curriculum. Others pointed to a deeper problem, arguing that Vietnam's traditional model of education thwarts the development of youth's creative capacities. A hub co-founder spoke of a 'closed process' in which '[s]tudents follow exactly what teachers teach them […] And when they grow up, they will teach the same thing, without a change'.

Both hub founders and users further blame the country's main art training institutions (e.g. Vietnam Fine Arts University, National Academy of Music) for their outdated curricula. The theories, artistic content, authors and practices taught in these institutions, an interviewee lamented, stopped at the beginning of the 20th century. As a result, interviewees remarked, few young Vietnamese artists develop an interest in non-traditional forms of artistic expression, and those who do are compelled to self-train or study abroad (if they can afford to). Hub users similarly blamed Hanoi's state-managed museums for their disregard of experimental and contemporary cultural production.

According to a creative space founder, this neglect of contemporary arts by state institutions generates a 'distance between art and the public' leading to its under-appreciation. Other participants mentioned that, incidentally, the domestic audience and market for contemporary and experimental arts in Vietnam is rather anaemic. Correspondingly, contemporary artists depend primarily on foreign buyers with one interviewee going as far as speaking of an 'art drain'.

Besides the cultural deficit discussed above, several interviewees pointed to the over-emphasis on economic growth and the associated rise in competition unleashed by the *Đổi mới* reforms. A number of hub founders noted that, as a result, non-profit-driven activities are increasingly devalued in Hanoi and that one of their objectives in setting up a creative hub in the city was to counter that trend. This echoes a pattern observed by Morris-Suzuki (2017) throughout East and North-east Asia wherein life politics groups have also emerged in response to modern corporate growth and, in particular, to its role in 'the erosion of community cooperation by the pressure of economic competition, and the devaluing of spiritual and creative capabilities that cannot readily be turned into a financial profit' (Morris-Suzuki, 2017: 11).

Also in line with Morris-Suzuki's (2017) conceptualisation of informal life politics, the decisions of hub founders to set up independent cultural spaces stemmed from shared sentiments that the state was highly unlikely to attend to the creativity deficit they perceive exists in Hanoi. As one founder told us, since the state only 'measures value in economic terms, not social benefits' it will likely continue to disregard cultural development needs. Others remarked that cultural initiatives are rarely profitable, therefore presenting no interest to government officials who 'only invest in projects that generate money for them'. While some hub founders expressed hope that this situation would change in the future, most thought it would take a while. Until then, as we see below, they are trying to *be* the cultural change they seek.

'Creating spaces where people can engage with art and each other'

As opposed to conventional civil society organisations such as NGOs, the individuals

driving Hanoi's creative hubs put little energy into advocating policy changes or transformations of the state institutions they deemed responsible for the city's underdeveloped creativity. Like other informal politics groups, instead of lobbying for changes, they try to enact them from the bottom up. In the case of Hanoi's creative hubs, this means carving out spaces of (relative) autonomy from governmentality where innovative artistic and cultural activities are not only valued, but actively nurtured and supported.

At the most general level, creative hub founders noted that they seek to provide the population of Hanoi with active forms of cultural engagement. Part of this occurs in establishing semi-public socialisation spaces, such as cafés and galleries, and in organising a range of more structured activities (e.g. exhibitions) and public events (e.g. talks, screenings, artistic performances). Some of these activities are directed to the general public, while others target a specific audience such as young people.

Through their spaces and programming, creative hub operators seek to facilitate exchanges both within Hanoi's intellectual and artistic community, and between this community and the public. They further aim to expose the general population, and young people in particular, to new ideas and forms of cultural expression. Founders noted that they try to provide non-mainstream intellectuals and artists with an audience and, concurrently, raise the public's level of appreciation for such work. For art-focused hubs in particular, this serves to cultivate a domestic market for Vietnamese contemporary artists, especially younger, less well-established individuals. While most tread this terrain very cautiously, hubs occasionally organise events touching on socially or politically sensitive issues, thus opening a rare space of public exchange on these concerns and debates in Vietnam.

Alternative value creation, one of the core elements of informal life politics (Morris-Suzuki and Wei, 2018), is a central goal of Hanoi's hubs. All the spaces that we studied explicitly promote a more exploratory, undetermined and freer way of being in the world which young users in particular perceive as extremely positive. In interviews, these younger users described hubs as 'having an open atmosphere' or 'spirit of freedom', and as 'open-minded spaces' where one can relax, discuss, speak and 'breathe freely'.

