

Motorbike Madness?

Development and Two-Wheeled Mobility in Hanoi

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Four million motorbikes navigate the narrow streets of Hanoi, having close to completely replaced the bicycle as a means of transport. This paper approaches the ‘motorbike revolution’ in Vietnam in general and Hanoi in particular at the intersection between political economy and everyday practices. It discusses how regional economic integration following the market reforms known as *doi moi* has facilitated the surge in motorbike ownership, as well as how this has materialised through everyday mobility practices in Hanoi. The paper argues that, given a context of lacking transport alternatives, the motorbike must be understood through its unique use value. Furthermore, the motorbike can be considered the main reason that the streets of Hanoi are not in a perpetual state of gridlock. Thus, the paper argues that while the high number of motorbikes brings along many challenges, the situation would deteriorate significantly if the millions of motorbikes are to be replaced by their emerging competitor, the private automobile.

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There is nothing quite like the buzzing and honking of four million motorbikes. This is why a visit to Hanoi can be so overwhelming for first-timers, and why visitors have often described the particularities of Hanoi’s streetscapes as ‘motorbike madness’ (something that is revealed by a quick google search). Not long ago the scene looked very different. It used to be bicycles that dominated the streets of the Vietnamese capital. Photographs and descriptions of Hanoi from as late as the early 1990s describe a level of tranquillity in the streets that is almost unimaginable today. How did it change into the inferno of honking and traffic jams of contemporary Hanoi?

The story of the motorbike in Vietnam is a fascinating one, and one that tells us a great deal about Vietnam’s development process. From being a luxury product as late as the 1990s, the motorbike is now found in practically every Vietnamese household. It is also the essence of Vietnamese urban life and has together with its non-motorised predecessor shaped urban geography. In Hanoi everything can be done on a motorbike. It is used for shopping, as a taxi (*xe om*, literally translates as

‘hugging vehicle’), for resting or sleeping (particularly by the *xe om* drivers), for going on dates or hanging out with friends, for walking the dog, for carrying obscene amounts of goods, and for bringing children to and from school. It is what keeps Hanoi going, the blood running through Hanoi’s veins, keeping the city alive. According to World Bank (2011) estimates, it is also the main reason why mobility is in fact still reasonably good in Hanoi with short commuting times in comparison to other large Asian cities.

This paper explores the ‘motorbike revolution’ in Vietnam from a consumption perspective, approaching motorbikes both from the macro-level changes in political economy following economic reforms, and from the streets of Hanoi. First and foremost, the paper sets out to explain how the motorised two-wheeler attained its dominant position, and how this has depended on social and economic changes following economic reforms. Furthermore, the paper considers the changing symbolic value of motorbikes, as well as their unique use value in the context of Hanoi’s physical and commercial infrastructure.

Development, consumption, mobility

The theoretical starting point for this paper is a broad approach to consumption as a distinct way to understand human relations to material goods. Goods can be used to communicate identity, class and belonging, but they also have their own material stories to tell and their own material agency (see e.g. Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014), and they play a crucial role in the performance of everyday practices.

Consumption, or ‘the acquisition and use of things’ (Wilhite, 2008, p. 3), has been subject to significant scholarly attention in recent decades. The field has seen an eclectic range of approaches to understanding consumption, ranging from the rational consumer of mainstream economics and the post-modernist emphasis on cultural expressivism and signs, to the present revival of practice theory (see Warde 2014 for further discussion).

The academic inquiry of consumption has traditionally seen a production – consumption divide, with one branch of research emphasising production, provision and the material, and the other focusing on the consumer, culture and the symbolic (see e.g. Slater, 1997 or Fine, 2002 for detailed discussions). This paper is influenced by practice approaches’ understanding of consumption as embedded in the social life of people and goods, as well as Ben Fine’s (2002) insistence that production and ‘systems of provision’ must be included in order to fully understand consumption. In a context of rapid development, this paper argues, consumption is best understood in relation to economic development processes as well as how these processes materialise in everyday life.

Focusing on the consumption of means of transport, another theoretical starting point of this paper is mobilities research. With what has been labelled the ‘mobilities turn’ of the social sciences (Sheller and Urry, 2006), the processes and meanings of movement of goods and people have received much recent scholarly attention (see Cresswell, 2010, 2012, 2014 for thorough overviews). Cars and the ‘system of automobility’

(Urry, 2004) have been at the centre of attention in the mobilities literature (see Butler and Hannam, 2014 for an overview), while motorbikes to a significant extent have been ignored (Pinch and Reimer, 2012). An aim of this paper is to take mobility research out of the car-dominated mobility systems of mature capitalist countries to the many particularities of the streetscapes of a rapidly developing country. In contemporary Hanoi, motorbikes are the dominant means of transport rather than ‘alternative mobilities’ in an overall system of automobility. As is discussed below, what I term a system of ‘moto-mobility’ has materialised in Vietnam’s capital, with urban and commercial geography having developed in a dialectical relationship with two-wheelers.

