

# The God Who Protects Graffiti: How Southern Fujian Vernacular Belief Shapes a Graffiti Writer's Spatial Strategies and Everyday Rituals

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## ABSTRACT

In the everyday streets and alleys of southeastern coastal China, graffiti often appears alongside temples, incense burners, and local deities within the same urban landscape. However, related research tends to interpret the localization of graffiti as symbolic collage or aesthetic mashup, rarely exploring how these local resources function within the creator's experiential world. This article uses Moon, a graffiti artist from Quanzhou, Fujian, as a case study, based on a transcript of an in-depth interview, to discuss how Southern Fujian folk beliefs have entered the conceptual structure and creative practice of graffiti writing. In the interview, Moon does not treat "Tudigong (the Earth God)" as a cultural symbol to attract attention but rather understands it as a protective force highly relevant to street creation. Starting from the Southern Fujian belief system of "worshiping what you ask for," he connects street creation with "land," thus deducing that Tudigong is the "deity who manages graffiti," and prays to him for more walls and creative spaces in his daily worship. Furthermore, the image of Tudigong in his work is not only a personal identifier but also a way to establish a relationship with the space. Before entering a new location to create, he would first draw a Tudigong in a corner or stick a sticker on it to connect himself with that space. This paper contributes by proposing a supplementary path to understanding the localization of graffiti: local culture is not merely a decorative element "added" to a work; it can also deeply participate in the creator's sense of space, the sustainability of practice, and the choice of symbols through everyday concepts and action systems such as folk beliefs, thereby influencing how graffiti is imagined and practiced in local society.

**Keywords:** Graffiti; Localization; Southern Fujian Vernacular Belief; Case Study; Cultural Practice

## INTRODUCTION

Graffiti, as a writing system originating in Western cities, has long been accompanied by global migration and local rewriting. Researchers have repeatedly pointed out that graffiti is not a visual grammar that can be transplanted unchanged. Once it enters a new linguistic, streetscape, and institutional environment, it will adapt to local material conditions, aesthetic preferences, and social relations, thereby generating new modes of expression (Abram, 2024; Brazioli & Brighenti, 2025; Goba, 2022). This visual intervention not only changes the landscape but also strengthens the recognizability and memorability of the location, re-encoding the space in public perception (Pogrmić & Đerčan, 2021). In the Chinese context, a growing body of research has noted that graffiti writers embed Chinese characters, local imagery, or folk symbols outside the alphabetic system to gain stronger recognizability and a sense of place within the local community (Bruce, 2010; Pan, 2014). However, in existing discussions, localization is often treated as a visible outcome, namely, what local elements appear on the surface of the work and how these elements are juxtaposed with global graffiti vocabulary (Sarmiento, 2020; Landry, 2019). In contrast, how local resources operate within the creator's lived experience has received far less scholarly attention.

This article attempts to shift the focus slightly. For many urban residents in southern Fujian, folk beliefs are not a domain that needs to be explicitly labeled as "religion," but rather a way of understanding that permeates the details of life: seeking wealth, peace, and health, each corresponding to different deities and rituals. It is both a language for interpreting the world and a daily method for organizing action. The question is, when graffiti writing enters this world of life, will folk beliefs merely be borrowed as seemingly attractive local symbols, or will they more profoundly influence how writers understand the streets, how they enter a space, and how they find a meaningful structure to place their creations?

To answer this question, this article selects the narrative of Moon, a graffiti artist from Quanzhou, Fujian, as a case study. In the interview, Moon clearly distinguishes two common external interpretations: one interprets his repeated creation of "Tudigong (the Earth God)" as a mix of folk elements and graffiti, and the other sees it as a strategy to gain attention. However, his explanation points to completely different starting points. He begins with the life logic of Southern Fujian beliefs, emphasizing that people worship different deities for different needs, and then establishes a connection between street art and "land," thus forming what he sees as a logical conclusion: the Tudigong is the deity who manages graffiti. Based on this understanding, after being exposed to graffiti in his early years, he began to pray to the Tudigong for more walls and creative space during his worship. Therefore, the Tudigong is not an external symbol "chosen to represent the place," but rather a reliable existence first established in experience, and then gradually incorporated into his artistic system.

