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# Contesting socialist state visions for modern mobilities: informal motorbike taxi drivers' struggles and strategies on Hanoi's streets, Vietnam

As the Vietnamese socialist state privileges 'modern' mobilities over so-called 'traditional' means, the livelihoods of informal motorbike taxi drivers (locally known as *xe ôm*) are increasingly under threat. Drawing on the literatures of mobilities and everyday politics, and on ethnographic fieldwork with *xe ôm* drivers, recent app-based competitors and planners in Vietnam's capital city, Hanoi, we argue that the state's vision creates specific mobility experiences, rhythms and frictions for *xe ôm* drivers. These drivers must not only negotiate policies curbing their mobilities, excessive police fees and dangerous customers, but also new smartphone app-based competitors. Nonetheless, *xe ôm* drivers have reacted with subtle everyday politics to reshape their mobilities, with tactics including performing 'identity management' with police, information gathering via social networks and inventive efforts to build loyal customers. This paper thus highlights how mobility and access to urban streets are being framed, coproduced and respatialised in a rapidly growing socialist city.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, informal economy, everyday politics, mobilities, socialist state, Hanoi, informal motorbike taxis, urban livelihoods

## Introduction

In their efforts to create a modern, prosperous and 'civilized' capital city, Vietnam's central government and Hanoi's municipal authorities are conceiving an urban space replete with security, orderliness and modernity. In 2008, Vietnamese state officials significantly expanded the official land area of Hanoi, resulting in an overnight doubling of the city's population to 6.2 million inhabitants (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2008). Being a socialist state, this occurred with little public input. This expansion is part of a campaign by city authorities to modernize Hanoi and create an economic super-hub, remodelling the country's capital to transform it into a 'second Singapore' (Asia One, 2016). A related goal is to reach a population of 10 million by 2030 (from 7.3 million in 2017; Statistical Publishing House, 2017). As part of this vision, Hanoi's municipal government has demolished a number of houses and alleyways to create new transport corridors, promoting highways, expressways and an elevated metro system. Concurrently, the municipal authorities have determined that a range of 'negative' practices

and habits must be removed from the urban sphere, with certain public spaces coming under heavy regulation (Vietnam Ministry of Trade, 2006; Nguyen Thi Tan Loc and Moustier, 2016). Specific policies are now directed at those considered to detract from the state's goals, such as the numerous individuals trying to maintain informal livelihoods on the city's streets. On top of a ban on street vending in core downtown streets enacted in 2008 (People's Committee of Hanoi, 2008), in early 2017 Hanoi's local authorities implemented a 'Clean Up the Sidewalks Campaign' with vendor carts, advertisements and even door ramps being targeted for demolition (Vietnam News, 2017). In the longer term, despite the fact that about five million motorbikes versus only half a million cars now ply the city's streets, the municipal government is proposing to ban motorbikes from downtown streets by 2030 (BBC News, 2017).

Such actions privilege the modern mobilities of cars, buses and rapid transit, while deeming 'slow mobilities' such as street vendors' handcarts, pushbikes (both labelled *xê thô sơ* or 'primitive vehicles'), and motorbikes (including motorbike taxis) to be unproductive, to impede traffic flow and to hinder the realisation of the state's modernisation discourse (Du The Huynh and Gomez-Ibañez, 2016; Nguyen Thi Tan Loc and Moustier, 2016). This discourse closely resembles what Scott (1998) calls 'high modernism', namely the belief that an efficient, rational city is one 'that *look[s]* regimented and orderly in a geometrical sense' (Scott, 1998, 4, original emphasis; see also Roy, 2005, 150). Cars are considered the ultimate symbol of modernity, bringing substantial status to their owners (Hansen, 2017), while motorbikes are increasingly positioned as obstructing traffic flow, inefficient and polluting (despite growing sales of electric scooters in the city). In a socialist state like Vietnam there are few channels by which individuals or groups of citizens can openly and officially contest specific state plans for urban modernisation (Labbé, 2015) and, more specifically, contest how these plans privilege the mobility of the elite while further ostracising those deemed 'non-modern'.

Yet, in such a context, we must not underestimate the agency and resilience of those who appear increasingly marginalised from urban life and policy. As such, the aim of this paper is to examine the mobile livelihoods and everyday politics of informal motorbike taxi drivers in Hanoi. We focus on the narratives of this marginalised workforce to highlight how mobility and access to the capital's streets are being framed, co-produced and respatialised, while revealing contradictions within state-sponsored modern urbanisation processes. After outlining our methods, we review the conceptual literature on mobilities and everyday politics that underpin this investigation. We then introduce the informal motorbike taxi drivers, locally known as *xê ôm* (literally 'hug vehicle') – the majority of whom provide local clients with short trips or ferry cargo around the city – at the heart of this study. We detail their everyday experiences and, together with the frictions they face while trying to sustain their mobile livelihoods. It quickly becomes apparent that *xê ôm* drivers are not part of the state's conceptions of modernity and civilisation, and are being increasingly sidelined by municipal policies and

