Informal motorbike taxi drivers and mobility injustice on Hanoi's streets. Negotiating the curve of a new narrative

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ABSTRACT

The central government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and Hanoi's municipal authorities are enthusiastically embracing a series of plans and policies for the capital city to create a sustainable mega-city. This state imaginary privileges 'modern' mobilities, championing highways, a bus rapid transport system, and an elevated metro, while so called 'traditional' means of moving around the city such as motorbikes, bicycles, or cyclos are being strongly discouraged and increasingly marginalised. For example, Hanoi officials are implementing a step-wise ban on motorbikes from downtown streets by 2030, while the majority of the urban population travels by motorbike, with about five million motorbikes plying the city's streets. While such an approach not only creates mobility injustice for lower socio-economic residents of the city as a whole, it threatens to undermine the livelihoods of thousands of informal motorbike taxi drivers (locally known as *xe ôm*). In this article I engage with the emerging mobility injustice literature to explore how state discourses regarding urban modernisation are impacting the possibilities for Hanoi's *xe ôm* drivers to maintain access to city streets and viable livelihoods. These drivers must negotiate emerging and often conflicting state policies, their enforcement, as well as new app-based competitors, all of which challenge the equitable distribution of motility and produce important frictions. Nonetheless, *xe ôm* drivers draw on their agency and creativity during their daily routines to push back, while also creating new narratives regarding their vital role in maintaining neighbourhood security. We thus see how marginalised individuals are counteracting policies they consider unjust, even when this urban agenda is embedded in a politically socialist context.

1. Introduction

In the urban metropolises of the Global South, informal transportation options such as minibuses, tuk-tuks, cyclos (trishaws) and motorbikes, with flexible fares, timetables, and routes enable those with limited financial means to access services and employment, and to move goods for themselves or small-scale businesses. With limited large-scale, planned transportation schemes, these alternatives are often the only means by which millions of people can travel on a daily basis, making a major contribution to urban mobility (Evans et al., 2018). Yet increasingly, such means of transportation are being seen as outdated and obsolete, failing to fit modern urban transportation ideals, with policies being implemented to restrict their operations (Eidse et al., 2016; Doherty, 2017; Sopranzetti, 2017). Such policies increase mobility injustice for lower socio-economic residents in Global South cities, as well as for the operators of these vehicles themselves (Evans et al., 2018). This paper focuses on such tensions in Hanoi, the capital of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In a city with a rapidly changing urban form, I examine the degree to which contemporary

transportation plans and policies are creating mobility injustice for a specific category of road-users, the city's informal motorbike taxi drivers, locally known as *xe ôm* ('hug vehicle'), and how these individuals attempt to adapt and respond.

In August 2008, Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng announced that the official territory of Hanoi would increase three-fold overnight, also resulting in a doubling of the city's population to 6.2 million inhabitants (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2008). This was an initial step in a concerted drive by Vietnam's central government and Hanoi's municipal authorities to create a mega-city that would be prosperous, 'civilised and modern' (*đô thị văn minh, hiện đại*) (Coe, 2015). Yet while aiming for a population of over 10 million by 2030 – compared with 7.7 million in 2019 – the authorities also want Hanoi to be the world's first 'sustainable city'. To meet this goal, and despite concerns raised by Vietnamese architects over the process, lack of local input, and design flaws, the 'Hanoi Capital Construction Master Plan to 2030 and Vision to 2050' was approved by the Prime Minister in July 2011 (Vietnamnet, 2009; Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2011). Promoted by a slick advertising campaign, this plan was designed with

foreign consultants from the US and South Korea, and now guides the city's 'sustainable development' and changing urban form. It aims to fashion a sustainable mega-city by preserving a significant amount of green space, with 60% of urban land allocated to green corridors and 40% to urban development (Söderström, 2014). Satellite cities in the enlarged city-region are a key feature, along with plans for rapid mass transport infrastructure.[1]

As part of this city makeover, the municipal government is implementing a bus rapid transit system and an elevated metro system (Nguyen, 2017). After numerous delays, the first metro line, for which construction began in 2011, is expected to start operations sometime in late 2020. The government is also designing new transportation corridors and investing heavily in highways and expressways (despite the contradictions this might imply vis-à-vis creating a more sustainable city). These transportation plans have entailed the destruction of house and shop-fronts, the widening of traditional alleyways, and the re-organisation of neighbourhoods. Moreover, critics claim that "there is very little inter-connectivity between [metro] platforms and other transportation nodes" and a "lack of coherence and vision in the transport policy calls into question its ability to solve mobility problems" (Leducq and Scarwell, 2018: 74). Gibert and Pham Thai Son, 2016 add that "the metropolitan authorities have come up with new priorities, beginning with the need for traffic fluidity, which reveals the rise in power of a neo-functionalism perspective concerning urban planning in Vietnam today" (see also Schwanen, 2018). As a telling materialization of this approach, despite the fact that over five million motorbikes ply the city's streets as opposed to only half a million cars, the Hanoi People's Council has proposed to ban motorbikes from downtown streets by 2030 (BBC News, 2017; Hansen, 2017).