More importantly, the image of the Tudigong also serves a practical function in Moon's work. He describes how, when working on projects in different locations, he often first finds a small corner to draw an image of the Tudigong, or sticks a sticker nearby, because he needs to establish a personal connection with the space. This connection is not the same as a connection in the sense of social media, nor does it necessarily point to external display. It is more like a process of self-positioning before entering the site: through a familiar image of a deity, transforming an unfamiliar space into a field that can be entered, endured, and continuously worked upon. Moon even goes further, giving this image a new naming approach and an open-ended orientation, emphasizing that it does not need a completely specific identity; it can be anyone, it can be you and me, thus making its energy easier to expand. This set of narratives suggests that folk beliefs here are not a repository of elements, but a mechanism that can organize feelings and actions.

Therefore, the core research question raised in this paper is: in Moon's creative narrative, how does Southern Fujian folk belief transform from a logic of life into an intrinsic resource for graffiti practice, and further shape its identification system and way of entering the field? Methodologically, this paper uses a transcript of an in-depth interview as the main material, and adopts a narrative analysis centered on meaning clues: around his causal deduction of the Tudigong, the arrangement of prayers and actions, and the description of his practice of "linking with the field," this paper extracts key concepts and experiential chains that can be discussed. This paper hopes to fill a gap in the often-overlooked puzzle in the study of the localization of graffiti: locality is not only reflected in the appearance of the work, but also in how the artist uses the concepts and forms of action that already exist in the local society to organize his street creation, and thereby change the way graffiti is understood and practiced in local cities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Understanding Graffiti as A Form of Spatial Practice

Recent research on graffiti and street art has increasingly moved away from treating them merely as images or styles, instead viewing creation as a continuous spatial action. Graffiti writing, through signatures, repositioning, covering, and updating, leaves identifiable traces on the urban surface, thus declaring its existence, marking boundaries, and establishing relationships. Related research indicates that the location of creation is not a neutral background; micro-topography such as alleyways, backstreets, and corners influences how different types of works appear and alters the rhythm of cleanup and preservation, ultimately shaping the character of the neighborhood and its local narrative (Dovey et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2022). At the governance level, cities often rely on both punitive removal and selective tolerance, incorporating some works into urban image projects through legal walls, festivals, and mural projects, while continuing to define others as

destruction and pollution. This keeps graffiti practice constantly tug-of-war between visibility and control (McAuliffe, 2012; Iveson & McAuliffe, 2022).

In this tug-of-war, legitimacy is not a one-time acquired identity label, but rather the result of continuous negotiation among graffiti artists in different contexts. On the one hand, the more visible a work is, the more likely it is to be revalued as an urban asset or creative resource. On the other hand, this visibility also makes it easier to trigger law enforcement, aesthetic screening, and passive "representation" (Landry, 2019). Therefore, many studies have turned to focusing on how practitioners can mitigate risks through time and space strategies, such as nighttime operations, marginal areas, brief interventions, and choosing routes that allow for rapid evacuation, to achieve a balance of being seen but not caught (De Martini Ugolotti & Genova, 2023). At the same time, the process of graffiti entering the art system and market has also been discussed as a transformation from subculture to art, providing new resources and stages while also bringing tension within the circle regarding purity and boundaries (Campos & Leal, 2021).

### **The Logic of Localization and Governance in the East Asian Context**

Focusing on Chinese and East Asian cities, research generally emphasizes that graffiti is not a simple transplantation of Western paradigms, but rather the result of continuous "re-localization" within language, symbols, and urban context. Taking China as an example, studies have traced the relationship between early graffiti and contemporary art scenes and art district spaces in Beijing and Shanghai, pointing out that graffiti artists repeatedly weighed the differences between English and Chinese writing, international styles and local expressions, attempting to form expressive paths with local distinctiveness (Valjakka, 2013). Further cross-city observations indicate that many works are better understood as responses to specific places, embedded in neighborhood history, renewal pressures, and spatial order, rather than simply transplantable "graffiti types" (Valjakka, 2015).

