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**Public spaces in late socialist East Asia: Interactions, performativity, citizenship**

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# The transformation of mobility in post-*đổi mới* Vietnam

*La transformation de la mobilité dans le Vietnam après la politique d'ouverture (đổi mới)*

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# The transformation of mobility in post-*đổi mới* Vietnam

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how mobility has changed in late-socialist Vietnam in the context of increasingly entangled intersections between private aspirations and state policies, economic development, and urbanisation. Based on “motorbike ethnography” in Ho Chi Minh City, the paper focuses on traffic as a major site where social actors negotiate dominant discourses on modernity, access to public spaces and citizenship. Traffic is also a marker of social inequalities and uneven distribution of motility. Traditional means of transport such as the bicycle and the cyclo, usually associated with lower social classes, must yield to more powerful means, in particular the car. Indeed, although motorbikes still dominate city traffic, the car plays a central role in contemporary notions of modernity and has become a symbol of conspicuous consumption for urban middle classes. In this paper I seek to understand the persistence of motorbikes, the increasing popularity of cars, and the relations between the two means of transportation in present-day Ho Chi Minh City from a mobilities perspective.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City, motorbike, mobilities, intimacy.

**Résumé :** Cet article explore les transformations de la mobilité dans le Vietnam socialiste d’aujourd’hui, dans le contexte d’intersections croissantes entre aspirations privées, politiques étatiques, développement économique et urbanisation. S’appuyant sur une « ethnographie à moto » à Hô-Chi-Minh-Ville, cet article met l’accent sur la circulation comme un site majeur dans lequel les acteurs sociaux négocient les discours dominants sur la modernité, l’accès aux espaces publics et l’appartenance citoyenne. Les modes de circulation sont aussi des marqueurs d’inégalités sociales et d’absence d’équité dans la mobilité. Les formes de mobilité plus traditionnelles comme le vélo ou le cyclo-pousse, généralement associées aux classes sociales inférieures, doivent céder la place à des moyens de déplacement plus puissants, en particulier la voiture. En effet, bien que les motos continuent de dominer dans le trafic urbain, la voiture joue un rôle central dans la notion actuelle de modernité ; elle est devenue un symbole de consommation ostensible pour les classes moyennes de la ville. Dans cet article, j’essaie de comprendre, à travers une approche de la mobilité, la persistance des déplacements à moto, la popularité croissante des voitures, et les relations entre ces deux moyens de transport à Hô-Chi-Minh-Ville.

**Mots-clés :** Vietnam, Hô-Chi-Minh-Ville, moto, mobilité, intimité.

## Introduction

Traffic is the most visible marker of Vietnam's transition towards a "socialist-oriented market economy", a shift which initiated in the mid-1980s with the macroeconomic reforms known as *đổi mới* (renovation) (Fforde 1996; Masina 2006). The favoured positional goods in post-war Vietnam have centred on technology, while other aspirational goods have lost popularity as they became outdated. Bicycles dominated Vietnamese streets until the late 1980s, but have gradually been replaced by motorbikes<sup>1</sup> (Truitt 2008; Freire 2009; Gillen 2015; Hansen 2017a). Starting from the 2010s, the value of motorbikes as status-producing goods decreased as car ownership became a symbol of social and economic achievement (Hansen 2015, 2017b). In this context, where a person's mode of transportation and social status are often conflated, mobility intermingles with the aspirations, desires, and practices of the modern city dweller (Jensen 2011).

The foundational role of automobility in contemporary notions of modernity (Nguyen-Marshall *et al.* 2012; Hansen & Nielsen 2014) has worked to institutionalise the car as a desirable good amongst the Vietnamese urban middle classes, and, more generally, as a necessary step towards the foundation of a new "urban civilisation" (*văn minh đô thị*) (Bradley 2004; Harms 2009, 2014; Gibert & Son 2016). However, partly due to the lack of viable public transportation, the high desirability of cars does not yet match the practicalities of automobility. Indeed, in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where the urban fabric is mainly characterised by narrow alleyways (*hẻm*), motorbikes still account for 80% of daily trips (*The Guardian* 2016; *Vietnam Investment Review* 2018; *VNExpress* 2019). The tendency to improve one's social position by purchasing the highest status vehicle possible within one's means is at odds with the fact that most Vietnamese, including those who do have a car, still rely on motorbikes for their everyday commutes. To explain this apparent paradox, I argue that, through the motorbike, urbanites negotiate state policies that challenge the equitable distribution of motility and lead to significant frictions between residents and the government (Turner 2020). By exercising agency and creativity during their daily routines, motorbike drivers generate new narratives and challenge normative discourses around access to public spaces, their right to the city, as well as gender roles (Law 1999; Uteng & Cresswell 2008) in this late-socialist yet still highly authoritarian regime. Besides highlighting how authorities create narratives of mobility based on neoliberal visions of modernity, I focus on how those whose mobility is endangered come up with tactics to protect their right to the city. In particular, I examine how bodies, streets, transport systems, and policies and processes of urbanisation intermingle with people's agency and choices of how to be physically and socially mobile in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC).