In this paper I detail my methods next, before introducing my conceptual lens which focuses on mobility injustice. I then track the specific plans and policies that are shaping mobility options in Hanoi, before turning to introduce the daily spatial practices of the city's informal motorbike taxi (*xe ôm*) drivers.[2] Here I analyse their daily routines, and the mobility injustices these individuals face due to state policies, as well as police procedures and new app-based competitors. I also draw attention to the daily actions that *xe ôm* drivers undertake to maintain their place on the street, as they push back against what they believe to be state-endorsed injustices, while also out-smarting their new competitors. Finally, I highlight the means by which *xe ôm* drivers in the city are attempting to shift the narrative around their profession.

This paper draws on 76 semi-structured interviews with independent *xe ôm* drivers (not linked to an app-based company), undertaken during 11 months of fieldwork between 2016 and 2019, completed by myself and/or my Vietnamese female research assistant. These interviews focused on driver livelihoods, their everyday routines, the challenges they face due to changing municipal policies, and their perceived roles in their local neighbourhoods. Of these 76 drivers, 74 were men and two were women, a fairly representative proportion of *xe ôm* in the city, with women drivers being uncommon. 'Ride-along' interviews (Kusenbach, 2003) were undertaken with eight additional male *xe ôm* drivers in 2017. During these rides a smartphone application was used to map the route and photos were taken of decision

making points (cross-roads, roundabouts etc.). Informal interviews were completed with the drivers as they drove or immediately afterwards (while showing them the photos just taken) to gain information on decision making points. Additional semi-structured interviews were also completed with 26 motorbike drivers working for app-based firms (at that time UberMoto and GrabBike, before UberMoto was acquired by Grab in 2018), and a further five semi-structured interviews were conducted with urban planners and planning academics. Finally, 52 conversational interviews with Hanoi residents focused on their opinions and use of independent *xe ôm* and app-based motorbike taxis, bringing the total number of interviews for this research to over 160.

2. Mobility injustice

It is not difficult to discern from national and municipal plans and decrees that the Vietnamese state has a strong interest in managing population movement and controlling the mobility of individual bodies in specific ways. In Hanoi, as state officials implement plans and policies to endorse 'modern' mobilities, this has meant that 'slow mobilities' such as low-cc motorbikes, itinerant street vendors, bicycles, and even pedestrians are considered to be hampering smooth traffic flows and delaying the state's modernization project being put into action (Du The Huynh and Gomez-Ibañez, 2016; Eidse et al., 2016; Loc and Moustier, 2016). Such discourses increase mobility injustice in the city, the evidence for which becomes clear when analysing the daily spatial practices and routines of *xe ôm* drivers.

Since the early 2000s, a 'new mobilities paradigm' has begun to focus "not simply on movement per se, but on the power of discourses, practices, and infrastructures of mobility in creating the effects of both movement and stasis, demobilization and remobilization, voluntary and involuntary movement" (Sheller, 2018: 11). The mobilities literature provides conceptual tools with which to question the nature and value of movements and flows, paying specific attention to how power and meaning are intertwined with movement, and to the underlying political and sociocultural contexts (Sheller and Urry, 2006).

Given the critical nature of the new mobilities paradigm, it is not surprising that: "Issues of uneven motility and of mobility rights, ethics and justice have become crucial to the field" (Sheller, 2018: 12). As such, Cook and Butz (2018) conceive mobility justice as focusing on fair access to motility across society, as well as unprejudiced institutional decision-making processes. More specifically, Sheller (2016: 15) explains that: "Mobility may be considered a universal human right, yet in practice it exists in relation to class, racial, sexual, gendered, and disabling exclusions from public space, from national citizenship, and from the means of mobility at all scales". With a focus here on *xe ôm* drivers in Hanoi, exclusions based on class, gender, age, and technological savviness are particularly salient, as is the local political context. Yet, to suggest that mobility injustice exists in a world of vastly unequal power is rather obvious, with the balance tipped structurally in favour of those with the largest holdings of economic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, I argue that a core value of the mobility injustice concept is to highlight hidden inequalities, while also being a call to action. Vukov (2015: 113) notes "the need to call into question the disciplining and policing of embodied movement that goes into legitimizing normative forms of movement". Non-normative modes of mobility often disrupt the plans and goals of those in positions of power, which can result in rapid responses by such power-holders, furthering mobility injustice (ibid.).

