

On the back of a motorbike:

Middle-class mobility in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

"Mobility" is a key concept in understanding processes of globalization and class formation. In this article, I examine motorbike mobility in Ho Chi Minh City and its role in reordering social stratification in urban Vietnam. In the years following trade liberalization, motorbikes emerged as exemplary symbols of purchasing power, displaying both monetized and motorized power. In response to the exponential increase in the number of motorbikes, Vietnamese state agencies inscribed streets with divisions to separate different classes of vehicles and regulate the flow of traffic. Motorbikes, I argue, elude attempts to regulate their movement precisely because they embody the very mobility promised by economic reforms. [*Vietnam, traffic, commodity, circulation, public space, mobility*]

Ho Chi Minh City, the most populous city in Vietnam, is besieged by motorbikes. These vehicles, classified as scooters or mopeds in other countries, outnumber all other forms of transport, including passenger cars, taxis, city buses, and even bicycles. In this article, I consider how motorbikes are exemplary symbols of purchasing power, machines that embody the promise of autonomy and freedom of movement associated with trade liberalization. In this regard, motorbikes are unexpected "agents" of liberation in southern Vietnam, liberating not the nation and its people but the individual consumer.

During the past two decades, anthropologists have examined commodity choice and the cultural significance of mass-produced goods in terms of self-creation (Appadurai 1996; Miller 1987). In postsocialist states, where economic shifts have produced profound ruptures in social status, commodity choice is a salient indicator of regime change (Patino 2005; Vann 2003). When the Vietnamese government initiated a series of reforms to liberalize trade and attract foreign investment in 1986, through a program known as "Renovation" (*Đổi Mới*),¹ it also opened the doors to foreign imports, including motorbikes. In Vietnam today, motorbikes (sing. *xe máy*, lit. "motorized vehicle") not only embody the freedom associated with the expanding marketplace and provide personal mobility, but they also signal a reordering of social stratification.

The astonishing increase in the number of vehicles is premised on the structures and growth of the Vietnamese economy that link consumers to global markets through new sources of production, particularly China.² My goal in this article, however, is not simply to demonstrate this link (see Vann 2003, 2006). Instead, I examine how motorbikes have become indispensable vehicles in altering the boundaries of the "private" and the "public" (Drummond 2000; Gal 2002; Roitman 2005; Sheller and Urry 2003), thus constituting a Vietnamese urban middle class.³ Motorbikes as a mode of personal transport resemble cars in cultures of "automobility" (Featherstone 2004; Sheller and Urry 2000),⁴ but they offer their users more flexibility (Freeman 2007) and also more risks (Moodie 2006). In this regard, motorbikes expose

the uneven processes of development that have accompanied globalization (Harvey 2006).

Scholarship on consumption tends to emphasize commodities as sign vehicles that transcend their own functionality (Baudrillard 1996), but this theoretical move keeps the motorbike out of traffic. Any discussion of the mobility and liberation associated with the motorbike that ignores the experience of traffic is incomplete (Miller 2001:25). I follow the lead of scholars (Collier and Ong 2005; Lee and LiPuma 2002) who have proposed that assemblages and cultures of circulation such as urban traffic are shaped by local systems of meaning and subject to historically constituted constraints. Although traffic may be saturated by social conventions, it is increasingly regulated by state agencies and subject to global models of urban planning. The constant condition of congested traffic provides the "friction" (Tsing 2005; see also Khan 2006) that interrupts the prevailing narratives of unimpeded flows of goods, ideas, money, and people accompanying market-led globalization.

In Ho Chi Minh City, the sheer number of motorized vehicles has placed enormous demands on the city's physical infrastructure. As these vehicles vie for the right-of-way, local and national government agencies, with financing from the World Bank, have implemented urban transport projects to regulate traffic and improve safety conditions (World Bank 1998). State-based discourses attribute the difficulty of regulating traffic to the problem of educating drivers. I argue that this discounts the agency of the motorbike. These vehicles embody the promise of economic reform; they are physical objects emblematic of purchasing power. And, as their power is constituted by the marketplace, motorbikes elude attempts to regulate their movement. Like other disjointed transformations in Vietnam's South (Gainsborough 2003; Taylor 2000; Truitt 2006), class formation is being shaped around a new paradigm of urban mobility. It is in traffic that one sees the emergence of the middle class.

Urban mobilities

When I first arrived in Vietnam in 1996, motorbikes were not the subject of my research, but they were a constant concern. My understandings of motorbikes were formed by my entry into traffic, first as a pedestrian and as a passenger on the back of motorbikes and later as the operator of my own used Citi motorbike. Motorbikes loomed even larger while I was conducting an 18-month study on the expanding money economy from 2000 to 2002 and during a monthlong follow-up trip in 2003–04. I was interested foremost in how motorbikes, like money, promised what Georg Simmel (1990) identified as individual freedom. But it was also clear to me that the freedom people associated with the motorbike was subject to increasing regulations. I sought to understand how, in turn, people constructed the legitimacy of those regulations (Roitman 2005). Although my research on motorbikes

emerged out of my interest in money, I do not mean to suggest that motorbikes can be equated with money, although the analogy can be productive. Motorbikes were highly valued objects, sometimes used as collateral for informal loans or even pawned to raise fast cash. As the predominant form of transport in Ho Chi Minh City, motorbikes linked people to different social spaces, but they were also a constant source of expenditure. Filling up the gas tank, incurring fines for traffic violations, and maintaining the motorbike mechanically left many people feeling vulnerable to the whims of the market, the traffic police, and even the men who repaired tires on the side of the street. Yet people were willing to bear these costs to participate in the larger economy of motorbike mobility in Ho Chi Minh City.

Mobility has been a key word for understanding class formation. The emphasis on mobility as an analytic category has been heightened by global capital flows, transnational labor migration, and processes of urbanization. In studies of city life, however, the everyday experience of traffic has often been sidelined. Urban theorists, as if to pay tribute to the endangered pedestrian, have regarded vehicular traffic with suspicion. Some scholars have decried traffic as erasing public space by making it "contingent upon motion" (Sennett 1977:14); disenfranchising less valued models of mobility (Jacobs 1992); and, like banking systems, "disembedding" individuals from local contexts and making them subject to expert systems (Giddens 1990). Other scholars, however, have proposed that traffic best exemplifies the "urban way of life," in which mobility, fluidity, and contact with strangers are constitutive of urbanity and modernity (Hannerz 1983; Simmel 1950; Wirth 1938).⁵

Theoretical concern with mobility coincides with critical investigation of global capital markets, networked publics, and the rescaling of governance (Brenner 1998; Sassen 2001; Thrift 2004; Urry 2004). With the emphasis on mobility, transport infrastructure has emerged as a productive site of investigation. Anthropologists and other scholars have investigated how public space and the built environment not only encode social difference, including race, class, and ethnicity, but also concretize those differences (Molotch and Logan 1988; Winner 1980). More recently, scholars have examined how personal forms of transport have marginalized mass transportation, contributing to the ascent of cultures of automobility (Featherstone 2004; Miller 2001; Sheller and Urry 2000; Thrift 2004). The ramifications of automobility are not limited to traffic in motion. Even at rest, motorized vehicles influence the creation and use of the built environment in the form of the parking lot (Jakle and Sculle 2004).