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1 I use the term "motorbike" to refer generally to motorised two-wheelers, regardless of their engine displacement.

The mobilities literature provides conceptual tools to understand how power, meaning and sociocultural contexts are intertwined with movement (Sheller & Urry 2006; Cresswell 2010). However, whilst focusing on the governing of mobility, proponents of the “mobilities turn” often neglect the ways societies are “governed *through* mobilities” (Bærenholdt 2013: 26). As Doughty and Murray (2016) explain:

The element of contradiction within institutionalised discourses of mobility is evident at the level of everyday practice where individuals must negotiate these multifaceted discourses in relation to their everyday mobile practices. (Doughty & Murray 2016: 312)

Similarly, Turner (2020) speaks of “mobility injustice” in her study of informal motorbike taxi drivers in Hanoi. In an approach consistent with Bourdieuan theories of consumption, Turner (2020: 2) argues that mobility injustice structurally favours “those with the largest holdings of economic and symbolic capital”. This is particularly evident in traffic, where mightier vehicles are usually yielded the right of way. As Yazıcı (2013: 532) states: “An anthropological focus on the everyday experience of traffic is timely and indispensable [...] because it is a growing, consequential, and inescapable daily experience for urban dwellers”. An analytical focus on traffic reveals that urban inequalities are produced not only through segregated social spaces, but also on the move, by favouring certain types of mobility over others. Furthermore, the physical proximity of vehicles in traffic minimises social distance and stirs awareness of class, making social hierarchies visible to everybody.

The paper draws on twelve months of “motorbike ethnography” (Hansen 2018) in Ho Chi Minh City, carried out between 2018 and 2020. While conducting fieldwork, I used a motorbike for all activities: exploring the city, observing the traffic, shopping, driving to interviews, and riding with informants. My work was particularly inspired by several studies (Truitt 2008; Freire 2009; Peters 2012; Turner 2020) that focus on the motorbike as a particularly instructive object for understanding the social transformations brought about by Vietnam’s transitional economy. However, although many social scientists have advocated the need for “mobile investigations” (Edensor 2000; Kusenbach 2003; Anderson 2004; Lee & Ingold 2006; Watts 2008; Jain 2009; Wilson 2011), very few have actually engaged with an autoethnography of driving (Brunson 2003; Gillen 2015; Sopranzetti 2016; Hansen 2018). Taking the driver’s seat reconfigured my bodily engagement with the city as well as my relationships and interactions with my respondents. As my identity was construed as that of a driver, I was acknowledged by my respondents as a “true” or “full” Vietnamese. In a country where the motorbike is integral to one’s identity, a deeper understanding of urban life cannot truly be gained without experiencing motomobility first hand, either as a driver or riding as pillion, ideally both, for each of them carries different meanings, expertise and engagement (Gillen 2015: 1). In this sense, the article also draws on my personal experience in Vietnam during non-academic trips over a span of over twenty years.

## Mobility in post-*đổi mới* urban Vietnam

One of the images that remains most vividly etched on the mind of anyone who visits Vietnam is that of city traffic. By retracing my own encounters with Ho Chi Minh City's traffic ever since my first trip to the country in 1993, I will outline a brief history of transportation in Vietnam in the past three decades.

### Bicycles

In the early 1990s, bicycles (*xe đạp*) and cyclos (*xích lô*) still dominated the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, making traffic —if not less unruly than it is nowadays— at least quieter. Postcards depicting cyclists riding smiling in the middle of the road are still a common sight in souvenir shops. These idyllic representations underpin a discourse centred on the nostalgia for the “austere but simple post-war life” (Carruthers 2016: 215), evoking images that many of my research respondents who were born right after the *đổi mới* associate with their childhood. Such representations often include rich cultural references (see Figure 1), featuring schoolgirls riding their bicycles in traditional Vietnamese dress (*áo dài*) and conical hat (*nón lá*). The setting also underlines the sense of nostalgia, as the Ho Chi Minh City Post Office, built between 1886 and 1891, is an historical landmark of the colonial era. All these elements reinforce the link between the bicycle and an idealised vision of the past, which overshadows the fact that bicycles are still used nowadays.



**Figure 1. School girl in “Ao dai”, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.**

Postcard retrieved online from <<http://johanpostcards.blogspot.com/>>

Besides the children, the poor and the elderly, for whom the bicycle has always been the primary means of transportation (Carruthers 2016: 217), cycling in urban Vietnam has recently become “a form of leisure, sport and conspicuous consumption” (Carruthers 2016: 213) for the urban middle class. In this sense, the slowness embedded in cycling is “a practical disposition that may distinguish

urban middle classes, rather than simply one that depicts everyday practices of underclasses” (Earl 2020: 456). Carruthers (2016: 218) adds that: “[T]he emergence of new forms of cycling [...] is complicating this simple equation of the bicycle with poverty and low status.” Indeed, cycling practices connected to the rise of middle-class cultures of consumption (Earl 2013, 2014) jeopardise well-established street hierarchies that usually give mightier vehicles the right of way (Truitt 2008: 7-8). Thus, the existence of urban elites advocating for more inclusive policies towards cycling might help safeguard the diversity of Vietnamese traffic in spite of the onslaught of motorbikes and the ongoing takeover of the car.