One possible way to highlight these inequalities is to look for sites of 'friction'. Cresswell (2014: 108) explains that the importance of friction is that it "draws our attention to the way in which people, things and ideas are slowed down or stopped". More broadly, Tsing (2005: 4) notes that friction is "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnections across difference"; it is the moment when universals such as financial capital, science – and I would suggest urban planning – "touch down on real terrain" (Cresswell, 2016: 1084). Tsing adds that

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[1] The Master Plan was designed by a consortium including the New York Architect Firm, Perkins Eastman, and two Korean firms Posco E&C and Jina Architects, along with the Vietnamese Institute of Architecture, Urban and Rural Planning, and the Hanoi Urban Planning Institute (Lamster, 2011). While a positive feature in itself, it should be noted that the proposed green corridors may lengthen distances and time between key services with respect to mobility.

[2] There is an important body of work regarding informal motorbike taxi drivers focusing on cities in sub-Saharan Africa (see Evans et al., 2018 for a review). Far less research has been completed in Southeast Asia, but see Oshima et al. (2007) and Sopranzetti (2017) regarding motorbike taxi drivers in Bangkok, and Karis (2013) concerning migrant *xe ôm* driver experiences in Hanoi.

"as a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (2005: 5). Friction "is not a universal but has specific contours that reflect the places it occurs in" (Cresswell, 2016: 1085). As such, when focusing on a case within a socialist state – or what Kerkvliet (2019: 19) calls a "responsive-repressive party-state" – I also find it relevant to search specifically for what Scott (1990) describes as hidden transcripts as adapted responses to overwhelming power. Thus, while highlighting how those in power create opportunities for mobility tuned to their own vision and needs, I want to focus on how those who find their mobility curtailed – who experience numerous frictions – respond and possibly push back. To do so, I examine how mobility (in) justice is intertwined among bodies, streets, transport systems, and policies and processes of urbanisation in Vietnam's capital city. More-over, with Hanoi's Master Plan being imagined and fashioned overseas among an alliance of international elites, there are important global connections to consider too.

3. Hanoi's transport system plans

In July 2017, the Hanoi People's Council, representing the local authority of the socialist state, voted to limit the use of motorbikes in the inner city over the coming years. The People's Council Deputy, Nguyễn Tiến Minh, argued that: "Some 70 per cent of traffic accidents are related to motorbikes, which proves that motorbike drivers are those at the highest risk of road accidents" (cited in Vietnam News, 2017b). Given the fact that there is about a 10:1 ratio of motorbikes to cars, this degree of involvement of motorbikes in accidents is perfectly logical, perhaps even low, and makes a rather weak argument for their ban. Other reasons given for the ban have included congestion (Vietnam News, 2017b) and pollution (Al Jazeera, 2018). While Hanoi's streets are congested with motorbikes, cars, and buses, and one could argue that Hanoi has reached 'peak motorbike', replacing motorbikes with cars and buses is unlikely to ease congestion in the near future.[3] Pollution is also a questionable rationale for specifically targeting 4-stroke low-cc motorbikes while coal-fired power plants, heavy industry, seasonal agricultural burning, and even strong winds bringing pollution from Chengdu and Chongqing in southwest China have all been found to be important causes of the city's pollution woes (Al Jazeera, 2018).

This will not be the first time that the municipal authorities try to implement a ban on motorbikes; the last attempt was in the early 2000s but authorities were forced to backtrack as the public transport system could not meet the increase in demand (The Economist, 2017). This time, the decree includes a focus on developing multimodal public transportation to serve 50–55% of residents' needs in the central urban area, and 40% in satellite areas by 2030, while motorbikes are being gradually limited in specific city areas and will be banned in inner districts by 2030 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2017; Vietnam News, 2017b). These steps are very much in line with Vietnam's northern neighbour, where over 30 Chinese cities have restricted or banned motorbikes – with an associated drastic increase in the sale of cars (South China Morning Post, 2004). The decree for Hanoi also plans similar restrictions on electric bicycles and cyclos, while cars will re-quire automatic toll collection equipment to be installed for inner city areas – without regulation of their polluting power – and taxi numbers are to be increased (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2017).[4] While state

officials are pinning their hopes on the new bus rapid transit system and the still to be completed elevated metro system to fill the gap, a former World Bank official has noted: "There is no evidence from the experi-ence of other cities that just building new transit lines creates a shift in demand toward transit away from individual vehicles like motorcycles and cars. This is especially true when the use of individual means of motorized transport have been prevalent over many years, as is the case in Hanoi" (Bertaud, 2011: 11).

