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Traveling Through Space: A Look at the Evolution of Transportation in Vietnam and its Implications

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Traveling Through Space

A Look at the Evolution of Transportation in
Vietnam and its Implications



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Abstract

As a country that has only started rapidly developing in the last thirty years or so, Vietnam's cities are still in throes of instating a comprehensive public transport infrastructure. During the French Colonial era in the early 20th century, Vietnam got a taste of its first mechanized form of transportation, the bicycle. These pedal-powered vehicles largely dominated the streets of Hanoi and Saigon until Doi Moi in 1986. Here, the motorbike came along and its rapid rise in popularity quickly pushed bicycles off the street. In the last twenty years or so, the motorbike population in Vietnam went from tens of thousands to tens of millions. Policy makers and urban planners couldn't keep up with this exponential growth rate, and the cities have generally been left with large traffic problems and people who don't care very much about following the laws. It is clear that some intervention, likely in the form of mass transit infrastructure, is desperately needed. After analyzing the history of Vietnam's urban transportation, I hoped to find out what role the motorbike plays in the daily lives of city dwellers and what values they impart it. Using Alexandre Freire's *"Motorbikes Against HCM?"* and Glenn Yago's *Sociology of Transportation* as respective lenses, I wanted to explore the sociocultural impact of the motorbike and how it can affect and change people's perceptions of space and their interactions with the environment. The main questions I sought to address were 1) How has the motorbike etched out a unique cityscape? 2) What sociocultural values has the motorbike imparted? 3) How feasible/popular are government plans to reduce motorbike usage and promote public transportation? Through a series of interviews with various individuals, I gained some deeper insight into their perspectives on the past and current transportation situation, and their feelings on a possible shift toward urban mass transit systems

Keywords: Urban Studies, Transportation, Development, Spatial Relations

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1. Introduction

Transportation lies at the heart of any economy. Or rather, the heart is one of the many places that vehicles can transport the humans of the world. Streets and roadways represent the veins these vehicular cells travel down, transporting goods and information from the beating metropolitan centers to the far out nerve-endings among the rural foothills and beyond. From the veins stem the more minute and specialized capillaries, which are responsible for the intricacies of transfer from one region to another. In terms of the roadway, the capillaries represent the alleyways and sidewalks home to Vietnam's bustling informal economy. This paper is primarily concerned with the shifting tides of Vietnam's transportation infrastructure and the most ubiquitous cell moving through it – the motorbike.

The motorbike's meteoric rise post Doi Moi has informed much of the country's cultural and economic styling since 1986. Many refer to the motorbike as the primary "icon of the renovation policy."¹ The city's landscape has mutated accordingly to its widespread popularity. Many stands along the sidewalk cater primarily to those on two wheels, and the built in ramps make the sidewalk itself yet another extension of the roadway. It would be hard to imagine the massive informal economy of the sidewalk operating under a transportation infrastructure revolving heavily around cars or mass transit. The emergence of motorbikes in tandem with this informal economy give credence to the idea of the motorbike as a symbol of modernization and the embrace of open market ideals. However, the

¹ Freire *"Motorbikes Against HCM?"* 69.

sidewalk economy is only one of many ways this symbol manifests itself.

As the motorbike carved its way through the cityscape and the countryside, its ubiquity has also shaped social interactions. During the course of my interviews, the concept of the motorbike as an individual, intimate space kept coming up, albeit indirectly. As Alexandre Freire states, “In a country where the state still remains rather intrusive in domestic spaces, where the density of the population is high and privacy is scarce and controlled, we could assume that the motorbike is used to enjoy some forms of privacy difficult to find elsewhere.”² Through my own interviews and observations, this seems to hold true. Public displays of affection are still considered socially taboo, but riding on the back of a motorbike almost requires the passenger to hold the driver, which usually manifests itself in the girl holding her man as they cruise down the street – simultaneously playing by the rules while embracing their love and the luxuries of a modernizing society.

Alexandre Freire’s article, “Motorbikes Against Ho Chi Minh?” is one of the few existing works that looks specifically at the sociocultural values imparted by the motorbike. The research that props up the article was conducted back in 2007. Many of his ideas about the idea of socio-spatial relations in regards to the motorbike still hold true, but the sociocultural values imparted on the vehicle seem to be waning, especially among the tech savvy University-age youth. One of my interviewees, Lily, stated, “The biggest issue among Vietnamese is awareness.” As the country moves increasingly toward liberal modernization, the

² Ibid. 68

youth (and those older generations willing to keep up) are becoming increasingly in touch with western trends and ideals, and with this, are becoming aware of their own culture in a global context. I will explore the implications of this interconnectedness and how it is spurring what seems to be a generational gap in regards to opinions on transportation.

