

Writings on the Wall: An Investigation into Young Graffiti Writers' Motivations, Meanings, and  
Strategies for Creation in Hanoi, Vietnam

By

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Geography

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## GLOSSARY

**Bomb:** To paint many places in an area, covering it with throws or tags as these are the forms of graffiti that can be executed with the greatest speed

**Buff:** To clean graffiti off a surface, either chemically or with paint

**Cross:** To paint on top of, or cross out, another writer's work

**Get up:** To be prolific as a writer

**Hollows/Outlines:** Throw up that consists only of an outline

**King/Kinging a City:** Highest accomplishment for a graffiti writer. To be the most prolific writer in a given area

**Pieces:** Short for masterpiece. Often contain more intricate designs and cartoon-like characters, and tend to incorporate shadows, three-dimensional effects, and blended colour transitions

**Piecing:** To paint pieces

**Tags/Hand Styles:** A stylized signature most frequently written in marker or spray paint

**Throw ups/Throws/Throwies/Fill ins:** Quickly produced outlines of a writer's name that generally only consist of two colours: one for the outline and one for the fill

**Writer:** Someone who does graffiti

## ABSTRACT

Graffiti has become an omnipresent feature of urban landscapes, with these sprawling words and images on public and private surfaces serving as an entry point for an investigation into the relationship between space, aesthetics, and politics. So far, there has been little academic research conducted on street art in the Asian context, and no literature on the burgeoning street art scene in Vietnam. However, the effects that globalization and modernization have had on the region, and the tactics citizens employ to negotiate state-imposed censorship and restraints, have been studied, positioning this focus within a broader area of study. As such, the main objective of this thesis is to explore the motivations behind the creation of graffiti and street art in order to determine how youth (17-30) identities are constructed and spaces are contested in the post-socialist liminal space of Hanoi, Vietnam.

**Key Words:** everyday politics, Hanoi, subculture, graffiti, youth, transgression



*Photo by author*

# **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

Graffiti has become an omnipresent feature of urban landscapes, with these sprawling words and images on public and private surfaces serving as an entry point for an investigation into the relationship between space, aesthetics, and politics (Lee 2013). The main objective of this thesis is to explore the motivations behind the creation, by youth, of graffiti and street art in order to determine how identities are constructed and spaces are contested in the post-socialist liminal space of Hanoi, Vietnam. So far, there has been little academic research conducted on street art in the Asian context, and no literature on the burgeoning street art scene in Vietnam. However, the effects that globalization and modernization have had on the region, and the tactics citizens employ to negotiate state-imposed censorship and restraints, have been studied, positioning this focus within a broader area of study. Graffiti and street art are studied as a means to better understand the ways by which public space has “become emblematic of changing discourses of individual rights, urban aesthetics, and the practice of citizenship” (Lee 2013: 304). Under globalization and democratized conditions, graffiti is argued to serve as an aesthetic representation of the self, “a visible element in the formation of urban... subjectivities,” while the creators of these urban art images remain embedded in the moral and cultural frameworks imposed by the state (Lee 2013: 307, 311). I seek to understand what compliance or resistance strategies young graffiti writers draw on in order to create in post-socialist landscapes of control. The focus of this research is on youth, as this group is at the center of the graffiti subculture, making them central to this phenomena (Lee 2013).

The definition of graffiti that I will be working with was suggested by Merrill (2015: 370), and frames graffiti as “a wide range of expressions” that are often defined “as an unauthorised act of inscription onto public or private property, and is divided into political, chronological, spatial, social and cultural subcategories that are the result of a range of different motivations”. This definition encompasses a wide array of forms and features, but focuses on graffiti as a transgressive practice. Transgressing, for the sake of this study, can be understood as any public behaviour that goes against the assumed and normalized rules of a given space, thereby infringing upon, or violating, the status quo (Cresswell 1996). This understanding of graffiti emphasizes that “there is a point and purpose behind what graffiti writers do,” and frames the experience of writers in this subculture as extremely structured by global, predetermined

rules and ways of being (Macdonald 2001: 2). The transgressive nature of graffiti, understood as a questioning and crossing of symbolic boundaries which make up the norms of a place, is central to this research (Cresswell 1996). This concept will be explored further in Chapter 2.

There are three basic types of graffiti: tags, throw-ups, and pieces. These are terms from the global graffiti subculture, and will be used throughout my thesis. *Tags* are the most prevalent and fundamental form of graffiti, a kind of stylized signature that engraves the writers chosen name on the urban landscape (Brewer 1990). Scribe<sup>1</sup> (05/22/2019), a Montreal graffiti writer who served as a key informant for this research project, confirmed that tags, also referred to as hand styles, are most frequently written in marker or spray paint. Like Scribe, I will also be referring to those who engage in the creation of graffiti as *writers*, rather than artists, based on the general preferences of members of this subculture.



*Figure 1.1 Tags on electricity box and storefront in Old Quarter  
Photo by author*

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<sup>1</sup> The tag of this writer is Scribe, and they gave me consent to use this name.



*Throw ups*, also referred to as *throwies*, *fill ins*, or *throws*, “are elaborated names formed in bubble, block or similarly expansive styles” (Brewer 348: 1990). They are often quickly-produced outlines of a writer’s name, and generally only consist of two colours: one for the outline and one for the fill (Macdonald 2001, Scribe 05/22/2019).



*Figure 1.2 Throw Up in Tây Hồ*  
*Photo by author*

The third type of graffiti is known as a *piece*, short for masterpiece, and involves more than two colours (Macdonald 2001). Although these works still depict the writers’ name, as is the case with tags and throw ups, pieces often contain more intricate designs and cartoon-like characters, and tend to incorporate shadows, three-dimensional effects, and blended colour transitions (Brewer 1990: 352, Scribe 05/22/2019). Pieces take a substantial amount of time to complete, so “they must be done in places with little, if any, human traffic in order for the writers to avoid arrest and concentrate on painting” (Brewer 1990: 352).



Figure 1.3 Piece in Tây Hồ  
Photo by Sarah Turner

Another important term in the graffiti subculture is *bombing*, which means to hit, or paint many places in an area, covering it with throws or tags as these are the forms of graffiti that can be executed with the greatest speed (Macdonald 2001). *Getting up*, or *kinging* a city, means a writer is prolific, and has many tags, throws, or pieces covering the walls of a given space (Scribe 05/22/2019; Doves 06/11/2019). *Getting up* also relates to the establishment of a writers' status in the eyes of others, and although this title can be self-declared, it is often granted by other respected writers (Macdonald 2001: 75). *Buffing* is the erasure or removal of graffiti by authorities and property owners. However, a writer's drive to *get up* generally out-paces even the most vigilant paint-out campaigns (Brewer 1990: 357). The ephemeral nature of graffiti is matched with the fleeting life of a freshly buffed wall, where the ongoing battle between graffiti writers and the authorities plays out.



### *1.1.1 Thesis aim and research questions*

The **aim** of this thesis is: **to investigate the actions and motivations of young street art creators and graffiti writers in urban spaces in Hanoi, Vietnam, and to investigate whether their actions can be considered a form of everyday politics.**

In order to approach this aim, my thesis is guided by **three main research questions**:

**1. Who are the individuals engaging in the creation of street art and graffiti, how did they get into this art form, and how do they go about creating?** To approach this question, I

provide an analysis of the individuals engaging in graffiti practices in Hanoi, placing an emphasis on revealing the motivations and strategies utilized by these writers.

**2. What are the spatial dimensions at play in the creation of graffiti and what are the reasons behind any spatial patterns that might exist across the city?** I address this question by conducting a spatial analysis of the areas with the highest graffiti presence, and investigating how graffiti writers negotiate the social, physical, and cultural boundaries which serve as either deterrents or catalysts for creation.

**3. Is the creation of graffiti and street art in Hanoi a form of everyday politics, or do their creators have other intentions?** To answer this question, I consider whether graffiti writers in Hanoi use everyday compliance or resistance strategies to navigate their relationship with state authorities, and in turn avoid severe punishment.

## **1.2 CONTEXT**

### *1.2.1 Reform and Modernization in Hanoi*

Hanoi's urban landscape has undergone a series of rapid transformations since the implementation of the socio-economic reform policy known as *Đổi Mới* in 1986 (Geertman and le Quynh Chi 2010). From a country that had been following a socialist doctrine with business organized in collectives and co-operatives, these reforms opened Vietnam to foreign direct investment. This shifted the country in the direction of a market-oriented economy, or market socialist, while the political sphere "remained firmly socialist" (Drummond 2000, Turner and Nguyen 2005). Although no official cultural policies accompanied this economic shift, the government began to allow for a greater degree of personal freedom, as both a result of increased foreign influence, and as a means of attracting foreign investment (Diamond 2012). This freedom, however, was bounded by the government's anxious censorship and surveillance as a

means of maintaining control over the “menace of foreign cultural pollution” (Diamond 2012: 65).

Private investment and development in urban areas such as Hanoi are two ways these changes have manifested (Leducq and Scarwell 2018, Diamond 2012). This new, urbanizing landscape is “narrated through the city’s material and physical expressions,” and can be understood through an analysis of the built environment (Valentin 2008: 75). These urban transformations, such as the development of gated communities and large shopping malls, are also represented by an omnipresence of Western influences and imported goods in Hanoi, marking “an era of competing leisure activities and consumerism driven by the global market” (Valentin 2008: 77). The revitalization and commercialization of public spaces that has come with these reforms, due to the changing conception of public and private space in contemporary Hanoi, and the ways in which young people navigate these urban spaces, including their creation of graffiti, is particularly relevant to this research (Valentin 2008).

### *1.2.2 Youth and Urban Space in Hanoi*

Youth is a socially constructed concept that changes in tandem with socio-economic and cultural reforms (Valentin 2008). For the purpose of this study, this group is defined as beginning around the age of 18, and ending around the age of 30-35, which is the census definition of youth in Vietnam (Valentin 2007). This demographic, as defined by the census, represented approximately 26% of Hanoi’s population in 2014 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam & United Nations Population Fund, 2016). In contemporary Vietnam, this period of life is often marked by the “generational hierarchies and inherent power relations shaped by Confucianism,” whereby positions of superiority and inferiority are established in part by one’s age, thereby placing youth at a structurally inferior position that requires them to honour ideals of filial devotion (Valentin 2008: 80, 81). This understanding of youth, which is grounded in the socio-cultural context of Vietnam, helps us understand the cultural expectations and social responsibilities that influence the ways in which this demographic navigates and uses space.

The way that urban space is used, specifically in regards to consumption, trade, and leisure, have shifted with the changing conceptualizations of public and private space in post-reform Vietnam (Valentin 2008). In part, this can be traced back to the Ministry of Construction’s contemporary Master Plans and policies which promote the redevelopment of

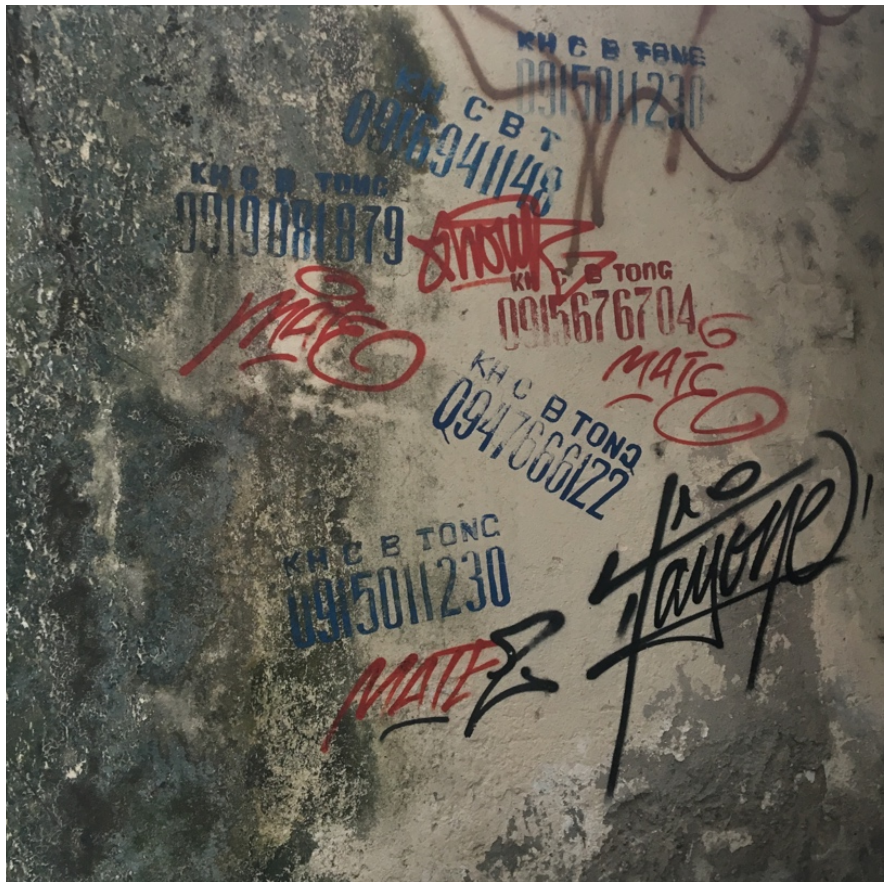
existing urban cores and periurban areas (Labbé & Musil 2013). These policies have caused a mass influx of rural-to-urban migration, with the proportion of the Vietnamese population living in urban areas projected to reach 45 percent by 2020, up by 23 percent since 1999 (Agergaard & Vu Thi Thao 2010; DiGregorio 2011). This has resulted in extremely high rates of density in Hanoi's urban environment and an intensification of public space usage (Geertman et al. 2016). These rapid transformations have also led to a rise in the spontaneous use of urban space, which is defined by Geertman, Labbé and Boudreau as “activities initiated and led by ordinary citizens that challenged a long history of hegemonic state control over the city” (Geertman et al. 2016: 594). These spontaneous uses include the appropriation of urban public space for private commercial and domestic activities, and recreational practices (Geertman et al. 2016). Geertman et al.'s study of the various uses and appropriation of public space will help inform my study of how writers in Hanoi use and navigate urban spaces in order to do graffiti.