A small number of hubs focus specifically on training the next generation of experimental and contemporary artists. In seeking to counteract some of the shortcomings of the Vietnamese educational system outlined above, the operators of these hubs rely on a paedagogy which encourages self-reflection and critical thinking. One hub user explained that the contemporary music and improvisation training offered at the hub they frequent was 'totally different from what is taught at official music schools'. Rather than being asked to follow a structured method, students were encouraged to develop their individuality and experiment with self-expression – something young Vietnamese artists are not used to, according to the founder.

This emphasis on emancipation from social norms and on individuality is reinforced by hubs' tendency to encourage non-conformity and social inclusion. Several hubs support a youth subculture which not only tolerates but openly values diversity in terms of life-world views, sexual orientations and personal appearances. This contrasts with many other spaces for young people in Hanoi where social conformity and low tolerance for differences are the norm. Participants noted, that people visiting many of the hubs live and operate outside Hanoi's mainstream culture and used phrases

such as 'a safe space', 'LGBTQ-friendly' and 'embracing diversity' to talk about these spaces.

As discussed earlier, Hanoi's creative hubs emerged in part in reaction to the unsettling social changes brought about by *Đổi mới*, and notably to what they perceive as a rampant profit-seeking mentality. As living politics groups, one response of the hubs to these concerns is to *embody* alternative socio-economic relations in Hanoi. Despite having to have an official for-profit business status to exist, the hubs we studied all operated in the style of social enterprises. Their founders were emphatic that generating a profit is neither their aim nor what motivated them to set up the hub initially. As such, few creative hubs charge entry fees for events aimed at the general public such as screenings, talks, concerts, and when they do, it is the bare minimum to recuperate production costs. The same holds for classes and workshops, where fees are kept to a minimum or non-existent. To do so, most creative hubs depend on unpaid volunteers to operate, and some founders told us that they are also unpaid.

Driven by the same motives, Hanoi creative hubs thrive to be collaborative rather than competitive social milieus. The classes and workshops offered by hubs are usually structured around group work and students are encouraged to support rather than try to outperform each other; approaches not yet common in mainstream Vietnamese education. Moreover, and as observed in hubs located in other contexts (e.g. Pratt et al., 2019), practices of cooperation have fostered the forming of affective communities in Hanoi's creative hubs. Users described these social spaces as being 'kind', 'supportive' and 'low-conflict', and as 'fostering a strong sense of community'. Here again, participants were quick to remark that such objectives are uncommon in Hanoi.

Doing life politics in an authoritarian context

The life politics of Hanoi's creative hubs can be – and at times are – perceived as threats by the Vietnamese party-state. The objectives, values and practices of creative hubs in the city challenge key tenets of the Vietnamese party-state's governing approach, from its official cultural policy to its de facto tendency to constrain freedoms of expression and of association. As a result, operators and users of creative spaces must navigate a range of mechanisms put in place by the state to control cultural and political transgressions in Hanoi. In an effort to broaden understandings both of the way hubs interact with their specific socio-political contexts and of how life politics unfolds in one of Asia's more authoritarian contexts, we unpack the state controls confronting hubs in Hanoi here, along with the specific tactics deployed by these life politics groups to continue pushing socio-normative boundaries in this context.

State reactions to hubs that 'cross the line'

Several interviewees told us that the Vietnamese state perceives both the promotion of cultural creativity, and the manner by which hubs undertake this, as a threat. In the view of one hub founder, 'the government is afraid of cultural freedom and it doesn't want civil society to organise and to rise up against it. [So,] from the government's point of view, it is important to control everything.' Another founder elucidated: 'In Vietnam, freedom has to exist within a framework … When the government sees an activity that is developing outside of that framework, they see it as transgressive and do what they can to eliminate it.'[7]

In this context, the state works to maintain control mainly through the Hanoi

Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism, whose broad mandate is 'to regulate the exposure of art to the general public according to the state's wishes and needs' (Libby, 2011: 209). As explained above, to hold a public event a hub needs to have it officially authorised well in advance by this governmental censorship body. Interviewees call this 'getting permission from the cultural police' – and nearly all of them have been denied such permission at least once. In some cases, entire events had been refused by state censors. In other cases, hubs were asked to remove specific elements deemed too transgressive, such as a specific painting, film or talk. A local observer of the Hanoi art scene remarked that this process tends to weed out some of the most innovative art works.