Motorbike ethnography

The paper draws on fieldwork in Hanoi over a period of seven months in 2012 and 2013. The findings are based on observation as well as semi-structured interviews with car owners and motorbike owners ranging from the age of 21 to 70, all belonging broadly speaking to the new Vietnamese ‘middle class’ (see Gainsborough 2010), in addition to interviews with representatives of motorbike manufacturers. Furthermore, the research has been based on ‘mobile methods’ (see e.g. Büscher, Urry and Witchger, 2011). I used a motorbike for practically all fieldwork purposes: to get around, drive to interviews, explore the city and observe traffic, go to restaurants and cafes, shop, and visit friends. This has played a significant role in shaping my understanding of the city, and in grasping the importance of the motorbike in the everyday life of Hanoi and its inhabitants (see Gillen, 2015 for a discussion on using motorbikes for fieldwork in Vietnam).

The motorbike revolution

Not long ago, the motorbike was a luxury good in Vietnam, and particularly so in the North of the country that had been subject to a longer period of socialist planning than the South. Before the market reforms known as *doi moi* ('renovation') were initiated in 1986 (see Masina, 2006; Hansen, 2015a), even a bicycle was a treasured good. The few available motorbikes in Hanoi mostly came from the Soviet Union, such as the famous Babetta and Minsk brands (still iconic for aficionados, but now either obsolete or banned from the streets of Hanoi). After reunification in 1975, a few Hanoians were able to get their hands on Japanese and European motorbikes (such as the popular Italian scooters) from the South, but it was *doi moi* that set the stage for the motorbike revolution.

When the Vietnamese government launched an import substitution policy for motorcycle manufacturing in the mid-1990s, the Japanese giants Honda, Yamaha and Suzuki, as well as San-yang from Taiwan started establishing businesses in the country in order to get around import quotas. Honda dominated the market in this period, although most of the models were still imported from the company's production in Thailand (Fujita 2013a).

These changes made motorbikes much more accessible, something that was visible in the streets of Vietnam's capital where local authorities were unable to keep up with the provision of public transport to fulfil the transport needs of an increasingly mobile and rapidly growing urban population. The motorbike was then the perfect substitute for the bicycle: similar to it in many ways, almost as easy to operate but a whole lot faster. It allowed Hanoians to carry out the same practices and access the same places as the bicycle, at the same time covering larger distances without having to break sweat. As Truitt (2008, p. 5) puts it, 'Unlike bicycles, motorbikes promise effortless mobility or, rather, mobility that relies on fossil fuel rather than human exertion'.

Still, however, owning a motorbike was not for everyone; the total of motorbikes nationwide reached about 6 million by 1999 (MONRE, 2007). The turn of the millennium was when sales started really taking off, and annual sales increased from 0.5 million in 1999 to 1.7 million in 2000 (Hansen, in press). The most important reason behind this year-to-year increase was China. With a good appetite for motorbikes already established but prices still too high for the average consumer, the stage was set for what Fujita (2013a) terms the 'China shock'. This consisted of cheap Chinese copies of Japanese motorbike models making their way across the border, often circumventing import laws by being imported as so-called knockdown kits and assembled in Vietnam by local entrepreneurs. The quality of these motorbikes was – and still is – comparatively low, but prices were much lower than for the Japanese competitors. This was an important step towards 'democratizing' motorbike ownership, but importantly also had the effect of forcing other firms to change strategy. Honda started producing models in Vietnam specialized for the Vietnamese market and were in this way able to compete with the Chinese copies. Fujita (2013a) reports that Honda experienced a shocking drop from 67 percent market share in 1998 to 12 percent in 2001, but that the Japanese giant still was able to reclaim the market after this and again become the dominant player. Chinese models have in turn been relegated to the Vietnamese countryside where they still make up a significant proportion of the market share (Fujita, 2013b).

Combined with rising incomes, this formal and informal integration into regional production networks contributed towards normalising motorbike ownership. By 2011 there was more than one motorbike by household nationwide in Vietnam (GSO 2012), and 2.4 motorbikes per household in Hanoi (EPS, 2014). Along with the rapid increase in ownership, the social meanings attached to motorbikes have also changed.

