

The Role of Graffiti Art as a Medium in Shaping Urban Image: A Case Study of Beijing 798 Art District

Zhiyan Zhang

Faculty of International Media, Communication University of China, Beijing, China, 100024

zhiyanZZ1030@163.com

Abstract. Graffiti art in Beijing has undergone prolonged development and evolution, narrating the diverse stories of the city and presenting a more varied image of Beijing. This study selects the graffiti art hub, the 798 Art District in Beijing, and employs spatial production theory and interactive ritual chain theory to deeply analyze the crucial role of graffiti art in disseminating the urban image of Beijing and the specific images it sculpts. Through the application of spatial production theory, we specifically explore the layout, positioning, and display modes of graffiti in the urban environment, as well as the potential impact of these factors on the perception and shaping of the urban image. Building upon this foundation, interactive ritual chain theory is utilized to investigate the interactive processes between the audience and graffiti, revealing how such interactions guide, influence, and co-construct the cognitive representation of the urban image.

Keywords: Graffiti, Urban Image, Spatial Production Theory, Urban Communication, 798 Art District.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the increasing cultural inclusiveness, graffiti culture has gradually entered the public consciousness. Many graffiti works are widely disseminated as artistic symbols and trendy representations. Graffiti art, with its unique colors and brushstrokes, has become a medium for showcasing urban landscapes and narrating urban stories, playing a pivotal role in the construction of urban culture and image. The emergence and rise of graffiti art on the streets of Beijing can be attributed to the city's rich cultural heritage and artistic foundation. Beijing's 798 Art District, as a gathering place for iconic graffiti works, is hailed as a "sacred ground" for graffiti artists, attracting many tourists for sightseeing and appreciation. Furthermore, graffiti works scattered throughout the city serve as significant channels of communication, forming a distinctive component in the construction of Beijing's urban image.

2. An Overview of the Development of Graffiti Art in Beijing

The initial emergence of graffiti in Beijing, with documented visual records, can be traced back to the mid-1990s [1], prominently featuring the distinctive 'Big Head' series painted by graffiti artist Zhang Dali on the city's streets and alleys. Around the year 2006, the graffiti scene in Beijing experienced rapid growth, with an increasing number of locations becoming conducive to graffiti art. Notably, areas such as the 798 Art District, Renmin University South Road in Wudaokou, Sanlitun, Gulou, and Nanluoguxiang emerged as key hubs for graffiti enthusiasts to convene and express their artistic endeavors [2].

In addition to the favor of street graffiti artists, Beijing has also garnered attention from numerous organizers of graffiti art and cultural creativity exhibitions. Events such as the inaugural Graffiti Carnival during the 2009 Beijing Youth Creative Week and the 2019 BDMG Graffiti Lifestyle Art Festival have unfolded in the city, reflecting the growing prominence of graffiti-related exhibitions. Beijing's graffiti art has also drawn considerable interest from various media outlets. Notably, the documentary film "Spray Paint Beijing," directed by foreign filmmaker Lance Crayon in 2009, stands as the first documentary centered on narrating the story of Chinese graffiti, featuring accounts of several Beijing Street graffiti teams, including the 'Beijing Sprayers' team, ABS, KTS team, among others. Local media channels such as Beijing Evening News, Xinjing Bao, Sanlian Life Weekly, and

CCTV have extensively covered Beijing's graffiti art. Functioning as a distinctive cultural exchange medium, graffiti art, owing to its aesthetic appeal and rich content, has, to a certain extent, served as a prominent ambassador for disseminating Beijing's urban image to the world.

Around 2006, Beijing's 798 Art District emerged as one of the favored graffiti venues for enthusiasts [3]. The 798 Art District, formerly the 798 Joint Factory that produced electronic materials, stands out for its greater tolerance towards graffiti art and diverse cultures compared to other locations and abandoned factories. Consequently, it has become a 'sacred ground' for graffiti artists to create and exchange ideas. Numerous large-scale graffiti events and parties take place in the 798 Art District. In February 2009 [4], six graffiti teams from across the country collaborated to complete a mural approximately 40 meters long and 6 meters high, marking the largest graffiti wall within the city of Beijing since 2009. The 798 Art Festival held in 2013 attracted a significant number of graffiti enthusiasts from around the world. The administrators of the 798 Art District provided substantial support, and the event received extensive media coverage. This created a valuable opportunity for domestic graffiti enthusiasts to engage in international exchanges and discussions.