There are very few formally endorsed opportunities in con-temporary Vietnam for everyday citizens or citizen groups to have their opinions heard regarding urban plans and transportation policies (see Kerkvliet, 2019 for a nuanced interpretation of state-society relations in Vietnam). While state newspaper articles often cite 'widespread con-sultation' with regards to a specific new policy, this commonly refers to state ministries and ministerial-level agencies producing feedback on government plans. As state employees, these officials know better than to rock the boat. Söderström (2014: 72) adds: "Master-planning in Hanoi can thus be seen as an aesthetic and political exercise, but it can also be seen as a useful smoke-screen behind which real development takes place". In a similar vein, Albrecht et al. (2010: 28) add: "Decision-making processes are extremely discreet. Their mysteries and prota-gonists are known and controlled by just a handful of individuals…This Vietnamese cocktail is subtle and effective. It is conciliatory regarding the past, holds society firmly in the present and allows the new economy to develop". Moreover, 'elected' government officials usually have a non-renewable four year mandate, so they often focus on short term development projects and have little interest in longer term vi-sions. While direct contestations over city plans are on the rise, such acts require those involved to have a great deal of patience and courage.[5]

4. Informal motorbike taxi drivers: Spatial practices and mobility injustice

4.1. Daily routines

Informal motorbike taxis are a common sight in many cities in the Global South, and Hanoi is no exception. Customers typically negotiate a price for a ride of a certain distance in advance, and then jump on the seat behind the driver for what can be a hair-rising dash through dense traffic. In Hanoi, *xe ôm* drivers tend to cluster around train and bus stations and other service locales such as hospitals, as well as waiting on countless busy street corners (Fig. 1).[6] As part of this population, the cohort of independent *xe ôm* drivers whom we interviewed had an average age of 51, and had been working in this occupation for an average of 15 years. Just over half were from Hanoi, with the remainder from nearby northern provinces. Before becoming a *xe ôm* driver, over three-quarters had held other informal employment with construction work, cyclo/trishaw riding, and security guard positions being common, while the rest had been farmers. Working an average of 12 h a day, the drivers' daily profits after petrol costs were about VND200,000

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[3] Over three-quarters of resident interviewees complained that the bus rapid transit system is causing increased congestion. They also noted that it has slowed bus commuting times by limiting routes, with more transfers now re-quired. In sum, this new transportation infrastructure has "contradictory justice implications" (Cook and Butz, 2018: 11).

[4] In comparison, see Zhang et al. (2014) regarding how a number of muni-cipalities in China are currently revisiting previous restrictions on bicycles and electric bikes.

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[5] Regarding such contestations see Gillespie and Quang Hung Nguyen, 2019 on how Hanoians used social media and street protests in 2015 to voice their concerns regarding a tree-felling dispute. As the authors note, these protests "disrupted the government's expectations about who can participate in urban governance" (ibid.: 978). Also see Söderström and Geertman (2013) for details of how international non-state actors have started to expand and influence discussions on public space use in Hanoi. Wells-Dang (2012) also considers how informal networks have helped provide channels for creative advocacy, while Kerkvliet (2019) investigates the rise of public political criticism.

[6] While one could argue that *xe ôm* drivers block pedestrian traffic by waiting for customers on sidewalks, they are by far the minority among the range of obstacles pedestrians face, with far more parked motorbikes of local residents, tea stalls, shop displays, and even drying washing cluttering the city's sidewalks (see Drummond, 2000; Koh, 2008).

Fig. 1. A xe ôm driver waiting for customers on a busy downtown street corner. (Source: author).