Creative spaces can face more aggressive forms of state controls, especially when they try to test the limits of the state's cultural policy. Some hubs recounted cases of sabotage by state authorities who cut off the electricity and water to their building on the day of a public event, even in cases where it had been officially authorised. As a counterstrategy, some have acquired their own power generators. Furthermore, over the years, around one-third of the spaces that we studied have been forced to close temporarily or permanently (as was the case for Zone 9) due to perceived infractions to cultural policy. A small number were also forbidden by state authorities to organise certain types of events for extended periods of time (e.g. public talks).

Manoeuvring around censorship and repression

Despite the challenges outlined above, creative spaces have been relatively successful at keeping their life politics experiment going on. Our interviews with founders and users of these spaces, as well as with other key informants, revealed five broad tactics on which they rely to continue pushing the boundaries of Hanoi's socio-cultural norms in the face of state censorship and repression. We label these as evasions, keeping a low profile, public/private script manoeuvring,[8] mobilising one's habitus, and using a diplomatic shield.

Evasions. A key tactic deployed by creative space operators consists of evading or circumventing the state's formal censorship controls. Sidestepping the official cultural authorisation application process (i.e. 'getting permission') altogether and simply holding public activities or events illicitly was a common approach. One hub founder explained that she can get away without official authorisations because she only holds low-key events. 'Somehow', she explained, 'the authorities have not caught onto us yet. Maybe if the content of our [events] was more provocative they might have an issue'. A clever variation on this tactic is to present only the 'safest components' of a planned event to state censors and, once authorised, to covertly add in other, more subversive or transgressive works to the event. In both cases, hub operators emphasised that such evasions come with two main risks: being fined for having organised a public event 'without permission' or having one's event closed or sabotaged by state authorities.

Keeping a low profile. A second common tactic used by hub founders is to avoid attracting the attention of authorities and ensure that they are not perceived as a political threat. In explaining how and why they employ this tactic, several hub founders referred to the experience of Zone 9 as a cautionary tale. Hub operators and users concurred that the large size and high visibility of this pioneering hub were key factors that led the

authorities to close it. At the time it was ordered to shut, interviewees recalled, Zone 9 was home to over 100 artists and was constantly organising public events, some of them featuring radical ideas and works.

In line with this, nearly all the hubs we studied purposefully keep their physical spaces and events relatively small – explaining in part why Hanoi's hubs are small scale compared with most of their international counterparts. As a founder remarked, state authorities in Hanoi 'become nervous when audiences grow too big', adding that the authorities see it as a sign that a hub is 'growing too influential'. Another approach to 'staying under the radar' mentioned by hub operators who organise art-related training is to target youth and beginners rather than more established artists. The visibility and larger followings of high-profile trainees, these interviewees explained, draws the authorities' attention, making it far more difficult to 'get permission'.

In the same way, hubs avoid marketing their activities and events too broadly. 'I don't run any promotional campaign', a founder explained, 'because the state wouldn't like [the type of activities I organize] … I only have a list of guests, for example, architects or musicians, to whom I send [personal] invitations.' Other hub operators similarly reported relying on word of mouth (instead of using social media for instance) to advertise their activities as a means to remain unnoticed by the 'cultural police', even if smaller audiences mean lower impact and revenues.

Public/private script manoeuvring. Hub leaders also rely on a tactic which we call public/private script manoeuvring. One of the forms this takes, used by more activist artists and hub leaders, has also been documented by scholars of Vietnamese contemporary and experimental arts (e.g. Libby, 2011; Lux, 2007; Nualart, 2016). It consists of hiding

social or political critiques in art works – through the use of abstraction for instance – so that they are not detected by state censors. 'If the critical voice in a work of art is direct and recognizable', a young artist explained, 'it can be easily rejected and may not be exhibited'. They expanded: 'When we do a work like that, we will have to give it an indirect form, we will put a different cover on it; indirect criticism is harder to recognize'. In the same vein, a hub curator explained that they think carefully about how art works are arranged or shown, given that specific groupings might be deemed to have 'political significance'.