### Motorbikes

My second trip to Vietnam took place in 1998. Whereas in the years immediately after *đổi mới* the motorbike was still prohibitively expensive for the average person, by the late 1990s the rapid economic growth had radically transformed the Vietnamese cityscape. The motorbike (*xe máy*) —especially Japanese models— had increasingly become an essential status symbols for urbanites (Earl 2004). By the year 2000, Ho Chi Minh City counted 2 million bicycles and 1.5 million motorbikes (Facts and Details, Vietnam). Swarms of motorbikes were taking over the streets, and although they had not yet outnumbered bicycles, their popularisation —mainly due to more accessible purchasing prices through the import of Chinese models (Hansen 2015)— brought about several issues including noise (Phan *et al.* 2009) and air pollution (Hieu *et al.* 2013), and an increase in the rate of traffic-related injuries (Le *et al.* 2002). As motorcycles were gradually replacing the bicycle as the *de facto* mode of transportation among urbanites, people’s mindset started changing, too. By the turn of the century, people began to look down on those who used bicycles and cyclos, which were thought of as being suited to the inferior classes and therefore deemed unfashionable. Media representations of motorbikes (see Figure 2) provide a more chaotic feeling compared to the idealised images of bicycle riders. They usually portray streets flooded with motorcyclists, where elements of urbanisation (e.g. street-facing stores, electric wires) are well evidenced.

As the number of motorised two-wheelers grew and even Japanese models, once considered luxurious, were becoming more popular, people started looking for other ways to reclaim their status in the anonymity of daily traffic. From the late 2000s, European motorbikes, most notably the Italian brand Piaggio, set a new standard of luxury and affluence among urbanites.

[O]wnership of a branded motorbike operates like an academic qualification that acts as a certificate of cultural competence. The brand name, like institutional recognition, makes it possible to compare owners and the relative symbolic value of their ride by establishing conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital based on guaranteed monetary values in a strict relationship between product, rank and remuneration (Earl 2014: 180).

The motorbike has profoundly shaped the patterns and practices of mobility, allowing people to move faster and farther. As a mobility enhancer and an important source of income —when used as a taxi or a mobile food stall— the motorbike has proved indispensable for every aspiring rural-to-urban migrant (Peters 2012).



Not only does a motorbike represent a tool for upward social mobility, but it also offers new freedoms in terms of social and gender practices. Truitt (2008: 3-4) argues that motorbikes do this by altering the boundaries of public and private to shape “a new paradigm of urban mobility”. In this sense motorbike has gradually become a symbol of not just affluence but also independence (Brunson 2013).



**Figure 2. Rush hour on Le Van Si Street (HCMC), Vietnam.**

Photo by Doan Duc Minh, *n.d.*; Postcard property of the author.

More so than any other form of motorised vehicle, motorbikes are appropriate for the scale of everyday life in urban Vietnam. The shapeshifting nature of the motorbike is reflected in its ambiguous position within traffic. In the past two decades, traffic in Vietnam has been subjected to increasing regulations. Following the diversification of private conveyance, authorities managed to control competing classes of vehicles by inscribing streets with lines of division (Truitt 2008). The edges of roads are reserved for “primitive vehicles” (*xe thô sơ*) including bicycles, cyclos, and pushcarts, while fast lanes have been created for cars, buses, commercial trucks, and passenger vans (Turner & Hanh 2018). In this classification, the motorbike is a hybrid mode of transportation, combining the manoeuvrability of the bicycle with the power of the car. Motorcyclists are freer to move across the street grids, making their way through tight spaces and narrow alleyways (*hẻm*) or even using the sidewalks. However, motorbikes are being progressively marginalised by the growing number of cars. Symbolically, the car has become a more accurate marker of middle class identity. Physically, in the attempt to reduce pollution and unclog roads, national and municipal authorities have been increasingly curtailing motomobility. In the early 2000s, for example, the Vietnamese government enforced a campaign to limit the number of motorbikes an individual could legally register in the city. However, city officials in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City were forced to lift the restriction, following social protests that legal scholar Mark Sidel (2008) labelled “motorbike

constitutionalism”. The success of these protests was partly due to the participation of urban elites, and although their claims revolved around consumption practices and private property rather than broader political demands, they represented the first case of open assertion of constitutional rights by the public in Vietnam on a national level. In August 2018, municipal authorities in Ho Chi Minh City issued a plan called “Strengthening public transport in combination with controlling motor vehicles in Ho Chi Minh City,” which included a step-wise ban on motorbikes from central districts by 2030, with the aim of tackling air and noise pollution, eliminating gridlocks, and reducing the number of accidents. Once again, the plan has met with strong resistance from the public opinion and the press. In this case, however, the plan has been opposed mostly by lower class urbanites who are unable to afford a car and thus lament the absence of viable public transportation.