For a significant period, graffiti works within the 798 Art District remained in a saturated state, leading to a temporary prohibition of graffiti within the park. However, owing to the persistent advocacy and standardization efforts of graffiti enthusiasts, the prohibition gradually lifted. The graffiti works in the 798 Art District, in comparison to other cities, demonstrate a heightened capacity to embrace diverse cultural styles from around the world. Simultaneously, these graffiti pieces exhibit rich regional cultural characteristics. Currently, graffiti works within the 798 Art District span across the entire park, constantly evolving through coverage and updates. This dynamic environment attracts a substantial number of visitors who come to capture memorable moments and engage in the graffiti experience.

3. Graffiti Art and the Construction of Beijing's Urban Image

In 1974, French sociologist Henri Lefebvre introduced the theory of spatial production [5], aiming to comprehensively understand how social space is constructed. He emphasized that social space is a complex social product resulting from the interaction of material and social practices. Lefebvre's delineation of space is profound, as he identified roughly four representative perspectives in the philosophical discourse on space. One of these perspectives' views space as a form of mediation or medium. According to this viewpoint, the space occupied by graffiti art is not merely an ideological presence but also a cognitive entity, given the various meticulously designed elements embedded by the artists. The surfaces bearing graffiti works and the spatial configurations created by the artworks and their surroundings not only reflect the influence of ideology but also encompass rich cognitive content, forming a complex and multi-layered conceptual framework.

Simultaneously, it can be observed that designing graffiti artworks is, in fact, a form of spatial practice. Taking the 798 Art District as an example, graffiti artists engage in the meaningful reproduction of elements and features that constitute their personal understanding of the urban image of Beijing. This involves the elimination of factors that may disrupt social harmony, ultimately shaping a space capable of showcasing the 'Beijing image.' Graffiti works encapsulate the diverse interpretations of urban styles and personal characteristics by the graffiti artists, not only reflecting the diversity of urban culture but also illustrating the individual journeys of the artists influenced by the urban environment. This, in turn, presents a unique and rich urban image of Beijing. In the process of this spatial meaning reproduction within the urban context, the 798 Art Center, as the birthplace of graffiti and a space for the exchange and collision of graffiti artists, gathers graffiti works into a unified space. This alteration of the original space's purpose and meaning brings a heightened focus on the inherent significance of showcasing the image of Beijing. Therefore, 'graffiti' is effectively regarded as a new 'tool of production,' utilized in constructing the urban image and propelling the generation of new spatial meanings.

3.1. Reconstruction of Urban Spatial Order



Figure 1. The most prominent graffiti artwork within the 798 Art Center

This is the most prominent graffiti artwork within the 798 Art Center, situated at a pivotal location that attracts most visitors for photo opportunities and group pictures. Titled 'Roaming Beijing,' the artwork was created by graffiti artist David Huang in 2019. Depicting the cityscape of Beijing, the artwork situates urban scenes within intersecting realities and multiple spatial dimensions. Elements depicted in the graffiti include futuristic flying cars and skyscrapers, alongside ancient architecture and Beijing's historically significant features. These elements, intermingled with characteristic figures within the graffiti, not only disrupt the existing spatial order but also reconstruct a new scenario where the city's past and future seamlessly converge.

This is a decidedly contemporary artwork, utilizing acrylic pigments and adopting a style reminiscent of modern commercial painting. It intricately and specifically delineates the artist's impressions of Beijing and the overall key elements of the city. Employing a predominantly pink color as the primary hue, the graffiti artwork further incorporates vibrant, bright, and highly saturated colors. This color palette accentuates the vibrant and dynamic attributes of Beijing, reconstructing a space enriched with complex elements that narrate the bustling, modern, and harmonious realities of Beijing, where the fusion of modernity and vintage aesthetics coexists, depicting a vivid and delightful portrayal of the people's lives.