At the level of governance and public acceptance, a common phenomenon in East Asian cities is the inclusion of some graffiti in urban renewal and branding in a more controllable manner. For example, research on Guangzhou shows that "graffiti murals" in urban renewal are often organized through aesthetic management, and viewers prefer complete and highly readable mural landscapes, with their evaluation of the works influenced by their on-site experience (Zhang et al., 2024). The case of Macau suggests that specific hotspots and styles may be "selectively justified" within the framework of cultural policy and local memory, with works being understood as a medium for evoking nostalgia and collective memory (Li & Liu, 2023). In Hanoi, Vietnam, and Singapore, research also reveals a governance oscillation: on the one hand, order is maintained through laws and cleanup; on the other hand, limited openness is achieved through legal walls and festival performances, thus creating a long-term tension between subcultural autonomy and the urban agenda (Kee et al., 2021; Chang, 2018; Chang, 2020). Meanwhile, some studies focus on media frameworks and discourse construction, pointing out that media narratives may weaken illegality and emphasize creativity and youth expression, thereby influencing public perception of graffiti and their tolerance boundaries (Liu, 2024). Other studies, using methods such as photo-guided interviews, show that the same medium can be interpreted with different social critical logics in different cultural contexts, reminding us that we need to discuss meaning within the local social context (Agustin & Chan, 2022).

### **Spatial Functions and Emotional Mechanisms of Folk and Everyday Religion**

Independent of graffiti research is the discussion of folk and everyday religion. Related research emphasizes that folk religion manifests more as practical resources in the lived world than simply a doctrinal system. Through small spatial nodes and everyday rituals, it transforms the flow of family, street, and village routes into meaningful places, thereby continuously producing a sense of place and order in daily life (Chi & Liu, 2024; Han, 2023). In terms of specific mechanisms, folk religion often centers on efficacious experiences and operable ritual procedures, enabling people to gain predictability amidst uncertainty and forming emotional anchors and a sense of security (Cao, 2024).

Under the context of state discipline and cultural governance, folk religion also exhibits a distinct characteristic of legitimacy negotiation. Research indicates that some local deities and temples, in order to gain institutional

space, are forced to undergo "de-religious packaging" through intangible cultural heritage, folk culture, or affiliation with institutional religions in exchange for the possibility of sustainable existence (Cao, 2023; Xu & Tao, 2022). Meanwhile, a more macro-level "public sanctity" production process exists within the East Asian context. When religious practices are incorporated into heritage and cultural frameworks, they may be secularized or resanctified in another way, entering state-recognized public spaces (Rots, 2019). In terms of risk and uncertainty management, folk religions also provide comparable analytical tools. Urbanization and regulation drive religious practices towards more fluid and covert spatial organizational forms, where people maintain their exchange relationship with deities by changing locations, times, and modes of presentation, thus continuing to operate their risk management logic under high-pressure environments (Cao, 2023). Furthermore, related research demonstrates the prevalence of multiple affiliations and hybrid practices in the East Asian context. Individuals and communities flexibly combine resources such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and local deities. This variability allows religious practices to be reinterpreted and mobilized under different power contexts (Yang & Hu, 2012; Oostveen, 2019). On a more contemporary level, religious resources will also enter the lives of young people in a digital and functional way and be used for emotional regulation and meaning support (Ouyang & Xie, 2025).

### **Research Gap and the Starting Point of This Paper**

Juxtaposing these two research traditions reveals a clear break. Graffiti and street art studies have been able to meticulously explain spatial strategies, governance logic, legitimacy negotiations, and risk mitigation, but discussions on how religious imagery and local deities enter graffiti practice remain quite scarce. Existing East Asian graffiti studies tend to understand religiosity more as a form of place metaphor or viewing ritual, rather than analyzing deity symbols as a resource for the writer's practice (Valjakka, 2015; Zhang, 2024). Currently, the most enlightening discussions are in adjacent fields about Buddhist elements in urban visual culture, suggesting that visual objects in public spaces may carry a certain local sacredness, but without directly addressing graffiti practice itself (Muzafarova & Mushaev, 2024).