These episodes are particularly telling of people’s agency when it comes to defending their right to be mobile in the city, or, in other words, their “right to the mobile city”. This right, which Castañeda (2020: 62) describes as “the marriage of mobilities and the right to the city”, allows people to negotiate dominant discourses not only around mobility at large, but also around cultural practices of gender and intimacy as I will highlight later in this paper.

## Cars

My third trip to Vietnam took place in 2015. The population’s transition from bicycles to motorbikes was completed and, by then, cars had become a common sight in traffic. Although cars had not experienced the same explosive growth in numbers as motorbikes, mainly due to their purchase price and the very high taxes imposed by the Vietnamese government, private car ownership has had profound impacts on the cityscape. In Ho Chi Minh city, the emergence of the car has been accompanied by the creation of expressways as well as “new urban areas” (*khu đô thị mới*). These massive developmental projects aim at improving living conditions in the city by combining residential and commercial areas that target the urban middle classes’ lifestyles. These projects, which claim to bring a new form of “urban civilisation” (*văn minh đô thị*) to the city, represent a growing convergence of views between the municipal authorities and the urban middle classes. This convergence can be explained by the growing desire of urban elites to protect and mark out the boundaries of their newly acquired properties by promoting a clearer distinction between public and private urban spaces. Thus, privacy is progressively becoming a consumer good for the upper-class urbanites, and this is reflected both in their living patterns —gated communities with exclusive access— and their modes of transportation —cars with tinted windows, because, as a Vietnamese car service company states on its website: “With window tinting not only are you protecting yourself from harmful UV rays, but also [...] your car will be cooler, with added privacy” (*Vietnam Car Care* website).



These two modalities of conspicuous consumption feed each other. As Hansen (2017a) argues:

People drive cars to belong to the middle class, while belonging to the (upper) middle class comes with expectations of automobility. And crucially, this is not necessarily about displaying status, it also concerns generally higher expectations to comfort, convenience, and safety (Hansen 2017a: 181).

Furthermore, such luxurious visions of new urban Vietnam act as “a visual symbol for the political as well as the individual wish to be part of a globalising modern community, as well as representations of internationally standardised town planning, driven by market forces” (Waibel 2006: 46).

Urban authorities control and regulate the daily practices of the population by managing people’s ways of being mobile. National campaigns urge urban dwellers to follow new urban rules of civilisation, such as the ban on trade on the sidewalk, to promote a modern urban life (Gibert & Sơn 2016). This state imaginary privileges “modern” mobilities, based on highways, a bus rapid transport system, and a metro, while “traditional” modes of transportation such as motorbikes, bicycles, and cycles are being strongly discouraged and increasingly marginalised (Turner 2020).

This is an example of what Bærenholdt (2013) calls *governmobility*. Developing an approach that combines insights from mobility studies (Sheller & Urry 2006; Urry 2007; Jensen 2011) and governmentality (Foucault 1978), Bærenholdt argues that societies are increasingly governed through mobility. More specifically, *governmobility* describes “a situation where the regulation of mobilities [is] internalised in people’s mobile practices” (Bærenholdt 2013: 29).

[G]overnmobility works through bodily, technological and institutional forms of self-government, which are enacted relationally and embedded in systems. Rather than through subjects, *governmobility* works through objects and relations [...]. Thus, *governmobility* means ruling through connections — mobilising mobilities (Bærenholdt 2013: 29).

Elaborating on this claim, I argue that the physical and legislative instruments implemented by the Vietnamese authorities to regulate mobility contribute to inculcating into urbanites the idea that one’s place in traffic reflects one’s place in society. Thus, my focus is not simply on the infrastructures of mobility —that is the technological and discursive components that enable the use of mobility as a service— but on mobility as an infrastructure (see Peters 2020), that is a “critical site through which politics is translated from a rationality to a practice, in all its social, material, and political complexity” (Appel *et al.* 2018: 20). Following this approach, infrastructures do not just help us to rethink politics, but they elicit embodied experiences that produce a sense of belonging, resistance, and meaning. In the next section I describe my own embodied experience with a particular form of mobility, the motorbike, and how it shaped my ethnography of traffic in Ho Chi Minh City.

## **Motorbike ethnography: Sensing traffic through a motorbike**

My research methodology is based on what Hansen (2018) calls “motorbike ethnography”. My own intimate and embodied experience with motorbikes, first as a passenger and then as a driver, provided fruitful insights around motomobility. It instructed me about both the physical and social aspects of riding, while allowing me to participate first-hand in the daily experience of traffic.