### *1.2.3 Wall Writing in Urban Space in Asia*

As almost no scholarly attention has been paid to graffiti and street art in Vietnam, I will be grounding my analysis of these creative practices in the context of East Asia, drawing in particular on research about mainland China. This is not to suggest that these two countries, or socio-political contexts, are to be equated. However, certain social and cultural commonalities do exist, such as the important socio-economic transformations which have moved both countries from strict socialist economies to socialist market economies, where socialist political orthodoxy is now combined with a capitalist market (Pan 2015). These similarities result in certain aspects and histories of street writing in China being applicable and relevant to the Vietnamese context (Pan 2015).

Symbols of the Chinese character *chai*, or demolition 拆迁 are commonly painted on walls in Chinese cities, representative of the mass urban renewal and redevelopment projects occurring there (Pan 2015: 28). Another predominant urban visual in Chinese cities are unauthorized ads, *xiaoguanggao*, which are mostly in the form of stickers and marker writings scrawled on public walls (Pan 2015: 28). These wall markings resemble the colourful stenciled wall inscriptions, *KH Cắt Bê Tông*, which are found on countless walls in Hanoi (see Figure 1.4). These inscriptions, which are each followed by a phone number, roughly translate to “drilling and cutting concrete,” and are also advertisements for small-scale demolition services. Political

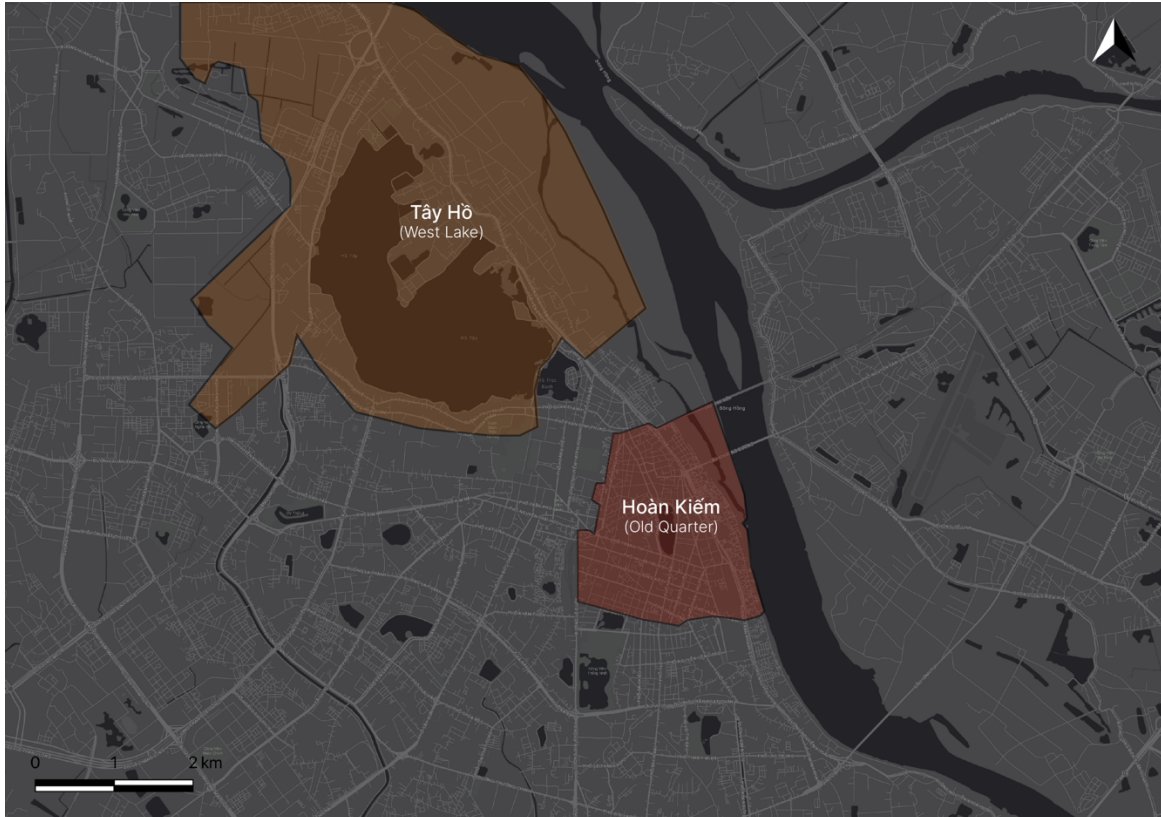
public writings, such as propaganda posters, are also prevalent in Chinese and Vietnamese cities, resulting in wall writing becoming a part of the public life of these regions (Pan 2015: 27). Due to these factors, public and even official perceptions of graffiti in the Asian context differ from those in the Euro-American context. Rather than being seen as an unauthorized violation of private property, “in China, unless these graffiti touch on political criticism or issues that concern “national security,” they are tolerated or simply ignored in most cases” (Macdonald 2001; Pan 2015: 29). Part of the purpose of this study is to see if this applies to the Vietnamese context as well. The massive urban renewal projects and reconstructions in both Chinese and Vietnamese cities have also provided an ever increasing number of half-demolished and abandoned urban structures, giving graffiti writers “many opportunities to slip in their pieces among these urban ruins” (Pan 2015: 28).



*Figure 1.4 KH Cắt Bê Tông and Tags in Hanoi  
Photo by author*

#### *1.2.4 Censorship and Surveillance in the Vietnamese Art Scene*

Although Vietnam has opened its economy, the social and political realms remain under “a dated yet effective communist matrix of control” which extends to media outlets and the art scene (Libby 2011: 209). All art exhibitions must apply for official state permits which are only granted after local agencies of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism regulate and censor any art which appears to go against the state’s wishes and needs. This includes art that depicts negative views of the state, nudity, or sexuality (Libby 2011). However, this censorship is often disorganized and artists can navigate it by creating artwork that is subtler in its subversion of the system. 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” (Libby 2011: 213). In a state where information is rigidly regulated and media is produced under government supervision, “visual art can be powerful in its abstractions,” as the conjurations of visual art “happen inside the viewer and are impossible to track, manipulate or extinguish” (Libby 2011: 215, 216). Contemporary art, as it is very difficult to censor, appears to provide a space where broader sociopolitical issues can be discussed in Vietnam without reprisal, however, knowing which boundaries to push, and which to comply with, is essential to these writer’s ability to create (Libby 2011). As graffiti has ties to the contemporary art scene, this analysis will guide me in understanding what strategies graffiti writers use to navigate censorship in order to create (Pan 2015).



*Map 1.1 Map of the two districts in Hanoi I conducted my research, Tây Hồ (West Lake) and Hoàn Kiếm (contains the Old Quarter)  
By author*

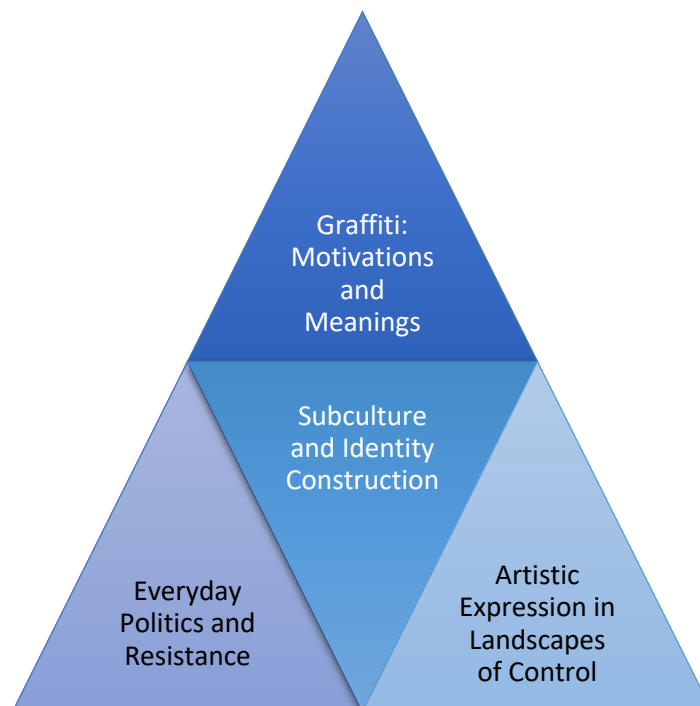
### **1.3 Thesis Layout**

Following from this introduction chapter and brief context, in Chapter 2 I develop the conceptual framework that informs my research. I specifically draw on literature on everyday politics, subculture and identity construction, and artistic expression in landscapes of control (see Figure 2.1). In Chapter 3, I outline the methodological approaches I utilized, including my research methods, coding techniques, and a reflection on ethical concerns and my positionality. I address my first two research questions in Chapters 4 and 5, while in Chapter 6 I answer my final research question and summarize my key findings.

## **CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I develop the conceptual framework (Figure 2.1) that informs my analysis on the motivations, meanings, and practices of graffiti writers in Hanoi, Vietnam. I draw from three bodies of literature to structure my research. First, I review literature which considers graffiti as a subculture in order to deepen my understanding of the practices and ways of being which are inherent to this culture. As the bulk of literature on graffiti is rooted in the Euro-American context, I begin with a survey of these works in order to lay the conceptual foundations. It is however important to note that these conceptual ideas are not always transferable to the Asian context due to the socio-political and cultural circumstances of each region, country or sub-region (Valjakka 2015: 254). Second, I analyze literature on everyday politics and resistance to understand how graffiti might function as a transgressive form of resistance, despite writers not necessarily viewing their work as a political act (Kerkvliet 2009). Finally, I analyze graffiti as an expression of political deregulation in post-socialist landscapes to inform my study of youth identity and transgressions in socio-politically restrictive public spaces (Geertman et al. 2016).



*Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework*

## 2.2. Graffiti as Transgressive Subculture

Tim Cresswell (1992) offers a geographical analysis of graffiti through the study of media and government reactions to its presence in New York. He draws from the work of David Ley (1974) who explores graffiti as an expression of territorial markers in Philadelphia. Ley suggests that “wall-marking 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” (Ley 1974: 495, 504). Cresswell (1992) furthers this analysis of graffiti as a transgressive reclamation of space by looking at the public’s reactions to graffiti, who frame the act as “deviant, abnormal, dirty, disorderly, and sick” (Cresswell 1996: 49). He argues that these reactions present “a discourse of disorder, a discourse in which graffiti is presented as a symbol of disorder and thus a threat to the image of New York City and civilization itself” (Cresswell 1992: 329). The transgressive character of graffiti, Cresswell argues, “lies in its refusal to comply with its context; it does not respect the laws of place which tell us what is and what is not appropriate,” therefore upsetting the geographical doxa, or the unquestioned and assumed structures which govern our everyday actions (Cresswell 1992: 337). This conception of doxa also serves as the basis for my understanding of what is deemed a transgressive act. Transgressions, for the purpose of my analysis, will be defined as crisis points in doxa, “those times and places where the previously unquestioned becomes questioned and powerful groups seek to defend the “order of things” against the heresies of “deviant” groups” (Cresswell 1996: 21). Transgressions represent a questioning of symbolic boundaries, and rest on the *results* – on the “being noticed” of a particular action (Cresswell 1996: 39). To transgress is to have crossed a line that was not meant to be crossed, to have acted in a way that deviates from the established norms of a place, therefore bringing into question that which was previously considered natural and assumed (Cresswell 1996).

### 2.2.1 Graffiti as Identity Construction

Early studies of graffiti, such as Castleman’s (1982) descriptive history of subway graffiti in New York City, and Lachmann’s (1988) work on the organizational and ideological sources for the creation and structural evolution of graffiti, also in New York City, join sociological literature on subcultures and deviant behaviour with their own ethnographic research. These early sociological studies often regard graffiti as an illegal and destructive subcultural form,



placing an emphasis on graffiti as a symbolic form of resistance. Graffiti is thus considered to allow “writers a relatively safe way to proclaim their opposition to law and its enforcers” while also creating a distinct identity for themselves in the form of a tag, a stylized signature that Lachmann puts forth as a sign of personal fame (Lachmann 1988: 236). The organizational structure of the subculture in Seattle is analyzed in the work of Brewer and Miller (1990), with the goal of learning from it to create more effective graffiti-reduction strategies. In this work, the different factions and styles within the subculture itself, the grouping of writers into *crews*, or informally organized groups of writers, and the mentor-protégé relationships that develop between emerging and established writers are detailed and interpreted (Brewer and Miller 1990). This is done to understand how the social organization and values of writers can be used as a means to structure other legal, creation strategies in order to curtail illegal graffiti practices (Brewer and Miller 1990). The values inherent to the subculture have also been studied, both by Brewer and Miller and other sociological scholars, such as Castleman (1982), Lachmann (1988), and Macdonald (2001). Drawing from these literatures, it becomes clear that fame, artistic expression, power, and rebellion are most frequently listed as the four fundamental values and motivations behind the graffiti subculture in the Euro-American context (Castleman 1982; Lachmann 1988; Brewer & Miller 1990; Macdonald 2001).