Before delving into the modern implications of the motorbike, and the results of my interviews, it is important to look at the vehicle's history in Vietnam. Where did it come from? Why did it become so popular? Will the future stay on two wheels, expand to four, or move toward joint funded mass transit systems?

2. Background

2.1 French Colonial Era

Post-colonial thought has generally viewed the transfer of technology and western knowledge as a one-way path of direct influence by the imperializing country. This could make sense for things such as countrywide railways and mass infrastructure systems, such as power grids and railroads. These types of large-scale entities generally have a linear and defined purpose, which supports their status as tools of conquest and domination, as well as the fact that they are capital intensive and generally state-reliant in terms of funding. More recently, however, certain smaller scale technologies have been analyzed in the context of western introduction and localized appropriation. As this paper concerns the motorbike and its ubiquitous influence, the article "Cycles of Empowerment? The Bicycle and Everyday Technology in Colonial India and Vietnam" by David Arnold

and Erich DeWald provides an appropriate starting point to analyze the birth and dominance of two-wheeled movement in Vietnamese history and culture.

Towards the end of the 19th century, bicycles began to arrive in Vietnam via France. As they had access to a new, untapped market, French bicycle manufactures (i.e. Peugeot) advertised their products specifically for the Vietnamese consumer. At the time of their introduction, though, bicycles were still very much a luxury good that sat beyond the means of most Vietnamese people.³ As can be seen in Vietnam's private car market today, however, means don't necessarily inhibit consumption. With the proliferation of "advertorials" in Vietnamese publications that described the influx of modern, western technologies, bicycles became a symbol of consumerist modernity that has followed ideas of transportation consumption in Vietnam up to the present day.⁴ The bicycle became more affordable and available as it became incorporated into daily life, and as local Vietnamese who were trained as apprentices in European shops disappeared with their newfound knowledge to open up their own businesses that were more accessible and affordable for those existing on the lower rung of the Vietnamese economy.⁵

"The now-familiar figure of the pavement repairman in India or Vietnam, pumping up tires, making running repairs to chains, brakes, and twisted forks, was early on established among the street-level practitioners of everyday

³ Arnold and Dewald, *"Cycles of Empowerment?"* 978.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 979.

technology.”⁶

As the Vietnamese embraced the mobile merits of the bicycle, these roadside repairmen popped up more and more along urban streets, and gave an early example of the symbiotic relationship between bicycles (later motorbikes) and the informal economy. Both fed the growth of the other; as the bicycle continued its rise in popularity, the business landscape also grew. In tandem with this newfound freedom and mobility arrived the birth of the vehicular commute in Vietnamese society.

“The bicycle transformed everyday life, making it possible for low- and mid-level clerks and functionaries to work in the private and public offices in central Saigon and Hanoi and still live further out, thereby encouraging the development of suburbs and the integration of the rural hinterland into the economic activity and social patterns of the city.”⁷

Thus, the bicycle gave rise to local entrepreneurship. Instead of slow, animal-drawn carriages, the Vietnamese people could now transport themselves, on their own time, using their own manpower, and at an even faster pace. This effect became even more pronounced when the motorbike came to the national stage many decades later.

Similar sociocultural values were placed upon bikes of this period as will be seen later with motorbikes. In the early 20th century, bikes were seen as status symbols relegated only to high-class Europeans. This quickly passed, however, as Vietnamese gained mechanical knowledge and were able to

⁶ Ibid. 981

⁷ Ibid. 988.

manufacture their own bicycles at a fraction of the cost. Oddly enough, this same article that focuses on a period 100 years prior to that of Alexandre Freire's aforementioned article also mentions bicycle clubs and bicycle racing, demonstrating the bicycle's impact in developing a "Foucauldian technology of the self, an aspect of the care and cultivation of the modern individual."⁸

Alexandre Freire also mentions street racing, and the motorbike in general as symbolizing the "emergence of new hedonistic values, more individualistic, with which the young urban populations ... identify themselves..."⁹ Generally, this would seem to be the case of an established custom that cements itself culturally over time. However, between this period of French colonization and the economic reforms of 1986, a new generation had been born under a completely different regime. While this paper is not concerned with comparing the different governments of these two eras, it is interesting to see that both the bicycle and its motorized form have been noted as novel expressions of modern individualism.