Cities of the South have largely been absent from discussions of urban planning except in the modernist model of the "Third World City," defined by the problems of overcrowding, poverty, and mismanagement rather than the intractable predicament of postcoloniality (Dick and Rimmer

1998; see Holston 1989). Accelerating rates of urbanization and rapid economic development, however, have made visible processes of class formation in urban transport projects. In two Southeast Asian cities, state-sponsored urban planning projects to ease traffic congestion have contributed to reifying social divisions. The Bangkok mass-transit system, an elevated train system funded to reduce major problems of pollution and congestion, has contributed to two different patterns of use, one above and the other below the transit line (Jenks 2003). In Manila, raised freeways called “flyovers” were designed and built to ensure the mobility of the middle and transnational-capital classes while bypassing the urban poor (Tadiar 1993).

Ho Chi Minh City, its large boulevards and wide sidewalks a legacy of French urban planning, presents another compelling example of how new lines of division are being inscribed in the streets. In the years following economic reforms, the streets themselves were transformed into marketplaces, a dynamic Lisa Drummond (2000) calls a blurring “from the ‘inside out’ and the ‘outside in,’” as public space became increasingly commercialized. Traders occupied sidewalks, laying out their wares for passing motorists. Rows of parked bicycles and motorbikes made it all but impossible for pedestrians to use the sidewalks.

Motorbikes may be the most widely used form of transport, but they are not a variant of what Michel de Certeau calls “pedestrian speech acts” (1984:97). It is in the idiom of purchasing power—not just through the sound of its engine but also through its price in the market—that the motorbike speaks. Motorbikes are legally classified by the size of their engine displacement, but they are socially classified by their model and pricetag.⁶ Motorbikes speak through their engine capacity, a power measured in cubic centimeters and signaled by the hum of the motor, which transforms the vehicle into an animated being. And it is through this power, motorized and monetized, that motorbikes are re-ordering social stratification, vividly demonstrating the layered, or “fractal,” negotiations of public and private that characterize transitional economies (Gal 2002). By way of drawing attention to the transitional dynamics of Ho Chi Minh City, I focus this article on motorbikes, rather than on the emerging market for private cars.⁷ This is not to suggest that many people in Ho Chi Minh City would not willingly trade their motorbike for a car. Many people express their aspiration to leave the motorbike behind, as they are all too aware of the costs of riding one—among them, the constant exposure to exhaust fumes and the stop-and-go traffic during rush hour that leaves drivers and passengers drained. But it is precisely their mobility, flexibility, visibility, and even vulnerability that make motorbikes such instructive agents for understanding Vietnam’s transitional economy. For this reason, I propose that one position the middle class occupies in Ho Chi Minh City is on the back of a motorbike.

On the back of a motorbike

With reforms of the Vietnamese economy, individual and household incomes have increased dramatically. In the period 1990–97, economic growth averaged 8 percent annually, an increase realized through foreign direct investments that largely targeted Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon, the capital of what was South Vietnam).⁸ Motorbikes were early indicators of rising household incomes and socioeconomic mobility (Haughton et al. 1999; Luong 2003b; Thomas and Drummond 2003), symbols of the twin engines of economic and technological power that have underpinned class formation in Vietnam.⁹ And in the wake of trade liberalization, their numbers have increased exponentially. By 2003, the number of registered motorbikes in Vietnam was estimated to be 10.1 million, whereas the number of cars was 630,000 (Trần et al. 2003:108).

More so than any other form of motorized vehicle, motorbikes are appropriate for the scale of everyday life in urban Vietnam. Unlike automobiles and trucks, motorbikes are not bound to the grid of city streets. People park their vehicles on sidewalks, maneuver them through narrow alleyways, and drive them over meridians and on sidewalks to bypass long lines of cars and trucks. Unlike bicycles, motorbikes promise effortless mobility or, rather, mobility that relies on fossil fuel rather than human exertion. A motorbike user enjoys mobility without physical exertion, accelerating with a twist of the handle and braking with a slight tap on the foot pedal. Motorbike users both respond to and escape from the constant calls of solicitation that emanate from crowded sidewalk markets. Pedestrians must wind around the rows of parked motorbikes and bicycles on the sidewalk, and they must also contend with the constant flow of motorbikes when they cross the street. A motorbike, however, provides one with a seat from which to partake in streetside markets (see Figure 1). While on the back of a motorbike, a person can stop by a street vendor to purchase fruit or check the day’s winning lottery numbers.

Motorbikes, like bicycles in the late 1970s and 1980s, occupy a central place in many urban households. They are often parked in the front rooms of homes, reminders of the mobility and freedom that contrast with often-cramped living quarters. One woman in her forties resisted using a motorbike, leaving the task of taking her daughter to school to her motorbike-mobile husband. When she finally learned how to drive a motorbike, she described the pleasure as “better than air-conditioning,” drawing on another technology of comfort in postreform Vietnam. Surveys (General Statistics Office 2006) have found that more urban households possess motorbikes than telephones, suggesting that these vehicles are an essential mode of communication in urban Vietnam.¹⁰ People travel to work, shop, and carry their children back and forth to school all on the back of a motorbike. Motorbikes not only link people



Figure 1. Shoppers on motorbikes make early morning purchases. Photo by A. Truitt.

to the marketplace by transporting them to their place of work and on urban errands (Jain 2002) but they are also the means by which people maintain networks of social communication.

The motorbike expresses the contradictions underpinning Vietnam's dynamic, yet unstable, socioeconomic environment. On the one hand, motorbikes lead people out of the household and kin networks that structure social relations. In this regard, motorbikes cannot be wholly domesticated. They are also highly valued household possessions, and, as is the case with money, one cannot be sure where the motorbike will lead. On the other hand, in interviews I conducted, people drew on existing models of gendered relations and class distinctions in conceptualizing the vehicles, thus limiting their liberating force. These contradictions in how people construct the meanings of technology are not unique. Some scholars argue that bicycles liberated women in Europe and North America by allowing them to move through public space and wear men's clothing (Bijker 1995:1), and others

have pointed out how Italian scooters "coincided with and reproduced the boundary between masculine and feminine" (Hebdige 1988:84).¹¹ In Ho Chi Minh City, both men and women drive motorbikes, but they do so in ways that reproduce the appearance of masculine control over purchasing power.

At the time I conducted this study, motorbikes signified the consumer desire stimulated by opening Vietnamese markets to the global economy. This desire was readily sexualized, as motorbikes literally provided the seats on which taboos around intimacy were momentarily forgotten. In traffic, a woman commonly sat close behind a man on a motorbike, her arms wrapped around his waist or her hands resting on his thighs. Tolerance for an otherwise unusual display of physical intimacy may have been rationalized as a safety precaution; that is, the person who sat behind grasped the driver for stability. But it was not only in traffic that motorbikes were the seats of desire. Couples withdrew from the flow of traffic, pulling up to fountains and parks to enjoy

private interludes while seated on their motorbikes. Not all men controlled this power. Several young men complained to me that, because they could not afford a motorbike, they could not get a girlfriend, thus conflating market power with sexuality.