plans as well as by police actions. We then show that despite finding themselves in an increasingly constricted environment, by drawing on an everyday politics that includes organising spatial routines, building upon social capital and networks, and negotiating power relations with state officials, Hanoi's *xe ôm* drivers continue to defend their livelihoods and access to public spaces. We then briefly examine how smartphone app-based motorbike taxi services appear to be creating further pressures for 'traditional' *xe ôm* drivers (named 'traditional' for lack of a better comparative term). Yet we find that traditional *xe ôm* drivers are able to reposition themselves with regard to new competitors, and continue to stake a claim to their right to the streets.

To explore the disjunctures between the lived mobilities and livelihoods of *xe ôm* drivers and the model mobilities that Hanoi's officials promote, we draw on ten months of fieldwork, including sixty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with traditional *xe ôm* drivers. These interviews focused on driver livelihoods and the challenges of and reactions to changing municipal policies. Of these sixty-two drivers, sixty were men and two were women, a proportion that is fairly representative of *xe ôm* in the city, with women drivers being very uncommon. Our sampling strategy was purposeful, including four locales where drivers congregate (ten interviews each at a central marketplace, the central train station, and one city and one long-distance bus station). An additional ten drivers were interviewed on street corners in the downtown core (Hoàn Kiếm District) and a further twelve in surrounding districts. We also completed eight 'ride-along' interviews with male traditional *xe ôm* drivers. On these rides we used a smartphone application ('app') to map our route, took photos of decision-making points (crossroads, roundabouts etc.) along the way, and informally interviewed drivers while they drove or immediately afterwards (while showing them the photos we had just taken) to gain information on decision making and meaning along the way. Semi-structured interviews were then completed with twenty-six motorbike drivers working for the recently arrived app-based firms UberMoto and GrabBike,<sup>1</sup> and a further five semi-structured interviews were conducted with urban planners and planning academics. All interviews (except those of two planning academics) were completed in Vietnamese, with the translations here being our own.

## Conceptualising urban informal mobilities and everyday politics

There is an extensive literature on informal motorbike taxis in sub-Saharan Africa, including studies in Nigeria of informal motorbike taxi earnings (Arosanyin et al.,

<sup>1</sup> In early 2018, UberMoto sold its Southeast Asian business to the regional rival GrabBike. However when fieldwork was undertaken in 2016–2017 we interviewed drivers working for both companies. The drivers' experiences with regards to the companies were fairly similar.

2011), collective organising (Ezeibe et al., 2017) and reactions to neoliberal urban planning (Agbibo, 2017). Further studies focus on policy debates regarding informal motorbike taxis in Ghana (Oteng-Ababio and Agyemang, 2015), and driver livelihoods in Uganda (Kisaalita and Sentongo-Kibalama, 2007), Togo (Olvera et al., 2016) and other countries. The literature on informal motorbike taxis in South East Asia is far less expansive, but includes a study of the impacts of motorbike taxi regulation in Bangkok (Oshima et al., 2007), and another on migrant *xe ôm* driver experiences in Hanoi (Karis, 2013). Less common still are studies that bring a mobilities lens to informal motorbike taxi research. Notable exceptions include Bürge's (2011) study of motorbike taxi drivers navigating social expectations to become respectable community members in Makeni, Sierra Leone, focusing on migration, mobility and generational relations, and Sopranzetti's (2017) comprehensive study of the everyday mobilities of motorbike taxi drivers in Bangkok, Thailand, as well as their roles as political mobilisers.

The mobilities turn, or 'new mobilities paradigm', is now maturing within the social sciences (Hansen, 2016b). This collection of literature focuses on 'how mobilities (in their diverse forms) play a *constitutive* role in "everyday life" and, significantly, on how they are primarily *relational*' (Waters, 2014, 22, emphasis in original). It has been suggested that the mobilities turn allows us to interrogate the nature and value of movements and flows, placing a focus on the power and meaning that is interwoven with movement, as well as its political and sociocultural production (Sheller and Urry, 2006). The mobilities literature thus raises critical questions with regard to power dynamics, forms of movement that are privileged or discouraged, and how movement can take on different meanings when considering an individual's positionality and the motive force involved in their movement decisions (Cresswell, 2006; 2010; Uteng, 2009; Blomley, 2014). Nonetheless, mobilities scholars have been critiqued for rejecting or ignoring previous and concurrent work on related topics such as migration and transport studies, which provide important insights into relevant 'materiality, politics and methodology' (Blunt, 2007, 2). As such, we highlight the 'productive connections' (Blunt, 2007, 2) between such bodies of literature, while focusing on 'the combined movements of people, objects and information in all of their complex relational dynamics' (Sheller, 2011, 1). Moreover, we wish to contribute to Global South mobilities research while examining the tensions between urbanisation policies strongly supported by a socialist state and a marginal labour force whose livelihoods rely on daily mobility. By doing so, we focus on what might be considered mundane, everyday mobilities. As Binnie et al. (2007, 166) note, 'mundane travels experienced as part of the everyday, commonplace journeys in wholly familiar space, are too easily neglected amidst academic scrutiny on the more extraordinary voyages of international travellers'.