The first time I had the chance to ride a motorbike in Vietnam was in 2016. Since the idea of driving in Ho Chi Minh City was still too frightening, I decided to practice in Da Nang, a seaside city in central Vietnam where traffic was much less overwhelming than in the southern metropolis. There, I developed my driving skills riding an old Honda Dream with manual transmission that a friend kindly lent me. In Da Nang, I learned the basics of motorbike riding: how to balance while idling, how not to make the engine stall when shifting gears, how to steer, and even how to carry a pillion. Having ridden a motorbike before, in Italy, all these tasks were quite simple and even driving during rush hour was not too complicated. This was mainly due to the urban layout of Da Nang, consisting of larger roads and boulevards that facilitated the flow of traffic and made manoeuvring relatively easy. When I returned to Ho Chi Minh City, although I switched to a much-easier-to-ride Honda Airblade (fully automatic), even basic tasks such as turning, yielding to other vehicles and parking, became more challenging. For example, nobody used indicators and I had to learn how to signal turns by sticking out my arm. Apart from being reminiscent of riding a bicycle, this gesture is also a way to physically prevent fellow riders from overtaking during the manoeuvre, which is particularly telling given the density of traffic in the city.

Taking the driver’s seat completely changed my perspective on the city. As a passenger, I had always enjoyed the freedom to look around, getting lost in the sensorial details of the surrounding landscape. As a driver, I had no time to indulge as my attention was focused on the road and on other vehicles. Driving and being a passenger, although occurring in almost the same physical space, imply different expertise and body behaviours (Adey *et al.* 2012; Laurier *et al.* 2008). While riding a motorbike, all senses come into play, although the main difference between the driver and the passenger lies in how they see. The passenger can stare and gaze, while the driver can only glance and must learn how to catch details out of the corner of their eye. Sometimes the passenger actively helps the rider, by giving directions or information about incoming traffic. The relation between people riding motorbikes, and also between the riders and the surrounding environment is asymmetrical (Laurier *et al.* 2008: 10). Being a driver requires riders to choose among many options in order to make the journey a better experience. This implies that the rider uses strategies to make the ride more pleasant (by taking shadowed boulevards to avoid the sun), safer (by riding slowly and dodging potholes) or faster (by riding on sidewalks and running a red light). As I moved to the driver’s seat, I transformed and reconfigured both my body and my identity. Some friends, surprised that I had decided to drive (and that I even enjoyed it!), complimented me for being “skilful” and “brave,” some others

called me “mad”, “crazy”, and “reckless”, but almost everybody agreed that riding a motorbike made me a “full Vietnamese”. Friends who did not drive —either because they cannot or because they do not dare— jokingly admitted that I was “more Vietnamese” than them. The experience of traffic is so deeply embedded in the everyday life and social fabric of urbanites, that only active participation in it allows for full citizenship.

Riding is a body technique that generates specific kinds of socialities both within the motorbike as a social space and between fellow riders, and these socialities have political dimensions (Bishara 2015; Freire 2009; Gillen 2015; Truitt 2008). Experiences of driving are linked with our social identities as well as our embodied senses of self. In other words, as put by Sheets-Johnstone (1999: 269), “what is kinetic is affective”. In Vietnam, the affective dimension of mobility is particularly associated with motorbikes.

One night, while dining with some friends, I asked Thich,<sup>2</sup> a young university student and motorcycle enthusiast who was studying for his car driving license, if he thought of switching to the car (his family owned one) as his main means of transportation. Firstly, he replied that he intended to use the car only for trips that require going out of the city, whereas for everyday mobility the motorbike would still be his go-to vehicle. He then added that he would never prefer the car because “four wheels move the body, but two wheels move the soul” (“*bốn bánh di chuyển cơ thể, nhưng hai bánh di chuyển linh hồn,*” fieldnotes). He proceeded to explain his bold statement by saying that a car is just a box, useful to move in between places and transport goods, but lacking all those feelings that only a motorbike can convey. For Thich, the possibility of a deeper engagement with the surrounding environment and of “freeing his mind” on two wheels make the motorbike much more exciting and desirable than the car. His statement underpins an understanding of mobility that goes beyond the materiality of physical movement. A motorbike, in his vision, is valuable not simply because it is easier to ride in the narrow alleyways (*hẻm*) of Ho Chi Minh City, but mainly because of the embodied feelings it conveys. During one of our night rides, Nhi, another of my respondents with whom I used to converse while driving around the city, spontaneously reached over my shoulder and told me how much she loved taking long rides “to think about her life, her job and her problems” (fieldnotes).

I, too, during the months I spent in Ho Chi Minh City, found myself taking long rides just for the sake of riding, a practice codified in the Vietnamese expression *đi vòng vòng*. This expression literally means “go around” or “go in circles” and describes the practice of roaming aimlessly, that is, without any specific destination, mostly at night. Many of my respondents, mostly young university students or young professionals with a lower class background, like Nhi, describe this practice in terms of ease and comfort. Some like driving at night because “the temperature is cooler and there is no traffic”. Others like riding with a friend because “it is easier to talk about anything than when you sit in a coffeeshop”. Furthermore,

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2 All names in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

riding around downtown allows one to participate in the nightlife of the city without patronising expensive bars, whereas riding outside the city centre might be an escape from the bustling chaos of District 1. The embodied experience of motomobility translates into an affective engagement with the urban landscape. What is more, through practices of motomobility, urbanites can (re)configure gender relations, as I illustrate in the next section.