The motorbike was more than a metaphorical seat for gendered mobility. Even the vehicles' mechanics were classified in terms of masculine and feminine bodies. One of the first advertisements to appear for motorbikes in Ho Chi Minh City's state-run newspaper, *Tuổi Trẻ*, promoted the Bonus, a "male bike" (*xe nam*, one with a clutch on the handlebar) produced in Vietnam by Vietnamese Motorbike Export Production (VMEP), a Taiwanese company. In addition to the Bonus, VMEP produced the Angel, a "female" vehicle, but consumers preferred imported motorbikes, especially the Honda Dream, to these local products.

In the evening, motorbikes were transformed into vehicles of masculine mobility. In Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, the roar of motorbikes could often be heard in the distance before groups of youths rode into view (Marr 1996). People presumed these youths were the sons of highly ranked officials. Excessive speed, like excessive wealth, was constructed as a privilege of the political elite and their kin. By identifying young men who raced through the streets as the sons of government officials, people discursively constructed postreform Vietnam within a prerevolutionary narrative in which the elite and popular classes moved differently through the society.

Although youth and speed contributed to moral panic about the appropriate use of motorized power, some people appropriated the mobility of the motorbike as a substitute for economic immobility. Several women and men described how they lost self-control on the back of a motorbike, letting the motorbike determine where they would go. A man in his thirties described his strategy of distracting himself whenever he felt stuck or depressed (*chán đời*): He would drive his motorbike around the city aimlessly, without regard to his destination. People juxtaposed their sense of immobility in the city's transitional economy with the physical mobility offered by the motorbike. At the same time, city traffic is increasingly hazardous, reflecting Ho Chi Minh City's rapidly shifting economy.

Economic reforms have been widely praised for eliminating the grinding poverty that characterized everyday life in the 1980s, but these reforms have been accompanied by an erosion of social safety nets, leaving many people increasingly vulnerable to escalating medical costs and the threat of unemployment.¹² Although the motorbike provides greater access to transportation, extending an individual's network of activities and relations, individuals in Ho Chi Minh City are at increased risk of injury on the back of a motorbike. Motorbike mobility has been accompanied by high human costs, a situation that finds grim parallels around the world as the risks of development are shifted from the body of the

nation-state to that of the individual (Moodie 2006). During my fieldwork, accidents that announced themselves by the sickening bang of metal against metal were all too common. The sound would draw curious onlookers, who gathered around the scene of an accident and dispersed only with the arrival of traffic police (Jankowiak 1993). Survivors of even minor collisions sought out nearby temples to make offerings to the deities and other spirits in the vicinity. Many people today bear scars from their injuries. A common scar borne by women is a small red mark on the back of the lower leg made by the hot tailpipe of a motorbike. In my analysis, I bypass the prevalent concerns about traffic accidents that organize discourses about safety and regulation, not because these concerns are incidental to the experiences I analyze but because they easily overtake what I argue is a more instructive line of engagement—how motorbike mobility constitutes the urban middle class in Ho Chi Minh City.

In making this claim about urban mobility, I stress the importance of considering not what lies above or below the middle class but, rather, what vehicles travel to the right and left of motorbikes in traffic.

Classifying vehicles

Urban planning has long been vexed by the problem of creating "segregated yet conjoined circuits of movement for pedestrians and vehicles" (Jacobs 1992:345). In Ho Chi Minh City, this problem is compounded by the struggle to create these circuits for competing classes of vehicles. The vehicles that travel on the far right-hand side of the street are "primitive vehicles" (*xe thô sơ*)—bicycles, cyclos, and food carts. The vehicles that travel on the left-hand side are the mightier motorized vehicles with four or more wheels—private cars, passenger vans, and commercial trucks. Motorbikes offer a hybrid form of mobility, and their in-between position in traffic materializes their importance as vehicles of the urban middle class.

Traffic in Ho Chi Minh City is a cacophonous, boisterous scene. Trucks carrying ocean-bound containers, 80-seat city buses, passenger vans, and sedans travel alongside motorbikes and small pushcarts. In the years following economic reforms, the Vietnamese state designated separate lanes for different vehicles to ensure the flow of traffic. In 1995, the Vietnamese government approved Decree 36/CP as part of a broad campaign to regain control over public space and regulate commercial activities. The decree was promoted to ensure traffic order and safety by laying out guidelines. In the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, the decree provided the rationale for inscribing streets with new lines of division. New hierarchies governing which vehicle had the right-of-way or who must yield to whom were organized around a classification scheme that opposed motorized

vehicles (*xe cơ giới*) to primitive, or “rudimentary,” vehicles (*xe thô sơ*):

Pedestrians must yield to all vehicles,
Primitive vehicles must yield to motorized vehicles,
Lesser-power motorized vehicles must yield to higher-
powered ones
[Article 52]

The traffic law has since been amended numerous times, demonstrating that city streets, like government decrees, are artifacts of social practices and conflicts. The spatial designation of one's proper place in traffic is still loosely based on a classification of which vehicle has the right-of-way, but the primary opposition is no longer between motorized and primitive vehicles. Rather, it is between “two-wheeled” and other motorized transport, signaling the privileged position of cars, passenger vans, buses, and trucks in city traffic.

Although the separate lanes were designed to ensure traffic order, they also made visible social stratification on city streets. Motorbikes are particularly instructive because they are a hybrid form of mobility—a two-wheel, motorized form of personal transport. Like their “primitive” predecessor, the bicycle, they have the flexibility to move off the grid of city streets designed for motorized traffic. And, although they are far heavier than bicycles and, so, are difficult to push onto sidewalks or up ramps, they can also carry three or more adults or children and transport towering bundles of goods strapped to the back of the vehicle. Finally, they travel almost as fast as cars and vans in city traffic.

The inscription of separate lanes for different classes of vehicles reinforces, metaphorically and materially, how vehicles in Ho Chi Minh City are socially classified. In other Southeast Asian countries where motorbikes are the predominant form of motorized transport, people regard traveling by car as a prerogative of the elite—high-ranking officials, foreign investors and dignitaries, and tourists (Pinches 1999:32). This perception holds true to a certain extent even in Ho Chi Minh City, where privately owned cars are becoming increasingly common. The obstacle to purchasing a car is not necessarily price; a used car often costs less than the newest-model Honda motorbike. Other costs, however, are high. Maintaining the car mechanically, purchasing fuel, and finding parking have placed privately owned cars out of reach of most, but by no means all, residents. In addition, car owners incur a social cost, as they are perceived to display unwarranted personal wealth.

The widespread use of motorbikes distinguishes the Vietnamese middle class from what could be considered the growing transnational-capital class in the city (Ong 2000; Sklair 1998). In a car, the driver and passenger are in an enclosed space, whose appearance of privacy and exclusiveness may be heightened by tinted windows, plush seats,

air-conditioning, and perfume sticks. In city traffic, the appeal of riding in automobiles is all too apparent. As traffic conditions worsen, motorbike riders express concern about their constant exposure to dirt, wind, rain, and the relentless sun. Women riders cover their hands and arms with long polyester gloves, and riders of all ages wear hats and face masks. Although the 2001 traffic law stipulates that the government's policy is to limit the use of personal transportation in large cities, the reservation of the far-left lane to car traffic is at least partially an accommodation to the practices of the transnational class.