Mobilities scholar Tim Cresswell (2010) has identified six facets of mobility, namely motive force, velocity, rhythm, route, experience, and friction, and we draw on this

framework here. Four facets that we wish to focus on include *motive force*, namely the reasons why movement takes place, such as to sustain a livelihood; *experience*, focusing on how and why certain bodies move more easily than others; *rhythm*, concerning the everyday movements of being a *xé ôm* driver, as well as how surveillance of such movement by the state maintains a certain social order; and *friction*, the causes of mobility being constrained, and how and why.<sup>2</sup> Cresswell (2010, 21) highlights that ‘mobility is a resource that is differentially accessed’, raising questions regarding who gets to be mobile and how. Such questions are extremely pertinent in the case of Hanoi’s *xé ôm* drivers, as we tease apart how similar movements involve different experiences, rhythms and frictions depending on the positionality of the subject, be they a traditional *xé ôm* driver, a GrabBike driver or an individual driving an imported car.

Connected to the mobility notions of experience and friction, we draw on political scientist Ben Kerkvliet’s (2009, 232) concept of everyday politics, which he defines as ‘people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct’. Kerkvliet (2009, 233) goes on to categorise everyday politics as ‘support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance’ (see also Scott, 1990). Focusing on everyday forms of resistance, Kerkvliet adds that ‘through their resistance, subordinate people struggle to affirm their claims to what they believe they are entitled to based on values and rights recognised by a significant proportion of other people similar to them’ (Kerkvliet, 2009, 233). Similarly, de Certeau (1984, xiv) demonstrates how individuals in structurally weak positions draw on quotidian acts to manipulate the mechanisms of state discipline to ‘conform to them only in order to evade them’. Johansson and Vinthagen (2016, 418), in their attempt to create an analytical framework to study resistance, add that

- 1 everyday resistance is a practice (not a certain consciousness, intent or outcome);
- 2 it is historically entangled with (everyday) power (not separated, dichotomous or independent);
- 3 everyday resistance needs to be understood as intersectional with the powers that it engages with (not one single power relation); and
- 4 it is heterogeneous and contingent due to changing contexts and situations (not a universal strategy or coherent form of action).

These dimensions help us to highlight the tactics *xé ôm* drivers draw on to claim access to the streets and to negotiate mobility frictions. By illustrating these drivers’ everyday lived realities, we reveal the degree to which mobility is intrinsically political, both producing and being reproduced by power dynamics and exclusion (Cresswell, 2006).

2 Cresswell’s other two facets, velocity and route, tend to focus more specifically on the micro-geographies of individual mobility, and are the focus of another article regarding *xé ôm*, in preparation.

## **Xe ôm mobilities**

Motorbikes became the dominant urban transport mode in Vietnam after economic reforms in the mid-1980s, with initial imports especially from Japan, Taiwan and China. Most motorbikes in Vietnam are 50–150 cc, with a fairly small wheel diameter (less than 40 cm) and often with step-through frames. They would tend to be labelled ‘scooters’ or ‘small-displacement motorcycles’ in North America or Europe (Lin and Kraus, 2009; Fujita, 2013; Hansen, 2016b). In Vietnam, acquiring a licence for such a motorbike is fairly straightforward, while gaining a licence for a motorbike over 175 cc includes specific restrictions (see Truitt, 2008). Production of 50–150 cc motorbikes began in Vietnam in the mid-1990s, and the industry has experienced rapid, though uneven, growth since, along with convoluted policy changes. For example, in the early 2000s, large volumes of low-priced imitations of Japanese-brand motorbikes were imported from China, resulting in what Fujita (2013) labelled the ‘China shock’. Since the Vietnamese government had banned the import of assembled vehicles, these Chinese imports arrived as component kits that were then assembled by local companies. Sales then slowed in 2003 before rising dramatically from 2006, due to policies that eased both motorbike registration and foreign-manufacturer activities (Truitt, 2008; Fujita, 2013; see Hansen, 2016a for 1998–2013 yearly sales).

As in many other Global South cities, informal motorbike taxis have become a common sight in Hanoi. They typically operate without a fixed price or meter, with the price negotiated before a ride (unlike recent app-based competitors). It is not known how many *xe ôm* drivers work in the city, but given their noticeable presence at bus stations, train stations and marketplaces, as well as at nearly every street corner in the downtown core and other high-traffic locales, we think it would be safe to estimate over 10,000.