### **Gendered mobility: Motorbikes as a mobile infrastructure of intimacy**

During fieldwork, I spent a lot of time riding with friends and informants. Either when meeting for an interview or just hanging out (*đi chơi*), the pattern was usually the following: women asked me to go pick them up, while men would usually meet me at a specific spot. The motorbike seat reiterates gender norms, in which agency is associated with masculinity and passivity with femininity. The man drives and the woman rides pillion, even when this seems to transgress the conventional hierarchies based on age and social position. For instance, one day my former Vietnamese language teacher, a woman in her thirties whom I addressed as *cô* (a reference term for older women), made me ride her motorbike to the place we agreed to have lunch at. Despite our social asymmetry and the fact that the motorbike belonged to her, she preferred to follow this deeply gendered travel convention.

Mobility is an issue that is gendered in both directions: on the one hand, mobility determines women's and men's access to participation in society; on the other hand, women's and men's mobility is determined by gender roles and inequalities. For example, even when actively driving, women are usually charged with a greater burden in fulfilling their normative gendered roles. Feminist geographers have long advocated that analysis of daily travel patterns cannot be gender blind and that there are very significant differences between the longer and more direct travel patterns of men and the shorter yet more fragmented travel patterns of women, who not only go to work but also have to deal with a long list of typically feminised care tasks, including dropping children at school, shopping, and taking care of elders (Hanson 2010; Law 1999). In Vietnam, women also find their driving ability being questioned, mocked, and in some cases condemned, especially on social media. Dash-cam footage of so-called "street ninjas" (female motorists who wear multiple layers of clothing that also hide their faces) causing traffic accidents have been widely circulating on Facebook and YouTube. Women's practice of covering their face originates from ideals of beauty around pale skin, but also connects to the fear of skin diseases due to continuous exposure to UV rays. The "ninja" outfits worn mostly by female motorists have become so dominant in the streets that they are more than just a fashion item or a manifestation of women's ideal of beauty. They have become the locus of a gender-biased struggle and are a scapegoat for the anger generated by growing traffic pressure in the big cities.

Motorbikes provide the seats where normative gendered roles and expectations can be negotiated. By using motorbikes, women can ultimately assert their sexual identity and agency. In her study of Nepalese "scooty girls," Brunson (2013: 613)

shows how in Kathmandu, the ability to drive motorbikes grants young, unmarried women “an escape from the informal policing that happens at home or in one’s own community, and the opportunity to utilise new spaces to create intimacy, particularly between those of the opposite sex”. A similar situation has been taking place in Ho Chi Minh City over the past decade. At night, couples ride to specific spots —usually dark boulevards outside the city centre— where they can find some intimacy far from prying eyes. Youths in Ho Chi Minh City soon realised that motorbikes themselves could provide mobile places of intimacy as fondling and displays of affection usually deemed inappropriate in public spaces could be disguised while riding around (*đi vòng vòng*). As a result, riding pillion and holding onto one’s partner has become a popular practice among young urbanites, mostly accepted as it can easily be conflated as a measure of safety.

In an urban context characterised by massive urbanisation and high population density, the “contingent invisibility” (Newton 2016) afforded by traffic also allows people to enjoy intimacy by taking advantage of the inevitable physical proximity that motorbikes allow. Even public displays of affection among couples have become part of an urban vocabulary that finds its way of expression in motomobility. In other words, the flexibility of this mode of transportation allows its users a mobile intimacy, whose meanings and practices extend far beyond the sphere of sexuality, to include new ways in which urbanites relate to each other, but also with the surrounding environment and ultimately with their own sense of identity and citizenship.

A first step towards understanding how motorbikes are experienced by people as places of intimacy is to problematise the notions of public and private. Private and public spaces in Vietnam show features and dynamics which risk being misunderstood if we take western —namely Euromerican— urbanistic norms as a paradigm. As argued by Drummond (2000), the distinction between public and private spaces in Vietnam is transgressed from both the “inside-out” and the “outside-in.” State involvement with life at home comprises a series of legal tools that organise domestic relations and hierarchies, including the organisation of the household (Marriage and Family Law), the education of children (Youth Law and the Vietnamese Youth Development Strategy 2011-2020), as well as domestic rituals (each household must display the Vietnamese flag during national holidays). In contrast to western countries, the cultural tradition of a Vietnamese household can often include three generations living together. The lack of space inside the house makes it particularly common to consider the street as a natural extension of the private realm, an asset that residents are entitled to for relaxation, commerce, parking, and sleeping (Earl 2010; Kim 2015). The street in front of a family’s house can become the seating area for their shop in the morning; in the afternoon, it is their shelter from the heat while mingling with neighbours. Just like parks, streets ease the pressure of high-density living configurations while adapting to a wide range of activities and users. This type of living arrangement can both bring problems in terms of (private) space and issues related to inter-generational and gender-based interactions (Drummond & Rydstrom 2004). Some informants reported cases in which their family purposely renounced the benefits

of larger living spaces for economic reasons. For example, Quyet used to have her own room in the family-owned condo, but she ended up sleeping in her parents' bedroom so hers could be rented out. In a similar way, Ai's family preferred to rent out their former property (a typical Vietnamese tube house which also included a pool) in its entirety and moved to a smaller house when she started university, so as to be able to make some extra money. In general, all my informants agreed that privacy is almost non-existent in Vietnamese households, complaining that "they must leave their room open all the time" or that "parents enter their room without knocking". As Hien told me: "there is no privacy at home, they [the parents] must always know what you are doing" (fieldnotes).