*The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York* (Macdonald 2001) is one of the most extensive contemporary works on graffiti and graffiti subculture, drawing on ethnographic methods. Macdonald shifts the sociological analysis from the approach utilized by earlier subcultural scholars (see Cohen 1955; Miller 1958) who grounded their studies in theories of delinquency. These earlier studies suggested that illegal subcultures were an individual’s revolt against middle-class goals and values (Cohen 1955, Miller 1958). Instead of following this Marxist approach which is centred around class struggle, Macdonald focuses her analysis around masculinity and identity construction, arguing that early theories of subculture are too class oriented and neglect other important areas of study (Macdonald 2001). She frames the graffiti subculture as highly structured, following an established route or career path. This interpretation also challenges public perceptions, such as those found by Cresswell (1996), that graffiti writers as “lawless and chaotic” (Macdonald 2001: 63).

Macdonald (2001: 66) continues to note that the gaining of symbolic capital, namely fame, recognition, and respect, are “openly expressed as a writer’s primary objective and the subculture is fully set up to support this goal”. What differentiates graffiti from other subcultures, she argues, is the explicitness and open recognition of its purpose; “fame, respect and status are not naturally evolving by-products of this subculture, they are its sole reason for being, and a writer’s sole reason for being there” (Macdonald 2001: 68). This fame is confined within the subculture itself, as the community relies on the public’s ignorance and misunderstanding of graffiti in order for the subculture to flourish and remain “free.” Keeping graffiti separate from the ‘powers that be’ ensures that the writers are the ones who “enjoy the power that comes from knowing only they can understand and direct it” (Macdonald 2001: 176). Macdonald argues that the alternative nature of this subculture, along with its organizational structure, offer individuals both a space and a set of guidelines to follow which can foster self-actualization and identity construction (Macdonald 2001).

### *2.2.2 Self-Expression and Artistic Agency*

All of the aforementioned works on graffiti utilize sociological approaches as a means to understand the practice as a rebellious form of urban subculture. It is essential, however, to also note that visual approaches have been drawn upon to create in-depth analyses of graffiti (Valjakka 2010). Valjakka’s (2010: 63) utilization of both sociological and visual approaches for the study of graffiti in China demonstrates how “visual aspects, such as style and materials, both reveal and interact with the motivation, creation, reception and acceptance of graffiti images”. To see all graffiti as a form of resistance or political action, she argues, is an oversimplification of reality that in part spurs from the absence of visual and artistic tools of analysis in the study of urban graffiti (Valjakka 2010: 65). Within this framework, graffiti images serve as “a form of agency and physical embodiment of the writer” which reveals personal identity and feelings (Valjakka 2010: 66). A distinction is made between “traditional graffiti,” which lacks an aesthetic intention or concern for style, and “modern graffiti,” which possesses more aesthetic concern and intention (Valjakka 2010: 70-71). A motivating factor behind modern graffiti is the renaming of oneself and the development of a specific identity based on the tag and an original style, with the creation of this form of graffiti being “aimed at the self-construction of oneself as a writer,” or as a site from which one performs another self (Valjakka 2010: 72). These concepts

of subcultural identity construction and artistic self-expression will inform my analysis of the motivations behind graffiti in Hanoi, as they offer insight into the structures and values which are embedded within it.

## **2.3 Everyday Politics and Resistance**

### *2.3.1 Everyday Politics*

The conceptual tools of everyday politics and everyday resistance, made popular by James C. Scott (1989) and Ben T.J. Kerkvliet (2009), provide a critical approach to understanding the context in which graffiti is produced, as these conceptual ideas frame the anonymity and presence of graffiti pieces as a form of covert resistance. As discussed above, graffiti is frequently framed as a form of protest and activism, or at least as a rebellious and transgressive act (Bruner 2005: 144). Everyday politics differs from official politics in that “it involves little or no organization, is usually low profile and private behaviour, and is done by people who probably do not regard their actions as political” (Kerkvliet 2009: 232). Boyte defines this as a process that “involves people reclaiming politics as an activity owned and engaged in by citizens, in environments that reach far beyond the formal political system” (2005: 36). This everyday politics involves “people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules.... in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts” (Kerkvliet 2009: 232). Authors drawing on this concept argue that the politics of subordinate groups are manifested through everyday forms of politics which Kerkvliet outlines as including “support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance” (2009: 233).

Scott’s notion of the ‘public transcript,’ which refers to the “open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” offers insight into how individuals in subordinate positions modify their behaviour to align with the “hegemony of dominant values” (1990: 2, 4). The ‘public transcript’ is “shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful,” and is a key survival tactic of subordinate groups (Scott 1990: 3). Underlying these public performances, however, is the ‘hidden transcript’ “that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” (Scott 1990: *xii*). The ‘hidden transcript’ “is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (Scott 1990: 4). The notion of hidden and public transcripts

will inform my analysis of the interactions and negotiations that take place between graffiti writers and local authorities.

### *2.3.2 Everyday Resistance and Compliance*

One version of these possible everyday politic strategies is resistance, or hidden acts of revolt, which can manifest as foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, smuggling, slander, and sabotage (Scott 1989: 34). A central tenet of this approach requires there to be little to no organization behind the act of resistance, which means that these actions are rarely overt, hence excluding more obvious acts of resistance such as attending open protests or engaging in civil disobedience. The production of graffiti appears coherent with other acts of everyday resistance, providing marginalized groups with a platform to voice anonymous opposition in “circumstances in which open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger” (Scott 1989: 34)

Everyday compliance, another strategy of everyday politics, entails acting in ways that may reinforce the dominant system of authority without the desire to sustain its dominance (Kerkvliet 2009). Examples of everyday compliance can be found in the works of Václav Havel (1985), who writes about power and politics in what was once communist-ruled Czechoslovakia. He speaks of individuals engaging in acts of compliance, such as a grocer who places the communist slogan “Workers of the World, Unite!” in his shop window every day. Havel argues that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers do not use the slogans they put in their windows to express their real opinions, rather, they do so “simply because it has been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because that is the way it has to be,” as “if he were to refuse, there could be trouble” (Havel 1985: 27). These acts of compliance, both Kerkvliet and Havel argue, are often undertaken “because these things must be done if one is to get along in life” (Havel 1985: 27).

Countries such as the former state of Czechoslovakia, about which Havel writes, and Vietnam, where I conduct my research, have political systems which aim to maximize “conformity, uniformity and discipline,” and so “any behaviour that is exceptional – out of line with what authorities expect – is a transgression, a ‘genuine denial of the system’” (Kerkvliet 2009: 237). Acts of compliance in such locales, Havel and Kerkvliet argue, are therefore often undertaken by individuals to avoid being seen as transgressors, rather than being statements of political support. They say less about the convictions of individuals, and more about how people

believe they must behave in order to appear as though they believe, or at least tolerate, what the system expects of them (Kerkvliet 2009: 237). These concepts will inform my understanding of how graffiti writers in Hanoi utilize strategies of resistance and compliance in order to be able to create.

## **2.4 Graffiti as Socio-Spatial Negotiation**

### *2.4.1 Graffiti in Asian Landscapes of Control*

The conceptualisation of graffiti as a form of contentious political participation is founded in contemporary Western graffiti culture (Pan 2015). However, Lee's (2013) work on graffiti in Indonesia puts forth similar arguments which posit graffiti in South East Asia as "emblematic of changing discourses of individual rights, urban aesthetics, and the practice of citizenship" (Lee 2013: 304). Through the employment of ethnographic methods in Indonesian cities, specifically Jakarta and Yogyakarta, Lee (2013) investigates how street art is produced and circulated. She defines various forms of street art while tracing a historical lineage of the creation of street art in Indonesia, framing the different motivations of creation within the social and political contexts of each era. Lee argues that the history of official painted signs on the walls of these cities naturalizes the presence of graffiti in these spaces, which differs from the perception of graffiti as abnormal and transgressive in the Euro-American context (Lee 2013: 318). This raises interesting possible parallels in the Vietnam case, given the history of propaganda murals in public spaces there, as I introduced in Chapter 1. While Lee adds that street art and graffiti in Indonesia have been influenced by the North American tradition which frames graffiti as vandalism and resistance, she argues that street art in Indonesia entered the mainstream as a highly technologized cultural trend and is more of a reflection of the political deregulation and loosening of the central control in the country than an expression of class-based youth resistance (Lee 2013: 305-306).

Pan (2015) complements these findings with her investigation of contested uses of public space with the utilization of three cases of graffiti production in contemporary China. Through the analysis of graffiti as forms of both resistance and propaganda, Pan highlights the dynamics between citizens and the state (Pan 2015). She argues that the governmental attitude towards graffiti in China is less confrontational, as authorities and the public often see graffiti "as something novel or even mysterious," rather than as an urban problem (Pan 2015: 137). The

relatively tolerant attitude of Chinese authorities towards graffiti to date “crystalizes the contests over a ‘post-socialist’ visual modernity,” whereby the state takes graffiti as an evident solution or advantage, rather than as an urban problem such as in the West (Pan 2015: 139). This is perhaps due to the state internalizing graffiti as representative of an ‘open and tolerant society’ (Pan 2015: 143).

This has also been the case in Singapore, where specific public wall markings have been gradually legalized. Nonetheless, the precise form of street art which has been approved reflects the pragmatic attitude of the state towards graffiti – “as long as art is aesthetically pleasing and serves a positive purpose, it is permissible” (Chang 2018: 1055). By accepting graffiti to some extent, “officials are promoting a more flexible and tolerant image of themselves regarding self-expression and urban youth cultures” (Valjakka 2010: 84). Graffiti with overt political denunciation in Singapore and China, however, rarely exists and is erased swiftly if it does surface (Pan 2015).

Since “graffiti in China is not considered as a war against the officials or as illegal political guerilla action by the writers or the public,” with most graffiti writers deliberately avoiding graffiti as a political statement, the motivations behind graffiti change as well (Valjakka 2010: 84). In a landscape where urban public space is subject to scrutiny and control, the aim of graffiti – for some – moves away from rebellion and towards the beautification of the environment, with the new generation of writers in China mainly using “the walls as a canvas for artistic self-expression” (Valjakka 2010: 75). This draws upon the concept of site-responsiveness, whereby the “street art responds to the environment of a city inasmuch as it partakes in the creation of visual culture” (Valjakka 2015: 255). In this politicised approach, the presence of graffiti acts as “sense-redistributors between the urban environment and the people,” generating “highly general aesthetical/political mappings of a particular area” (Pan 2015: 6). Graffiti can thus become a tool which illuminates “how the aesthetics and politics of representational forms and their intermediality are mobilized in a variety of contested spaces” through the schizophrenia of the visual language in rapid capitalistic modernization (Pan 2015: 139). Given the Vietnamese state’s ongoing attention to public dissent, these potential and subtle ways of graffiti being utilized and considered in contested spaces will be a focus of my work.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Within this chapter, I develop the conceptual framework that I draw on to inform my study of graffiti writers in Hanoi, Vietnam. First, an analysis of graffiti as a specific subculture offers insights into the philosophical underpinnings of the practice, emphasizing the formative role graffiti plays in the establishment of identities, as well as how it serves as a form of empowerment and self-expression (Merrill 2015: 370). As Macdonald (2001: 126) argues, “deviance often has a purpose... breaking the law is not accidental, it is deliberate – a gesture of action, rather than mere reaction”. By drawing on concepts from the everyday politics literature, I hope to reveal how subordinate groups may negotiate power relations through acts of resistance, compliance, and possibly quiet encroachment. This will inform my analysis of how writers navigate spaces and boundaries to create graffiti, and how authorities structure their responses to these acts of creation. Finally, my review of graffiti in Asian landscapes concludes that graffiti must be analyzed in its specific context as, despite being a global phenomenon, the motivations behind its creation are not homogenous, indeed, not even across Asia (Valjakka 2011: 67). I will draw on these understandings to focus on graffiti in the context of the Vietnam socialist state.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In order to address my aim and research questions, I carried out seven weeks of qualitative field work in Hanoi during June-July 2019. In this chapter, I first outline the research methods I used during field work, and then go on to explain how I analyzed the data that these methods produced. I end the chapter with a discussion of the role of ethics in my research project, and a critical analysis of my positionality.

### **3.2 Research Methods**

The investigation of my research aim was guided by two complementary qualitative methods, namely semi-structured interviews (including photo elicitation) and participant observation. In this section, I provide an overview of the purpose and praxis of these two methods. The data collection process was also facilitated by my research assistants, Đặng Hữu Liệu and Hoang Linh Chi,<sup>2</sup> who performed the essential tasks of interpretation, setting up interviews, finding transport, and helping me understand important cultural norms and references. Wiz, a Vietnamese graffiti writer, also assisted me by facilitating and interpreting my interview with another Vietnamese graffiti writer.

#### *3.2.1 Defining and Outlining the Methods*

My semi-structured interviews were organized around “ordered but flexible questioning” so that I was not restricted to deploying a certain set of questions, and instead had the freedom to ask or alter questions from an interview guide that I had created beforehand (Dunn 2016: 158). By using overt participant observation, on the other hand, I aimed “to develop understanding through being part of the spontaneity of everyday actions” by observing the behaviours of individuals to learn about the meanings and intentions of their actions (Kearns 2016: 318).

##### *3.2.1.1. Semi-structured interviews*

In total, I conducted 33 semi-structured interviews that lasted between 20 minutes and two hours. Each interview was guided by a list of suggested questions and themes that I had designed

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<sup>2</sup> My research assistants agreed to be named in this thesis.



beforehand as my interview guide, and were conducted after arranging a time and place to meet with participants. One interview took place in Montreal, Quebec with a graffiti writer prior to my departure for Hanoi, and one took place in Toronto, Ontario, after returning from the field, with a writer who had spent time painting in Hanoi earlier that summer. The remaining 31 interviews were conducted with graffiti writers or street artists in Hanoi (17), individuals who were not associated with the graffiti subculture as a means to gain insight into attitudes and perceptions held by the public (9), and key informants from organizations who have aided the production of art projects in public space in Hanoi (5). My interviews were conducted with individuals between the ages of 17-35, as my research is focused on youth graffiti writers.