2.2 Doi Moi and Successive Years

Without going too far into a topic that's already been heavily covered by the literature, I'll briefly discuss the 1986 economic reform, Doi Moi, and how it further mobilized the urban population and opened up the business landscape by further catalyzing entrepreneurship and consumption. After the era of French

⁸ Ibid. 982.

⁹ Freire "*Motorbikes Against HCM?*" 68.

colonization came to an end, the North and South were divided on which path the country should follow. The North moved toward a Soviet-based, centralized economy whilst the South participated in a more western oriented market economy. This division led to the all-too-well-known American war that resulted in victory for the North and the fall of Saigon in 1975.

From this point forward, for about the next ten years, the Northern victors took power in the government and attempted to incorporate the South into its centralized model. As we now know, this failed tragically as the entire country fell under a spell of food shortages, massive debt, inflation, and general poverty.¹⁰

To alleviate the massive structural, social, and economical damage being wrought during these ten dark years, The Sixth Party Congress agreed to a set of reforms that were spur Vietnam's economy to action. Ironically, but logically, this involved switching the country away from heavy SOE dominance and state-sponsored subsidies, and back to the Southern model of market involvement.¹¹ This resulted with Vietnam setting the path to embrace everything that free markets are known for – trade liberalization, the redistribution of collective farmland, and not long after, the opening of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). These reforms changed and evolved regarding what worked and what didn't as time went on.

This opening of trade allowed for the next wave of transportation to sweep the nation – the motorbike. I've already mentioned one, but there are quite a few parallels surrounding the introduction and assimilation of bicycles and motorbikes

¹⁰ Van Arkadie and Mallon, *Viet Nam: A Transition Tiger?* 42.

¹¹ Ibid. 65

into Vietnamese society. The case of Doi Moi doesn't present a perfect parallel, but something more tangential. When the French brought bicycles to Vietnam in the beginning of their colonization, it was in the form of a personal luxury good from home. However, they soon realized that certain Vietnamese (at the time when it was still considered luxury, the very early 20th century) could afford these bicycles and were interested. Thus, a small but growing market was untapped for French manufacturers to fill. This same idea took hold during and after Doi Moi, but with a market containing a massive range of consumer products. The main point is that one of these many products was the motorbike. Many scholars view trade liberalization as a form of neo-colonialism, which does not have much relevance for this paper, other than the fact that is an interesting tie between the two eras in which a new form of transportation was introduced to Vietnamese society at large.

As time accelerated past the initial economic reforms, the purchasing power of Vietnamese people grew, and Vietnam went from being a country of bicycles to "The Land of the Honda." Today, Vietnam contains around 35 million motorbikes per 88 million residents.¹² Internationally, Vietnam is seen as an economic success story. They have successfully gone from being of the world's poorest nations to a middle-income country on the rise, in the span of merely thirty years. This jarring and rapid transition from hard-line socialism to a liberal free-market economy seems to have left both Vietnam's citizens and its government without very effective policy to deal with the new radical new

¹² Hansen *Cars and Capitalism in Contemporary Hanoi*

freedoms they have been presented with. Motorbikes are the overarching symbol of this new freedom as relaxed domestic business laws and the encouragement of FDI resulting from Doi Moi have brought an exponential amount of money into the economy. This, coupled with the highly individualized nature of transport motorbikes provide have made it an icon of modernization in all aspects.

2.3 Modern Viewpoints

As mentioned, Dr. Alexandre Freire has written one of the very few (if not, the only) articles that look at the sociocultural values imparted on society by the motorbike. “Motorbikes Against HCM?” was what prompted me to research the motorbike in the first place. In this article, Dr. Freire makes many claims regarding motorbikes, such that they represent a brand of ‘political consumerism’ “a shift from a culture of discipline towards a culture of pleasure,” and that “motorbikes appear to be important in the search for some intimacy.”¹³ It is the last quote that I believe holds the most weight theoretically. In socialist/communist countries, the state generally makes its presence known in most areas of daily life. With the advent of the motorbike came a new form of mobile private space. While driving on the public roadways, sidewalks, and parks provided by the state, motorbike drivers are subverting public space for their own private use. In his seminal work, *The Sociology of Transportation*, Glenn Yago states that, “Transportation centrally affects the relationship between physical

¹³ Freire “*Motorbikes Against HCM?*” 68-80

space and society.”¹⁴ This phrase, his article, and Dr. Freire’s meshed together to form the theoretical lens through which I began my research on the impact of the motorbike and society’s shifting opinion on both it, and transportation as a whole.