As Libby (2011: 215) remarked in a study of Vietnamese experimental and performance arts, 'one of the most powerful defenses of contemporary art is that it is more difficult to pinpoint the message of the artist largely because of the abstract nature of the medium'. Yet, this is not a bullet-proof strategy. Both artists and hub leaders emphasised that officials in charge of cultural censorship in Vietnam have a hard time understanding new forms of artistic expression which, as one hub leader put it, 'make the government nervous, irrespective of the works' content'. Resorting to abstraction, indirect criticism and subtle messages to bypass the 'cultural police' is therefore a double-edged sword that hub leaders must handle carefully.

Another form of public/private script manoeuvring used by hubs is to present the events, contents and activities they organise not only as being a-political but also as making a positive contribution to society. One founder told us that when they explain the purpose of their hub to the media or state officials, they emphasise how it aims to 'expose youth to Vietnamese culture, values and traditions; to instill good values in youth'. Other hub founders similarly explained that they 'don't advocate the exploitation of elements prohibited by the

state' or, else, that they run their hub 'for cultural, not political purposes'. This approach, which one hub leader referred to as 'having formed the attitude of good citizens in a volatile society' can, however, easily veer into self-censorship.

Mobilising one's habitus. We also found that a number of hub founders mobilise their habitus, especially regarding their socio-cultural and political capital and related actions, to remain operational (Bourdieu, 1977). Most of the founders of the hubs that we studied are university educated (often with graduate degrees) in areas ranging from law and language, to classical training in music and painting. As discussed earlier, many have spent extensive periods overseas or have worked for foreign embassies and large international organisations active in Hanoi before setting up their hub. These experiences have endowed these individuals with extensive social networks and with local reputation as experts in their field who are also well versed in the national and international art scenes. Such backgrounds and reputations endow several hub founders with an aura of respectability in Hanoi, even among state censors.

For many founders, this aura of respectability is accompanied by 'good connections' (*quan hệ*) with government officials. In interviews, some were very upfront about how this had helped their hub to keep operating. One participant explained how the small group of artists, with whom they founded a hub in Hanoi, purposefully invited an individual who had a high-profile among Hanoi's artistic community and good contacts in the government to join them. A founder similarly noted: 'I was born into a wealthy family. My family line was a powerful one', continuing to provide details of their close governmental links, both historically and now. While the reputation and connections of hub founders do not prevent government officials from 'pulling the plug'

on exhibitions or events that are deemed too transgressive, it has allowed some of them to 'get away with more' than others with regards to pushing the usually acceptable boundaries. Another reflection made by an observer of the creative community was that some founders remain closely tied into overseas networks, including having a partner or husband or wife from a foreign country so that if things became too difficult they could 'escape for a while until things cool off'.

Using a diplomatic shield. Finally, hubs navigate state controls and censorship by placing their activities under the diplomatic protection of foreign organisations. As discussed above, a number of foreign embassies in Hanoi (most notably those of European countries) and cultural promotion agencies (e.g. the Goethe Institute, the British Council, L'Institut Français de Hanoi) and UNESCO's Vietnam country office have played a key role in supporting the emergence of independent art spaces in Hanoi. The representatives of these organisations that we interviewed explained that a central motive underpinning their support of creative hubs in Hanoi is to increase freedom of expression in Vietnam or, in the language of one, the 'diversity of cultural expressions'.

To this end, foreign embassies and cultural promotion agencies provide hubs with more than financial support. They allow them to use their organisations as a 'diplomatic shield'. A common tactic reported by different hub operators is to partner up with a foreign embassy or cultural promotion agency for specific activities and events and ask that organisation to 'get permission' from the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism. Several interviewees explained that the Vietnamese state is a lot more lenient when an application to organise an artistic event comes from a foreign government's embassy or cultural agency. Hubs tend to lean on these organisations to organise

innovative activities and events that state censors might perceive as too transgressive. Some hubs have similarly sought grants from foreign embassies and organisations based in Hanoi for larger and unorthodox projects, such as multi-day festivals, in the hope that this sponsorship would shield them from state censorship or sabotage.