(USD$8.60) or US$258/month. By working every day, which the vast majority did, this level of income places them well above the official monthly minimum wage for Hanoi (US$180 as of January 2019). Regular customers were important for just under half of the drivers interviewed, with these customers phoning to organise a ride for themselves, to take children to and from school, or to deliver goods for a small business. *Xe ôm* drivers worked hard to maintain their customer base, as one noted: "I must be on time, drive carefully, and always be polite. That means I'll be asked to drive for them again. It's important that I build trust with my customers" (interview 2017). Drivers explained that their core motivation to enter this occupation was the flexibility, as well as the freedom from being reliant on others. This flexibility allowed them to help other family members with their jobs, such as ferrying goods from a wholesale market to a family's small food stall, or looking after children or grandchildren. As one 61 year old driver explained: "this is a 'free job' [*làm thuê*]; I can come and go as I please and I don't have to follow someone else's rules. We might have to deal with bad people at times, but that's part of the job" (interview, 2016).

4.2. Xe ôm mobility injustices

Mobility injustice carried out at the bodily scale and in relation to socio-economic standing is readily apparent when one observes how unlikely it is that luxury car drivers get pulled over by police on Hanoi's roads compared to motorbike drivers (*xe ôm* or others). Transport police in Vietnam are infamously corrupt,[7] and motorbike drivers are an easy target for bribes, being less likely to be connected to influential state actors, than car occupants. While *xe ôm* drivers do not appear to be specifically targeted by transport police, they are as vulnerable as any other motorbike drivers to the whims of those on duty. A 48 year old *xe ôm* driver explained: "If we are in the wrong lane, or if the policeman's greedy, we'll get stopped and fined. It's about VND200,000-250,000

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[7] Like the majority of state workers, traffic police pay a 'fee' to secure their job. State employed colleagues have noted that this can amount to USD5,000, hence recouping costs becomes a prime objective (interviews, 2010 onwards; Vietnam Express International, 2018).

[US$9-11] if it's on the spot; sometimes we pay a bribe, sometimes it's more official. It changes like the weather really, but it's always more before Tết [Vietnamese New Year holiday]" (interview 2016). This increase in bribes and fines before Tết, when police are keen to gain extra revenue for the festive season, has also been commented upon by informal street vendors in the city (Turner and Schoenberger, 2012).

Beyond the daily actions of the transport police, *xe ôm* drivers have been targeted more specifically as part of the municipal government's 'Clean up the Sidewalks Campaign' policy. This campaign, which includes the clearing of street stalls, motorbike parking, and even motorbike ramps, was initiated in Hanoi in early 2017, with its policing fluctuating since then (Vietnam News, 2017a). Nonetheless, it tends to be strictly enforced in certain locales like tourist areas and around marketplaces, which are the ideal locales for *xe ôm* drivers to wait for customers. A 52 year old driver waiting outside the city's main dried goods market Đồng Xuân (Fig. 2) explained: "The new law to clear the roads and sidewalks affects our work a lot. I know that we're now breaking the law by waiting here, but we still have to earn a living. We can't do anything except suffer from it" (interview 2017). This *xe ôm* driver's comments highlight how rights to certain public spaces and livelihoods in Hanoi are directly impacted by such policy initiatives, underlining the fact that "the ability to stay in place is just as if not more important than access to unfettered mobility" (Montegary and White, 2015: 4).

4.3. Sticky encounters and pushing back

Tsing notes the "sticky materiality of practical encounters" when global ideas, capital, and politics are transformed in local sites (Tsing, 2005: 1). In this case, sticky encounters emerge as *xe ôm* drivers push back against the state's plans and policies for the capital city, and their implementation. *Xe ôm* drivers skillfully draw upon their social networks and knowledge of police routines to protect their spatial practices as much as possible, with specific mobility practices to avoid transport police (cf. Stillerman, 2006). As well as avoiding regular police check-points, drivers utilise their social capital and warn *xe ôm* friends of new check points and the numbers of police waiting. As one 54 year old driver noted: "we know most of the places traffic police wait, but if there's a new place I'll let my friends [*xe ôm* drivers] know. We all share

Fig. 2. Waiting for customers at the edge of Đồng Xuân market, while keeping a careful eye out for police. (Source: author).

information like that…have to make sure we're wearing our helmet and only have one passenger, the usual stuff" (interview 2017).[8] During 'drive-along' interviews, the eight *xe ôm* drivers had clear motives as to why they chose specific routes, including comparative distance, number of traffic lights, traffic jams that they already knew about, and avoiding police. For instance, while driving along a busy street with a median barrier, one driver pointed and explained "usually I'd make an [illegal] turn here at this gap, as that's a much shorter route, but see there's two police over there" (ride-along interview 2017). Another driver similarly noted, "that's the fastest street over there [pointing], that small lane, but the police know we want to take it and it's one way the other way, so they've been at the other end all week" (ride-along interview 2017).