## **Motive forces and experiences**

The *xe ôm* drivers we interviewed expressed strong independence, with the decision to become a *xe ôm* driver being theirs alone. Yet the underlying causes of their move into this livelihood suggest more complicated origins, especially a lack of viable alternatives for those with limited formal education (cf. Cresswell, 2011). Of the sixty-two ‘traditional’ *xe ôm* drivers interviewed, the average age was fifty, and the average time working as a *xe ôm* driver was fourteen years. Just over half were originally from Hanoi, with the remaining twenty-nine from northern provinces nearby, especially Nam Định and Hưng Yên. This result surprised us, given previous work on itinerant street vendors in Hanoi, nearly 100 per cent of whom are rural-to-urban migrants (Turner and Schoenberger, 2009). Before becoming a *xe ôm* driver, over three-quarters

had held other informal positions, such as undertaking construction work or driving cyclo/trishaws, while the rest had been farmers. As one forty-six-year-old driver noted,

I used to work as a cyclo driver for six years. But in 2001, Hanoi banned cyclos. My cyclo was taken by the police because I didn't have enough paperwork for it, so I went home for a few years, and then started as a *xe ôm*. (Interview, 2016)<sup>3</sup>

Four-fifths of the drivers we interviewed were married, and of those, a third had wives also working informally, such as in street market trade. Only two interviewees were women, one whose husband had died, and one who reported her husband was an alcoholic. The drivers' daily profits after petrol costs were about VND 200,000 (US\$8.60), for working an average of twelve hours a day. While wages vary enormously in the city, the official monthly minimum wage for Hanoi was US\$155 as of January 2016 (IndustriALL Global Union, 2015), meaning *xe ôm* drivers were able to make more than one and a half times this (US\$258/month) if working every day, which most did. All the drivers used their income for daily necessities, and if they had children, they then saved what they could for school fees. Despite surpassing the Hanoi monthly minimum wage, it is interesting to note that this income is far less than the monthly incomes of Bangkok's informal motorbike taxi drivers, who are estimated to make US\$400–1,000 (Sopranzetti, 2017).

When asked why they chose this job, many noted the flexibility that allows them to look after children or grandchildren or help other family members with their jobs. Some added that they liked the freedom, and not having to depend on others or be managed. Yet, they also acknowledged that this came with risks, such as lack of a stable income. As one fifty-two-year-old driver noted, 'I like this job because it is a "free job", I don't depend on anyone. But I don't like that there are many risks and bad things that we have to deal with, but I have to accept it' (interview, 2016). He added, '*xe ôm* is lighter than being a [market] porter, we don't have to sweat, but it is hard in other ways: we are facing the rain and the sun, travelling on roads with possible accidents'. Another driver explained, 'This job brings us freedom; it's very flexible. If we have a party in the village or home, we can take the day off' (interview, 2016). Other interviewees commented that their other options, such as working as a security guard or construction worker, would provide a lower income, while being more structured and potentially more dangerous. One sixty-two-year-old elaborated:

3 Confirming that state restrictions regarding mobility are certainly nothing new in Vietnam, another driver explained that in the early 1970s, migrants from outside the capital were allowed to work in Hanoi as cyclo drivers. This was stopped from 1977 until 1982, when only those with Hanoi resident permits were allowed to undertake this occupation. From 1982 until 1987 this rule was relaxed again, and rural migrants were once more allowed to be drivers, until 1987 when the policy tightened yet again. The vast majority of cyclos were then banned in 2001 except about 300 linked to four travel firms, although others continue to work illegally (VietnamNet, 2011; interview, 2017).

I work as a *xe ôm* because I don't have a high education and farming now is based on machines. Now, if I stay in my home town, I can only work as a builder assistant. It's a hard job and the wage of a builder is equal to the *xe ôm* wage. (Interview, 2016)

Overall, *xe ôm* drivers repeatedly highlighted the positive aspects of this work, but some frictions nonetheless became apparent as our interviews progressed, as outlined shortly.