Semi-structured interviews with 19 graffiti writers and street art creators (Table 3.1) helped me gain insight into which individuals are involved in the creation of graffiti and street art in Hanoi, what methods they utilize, and the motivations behind their creations. More generally, the use of this method helped me gain “access to information about events, opinions, and experiences,” as interviews are able to “investigate complex behaviours and motivations” in ways that other methods, such as observations, cannot (Dunn 2016, 150). Specifically, this method helped me to answer my first and second research questions, which focus on the who, how, and why of graffiti. It should be noted that four of the interviews in Hanoi became group interviews, as friends of the original participant were present at the time of interviewing. However, the individuals who accompanied the respondent during the interview generally did not take part, and fulfilled more of a spectator role, aside from the occasional comment or assisting with language barriers.

I had hoped to use photovoice, or auto-photography to complement my other methods and provide visual expressions and interpretations of space through the eyes of the participants, giving them the opportunity to construct and articulate their own meanings, (Johnsen 2008, 2). However, upon my arrival in the field, I quickly realized that this method would be difficult to formally incorporate, as the first several respondents did not express interest in participating in this manner. I then changed my approach, and asked participants to show me their photos and construct narratives around those during interviews, rather than asking them to go out and take photos based on questions I had created. I thus undertook a form of photo elicitation, using photographs during the interview process to favour collaboration between the researcher and respondent (Lapenta 2011). The use of photo elicitation “can present subjects that might be

invisible to the researcher but visible to the interviewee, triggering unforeseen meanings and interpretations,” while also changing the nature of the researcher-respondent relationship (Lapenta 2011: 2). I hoped this would be both less of a burden on participants, and allow for more freedom in their expression through the showing of photos and videos.

Of these 19 interviews, six were conducted in Vietnamese in the presence of one of my research assistants. During these interviews, my research assistant would interpret each response given by the interviewee, and relay their answer to me in English. I would then ask a follow up question in English, and my research assistant would pose the same question in Vietnamese to the respondent. Each of these interviews was audio recorded and the English sections were transcribed, verbatim, by me. The remaining 13 interviews were conducted in English, without the help of a research assistant, and all of these interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by me. I also took notes in my field journal during each of the 19 interviews, and these notes were compiled alongside the completed transcriptions. I was given permission by 15 graffiti writers to use their tags, or graffiti names (listed in Table 3.1) throughout this thesis, and have created pseudonyms for the remaining four who asked to have their tags kept private.

<b>Graffiti Tag or Pseudonym</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
Box	Foreigner	Male	20-25
Dath	Vietnamese	Male	20-25
Deypher	Vietnamese	Male	17-20
Doves	Foreigner	Male	20-25
Goner	Vietnamese	Male	17-20
Minh Meo	Vietnamese	Male	20-25
Naimo	Vietnamese	Male	17-20
Nope	Vietnamese	Male	20-25
Oupa	Foreigner	Male	25-30
Payr	Vietnamese	Male	17-20
Rival	Vietnamese	Male	20-25
Scribe	Foreigner	Male	20-25

Soor1	Vietnamese	Male	30-35
System01	Foreigner	Male	30-35
Ware	Foreigner	Male	25-30
Wiz	Vietnamese	Male	20-25
Zima	Foreigner	Male	25-30
Zui Boy	Vietnamese	Male	30-35
Zunk	Vietnamese	Male	25-30

*Table 3.1. The 19 Youth Graffiti Writers and Street Artists Interviewed*

### *3.2.1.2. Key informant semi-structured interviews*

One semi-structured interview took place in Montreal, Quebec, prior to my departure for Hanoi, with a graffiti writer in order to document graffiti terminology and review potential methods. The remaining five interviews with key informants were conducted with members of organizations who had facilitated street art projects in Hanoi, with or without state permission, or had insight into the arts scene in Vietnam. These interviews helped me establish how street art projects, which differ from subcultural graffiti, were perceived and implemented, and how individuals navigated state-censorship and control in the creation of their respective public art exhibits. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, and followed an interview guide. Five were conducted in English and were not audio-recorded, and one was audio-recorded and conducted in Vietnamese with the help of a research assistant. I took in depth notes in my field journal for each of the six interviews.

### *3.2.1.3 Semi-structured interviews with locals*

I also interviewed nine individuals who were not associated with the graffiti subculture to gain insight into the attitudes and perceptions held by the public surrounding graffiti in Hanoi. Each interview ranged between five minutes and half an hour, was audio-recorded, and followed an interview guide. They were all conducted in Vietnamese, interpreted by my research assistant, and took place in two areas with high pedestrian traffic - around Hồ Tây and Hoàn Kiếm Lake.

#### *3.2.1.4 Observation as method*

Observations were conducted in order to “understand more fully the meanings of place and the contexts of everyday life” in areas where there is a high concentration of graffiti (Kearns 2016, 316). This method aided me in answering my third research question, concerned with the spatial dimensions of street art. I completed broad observations in two wards of Hanoi – (1) Hoàn Kiếm- the inner city/historic district which is densely housed, and (2) Tây Hồ (West Lake), an expatriate and middle to upper class area. These observations were conducted at specific graffiti-concentrated sites, while on the back of a motorbike, the latter granting me deeper insight into the spatial organization of graffiti in Hanoi. These observations were done in order to track street art and graffiti styles across space, as well as to investigate the potential reasons for the presence/absence of street art in different locations. Prior to completing these observations, I asked participants during their semi-structured interviews if there are specific areas in which graffiti is concentrated, and what interpretations they had of different areas and the styles that are present within them. This complemented and provided direction for my own observations.

### **3.3 Sampling and Recruitment**

I employed purposive, non-probability sampling to select all participants for semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling refers to the selection of participants from a larger population based on certain characteristics which, in this case, were specifically age, due to my focus on youth, and their connection to the graffiti scene (Burgess 2005). Non-probability sampling encompasses any method of selecting participants that relies on the researcher’s aim and judgement, rather than random selection (Wellington and Szczerbinski 2007).

In order to recruit participants for semi-structured interviews, I utilized two main methods, namely snowball sampling, and cold calling (Hubbard 1999, Morrice 2013). I relied heavily on cold-calling, whereby I would find members of the graffiti scene in Hanoi on social media sites such as Instagram, contact them and explain my project, and ask them if they were open to being interviewed. I also relied on this sampling method to find the nine locals I interviewed who were not affiliated with the graffiti community, whereby I asked locals around Hồ Tây and Hoàn Kiếm Lake if they were willing to be interviewed about their thoughts on graffiti. Snowball sampling was also used, whereby I would speak with an initial contact, one who I had either made through cold calling or who was introduced to me by one of my

supervisor's connections, in order to facilitate my introduction to others in the community (Valentine 2005). Five of the six key informants were recruited through my supervisors connections, and the remaining key informant interview was conducted with a graffiti writer I know and had worked with in the past.

### **3.4 Analysis**

Upon my return to Canada following fieldwork, I began the process of coding my data, to find patterns, themes, and categories (Cope and Kurtz 2016). I predominantly drew upon open coding, during which I generated codes as I worked through my transcribed interviews, specifically through the creation of categories and concepts in order to thematically organize the data (Cope 2010). I first began this process on an individual basis, focusing on one interview at a time, however, after I had gone through five interviews, I began grouping together responses based on *a priori* codes, which were created around my interview guide and conceptual framework. This allowed me to create a multi-layered approach that categorized responses based on recurring themes and justifications (Valentine 2005, Cope and Kurtz 2016).

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations and Positionality**

#### *3.5.1 Ethical Considerations*

This project was undertaken as part of a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Grant, headquartered at *Institut national de la recherche scientifique* (INRS), Montréal. The Research Ethics approval came from INRS and covered participants aged 16 and older. I also received official authorization from the Research Ethics Board I (REB) of McGill University for this specific project, which covered participants aged 18 and older.

I decided it would be more appropriate to ask for oral, rather than written consent for semi-structured interviews, as asking for written consent could have both skewed the power dynamic between the participants and myself even further, and potentially create a sense of distrust due to the transgressive and underground nature of graffiti, being created in a socialist state with high surveillance of its citizens (Kerkvliet 2005). As part of the informed consent process, I made it clear that the interview could be put on pause or stopped at any time, and that no questions were required to be answered. I also gave the participants the option to choose the location of the interview, which predominantly took place in cafés, and I offered them a

beverage of their choice to compensate them for their time. Respondents seemed to be comfortable talking about their work, and all of them agreed to having their graffiti tags used in the thesis, with one respondent saying they would prefer that as they are “always after more Instagram followers” on their graffiti account (System01, foreigner, 07/04/2019). I have kept the real names of all respondents confidential.

### *3.5.2 Positionality*

It is important to note my positionality and non-neutrality as a researcher, as my identity as a young, white, middle-class, cis-gendered woman is sure to have affected both how I perceived my respondents and how I was perceived in the field. It is also likely that the way I dress and the fact that I have both piercings and tattoos affected how I was perceived, and perhaps made me more accepted by the young writers I interviewed as I was close to them in age, and similarly presented myself in an alternative fashion. Although I shared interests with the participants, my positionality while conducting academic research with predominantly young male graffiti writers in Hanoi resulted in relationships which were not only skewed by researcher-researched power relations, but also power relations which were spurred from my identity as a Western outsider. My cultural differences, as well as my inability to speak Vietnamese, also resulted in me being unable to pick up on certain cultural or linguistic cues or metaphors, and therefore interpreting responses or situations in a way that is reflective of my identity and experience. As I conducted the majority of interviews alone, without the help of an interpreter, my reliance on communicating in English placed those who did not share this as their first language in a position where self-expression could at times be difficult. This further complicated our respective positions and the power imbalances inherent within them, which I attempted to account for by working with an interpreter whenever I could, and ensuring that the interviews conducted in English with non-native speakers were conducted in a manner that prioritized their narratives and methods of expression. Despite these power dynamics, my prior knowledge of graffiti, connections with writers back in Canada, and interest in alternative lifestyles allowed a rapport to build between me and many of the individuals I interviewed.

### **3.6 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have outlined the two main methods I drew on to complete my fieldwork, namely; semi-structured interviews (including photo elicitation) and overt participant observation. I have also detailed the steps that were undertaken to complete my analysis, the institutional and ethical considerations that shaped my research design, and how I reflected upon my positionality and navigated the power dynamics inherent to this research.

## **CHAPTER 4. RESULTS: CATALYSTS, STRATEGIES, AND MOTIVATIONS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In the following chapter, I present key findings from my analysis to answer the first of my three research questions: **Who are the individuals engaging in the creation of street art and graffiti, how did they get into this art form, and how do they go about creating?** To address this question, I have divided the chapter into three sections, the first of which provides a brief overview of the graffiti scene in Hanoi (Section 4.2). The following two sections then focus on specific groups of individuals engaging in graffiti practices in Hanoi: Vietnamese graffiti writers (Section 4.3), and expatriate graffiti writers (Section 4.4). In each section I aim to provide space for the distinct identities of participants, as I found that the motivations and strategies utilized by the actors involved in the creation of graffiti and street art varied due to a diverse array of social, cultural, and economic factors. In this chapter, I also add to the literature to date regarding graffiti by offering insights into the Asian context, an area of study that lacks scholarship, especially in the context of Vietnam. This is done through the elucidation of the opinions and practices of graffiti writers and street artists in Hanoi, Vietnam, to show how these motivations and practices take different forms than those studied in the Western context.

### **4.2 Brief History of graffiti and the different groups involved in Hanoi**

Before focusing on an analysis of the individuals who engage in the creation of graffiti, it is important to first offer some background on the nature of graffiti in Hanoi, Vietnam. Based on information gathered in the field, there appear to be 15-20 writers who others deem as “active”, meaning those who do graffiti at least once a week, although “there’s a lot more people that look and dabble themselves a tiny bit” (Doves, foreigner, 06/11/2019). The scene consists of both Vietnamese and expatriate writers, and although each group tends to keep to their own, there is overlap between members of the two groups, with some Vietnamese writers occasionally painting with foreign writers.

In most Western cities, where graffiti is villainized, rules and regulations exist which ensure frequent “buffing,” or the removal of graffiti from city streets and structures. In Hanoi, however, interviewees explained that there are no specific organizations, or city-run initiatives, whose purpose is graffiti removal. Although some shop and hotel-owners and other locals paint



over these works themselves, this is expensive and fairly uncommon, creating an environment where graffiti lacks the ephemeral quality generally associated with it. This makes it difficult to ‘read’ the graffiti landscape to know the writers who are currently active, as the words scrawled across the urban environment could have been there for any number of weeks, months, or even years. This lasting-presence of graffiti highlights the way these acts are viewed by law enforcement, which is generally neutrally, as long as “you’re not hurting anyone, costing the government money, or doing anything that could be seen as anti-state” as one graffiti artist, Ware explained (foreigner, 07/19/2019). I elaborate on the formal repercussions for, and perceptions of, graffiti, in Chapter 6.

In regards to the history of graffiti in Hanoi, interviewees were aware of two ‘generations’ or waves of graffiti, with the first group beginning approximately 15 years ago, in the early 2000s. This first generation consists of writers who now range between 25 and 35 years of age, and began when “there was only spray paint for motorbikes” accessible to writers (Zui Boy, local, 06/19/2019). The scene has evolved since then, especially with an influx of foreigners travelling to Hanoi to paint, although the practices continues to be rooted in local hip hop culture and activities, with a strong link between graffiti writers, break dancers, rappers, and DJs. The second generation, which consists of younger writers between the ages of 17-25, are newer to the scene, and have done graffiti for five years or less. Some of these younger writers have been taken under the wing of more seasoned writers, and have learned techniques and styles, and therefore mentalities as well, from them (Box, foreigner, 07/09/2019). Of the 12 Vietnamese artists I interviewed, five identified with the first generation while the remaining seven writers identified with the second one. There appears to be “a kind of generational divide” between these two groups, with some younger writers -- described as the second generation -- straying from the practices and techniques of the older generation. Across both generations, the majority of graffiti activities in Hanoi can be categorized as either piecing or bombing (defined in my Introduction chapter, or see Glossary).

