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Subaltern struggles to access public spaces: Young rural migrants in Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between youth who are rural labor migrants and public spaces in Hanoi, Vietnam. A host of constraints limit the access of these young subalterns to the city's public spaces, ranging from a shortage of such spaces in areas where they live, to limited leisure time, constrained mobility, and social stigmatisation. Yet, these young men and women still manage to use and enjoy a number of public spaces in Hanoi for socialisation and recreational purposes. In analysing the practices adopted by these youth to access and use these spaces, we bring a stronger focus on socio-spatial critiques and everyday politics to existing understandings of rural migrant experiences in Vietnamese cities. We approach the everyday socio-spatial practices of young labour migrants in Hanoi as a complex amalgamation of both their individual subjectivities, needs, and desires, and the multiple obstacles they face to engage with urban public spaces. By unpacking these tensions, our analysis uncovers the specific importance of informal sidewalk stalls and pedestrian streets for this engagement. The multiple ways by which the youth comply with or subtly resist expected norms in these spaces uncovers their creativity in developing a range of everyday politics and spatial negotiations. Despite their subaltern position, migrant youth are able to challenge the material and socio-normative constraints they face in Hanoi to gain a respite from their harsh working conditions and pursue their desires for distinctively urban experiences.

KEYWORDS
Hanoi, public spaces, rural migrants, Vietnam, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

In downtown Hanoi, Vietnam's capital city, it is a little after 9.30 PM on a Thursday evening. Ly,[1] aged 17 and originally from Thái Bình province, is working as an assistant in a hair salon. She finally leaves her workplace with a sigh of relief after a 13 h-long workday. With another young female coworker—also a rural migrant—she heads for a small lake about 10 min away. The two women slowly stroll around the lake before pausing at an informal tea stall to sip cups of ice tea and unwind. By 11:30 PM—a curfew strictly enforced by their employer—they have returned at the salon which, at night, turns into a makeshift dormitory for its rural staff. If not too tired, they will try to return to the lake the next evening, which is one of the very few places in Hanoi they visit regularly to relax and gain a brief respite from work.

Since the Vietnamese government began to ease restrictions on internal population movement,[2] Hanoi has been receiving a steady flow of young rural migrants like Ly. By 2009, an average of 50,000 individuals were moving from rural areas to the Vietnamese capital

[1]All names are gender-appropriate pseudonyms.

[2]Starting in the 1960s, a policy called the 'household registration system' limited the movement of people in Vietnam by coupling access to social goods (education, health, food, etc.) to a specific place of registration. This system was progressively relaxed from the mid-1980s onward.

(GSO, 2020a), of which over half were youth aged 15–30 years old (GSO and UNPF, 2016, pp. 39–42). Most of these youth leave their homes, in rural areas of Vietnam's northern provinces, with the aim of taking low-income, unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in Hanoi (Coxhead et al., 2015, p. 12).

As is the case in the rest of the region, the movement of people from the countryside to cities has received significant policy and scholarly attention in Vietnam. Much of this literature is based on large quantitative surveys and census data, and focuses on measuring and characterizing the relocation of rural people to urban centers (e.g., N. A. Dang et al., 2003; GSO and UNPF, 2016). A smaller and more recent body of studies is nonetheless concerned with analyzing the experience of rural migrants in Vietnamese cities, with a focus on their difficult working conditions and limited access to decent housing, public services, and social protection (e.g., Locke et al., 2008; Van Quyet & Van Kham, 2016). Studies looking at the everyday experiences and perceptions of migrants themselves are also slowly beginning to appear, investigating, for instance, the well-being of migrants in cities (Pham et al., 2018) and ways in which gender shapes their migratory experiences (Nguyen & Locke, 2014).

The scholarship outlined above provides an increasingly detailed portrait of urban-bound migration in Vietnam. Moreover, research on the urban experiences of rural migrants has brought much-needed attention to the predicament of this population in Vietnamese cities. A void remains, however. To paraphrase a critique about transnational migration scholarship raised by Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2011, p. 2) a decade ago: there are many studies of migration *to* cities in Vietnam, and a growing number of studies about the life of rural migrants *in* cities. Yet there is very little work on rural migrants' relationships and interactions *with* the social and spatial dynamics of cities and with urban space (re)production processes in particular.

This question is however attracting growing research attention in other Asian contexts, notably China (see, for instance, Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Brøgger, 2019; Wu, 2010; Zhan, 2018). Studies conducted in these contexts show that rural migrants can—and in many cases do—play a much more active role in the production and reproduction of urban spaces in the region than was previously assumed. Scholars, such as Bork-Hüffer et al. (2016, p. 135) have gone as far as to argue that in large Asian cities, migrants 'drive urban restructuring' processes. On this basis, these same authors have called for more research to understand how different groups of migrants participate (or not) in the (re)making of urban spaces and how the specific socio-political contexts within which they reside shape their spatial practices.

This study responds to this call by exploring the everyday spatial practices of rural youth labour migrants in Hanoi. As will be discussed in more detail below, these youth face especially strong exclusionary forces in Vietnamese cities, with regard in particular to economic exploitation and social stigmatisation. In what follows, we investigate how these migrant youth engage with specific urban spaces in Hanoi, focusing on their relationships and interactions with public spaces. Our investigation is guided by the following questions: What are the urban spatial practices of the large numbers of rural youth migrants who reside temporarily or permanently in Vietnamese cities? How do these youth's relationships with and perceptions of the city shape their everyday socio-spatial practices and vice-versa? Do they participate in the (re)production of urban spaces in Vietnamese cities in specific ways? If so, how?