Conversely, studies of folk and everyday religion have sufficiently demonstrated how deities and rituals participate in place-making, legitimacy negotiation, and emotional safety. However, they rarely enter high-risk subcultural scenarios such as graffiti and street art, and there is a lack of empirical material on how creative actions borrow deity symbols to negotiate risks and boundaries (Chi & Liu, 2024; Cao, 2023). Therefore, focusing on how graffiti artists mobilize local deities and their ritualistic actions in their creations, and transforming them into place markers, emotional anchors, and risk negotiation tools, will help to truly integrate the spatial politics of graffiti with the life-world analysis of folk religion. It can also provide a more granular explanatory framework for the localization mechanism of graffiti in the Chinese context (Cao, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024; Li & Liu, 2023).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design and Case Selection**

This paper employs an interpretive case study design, focusing on the creative narrative and practical logic of Moon, a graffiti artist from Quanzhou, Fujian. Two reasons were chosen for this case. First, Moon has consistently created art in the urban spaces of southern Fujian, and his experience demonstrates how the local world concretely shapes street practice. Second, he has developed a continuous series of works centered around the Tudigong, and in interviews, he clearly explains that this series is not merely a simple visual mashup but rather built upon a daily understanding of southern Fujian beliefs. Therefore, this case is significant as a "key case," helping to reveal a conceptualizable mechanism—how folk beliefs are transformed from the logic of daily life into the intrinsic resources of street art.

It should be noted that this article does not attempt to generalize the overall picture of graffiti artists in Fujian based on a single case. The task of case studies here is to propose a debatable explanatory path through highly information-dense narrative materials, which can be tested, compared, and revised by subsequent research in larger samples or different regions.

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## Data Sources and Processing

The primary source material for this paper is a transcript of a semi-structured, in-depth interview with Moon, covering his creative journey, stylistic development, the origins and significance of his "Tudigong" series, and his creative experiences in different cities and settings. The interview, conducted in Chinese and recorded in its entirety, was completed in March 2025. The transcript was transcribed with timestamps, and researchers meticulously reviewed each segment against the recording to minimize mishearing and semantic shifts, while preserving the rhythm of spoken narrative as much as possible. In addition to the interview, this paper also references several representative images authorized by the interviewee, used to verify the symbolic details and site-specific practices mentioned in his narrative. The images were not systematically coded separately but rather used to verify and interpret the narrative chain. All data underwent de-identification processing during analysis and writing; content involving specific locations and traceable details retained only those directly relevant to the argument and was blurred as necessary.

## Analysis Path

This analysis does not aim to summarize commonalities within a group but rather focuses on tracing the meaningful threads within individual case narratives. Specifically, the analysis process comprises three steps. First, a thorough reading of the entire manuscript is conducted, marking all narrative fragments related to the Tudigong and recording their context—for example, whether they are used to explain the starting point of creation, the experience of the site, or the choice of symbols. Second, these fragments are sequentially analyzed, focusing on how the interviewee translates the life logic of Southern Fujian beliefs into the "action logic of street creation," and further implements this logic into repeatable practices. Third, the narrative threads are compared with the materials in the work, examining how his statements such as "linking the site," "leaving symbols," and "an open image of the deity" are reflected in the form of the work and the action arrangements, thereby forming an explanation of the mechanism.

To enhance the clarity of the argument, this paper adopts a "conceptual clue to action steps" approach in its writing. That is, it first explains how the interviewee deduces the meaning, then shows how the meaning is incorporated into specific practices and finally discusses how these practices affect the generation path of graffiti localization.

## Ethics and Reflexivity

All interviews and artworks used in this article were provided with informed consent from the respondents and adhered to the principles of anonymity and minimum identifiability. Since researchers and respondents shared the graffiti context and industry terminology, this article takes special care not to "naturalize" industry experience into unquestionable common sense when interpreting it. Instead, it strives to ground key concepts in the respondents' specific statements and observable actions to reduce the risk of over-representation or over-inference.

## FINDINGS

This analysis presents three nested sets of findings, all pointing to a core conclusion: in Moon's practice, the Tudigong is not a local element "added" to the artwork, but rather a set of everyday belief resources that organize feelings and actions. It explains both why creation is related to the "land" and how to enter and establish a relationship with the site, ultimately influencing the way graffiti is generated in a localized manner.