3. Methodology

I conducted my fieldwork in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. To study the motorbike and its modern-day implications, I could’ve studied in Ho Chi Minh City as well. I decided to work in Hanoi because, personally, I found it a more charming city to live in, which comes from the fact that it is generally regarded as the cultural hub, with Ho Chi Minh City being the economic hub. To study the cultural implications of the motorbike, then, it made a bit more sense to do so in Hanoi.

To answer my research questions, I made use of a few different anthropological methods. First, I focused on direct observation. In an attempt to focus my question from the broad scope of “motorbike culture,” I took a backseat for a little bit and simply observed my surroundings and the way people interacted with their environment and what role the motorbike had in these interactions. This narrowed my primary focus to a question regarding the changing perceptions of space in the context of transportation.

From here, I conducted several in-depth interviews. First, I spoke about

¹⁴ Yago “*The Sociology of Transportation.*” 171.

the evolution of individualized transportation in Vietnam with Dr. Vu The Long, an established researcher and instrumental figure in the passing of Vietnam's helmet law in 2007. Next, I interviewed Dr. Nguyen Quang Bau, Director of the Institute on Strategies for Transportation and Traffic in Hanoi. Finally, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews using the 'snowball' technique, in which I gained new contacts from those I previously interviewed. Two interviews were also conducted with random passerby (who both ended up being University students) on a warm Monday evening at Hoan Kiem Lake.

The majority of my interviews ended up being with University age students. This was not my initial plan, but I think it worked out that the scope of my research ended up focusing on changing perceptions of transportation, as University age students are among the massive youth generation that have the power to shape consumer behavior and influence government policy in the coming years. This, however, skewed my results primarily toward one group. Since transportation affects every mobile person in society, it may have been better to get a wider sample range, but the obvious constraints of time and limited contacts made this extremely difficult.

My primary reason to conduct interviews was to see if I could penetrate beneath my surface-level observations and see if there was any deeper thought or ideology to the issue of traffic and transportation in Hanoi. I interviewed four University age students, two male and two female, as well as two working-age individuals of differing age. One was a small business owner, male, age 65; and the other was a man who worked for the military, age 28. The interviews were

conducted beginning with basic questions about the individual before moving on to a list of formulated questions regarding the individuals' transportation preferences and opinions. I used a semi-structured format for the interviews so as to follow any interesting leads that came up in conversation. Interviews lasted anywhere from 30-90 minutes, depending on how talkative the interviewees felt and how in depth they could go on the more theoretical/sociocultural side of transportation. The interviews with the University students were conducted in English and those of the two older men were conducted in Vietnamese with the help of a translator. A write-up of the formulated questions can be found in Appendix A.

4.1 Limitations and Issues

I've already stated the obvious limitations of time and a limited contact base in the previous methodology section. On top of those, there is the other obvious limitation of the language barrier. My very limited Vietnamese was practically useless in trying to effectively communicate with any non-English speaking citizen, and some of the questions I tried to ask regarding the motorbike shaping a unique cityscape either didn't translate very well or were out of the scope of how my interviewees perceived transportation. However in hindsight, I can understand this. It would be similar to a foreign student coming to the US and asking me about cars. As motorbikes have been around for the entire lifespan of the majority of my interviewees, they are seen as a given and not

something to put too much thought into, at least theoretically.

One limitation I believe I imposed on myself was not conducting a survey. Initially, when I was still figuring out which angle to tackle motorbikes from there (there a great many ways to do this), I didn't think a survey would hold water in my research. Later, when my interview results spurred me to focus more on changing transportation preferences, I realized how helpful a survey could have been. If I had this exact topic from the beginning of my research period, one of my first courses of action probably would have been to conduct a survey. However, that's part of both the excitement of conducting interviews – you never know what will pop up and change your inherent assumptions, and thus the trajectory of your research. At the same time, I wasn't faced with the many statistical issues that generally plague surveys, such as bias, non-response, etc.