Everyday travel by car may be reserved for the elite and transnational classes, but many residents have had the opportunity to experience travel in passenger vans or rented cars. I found that people who owned motorbikes preferred to travel by car or passenger van for long-distance trips to visit temples or for leisure day-trips, for example, pooling money to rent a van for a day-trip to Chau Doc or Vung Tau, two popular destinations. For important ceremonies, including weddings and engagements, people left their motorbikes at home and, instead, rented white cars or passenger vans. These vehicles protected the celebrants from the dirt of city traffic, and the white exteriors decorated with flowers and the Chinese characters for *happiness* also drew attention to them. Thus, the social classification of cars and vans as vehicles for long-distance and collective travel reinforced the role of the motorbike as a mode of individual mobility.

Not every individual or even household in the city owned a motorbike. Motorbike mobility was harnessed to earning power, and individuals who did not travel by motorbike were often confined to home. Lan, a woman in her late twenties, stayed at home to prepare meals and provide child care for her older sisters and brothers, who operated several stalls in a nearby marketplace. She sold sundries from glass counters in front of her house, the profits from which provided her with pocket money. Only occasionally was she able to use the family motorbike. Her sense of personal mobility increased dramatically when she signed a contract to work in Japan for two years. Once she demonstrated she had potential earning power, her older sister agreed to let her use the household motorbike in the evenings to attend Japanese-language lessons in the center of the city.

In Ho Chi Minh City, residents who did not possess private vehicles were able to access transport through the relatively expensive fleet of private taxis, the readily available motorbike taxis, and the recently expanded city bus system. Some people still traveled by *cyclo*, a type of rickshaw in which the passenger sits in the front while the driver pedals behind. In recent years, however, *cyclos* have been largely limited to transporting goods relatively short distances because they have been banned from major thoroughfares. At the same time, the city government has invested in the bus system in Ho Chi Minh City by subsidizing fares and

expanding the network of routes.¹³ Buses are scheduled to run every five to ten minutes and provide an air-conditioned ride on some routes, but many people continue to shun public transportation because it lacks the convenience of door-to-door service they have come to expect on the back of a motorbike. On some city streets, buses use the same lane as motorbikes, traveling close to the sidewalk so riders may embark and disembark. Because these buses frequently pull up to the sidewalks, they also compete for space with non-motorized transport, including bicycles and pushcarts.

Although the Vietnamese state has attempted to regulate traffic by inscribing lines of division in city streets, motorbikes easily cross these divisions. They combine the power of motorized transport with the flexibility of a bicycle and in so doing have become indispensable for urban mobility in Ho Chi Minh City. Yet motorbikes are also valued when they are not in motion. Motorbikes, especially the latest Japanese models, are possessions that store monetary value. And it is people's concern with reliability and resale value that has turned motorbikes into vehicles of class formation as well as private property.

Private property

One of the first questions people asked when they arrived at their destination was where they could park their motorbike. Motorbikes were conspicuous commodities that displayed market value, unlike money, which could be concealed. Most people readily pointed to the price of their motorbike as a proxy for its value, which suggests that commoditization was never out of mind. In Ho Chi Minh City and elsewhere in Vietnam, motorbikes were vehicles for reconstituting a regime around private property.¹⁴

When parked, motorbikes were an assemblage of parts to be sold or pawned. Some people refused to lend their motorbike to a friend or even a relative, speculating that if they did so, in a matter of an hour or two, it could easily be stripped of genuine foreign parts and fitted with domestic parts, resulting in a substantially inferior machine. One man who owned a motorbike usually left it locked in his house, preferring, instead, to seek passengers for his cyclo and claiming that his wife feared he would lose the motorbike if he solicited strangers. Crime ledgers in state-run newspapers carried daily stories of theft and loss. Commercial establishments and government offices provided parking lots, often located in the ground floors of buildings, on sidewalks, or in empty lots. Attendants monitored the lots in exchange for a few thousand Vietnamese *dong*. These operations generated various forms of accountability: Some attendants wrote the last four numbers of the motorbike license plate on a claim ticket, others wrote the number of the claim check in chalk on the seat of the motorbike, and still others offered laminated claim checks bearing their photographs and supposedly authenticated copies of their fingerprints. If one lost the claim

check, one had to produce the registration card of the motorbike to retrieve the vehicle, a requirement that was not as straightforward as it seemed.

At the time of this study (2000–02), ownership of motorbikes, the socially recognized boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, was governed more by social conventions than by legal regulations. One could prove legal ownership of a motorbike through possession of a registration card issued by the district police. For many people, the name listed on the registration card was inconsequential; what mattered was that one possessed the card. People bought and sold used motorbikes without registering the new owners' names; instead, they signed informal purchase agreements, contracts that had no legal standing but assured the buyer that a motorbike was socially recognized as his or her property (Truitt 2007). This social contract allowed the buyer and seller to avoid the lengthy procedures of transferring ownership, which required both parties to sign papers validated by the police stations in their areas of residence and for the new owner to purchase liability insurance and pay other fees. Motorbikes smuggled into the country from Cambodia to avoid quotas, tariffs, and other duties lacked the proper documents to be registered with the police and, for this reason, were sold at steeply discounted rates. For people who purchased new motorbikes, and especially for those who intended to resell the vehicles, the registration process was compulsory.

In early 2004, the Vietnamese government attempted to regulate traffic not through the traffic code but by placing restrictions on vehicle ownership, a campaign known as "one person, one motorbike." The aim of the campaign was to reduce the number of motorbikes an individual could legally register in the city and thereby limit the onslaught of motorbikes on the streets. City officials outright banned the registration of new motorbikes in the center of Hanoi, the country's capital city. Motorbike users and lawyers challenged the ban, citing the right of citizens to own property as protected by Article 58 of the 1992 Vietnamese Constitution as well as by the Vietnamese Civil Code. City officials in Hanoi were forced to lift the restriction, and by January 2006 motorbike markets rebounded.¹⁵ Legal scholar Mark Sidel (in press) has named the social movement to overturn the ban "motorbike constitutionalism" and argues that motorbike ownership provided the perfect foil for citizens to use in challenging government policies on constitutional grounds. Protests around "the right to be free to own, register, and ride one's own motorbike" did not relate to broader political demands but were, instead, organized around consumption practices and private property. As Sidel points out, this movement was paradoxical. The constitution does not provide unfettered protection for individual acquisition. In fact, the revised traffic law (2001) specifies that the state has the right to limit individual forms of transportation. However, the movement succeeded in part because it was led by the



Figure 2. A motorbike repair shop. Photo by A. Truitt.

urban middle class, those who benefited the most from the *Đổi Mới* process.

The brand of motorbike that first achieved status as a means of mobility and a store of value was Honda. A brief history of Honda models provides an instructive timeline for understanding transformations in how motorbikes have been valued in Ho Chi Minh City.