Our analysis adopts a purposefully broad definition of public spaces with the aim of encompassing the array of nondomestic spaces which previous studies have identified as important sites of socialization and recreation in Hanoi (e.g., Drummond & Nguyen, 2009; Kurfürst, 2011). This definition encompasses two main types of spaces. Often called 'conventional' or 'formal' public spaces, the first type refers to government-managed, green and open spaces. In Hanoi, this corresponds mainly to parks and squares.[3] The second type, which we call 'consumption spaces' in this study, refers to privately-run, indoor and outdoor spaces used for leisure and socialization. In Hanoi, this includes sidewalk tea- and food-stalls, cafés, marketplaces and shopping malls, among others.

Conceptually, our research takes a cue from recent critiques of analyses of 'migrants in the city' in Asian countries characterized by intensive urban transitions (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2015; Zhan, 2018). It also builds on ideas put forth in research on the socio-spatial practices of other subaltern groups in Global South cities (Lindell, 2019; Roy, 2011). Namely, we interrogate the prevailing tendency in studies of rural-to-urban migration in rapidly urbanizing Asian contexts, to focus analyses on the exclusionary and marginalizing forces confronting migrants in cities. In an effort to broaden understandings of migrants' urban experience, this paper explores how these forces intersect with migrant's agency to shape their socio-spatial practices in Hanoi. We hence draw on Benedict Kerkvliet's (2009) work on everyday politics to understand how migrants negotiate prevailing norms regarding the use of and behaviour in public spaces.

Next we outline our methods, before introducing our conceptual framework regarding the socio-spatial agency of young rural migrants. Then, we contextualize the movement of rural youth labour to Vietnamese cities and review the main obstacles these youth face in accessing public spaces in Hanoi. Our analysis starts with a focus on the urban public spaces this population nevertheless engages with, revealing the specific importance of informal sidewalk stalls and pedestrian streets for these youth. We also discuss the spatial negotiations practices that youth rely upon in the city to access and use these spaces. We end by reflecting on what these practices reveal about the urban experiences of youth migrant workers in the city and on the impacts that their sociospatial practices have on the publicscape of Hanoi.

2 | METHODS

This study is based on 102 semi-structured interviews with rural youth labour migrants[4] aged 16–30 years old, conducted between August 2018 and January 2019. We recruited participants in five

[3]Locally known as 'flower gardens' (*vườn hoa*).

[4]For the purpose of this study, we defined as a migrant any person of rural origin who spends at least part of the year in Hanoi and this, irrespective of their residence permit status.

TABLE 1 Characteristics of study sites and types and number of participants recruited

Ward (and district)	Main characteristics	Labour category of participants	Number of participants
Trương Định (Hai Bà Trưng)	– 6 km south of historical city centre – Lower socioeconomic population – Dense residential zone which included significant industrial activity from 1960s to 1990s	– Small services – Manufacturing – Domestic aid – Self-employed	40
Mỹ Đình I (South Từ Liêm)	– 5 km west of historical city centre – Recently urbanized areas with mix of urban villages,[a] new housing estates, and large infrastructure (e.g., national stadium)	– Small services – Domestic aid – Self employed	22
Chương Dương (Hoàn Kiếm)	– Less than 1 km east of historical city centre – Dense urban zone with very limited public amenities – Considered a 'slum' up to the late 1990s and still home to a large lower socioeconomic class population		20
Thuy Phuong (North Từ Liêm)	– 8 km north-west of historical city centre – Adjacent to an industrial zone – Mix of urban villages, new housing estates, and colleges	– Manufacturing	10
Sài Đồng A & B (Long Biên)	– 12 km east of historical city centre – Area developed in the 1960 to house industrial activities – Adjoins urban villages		10

[a]Former rural settlements which, over the last decades, took on urban characteristics (e.g., higher population and built densities, nonagricultural economic activities). Many of these settlements have since been engulfed into the built fabric of the city.

Source: authors.

wards of Hanoi, namely: Trương Định, Sài Đồng A and B, Chương Dương, Thụy Phương, and Mỹ Đình I. These sites were selected because they are home to significant labour migrant populations while displaying different degrees of centrality, urban development trajectories, and socioeconomic profiles (see Table 1).

Participants were selected using a convenience sampling method. We relied on three criteria to ensure a diverse sample. First, we sought a balance of male ($n = 52$) and female ($n = 50$) respondents. Second, we recruited participants who hold different jobs in the four sectors which absorb most rural labour migrants in Hanoi (GSO, 2020b, p. 70): (i) staff in small service businesses such as cafés, restaurants, and retail shops ($n = 44$); (ii) workers in factories and small manufactures ($n = 30$); (iii); self-employed (e.g., street vendors, motorbike-taxi drivers) ($n = 18$) and (iv) domestic aids (nannies and maids) ($n = 10$). Finally, we recruited participants belonging to three different age groups within the 16–30 years old bracket: 16–19 ($n = 26$), 20–24 ($n = 36$) and 25–30 ($n = 40$).