As for my interviews, though University age students were a proper demographic for my question about changing views of transportation, it would've been nice to get a broader picture from different types of people. My biggest regret is not interviewing any Xe Om drivers, as they have gained so much from the popularity of motorbikes, yet they have the potential to lose it all if mass transport becomes more popular or some type of urban ban on motorbikes ever takes effect. In the end, as previously stated, transportation is a massive issue that incorporates so many different factors that it is extremely difficult to get satisfactorily representative results in the short span of twenty-five days. Regardless, I think I was still able to glean some worthwhile insight into the transportation issue, which I'll discuss in the next section.

5. Findings & Discussion

5.1 Bribery & Corruption from Traffic Police

As I pondered my research topic and observed the state of transportation in Vietnam, I constantly wondered how such a seemingly lawless system functioned, on the whole, so smoothly. Traffic lights are obeyed maybe half the time, the nascent helmet law still hasn't taken full effect, and there is always a least one speeding menace in a crowd of vehicles, rapidly shifting his (almost always a male) center of gravity to make it around the moving obstacles surrounding him. The police are generally disliked and viewed as an extension of state oppression and corruption. I witnessed their brand of bribery first hand when one of my local volunteers in Hanoi was singled out and pulled over for being in the "wrong turning lane" among a sea of other bikers committing the exact same supposed crime. Luckily, she is a skilled negotiator and bargained the "fine" down from a staggering 2 million dong to 200,000. However, that is beside the point. The fact of the matter is that this form of corruption exists on a large scale and it forms of a sort of gray middle ground on the spectrum of public and private space. While there are sure fire ways to get the attention of police, as mentioned above, there also random acts of bribery, as mentioned above. This presents a vague social contract and catalyzes forms of structural violence

against authority.

Unfortunately, the above findings were based solely on past literature and observation. As my interviewees were primarily University age students, they were in the upper percentile of “awareness” levels for Vietnamese people. One of the few older people I interviewed, an army engineer named Cong, did offer his past history and opinion on the Vietnamese police force. He described the much-disliked traffic police as a group of greedy individuals who suffer from a top-down system that places them (the traffic police) at the bottom (I cannot quote as this interview was translated from Vietnamese). There is a distinct lack of any check-and-balance system and aside from meeting quotas; the police can essentially reign free. When my volunteer was pulled over and hassled by the police, she explained how they tried to milk any money they could from her, even with her constant pleas of “I am a poor student!” Since she was taking up their time and not giving in to their absurd asking price, they settled with the 200,000 dong that she claims they simply stuffed in a drawer with no paper work involved.

“Under current regulations, traffic police keep the driver’s license and/or vehicle registration and issue a fine decision that includes an appointment to return the papers to the drivers.”¹⁵ The fact that such a regulation is blatantly ignored doubtlessly sparks anti-police feeling, and as an extension of that, anti-government sentiment. One of Mr. Cong’s proposed solutions for this issue was to install more cameras on roads so as to form more objective traffic laws. It was interesting that he felt a more authoritative measure was needed to curb the

¹⁵ *“In Vietnam, Proposed On-the-Street Traffic Fines Spark Corruption Fears”* Thanh Nien News. 18/2/14.

corruption problem as it seemingly revokes the notion of the motorbike as a “private” and “intimate” space as Freire puts forth.

5.2 Motorbike Traffic and Transportation Issues at the Policy Level

The aforementioned issues with corrupt police and widespread bribery no doubt stem from the mass of motorbikes clogging the streets. The practice is akin to fishing in a crowded pond – if you want the catch, all you have to do is go for it. The problem on the policy side of things is that the pond is immensely crowded. To find out more from this perspective, I conducted an interview with Dr. Nguyen Quang Bau, the former Director of the Institute on Strategies for Transportation and Traffic in Hanoi, and now the Director and Founder of the Research Institute for Environment and Sustainable Development of Transportation. This in-depth interview lasted nearly two hours and provided massive and striking insight into the traffic and infrastructure issues facing Hanoi. According to Dr. Bau, cities with any more than three million residents must have both a subway system, and 25% of their land area must be dedicated to “parking space.”¹⁶ Currently, Hanoi is without any form of metro and is sitting on only 10% parking space. Rush hours are exceedingly dense, with a large mix of taxis, trucks, buses and motorbikes. This density is felt on the highways and especially so in the ancient, narrow streets running through places like the Old Quarter. According to a report done

¹⁶ Parking space, in this sense, refers not only to vehicle parking space, but also “static transportation” space -- walk-able areas uninterrupted by vehicular traffic. This is especially an issue Vietnam, where motorbikes can access many other spaces (i.e. parks) off the road, further reducing walking-only land.

by the Asian Development Bank, motorcycles have an 80% share of the private transportation used in urban sectors, with a projected growth rate of 9% yearly.¹⁷ As a newly (and rapidly) urbanizing city, policy has failed to keep up with growth, so I asked Dr. Bau what some of the solutions are to curb urban congestion and continue on the path toward urban modernization.