Dreams made elsewhere

In the expanding economy of Ho Chi Minh City, consumers are confronted with a world of commodity goods and brand names that are rapidly becoming integral to the “process of social self-creation” (Miller 1987:215). Honda, like other brand names, resists translation into Vietnamese. Branding, like the logic of proper names, appears to guarantee a singular identity (Morris 2000:61). In Ho Chi Minh City, motorbikes are simply called “xe Honda” (see Figure 2). The conflation of the object and the brand name in southern

Vietnam contrasts with the situation in other emerging markets, where the struggle is “to extend the provenance of the brand over the arena of consumption” (Rajagopal 1999:136). The widespread use of the word *Honda* to refer to motorbikes more generally is a sedimented reference to brand recognition cultivated in the 1960s in South Vietnam as part of “nation-building efforts.” The succession of Honda models provides a timeline for Vietnamese economic reforms, from the return of the popular Cub in the 1980s (see below) to the arrival of the Dream in the 1990s and, most recently, the increasing brand segmentation around categories of youth and style signaled by the Wave and the Stream. With the influx of Chinese motorbikes, consumers have been faced with the question of how to value all such vehicles, even those branded Honda.

Consumer culture in southern Vietnam has followed a trajectory of production and consumption quite different than that in eastern Europe. In both cases, socialist governments emphasized domestic production. In eastern



Figure 3. A lottery ticket printed in 1987 promotes two status symbols, a Honda Cub motorbike and a television. Author's collection.

Germany, consumers recall the Trabant, or “Trabi,” as a failure of socialist production (Berdahl 2001), and, in export markets, the Russian Lada earned a reputation as signifying “automotive poverty,” as it was priced far below the market rate (Hamilton 2002:192). By contrast, in South Vietnam, the importation of Honda Cubs in the 1960s was subsidized by U.S. dollars to aid in the nation-building efforts of the Saigon-led government. Mr. Trung, a longtime resident of Saigon, recalled that, in the 1960s, the motorbike was a sign of social status. Civil servants and military officers in South Vietnam were eligible to purchase motorbikes through the Import-Substitution Program, a program that used subsidized U.S. dollars to enable the purchase of commodities in an effort to build a middle class. Other residents, Mr. Trung pointed out, had to either rely on personal connections to purchase Honda motorbikes or pay for their motorbikes in full up to a year in advance of delivery. Mr. Viet, in his fifties, once owned a motorbike he had purchased from a licensed dealer whose children he had tutored. Shortly after the collapse of the Saigon-led government, he sold his motorbike because he could no longer afford to purchase gasoline or spare parts for the vehicle.

In the 1980s, with government-initiated reforms, the doors of Vietnam were again opened to Honda motorbikes. Honda Cubs were first sold in Intershops, or hard-currency stores, in exchange for Hong Kong dollars, French francs, or U.S. dollars. Dealers were soon after issued licenses to import used Honda Cubs. Images of Honda Cub motorbikes appeared on the state-issued lottery tickets with the slogan

“Win [the lottery] and buy imported goods!” (see Figure 3). These imports were not the latest-model motorbikes like those that today line shops around the city but “graveyard motorbikes” (*xe máy nghĩa địa*),¹⁶ purchased at steep discounts and imported from neighboring countries where they had been repaired for sale in Ho Chi Minh City. Access to Honda motorbikes, castoffs of wealthier countries, located Vietnamese consumers within a global hierarchy of consumption practices. Mr. Huy, a man in his forties, recalled how he entered into the motorbike market by transporting vehicles into the country by truck, repairing them, and then selling them. The motorbikes he sold were “smuggled motorbikes,” vehicles that entered the country not through officially licensed channels but over the porous borders with Laos and Cambodia. Today he owns a shop on a major boulevard in Ho Chi Minh City, where he does a brisk business selling the latest Honda, Suzuki, and Yamaha motorbikes.

In the 1990s, the motorbike of choice for many Vietnamese consumers was the Honda Dream II. If Roland Barthes (1972) had observed the popularity of this model, he might have extolled its virtues as he did those of the new Citroën: a superlative object whose “absence of origins” produced a “purely magical object” that roused the desires of consumers throughout Asia. The elegant Dream promised reliability and high resale value for Vietnamese city residents. As early as 1992, journalists invoked the popularity of Honda Dream motorbikes as a key symbol of middle-class consumer aspirations in Vietnam: “\$2,000 motorbikes manufactured in Thailand—are the most coveted status symbol

on the streets of Saigon, the bustling, hustling Vietnamese metropolis that almost no one calls by its still-official name, Ho Chi Minh City" (Shenon 1992:16).

Imported motorbikes have since become key symbols in the larger struggle that has pitted consumer demand against government controls over consumption and production. In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Commerce and Tourism issued quotas and raised duties on imported motorbikes and automobiles in an effort to control the burgeoning market. In the United States, the appeal of the Honda brand is its reliability and high resale value, two qualities that are also valued by Vietnamese consumers. Whereas most consumers in the United States may not know (or even care) where their Honda Civic or Accord was actually manufactured, the question of a vehicle's origin was one that interested Vietnamese consumers at the time I conducted this study (see also Vann 2003). This concern also explains why the government-led project to appropriate the power to produce the Honda Dream failed, at least initially, to transfer to the Honda Super Dream, a model designed for and produced in Vietnam.

Honda Dreams, some dealers estimated, accounted for more than 70 percent of market sales in the mid-1990s.¹⁷ The Vietnamese government attempted to domesticate production through import substitution, locally manufacturing a version of the Honda Dream, the Super Dream. In 1995, the Honda Corporation, a Thai company, and a Vietnamese partner formed a joint venture to build a factory to produce Honda Super Dreams. In February 1998, the first Honda Super Dreams rolled off the assembly lines, but by October, only one-third of the 130,000 units produced had been sold. The Super Dream could not match the allure of the original Dream manufactured elsewhere.

The Super Dream "made in and for Vietnam" offered an instructive object lesson in Vietnam's economic integration into global markets. Although manufacturing based in Vietnam—often no more than assembly lines that quickly put together packaged kits—has expanded, the failure of the Super Dream to replace the Honda Dream demonstrates that the foreign-made vehicle was more attractive than the locally produced version. Even though the Super Dream was billed as having been designed especially for the conditions of Vietnam, most consumers still preferred motorbikes manufactured outside the country and willingly paid a premium to purchase them.

In the late 1990s, motorbikes made in China began to flood the Vietnamese market. Vehicles that resembled the Honda Wave and Honda Future appeared on the streets at less than half the asking price of a Honda Super Dream. These cheap motorbikes signaled another fault line between the world market and Vietnamese markets (Vann 2006) by calling into question the legitimacy and legibility of the brand. Pressure from Honda resulted in slight changes in naming practices so that the Chinese Wave was transformed

into the Wake. The arrival of Chinese-made motorbikes coincided with a new strategy by the Japanese manufacturer to relocate its factories in places where production costs were lower. In response to consumer demand, Honda offered a low-priced motorbike, the Wave Alpha, produced, ironically, in China (Abrami 2003).

In this transformation of global production, how people valued motorbikes began to shift. Chinese motorbikes provided the "look" at a price many people could afford. In 2000, the year that Chinese motorbikes were first widely available, the number of registered motorbikes jumped almost 30 percent from the previous year, leading one journalist to wonder if there would be enough streets for all the vehicles.