All of our participants hail from the northern part of Vietnam and the vast majority ($n = 83$) are of Việt Kinh ethnicity, the country's majority ethnic group (the remaining belong to the Hmong, Tày, and Thái ethnic groups). Reflecting the profile of Vietnam's broader internal labour migrant population (Coxhead et al., 2015, p. 12), most of the youth we recruited had a limited educational level at the time of interview. A little over half ($n = 55$) had completed at least part of a secondary school education (grades 6–9) and just over a quarter ($n = 28$) had at least some high school training (grades 10–12). Few attended a vocational school or university ($n = 12$). Nearly two-thirds of participants were unmarried with no children at the time of the interview ($n = 62$), about a third were married and had kids ($n = 30$), the rest being either married with no kids ($n = 8$) or unmarried with kids ($n = 2$).

Interviewees were approached at their workplace or near their place of residence. A team of five local research assistants conducted the interviews in Vietnamese, which were then taped, transcribed, and translated into English. Interview questions explored the participant's migration trajectory, their living and working conditions in Hanoi, usage of and relationship to public spaces, and perception of the city and of its residents. Interviews also included a photo-elicitation exercise during which participants were presented with photos of eight types of public spaces in Hanoi and asked to discuss their perception and usage of each. The data was coded using both a priori themes related to the interview themes listed above and emergent themes identified during the coding process.

3 | CONCEPTUALIZING THE SOCIO-SPATIAL PRACTICES OF RURAL MIGRANTS IN VIETNAMESE CITIES

To date, there has been fairly limited scholarship on rural migrants in Vietnamese cities that focuses on conceptualising their socio-spatial agency and practices. A few studies have investigated the residential and work spaces of rural migrants in urban settings (e.g., Agergaard & Thao, 2011). The aim of such work has generally been to document—and often critique—the substandard housing and work conditions of migrants and the negative impacts on their well-being. Much less

attention has been paid to the interaction between rural migrants and the socio-material environment of cities, especially when it comes to urban spaces beyond those where they work and sleep.

As mentioned earlier, studies concerned with other rapidly growing Asian cities have however begun to recognize that 'urban spaces and migrant landscapes are mutually constructed' (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016, p. 129) and have started to investigate the specific roles played by rural migrants in urban space (re)production processes (e.g., Liu et al., 2015; Wu, 2010; Zhan, 2018). A key finding of these works is that migrants regularly appropriate, reproduce, and contest urban spaces and in so doing, alter the socio-spatial fabric of cities. This literature also emphasizes the heterogeneity of migrant populations in these contexts (e.g., temporary, circular or permanent; from non- and low-skilled to highly skilled; different age groups, etc.) and the situatedness of their interactions with and impacts on the urban environment. In turn, these results underpin calls to look into the interactions that specific groups of migrants have with urban spaces in Asia and to conceptualize the roles they play in urban space reproduction processes.

Bork-Hüffer et al. (2016) recently argued that understanding these roles requires moving beyond the so-called 'victimization paradigm' underpinning analyses of migrants' urban lives. These same authors remark that, by focusing chiefly on concerns of social exclusion, segregation and roles in urban labour markets, the literature has tended to produce one-sided accounts of rural migrants' relationship with cities. Liu et al. (2015) similarly note that the predominance of structurally-driven analyses in migration scholarship tends to reduce the urban experience of rural migrants to its hardships, while sustaining the idea of a population floating passively through the city rather than interacting with it.

Taking stock of the critiques outlined above, we build on conceptual ideas recently articulated by scholars concerned with the everyday spatial practices of marginalized urban people (including but not limited to migrants) in cities in the Global South in general and in Asia in particular. At the most fundamental level, authors focusing on everyday urbanism,[5] social spatialisation, and space-making practices argue that urban subalterns are not passive victims (e.g., Bayat, 2013; Qian, 2022; Roy, 2011; Turner & Schoenberger, 2012). In spite of the restrictions and hardships that they encounter, these populations can actively engage with, and even alter urban spaces. As such, they are 'important participants in the incessant making and remaking of [urban] spaces and in the provisional respatialization of the city' (Lindell, 2019, p. 4). In line with these ideas, we consider that a number of the spatial practices of young labor migrants in Hanoi—and their material outcomes—are the result of decisions and actions taken by purposive actors who exercise agency in spite of their subjection.

Conceptualizing rural migrants as agents however warrants a clarification of this notion—a point which is often addressed vaguely in the critical research on urban subalterns cited above. Drawing on Sewell (1992), we conceive of the agency of rural youth migrants as their individual and collective capacity to process the socio-spatial relations they are enmeshed in, and to devise and enact ways to pursue their needs and desires in spite of the constraints these same relations pose to them. Echoing ideas put forth by Bork-Hüffer et al. (2016), this relational conceptualization of rural migrants' socio-spatial agency brings attention to the motivations and aspirations of this group in Hanoi. It also attends to how migrants conceive of the city's socio-material environment and interpret their positionalities and identities in it.

Taking cues from Roy (2011) and Lindell (2019), our conceptualization of rural youth migrants' socio-spatial agency moves away from essentialist treatments of urban subaltern agency, often defined as forms of resistance against dominant social structures or institutions (such as state regulations or neoliberal regimes) or as being motivated by socio-politically progressive intentions. By keeping the links between agency and intentionality open, we instead aim to account for a wide range of subjectivities as they relate to and shape young rural migrants' socio-spatial practices.