Although there appears to be a fairly equal split numerically between foreign and Vietnamese writers, individuals such as expatriate graffiti artist Doves (foreigner, 06/11/2019) explained that “the majority are foreign, bombers especially. They run the scene”. From further interviews I found that this has caused some tension between the two groups, with some Vietnamese writers feeling like there is a disconnect between their approaches and philosophy,

and the ways of the foreign writers. “If you want incredible work by Vietnamese,” Vietnamese graffiti writer Rival (local, 07/08/2019) suggested, “you have to go to Saigon. Hanoi is a big international scene, they go bombing everywhere, drunk, no rules, no respect”. Some local writers, such as Nope, find this aspect of the scene upsetting, as it occasionally results in their work being painted over, or crossed, by foreign writers. He explained: “you spend a lot of time and money doing something original and new, and someone just paints over you in an old style that’s not beautiful or cool. If what someone was putting up was better, I would be okay with it, but if it’s just black bubble letters, it’s frustrating because paint is so expensive” (Nope, local, 06/27/2019).

Despite the frequent inseparability of conflict and graffiti culture, there appeared to be remarkably little tension in the scene in Hanoi (Macdonald 2001; Castleman 1982). There were only two cases of ‘beef’, or problems between two writers, that I heard about during my time in the field. The first was between two expatriate writers, and the other was caused by a young Vietnamese writer who was unaware of certain ‘rules’ in the culture, specifically that one should never paint over the work of a writer who has died. This mistake resulted in his graffiti then being ‘crossed’ (painted over) by an expatriate writer as a way to “put him in his place” (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). Nonetheless, the expatriate writer stressed that this was handled significantly more amicably than it would have if it had happened back in his home country, where a physical fight would have most likely ensued (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). Indeed, most graffiti writers whom I interviewed framed Hanoi’s graffiti scene as a friendly, tight-knit community, where “everyone’s cool with each other, and you’re able to take your time with your pieces, rather than rushing it, always looking over your shoulder for the cops” (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). I now provide a deeper analysis of the individuals and practices that make up this subculture in Hanoi.

### **4.3 Vietnamese Graffiti Writers**

In this section, I focus on the backgrounds and perspectives of the Vietnamese graffiti writers and artists whom I interviewed. I begin with an overview of their general demographics, including age and employment status, before moving on to analyze their methods and means of creation, and the underlying motivations behind their acts.

#### *4.3.1 Participant Demographics*

Of the 33 individuals I interviewed, 12 were Vietnamese and self-identified as either graffiti writers or street artists. All identified as male. They ranged in age from 17 to 32, with the average age being 24. Of these 12 individuals, only one considered the creation of street art as their full-time job, frequently painting commissioned pieces for cafes and bars, with the remaining 11 considering it as a hobby or passion. Four of these 11 individuals worked as tattoo artists to gain an income, two had their own vintage clothing store or brand, and the remaining five did not specify their method of employment. Despite the majority of participants not identifying the creation of street art as their job, seven of the 12 had been paid to do commissioned works in the past, either for establishments, such as cafes and bars, or in the private homes of family and friends. Seven of the 12 participants identified as being active graffiti writers and connected to the ‘scene’, one identified as being a street artist, and the remaining four individuals had done graffiti less than four times, and did not express being involved with, or knowledgeable of, the graffiti community or culture in Hanoi. Although all of these individuals were born and raised in Vietnam, only seven had been born in Hanoi, with the remaining five having moved to Hanoi at either a young age with their families, or to attend university.

#### *4.3.2 Catalysts and Strategies for Creation*

The oldest generation, the writers who pioneered the scene in Vietnam, said they discovered graffiti through hip hop culture. Most had been involved in other areas of the hip hop scene, such as breakdancing, and had found out about graffiti through movies and various online forums. Each of these individuals taught themselves how to paint, studying the works of other writers online, and practicing on paper as they saved up to buy cans of spray paint. The younger second generation generally began doing graffiti in similar ways, practicing and learning from other writers, although they more frequently utilized social media pages like Graffiti Hà Nội<sup>3</sup>, which had come into being with the establishment of the scene in the country. This forum

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<sup>3</sup> [Graffiti Hà Nội Facebook Page](#)

predominantly features Vietnamese graffiti, rather than works done in Europe and North America.

The strategies for creation utilized by these writers varied, as some focused on creating commissioned street art pieces, which were therefore legal and catered to the client, while others preferred creating characters or pieces on various walls and surfaces along city streets. Tagging was mainly reserved for the Old Quarter in Hoàn Kiếm district, as the electricity boxes which stand at every street corner provide a perfect canvas for a tag in paint marker. The busyness of the Old Quarter, along with the higher police presence, also makes it difficult to create more detailed, time-consuming pieces, which is why most writers stick to tagging or doing quick throw ups in that area (Wiz, local, 06/19/2019). Larger, more detailed pieces are generally kept for Tây Hồ, a fairly upmarket area with expatriate and diplomatic accommodation, but where a number of younger expatriate English teachers also live in shared accommodation. In this area, it appears that graffiti is viewed as more socially acceptable (Minh Meo, local, 07/03/2019). Each of the writers I spoke to classified paint as expensive, costing about 85,000-90,000 VND for a can (~\$5CAD), and predominantly used brand name paints such as One Take or Montana. Zui Boy, one of the first Vietnamese graffiti writers in Hanoi, suggested that painting a detailed piece on a large wall in Hanoi could require up to 20 cans of paint, culminating in spending around 2,000,000 VND, or a little over \$100CAD (Zui Boy, local, 06/19/2019). When speaking about his strategies for creation, Zunk (local, 07/17/2019) reported that

The Vietnamese are not naughty... it always depends on attitude and the place, always on the place. And it's about your quality, if your quality is good, even for bombing, even for throw ups – with good colours, the 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].

Nope (local, 06/27/2019) emphasized that he tends to avoid private property altogether, while also stating that he does 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 up to buy more paints and do a beautiful piece that people won't hate”.

#### *4.3.3 Motivations and Mentalities*

“Graffiti is about expressing what you already have,” says Dath, a local artist (06/29/2019) “and through that, finding freedom”. Each of the 12 Vietnamese writers I interviewed spoke of finding

freedom through the creation of graffiti, as it allows them to engage in an artistic form of self-expression that is not confined to the rigid rules and regulations they associate with the art world. “It adds something to the street if done properly,” writer Minh Meo told me (local, 07/03/2019). Wiz echoed this mentality, explaining:

I would want to define my art as something you can find chill in... it will be better for people, 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 would be better for everyone” (Wiz, local, 06/19/2019).

For these artists, graffiti is associated with positive aspirations of creation in Hanoi, rather than destruction, in comparison to how graffiti is often considered in Western contexts (Cresswell 1992; Macondald 2001). “I just love the work,” Rival told me, “I love the free feeling” (Rival, local, 07/08/2019).

Despite Vietnamese graffiti writers framing their work in a positive way, it does not always have an entirely positive reception. When questioned on this, local artist Zui Boy (06/19/2019) explained, “Vietnam society isn't open like in the West. Graffiti is about freedom, and this is very opposite to the system in Vietnam”. These artists therefore try to keep their graffiti as inoffensive as possible; “we're already painting illegally somewhere, so we don't touch politics” (Zunk, local, 07/17/2019). “Don't get me wrong, we have a lot of problems with our government,” Wiz added, when speaking on the transgressive nature of graffiti, “but we don't want to transport that to art. It's separate. 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 it's what we're good at, and it's how we are free” (Wiz, local, 06/19/2019).

#### *4.3.4 Summary*

Generally speaking, Vietnamese graffiti writers are more likely to create detailed pieces, whereas the majority of expatriate writers tend to focus their energy on bombing, as detailed next. Vietnamese writers are also conscious of avoiding painting on surfaces such as private property, and speak of trying to create pieces that will be positively received by the general public rather than work that will be negatively frowned upon, or seen as damaging property.

#### **4.4 Expatriate and foreign Graffiti Writers**

In this section I change my focus to individuals engaging in graffiti or street art practices who do not identify as Vietnamese, and who have moved to Hanoi from their home countries. Following the same structure as the last section, I begin with an overview of participant demographics before moving on to answer the questions of how, and why, these individuals create.

##### *4.4.1 Participant Demographics*

Six of the 33 individuals I interviewed in Hanoi identified as expatriate or foreign graffiti writers, and all of these individuals identified as male. Five were residing in Hanoi as expatriates, while one additional individual had travelled to Hanoi on a contract with the spray paint company One Take to create a video of him doing graffiti throughout South East Asia. These individuals ranged in age from 24 to 35, with the average age being 28 (thus on average, four years older than the Vietnamese artists I interviewed). Of the five residing in Hanoi, four were employed as English teachers, one was employed as an art teacher, and the sixth was working remotely as he prepared for his departure to teach English in another country. All of these individuals described themselves as being active in the scene, and only one of the six had started doing graffiti in Vietnam – the other five had all done graffiti in their respective home countries. Only two of the six individuals reported repeatedly going out and either piecing or bombing with Vietnamese writers. The remaining four writers all reported sticking mainly with the expatriate community, although they all spoke highly of Vietnamese writers, and mentioned wanting to paint with them more frequently.

##### *4.4.2 Catalysts and Strategies for Creation*

Each of the five writers who began doing graffiti before moving to Hanoi became involved with it in their early teens, and most of them associated this period with anger and rebellion. All of these individuals started with tags and throw ups, with three of them stealing paint as a means to create, as they were unable to afford it at the time. System01, a British writer who has lived in Asia for five years, began doing graffiti because “he was young and anti-establishment” (foreigner, 07/04/2019), a sentiment shared by Ware, Doves, Oupa, and Zima. While System01 now focuses on painting characters, the others mainly do throw ups and tags, and still classify what they do, first and foremost, as bombing, although they do occasionally create more detailed,

artistic pieces. Doves (foreigner, 06/11/2019) spoke to me of his common method for doing graffiti: “When I move somewhere, I do shitloads of throwies first, always fills, I try not to do hollows, then I’ll just go hard on tagging, spend weeks every night just tagging, maybe months, and then maybe mix it up, throwies tags throwies tags” . The goal, he says is to “kind of paint the city, smash it”, so as to ‘get up’, or ‘king the city’, gaining status and respect in the subculture (Doves, foreigner, 06/11/2019; see also Macdonald 2001).

The cost of spray paint in Hanoi is relatively cheap compared to in these writers’ home countries, “a couple euros for a can”, and since teaching English is a lucrative job, especially with the low costs of living in Hanoi for foreigners, most expatriate writers view the city as “a painter’s dream” (Doves, foreigner, 06/11/2019). This is complemented by the city’s plethora of construction sites, providing no shortage of corrugated iron sheet fencing to use as a painting surface. All of these writers explained moving to Hanoi in search of a calmer, less conventional lifestyle, although some mentioned having to flee their own countries after getting in legal trouble for doing graffiti back home. Doves (foreigner, 06/11/2019) added that many graffiti writers flock to South East Asia because “it is one of the only places where you can go and paint freely”. Writers view Global South countries like Vietnam as an ideal place to paint, due to a lack of regulations: “You don’t have to worry about the cops out here, that’s one of the reasons why so many people want to come out here to paint” (Box, foreigner, 07/09/2019). Times do seem to be changing, though, with authorities becoming more vigilant as graffiti becomes more present. “The bubble’s popping, and when Asia’s gone, it’s not going to exist on the same level... we’re all waiting for them to make an example out of one person. They’re going to pick one, they’re going to f\*\*k him, and it’s going to change the whole thing” (Doves, foreigner, 06/11/2019).

The only writer who began painting in Hanoi, Box, goes about his creations in a manner that diverges from the other expatriate writers. Box (foreigner, 07/09/2019) started painting with a Vietnamese friend, Nasty, a break dancer and well-known writer in the scene, and mainly does pieces. Before painting, if it is on private property, he says he tries to ask for permission: “We’ll just talk to people and ask if we can paint on their wall. Sometimes they say ‘yeah’, sometimes they say ‘no’, and if they say no we respect it and don’t paint there” (Box, foreigner, 07/09/2019).

#### *4.4.3 Motivations and Mentalities*

The mentalities surrounding graffiti for expatriate writers appeared to differ in some regards from those of Vietnamese writers. Although expatriate writers also spoke of graffiti as a form of self-expression, most did not define their works as primarily artistic. “It’s like an addiction,” Doves told me, “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” (foreigner, 06/11/2019). Vietnamese writers explained that they became frustrated when their work was either ‘crossed or buffed’, as they had spent substantial time and resources to create their piece. In order to avoid this, most Vietnamese writers catered to the public as a means of remaining ‘up’; being careful with the kinds of graffiti they created, and where they did it, so as not to provoke its removal. In comparison, expatriate writers such as Doves and Oupa spoke of the minimal buffing that takes place in Hanoi with a degree of boredom. “I wish they kind of buffed more, to be honest,” Doves told me (foreigner, 06/11/2019). The lack of buffing alters the game, and changes the rules on some level, because there ceases to be a need to go out and paint in order to remain visible in the city. “I’m getting bored of painting here,” Oupa told me, “there’s not enough excitement, the cops don’t care or stop you” (foreigner, 06/24/2019). For thrill-seeking foreign writers, Hanoi does not offer them the adrenaline and rush that comes with 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” (Doves, foreigner, 06/11/2019).