The most striking strategy he told me about was a plan to move the city's main institutions -- factories, hospitals, etc. -- from Hanoi to Tam Dau, 50 km away. However, this plan collapsed due to lack of funding and support. I found it quite surprising that this was considered a potentially more feasible option than simply instating a metro system. He also brought out the more obvious answers such as a more diversified use of public and private transport. Before the interview, I had seen a fair amount of information online calling for the ban of motorbikes in both Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.¹⁸ When I asked Dr. Bau about this, he gave a pessimistic, yet probably realistic response: The motorbikes are here to stay, and won't be going anywhere any time soon. Coming from a seasoned official, it's hard to dispute his answer.

Dr. Bau made a note of discussing the ongoing Hanoi metro project. The state definitely supports building a mass transit infrastructure, he said, but the problem comes down to funding. The state cannot currently afford such massive public works in two cities (as they also attempted metro development underway in HCMC), and would need some sort of foreign development assistance, or

¹⁷ <http://www.adb.org/projects/40080-023/details>

¹⁸ <http://thanhniennews.com/society/vietnam-considers-banning-motorbikes-in-big-cities-554.html>

private investment, to make this dream a reality. Another big problem, especially in the primarily hot weather in Hanoi, is solving something called the “last mile” problem. The last mile problem is a public transit issue that has to do with transportation between a bus/subway stop and the traveler’s final destination. I will discuss this issue more in the further research section.

5.3 Shifting Opinions Among the Youth

The four University age students I interviewed provided the most interesting results of my research. From reading Freire’s motorbike article, I was expecting to find strong support of the vehicle due to the freedom it offers and the opportunity for conspicuous consumerism that it presents. The motorbike’s symbolic representation of modernization and the pursuit of individual pleasures, I figured, would still be widely attractive for the newly mobile youth. These ideals were still valued, but, judging from the opinions of these four individuals, they were no longer manifested in the motorbike.

First, I spoke to Minh, a 21-year-old student at Hanoi University, as he was sitting on the edge of Hoan Kiem Lake one evening. After asking him preliminary questions, such as what is your name, your occupation etc., I began to ask him about motorbikes. I asked him if he owned one, and if so what brand/model. He responded with the tried and true Honda Wave RSX. When I asked him his opinion on this bike, and why he chose it in particular, he stated, “It is cheap and does what I need it do.” I had been expecting something of a more

consumerist mentality, as in buying a bike because it is one of the best looking, the fastest, or the most expensive. Something that would instill the idea of consumerism as Baudrillard puts it, a “process of classification and differentiation.”¹⁹ Purchasing a motorbike solely on its utilitarian values does not meet either of those criteria. However, a day in Hanoi can tell you that the Honda Wave is easily the most popular model seen cruising the streets. So while this may not be an instance of “differentiating” consumerism, it may be classifying Minh as someone joining the crowd to keep up his appearance as a street conscious youth. The way he shrugged off his purchasing decision though, led me to believe maybe he really didn’t put very much thought into it after all. Eager to learn more about his viewpoint, I went on to ask Minh about his views on public transportation. His tone and demeanor immediately grew a bit more impassioned on this topic.

“Buses are convenient. Motorbikes are for short distances. If there are more buses available, I think I and many others would use them.” These few short sentences alone seemed to dispel much of Freire’s claim of the motorbike as *the* icon of consumption. Furthermore, Minh said that motorbikes are “only useful for short distances.” The interview with Minh painted an overall picture of nonchalance toward the motorbike. I attribute this to the fact that Minh, and many others his age, grew up with the availability and popularity of the vehicle, especially in the urban center of Hanoi. To him, it seems to be just another part of city life. His positive attitude toward an improved bus system was striking. It

¹⁹ Baudrillard *The Consumer Society*. 79.

seemed to penetrate a new echelon of “luxury” thinking. I mean to say that buses and public transport provide a service, someone/something transporting the individual. Minh claimed that driving motorbikes too long was “tiring.” It seems, with Minh and the younger generation, the novelty and excitement of personal transport may be waning, and awareness of transport problems and potential solutions is growing. Public transportation fills the desire to be served, so to speak.