According to the Interactive Ritual Chain Theory, the process of individuals gathering to view graffiti is not merely an individual experience but a socialized, ritualistic communal process of knowledge acquisition. Observers enter a ritualistic participatory state, which encompasses not only singular observation but also sensory and emotional engagement. Graffiti enthusiast Su Tie (pseudonym) considers this graffiti artwork to have become a landmark element of the 798 Art Center. However, he perceives it as distinct from other graffiti pieces. Su Tie notes, 'Most graffiti artists do not use acrylic as a painting tool; we mostly use spray paint, as it is quicker for coloring.' In addition to the variance in painting tools, Su Tie also asserts that most grassroots graffiti artists do not create in such a structured manner but prefer a more liberated and spontaneous painting approach. Simultaneously, those observing the graffiti artwork share a cultural experience. In this collective artistic encounter, individuals may engage in mutual exchanges of interpretations, share personal perspectives, and form a social interactive chain. Through this process, graffiti, as an expression of urban image, can generate a shared cognition and emotional resonance among viewers, facilitating the shaping and dissemination of the urban image. Consequently, the creation of this graffiti artwork is likely a part of urban image planning strategies. The government, as the administrator of the city, believes that graffiti art can exert a certain influence on the spaces it occupies. Simultaneously, they are willing to use graffiti to convey a positive urban image to the viewers.

3.2. Reproduction of the Significance of Subcultures

Subcultures are secondary cultural systems that emerge within the framework of mainstream culture, typically formed by specific social groups or social strata. These secondary cultural systems often exhibit distinctions from mainstream culture, encompassing varying features such as values, behavioral patterns, language, attire, music, art, among others. Focusing on subcultures like graffiti within the context of their impact on the urban image, they play a crucial role in the reproduction of cityscapes. Through a semiotic perspective, we can gain a better understanding of how subcultures shape and reshape the visual and cultural representations of the city.



Figure 2. Graffiti artwork titled "Life is Tough"

Graffiti, as a subcultural symbol, expresses itself through urban walls and streets. It goes beyond being merely a simple pattern; rather, it serves as a redefinition of urban significance. The graffiti artwork titled 'Life is Tough' displayed at the 798 Art Center is the creation of members from the local graffiti organization ABS in Beijing. This piece conveys a thematic significance that holds symbolic meaning. ABS, established in the early months of 2007, stands as one of China's most influential graffiti teams. The name ABS is an abbreviation for 'AROUND BOHAI SEA' and simultaneously alludes to the Anti-lock Braking System (ABS) in automotive terminology, symbolizing the team's commitment to fundamental development without deviating from its initial trajectory [6]. The predominant graffiti technique employed by the ABS team is Tag signature font graffiti, which is the most common and accessible form in the realm of street graffiti murals.

After the original 798 electronics factory was demolished, the word "Chai" (demolition) appeared on an abandoned wall. Artists from the ABS Graffiti Club, drawing upon their understanding of adversity and pursuit of resilient willpower, engaged in a secondary creative process following the appearance of the "Chai" motif. They interpreted it as a personification, symbolizing the indomitable spirit in the face of hardship. Member NOISE explained, "This wall is more like a person's embodiment, not collapsing no matter how difficult the circumstances, just like a person." Through their choices of patterns and colors, graffiti artists express their unique perspectives on the city, thereby guiding the audience's perception and understanding of urban environments.

For the artists of ABS, graffiti appears to be a mode of expression seemingly incongruent with mainstream societal development. However, it serves as a means of emotional release and advocates freedom. According to member SEVEN, "Graffiti is presented in public spaces, not as a commercial tool to market products, but rather to add a warm touch of color to the city." ABS artists increasingly display their resilient strength with confidence in their works, a manifestation influenced by the subtle impact of Beijing, the metropolis they inhabit. In the face of the high-pressure urban life, individuals in large cities like Beijing choose to maintain an unwavering resilience, leaving a profound impression of the city's image in the hearts of its inhabitants.

Through the subcultural influence on the reproduction of urban imagery, spatial and temporal dimensions are no longer confined to flat definitions. Instead, they manifest in a more diverse and open manner, involving the identity identification of urban residents and emotional connections to urban spaces. Consequently, such subcultural processes of dissemination are not merely vivid artworks but also constitute a rewriting of urban narratives. Through symbols, colors, and forms, they redefine the significance of the interrelationship between the city and its inhabitants.