Between distinction and mundane mobilities

The social and economic transformations of *doi moi* involved a crucial legitimisation of private consumption and display of wealth (Vann, 2012). In this context, motorbikes became a powerful status object and a symbol of the new Vietnam (Truitt, 2008). With two-wheeled mobility ‘democratised’, the status once attached to owning a two-wheeler started to diminish and the role of motorbikes as vehicles for social distinction took a new turn. While the ultimate competitor in form of the private automobile started entering the stage, the combination of high tax levels and an urban geography badly suited for automobilicity (Hansen, in press) paved the way for an old favourite in the shape of the Italian scooter.

The size of the market for ‘luxury’ motorbikes in Vietnam is considered to be extraordinary compared to other countries with a high prevalence of motorbikes; at a certain income level, cars have replaced motorbikes to a much larger extent than in Vietnam. This made the famous Italian manufacturer Piaggio decide to use Vietnam as its base for producing its different Piaggio and Vespa models (Interview, representative of Piaggio Vietnam, November 2013). At several times the price of its competitors, Piaggio did not aim to compete on price. In addition, with Japanese models generally considered as reliable and of very high quality, durability or technology would not necessarily have led to success in a competitive market. Instead, in the words of Wunker (2011, np.), Piaggio ‘competed asymmetrically’ and developed a market for premium scooters. As expressed by a representative of Piaggio Vietnam, the typical buyer of their product is looking for something ‘very stylish’, something ‘to define themselves, or express themselves’ (Interview, November 2013). While Honda Vietnam have followed up and developed their own premium brands, nothing on two wheels so far seems able to compete with the status of an Italian motorbike.

However, while symbolic value and status

may be central aspects of consumption, it is important to remember that most consumption takes place as part of everyday practices, as ‘ordinary consumption’ in the words of Gronow and Warde (2001). Transport is first and foremost a means of getting from A to B, and the explicit *use value* of the motorbike as well as the lack of alternative means of transportation are probably the best explanations for its popularity.

In his celebration of the motorbike in Vietnam, Vietnamese novelist Nguyen Truong Quy (2014) speaks of the symbolism of the motorbike and how it can be associated with freedom. His most important point, however, is how this contrasts with the role of the motorbike for most Vietnamese. As he asks, “Among the crowds of motorbike riders, often frantic, often flaunting [sic] the laws of traffic and the code of civilized conduct, dragged into a chronic fatigue day after day, month after month, on their ordinary commuter’s motorbike: how many of these people think of the two wheels beneath them as a source of inspiration?” (Quy 2014, p. 35).

This is a crucial point. Arguably, the main reason for Hanoians to drive a motorbike is that they do not feel they have a choice. This was also reflected by informants in Hanoi. As argued by a young, female motorbike owner: ‘It’s my only choice, right. I cannot walk around Hanoi, I cannot drive a car, I don’t have one and I can’t, so yeah, motorbike is like the only choice’ (Interview, November 2013). This can be seen as a form of consumer lock-in. Although it is certainly possible to survive in Hanoi without a motorised vehicle, it makes participating in the dynamics and flows of contemporary society much harder. Through the combination of overall processes of economic development, urban transport provision and everyday practices of mobility, the motorbike has become an essential commodity in contemporary Hanoi.

Development, consumption and mobility in Hanoi

Symbolic value and use value are of course not mutually exclusive categories. The motorbike can be used mainly for transport *while* displaying class, status or urban cool. The young motorbike owner who felt locked in to the system of moto-mobility herself drove what could be considered a premium scooter. The point here is that status or symbolic value alone cannot explain the motorbike revolution.

The role of the motorbikes in Hanoi today would be impossible without the market reforms of *doi moi*. The reforms opened up the Vietnamese economy to global and regional trade networks. This allowed motorbikes to enter the streets and simultaneously legitimised private consumption. As this paper has shown, however, the economic processes that allowed for the motorbike revolution were more complicated than simply a case for increased economic openness would suggest. Indeed, Vietnam protected its borders against imports, and the rather unplanned development of the China shock was vital for making motorbikes available to large parts of the population.

Still, economic determinism cannot give us the full picture as other regions of the world have never come close to the levels of motorbike ownership seen in Vietnam. Moto-mobility as the dominant means of transport is an Asian phenomenon, evident from figures showing how 84 per cent of the world motorbike demand is expected to come from the Asia/Pacific region in 2016 (Freedonia, 2013). It is quite obvious that other Asian countries, such as Japan, Taiwan, China, and Thailand, have been vital to the specific developments in Vietnam, both through trade and production and as examples of motorbike-driven societies.