We thus draw on Benedict Kerkvliet's (2009) notion of everyday politics to explore a far broader and more nuanced span of possible engagements. Through this notion, Kerkvliet seeks to chart and illuminate a less visible type of politics, embedded in everyday life and actions. Like other types of politics, everyday politics is concerned with basic questions including: Which groups control and use resources and on which values and ideas do they draw on to do so (or try to)? Everyday politics however differs from more conventional (and visible) forms of politics in that it occurs through 'quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct' and is undertaken by 'people who probably do not regard their actions as political' (Kerkvliet's, 2009, p. 232). In this sense, the ways in which rural migrants negotiate the norms and rules of access and use of public spaces in Hanoi (understood as a resource) through their everyday socio-spatial practices is an expression of everyday politics.

Kerkvliet (2009) identifies four forms of everyday politics, namely: support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance. He argues that while studies have tended to focus on resistance, other forms of everyday politics are just as significant. In this view, individuals involved in everyday politics–including rural youth migrants–might therefore engage in actions that they do not view as political, and certainly not as resistance, but which nevertheless have potentially transformative impacts (see also Ortner, 2006; Scott, 1990).

4 | 'AFTER WORK, I JUST WANT TO GO TO BED': CONTEXTUALISING THE URBAN CONDITIONS OF RURAL YOUTH LABOUR MIGRANTS IN HANOI

Following the *Đổi Mới* (socioeconomic renovation) reforms from the mid-1980s, Hanoi has attracted large numbers of young rural labour migrants (GSO, 2020b, pp. 29, 87). Starting in the 1990s, sustained

[5]Understood here as an approach to understanding the social use of space focused on the activities of daily life.

demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labour in the service, industry and construction sectors of large Vietnamese cities, coupled with a lack of economic and employment opportunities in the countryside, fuelled the movement of young people from rural to urban areas (Van Quyet & Van Kham, 2016). Since then, youth aged 15–30 years old have continued to represent approximately two-thirds of all migrants in Vietnam and the majority of labour migrants to cities (GSO and UNPF, 2016, pp. 39–42; GSO, 2020b, pp. 29–30).

The difficulties faced by migrants in the low-income and low-skill jobs they take on in Vietnamese cities are well documented with regard, in particular, to their lack of security, low wages and long working hours. Only a minority of migrants have labour contracts, but even then they face considerable insecurity, harsh working conditions and in some cases, labour abuses (Locke et al., 2008; Van Quyet & Van Kham, 2016). The earnings of migrant workers are also significantly lower than those of urban residents occupying similar jobs (Haughton et al., 2018). According to Haughton et al. (2018, p. 215), migrants tend to compensate for their lower wages by working longer hours, putting in as much as 70 h per week on average compared to about 50 h for urban residents.

Our own data supports these findings. Most of the youth migrants we interviewed worked 12 h or more per day, and had only 1 or 2 days leave per month. This left them with extremely limited time and energy for leisure activities, notably when compared to other youth groups in Hanoi, such as the young users of city parks and squares surveyed by Boudreau et al. (2015), most of whom visit these spaces for about 2–3 h daily to practice a physical activity (running, skateboard, football, etc.) (Boudreau et al., 2015, pp. 75–82). Contrastingly, the youth migrants we interviewed not only rarely visit formal open public spaces in Hanoi, but very few them practice physical activities during their leisure time. Instead, a typical response given by participants when we asked how they spent their time off work, was: 'I rarely go out after work. Whenever I come back to my room after work, I only want to go to bed' (interview 24.08.2018).

Qualitative evidence from previous studies (T. T. T. Dang, 2016, p. 101) and our own interview data suggest that, from the outset of their migration, most youth labour migrants only intend to stay temporarily in Hanoi, although the lengths of these stays vary from a few months to a few years. A central objective of these migrants during their urban sojourn is to remit as much money as they can to their rural households (Locke et al., 2008, pp. 42, 45; Pulliat, 2013). In line with this goal, labour migrants generally tried to reduce their living costs in the city to a minimum (Locke et al., 2008; Pulliat, 2013). This strategy, in turn, affected several aspects of their lives in Hanoi, including their housing arrangements, mobility and, notably for this study, their ability to access and use public spaces.

Two common housing arrangements prevail among rural migrants in Hanoi. First, migrants sleep at their worksite or workplace; such as Ly, whom we met at the beginning of this piece. The premises of small businesses (e.g., restaurants, cafés, hair salons) often also serve as makeshift dormitories for migrant staff. Construction crews also typically set up temporary sleeping quarters on construction sites, while young nannies and maids generally reside with the household employing them. A second common housing arrangement is for migrants to rent a very simple room in a guesthouse or makeshift boarding house, known as a '*nhà trọ*'. In both cases, migrants tend to share their rental rooms with up to four to five other migrants, with shared bathrooms and sometimes cooking areas (Locke et al., 2008).

These housing arrangements influence the degree of autonomy that youth migrants have to use their leisure time. Youth living at their workplace generally have to get their employer's permission to go out, hence their socializing activities are more restricted and surveilled, and they often have a curfew at night. Illustrating this, a 16-year-old woman who used to work at a Korean restaurant reported being 'managed very closely' by her employer: 'I was rarely allowed to go out', she told us, 'even when I finished early, like at 9 PM' (interview 15.12.2018). Others reported being fined by their employer if they returned late. In contrast, migrants renting a shared or individual room have much more freedom over the way they use their time off work in Hanoi.