Not enough streets for the vehicles

As in other cities of the South, urbanization in Ho Chi Minh City is often portrayed in terms of unregulated growth. The sheer variety of vehicles—their differential speeds, sizes, and uses—conveys a sense of unregulated, unruly city traffic. Swarms of motorbikes, processions of luxury sedans and four-wheel all-terrain vehicles, ocean-bound trucks, and bands of food carts all vie for space on city streets. State-run newspapers regularly report on those intersections that are blocked (*kẹt xe*). The experience of traffic gridlock in Vietnam draws on the same phrase people use when they have no liquidity, or are financially blocked (*kẹt tiền*). Traffic congestion in the city is a paradoxical sign of Vietnam's economic development (see Figure 4).

Although the number of personal cars on city streets has also increased, it is the staggering number of motorbikes that better illustrates the traffic crisis. Images of urban traffic congestion that appear in the newspapers or on the evening news do not show the queues of trucks lined up outside the city center but the hordes of motorbikes that swarm across bridges or circle the city on a Saturday night. Recent estimates suggest that the sheer number of motorbikes and other vehicles on city streets has slowed traffic down to a crawl; the average speed of traffic in Ho Chi Minh City dropped from 30 kilometers per hour in 1975 to a slow 10 kilometers per hour in 2007 (Tuổi Trẻ 2007b). In a popular and satirical column, "Say It or Don't," Lý Sinh Sự' recounted the popular fear that the exponential increase in motorbikes would overwhelm city streets: "It's so frightening! In Ho Chi Minh City, one thousand motorbikes are registered every day, they say that if imports continue at this pace then in another year, there won't be enough streets for the vehicles [không còn đường cho xe!]" (2000:7).

Urban gridlock is a constant condition in many cities, an uncomfortable yet familiar reminder of how illusory are the dreams of "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000). Film critic Ian Parker describes traffic in London as a paradox of gridlock and speed: "Their cars promised [people] power, autonomy,



Figure 4. Motorists wait at a red light. Photo by Q. Huynh.

and control, and London traffic takes all these away—which is why people suddenly accelerate to 60 miles an hour, if they can, even on the approach to a red light at Knightsbridge” (2002:297).

Equating the experience of traffic in Ho Chi Minh City with traffic in London would be a mistake. Parker, instead, claims the turmoil experienced in the “developing world” does not lead to the internalized “road rage” of the driver in the West but is accepted as an inescapable social condition: “People will be driving as it makes sense to them, sounding their horns. They will be in general agreement about fairly basic driving etiquette” (2002:297). How, though, is it possible to maintain general agreement when city streets and forms of mobility are in a state of accelerating change? Parker presents an overly romanticized vision of traffic—tumultuous but localized—that cannot be sustained in cities where the physical infrastructure and regimes of mobility are being reterritorialized by global capital and new forms of stratification (Brenner 1998; Ong 2000).

In Ho Chi Minh City, the systems of traffic signs and regulations are based as much on international regulatory standards as they are on social conventions. Striped crosswalks, signals that feature the conventional green, yellow, and red lights, and a “sense of general agreement”—in which motorbike users weave around elderly people waving white

cloths or young women balancing trays laden with food or beverages—all structure the movement of traffic. When describing traffic to me, however, people drew on idioms of sociality rather than state-based discourses of regulation. They described traffic not as a zone governed by impersonal signs but as one of face-to-face contact. These idioms also explain why some drivers were willing to claim that traffic rules were unnecessary. One woman in her early twenties claimed, “I know what is in the other person’s head.” Her confidence in maintaining distance from other drivers was not located in the impersonal systems of electronic and written signs but in her ability to recognize—and, indeed, anticipate—what the other person would do. Other people described their strategy of looking ahead, not behind, when they merged into crowded streets. Eye contact, rather than a formal system of signs, governed who would yield to whom. People argued that the inability to see the face of other drivers was one reason they resisted using safety helmets, a point I address more fully below. Although these theories of the everyday resonate with claims that “the urban” is still predicated on concepts of trust and reciprocity encoded in cultures of circulation (Thrift and Olds 1996), they discount the more generalized feature of city life: people coming into increasingly physical proximity with strangers (Hannerz 1983; Simmel 1990; Wirth 1938).

In the rapidly changing urban environment of Ho Chi Minh City, to insist that one can anticipate what the other will do seems futile, if not foolhardy. Such claims are even more difficult to sustain as Vietnam's economy becomes increasingly integrated with the global economy. In the early 1990s, traffic accidents were commonly blamed on foreigners, and residents also cast blame on migrants who arrived from the countryside. In satirical humor magazines, such as *Tuổi Trẻ Cười*, the culprits were usually depicted as young "cowboys," urban youth who defiantly ran red lights or drove at excessive speeds, armored by their parents' cash or political connections.

Traffic, like the market, overturns hierarchies of personhood. Vietnamese linguistic conventions mark personhood in terms of relative age and rank (Luong 1989), but these principles cannot designate who yields to whom in city traffic. In traffic an effacement of national identity takes place. Anyone who enters traffic—resident, migrant, or foreigner—is a participant. In contrast to the intimacy presumed in face-to-face encounters, international traffic regulations are intended to establish distance between motorists and govern their movement in predictable ways. However, in Ho Chi Minh City, these regulations inhibit the mobility promised by motor power. The sheer mass of motorbikes often overrides the authority of the traffic light. After enough motorbikes have gathered at a red light, the vehicles move forward, like a phalanx, into oncoming traffic. Most people I interviewed described frustration with the constant congestion, but they also rationalized their actions—pulling up on sidewalks to bypass traffic congestion, driving the wrong way down a one-way street, carrying three adults on the back of a motorbike—as socially acceptable actions. Their constructions of the "licitness" of these actions point to the friction arising between personal mobility and state regulations (Roitman 2005).

Motorbikes are key vehicles in class formation and the reterritorialization of public space through global capitalism in Ho Chi Minh City. In this light, the disorder of traffic, rather than a sign of the failure of citizens to heed the law, can be read as an indicator of economic reform—the promise of individual freedom and autonomy associated with the market, newfound urban mobility, and the formation of new hierarchies of who (or what) has the right-of-way. The increased demand to regulate the flow of traffic from different agents—foreign investors, city residents, even supranational organizations such as the World Bank—is part of the process of reterritorialization under global capitalism, a process to which I now turn.

Reordering traffic

Cities depend on complex physical infrastructure to support the flow of people, goods, and information. This infrastructure—roadways, bridges, train tracks, and ports—

ensures people and goods have access to markets (Nguyen 2002). In an effort to promote development, government agencies, with substantial financing from the World Bank and other international organizations, embarked on a strategy to improve urban transport in Ho Chi Minh City (World Bank 1998). This entailed creating new forms of financing to widen streets and build new bridges, connecting disparate points in the city in novel ways and fueling the speculative real-estate market. Yet any social system hinges on compliance—the willingness of subjects to comply with the imposed order. Although physical infrastructure is entwined with processes of reterritorialization, my analysis focuses on the regulation of traffic and safety campaigns, a line of inquiry that examines how subjectivization cannot be understood simply in terms of society against the state; rather, it is dialogic (Luong 2003a:23). It is this process of reterritorialization that contributes both to the emergence of the Vietnamese urban middle class and to the reconstitution of state power.