### How Southern Fujian Folk Belief Makes Tudigong a Guardian of Graffiti

In the interview, Moon repeatedly emphasized that his motivation for creating the Tudigong imagery was not to superficially blend folklore with graffiti, but because he believed there was a logically plausible relationship between the Tudigong and street art. He explained this by citing common life experiences in Southern Fujian (Southern Fujian) beliefs: people choose corresponding deities based on their needs in daily life—whether it's

wealth, peace, or health—each has their own deity to worship. This understanding of "worshipping what one desires" provided him with an explanatory framework that could be used to organize his actions.

Within this framework, he understands graffiti as an action that occurs on the streets and alleys and is closely related to "the land." In the Southern Fujian (Southern Fujian) context, the Tudigong is associated with the land, community, and street order. Therefore, when he places his creations within this logic of belief, the Tudigong naturally becomes the guardian and manager closest to street creation. It is in this sense that the Tudigong is not an external cultural symbol, but rather an existence first established in the mind as "related to creation," and then entering images and actions. The interviewee summarized this starting point in one sentence, emphasizing that creating the Tudigong was not for mixing folk elements, but because "the starting point is that I believe the Tudigong is the god who blesses graffiti" (Moon, Interview). In the same narrative, he further connects street creation with the land and concludes that "the god who manages graffiti is the Tudigong" (Moon, Interview). This deductive process is crucial because it transforms "local culture" from a decorative resource into an operational daily rationality, explaining why writers repeatedly create works around the same deity's image for a long time.

### **From Concept to Action: Everyday rituals of Praying for "More Walls" and Entering the Space**

The second finding is that faith doesn't remain at the level of explanation but further transforms into repeatable actions. Moon mentioned that after he started graffiti, whenever he encountered the local Tudigong in temples or daily worship, he would tell him about his wish for more walls and creative space. The key point here is not whether religion "truly brings" walls, but that faith provides a way of understanding creative resources: walls are not just randomly occurring physical conditions but are also understood as life resources that can be prayed for, entrusted, and expected. In this way, the issue of creative resources is placed within a familiar local experience, thus giving creation a more stable meaning.

Even more inspiring is Moon's description of a very specific approach to entering a space. When he goes to a new location to work on a project, he often first finds a corner nearby to draw a statue of the Tudigong or paste a sticker of him. He explains this action as establishing a relationship with the space within himself, allowing himself to "enter" the space and work more comfortably within it. This practice can be understood as a lightweight daily ritual: its primary goal is not external display, but rather "transforming unfamiliar spaces into accessible areas." The Tudigong here becomes a practical installation, realigning the creator's body, emotions, and space, transforming creation from a one-off on-site act into a repeatable sequence of actions.

This approach of connecting before creating offers a new perspective for understanding the localization of graffiti. The local character in the artwork isn't a final decoration, but rather something that enters the practical process through ritualistic actions before the creative process even begins, influencing how the artist chooses locations, understands the space, and moves between different locations. When discussing how prayer and action specifically occur, he recalls saying during worship, "I wish there were more walls, I wish I could have more creative spaces" (Moon, Interview). Regarding his specific approach to entering unfamiliar locations, he says that when working on projects in different places, he "would first find a small corner to draw a local deity, or use local deity stickers to stick on nearby, because I need to connect with the space in my own state," adding that this connection makes him "more comfortable in that space" (Moon, Interview).

### **Abstract Deities and Expandable Locality: Animism, Open Imagery, and the Feeling of Territorial Expansion**

The third discovery concerns the visual form and scalability of the Tudigong image. Moon, explaining why he hadn't yet painted the Tudigong, mentioned a key dilemma: the appearance of a deity is not verifiable; no one has seen it. Therefore, he initially couldn't find a reason to depict the Tudigong with a fixed appearance. Later, through spray painting, he shifted to finding a balance between abstraction and representation, allowing the Tudigong to appear to have a human-like structure, but with open facial features, leaving room for the viewer's imagination.