## Rhythms

The daily rhythms of the drivers' livelihoods were determined by the customers they secured, the number of trips they made and the locales they visited. The individual trips per day of our interviewees ranged from four to ten, with an average of six. Close to 50 per cent of the drivers had regular customers who called them by phone for a ride, either for themselves, to take their children to and from school, or to deliver goods for small enterprises. Drivers detailed the practices needed to maintain such relationships:

To keep the relationship with regular customers I give them a fair and good price, talk with them politely, and drive carefully. If we talk with the customer impolitely, they won't want to go with us a second time, even though they may ask for our phone number, just to please us at that moment. (Interview, 2016)

Another *xe ôm* driver, with twenty-five years' experience, stressed the importance of providing additional services to maintain his customer base:

If we want to keep good relationships with regular customers, we must treat them well. For example, when I drive them with a bag of rice and they live on the fourth floor [of an apartment block], I park my bike and willingly carry it up the stairs for them. They then know my enthusiasm and of course they'll ask for my phone number and travel with me next time. But if I leave them with a heavy fifteen- to twenty-kilogram bag of rice and don't care if they can carry it, or if I carry it but ask for more money, they won't travel with me again. (Interview, 2016)

Drivers repeatedly noted the importance of negotiating a fair price, being polite and building trust-based relationships to maintain regular customers. Moreover, one fifty-two-year-old with twenty-one years' experience described how he retained regular customers in relation to new app-based services: 'I have many fixed customers who never go with UberMoto or GrabBike but use my service, because Uber and Grab *xe ôm* do not know the roads well, while my customers are in a hurry' (interview, 2017).

An interesting subgroup of customers were individuals who got carsick, of whom there appear to be many in Vietnam. *Xe ôm* drivers sometimes took such individ-

uals more than a hundred kilometres to a customer's home town in a neighbouring province to help customers avoid bumpy, crowded bus trips. One fifty-year-old driver remembered,

The longest ride I've done was to Thanh Hóa Province, more than two hundred kilometres. I drove a customer there two years ago because she got carsick, she could not travel by bus. We calculated the cost by kilometre, 4,000 đồng per kilometre [US\$0.17/km]. (Interview, 2016)

The rhythms of this job are not only daily, but also weekly and monthly. Drivers noted that weekends usually drew fewer customers, while monthly Buddhist festivals created a specific rhythm to their work: the first and fifteenth of the lunar month are important days for temple visits and increase potential clients. The majority of drivers also explained that they could secure far more rides before and after Tết (Vietnamese New Year); before, customers are shopping for gifts and festival items, while after they are travelling to see family and friends. One middle-aged driver explained,

One month before Tết holiday, I often transport kumquat trees [a symbol of prosperity] for a garden centre located in Tứ Liên Village [in the north of the city]. I can earn good money because, if I take people from here to Ngọc Thụy area [closer], I charge them 40,000 đồng [US\$1.70] but if I transport a kumquat tree with the pot, I can charge people 300,000–400,000 đồng [US\$13–17] because of Tết. (Interview, 2016)

On a daily basis, *xe ôm* drivers typically waited for customers at a specific site, while sitting on their bikes. This was frequently on a sidewalk at a busy intersection or near a marketplace or bus station. The rights to claim such a space tended to come from informal connections with people already in this occupation, oftentimes *xe ôm* drivers from the same rural village.<sup>4</sup> One fifty-two-year-old driver explained, 'I have a friend who used to work as a *xe ôm* driver in this street, so he introduced me to this place five years ago' (interview, 2017). Another driver noted, 'My uncle introduced me to work here; he gave me some customers at the beginning and showed me how to work' (interview, 2017). Yet, while social capital was an important entry asset, fights or turf wars were reported to break out on occasion.

## Frictions

Despite the many reports of flexibility and freedom, drivers also noted the pitfalls of this occupation, with four standing out. The top fear was having to negotiate at night with a potential customer who might turn violent or refuse to pay. A thirty-two-year-

<sup>4</sup> Within bus stations or railway station perimeters there are groups of *xe ôm* who work within a management scheme directed by the station, paying a fee to wait on-site for customers. We do not focus on these groups here.

old driver explained, ‘I don’t work at night as it is very complicated and dangerous. We sit at the front and the passenger sits right behind us; they could easily do bad things and we can’t protect ourselves’ (interview, 2016). The majority of drivers expressed similar fears, with many detailing a significantly reduced spatial scope of trips they were willing to make at night, and specific actions they took to stay safe (see also Olvera et al., 2016). A fifty-three-year-old driver noted, ‘When I work at night, I only drive to places where I know the roads well, like around the Old Quarter [downtown tourist area], but I must stop in a well-lit place on the road, not down a dark alley’ (interview, 2016). One of the rare female *xe ôm* drivers similarly explained, ‘It’s a very dangerous job; some bad customers don’t pay me, especially young men. I drive them to an alley, they ask me to wait for them [to get cash for payment], but they never come back’ (forty-six-year-old, interview, 2016). One-third of the drivers also linked nighttime dangers to having to negotiate with users or suppliers of illegal drugs. One driver suggested rather bluntly, ‘If we take [drug addict] customers to a dark and empty place, then the following day, my wife loses her husband and my children are orphaned’ (thirty-two-year-old, interview, 2016). This threat of violence alone meant that many elected not to work after dark, while others only agreed to drive long-standing customers they trusted.