As for public spaces, streets (including sidewalks) have always been part of Vietnam's everyday life (Kim 2015), yet in HCMC almost all streets have been appropriated by private individuals for mostly temporary, small-scale economic activities, including small shops, street vendors, and parking areas. More "conventional" public spaces like squares and green parks are either privatised to accommodate the growing demand for leisure space, occupied by residents for sports and gatherings, or used as vehicles of nationalist propaganda through displays of political pride that include statues of Vietnamese luminaries, the national flag, and parades during national holidays.

Freire (2009: 76) highlights the inner contradiction of spatial relations in Vietnam, where "private space is deprived and strongly controlled, and public space is almost a place of quasi-contestation". How is the motorbike positioned in such a contradiction? I argue that because true private spaces are rare, the motorbike provides an escape from the constraints of domestic space and is used to enjoy some forms of privacy and intimacy difficult to find elsewhere. In other words, the motorbike has become a mobile infrastructure of intimacy that is the epitome of new forms of embodiment and phenomenology that mediate how street cruisers sense and inhabit the physical and the social world. In this sense, I use the term "intimacy" to refer to an array of private-public arenas in which people perform their right to the city. Motorbikes foster the material and pleasure-seeking culture that emerged after the renovation policies of 1986, by allowing urbanites to access places that were previously inaccessible simply because they were too far away, as well as making it possible to carry out activities that would not be possible using bicycles. Thanks to motorbikes, rural migrants and farmers have easier access to the city (Peters 2012), while motorbikes themselves can serve as mobile shops for street vendors who mainly sell food, drinks, but also clothes, electronics and other wares. Motorbikes allow them to earn a living by transporting people and goods, hence the mushrooming of ride-hailing services such as Uber, Grab and VietGo, which also contributed to the growth of Vietnam's food delivery market (*Vietnam Investment Review* 2019).

To some, the motorbike represents an object of not only physical but also social mobility. To others, it is nothing more than a consumer item, whose most valuable feature consists in the social status associated to its price, brand and model. In this sense, Vietnam's "motorbike revolution" resembles the situation of post-war generations in Italy, analysed by Arvidsson (2001) in his study of Vespa and Piaggio's



youth-targeted marketing strategies. Motorbikes indeed become an item of inter-generational differentiation. Compared to elders, youths tend to purchase (or at least aspire to) newer and more expensive models, some of which can cost more than 100 million VND (more than \$4,000 or €3,600). They are also more keen to invest in customisation, which reinforces the image of motorbikes as fashion items and signs of identity. The uniformity that the authorities are trying to achieve through the “citizen model” is hindered by the emergence of individualistic values and visible social stratification processes, undertaken in particular by the young Vietnamese as an act of symbolic violence against elder generations.

The inevitable physical proximity when riding together on a motorbike allows couples to fondle each other while riding, although such sense of freedom is not shared by everyone. Some of my informants, especially women, consider public displays of affection inappropriate, regardless of whether they are carried out in a café or on the back of a motorbike. However, there is another practice which allows people to achieve some intimacy in the realm of the public. At night, youngsters park their motorbikes alongside streets and just sit, sometimes even for hours, while conversing, playing with their mobile phones or simply watching the traffic. This is another example of urban appropriation, one that resembles Solomon Benjamin’s notion of “occupancy urbanism” (Benjamin 2008). In the last part of this paper, I will analyse such practice drawing from my observation and participation in the nightlife of one of HCMC’s most popular streets.

Nguyen Hue walking street (*Phố đi bộ Nguyễn Huệ*) is a broad walking promenade located in the heart of HCMC, stretching for 800 metres from HCMC People’s Committee building to Ton Duc Thang street. Nguyen Hue is a popular spot with tourists and locals who are attracted by a plethora of fancy bars, luxurious boutiques, and French colonial architectural gems. At night, as thousands of pedestrians throng the central promenade, motorcyclists gather on both sides and by either idling on the curbside or taking up the sidewalk, they temporarily appropriate a patch of public space. This practice allows them to participate in the nightlife of one of the most popular spots in the city without paying parking fees or patronising overly expensive coffeeshops. Such “momentary immobility” (Sheller & Urry 2006: 2) allow riders to express their right to the city by negotiating the threshold between visibility and invisibility. They are visible for they physically occupy public space, but they disappear in the anonymity of the crowd. Brighenti (2010) argues that regimes of visibility are an optic metaphor of social relations, deeply concerned with power and social territory:

Visibility is a social dimension in which thresholds between different social forces are introduced. In this sense, the visible can be conceived of as a field of inscription and projection of social action, a field which can be explored as a territory (Brighenti 2010: 4).