There are also a number of minute negotiations and decisions involved with how *xe ôm* drivers react to being stopped by traffic police. These include pleading poverty and a need to maintain a livelihood to feed their family, and hence asking police to show compassion (*thông cảm*). Similarly, those who are war veterans can use this symbolic capital to petition for a lower or reduced fine, given on-going respect for those who served in the Vietnam-American war and Sino-Vietnamese border war. As one 66 year old driver explained: "I fought in the war and have a modest pension. The police know we don't get much and that we served our country well. If I show them my medals they go easier on me; sometimes they just let me go, especially if they had family in the war too" (interview, 2018; also see Koh, 2006, and Turner and Schoenberger, 2012).

Beyond concerns with the police and specific policies, app-based,

ride-hailing motorbike taxi companies have increased competition – and friction – for independent *xe ôm* drivers.[9] These app-based companies first appeared in Hanoi in 2014, introducing a new cohort of drivers working for companies such as UberMoto (until 2018) and a regional equivalent, GrabBike. The drivers for these app-based firms are younger in average age than independent *xe ôm* drivers and are often university students or young workers, driving in their spare time. These individuals are more tech-savvy than their *xe ôm* driver counterparts and far more likely to own a smart-phone, one of the requirements for their position.

Over half the independent *xe ôm* drivers we interviewed were concerned that app-based operations had increased competition for customers. Yet, at the same time, the overwhelming majority had rather philosophical views regarding these newcomers, or had devised ways to maintain a niche market. One 52 years old explained: "There are too many Grab vehicles, you see them everywhere! For sure there are more of them, but I'm still here doing my business all these years. They have their customers and we have ours. I'm doing it not just for the income but for fun as well; sitting at home doing nothing is boring" (interview, 2018). For most *xe ôm* drivers, it was only one-off or irregular customers whom they had lost, while regular customers tended to remain more loyal after the arrival of app-based firms. Independent *xe ôm* drivers and customers noted three core reasons why these drivers' customer base had been largely retained: first, independent *xe ôm* drivers know their way around the city streets extremely well, while app-based drivers are often students from out of town relying on their phones to navigate the city, and frequently get lost or use a slower route than necessary. Second, some female customers, especially older women, mentioned that for safety reasons they preferred to travel with a driver they already knew, while others noted that they sent their young children to school with a regular driver and would not trust an app-based driver whom they did not know. Third, some residents use *xe ôm* drivers to deliver small goods and again, trust was an important factor in these deliveries.

However, in 2018–19, my research assistant and I also found new, rather enterprising approaches that independent *xe ôm* drivers have begun implementing to compete with their new rivals. *Xe ôm* drivers are pushing back against GrabBike competitors by mimicking their uniforms. It is incredibly easy to order knock-off copies of clothes in Vietnam, and just as easy to order a freshly painted and designed helmet. Thus some resourceful *xe ôm* drivers now dress to impersonate GrabBike drivers, wearing a fake GrabBike green logo-printed t-shirt and green helmet. Moreover, since some GrabBike drivers have taken to waiting near bus stations and around tourist areas, rather than waiting for a customer via their phone, *xe ôm* drivers in their fake GrabBike gear do just the same; not even needing a smartphone and just negotiating a fare in person, as they always have (Fig. 3). In addition, since GrabBike bought out UberMoto, there have been limited large-scale app-based competitors to keep GrabBike fares in check. As GrabBike has raised its prices, especially at busy periods of the day and night, some customers are realising that this company (as well as smaller emerging app-based competitors such as Be and GoViet) no longer offers important benefits over traditional *xe ôm* drivers, and have reverted to *xe ôm* (resident interviews 2018, 2019).

5. Shifting the narrative symbolically – Upholding vital functions

In this context, *xe ôm* drivers are also resisting mobility injustices by changing the narrative regarding their right to the city. Drivers raised three key arguments during interviews regarding their important role in

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[8] Travelling with three on a motorbike (such as a *xe ôm* driver with two customers) is extremely common in Vietnam albeit illegal.

[9] The tensions between these two groups are analysed in a different paper (*see x– add after review process*), and hence I just briefly summarise them here to highlight a specific friction and important changes to traditional *xe ôm* drivers' everyday practices.

Fig. 3. An independent xe ôm driver in the foreground with fake GrabBike helmet, and registered GrabBike drivers in the background, all waiting for customers in the downtown core. (Source: author).

upholding neighbourhood safety. Such arguments correspond to Ilcan (2013: 4) notion of the mobility-knowledge nexus, namely "how people can harness certain types of knowledge to frame their belonging to a place…and justify and legitimate new and common arrangements of mobilities at local…scales".