The power of the Vietnamese state to control communications, regulate commerce, and collect revenue is being reconstituted in city traffic. In an effort to project the state's authority, traffic police became increasingly visible on street corners. People saw these officers as embodying both highly personalized forms of private power and the impersonal power of the state (Das and Poole 2004). People I interviewed admitted to settling fines for violations by tucking a 50-thousand-dong note (around \$3.00 in 2003) under the identification card or driver's license they presented to officers. Most people rationalized the practice as supplementing the low wages of government officials or as saving themselves the time they would have had to spend appearing at the district police station. Other people offered alibis rather than pay a fine, a strategy they justified as settling a matter by local knowledge.

In 2003, traffic officers had streamlined their techniques for issuing fines. Drivers who ran red lights, operated a motorbike without a side-view mirror, or failed to turn on their headlights in the evening were pulled over by the traffic officers and fined on the spot. On Trung Hung Dao, a major thoroughfare in Ho Chi Minh City, an electronic billboard displayed the amount of revenue collected by the city government. This electronic display offset the complaint that traffic police were lining their own pockets by converting state power into private gain. Tickets for traffic violations were issued on a scrip of various denominations, each with a glistening hologram. When I first saw the tickets, their elaborate design, much like that of a bank check, surprised me. One man speculated that the elaborate design was intended to prevent someone from donning a uniform and then pulling people over to collect money. The holograms were intended to project reliability and security, like holograms now incorporated on the polymer Vietnamese currency. Another man suggested that the tickets were part of the larger fiscal policy

of the state: The receipts had originally been intended for tax collections, but they were, instead, used for collecting fines, a more reliable source of revenue.

Given the hazards of traffic in urban Vietnam, recent campaigns have emphasized personal safety. The project of public safety has also been harnessed to the state's ability to raise revenues through its power to issue fines for traffic violations. The debate over safety helmets demonstrates negotiations over local customs and "international standards" in urban contexts. Rumors circulated that, in 2001, the traffic police would begin issuing fines to drivers who did not wear helmets.¹⁸ Safety helmets soon lined the sidewalks, especially in front of sports shops. In a high-profile department store in Ho Chi Minh City, helmets appeared as luxury items in a window display. Shops selling helmets prominently displayed newspaper articles promoting their use and certificates of safety issued by the Ministry of Transportation for each brand.

The helmets were promoted to protect motorbike users against injury, but risk cannot be determined with reference only to how nature and technology interact. Assessments of risk are socially constructed, requiring an approach that considers "both moral judgments about how to live and empirical judgments about what the world is like" (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982:10). Traffic is an inevitable, inescapable feature of city life, and although people were well aware that accidents were common, they considered their personal risk slight. Some people claimed that accidents were a matter of fate and, thus, unavoidable. Others expressed concern that wearing a helmet might actually jeopardize them in traffic: Not only was wearing a helmet uncomfortable but it also restricted the driver's vision and reduced sound, thus making it difficult for the driver to judge the traffic behind. Still others pointed out that, unlike traffic in developed countries, where people traveled at greater speeds, city traffic in Ho Chi Minh City was relatively slow, and greater risks were posed by poor road conditions and reckless drivers.

Although campaigns did not succeed in convincing people to wear safety helmets until December 2007, users have complied with the regulation to use side-view mirrors. The relative failure of the helmet regulation and success of the side-view-mirror requirement are related to the peculiar position of the motorbike in traffic, a position in which the exposed operator sees and is seen. Like helmets, mirrors were promoted as safety features, but unlike the helmet, the side-view mirror did not constrict the freedom of the user. In the first month the regulation was enforced, accidents in Ho Chi Minh City increased dramatically because people were not familiar with maneuvering their motorbikes using side-view mirrors. The use of mirrors was intended to establish a new relation between the driver and the road, as drivers could see what was coming from behind. Unlike helmets, which concealed and confined, mirrors made visible what was previously out of sight. The side-view mirrors appeared to bring

a new way of seeing into city traffic. Yet this perspective was irrelevant. People looked ahead, not behind, expecting those behind them to yield.

People purchased side-view mirrors not because they were convinced that the mirrors contributed to greater safety but because they knew the mirrors eliminated the risk of being fined by the police. The side-view mirrors sold on the street were referred to as "*hàng dỏm*," or "worthless goods." When the motorbike moved, the mirror would quiver, eventually rotating downward or upward so that the driver could not see the reflection of other drivers, only the mirror itself. The mirror thus failed as a device to reflect images, but it did offer the appearance of compliance and protected the driver from being hailed by traffic cops. The cost of one of these worthless mirrors, several people noted, was approximately the same as the fine for not having one.

State-led discourses construct the traffic problem as one of education, training, and compliance with the law. This explanation, however, does not account for the "agency" of the motorbike. To be sure, the high death rate could be reduced through safety precautions such as using helmets. These precautions, like the use of safety belts in automobiles, have significantly reduced injuries from accidents. Yet something more is at stake in an anthropological understanding of urban mobilities and motorbikes. Motorbikes have been instrumental in class formation in Ho Chi Minh City as symbols of purchasing power, embodiments of individual freedom, and flexible forms of mobility. Yet the very processes by which these vehicles have generated new social arrangements and produced new subjectivities may lead to their displacement as vehicles of the middle class.

A new paradigm of mobility

Motorbikes are the predominant mode of personal transport in Ho Chi Minh City, indispensable vehicles for everyday life following reforms of the Vietnamese economy. Motorbikes offer a mode of mobility premised on purchasing power but one that is flexible and highly adaptable to urban life. Motorbikes lead people out of the household and into traffic, a zone in which residents, state agencies, urban planners, and even international agencies are renegotiating who or what has the right-of-way. In this new social order, one's position is based on the classification of one's vehicle, not on personhood. Motorbikes in this regard are critical agents in the emergence of an urban middle class.

Urban mobility in Ho Chi Minh City cannot be understood by reference to European and Northern American cultures of automobility. Motorbikes offer greater flexibility than either their "primitive" predecessor, the bicycle, or their more luxurious alternative, the private car. They easily move off the grid, exemplifying the dynamics identified more generally with processes of modernity, including intensifying global flows, and also with uneven geographical

development. State-led projects to control traffic by imposing import quotas or restricting ownership of new motorbikes have been ineffective. Yet, as more people acquire motorbikes, the personal mobility that these vehicles embody is stopped short by the inescapable conditions of urban traffic congestion, worsening air quality, and limited alternatives for mass transportation.

Anthropological studies of transport demonstrate that differences in urban mobilities cannot be understood in terms of cultural or political-economic explanations. The zone of traffic—fueled by mass consumption, organized by urban planners, and animated by people and their vehicles—raises persistent questions of “inequality, aspiration, and rank in an imagined ‘world’ ” (Ferguson 2006). In 2007, a new paradigm appeared to be taking shape in Ho Chi Minh City, one in which privately owned cars were privileged over other forms of transport. In that paradigm, motorbikes and automobiles could not be accommodated in the same lane. As city boulevards were widened to accommodate traffic, the far-left lane was designated for cars. Motorbikes were relegated to the far-right lane, where they mingled with the very forms of transport they were designed to overtake. What this portends for the development of urban transport in Ho Chi Minh City is not yet clear. Some plans have called for increased funding for public transportation, and others have supported user fees for private transport. As people enter into traffic, class formation is being renegotiated around new modes of mobility and consumption practices. And as the lighter, more flexible, but more exposed motorbike is pushed to the side of the road, the privately owned car may come to define the aspirations of the middle class in Ho Chi Minh City.