Second, transport police in Vietnam are notoriously corrupt. It is an open secret that state workers, including traffic officials, usually pay a ‘fee’ to secure their job, sometimes up to US\$5,000, and that the following years are spent finding ways to recoup their costs. As such, for anyone using the road in Vietnam, the smallest traffic violation – or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time – can result in stiff ‘fees’ (see also Truitt, 2008; Hansen, 2016b). As one sixty-year-old driver noted,

I have been fined by the police, about VND200,000–250,000 [US\$9–11], because I was in the wrong lane. Sometimes we have to pay officially, sometimes we can be ‘hot fined’ – we pay a bribe. It’s up to each case; we must be flexible with the situation. (Interview, 2016)

Moreover, given that *xe ôm* drivers usually wait on sidewalks, they have become a target for fines due to the recently implemented ‘Clean Up the Sidewalks Campaign’, especially in locales where it is being strictly policed, such as tourist areas and around marketplaces. Drivers waiting in these areas keep a careful watch, moving on quickly if necessary.

Third, *xe ôm* drivers noted the daily hazards they faced driving on Hanoi’s roads. Hanoi’s traffic has a long-standing reputation locally, nationally and internationally as chaotic and high-risk (underpinning the municipal and central governments’ goal of eradicating motorbikes). As a fifty-eight-year-old *xe ôm* driver explained, ‘We need to have a fast brain to manage and control our bike on the roads, but of course we often face risks and accidents; we can’t tell what will

happen' (interview, 2016). When comparing this occupation to that of a market porter, another driver added, 'Being a porter is heavy work, while *xe ôm* is light work, but we must face many stresses when we travel on roads; porters don't have to worry' (interview, 2017).

Fourth, some drivers noted the seasonality of the job as a downside. In winter, Hanoi can become remarkably cold and humid and residents often turn to regular taxis if they can afford them. According to one driver, 'If it's too cold and rainy, customers prefer going by taxi. Just a very few who get carsick or don't have much money travel with *xe ôm*' (interview, 2016). Yet two other *xe ôm* drivers saw such conditions as an opportunity, noting that rain often deterred other *xe ôm* drivers from working, and hence they gained more rides. In summer, the heat or monsoon rains sometimes discouraged would-be customers, with a driver explaining, 'If summer is coming, we don't have many customers because they are getting richer and richer, and if it is too hot, they go by taxi' (interview, 2017).

### ***Xe ôm* everyday politics**

Anna Tsing (2005, 5) notes, 'As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power'. To negotiate the frictions detailed above, defend their livelihoods, and form 'counterspaces' to navigate and at times resist dominant modernisation narratives, *xe ôm* drivers organised their spatial practices, built on their social capital, and negotiated power relations with state officials through 'identity management' techniques. To start with, *xe ôm* drivers had crafted a number of tactics to deal with the dangers of certain potential customers, including simple avoidance by not working at night. Others who continued to do so had rehearsed inventive excuses to avoid suspect-looking customers. A few explained that they fake a phone call and then state that they have urgent family business to attend to, or simply note, 'I feel tired now; sorry, I can't drive you'. However, the most common excuse that over half the night-time drivers relied upon was to explain that they were waiting for a regular customer, and hence were not available – an excuse also used during the day when drivers had reason to feel uncomfortable accepting a customer.

To outsmart police, *xe ôm* drivers who clustered at certain sites such as markets and bus and train stations advised their *xe ôm* friends of police checks along the routes they had just travelled, and drivers were well aware of the usual locales where police were waiting. 'If we see a new police stop, we call to share the news with other *xe ôm*, telling them to be careful, wear a helmet' (interview, 2017). *Xe ôm* drivers also modified their spatial practices and rerouted to avoid police when necessary, such as when travelling with two customers, an extremely common but technically illegal practice in Vietnam. *Xe ôm* drivers noted that while they preferred not to take two customers, they would

sometimes make an exception for a parent with a sick child, or two elderly people; they then needed to be extra vigilant with their avoidance moves.

If stopped by police for riding without a helmet, carrying too many passengers, being in the wrong lane, or one of the countless reasons police fabricate to extract a ‘fee’ or bribe, *xe ôm* drivers relied on what we call ‘identity management’ techniques, playing upon specific identities to negotiate their right to be mobile. For example, a number of drivers described how they would plead poverty and their lowly job as an informal worker, while a few would make known their status as a war veteran to be able to negotiate a lesser fine. According to one driver, ‘police stop me sometimes. I ask them to forgive me because of my mistake, saying that we *xe ôm* are poor, we have no money’ (interview, 2016). By showing respect and performing a certain position in society, such acts served to help *xe ôm* drivers contest rules and norms in a subtle manner. Another noted that as a war veteran he gained respect and tolerance from police, adjusting the power dynamic:

All *xe ôm* are stopped by police at some stage. Before, I was stopped and fined, but now I’m smarter. I keep some medals I earned in the army in my pocket, so when the police stop me I show them the medals and they let me go. (Interview, 2016)

This was not the first time we had heard of such everyday politics being drawn upon by marginalised communities in Hanoi, with street vendors describing similar identity management techniques when facing fines and police sanctions (Turner, 2014; see also Bürge’s 2011 discussion of how informal motorbike taxi drivers in Makeni, Sierra Leone, morally navigate an unstable political landscape and social space).