Yet these renters face an obstacle to accessing public space of a different nature. Rentals for migrants tend to be concentrated in lower socioeconomic areas of Hanoi, characterized by a shortage of public amenities. This includes a lack of formal open public spaces such as parks or large squares (partly explaining why few migrants use these types of spaces). This shortage of public spaces is compounded by the restricted mobility of young migrants. Only a minority of our respondents owned or had access to an individual vehicle such as a motorbike or bicycle, and many others limited their use of taxis or motorbike-taxis to save on cost. While public buses offer a cheaper alternative, respondents remarked that public transit stops relatively early in the evening (around 9 PM), when they tend to have (limited) leisure time. The majority of our respondents therefore travelled around the city by foot, limiting their spatial reach.

Finally, rural-to-urban migrants are subject to enduring negative perceptions by long-term Hanoians (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012). The range of prejudices against migrants circulated by political leaders, the media, and more established residents is vast. It includes, for instance, the notions that migrants make the city overpopulated, congested, disordered, dirty, as well as unsafe. Some media outlets and urban residents further deplore the undesirable attributes of rural newcomers, including their low socioeconomic status, 'backwards' rural accent, and undesirable appearances (Karis, 2013; Van Quyet & Van Kham, 2016).

Rural migrants involved in low-income and low-skilled jobs in Hanoi are particularly vulnerable to these prejudices, because of the close links made between migrant status and low-income employment (Pulliat, 2013). In a study focusing on discrimination against low socioeconomic migrant workers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Van Quyet and Van Kham (2016) found that a third of respondents reported having been intimidated at their workplace, which they attributed to being a migrant. Our interviewees similarly reported having been stereotyped and discriminated against at their workplace. For instance, one interviewee from Hà Giang, an upland

province bordering China, explained: 'Well, they said Hà Giang people are like this and that. I heard them say all these bad things about Hà Giang and I felt very annoyed' (interview 15.11.2018). Others reported customers and superiors lashing out at them for making minor mistakes, abuses which they said they had to endure silently to keep their position. 'Although they are wrong', a 29 years old men told us, 'we have to endure it, because we are workers here, and because we are from the countryside'. (interview 15.09.2018). Interestingly, interviewees indicated feeling more stigmatized at their places of employment, than in the other spheres of their lives in Hanoi, a situation which, as we will see below, informs their socio-spatial practices.

All told, young labour migrants in Hanoi, as for older migrants as well, face stigma from long-term Hanoi residents and are made to feel inferior, especially in their places of work. They struggle to access and use public spaces due to limited time-off work, limited mobility, compounded with either curfews put in place by employers if living on site or the limited availability of public spaces (especially formal ones like parks and squares) in the areas where their rental accommodation are located. It is in this context that we now focus on the relationships that these rural youth negotiate, and the spatial practices they employ to engage with specific public spaces in Hanoi.

5 | FEELING AT EASE IN SPECIFIC EVERYDAY AND DESTINATION PUBLIC SPACES

Despite the various constraints discussed above, the vast majority of the 102 youths interviewed for this study still wanted to use public spaces during their leisure time. Some of our findings mirror patterns observed in recent studies concerned with the ways youth relate and use public spaces in Hanoi, irrespective of their place of origin (Boudreau et al., 2015, chap. 4–5; Le To Luong, 2013; Pham et al., 2019). Similar to other Hanoi youth, the migrants we interviewed rarely visited a public space unaccompanied and women, in particular, expressed a strong preference for using these spaces in groups. This ranged from being with a spouse and children or, if relevant, to workmates or friends. Our findings further reflect those of the above-cited studies, which note that, in Hanoi, young men go out more often and use a wider variety of public spaces than young women who tend to spend more time in domestic environments, such as at friends' or coworkers' places.

Analysing the sites where our participants spent their leisure time, we began to note more precise patterns of interest. In what follows, we shed light on these patterns through an analysis of what we call the 'everyday' and 'destination' public spaces used by our interviewees in Hanoi. We focus on two specific urban public spaces they notably favored: sidewalk stalls and pedestrian streets. The relationships and interactions that these youth had with these spaces revealed first, their need to gain a respite from difficult working conditions, and second, their aspirations for distinctively urban experiences. Together these factors shaped their socio-spatial practices in nuanced ways.

5.1 | Everyday public spaces—Sidewalk stalls

Despite long working hours, several youth labour migrants mentioned that they felt a conscious need to spend time in public spaces after their working day. This desire to utilise what we have termed 'everyday public spaces' is closely related to the taxing working conditions of this population. As a 21 years old man remarked '[Public places are] very necessary for people like us. Work is tough sometimes, so we also need places like this to relax' (interview 9.10.2018). In line with this comment, several participants explained that the public spaces they visited most regularly in Hanoi allowed them to unwind. Most used these spaces several times per week but stayed in them for relatively short periods of time, from 30 min to 2 h, or, as interviewees explained, just long enough to 'release the tiredness' (interview 07.10.2018) and 'loosen up after working hard for hours' (interview 11.11.2018).