First, the majority of xe ôm drivers noted that it was their duty to help those in need and present a positive image of xe ôm as an occupation. One 44 year old xe ôm driver explained: "Personally I think it comes from human compassion. For example, when I see an elderly person or a young kid trying to cross the street I would help. I don't know about you but I always help, especially old people, we have to live with compassion generally" (interview 2018). A 74 year old male driver noted: "I help with all my heart, especially people from afar who know little of the area". He added: "For example, while someone is busy eating [at a road-side stall] and I see a thief attempting to steal something from them, I have to alert the person eating immediately. I can't turn a blind eye" (interview 2019).

This importance of assisting others was oftentimes linked to the argument that drivers need to preserve a positive relationship with nearby business operators to be able to maintain their right to wait at a certain locale. One 61 year old male driver explained: "When we stand in front of a store we need to ask the owner for approval, we have to be thoughtful as well, sometimes they ask me to mind the store for them when they need to take a short break. There has to be a kind of relationship between us" (interview, 2018). Another driver added: "As we work around here we need to be considerate, for example I remind sidewalk vendors to keep their space tidy" (interview, 60 year old, 2018).

Second, xe ôm drivers stressed their role in upholding local security when based in their own neighbourhood.[10] It became clear during

interviews that xe ôm drivers have a close affinity to their own residential neighbourhood where they commonly worked (unless part of a cluster based at a hospital, train, or bus station). These neighbourhood xe ôm had a strong belief that it was their duty to protect their neighbourhood, with some even having been asked directly by local ward officials to "keep an eye out and help maintain neighbourhood law and order" (interview, 2018). Because of this informal neighbourhood role, xe ôm drivers felt they were fully entitled to wait for customers on local sidewalks. One 52 year old male driver explained: "When I am at work here, I also look out for this neighborhood. We [xe ôm drivers] have to jump in to help out when something happens, like a fire. We can't stand by idle; people wouldn't like it and would call us names. Even when things like scuffles or an assault occurs in the neighborhood, we have to help talk with the people involved. If anything serious happens we have to report to authorities; they are in charge but we still help to lower the tension and calm down the situation" (interview, 2018). Another a 59 year old driver determined that his role was more prevention than giving chase to thieves, explaining: "When we see a thief we have to shoo them away. It's not our job to chase after them, that's police work, but if we see strangers hanging around, such as drug addicts, we have to ask them to move on to ply their trade elsewhere". It is important to note that this narrative was spatially bound, and only played out in the xe ôm drivers' own neighbourhoods rather than on the city's streets as a whole. As the above 52 year old driver added: "Of course I only help out in this [neighbourhood name]; elsewhere I would ignore whatever is going on since you can get into big trouble poking your hands in other people's business". Other drivers also noted that security was a very sensitive topic and that it was best to keep to oneself if working away from one's own neighbourhood.

Third, independent xe ôm drivers not only believed that GrabBike was increasing competition, but they also argued that the increasing popularity of GrabBike was resulting in a decline of neighbourhood security. One 59 year old driver was emphatic: "As more Grab bikes arrive, there will be fewer xe ôm, that will reduce neighborhood security for sure" (interview, 2018). Another driver, aged 62, added: "There are so many Grab bikes these days. If traditional xe ôm decline,

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[10] Hanoi's districts each contain a number of wards, which are further divided into neighbourhoods or resident groups (tổ dân phố), each of which has a 'head person' who represents residents. Gibert and Pham Thai Son, 2016 explain: "The groups organise monthly meetings, in which they inform residents of administrative news, discuss local policies, and mediate household conflicts. Thus, alleyway households proactively participate in the management of their daily lives and the development of their surrounding space and landscape".

social evils [*tệ nạn xã hội*] will increase because there are so many drug addicts and people high on drugs".[11] Similarly, a 55 year old *xe ôm* driver explained: "A decrease in the number of *xe ôm* drivers is reducing the level of security in the area".

By drawing on such narratives, independent *xe ôm* drivers legitimised their appropriation of sidewalk space and their livelihoods as a whole, arguing that instead of being bodies increasingly 'out of place', they were important individuals in the creation and maintenance of safe neighbourhood spaces. They subconsciously drew on Jane Jacobs' argument that to have successful city neighbourhoods, "there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street" (Jacobs, 1992 [1961]: 35). The irony of this position of course, is that it is being made in a capital city of a socialist state that has high levels of 'official' surveillance of its citizens already…

6. Concluding thoughts

"The capacity for movement (motility) under conditions of one's choosing is regarded as a valuable resource or form of capital that is unequally distributed in social contexts structured by hierarchies of power" (Cook and Butz, 2016: 400).