Despite this desire for more excitement, many foreign writers spoke of how their mentalities regarding graffiti have changed since coming to Asia. Doves 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” (Doves, foreigner, 06/11/2019). Foreign writers who noted that they generally stuck to themselves back home had also begun socializing with other people in the scene since moving to Hanoi. Moreover, individuals who used to only go out bombing noted that they have begun creating more artistic pieces as well, or at least have gained an appreciation for these more alternative forms of graffiti. “When I was younger,” Doves told me, “I was looking for beef, and I 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” (Dove, foreigner, 06/11/2019).



## 4.5 Chapter Conclusions

In this chapter I have sought to analyse a number of characteristics regarding the individuals who engage in the creation of graffiti in Hanoi, as well as the factors that affect how, and why, they create. I found that strategies for creation varied between the Vietnamese and expatriate graffiti communities, with Vietnamese writers being more concerned with the creation of artistic pieces which would be positively received, and expatriate writers focusing more on getting ‘up’, and the ‘rush’ associated with doing graffiti. The wealth disparity between these two groups also appears to have influenced how they view graffiti. Vietnamese writers described spray paint as expensive compared to their incomes, and therefore they were more careful with what, where, and how they created. Expatriate writers, on the other hand, viewed their lifestyle in Hanoi to be extremely affordable, and were not as concerned with the costs of paint, or their work pleasing the general public. Despite these differences in mentalities, the scene in Hanoi did appear to be relatively relaxed and devoid of conflict, with the two groups managing to coexist. “We all have the same way of life, the same spirit of doing it together,” Dath told me. “Each [locals and foreigners] might have differences about styles or ways of approaching but still, in the same mindset of doing graffiti... the ultimate goal is freedom, freedom is everything, and they all have that” (Dath local, 06/29/2019).

## **CHAPTER 5. RESULTS: SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF GRAFFITI IN HANOI**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I present key findings from my analysis in order to answer the second of my three research questions: **What are the spatial dimensions at play in the creation of graffiti and what are the reasons behind any spatial patterns that might exist across the city?** In order to address this research question, I have divided the following chapter into three sections. First, I give an overview of the areas in Hanoi which have the highest graffiti presence, and offer an analysis of the conditions present in each area which allow for this concentration (5.2, 5.3). I then extend this analysis to the medium of trains, a common canvas for graffiti writers (5.4). This is then complemented by an investigation into how graffiti writers and artists negotiate the social, physical, and cultural boundaries which serve as either deterrents or catalysts for creation in these areas, and what happens when these boundaries are crossed (5.5).

### **5.2 Spatial Analysis**

In this spatial analysis, I begin with a general review of the surfaces used and styles of graffiti in the two districts where I observed the highest concentrations of graffiti in Hanoi, namely Hoàn Kiếm, which includes the Old Quarter but is not restricted to that area, and Tây Hồ (West Lake). I then analyze the specific qualities each area possess that I argue lead to either the presence, or absence, of graffiti. I end this section with a brief overview of painting trains, a graffiti practice which has much higher stakes than the painting of other surfaces in Hanoi.

#### *5.2.1 Tây Hồ / West lake*

Tây Hồ, or West Lake, wraps around the largest lake in the city. It is home to a large expatriate population, and is viewed by many locals and foreigners as a calmer residential alternative to the central, bustling Hoàn Kiếm district. With the higher presence of expatriates and many temporary construction walls that surround large new housing and commercial building sites in the area, this neighbourhood has the highest concentration of graffiti and street art in the city. Of all the writers I interviewed, each listed West Lake as the area they do graffiti the most frequently, with both Vietnamese and expatriate writers agreeing that “graf is pretty socially acceptable in the area” (Minh Meo, local, 07/03/2019). Box, for instance, has only painted in

West Lake, and says he likes the area because he can take his time with what he paints rather than having to look over his shoulder all the time, which he would have to do in the Old Quarter (Box, foreigner, 07/09/2019). Oupa (foreigner, 06/24/2019) told me that Tây Hồ is preferable for piecing and bombing, as “no one cares, and you don’t get in any trouble there... you can paint during the day even, but the best time to paint is after midnight when everything closes and cops are no longer around”. The areas with the highest concentrations of graffiti in Tây Hồ can be seen in Map 5.1 below:



*Map 5.1 Areas in Tây Hồ with highest graffiti concentrations, illustrated with graffiti from each area  
Map by author*

### *5.2.2 Temporary Construction Walls*

Certain conditions in Tây Hồ are especially conducive to graffiti. The high presence of temporary construction walls, made out of corrugated iron, provide an ideal surface for quick throws and tags. Although these walls belong to private construction sites, they are generally viewed as public domain. Figure 5.1 is an example of a throw completed on such a temporary construction wall by expatriate writer Doves, while Figure 5.2 includes throws by the expat

writer Box and the Vietnamese writer Nasty, who frequently paint together. These spaces are the most common sites to find graffiti, with most of the corrugated iron in the area already serving as a host to at least one piece of graffiti. I was told that this is because it is “the chilliest surface to paint, the private security guards have even come out before while I was painting and just given a thumbs up saying it looks nice” (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). Doves added: “Even the locals are more understanding when it’s construction compared to someone’s house”(foreigner, 06/11/2019). Wiz (local, 06/19/2019) explained that he mainly paints on these temporary walls, as “they’re going to go down anyway, and it looks better to have colour on it”. Rival1 seconded this sentiment, saying that when he goes out bombing in Tây Hồ, he chooses “the walls that are old, dirty, or temporary,” and avoids bombing in new spaces (local, 07/08/2019).



*Figure 5.1 Graffiti (throw up) on temporary construction wall by Doves in Tây Hồ  
Photo by author*



*Figure 5.2 Graffiti on temporary construction wall in Tây Hồ by Box and Nasty  
Photo by author*

### *5.2.3 Private Shutters*

Another, more controversial surface, whose omnipresence in the area transforms its use into a canvas for writers, is the private shutter or roller door. These are located on most store fronts, as well as at the front of many private homes, and are generally rolled up during the day. When night falls, however, the landscape of the area changes drastically with the closing of the shutters. The various pieces and throws that had been hidden all day are once again visible. The fact the graffiti on these surfaces is only visible during the night, deters some writers. “How I see it,” Doves (foreigner, 06/11/2019) told me, “is that where I try and paint is the most visual place, and those shutters, unless it’s an abandoned building, they’ll be up during the day. So I’m not as interested, I try more to get walls, when I can”. Writers like Box, however, find the shutters to be a more permissible private surface to paint on - “I’d be okay with doing it on the shutters, just because they’re usually only pulled down at night” (Box, foreigner, 07/09/2019). The Vietnamese writer Nope believes, regardless of the temporality of the surface, that it is rude to paint on private property. “It’s disrespectful to paint on someone’s home that they worked so hard to get. Some home owners in Tây Hồ don’t have the resources to buy paint over and over, so they just have to leave the graffiti up, not because they want it” (Nope, local, 06/27/2019).



This runs contrary to the logic of Ware (foreigner, 07/19/2019), who believes “if people don’t like the graffiti, they’ll buff it themselves. If people don’t mind it, they’ll keep it up” . Ware, however, still avoids painting private shutters so as not to upset local property owners: “I used to paint garage shutters,” Ware told me, “but I don’t really do that anymore. I thought it was for shops, but I realize now that it’s people’s homes too, so I don’t want to paint there” (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). Despite the variance in opinions, many shutters are painted in West Lake, with several examples demonstrated in Figures 5.3 and 5.4.



*Figure 5.3 Graffiti (throws) on private shutters off Âu Cơ-Nghi Tâm Road street  
Photo by author*



*Figure 5.4 Graffiti (tags) on private shutters  
Photo by author (on film)*

#### *5.2.4 Quasi-Legal Graffiti Walls*

When creating pieces, writers tend to gravitate towards areas where there is already a high presence of graffiti, and it is therefore deemed more acceptable. Three specific spaces mentioned by each Vietnamese writer were the walls that enclose the Hồ Tây Water Park (an amusement park), at the north-east of Tây Hồ; the public space off Lạc Long Quân, along Trích Sài in Tây Hồ, where the walls are coated in graffiti; and a graffiti alley at Ngõ 12 - Đặng Thai Mai. Each of these spaces host the majority of pieces in the area - the larger, more intricate works. Although these walls are generally viewed as acceptable to paint on, with all the writers who have written on them saying no public or private officials have ever stopped them while painting there, they are not strictly legal (Zunk, local, 07/17/2019). “There are no graffiti walls that are supported by local government, if anything maybe a foreign embassy would create a graffiti wall but this is not common and I don’t know of any” (Zui Boi, local, 06/19/2019). The graffiti on these walls therefore exist in a quasi-legal state, which draws many writers to these areas to write, despite the minimal space available. The wall along the Water Park, for instance, was recently re-painted by a group of Vietnamese and foreign writers at the end of July of 2019. The group had to first paint over their old pieces in order to have room to paint the new ones in this desirable spot. This is demonstrative of the competition for space in the area, leading writers to



do graffiti on surrounding walls in close proximity to ‘acceptable spaces’. Wiz, for instance, mentioned a piece he had completed shortly before our interview near a public park by Lạc Long Quân, but due to the lack of space within the confines of the park itself, placed it on a wall bordering the park. These spaces are especially desirable due to their high car and motorbike traffic, and therefore high visibility (Wiz, local, 06/19/2019).



*Figure 5.5 Piece by Wiz next to public park in Tây Hồ  
Photo by author*



*Figure 5.6 Pieces on the wall surrounding Hồ Tây Water Park  
Photo by Sarah Turner*



### 5.2.5 Changes in the Area

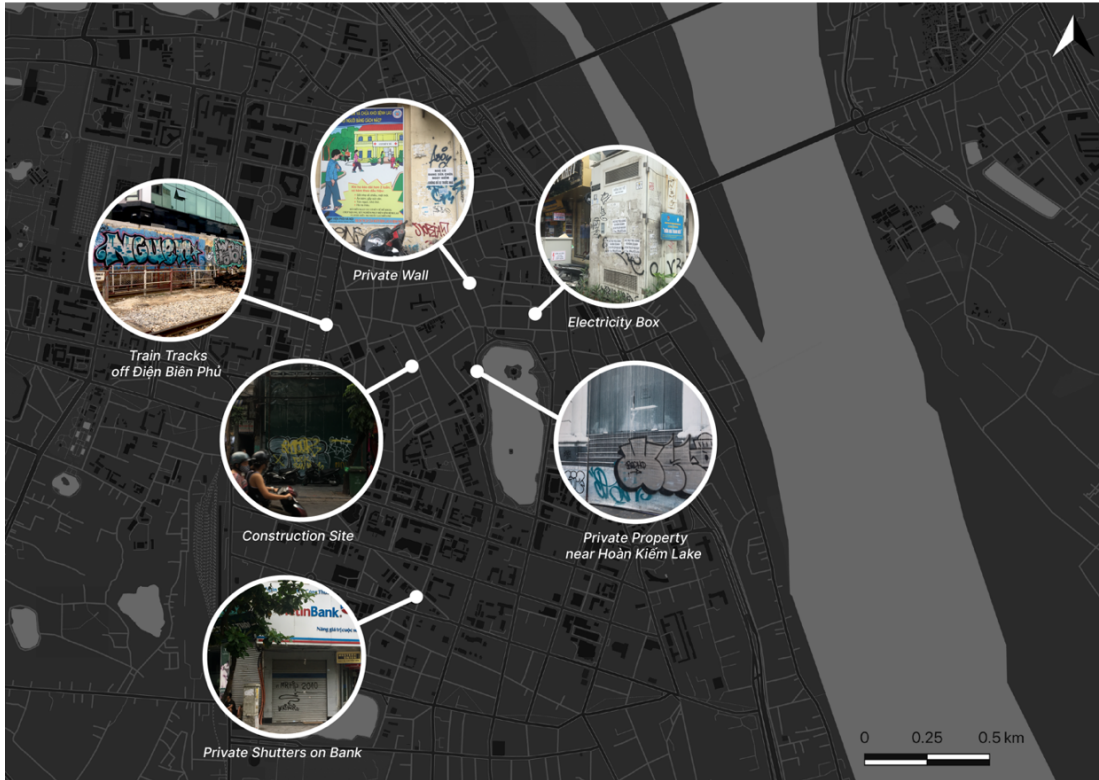
Although Tây Hồ is considered calmer than downtown areas with regards to the concentration of traffic, lower pollution and local authorities known to be more lenient towards graffiti, there have still been some tensions between local residents and writers. The street Âu Cơ-Nghi Tàm used to be a magnet for graffiti, as it has “high visibility since everyone drives along that road coming to the Old Quarter from the airport” (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). Recently, however, this has changed, and all of the works were buffed, or painted over (Figure 12). In February 2019, around the time the graffiti was buffed, several media outlets ran a story on the graffiti along the Âu Cơ road which framed expatriate graffiti writers in a negative light. “It had some really beautiful pieces,” Ware told me, “but the media framed it negatively, saying it was destructive” (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). The media outlets “interviewed some locals and police who said it was ugly, said there was CCTV footage of westerners doing it late at night. After that, people were more careful with graffiti” (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). Some writers fear that these anti-graffiti campaigns will become more widespread, restricting their ability to create in the future.