Youth labour migrants reported using different types of public spaces on their working days, ranging from the banks of urban lakes, to local alleyways, or in the rare cases wherein such spaces is available at walking distance from their home, a park or square. Yet, the everyday public space interviewees used and appreciated by far the most were the small-scale tea- and food-stalls set up informally on sidewalks. Many young migrants patronised stalls located near their homes several times a week, in some cases daily. This popularity of these consumption spaces is partly explained by their ubiquity in the sites studied. As a 19 years old woman told us: 'We come here quite often because sidewalk stalls like this one are easy to access'. (interview 06.10.2018). The low cost of the drinks and food sold at these stalls and the fact that they are often open late at night further contributes to their accessibility. Moreover, the pressure to spend a lot in these spaces is low. 'It costs less than other places', an 29 years old domestic aid remarked, 'just 3,000VND [approximately 0.13USD] for a cup of ice tea, and you can sit as long as you want' (interview 27.9.2018).

Beyond their physical and economic accessibility, participants explained that they were drawn to sidewalk stalls because they felt 'at ease' or 'comfortable' (*thoải mái*) in these spaces. This feeling stems in part from physical characteristics of the stalls. Youth appreciate the fact that these are open air spaces, allowing them 'to enjoy the evening's breeze' (interview 07.10.2018) and watch the city life go by without being entirely part of it. Newly arrived migrants in particular, told us that these stalls provided them with an opportunity to become familiar with the 'hustle and bustle' of the city's streets from a safe distance. 'I used to sit by the street a lot', a 28 years old man who had lived in Hanoi for 8 years recalled. 'I was confused and puzzled with the busyness, the crowds, and the colourful traffic lights. I'd never ever seen these things before so I was in a daze at first. But bit by bit, I got used to it' (interview 14.10.2018).

The 'comfort' provided by sidewalk stalls was also a function of interviewees noting that, in these spaces, they were not feeling socially stigmatized as labour migrants. Reflecting on their positionality in the city, several interviewees attributed this feeling to the nature of the clientele of the stalls they frequented. This idea came across in the remarks of a 23 years old female migrant who operates such a stall: 'A few Hanoians come to my stall, but not as many as people from other provinces, and they are common people (*người bình dân*). I actually treat them all the same, they all come here to sit and have a cup of tea, to tell their life stories. Everyone is quite friendly and sociable'. (interview 27.12.2018).

Further illustrating the reflexive capacities of migrant youth, some contrasted their experience at sidewalk stalls with those at other types of consumption spaces in the city, where they did not feel that they belonged entirely. A young woman, for instance, highlighted the diversity of users as the main factor underpinning the 'ease' she felt at tea stalls: 'I like it because there are many kinds of people, and it's comfortable there' (interview 24.08.2018). Others pointed to appearance or behaviour norms upheld in indoor spaces, such as cafés, which they disliked or felt they did not conform to. 'These places may require that you dress up, be polite, not put your feet up on the bench', a 28 years old female told us. 'I don't like to hang out in such places', she added, '[b]ut I might go to sidewalk stalls. I feel normal there and have nothing to be shy about' (interview 27.08.2018). These migrants had therefore embraced a certain public space as part of their everyday politics, and felt no need to modify or resist expectations there. However, they had adjusted their behaviour to focus on these specific social sites rather than, for example, congregating in indoor spaces, so as to feel at ease. In this way, there was a certain compliance with broader expectations from other urban residents as to the 'place' of the migrant in the publicscape of the city.

5.2 | Destination spaces—Pedestrian streets

Besides the everyday spaces analysed above, we found that youth migrants used other specific public spaces in Hanoi either for a 'day-out' or 'night-out'. These public spaces were generally located at a greater distance from the accommodation or workplace of interviewees and reaching them often required taking (and paying for) a taxi, motorbike-taxi, or a public bus. As our label suggests, migrants used 'destination spaces' less frequently, from once a week to once a month or more, but they tended to stay at these sites longer, from a few hours to a whole afternoon or evening.

A key factor driving young migrant labourers to utilise specific destination public spaces was the aspiration for a uniquely urban experience; one unavailable to them in their rural place of origin. While parks with unique features (such as small zoological section) and large shopping malls were mentioned, by far the most common public space that interviewees visited as a destination venue were pedestrian streets. In 2016, Hanoi's municipal government introduced its first pedestrian precinct around Hoàn Kiếm Lake in the downtown area. Since then, the government has introduced two other pedestrian areas, with the most recent starting in 2022, but Hoàn Kiếm remains the most popular, with thousands of visitors every weekend.

Many participants remarked how lively this site is in the evening, contrasting it with quiet evenings back in their home, rural areas. In line with this, interviewees highlighted the core elements that attracted them to these streets. Notable were the 'many entertainment and amusing activities', (interview 06.10.2018), that created a carnival-like atmosphere. Interviewees noted, for example, the presence of 'groups dancing on the street' (interview 19.11.2018) and, in particular, the regular presence of youth groups practicing and performing hip-hop and other dance styles on these streets. Others pointed to the presence of 'a night market' (interview 18.09.2018) with 'many shops' (interview 14.11.2018) and 'lots of [affordable] street food' (interview 22.09.2018).

As opposed to sidewalk stalls, which allow youth migrants to *watch* urban life go by, it is the possibility to *be* part of city life that attracted interviewees to public spaces such as the pedestrian streets. This desire to actively partake in urban street-life came across clearly in the descriptions interviewees made of these spaces. When we asked these youth what they liked about them, a common response highlighted the pleasure they derived from being in a crowded environment. A 19 years old man described how he liked these spaces: 'It's quite fun. I feel it's bustling (*đông vui*), teeming with people (*đông người*)' (interview 10.09.2018). While interviewees indicated that they rarely, if ever, socialized with strangers in the pedestrian streets, many said that they appreciated the possibility it gave them to mingle with the rest of Hanoi's urban population, including other youth who were not rural migrants. Due to the diversity of activities present, and the relatively low cost of the street food on offer, this allowed the migrant youth to feel 'part of the crowd' and they noted that they did not feel openly discriminated against in such spaces. Again we see youth migrants complying with the norms and rules regarding behaviour and expectations in these sites (Kerkvliet, 2009).