He avoids fixing the Tudigong into a fixed image because, in his understanding, "it is a deity, and he himself is an air-like existence whose appearance has never been seen by anyone" (Moon, Interview). Therefore, he prefers to understand the recurring Tudigong as an open mode of manifestation and proposes that "every Tudigong I create now is a concept of animism" (Moon, Interview). Under this understanding, the openness of the image is not merely an aesthetic choice but becomes a key condition for its ability to recur across fields and accumulate local characteristics in movement.

This openness is not merely an aesthetic choice but also connected to his understanding of the "animism" in Southern Fujian beliefs. In his narrative, each Tudigong can take different forms—round, square, tall, short, fat, or thin—thus becoming a recurring entity in different settings. Because of this, the Tudigong symbol not only serves local identification but also carries a feeling of territorial expansion in mobile creation. He connects this feeling with the impulse to "leave marks everywhere" in graffiti writing, making the Tudigong belong to the Southern Fujian context while maintaining continuity in cross-site actions. In other words, locality does not confine creation to a fixed location; instead, it gains a mobile and extensible mode of expression through an open deity image.

### Summary

In summary, Moon's Tudigong series elevates "folk belief" from a background cultural element into a practical mechanism. On one hand, it provides an interpretive framework, establishing an understandable relationship between street art and the land, community, and daily order; on the other hand, it offers action installations, connecting creators with the site through practices such as supplication, pre-marking, and open representation, allowing localism to enter graffiti practice in a deeper way. Thus, the localization of graffiti is no longer merely about the appearance of local symbols on the surface of the work, but rather about the concepts, steps, and feelings of how the local world participates in shaping and creating art.

### DISCUSSION

Reinterpreting the localization of graffiti: It's not about adding local elements to the artwork, but about incorporating local lifestyles into the process of action.

In graffiti studies, localization is often described as a visible result, such as the appearance of local language, local imagery, or folk symbols in the work, thereby gaining stronger recognizability and a sense of place (Valjakka, 2013, 2015). Moon's case takes this issue a step further. For him, the Tudigong is not a decorative material chosen to represent the place, nor is it a superficial fusion of folklore and graffiti. He stated directly in an interview that the "starting point" for creating the Tudigong is that he believes the Tudigong is a god who blesses graffiti (Moon, Interview). This statement shifts localization from a visual result to a starting point of meaning. The Tudigong is first and foremost an entity that can explain and support street art, and only secondly becomes a recurring image in the work's system.

This shift is significant because it suggests that the locality of graffiti doesn't necessarily stem from a single local symbol, but rather from reasoning and behavioral habits within the local world. Moon doesn't first decide on a folk image and then seek justification; instead, he starts from a common life logic found in Southern Fujian beliefs, correlating different demands with different deities, and then incorporating the relationship between street art and the land. His conclusion is that "the deity who manages graffiti is the Tudigong," and that during worship, one "expresses the desire for more walls, the desire for more creative space" (Moon, Interview). This narrative transforms walls from a randomly available physical resource into a life resource that can be entrusted and expected. In contrast to the spatial politics and surface competition emphasized in graffiti research, Moon's material suggests that writers, facing unstable creative conditions, not only adjust timing and path strategically, but may also leverage local knowledge to provide direction and continuity for their actions.

### Everyday Religion as Miniature Infrastructure: Transforming Unfamiliar Spaces into Accessible Venues

Graffiti and street art studies have long pointed out that the creation site is not a neutral background, but a space that is constantly occupied, contested, and reproduced (Dovey et al., 2012). Under governance pressure,

cities often manage images through a combination of cleanup and selective tolerance, thus graffiti practice has long been caught in a tug-of-war between visibility and control (McAuliffe, 2012; Iveson & McAuliffe, 2022). Moon's case adds a more intrinsic dimension to this "spatial strategy," namely, how the creator aligns their emotions with the site before entering it, thereby making the action bearable and repeatable.