*Figure 5.7 Buffed graffiti along Âu Cơ-Nghi Tàm Road  
Photo by author*

### **5.3 Spatial Analysis - Hoàn Kiếm**

Hoàn Kiếm refers to the urban core of Hanoi, which includes the historical Old Quarter, and is a busy, high density district full of restaurants, hostels, and mixed use commercial and residential buildings. Tagging is more predominant in the Old Quarter than many other areas of the city, with piecing generally being restricted to a quasi-legal wall along the train tracks (Figure 5.11). Although some writers, such as Wiz, still go out bombing in this area, they generally create smaller pieces, frequently using paint markers rather than spray paint to tag (Wiz, local, 06/19/2019). It is common to see throws on private shutters in the area (see Figure 5.8), as well as on some public and private walls, however, these are less widespread than in Tây Hồ. Oupa, an expatriate writer, has predominantly painted in the Old Quarter, mainly doing quick throws and fills, or tags with paint markers which he says he always has with him (Oupa, foreigner, 06/24/2019). Writers like Oupa and Wiz (local) generally wait until after midnight to paint in the area, once shops have closed and shop shutters are down. All of the writers I spoke with, except two, had painted in the Old Quarter before, although they all painted in Tây Hồ more frequently. The areas with the highest concentrations of graffiti in Hoàn Kiếm can be seen in Map 5.2 below:



Map 5.2 Areas in Hoàn Kiếm with highest graffiti concentrations, illustrated with graffiti from each area  
Map by author



Figure 5.8 Graffiti by expatriate writer on shutter of a bank in the Old Quarter  
Photo by author

### 5.3.1 Electricity Boxes

The electricity boxes which are placed on most sidewalks in the Old Quarter are also frequently tagged by writers. These boxes are normally reserved for smaller tags, done in paint marker, or writers will place stickers on them. The stickers are a kind of printed tag, normally just a print of their chosen name. They are “a way for writers to communicate, and it’s cool to make the electricity boxes look better,” Nope told me (06/27/2019). An example of this style of graffiti on electricity boxes can be seen in Figure 5.9 and 5.10.



*Figure 5.9 Electricity box in Old Quarter with stickers and tags  
Photo by author*





*Figure 5.10 Close up of electricity box with stickers and tags  
Photo by author*

### *5.3.2 Public and Private Walls*

The prevalence of graffiti on public and private walls in the Old Quarter is less than in Tây Hồ however there are still a significant number of pieces and throw ups in the area. The main area for piecing appears to be by the train tracks, off Điện Biên Phủ Road, pictured in Figure 5.11. The fact that this location is away from main streets makes it a good place to do longer, more detailed pieces. Several private and public walls have also been painted in the Old Quarter, generally with quick throws, and it appears that these are mainly done by foreign writers. The wall pictured below, in Figure 5.11, is the only name I, or any of the people I interviewed, are aware of that is in Vietnamese as most writers, Vietnamese or foreign, use English graffiti names. “The rumours say he’s half-Vietnamese,” Zunk told me, “It’s a really popular family name in Vietnam, Nguyen. It’s the family name of the last king, the last dynasty in Vietnam was Nguyen” (Zunk, local, 07/17/2019).



*Figure 5.11 Pieces by train tracks in Old Quarter  
Photo by me*

#### **5.4 Trains**

Trains are also known to be a highly desirable canvas for graffiti writers, as they extend the reach of the writer's name and widen the audience, both highly sought after in this subculture (Macdonald 2001). Aside from visibility, painting trains is also “generally seen as a greater achievement and granted more respect than one upon a wall” due to the fact that it is a much more dangerous endeavour (Macdonald 2001: 83). Freight trains and passenger trains are well regarded as spots to paint pieces, however, this is difficult in Hanoi. Although a writer spoke to me of painting three trains in Saigon, a freighter and two commuters, none of the writers I spoke to mentioned painting trains in Hanoi, although all of the expatriate writers, aside from Box, mentioned painting trains elsewhere. Painting trains seems to be a less common practice in Hanoi, with one seasoned writer telling me that he does not paint them anymore as there is “no scene for that here” (System01, foreigner, 07/04/2019). Throughout my interviews, however, one story of an expatriate writer painting a train frequently came up, detailed next (Figure 5.12).



*Figure 5.12 Graffiti on Hanoi metro  
Photo from Saigoneer.com 12/17*

#### *5.4.1 Hanoi Metro Controversy*

Hanoi is currently constructing four metro lines and, although it is not yet operational, the project has become highly symbolic as it conveys a sense that Hanoi is becoming a ‘modern city’. One writer in Hanoi, whose identity has become an exciting mystery to uncover in the graffiti scene, succeeded in painting one of the city’s metro carriages while it was in storage at Cat Linh Station (Zunk, local, 07/17/2019). The carriage the writer painted was from the one line that is being funded by China. This incident happened in 2017, and a police investigation was started soon after, something that is almost unheard of regarding graffiti in Hanoi (Minh Meo, local, 07/03/2019). “It was because of the metro, not because of the graffiti” Zunk told me, “because the train was made by China, and in Vietnam people don’t like it. There’s also a debate about if we need the metro or not, so it became a scandal because of the situation” (local, 07/17/2019). “He got f\*\*cked” Doves said when speaking about the incident, “they’re still looking for him but he flew out right away. Bombing a metro guaranteed you’d be going away for a long time to a Vietnamese prison,” with Doves adding that the police would have viewed the graffiti on the train as anti-state (foreigner, 06/11/2019). Soor1, a local artist in Hanoi who predominantly does commissioned street art pieces, told me the police contacted him during the investigation to see if

he knew who had done it, and if he could help catch them (Soor1, local, 07/10/2019). He told me that police care about vandalism, and that he knew right away when he saw the piece that it was by a foreigner, as “it is only foreigners who do the vandalism style” (Soor1, local, 07/10/2019). Despite the controversy, government officials were not able to find the writer who had done this, but such an act has yet to be attempted again.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter I sought to better understand the spatial dimensions of graffiti in Hanoi, as well as the factors that affect where, and how, graffiti writers create their pieces. From observations around the city as a whole and interviewee comments I determined Tây Hồ and Hoàn Kiếm to be the two districts with the highest graffiti presence. The factors that seem to influence the presence of graffiti in these areas include the surfaces available, for instance, a high concentration of temporary construction walls around new large buildings is likely to coincide with a high concentration of graffiti, and reactions of locals and authorities. Although foreign and Vietnamese writers go about their creations with different strategies, focusing on different types of graffiti, each group limits their graffiti to the same surfaces and areas, with the exception of private shutters. Graffiti appears to be tolerated by locals and officials in Tây Hồ and the Old Quarter in Hoàn Kiếm, however, there are still certain cases, such as that of the yet-to-be-commissioned metro, which provoke investigation and potential harsher punishments due to the assumptions of anti-state sentiment in these acts.



## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION. PERCEPTIONS, REPURCUSSIONS, AND RESISTANCE**

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

This discussion is guided by the research question: **is the creation of graffiti in Hanoi a form of everyday politics and resistance, or do their creators have other intentions?** In the first section of this chapter, I give an overview of the punishments for graffiti, and offer cases where writers have managed to navigate and avoid punishment (6.2). In the following section, I offer the public's perception of graffiti with an analysis of my interviews with nine locals (6.3). I then present findings that posit graffiti writers' methods of creation as forms of everyday compliance and resistance. I frame the self-censorship and negotiations that take place during creation as methods to avoid the possible punishments that could come with crossing these boundaries, while ensuring writers maintain their ability to create (6.4). I conclude by summarizing my key research findings (6.5).

### **6.2 Punishment and Repercussions**

#### *6.2.1 Getting Caught*

Of all the active Vietnamese writers I talked to (7 Vietnamese writers considered themselves active), only two had never been caught and punished by local Hanoi authorities or private security guards for doing graffiti. Rival1, one of these writers, explained he never gets in trouble with the police because he only paints “the walls that are old and dirty,” and makes sure to make his work beautiful (local, 07/08/2019). People “see a lot of dirty bombing in the streets, and they don't like this kind of graffiti. People want good graffiti, not dirty, they want nice colours, nice flow, ones that take time” (Rival1, local, 07/08/2019). Soor1, the other artist who has never had any trouble with police or locals, echoed the sentiment that, as long as your graffiti is beautiful and you avoid painting in certain places, you will not get in trouble (Soor1, local, 07/10/2019). “There are two kinds of graffiti,” he explained, “vandalism, which is underground, dirty graffiti, and then there is artistic graffiti, which is above ground, clean, and artistic. Police care about the vandalism style,” but, he added, not about the artistic style that attempts to cater to the themes and desires of the place (Soor1, local, 07/10/2019).

The other active Vietnamese writers whom I interviewed had all been caught by private security guards or ward police before, although Zui Boi emphasized that he was only caught

when he was younger, and not since he had become more focused on the artistic side of graffiti (Zui Boi, local, 06/19/2019). Despite most writers having confrontations with some authority figure, these encounters did not always lead to a fine or arrest. Writers often told me it was easy to evade punishment by running away, negotiating with the authorities, or paying a bribe. When speaking of his friends, who are Vietnamese writers, Box told me that when they got caught “nothing happened to them... one of my friends, I think like 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]” (Box, foreigner, 07/09/2019). Zunk recounted a story about a drunken policeman who tried to apprehend him and some friends after catching them doing graffiti, although what they ended up being taken in for was parking illegally on the street. “We had to write a paper,” Zunk (07/17/2019) told me,

about how sorry we were for being there or something, but in the police station there were two opinions – one opinion is ok, there is not any crime – because we were painting a music scene with a cat playing guitar, it was so cute – so half the police said ok, let them go, but the drunken policeman tried to show off his power”.

Zunk continued to recall that the group of four writers ended up being 1,500,000 VND total (approximately \$90 CAD), and Zunk had his motorbike license briefly seized. Zunk framed this situation as representative of certain police wanting to assert their authority and “make trouble”, although he did state that this turn of events was specific to encounters with “drunken policemen”, and that not all authorities responded to graffiti in this way (local, 07/17/2019).

Only one foreign writer mentioned getting in trouble with the police for doing graffiti, and even being beaten up by a police officer once, despite the same writer telling me that “unless you paint something anti-government in Vietnam, it’s normally okay” (System01, foreigner, 07/04/2019). All the other expatriate writers I interviewed mentioned how police rarely pay attention to them, but that most of them have been chased or yelled at by local residents before, especially when painting on private property or shutters (Ware, foreigner, 07/19/2019). Doves told me that “mostly people don’t care,” but he did warn that occasionally there are “locals” that get upset and take action, “like one person in Saigon, a drunk guy, who threw a can of beer at me” (foreigner, 06/11/2019). Zunk added to this, telling me: “sometimes in Hanoi you will see men with swords on the street. I’m only scared of those people – not of the police” (local, 07/17/2019).

### 6.2.2 Punishment

Generally, when caught doing graffiti the individual has to pay a fine. Zui Boi estimated the fine to be “a couple million Vietnamese dong” [approximately \$120 CAN], while Dath suggested 1,500,000 VND [approximately \$90 CAD], and Nope estimated the figure to be around 1,000,000 VND [approximately \$60 CAD] (Zui Boi 06/19/2019; Dath 06/29/2019; Nope 06/27/2019). When Wiz got caught by local police, he told me “I had to sit in the station for two or three hours until my dad could come pick me up and apologize” (Wiz 06/19/2019). Wiz added that often if you get caught painting a private wall, “you’ll have to paint it back to the original colour. I’ve done that twice – painted over my own work as public service” (Wiz 06/19/2019). Although Doves had never been caught in Hanoi, he recounted several stories of him or his friends being apprehended by law enforcement in Saigon. “There’s been times that I’ve been painting in Saigon,” he told me, “there would be one Vietnamese guy painting with us, and the police drove past us, one [police] guy on the back of the bike, and it was westerner, westerner, westerner, Vietnamese guy [writing] – and they just punched him [the Vietnamese writer] in the face” (Doves, foreigner, 06/11/2019). Nonetheless, despite Doves having “the foreigner card,” an expression he used to explain that being a foreigner places him in a much more privileged situation than Vietnamese writers, he had been arrested before for doing graffiti in Saigon. “I got brought back to the station, and it was nine hours of sitting on a wooden stool and a massive amount of paperwork...but my name, which they kind of got wrong, was published in a police newspaper” (Doves, foreigner, 06/11/2019). In the end, Doves told me: “I paid a 500k bribe, which, I don’t know if I should say, but we also paid the official fine, which was about 1,500,000 VND, so I paid about, in Euros, 50 Euros maybe? Not so bad” (ibid.).

Although no one I interviewed spoke 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”, which has a fine of about 200,000 VND [approximately \$12 CAD] (Nam Phung: 2011). Another writer in this documentary mentioned being fined the same amount for “dirtying the wall”, which they mentioned was similar to being charged for littering (Nam Phung: 2011). Both this documentary and my own interviews show that there are no official laws about graffiti in Hanoi, and that the punishments writers have received are often for other misdemeanours (Nam Phung: 2011).

### 6.2.3 Conclusions

In this section, I have looked at the punishments in place for doing graffiti in Hanoi. Fines appear to be the most common punishment, however, there does not appear to be a standard protocol or policy regarding how authorities are supposed to respond. No writers or key informants in the art scene were able to cite a specific policy regarding graffiti, however, I did find that writers have been formally charged for illegal advertising and littering (Nam Phung: 2011). Punishment seems to work on a case-by-case basis, determined through spatial and verbal negotiations between writers, security guards, and local authorities. Private security guards and local officials who reacted negatively to writers doing graffiti were often described as ‘drunk’, with graffiti writers implying that these confrontations were the fault of the guards or officials who drunkenly picked fights, and that under different circumstances no problems would have arisen. Although almost every writer had a story about a run in with angry locals or authorities, these instances did not appear representative of the most common reactions to painting in public spaces, which most writers cited as a kind of curiosity. “It’s so different,” Doves (foreigner, 06/11/2019) told me, 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”.