3.3. Cultural representations in ritualistic communication

In various ritualistic activities or communication processes, communicators consistently express and transmit cultural information through symbols, codes, ceremonial actions, and other means. This encompasses cultural symbols, symbols, ceremonial actions, and the cultural connotations and values carried by these elements involved in the ritual. Graffiti, as a form of art with unique cultural significance, employs a series of symbols, codes, and ritualistic actions in expressing culture.



Figure 3. Graffiti artwork shows the relationship between Beijing and Berlin

The image above depicts a graffiti piece on a long canvas within the 798 Art Center, commemorating the 25th anniversary of Beijing and Berlin becoming sister cities in 2019. The labels "Beijing" and "Berlin" are positioned on opposite sides of the composition, while the middle section features silhouettes of prominent Beijing landmarks, referred to by the 798 Art Center management as the "Berlin Wall." [7] Originally symbolizing the ideological and political divide between East and West Germany during the Cold War, the Berlin Wall embodied a physical manifestation of the prolonged standoff between the two German states, becoming a symbol of the Cold War era. However, in this graffiti piece, the emphasis is on the international friendship and cultural inclusivity between Beijing and Berlin, highlighting Beijing's image as a cosmopolitan and friendly metropolis. This creates a cultural contrast, providing old elements with new interpretations, connotations, or emotions, allowing viewers to understand the artwork from different perspectives. This innovative creation represents graffiti artists' personalized responses to the original meaning, expressing their thoughts, feelings, and viewpoints through new forms of artistic expression. This form of creativity not only offers graffiti artists a broader space for expression but also provides viewers with a more diverse cultural experience.

Graffiti art, through cultural representations in ritualistic communication, disseminates and promotes specific cultural connotations through its works and creative processes, thereby imparting unique significance to urban spaces.

4. Graffiti Reflected in Urban Imagery: Characteristics of Symbolic Communication in the 798 Art District

4.1. Communication Theme: The Symbiosis of Era's 'Pain Points' and Urban Development

Selecting the 'pain points' of the era and the urban community as communication themes not only reflects graffiti artists' engagement with current affairs but also serves as an effective means to resonate within the urban environment [8]. Such communication themes endow graffiti with depth and societal engagement as a medium in the dissemination of urban imagery. Artists, utilizing graffiti as a medium, integrate individual aesthetic expressions with social participation. Through

symbolically conveying information, graffiti, as an art form, allows audiences to perceive the societal issues that artists are concerned with. Subsequently, viewers engage in interpreting the graffiti, forming personalized understandings. The symbols and patterns employed in graffiti carry rich cultural connotations, prompting viewers to connect them with their own cultural backgrounds when interpreting graffiti. This cultural interaction is manifested not only in the individual interpretations of the audience but also in the formation of shared cultural symbols among diverse viewers.

Graffiti works, as a contemporary expression of urban culture, reflect certain issues of the times. Through graffiti art, artists convey unique perspectives on societal, cultural, and political phenomena, revealing concerns about problems in the process of urban development. However, at the same time, graffiti art faces a paradox: it attempts to voice dissatisfaction with society while struggling to impede the irreversible progress of urban development. The development of a city, as a complex social system, involves numerous factors spanning political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Although graffiti art can express reflections through visual language, its influence is relatively limited and challenging to directly alter urban planning and decision-making. This complexity imparts both constraints and significant symbolic meaning to the role of graffiti art in urban development.

4.2. Mode of Dissemination: Artistic Expression and Ritual Interaction

The Symbolic Interaction Theory emphasizes the symbolic nature of signs and the interactions that occur as individuals collectively understand and engage in symbolic communication. In graffiti, artists utilize distinctive symbols and patterns for artistic expression, transcending linguistic limitations and conveying ideas and emotions through visual and sensory means.

Viewers engage in a process of symbolic interaction when appreciating graffiti. Through the interpretation and understanding of symbols, they establish a spiritual connection with the creators, undoubtedly achieving the intended effect pursued by every artist. Simultaneously, this interaction goes beyond a simple transmission of information; it is a collaborative construction of symbolic meaning. Within the urban community, viewers collectively participate in interpreting the significance of graffiti, sharing not only symbols but also a sense of identity and urban culture.