Crucially, '[t]he effect of production on consumption is mediated through the nexus of practices' (Warde, 2005, p. 141). The important role of bicycles at earlier 'stages of development' has played an important role for the subsequent

popularity of motorbikes. The earlier prevalence of vélomobility firmly established two-wheeled practices, shaping and being shaped by urban infrastructure. In Hanoi, this development continued and was strengthened by motorbikes (Hansen, 2015b). Urry (2004, p. 27) has famously conceptualised automobility as a 'self-organizing autopoietic, non-linear system'. I argue the same can be said about 'the system of moto-mobility' that is in place in Hanoi. Once motorbikes started replacing bicycles, motorbikes and the two-wheeled geography and infrastructure of mobility and consumption in Hanoi have developed dialectically, reinforcing each other (Hansen, 2015b). While I argue the use value of motorbikes within this system, including a significant degree of lock-in, is the most important factor in explaining the popularity of two-wheeled mobility, motorbikes are simultaneously subject to often complex processes of distinction and changing symbolic value. This in turn has changed with increasing affluence. In a context where motorbikes represented a scarce commodity, just being on two wheels could be enough to gain social status. When owning a motorbike is close to completely normalised, distinction requires new versions of motorbikes, something that contemporary capitalism has proved extremely efficient at providing.

Economic reforms, regional economic integration, two-wheeled practices and the system of moto-mobility have thus shaped Hanoi into a city of motorbikes. The motorised two-wheeler is integral to close to all aspects of everyday life in the Vietnamese capital. But systems can be broken, and Hanoi has in recent years experienced a surge in car ownership. While still far fewer in numbers than motorbikes, the number of cars is increasing much faster, indeed as much as 222 percent between 2005 and 2011 according to the World Bank (EPS, 2014). While very expensive to acquire and use, and less convenient for driving in the narrow streets, cars provide safer, cleaner, more comfortable and even healthier mobility in the polluted Hanoi air. They also now repre-

sent perhaps the main aspirational good for the middle class. This in turn is visible in new developments in the traditional fringes of the capital, where so-called New Urban Areas are constructed with an embedded expectation of a future system of automobility (Hansen, 2015b). Thus, while the two-wheeled icon of Vietnam continues to dominate the streets of Hanoi, it remains to be seen how long this will last.

Concluding remarks: A future on two or four wheels?

The remarkable increase in motorbike ownership in Vietnam today can be understood from a consumption perspective accounting for changes in the provision of goods as well as its relationship to everyday practices. This paper has argued that formal (Japan, Taiwan) and informal (China) economic integration has played a crucial role in the motorbike revolution, in particular the ‘China shock’ made motorbikes gradually become available to ‘everyone’. In addition, Vietnam was previously dominated by bicycles, and the motorbike has effectively replaced its non-motorised predecessor as a similar but faster and more convenient technology. There can still be a significant amount of status attached to some models of motorbikes, but the motorbike is now facing tough competition from private cars. It is still, as Truitt (2008) has argued, in traffic that you see the new middle class in Vietnam. For Truitt this refers to the owners of motorbikes, and you can arguably still spot the middle class by the type of motorbikes they drive. Increasingly, however, the middle class is now to be found within the confines of a private automobile (although, interestingly, very few car owners seem to get rid of their motorbikes, see Hansen, 2015b).

The millions of motorbikes certainly bring a certain feeling of chaos to the streets of Hanoi. The system of moto-mobility does have its logic, however, and actually works fairly well. If you are a motorist, that is. Large parts of Hanoi today

are a nightmare for pedestrians. The motorbike must take part of the blame for this, and it also plays a central role in giving Vietnam among the highest number of traffic casualties in the world (Short and Pinet-Peralta 2010). Nevertheless, the biggest threat to mobility in Hanoi today is the surge in private car ownership (Hansen, in press). Meanwhile, motorbike companies are worrying about stagnating sales, and there is much talk of a saturated motorbike market (e.g. Thanh Nien News 2014). The private car is finally the new king in town, also in Hanoi, although it fits badly into Hanoi’s ‘moto-mobile’ geography (Hansen, 2015; Hansen, in press). The motorbike is here to stay for now, but the chaos of Hanoi traffic may just get worse as the two-wheeler has to compete for scarce road space with its four-wheeled big brother. Unfortunately for the aspirations of many Hanoians today, if the four million motorbikes are to be replaced by cars, an image of the future of Hanoi could quite possibly be seen in the almost completely gridlocked streets of Manila, Jakarta and Bangkok.

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