6 | NAVIGATING THE STATUS OF LABOUR MIGRANT THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS AND COMPLIANCE

The relationship and interactions that rural youth labour migrants have with the public spaces of Hanoi support and broaden previous findings about the role of the working conditions of this population in the city in shaping their urban experience (Karis, 2013; Pulliat, 2013; Van Quyet & Van Kham, 2016).

More specifically, the youth whom we interviewed understand their subaltern position in Hanoi, and much of the discrimination and social stigmatization they experience in the city, as a factor of their status as migrant workers. These youth are however also aware that the visibility and consequences of this status are not something fixed in the city. Instead, and reflecting their capacity to process the socio-spatial context they are enmeshed in, interviewees conceived of their

status in the city as situational and, therefore, as a reality which they can navigate through their spatial practices.

A telling example of this reflexivity concerns the ways in which some interviewees contrasted experiences of discrimination or stigmatisation at work with the way they feel in the public spaces they favour in the city. To give but one example, a young woman told us that when she visits public spaces with the children she cares for: 'I feel like people are looking down on me. I always think they see me as a nanny from the countryside [….] We are like normal people but we feel embarrassed when people look at us and judge us' (PV-78). She compared this experience with that of being at a night market with friends on her leisure time, explaining that she feels 'comfortable' in such contexts 'because it's crowded there, and we dress like normal people, so no one knows what we do for a living'. This creates an interesting everyday politics in that while the youth are complying with the dominant narratives of appropriate behaviour in public spaces, by concurrently working to 'camouflage' their employment and social status, they elude the labels that long-term urbanites often place on them.

In line with this, when youth migrant workers say that they favour public spaces that make them feel 'comfortable' or 'at ease', they refer to more than the presence of amenities (e.g., sitting areas, food-stalls), physical characteristics (e.g., openness, breeziness) and activities (e.g., street performances) that fulfil their recreational and socialization needs. The 'ease' that these young men and women seek in public spaces is indeed, and just as importantly, also a respite from the inevitable visibility of their status at work and from associated experience of stigmatization and discrimination.

Some interviewees associated this aspect of the 'ease' they seek with the experience of going unnoticed in public spaces, as in the above quote from the young nanny. Others used the term '*hòa đồng*' to describe circumstances that give rise to such feeling for them in public spaces. This Vietnamese expression combines notions of blending in, mixing or intermingling harmoniously with others, highlighting the nonconfrontational nature of youth migrant workers' practices of public spaces. Indeed, only a few interviewees reported consciously or intentionally challenging the forces of subjection they feel in Hanoi's public spaces. A young women, for instance, told us that she continues to go watch movies on a regular basis at a cinema in the inner-city despite being made to feel, by other clients, that she does not belong there because of her 'inferior appearance' (interview 02.10.2018). This was however uncommon among our interviewees. In line with the idea of 'blending in harmoniously', the majority explained that they avoid spaces where they are made to feel they do not belong and similarly try to avoid transgressing what they perceive as the rules governing the public spaces they use in the city.

Young labour migrants instead used an approach akin to combining support, compliance and modifications and evasions as conceptualized by Kerkvliet (2009). They unobtrusively take advantage of opportunities offered by the publicscape of Hanoi to carve a space for themselves in the city. The everyday and destination spaces analysed in the previous section provide two telling instances of such tactics. On an everyday basis, respondents look for highly accessible spaces, such as sidewalk snack and tea stalls. In part due to their physical accessibility, the stalls used most frequently and intensively by our interviewees are those located near their places of residence, in areas where labour migrants tend to concentrate. While their status as labour migrants might be visible in these consumption spaces, it does not translate into discrimination or stigmatization. The predominance of other migrants in such spaces and the inclusive attitude both of the more established urban residents who use sidewalk stalls alongside migrants and of the individuals who manage them instead lead to a sense of belonging. A young migrant woman even evoked a sense of ownership, remarking that: 'these stalls have become a part of us' (interview 06.10.2018).

While being unintentional, the regular usage of sidewalk stalls by youth labour migrants contributes to the reproduction of a specific, and one might argue underappreciated, type of informal public spaces in Hanoi. Among other social functions, sidewalk tea stalls and snack stalls provide migrants with a safe and accessible environment to get 'acclimated' with urban life, to be in the copresence of some urban residents who (at least in this environment) do not stigmatize them, and to socialize with their peers outside of the cramped quarters of their homes.

While it provides youth labour migrants with these various benefits, the use of sidewalk stalls near their homes, in areas characterized by large rural migrant populations, is also a self-segregation tactic. As such, it contributes to keep youth labour migrants on the socio-spatial margins of the city. This form of spatial appropriation echoes the argument according to which there is more to the socio-spatial agency of subaltern individuals than resistance against dominant structures and institutions (Kerkvliet, 2009; Roy, 2011). In this particular instance, youth labour migrants' socio-spatial agency—and their compliance with expected norms of behaviour and where they might gather—tends to reproduce rather than contest or bridge the divide between migrants and a significant segment of the more established urban population. On can think for instance, of the divide between the youth we interviewed and the wealthier Hanoians who rarely venture in the lower socioeconomic neighborhoods where migrants live or, for that matter, use sidewalk stalls anywhere in the city.