As with some forms of public/private script manoeuvring, the reliance on foreign organisations is a balancing act for hubs, especially when financial support is involved. In the words of a well-established artist: 'If you accept funding, you are under the influence of the organisation as they have their own intentions.' A hub founder similarly remarked that external funding compels hubs 'to make compromises on their values or vision'. For this reason, several hub operators told us that they try to remain as independent as they can from external funding and only rely on foreign embassies or international organisations as a diplomatic shield when absolutely necessary.

Concluding thoughts

This study of Hanoi's creative hubs contributes to recent efforts to understand the nuances of how and why creative hubs emerge and operate in different socio-political contexts. Scholars of creative hubs who have recently addressed these questions have begun to make 'hidden' aspects of creative hubs more visible in different parts of the world. These works have shed light, among other things, on the ways in which these cultural formations and their communities interact with and transform their milieu (e.g. Gill et al., 2019). In line with this, our case study of Hanoi's creative hubs contributes to nascent explorations of the forms of political engagement practised and made possible by creative hubs in urban settings in socialist states, or in states

'less-open' to what might be considered socio-political or cultural transgressions (e.g. Dinardi, 2019).

The founders and users of the creative hubs we studied remain dissatisfied with what they perceive as a 'creativity deficit' in Hanoi. They lament, in particular, the constraints that the city's artistic, cultural and intellectual avant-garde continues to face, despite *Đổi mới* reforms. While some members of Hanoi's creative community have responded by moving back overseas or by relocating to Ho Chi Minh City, which some deem more culturally open, the individuals interviewed for this project have elected to stay. In line with Morris-Suzuki's concept of life politics, they have decided to establish independent cultural spaces where they try to enact the more open and free cultural milieu they seek for Hanoi.

The living politics approach also allows us to recognise the actions and discourses of the founders and users of Hanoi's hubs as proactive responses aimed at the creation – on a very small scale – of alternative ways of living and being. This involves promoting a broad exchange of ideas between different user groups and the public more generally, creating spaces that relax societal norms and are more welcoming of diversity than is usual in the city's other social spaces, as well as providing training in experimental art well beyond the mainstream educational syllabus. Additionally, hub founders try to push back against profit-seeking norms (ironically thus being more socialist in socio-economic approach than has become the custom in the country), while also seeking to create true collaborative efforts.

Moving beyond Morris-Suzuki's original conceptual ideas, we have also teased apart the specific nuances of the formation of everyday life politics in the particular socio-political context of Hanoi, and Vietnam more generally. This has allowed us to

analyse and interpret more precisely the specific political engagement tactics on which local life politics groups rely to stay in operation and continue their socio-normative experiment, despite state censorship and repression. We hope that this study will be a catalyst for further work combining a conceptual lens of everyday life politics with the region's rapidly emerging creative hub scene. We also hope that this study will encourage further research regarding creative hubs in Vietnam. The country's creative scene is much broader than the small sample of creative hubs covered in this study, and it is evolving very rapidly. There is not only a need to investigate other types of creative spaces active across urban Vietnam but also, and taking cue from the growing research on creative hubs (e.g. Pratt, 2021), to expand our understandings of their positions, roles and interactions with creative economies and networks both within Vietnam and beyond.

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Notes

1. This study reports politically transgressive discourses and actions taken by individuals belonging to a small community in Hanoi. For this reason, this paper provides limited information not only about our respondents' individual identity but also about the creative spaces they are affiliated to (specific sector of activity, location, membership, clientele, etc.).
2. In effect, the Communist Party of Vietnam closely embodies the state or government, and vice versa.
3. Often translated as 'renovation', this policy package gave market mechanisms a greater role in the country's economy but preserved the Vietnamese Communist Party's political domination.
4. For further discussion on the ways these organisations have supported alternative artistic and cultural practices and spaces in Hanoi in the face of state sanctioned barriers, see Taylor (2007).
5. This hub, set up by a group of contemporary artists, existed for only eight months in 2014. Its large size and vibrancy, as well as its rapid dismantling by the state, left a strong mark on Hanoi's cultural scene.
6. Previously Ministry of Culture and Information.
7. The fact that many hub founders experienced minimally monitored creative environments while they studied or lived in the West might explain their perception that the Vietnamese party-state continues, to this day, to interfere significantly with creative activities.
8. The name of this tactic draws on Scott (1990).

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