## **Differentiated politics of mobility: the rise of app-based competitors**

In addition to these long-standing frictions and the unsympathetic political environment that shapes *xe ôm* mobilities, since 2014 these drivers have faced another potential threat to their livelihoods, namely the appearance of app-based motorbike taxi companies. These competitors have created a ‘differentiated politics of mobility’ (Cresswell, 2011, 552) between ‘traditional’ *xe ôm* drivers – those analysed above – and a new cohort of drivers working for companies such as UberMoto and a regional equivalent, GrabBike. GrabBike was founded by three brothers who initially started GrabTaxi in Malaysia in 2012, and the first GrabBike service was piloted in Ho Chi Minh City in 2014 (Thanh Tien News, 2014). UberMoto was then launched in Vietnam in 2016 (*Le courrier du Vietnam*, 2017) before it sold its Southeast Asia business to GrabBike in early 2018.

In comparison to traditional *xe ôm* drivers, interviewees linked to these new firms were far younger, with the average age of those interviewed being twenty-nine. They were mostly university students driving in their spare time, or new employees aiming

to boost their often limited starting salary. In part, the youth of these drivers can be linked to the need for a smartphone. Many Hanoi residents over the age of about fifty and/or of lower socio-economic status, including many traditional *xe ôm* drivers, tend to have access to neither a smartphone nor the knowledge of how to use one.

For youth with a smartphone, it is extremely easy to start working for an app-based firm as a driver; they simply need their motorbike licence, a motorbike less than ten years old, a bank account and their ID card. In return, they receive two branded t-shirts and helmets, and access to the app features as a driver. Few of those we interviewed or observed knew the city streets well, using their phones to navigate as they drove (with numerous near misses, given the crowded streets). There are no clear figures as to how many app-based drivers there are in Hanoi, but in June 2017 the chairman of Grab Vietnam claimed there were 50,000 drivers throughout Vietnam, with hundreds joining daily (Associated Press, 2017).

As Sheller and Urry (2006, 207) note, 'there are new places and technologies that enhance the mobility of some peoples and places and heighten the immobility of others'. Given the city's 'Clean Up the Sidewalks Campaign' noted earlier, it is important to note that app-based drivers seldom wait on sidewalks for customers, with these drivers explaining that they prefer to wait at home or at a cafe, finding customers through their mobile application. This immediately reduces their chances of being fined for 'inappropriate use' of the sidewalk, a friction that traditional *xe ôm* must remain alert to.

The local media have been quick to stress that such app-based companies are forming a very real threat to traditional *xe ôm* drivers. Indeed, over half the traditional *xe ôm* drivers we interviewed were concerned by the competition brought by these newcomers to the city's streets (we also interviewed a few traditional *xe ôm* drivers who had converted to riding for these companies). Yet those still working as traditional drivers also gave a number of reasons why they believed they could maintain a good proportion of their customer base. These drivers noted that they maintained many loyal customers, often middle-aged or older, who had no intention of buying a smartphone. Other passengers did not like the thought of being driven by a stranger who probably did not know the most direct route to take. This was especially the case for older women residents with personal safety concerns. Adults with small children delivered to and from school by their regular neighbourhood *xe ôm* driver were not planning on changing their approach either. As one traditional *xe ôm* driver explained,

GrabBike drivers charge 5,000 đồng per km, and I charge 7,000 đồng, but my customers prefer regular *xe ôm* because they can't send their children to school with strangers. If I travel with them [the children] and something happens, as a regular *xe ôm* I will protect them. Grab drivers just drive the customers for money, they don't care if anything may happen to the customers. (Interview, 2016)

Moreover, UberMoto and GrabBike were not deemed very suitable for small enterprises who needed regular deliveries of goods, as no trust had been established, unlike with a regular *xe ôm* delivery driver. Indeed, trust was an important factor keeping some residents (but not all) keen to rely on their usual drivers. Traditional *xe ôm* drivers were also well aware of the prices that GrabBike and UberMoto charged customers, calculating that their profits would drop if they were to join.