In her 2018 book, Sheller outlines a series of principles of mobility justice. Among these she includes ensuring that: "all modes of moving are afforded space and that streets are not dominated by one mode, such as cars". She also notes that "all communities should be included in decision-making processes" (Sheller, 2018: 173), while Cook and Butz (2016) add that mobility justice usually entails that decision-making procedures be undertaken in a democratic manner. This pretty much leaves centrally ruled countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and China out of the equation.

City authorities in Hanoi, with strong backing from the central state, remain resolute in their aim to refashion the city into a "global financial hub" to rival Hong Kong and Singapore, and to practice the 'art of being global' (Minister of Planning and Investment, cited in Vietnamnet, 2016: online; Roy and Ong, 2011). The current Master Plan and related transportation and other 'development' policies mean that inequitable mobility is likely to increase in the near future, especially when the motorbike ban is fully enforced. This push for a certain vision of modernity not only undermines the informal livelihoods of thousands of independent *xe ôm* drivers, but is destabilising time-honoured, relevant forms of local cultural behaviour based on solidarity, trust, and compassion. As a result, complex, organic social relationships that appear to be beneficial to neighbourhood security and well-being and that shape a specific urban texture are being disrupted. Or, put another way, the Vietnamese state appears to be throwing the baby out with the bath water.

As *xe ôm* drivers continue to work (for now) within a climate of mobility control and surveillance, it is unlikely that they will be able (or be authorized) to mobilise or take collective action through large scale overt and direct challenges to the state's ongoing project for Hanoi. In this context, it is probably naïve or overly hopeful to consider that members of this precarious work force will be able to create long-term, meaningful counter-spaces or counter-hegemonic movements anytime soon (Gramsci, 1971; Pratt, 2004). Unlike protests against the restructuring of public space in democratic countries in the Global North (Mitchell, 1995; McCann, 1999), *xe ôm* drivers must try to protect their livelihoods through far more subtle means and cautious negotiations reminiscent of Scott's (1990) notion of infrapolitics. Yet, with their everyday, micro-level, spatial practices, independent *xe ôm* drivers do

resist dominant mobility paradigms with flexible and creative approaches. They warn friends of police blocks, navigate around the city to avoid fines and bribes, and imitate GrabBike drivers to reach a broader customer base. *Xe ôm* drivers build trust with customers, neighbours, and shop keepers, many of whom they have known for years, in very local and situated ways, while remaining highly mobile, navigating the city with their vehicles and bodies, and transgressing geographical and social boundaries (see also Sopranzetti 2018). Concurrently, they have also succeeded to some degree in creating a new narrative regarding their rights to certain spaces. I thus suggest that 'micro counter-spaces' are being shaped via their actions, opening up space for alternative narratives to be heard and acknowledged by a range of actors. Yet, will they be able to take this further? As a comparison, in 2008 the Vietnamese Women's Museum (*Bảo tàng Phụ nữ Việt Nam*) organised an exhibition on Hanoi's women street vendors which gained wide press coverage and helped raise awareness of these individuals' backgrounds, livelihood options, and family responsibilities.[12] A similar exhibition supported by a non-government organisation or social enterprise (albeit unlikely to be staged at the Women's Museum) could help highlight the alternative narratives being put forward by Hanoi's independent *xe ôm* drivers, and perhaps also create space for dialogues with city officials regarding the upcoming motorbike ban. Such an exhibition has yet to occur and the 2020 Coronavirus outbreak throws these livelihoods into an even more tenuous situation. Nonetheless, there is still hope that in their low-key, daily decisions, manoeuvers, and unexpected actions, these independent *xe ôm* drivers will continue to adapt to maintain their livelihoods and access to the city, while contesting and subverting elements of the dominant urban planning model being put forward by powerful actors.

Acknowledgements

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[11] Social evils relate to "official definitions of nonacceptable behaviors in citizens, such as drinking alcohol, gambling, drug addiction, violence, prostitution, pornography, superstition, and any criminal actions" (Rydstrøm, 2003: 679).

[12] The panels from the exhibition can be accessed here: http://www.baotangphunu.org.vn/Tin-tuc/161/online-exhibitions

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