He recounted that when he went to different places to work on projects, "I would first find a small corner to draw a picture of the Tudigong, or put a sticker of the Tudigong nearby, because I needed to connect with the space in my own state of mind" (Moon, Interview). He then explained that the feeling this connection brought was "it made me feel more comfortable in this space" (Moon, Interview). If we put this experience back into the framework of everyday religious studies, it is more like a lightweight ritualistic action. It does not rely on formal religious venues, nor does it need to be publicly displayed, but it accomplishes two things at the action level: first, it transforms an unfamiliar space into an accessible workspace; second, it provides an emotional refuge for high-risk or high-uncertainty actions. Similar ideas are not unfamiliar in folk and everyday religious studies. Many studies emphasize that the value of ritual lies in connecting space with bodily experience and providing predictability and a sense of security in uncertainty (Han, 2023; Cao, 2024). Moon's case brings this logic into the details of graffiti practice, making it easier for us to understand why the same deity image would appear repeatedly in a writer's sequence of actions.

### **Open Deity Image and Movable Locality: Locality is not necessarily equivalent to fixed symbolism**

Moon's treatment of the Tudigong further illustrates how locality can be both stable and mobile. He is not in a hurry to depict the Tudigong with a fixed face because, in his understanding, the deity "has never been seen by anyone," but is a "presence like air" (Moon, Interview). This statement is not merely a philosophical expression; it directly influences the openness of how he shapes the image. He emphasizes that the Tudigong can take different forms and understands his constantly created Tudigongs as "each Tudigong is a concept of animism" (Moon, Interview). Under this understanding, the image no longer needs to precisely correspond to a fixed style of deity but is more like a mode of presence that can repeatedly appear in different settings.

It is precisely because of this openness that the Tudigong can carry a sense of expansion in mobile creations. Moon describes this expansion in a very straightforward way: when "the Tudigong is present here, it means that this area has been blessed," bringing a feeling of "expanding territory" (Moon, Interview). This set of expressions echoes the discussions in graffiti research about marking, occupying space, and territorialization, but it does not simply treat faith as a decorative language for graffiti territorialization. Instead, it makes the divine symbol a practical device that weaves together spatial occupation and emotional security. In other words, locality here is not accomplished by a fixed local symbol, but by a local worldview and mode of action that continuously operates, ultimately accumulating a stable style and site relationship through movement and repetition.

### **On Legitimacy and Risk Negotiation: From External Legitimacy to the Sustainability of Action**

Graffiti studies often discuss its legitimacy within the context of urban governance, public acceptance, and artistic processes, pointing out that graffiti may gain conditional recognition in creative cities and urban renewal narratives, or it may be continuously stigmatized through cleanup and punishment (McAuliffe, 2012; Zhang et al., 2024). Folk religion studies emphasize that under superstitious discourse and institutional discipline, many practices strive for survival through culturalization, intangible cultural heritage status, or reinterpretation (Cao, 2023; Xu & Tao, 2022; Rots, 2019). The key reminder from the Moon case is that the mobilization of the Tudigong primarily addresses not external institutional legitimacy, but internal sustainability. Praying for more walls and creative spaces (Moon, Interview) and establishing spatial connections through pre-emptive stickers or drawings (Moon, Interview), collectively transform uncertain street actions into a repeatable process. It makes creation more affordable and easier to sustain.

Of course, this doesn't mean the Tudigong symbol won't influence the external level. Theoretically, it could indeed become a cultural vocabulary more easily understood by the local public, thus weakening the perceived vandalism of graffiti in certain contexts, and even creating blurred tolerance boundaries at the community level. However, based on the current materials, the more reliable conclusions in this paper still come from the

narrative and action logic of the creators, rather than feedback from the public and governance. Incorporating audience interviews, community interactions, and cleanup records in the future will allow for a more concrete answer to whether the Tudigong symbol will change how artworks are categorized and treated in public spaces.