4.3. Effect of Dissemination: The Empathic Space of Urban Communication

In graffiti, artworks often carry the artist's unique understanding of the city, society, or culture. The social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970s emphasizes the establishment of connections among individuals in society through shared identities [9]. By appreciating these graffiti works, viewers generate a common emotional resonance.

Graffiti, as a form of urban communication, conveys a unique understanding of the city and visions for the future through its distinctive form and content. The new urban image is gradually perceived through repeated observations and confirmations of graffiti and the urban environment, becoming a shared experience that evolves into a common identification. Consequently, it establishes a collective memory in the dissemination of urban imagery, creating a closed loop for the transmission of the city's new image. This communal experience and sense of identification construct an empathic space for urban communication, transcending mere perceptual experiences. It represents the fusion of urban culture and civic emotions, providing robust support for the dissemination of the city's image and fostering closer connections among viewers through shared experiences.

5. Conclusion

The focal exhibition venue for graffiti art in Beijing is located within the 798 Art District, providing robust support to the construction of Beijing's urban image. The 798 Art District, as a culturally rich artistic hub, offers a diverse platform for showcasing graffiti art, highlighting Beijing as an open, inclusive, and creatively vibrant city. This further reinforces its position on the international cultural stage. By integrating graffiti art into the unique historical and cultural ambiance of the 798 Art District, Beijing has successfully blended modern art with traditional culture, infusing

the urban image with new trends and vitality, showcasing the city's innovation in cultural development.

Graffiti, as a unique form of art, not only involves the creation of artistic expressions on urban walls and structures but also constitutes a process of redefining and reshaping the urban space. The reshaping of the urban spatial order it entails reflects not only the subculture's challenge to traditional norms but also, through this challenging artistic endeavor, bestows new meaning upon the urban space. In the 798 Art District, graffiti artworks contribute to shaping the image of Beijing by embodying various symbols such as prosperity, resilience, cultural inclusivity, and more. This novel cultural representation goes beyond being a singular symbol; it profoundly expresses the city's diversity, openness, and the inclusive integration of different cultural elements through artistic means. This positions graffiti as an integral part of the urban cultural landscape, propelling the reinterpretation and reshaping of the city's image in the minds of the audience.

In the era of rapid development of contemporary new media technologies, there is an urgent need to harness these emerging technologies to deepen and expand the influence of Beijing's graffiti, further extend its reach, and enhance its communicative impact. New media technologies also provide us with more extensive and real-time communication channels, creating more favorable conditions for the dissemination of graffiti art in urban spaces. By fully utilizing the convenience of new media, we can achieve a more comprehensive and in-depth presentation of Beijing's graffiti on digital platforms. Through emerging media tools such as social media and digital art platforms, we can broadcast graffiti works globally, allowing more people to experience and understand this unique urban cultural expression up close. Simultaneously, this opens up broader possibilities for interaction between artists and audiences, fostering a more participatory and multidirectional interactive process in the dissemination of graffiti.

References

- [1] Zheng Xinxin. Research on the Contemporary Art Phenomenon of Beijing 798 Graffiti Mural [D]. North China University of Science and Technology, 2018.
- [2] Wang Qi. The Past and Present Life of 798 [J]. Great Horizons, 2010, 15.
- [3] Cai Ning. Reveling in Utopia and Reality, Memory, and Future, Research on Gallery Design in Beijing 798 Art District [J]. Chinese and Foreign Architecture, 2010, 12.
- [4] CROW. THOMAS E, Modern Art in the Common Culture Yale University Press, 19.
- [5] Wang Xiaorong. Research on the Impact and Assessment of Safeguarded Housing Settlements on Urban Social Space [D]. Southeast University, 2016.
- [6] VICTORIA L, RODNER, Elaine Thomson. The art machine: dynamics of a value generation mechanism for contemporary art [J]. ArtsMarketing: An International Journal, 2013.
- [7] Liu Wei. The Double "Character" of Graffiti Art [D]. Tianjin: Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts.
- [8] Pang Yan. The Legitimacy of Urban Graffiti in China [J]. Literary Life - Wenhui Yiyuan, 2011, 3.
- [9] Qiming, Zhang Dali. Warm Sunshine in Winter. Dialogue with Zhang Dali [J]. Decoration, 2004, 01: 16.