It is too early to determine the state's official view on these app-based newcomers. Planners and local academics with whom we talked noted that app-based drivers are considered more modern and sophisticated than traditional *xe ôm* drivers due to their uniforms and use of smartphone technology. Indeed, the municipal government has not interfered with the operations of these companies to date, in contrast to Manila and Bangkok, where app-based motorbike taxi companies have been periodically suspended (Dawson, 2016; CNBC, 2017). However, by 2017, the numbers of app-based drivers in Hanoi had grown considerably, fights between traditional and app-based drivers had been reported in the media, and crowds of GrabBike drivers around bus stations had begun to cause concern among passengers (Associated Press, 2017). Given the overall negative tone of state discourse regarding motorbikes, as well as the state's reluctance to liberalise the transport sector, we would suggest that the ongoing operations of such companies, in their current form, cannot be taken as a given.

## Concluding thoughts

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam's modernisation vision for Hanoi, including urban renewal projects, high-rise developments, large residential gated communities and new transport routes, is not about to include community-based planning and meaningful participation in designs anytime soon. The Vietnamese state maintains a centralised, institutionally embedded approach to urban planning, with state officials actively involved in the day-to-day spatial arrangements of economic resources and the citizenry (Huynh, 2015). The result is a contested urban landscape and a range of (usually) covert resistance strategies being activated – cautiously – among marginalised groups who are constantly made to feel out of place (for instance, see Labbé, 2014, with regard to land disputes in peri-urban Hanoi). As urban planning policies increasingly privilege modern model mobilities over so-called traditional means, we see important tensions emerging and the threat of growing immobility for those on two wheels, deemed non-modern. Hanoi's municipal authorities, strongly supported by the central state in their quest for modernity, conceive the city's streets so as to privilege the wealthy, especially those owning cars. These power dynamics may render *xe ôm* drivers – both traditional and app-based – immobile in the future, supposedly to allow the fluid mobility of others. Obviously, there are significant social repercus-

sions stemming from such a discourse. *Xe ôm* remain a favourite means of transport for numerous residents, ‘generating reliable rhythms and habitualised repetitions’ that can offer ‘certainty and security’ (Binnie et al., 2007, 167), while *xe ôm* drivers also carve out an essential livelihood to support themselves and their families.

Through reappropriation and everyday struggles, *xe ôm* drivers create ‘counter-spaces’ in an attempt to preserve their livelihoods, designing alternative practices and knowledges of moving which often challenge the state’s urban planning vision, as well as traffic regulations. For instance, we have found that while traffic police take a rather zealous approach to fining motorbike drivers, traditional *xe ôm* drivers take note of the spatial practices of officials and the timing of their operations, in order to continue their work with the least possible harassment. If stopped, *xe ôm* drivers leverage their personal identity as elderly, poor or war veterans to pay the lowest fines possible. As Wang et al. (2013, 197) note, ‘mobility concerns not only physical location, but also relational references, bonding, social security and networks’, and *xe ôm* drivers are quick to draw on such resources to maintain their rhythms while reducing frictions.

While traditional *xe ôm* drivers are keeping a close eye on new smartphone app-based competitors, we have found that traditional *xe ôm* drivers maintain an important niche role in serving specific segments of society, including the very young and old as well as those with goods to transport. Yet this is not to say that these are secure livelihoods. Other stresses on their livelihoods include the fact that Hanoi residents’ incomes have risen, resulting in more people affording their own motorbike; an increase in public transport, especially air-conditioned buses; and the rising costs of basic necessities for their own families. Drivers are also well aware that the state might ban their operations at any time, along the lines of street vendor restrictions already in place.

Paradoxically, current city policies have also created opportunities for *xe ôm* drivers (traditional and app-based), likely unanticipated by officials. As a foretaste of the municipal government’s proposed 2030 ban on motorbikes from downtown streets, a small number of streets in the downtown core have already been closed to motorised vehicles during weekends since 2016. When asked about the impact of this ban on their work, most traditional *xe ôm* drivers not based in the area said their customers seldom travelled there anyway, so there was little impact. Others working closer to this core noted that the ban was causing difficulties for residents and visitors to find parking for their own motorbikes close to the area, so some were turning to *xe ôm* (traditional or app-based) instead, keeping their own bikes at home. Hence for some *xe ôm* drivers, a ban on vehicles in specific city areas had, ironically, increased opportunities to gain customers.

Despite a political system in which the state continues to have a strong hand in organising urban space and people’s livelihoods, our interviews with traditional *xe ôm*

drivers show that the picture, while not overly rosy, is not entirely bleak either. Hanoi's *xe ôm* drivers are actors with agency and resourcefulness, and their mobilities are multiple and dynamic, shifting while also revealing their adaptability (cf. Cresswell, 2010). This reflects a spatial and everyday politics with which marginalised groups seek to build and maintain livelihoods and represent themselves in specific ways. A combination of ingenious everyday measures, including carefully designed resistance tactics, might just allow these *xe ôm* drivers to continue to appropriate and roam these streets a little longer.

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