The second interviewee I met with at Hoan Kiem Lake was another University student, this time from Hanoi Foreign Exchange, named Hoàng. I started off with the same general questions I’d asked Minh, and surprisingly, I was given the same general answers. Hoàng was not overly concerned with having the best motorbike in any sense of the word and simply needed it to move himself around. When the topic of public transport came up, he emphasized the safety provided by a bus. “On the street anything can happen, but when I’m on a bus I don’t have to worry about accidents.” My interviews with these two students kept reminding me of my interview with Lily, in which she stated the biggest problem with Vietnamese people is awareness. Here I could see among this younger, modernizing, urban generation, that awareness is on the up and up. With Hoàng, I also asked about his opinion on the police, whether he believes they do a good job, and if he obeys the law. Again, from Freire’s lense, I was expecting an answer connoting some form of symbolic violence against authority, such as declining to wear a helmet, or disobeying a red light, both of which are quite common on the streets of Hanoi. Again, I received another surprising, yet

thoughtfully aware response. “If I follow the rules, I can save money.” Hoáng viewed the situation rationally. Maybe disobeying rules could make one look outwardly cool, but that status could come at a potentially high cost, especially for a student. In a place where you can be pulled over and bribed for no reason, as I mentioned earlier with my volunteer student, Hoáng believes there is no point in putting oneself at a higher risk for virtually no reason. I pressed on further to test Freire’s notions of the motorbike as a novel form of private space and asked Hoáng his thoughts on that idea. This was a bit of a tough thought to communicate, as it’s quite theoretical, but I think the meaning was conveyed a bit better than I had initially hoped. Hoáng stated that, “Motorbikes are more private to do what you want than sitting on a bench.” While not a very provocative statement, it embodies the idea of the motorbike as a mobile, private space to subvert the state-controlled dominance of public space.

5.4 The Smartphone’s Influence on Perceptions of Space & Transportation

This subversion of space is what interested me the most. Whereas Freire states that the motorbike offers a form of privacy that can glide over the government dominated public landscape, it seems a new space is being rapidly occupied by the youth that it is more mobile and more subversive than the motorbike could ever hope to be. This is the virtual space that is travelled and occupied from the screen of a smartphone. When I was interviewing the two aforementioned students, I noticed both grab their respective smartphones at

some point during the interview. While I didn't come up with questions for this phenomenon of a new space to be occupied during the course of the interviews, the thought came to me later and I was quite fascinated when I linked the ideas of virtual space and transportation together.

Smartphone use is rising rapidly in Vietnam, and with the introduction of the first nationwide 3G network only a few short years ago, it is changing the way the youth experience their surroundings. "Vinaphone notes that the heaviest mobile Internet users in the country are in the 15-24 age group, which, significantly, make up more than 20 percent of the country's population."²⁰

While the motorbike represented a jump from closed off poverty and immobility into global market participation and thus, mobility, the smartphone seems to represent the next massive shift into global connection and instantaneous transport from one end of the world to the other with the click of a button or the swipe of a finger. This newfound ability to communicate with anyone instantaneously and think in a global manner has spurred greater investment in virtual space and in turn, greater awareness, which I think may explain some of my interviewees' responses.

This newfound inhabiting of virtual space also changes interaction with the environment, and to go back to Glenn Yago, "...the relationship between physical space and society."²¹ By focusing on the virtual realm, the private, physical space offered by the motorbike becomes less important as it is not nearly as versatile

²⁰ <https://gsmaintelligence.com/analysis/2011/07/smartphones-spark-mobile-internet-boom-in-vietnam/289/>

²¹ Yago *The Sociology of Transportation*. 171.

as the smartphone. The smartphone at once affirms social standing, and keeps its users connected with friends, family, and news while offering myriad mobile entertainment options. Clearly, it is a space more beneficial to occupy. As young Vietnamese continue to rapidly inhabit the nation's 3G network, they will become more culturally aware by virtue of instantaneous global access, and likely be more inclined to use public transportation as a means to serve their desire to occupy virtual space, as opposed to forfeiting that for the time and effort required to transport oneself on a motorbike.