In turn, the destination spaces used by youth labour migrants highlight a different tactic, revealing the capacity of this population to negotiate and, in some cases, even partly transcend their subaltern status in the city. As analysed above, when time allows, youth labour migrants visit public spaces which they see as offering uniquely urban experiences. In this category, the pedestrian streets stood out as destination spaces that the migrant youth especially appreciated being able to access and feel comfortable participating in, during their leisure time. Reflecting on how long-term Hanoi residents perceived and acted towards young migrant workers in different spheres of their urban lives, some interviewees told us they thought their migrant status was less visible in crowded public spaces, especially these pedestrian streets. 'In such space', a 21 years old female remarked, 'nobody knows about you, so there's nothing to be scared of' (interview 14.11.2018). Another woman migrant, aged 23 years

added: 'I can go there without anyone noticing me as it's a collective space (*không gian chung*)' (interview 27.12.2018).

To some degree, the fact that these are municipal streets, with no payments expected at all for access (unlike some of the city's public parks which charge entry fees to users; or an unspoken expectation in spaces such as shopping malls), gave migrant youth workers a feeling of greater access and acceptability. For example, an interviewee noted that he felt *entitled* to visit the pedestrian streets because of their high degree of 'publicness'. 'I think the pedestrian street is for walking', he remarked, 'so everybody has the right to walk there. It's not for anyone in particular' (interview 15.11.2018). Others came to a slightly different conclusion, noting that since they are not expected to serve other urban residents in highly public spaces (as many feel compelled to do in their jobs), long-term Hanoians do not reflect (and judge and often discriminate) so quickly on the background of the rural youth they meet in these spaces. '[Urban residents] may still distinguish who is from the city and who is from a province', a 19 years old male remarked. 'However', he elaborated, 'they do not show any discriminating attitude. I think they do not care much about the origin of other people in these spaces' (interview 22.09.2018). To put it another way, in these public spaces, two worlds come together, but they do not have to collide.

7 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this study, we have explored the relationship and interactions that youth migrant workers have with the public spaces of Hanoi. This exploration contributes to ongoing efforts to understand how 'urban spaces and migrant landscapes are mutually constructed' (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016, p. 129). By looking at a Vietnamese city, we have broadened the geographic scope of nascent research on the role of migrants as agents of city dynamics in the region which, thus far, has tended to be centered on China. Moreover, by focusing specifically on rural migrant workers, our investigation sheds light on the urban experiences of a vast group of urban youth who have received only limited research attention in the Vietnamese context.

Responding to calls for more nuanced portraits of rural migrants' relationships and interactions with the socio-material environment of cities, we have revealed that the socio-spatial practices of youth labour migrants are a complex amalgamation of their individual subjectivities and desires, and the multiple obstacles that constrain their access to and usage of public spaces in Hanoi. We thus showed that, while powerful exclusionary and subjection forces push these youth to the socio-spatial margins of the city, their need to unwind with their peers outside of their homes after long workdays and their longing for distinctively urban experiences draw them in. By mobilizing Kerkvliet's everyday politics (2009) to unpack these tensions, we not only highlight the importance of specific urban spaces in the urban life of youth labour migrants, but also shed light on the quiet and nonconfrontational ways by which these young urban subalterns deploy their agentive capacities in Hanoi.

The spatial practices which youth labor migrants use to access public spaces complicate portraits of 'migrants in the city' as victims of economic exploitation, institutional discrimination and social stigmatization who float passively through urban environments. Instead, these youth participate—along with other urban users—in specific forms of reproduction of public spaces in the Vietnamese capital. They notably play an active role in the reproduction of sidewalk stalls, a type of informal public space which the state has long deemed as untidy and 'backwards' and tried to eradicate at times (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012). Moreover, by having adopted Hanoi's new pedestrian streets as one of their preferred destination space, rural migrants not only benefit from but also contribute to the success of this new type of public space created by the municipal government, notably in terms of social diversity and inclusivity.

The spatial practices of these young migrants are not spectacular, nor have they altered the publicscape of Hanoi in ways comparable to those of other, more assertive groups of migrants documented in the literature on Asian cities (e.g., Bork-Hüffer et al., 2016; Brøgger, 2019; Wu, 2010; Zhan, 2018). In the same vein, the spatial practices that we have documented are not driven by conscious intentions to resist or contest the rules and norms governing the access and use of public spaces in Hanoi. Like other nonresistance expressions of everyday politics documented by Kerkvliet (2009), the socio-spatial practice of youth labour migrants are, nevertheless, transformative. Most obviously, they contribute to reproduce both older (sidewalk stalls) and newer (pedestrian streets) public spaces in Hanoi. In a more subtle way, the participation of rural youth migrants in these city-making processes quietly allows them to a feel little more at home and safe in the city and to negotiate spaces that, when they first arrive in the city, they often feel alienated from. Hence by utilising a conceptual framing that allows for more everyday and mundane actions and tactics to be unfolded, we can show how these young migrants carve a small part of Hanoi's publicscape for themselves, and gain a greater sense of self-value and perhaps even place-attachment.

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Research data are not shared.

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