Notes

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1. Đổi Mới is associated with the Sixth Communist Party Congress, which approved a set of administrative reforms that loosened restrictions on exchange by slowly dismantling the rationing system and initiated an open-door policy to attract foreign investment and increase trade with the world economy. For more elaborated discussions of Đổi Mới, see Fforde and de Vylder 1996.

2. In the decade from 1991 to 2002, the number of vehicles in Vietnam jumped from nearly 1.8 million to 10.9 million. Of that increased number, more than 90 percent are motorbikes (Trần et al. 2003:108). As of April 2007, the Ho Chi Minh City Traffic Committee

estimated there were 3.1 million registered motorbikes in the city, which has a population of nearly seven million. I would like to thank Mirjam Sidik, director of operations of the Asian Injury Prevention Foundation in Ho Chi Minh City, for providing me with the most current data available at the time of this writing (May 2007).

3. Neoliberal projects and experiments have troubled one of the classic distinctions of the private–public divide: its role as marking the boundary between the market and the state, of private interests versus public interests. The perspective taken by neoliberal proponents is that the public or the state has overextended its authority over interests that ought to be left to the private sphere. Opponents of this view argue that private economic interests have dominated the public realm, thus undermining the common good, which the state is meant to represent and protect. Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2003) argue that attention should be directed at forms of mobility that blur the distinction, thus destabilizing what is often seen as static understandings of the public and the private. Susan Gal (2002) proposes a semiotic approach that focuses on the fractal reordering of the public and the private, particularly in postsocialist states such as Hungary. I argue that motorbike mobility is one such project in that it locates the economic power of the consumer in city streets, arguably a domain of public life.

4. Sheller and Urry argue that “mobility is as constitutive of modernity as is urbanity, that civil societies of the West are societies of ‘automobility’ and that automobility should be examined” (2000:738). They propose several interlocking components of automobility: the automobile as “manufactured object,” “individual consumption,” the “machinic complex” that organizes automobility, the “semi-private mobility” that subordinates public mobility, and environmental resource use as physical as manifested in infrastructure and environmental costs such as deteriorating air quality in cities. Their argument, however, is limited to cultures of automobility in North America and Europe (Sheller and Urry 2000:739). My argument considers how automobility is experienced in Ho Chi Minh City on the back of a motorbike. In so doing, it highlights the pleasures and vulnerabilities that accompany the rapid expansion of personal motorized transport in a still-impoorished country.

5. Ulf Hannerz argues that, in traffic, anomie or isolation is realized: “Traffic relationships hardly exist where other terms are available for the definition of co-presence, where everyday is a kinsman or a co-worker or a neighbor or a playmate, or is present for the purpose of some recognizable interaction of provisioning” (1983:106).

6. In government documents and state-run newspapers, motorbikes (xe máy) and “motorcycles” (xe mô tô) are classified as “two-wheeled vehicles.” Motorbikes are two-wheeled vehicles with an engine displacement between 50 and 175 cubic centimeters, whereas motorcycles have larger engines and are subject to more restrictions in terms of registration. For instance, owners must belong to a club and are called on to participate in government-organized parades and other events.

7. The argument I make regarding mobility, consumption, and regulation could easily be extended to personal cars. By 1997, well over half of the passenger cars (57 percent) and commercial vehicles (61 percent) were privately owned (Trần et al. 2003:109). However, the market for personal cars still trailed significantly behind that of motorbikes between 1991 and 2001.

8. Ho Chi Minh City posted the highest economic growth in the country, almost 79.1 percent between 1993 and 1998 (Luong 2003a:18). The average income for residents in Ho Chi Minh in 2005 was three times higher than for the country as a whole. Whereas the average income for the entire country was \$638, incomes for residents in Ho Chi Minh City are estimated to have ranged from \$1,800 to \$1,900 per year.

9. Not everyone in Ho Chi Minh City wants to display his or her purchasing power. Some residents, particularly those who still recall the upheaval in southern Vietnam following the collapse of the Saigon-led government in 1975, remain cautious in their consumption practices. An economist described the “relative absence of such expensive conspicuous consumption in what has long been referred to as the ‘individualistic, commercial, south,’ [as] intriguing” (Fforde 2003:50). Younger residents in the city, by contrast, draw on the marketplace to express social status.

10. Household surveys provide a glimpse into the world of commodities. According to the results of one survey (General Statistics Office 2006), 78.2 percent of urban residences reported owning a motorbike, whereas less than 3 percent had a truck or car. Moreover, the percentage of urban households that owned motorbikes was higher than that of households with radios, telephones, or refrigerators but lower than that of households with televisions (94.4 percent).

11. Dick Hebdige argues that the scooter was first introduced as a feminized alternative to its “more powerful more ‘primitive’ (i.e., of earlier origin, more ‘functional’ and ‘aggressive’) antecedent: the motor cycle because of its flat, open platform that permitted women to wear long skirts and its long engine capacity” (1988:84).

12. Data available through the World Bank indicate that traffic accidents increased dramatically from 1999 to 2002, a period that coincided with the introduction of relatively cheap motorbikes from China, but showed a decrease from 2002 to 2003. The death toll from accidents was estimated to be 9 per 100,000 people in 2002, although the collection of data is not complete and the rate could be higher (World Bank 2004).

13. Government figures estimate that only 34 percent of the available bus seats are used despite the recent upgrades to Mercedes 80-seat vehicles that offer passengers a comfortable ride and despite the system of subsidized fares (*Tuổi Trẻ* 2007c).

14. In his early-20th-century monograph on money, Georg Simmel suggests that it was not the products of labor but the “tools of labor, including weapons” (1990:323) that brought about a conception of private property. Furthermore, he suggests that it is transportability, in contrast to land ownership, that organizes ideas of private property (Simmel 1990:351). A social history of bicycles, especially in northern Vietnam, may provide a counterhistory of private property in a socialist regime, but such a history is beyond the scope of this article.

15. In recent months, however, the motorbike market has slowed in response to another development—the entrance of Vietnam into the WTO, a move consumers anticipate will lead to a significant drop in the price of a motorbike.

16. I encountered the term *graveyard motorbike* in newspaper and magazine articles published in southern Vietnam in the early 1990s, although during the time I conducted research, I did not hear people use the term. Rather, I heard *smuggled motorbike* (*xe mien*) and *xe may secondhand*.

17. The popularity of the Honda Dream did not mean that consumers insisted on authenticity. Vietnamese who purchased what was regarded as an inferior brand could pay to have the vehicle upgraded (*lên đời*), in which a motorbike would be magically transformed into a newer and more prestigious model by substituting a few parts and changing its exterior. One “raised” the *Đời*, or model, of the motorbike by simply replacing external parts and transforming its appearance but not its engine. A Citi motorbike imported from Korea could be purchased for less than half the cost of a new Honda Dream and, with a few parts, converted into the image of a more prestigious model.

18. More than 700,000 violations were reported after the traffic police began fining motorists for not wearing safety helmets on 18 roads in Ho Chi Minh City (*Tuổi Trẻ* 2007a).

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