## CONCLUSION

This paper takes Moon, a graffiti artist from Quanzhou, Fujian, as a key case study to discuss how Southern Fujian folk beliefs enter the conceptual structure and action process of graffiti writing, and further shape the relationship between the creator and urban space. The answer to the research question is that, in Moon's narrative, Southern Fujian folk beliefs do not passively provide symbolic elements, but rather enter the creative process as an interpretive framework and light ritualistic actions, thereby stabilizing his system of Tudigong symbols and providing emotional placement and action sequence for entering unfamiliar spaces. Unlike the common understanding of localization as a collage of local symbols, the material in this paper shows that the Tudigong in Moon's practice is first and foremost a reliable existence and interpretive framework, and only then becomes a repeatable visual image. Moon translates the everyday religious logic of praying for something into the action logic of street creation, linking graffiti with the land, and thus defining the Tudigong as the guardian and manager most directly related to street creation, praying for more walls and creative spaces in his worship. This deduction transforms walls from merely accidental physical conditions into life resources that can be entrusted, expected, and interpreted.

This article further points out that the Tudigong not only provides symbolic meaning at the level of artwork but also enters the creative act in a lightweight yet repeatable way. Moon describes that when he enters a new creative location, he first draws a Tudigong in a corner or sticks on a sticker to establish a connection with the site, allowing him to enter the creative state more stably and stay in the site. This kind of action is closer to a daily ritual; it is not predicated on external display but completes the entry into the site and the placement of emotions at the action level. At the same time, Moon takes an open approach to the image of the Tudigong. He emphasizes that deities cannot be fixed with a single face and understands the Tudigong as the manifestation of animism in all things. The open image of the deity gives locality a mobile mode of expression. The Tudigong can anchor the meaning related to land and community order in the Southern Fujian context and can also maintain a continuous sense of presence in cross-site mobile creation, bringing a practical experience of territorial expansion.

Based on the above findings, this paper's theoretical contributions are mainly reflected in two aspects. First, this paper advances the localization of graffiti from a visible symbolic outcome to a debatable practical mechanism, demonstrating that local culture is not merely added to the material library of works, but may deeply participate in the creative process through concepts and action systems such as everyday religion. Second, this paper provides an explanatory path for understanding the sustainability of graffiti practice, different from a purely strategic perspective, emphasizing how emotional placement and site-specific connections intertwine with spatial action to jointly support recurring street creations. By connecting the sensitivity of graffiti research regarding spatial politics and governance negotiation with the explanatory framework of everyday religious research regarding spatialized rituals, legitimacy transformation, and emotional support, this paper proposes that local deities can be understood as a practical resource, rather than merely local symbols.

Methodologically, this paper employs an interpretative case study strategy, utilizing in-depth interview narratives with high information density to trace meaningful clues. The aim is not to arrive at statistically representative conclusions, but rather to propose a comparable and verifiable mechanism. However, this study also has clear limitations. First, a single case cannot represent the entirety of Southern Fujian or Fujian writers; the value of this paper lies in mechanism explanation rather than group generalization. Second, the material primarily comes from interview narratives, lacking multi-source verification of on-site actions, audience interaction, and governance processes; therefore, the legitimacy of the external effects still requires more substantial empirical support. Third, the readability of local deity symbols varies across different cities and communities; misinterpretations, translations, and reinterpretations may alter their actual effects, which requires more careful handling in future research.

Future research can proceed in three directions. First, conduct comparative case studies across cities or regions to observe whether graffiti artists in different locations also mobilize resources related to deities, amulets, or local rituals, and how these resources enter the action process. Second, introduce the perspectives of the audience and the community to analyze how deity graffiti is categorized by the public as art, prayer, traditional culture, or vandalism, and examine how this categorization affects tolerance boundaries. Third, combine governance process materials to examine whether deity symbols influence the operational logic of cleanup, tolerance, and legal wall systems. Through these additions, the mechanism hypotheses proposed in this paper from the creator's perspective can be expanded into a more complete explanation of urban spatial negotiation relationships.

In conclusion, Moon's Tudigong series reminds us that understanding the locality and continuity of graffiti in the context of Chinese cities cannot be limited to the surface of images or stylistic lineages. The daily understanding of deities, rituals, and spaces in the local world may enter the creative act in a deeper way, thereby influencing how graffiti artists find walls, how they enter spaces, how they place their emotions, and how they maintain repeatable street practices on the ever-changing urban surface.

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### Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee at Taylor's University (approval: HEC 2024/434) on 14/11/2024.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Data Availability

To protect the privacy of respondents, the data from this study will not be disclosed to the public.