6. Conclusions & Further Research

It is no secret that Vietnam is a rapidly changing and expanding country, and transportation is a meaningful lens through which to analyze the success of a country's development. When bicycles starting hitting the streets during the French colonial era, an incessant love affair with all things two wheels began to blossom. Born out of convenience, growing necessity, and functionality, Vietnamese people flocked by the masses to the ability for more personal control over their transportation. When the country finally reopened itself to the world during Doi Moi, the second evolution of personal transportation came in the form of a motorized bicycle primarily from Japan – the motorbike.

During the years after Doi Moi, into the 1990's and early 2000's, the motorbike was looked at as the bastion of renovation policy. It gave people increased mobility and control over their lives. This mobility led to greater

entrepreneurship in the rapidly growing economy. And finally, this mobility in the scope of trade liberalization led to the birth of consumerist ideals and status seeking through purchasing power. The motorbike and Doi Moi planted the seeds for the desire of modernization and inherently brought with it rapid urbanization. More importantly, it brought the idea and ability to have a self-controlled private space. This newfound freedom and power saw an exponential rise in motorbikes on the road and has, in recent years, blossomed into a crippling traffic problem that is inhibiting the very mobile freedom the motorbikes initially offered.

However, the introduction of the smartphone in Vietnam has the potential to offer an indirect solution to the city's transportation problems. The students I interviewed did not revel in the novelty of riding a motorbike. To them, it was just a way to get around, plain and simple. It was quite clear from them, and many young people in Hanoi, that staring down into the phone screen is an increasingly important activity taking up more and more of their time. It was the clear that the students I interviewed preferred to use the bus if it fit their needs. Motorbikes were preferred for short distances. If public transportation officials and urban planners could figure out a way to solve the "last mile" problem, and provide some effective transportation between bus/subway stop and final destination, there could be a case for lessening the amount of motorbikes on the road. Boston's hubway system could be a model that planners could look at. If implemented in tandem with urban mass transit, it could be an effective solution.

The youth's smart phone infatuation could also be used as a way to

promote public transportation for those not completely on board with it yet. By virtue of being transported on a bus or train, the individual is not exerting time or effort in their travel. This time could be used to connect with people online, check emails, play a game to relax, or even catch up on the latest news. There are all these benefits, plus the added bonuses of avoiding corrupt police, dangerous drivers, and the cost of petrol. Just as Dr. Vu The Long used a design competition to make helmets cool and attractive to young people, branding subway/bus systems as places where you can relax safely and spend time on the internet could seem quite desirable for the 3G infused youth. Since one of the biggest problems for the State is funding these massive subway systems, it would be interesting to see if they could somehow jointly fund a project with a mobile provider, such as Vinaphone or Mobifone. Some integration between smartphone usage and public transportation could at once curb traffic, and propel Vietnam on to the world stage as a forward-thinking land of innovation and modernity.

I think that the relationship between virtual space occupation (smartphone use) and transportation is an area that deserves attention and further research. In Vietnam and around the world, smartphone use is a novel activity that hasn't been given much thought in the context of transportation. I believe that scholarship in this field could lead to amazing, innovative solutions for developing countries that are looking to take the next step into modernization and establish mass public transit systems. Something like underground 3G in a subway system, or outlets for charging phones, could really promote mass transit as an

attractive alternative option to private mobility. It will be interesting to see the methods through which the State and/or private investors approach this massive issue in the years to come.

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Interviews with citizens of Hanoi, May 2014

Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Questions

What is your name?

How old are you?

Do you own a motorbike?

What kind?

How much thought did you put into purchasing this motorbike?

Do you view the motorbike as a source of personal space?

What is your primary mode of transportation?

What are your thoughts on public transportation, such as the bus or a subway system?

Do you ever take the bus?

What do you think about the traffic in Hanoi?

Do you wear a helmet?

Do you make an effort to obey traffic laws?

What's your opinion on the traffic police?

Would you support a citywide ban on motorbikes?

Do you think such a ban could ever be implemented?

Would a ban on motorbikes drastically affect your life?

If public transportation were more developed, would you be more likely to use it?

Do you support the construction of the Hanoi metro?

*After asking a majority of these pre-formulated questions, new questions would be formulated based off the interviewee's previous responses