Complementarily, invisibility as an act of resistance is a “productive force that contributes to the legitimization of a weak social segment in an urban environment rather than just a negative consequence of social inequality” (Newton 2015: 112).

## Final reflections

In this paper I have shown that in a context of political and economic transition, mobility is the locus where cultural symbols and rights to the city are negotiated between users, society and the state. Motorbikes in Vietnam act as agents of democratisation in a progressively stratified society. They are a medium through which people participate in urban life and find alternative ways of self-expression. Furthermore, they are cultural symbols of liberation, providing a place for intimacy in a context where domestic space is overly controlled and privacy has become a consumer good only accessible to the wealthier classes.

In a city where rapid urbanisation and high population density are exerting a huge pressure on infrastructure development, leaving little room for privacy and self-expression, the motorbike allows for autonomy and freedom of movement while also serving as a mobile site for both personal and inter-personal intimacy. Some people find motorbikes a more appropriate setting for private conversation than the relatively anonymous but often crowded cafes. The close and inevitable proximity of the driver and passenger allows for bodily and emotional closeness. Romantic couples perched on motorbikes can exchange gestures of affection that would normally be considered inappropriate elsewhere, like hugging or even kissing. Motorbikes thus become the physical and figurative space where the private and the public, the individual and the collective overlap. Many of my interviewees also mentioned motorbike riding as a form of personal intimacy, offering a way to think or reflect about their own problems. Especially at night, many youths ride their motorbikes without a specific destination. Through the embodied practice of riding motorbikes, urbanites affirm their right to the city, which is illustrative of people's agency regarding urban living.

Vietnam's late-socialist shift toward capitalism and globalisation has profoundly shaped Ho Chi Minh City's public culture. New living arrangements in the form of gated communities signal the state's effort to make urbanites conform as "model citizens", while the streets, the most visible and consumed public space, are turned "inside out" for commodification. In this contradictory context, the meaning and modalities of political participation are shaped around "everyday politics", micro acts of resistance through practices of mobility that allow the weakest segments of the population to affirm their right to the city.

To relieve the pressure of urban traffic, the construction of the HCMC metro started in 2012 and was expected to be completed in 2021. However, funding issues have caused severe delays and as of December 2018, only 62% of construction on the first line had been completed. Interestingly, although public opinion has profoundly criticised both the project due to traffic disruptions caused by massive roadworks, and also the government for the repeated delays (which involved an international corruption case), city dwellers do not seem to question the HCMC's actual need to have a metro in order to be a truly modern metropolis. As highlighted by Harms (2016), the ideas of urbanisation (*đô thị hóa*), industrialisation (*công nghiệp hóa*) and modernisation (*hiện đại hóa*) are ever present in state-led propaganda but they also mirror a notion of social development which is detached from the Communist

Party. This process resonates with what Harms, citing Gramsci, calls “domination through consent”: the everyday acceptance of cultural ideology in the face of a situation that seems to hinder it. People in HCMC might critique the party but not its vision of progress, and the metro perfectly shows the clash of the ideals of modernisation with the messy realities of development in practice. As Brian Larkin (2013: 335) puts it, infrastructures are “the means by which a state proffers [...] representations to its citizens and asks them to take those representations as social facts”. Through their use of infrastructures, people negotiate their relationships with the state, and this is especially true of roads, because driving is an interactive process replete with skills and affect (Thrift 2004), as well as being bound up in our identities.

The ambitions of my research are reflected in its several limitations. First of all, although Vietnam is progressively embracing capitalism, aspirational goods and emerging lifestyles must not be understood only in relation to materialistic consumption, but also in the quest for a better, presumably happier life. Nonetheless, it would be hasty to say that improved living standards are directly proportional to psychological well-being. According to the Ministry of Health’s recent statistics, 15% of Vietnam’s population suffer from depression and anxiety disorders, and “[t]he culprits of mental health problems are pressure in career and studying” (*Sài Gòn Giải Phóng*, 2019), indicating youths as the most fragile segment. In this regard, Tran (2012) argues that:

Anxiety has become emblematic of neoliberalism’s opportunities and risks in people’s public and private lives, yet to worry is a key means through which individuals enact forms of personhood based on care, compassion, and filial obligation (Tran 2012: ix).

Although in this paper I have paid attention to different scales and levels of mobility and consumption, including body practices of intimacy and space appropriation, I have to a lesser extent examined how these practices and relationships of sentiment come to be understood as specifically emotional themselves, a process that is crucial to subject formation in Vietnam’s transition to a market-oriented economy.

Finally, the coming years will bring significant changes in the social, economic and urban landscape of HCMC. Continued research on urban mobilities in HCMC and other major cities of Vietnam could provide interesting findings relevant to consumption, mobility and sustainable urbanisation. A possible continuation of the research conducted in this paper would be to expand the analysis beyond the middle class, to analyse how the urban working class and the urban poor perform and experience everyday practices of mobility. Another interesting venture would be to explore how the metro will affect patterns of mobility and private motorisation.

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