### 6.3 Perceptions

Of the nine interviews I conducted with individuals who were not associated with graffiti, all of them agreed that when done in the ‘right place,’ they would describe graffiti as beautiful and as an art form. An older woman I spoke with in Tây Hồ, who is responsible for keeping a number of public toilets in the area clean, spoke to me about how one of the toilets was recently painted by a foreign writer. “On the wall near the water park it’s okay, it’s new and beautiful” she told me, “but not here on my property, and not when it’s old and dirty” (18/07/2019). She then went on to ask me what the graffiti meant, and if it was a signal foreigners used to communicate with each other, telling others to come to her property (18/07/2019). An 18-year-old girl I interviewed at Hoàn Kiếm Lake in the Old Quarter echoed this opinion, saying that when graffiti “is in the right place, it’s beautiful, but if it’s in the wrong place it’s dirty, it destroys the landscape”

(20/07/2019). When asked what they think the ‘proper’ space for graffiti is, most non-graffiti writing respondents provided similar replies. Temporary construction walls and surfaces such as the wall along the Water Park in Tây Hồ are acceptable and add beauty to the area, but if done elsewhere it is misbehaving (42-year-old man Tây Hồ, 18/07/2019). After reflecting on if she would ever do graffiti herself, the 18-year-old girl I interviewed in the Old Quarter replied “no, I can’t draw beautifully enough, I am not an artist” (20/07/2019). These responses reinforce what most writers I interviewed told me about the public’s perception of graffiti - that, because “graffiti in Vietnam is rooted in the art community, it’s more acceptable to do here than in the West, where it’s rooted in criminal gangs” (Minh Meo, local, 07/03/2019). However, the specific site where graffiti is done appears to be crucial to its acceptance. Furthermore, the sites and surfaces that the locals I interviewed deemed acceptable are consistent with those of the Vietnamese writers. This suggests a collective, normative agreement between Vietnamese writers and the public about where in the city graffiti is deemed appropriate.

## **6.4 Graffiti as Everyday Politics**

### *6.4.1 Socio-Spatial Negotiations*

Over the course of my fieldwork, it became evident that graffiti in Hanoi does not have the same negative connotations as it does in the Euro-American context, where it is historically associated with vandalism and violent gangs (Lachmann 1988; Ley 1974). In fact, some of the more ‘destructive’ graffiti practices, which are centred around overt vandalism and illegality, appear to have been modified and/or censored by Vietnamese writers. This is demonstrated by the Vietnamese writers’ avoidance of private property and shutters, and their concern with creating artistic pieces that will be appreciated by the public. Therefore, the notion “that graffiti is primarily illegal vandalism that promotes criminality and must be countered with harsh punishment is not necessarily appropriate” in the sociocultural context of Vietnam, as Valjakka also found in the case of China (Valjakka 2010: 81). My interviews with graffiti writers revealed that self-censorship and site selection are important factors in the negotiation between writers, locals, and authorities over what is tolerated and what is not. These socio-spatial negotiations are conducted to appease people’s negative perceptions of graffiti. This appears to take place because the continuation of the Euro-American culture of graffiti as illegal vandalism could put writers at risk of severe punishment in Vietnam, a semi-authoritative state. The expatriate writer

Doves (06/11/2019) suggested that the criteria for what crosses the line in Vietnam depends on how the act is perceived, “and graffiti could definitely cross it [if it is seen as anti-state], so you do have to play the game to some sort of degree”. When writing about graffiti in Singapore, Chang (2019: 246) noted that graffiti writers were “going legal as a way to prolong their practice without being criminalized”. I would argue that some writers in Hanoi are also following this approach. This can be seen in the case of Vietnamese writers such as Zui Boy, who explained that when he goes out to paint, he tries to “make a kind of gift for the space, for people and the space” (Zui Boy, local, 06/19/2019). By complying with the expectations of the general public and authorities of creating ‘beautiful works’, and modifying their behaviour within the subculture, writers in Hanoi are reworking their approaches to fit local expectations to some degree and to evade censorship. “Now people are starting to see the art in graffiti,” Vietnamese writer Dath (06/29/2019) elucidated, adding: “It moves from just tagging and bombing in the street, to becoming a commissioned work, a piece of art, a way of life”.

#### *6.4.2. Everyday Modifications and Compliance*

Graffiti writer’s avoidance of certain areas and surfaces in Hanoi, such as private garage shutters, the frequency with which they ask for permission or avoid private property all together, and their tendency towards artistic pieces rather than tags and throw ups, are all forms of everyday modifications that lean towards complying with local society norms and expectations. “People want good graffiti,” Rival1 explained, “not dirty,” so he makes sure to paint colourful, artistic pieces so as to gain favour with the public and ensure the longevity of his practice (Rival1, local, 07/08/2019). The way writers engage in self-censorship is representative of Scott’s conception of the public transcript; defined as the “open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (Scott 1990: 2). Hanoi’s graffiti writers modify their public transcript, specifically through how they interact with those they come in contact with while painting, and the ways by which they go about painting to begin with. Many Vietnamese writers avoid painting on private property so they do not start conflicts with local homeowners, and they often present graffiti as a method of ‘harmless’ urban beautification when engaging with the public, thereby distancing their practices from the subcultures’ destructive roots. These modifications, specifically the reframing of the graffiti subculture to comply with local expectations, are made by writers in order to continue their graffiti practice. It is a performance “shaped to appeal to the expectations

of the powerful” and done out of prudence, fear, or a desire to curry favor (Scott 1990: 2, 3). The public transcript, or “impression management in power-laden situations,” is “one of the key survival skills of subordinate groups,” and is a form of everyday compliance (Scott 1990: 3). This tactic allows graffiti writers to continue painting, as it shifts the public’s understanding of graffiti from a narrative of destructive vandalism and towards one of beautification and artistic expression.

#### *6.4.3 Everyday Resistance*

Each time a writer goes out to paint in the streets of Hanoi, they are engaging in a form of everyday resistance by contesting and adjusting the rules and norms of the public space to include them and their practices (Kerkvliet 2009). Graffiti writers “struggle to affirm their claims to what they believe they are entitled to”, namely the freedom of artistic expression, by engaging in strategies of everyday modifications, compliance, and resistance (Kerkvliet 2009: 233). “We can make it better than just trying to go against the government” Wiz told me; “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” (local, 06/19/2019). Drawing on Geertman et al.’s (2016) work on youth-driven tactics regarding the appropriation of public space in Hanoi, graffiti practices in Hanoi can shed “light on how non-ideological everyday practices performed by youths... contribute to socio-political change in the city” (Geertman et al. 2016: 596). The socio-spatial tactics utilized by graffiti writers in Hanoi appear to have been developed as a means to “secure space and... express their interests and identities” in controlled public spaces (Geertman et al. 2016: 608). These non-confrontational tactics enable the individuals and practices of these subcultures “to become a normal part of the everyday urban landscape” by changing the meaning and use of these spaces to include them (ibid.: 610).

#### *6.4.4 Resistance and the Post-Political Generation*

It is important to heed Valjakka’s (2010) advice not to oversimplify the meaning of graffiti in Asia by reducing it to a mere form of resistance or political action. The freedom that comes with doing graffiti appears to be an essential motivating force behind its creation in Hanoi, while the act of doing graffiti - the creation of tags, throws, and pieces - are all part of the writer’s process of self-expression and construction (Valjakka 2010: 64). Graffiti is a powerful form of agency

for these writers, and Lee (2013: 323) frames this expression of agency as emblematic of what she calls the “post-political generation”. She details how the youth who make up the post-political generation understand

that the sovereignty of the self demands a right to expression and the right to be apolitical; in short, the act of presenting oneself as agent, consumer, and free individual, appears radical and a priori because the neoliberal idea of the self has succeeded in making the scaffolding of state and society recede (Lee 2013: 323).

Youth in post-socialist countries, she argues, are “politically engaged in a new and disordered way” by incorporating “neoliberal ideas while remaining embedded in broader moral and cultural frameworks” (ibid: 310). Graffiti and street art, therefore, appear to serve as a medium through which youths express themselves and construct their identities. In Vietnam, where “the push and pull between modernity and Confucian and communist traditionalism can be felt in every corner of” society and is reinforced by state censorship and surveillance artistic self-expression, especially in public spaces, is no small feat (Libby 2011: 210). “Graffiti is the symbol for the free and brave,” Zui Boy told me, “in it you have freedom and respect” (local, 06/19/2019). “There’s no telling what graffiti will be,” Dath added, while reflecting on the future of graffiti in Hanoi, “but people will notice it. It will be something bigger, better, and more delicate. We are reaching for a new and higher peak” (local, 06/29/2019).

## **6.5 Summary of Key Findings**

This research project was shaped by the principal **aim: to investigate the actions and motivations of young street art creators and graffiti writers in urban spaces in Hanoi, Vietnam, and to investigate whether their actions can be considered a form of everyday politics.**

To satisfy this aim, I answered **three main research questions**:

### **1. Who are the individuals engaging in the creation of street art and graffiti, how did they get into this art form, and how do they go about creating?**

In Chapter 4, I answered this question by drawing on 19 interviews with graffiti writers and street artists. First, I provided a brief overview of the different groups involved in the graffiti scene in Hanoi, which consists of foreign and local writers. I found that there appear to be around 15-20 ‘active’ writers, meaning those who go out and paint at least once a week. Graffiti



originated from, and is deeply embedded in, the hip hop scene in Hanoi, which began to creep into the mainstream and gain traction in the early 2000s. Since then there have been two generations of graffiti writers, the first generation who began doing graffiti 15 years ago, and the second generation who have been doing graffiti for under five years. The individuals that are a part of the graffiti subculture in Hanoi are predominantly young, ranging between 17-35 years of age, and identify as male. Most Vietnamese writers learned about graffiti through films and various online forums centred around hip hop, after which they taught themselves or learned from older writers, the ‘first generation’. Although there have been some minor disputes, people framed Hanoi’s graffiti scene as a friendly, tight-knit community with much less conflict between writers than in the Euro-American context.

I then analyzed the strategies and motivations of Vietnamese and foreign writers to create graffiti in Hanoi. I found that Vietnamese writers gravitated towards areas where there was already a high presence of graffiti, and avoided painting on private property such as the garage shutters of people’s homes or businesses. Vietnamese writers were generally described, both by themselves and foreigners, as ‘piecers’, meaning they focused on painting artistic pieces rather than throw ups and tags. They also emphasized the aim of graffiti as beautifying the landscape through artistic expression. Most of the expatriate and foreign graffiti writers classified themselves, first and foremost, as bombers, although they also do pieces. The foreign writers mainly painted along temporary construction sites and on public walls, and, unlike the Vietnamese writers, on private property such as garage shutters. Finally, I found that strategies for creation varied as foreign writers were more concerned with ‘getting up’ and the ‘rush’ associated with graffiti, whereas the Vietnamese writers were more concerned with creating artistic pieces which would be positively received by the public.

## **2. What are the spatial dimensions at play in the creation of graffiti and what are the reasons behind any spatial patterns that might exist across the city?**

I approached this question in Chapter 5 by offering a spatial analysis of the two districts in Hanoi, Tây Hồ and Hoàn Kiếm where the majority of graffiti is concentrated. Writers – both local and foreign - described Tây Hồ as the area where it is the most socially acceptable to do graffiti, and listed it as the most frequent place they paint. The high presence of temporary construction walls in the district provides an ideal surface for graffiti. I found that Tây Hồ has a

higher presence of pieces, which can be found along temporary construction sites and quasi-legal graffiti walls, while the Old Quarter, in Hoàn Kiếm district, has many throw ups and tags, which are quicker to complete. These can be found on private shutters, electricity boxes, and public and private walls.

Factors that influenced the presence or absence of graffiti included the built environment itself, namely, what surfaces were available to paint, and the behaviour of locals and authorities towards graffiti in the area. Tây Hồ, for example, was known to be the most lenient in regards to graffiti, with most writers having few confrontations, especially with police, while painting there. The busyness of the Old Quarter, however, makes it a higher risk area, as it is more likely that writers will be caught by locals or police while painting. It is common for writers to choose their spots based on where their graffiti would be most visible in order to gain the most respect from their peers, however, many writers in Hanoi also expressed that they preferred spots to paint which allowed them to take their time with their piece, and were therefore less populated such as side streets or areas near quasi-legal graffiti walls where they would not be interrupted.

### **3. Is the creation of graffiti and street art in Hanoi a form of everyday politics, or do their creators have other intentions?**

The discussion of my final research question was guided by concepts of everyday politics outlined in Chapter 2. I hope to have contributed to discussions regarding graffiti in the Asian context by analyzing and interpreting how graffiti writers navigate the rules and expectations surrounding graffiti creation in Hanoi, Vietnam, and framing these socio-spatial navigations as forms of everyday politics. Writers engage in verbal and spatial negotiations, such as self-censorship and site selection, as a way to both contest and comply with people's understanding of the il/legality of graffiti in public spaces. These negotiations, or the modification of "public transcripts," take place between writers, locals, and authorities, and allow writers to influence the public's perception of graffiti by complying with their expectations of what is, and what is not, acceptable (Scott 1990: 3). This also works as a form of everyday resistance, as these tactics have been developed as a means to secure space in controlled areas where graffiti is not always welcome. By modifying graffiti practices and contesting the normalized rules of public space usage in Vietnam, graffiti writers are engaging in subtle forms of resistance to secure their ability to continue creating and participating in the graffiti subculture.

Within this thesis, I have attempted to give an overview of the motivations and meanings behind graffiti in Hanoi, Vietnam. This research is one of the first to focus on the graffiti subculture in the context of Vietnam and attempts to tie together conceptual debates regarding everyday politics, artistic self-expression, and youth identity construction in landscapes of control. This thesis has shown that although graffiti in Vietnam is rooted in the Euro-American origins of the subculture, it has evolved to embody different motivations and mentalities so as to conform to, but at times also quietly contest, the expectations and socio-cultural context in which it is embedded.

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