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Rural Aspirations in Urban Vietnam

The City as a Means to an End

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Introduction

The question of how to account for the “rural” in light of urban Asia’s breathtaking scale and multidimensionality is an increasingly prevalent one in the urban studies literature. Does, for example, the rapid urban land expansion in and around Southeast Asian cities mean that formerly “rural” areas are being transformed into (sub)urban spaces?¹ What roles do rural-to-urban mobility and population loss in rural areas play in reshaping the city?² Perhaps more consequentially, what is the conceptual value of ideas like “the rural” and “the countryside” in light of Southeast Asia’s rapidly urbanizing society?³ What I appreciate most about these questions is that they reflect conversations ordinary people are having on the streets, in workplaces, in apartment blocks, and in farms throughout the region. As Wachsmuth points out, while the typical analytic approach to processes of urbanization focuses on the “obsolescence” of the city-countryside binary, the distinction between the urban and the rural “remains central to urban experience”.⁴ This is the case in cities throughout Asia, yet illustrations of how this distinction is reinforced and reimagined are largely absent from work in urban studies.

In this essay I use attitudes and activities drawn from Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) to argue in favor of retaining the “rural” (*nông thôn*) as a foundational component of Vietnamese space. I show that people in Ho Chi Minh City frame their aspirations in spatial terms that privilege the lifestyle qualities of the countryside. Following from previous research published in

2016 in *Urban Studies*, this work offers a conceptualization of what I call “the city as a means to an end”.⁵ This phrase encapsulates how the city is produced as a valuable yet transitory stopover amidst the permanence of home imagined elsewhere. Equally as important in this piece is that there is a more foundational Vietnam existing in a rural *elsewhen*,⁶ a mythological past that is seen by my informants to more adequately represent Vietnam’s spatial essence. In my reading the city is expedient in the most ephemeral of ways—it is a path used for professional growth, or to make money, or to accumulate status—but it does not have the symbolic posterity of the countryside (*miền quê*). The rural is seen as collectively timeless while the city has a finite lifespan that is largely contingent on an individualized set of achievements (or failures).

For those living in urban Vietnam, this sense of extra-urban timelessness is increasingly treated in aspirational terms as a potential asset to acquire in the future. In what follows I ask: how do new modes of consumption in Ho Chi Minh City repurpose the present and future as a means to inject the past with “rural” sensibilities? The vehicle I use to answer these questions is the automobile, which is emerging as one of the most popular forms of material consumption in Vietnam and has come to symbolize the country’s rapid development and urbanization.⁷ Underneath the surface of their contemporary “urban” traits, however, I show how the car displays complex entanglements of past, present, and future. To paraphrase the Vietnamese government’s description of Vietnam’s economy, which they have coined “a market economy with a socialist orientation”, I would argue that Vietnam is urbanizing according to a rural orientation.⁸ Evidence of this phenomenon is highlighted in the next two sub-sections.

Transporting change: driving and the urban-rural divide

Choosing one’s means of transportation for moving through Ho Chi Minh City is a meaningful undertaking. The motorbike is the most common type of vehicle in urban Vietnam, akin to the automobile in the United States in terms of its use, exchange, and symbolic values (see Figure 7.1).⁹ However, cities throughout Vietnam are transforming because of increased ownership of automobiles. Until very recently reserved for buses, trucks, government vehicles, and taxis, Ho Chi Minh City’s streets are becoming “automobile friendly” as increased personal incomes, greater supply and availability, and road infrastructure improvements in the leafiest parts of the city become an important part of urban Vietnam. In the capital Hanoi the World Bank has stated that there was a 222 percent increase in

automobile ownership between 2005 and 2011.¹⁰ Four-wheeled growth is likely even greater in Ho Chi Minh City because it is a larger urban area known for greater levels of affluence than the capital, Hanoi.

While private car ownership stands out as a status symbol in a country where only a relatively privileged few can afford to acquire them, the rationale for purchasing vehicles stretches well beyond an overt display of wealth. For example, in his research Hansen draws from interviews with automobile owners in Hanoi to show that private cars “allow for safer, ‘healthier’, more comfortable and more status-enhancing performance of mobility”.¹¹ My respondents in Ho Chi Minh City speak similarly but also suggest that in the case of the private car, ownership’s convenience arises from the protective, nurturing, and collectivized aspects of Vietnamese society.¹²

For example, one of my respondents named Ai downplays the class status she set for herself when she bought a new Honda sedan and emphasizes the health and resourceful qualities of a commute by car. Saigon’s air is very poor, she regularly insists, and driving a car keeps her healthy and productive. When she picks up her friends or wants to take someone out for coffee, she asserts, she prefers to do so by car and accompany them to their destination together so that they will be protected and safe from the ugly underside of “urban” Ho Chi Minh City. She believes that her car is collectively “owned” and those close to her are therefore able to share in her successes. In speaking this way she challenges urbanization’s persistent links to individuality, selfhood, and entrepreneurship. Additionally, Ai’s purchase and use of her car combines a reshaping of the self through individual purchasing power with a reinforcement of kinship and friendship networks (see Figure 7.2).¹³

Going back to her initial wishes behind the purchase of an automobile, Ai’s sentiments are in keeping with many living in urban Southeast Asia whose transportation habits are shaped by the extremes they go to protect themselves from unsavory elements like sun, heat, humidity, traffic, air, noise, precipitation, and wind.¹⁴ Lee calls this kind of approach “infrastructural aptitude” when speaking to the skills needed for drivers to negotiate traffic in Jakarta, Indonesia.¹⁵ Driving through difficult traffic conditions is an “enabling capacity”¹⁶ that is representative of both an individualized and collective set of aspirations in cities around Southeast Asia. And although Ai does not spell it out, it could be postulated that her drive to collectivize transportation in comfortable, clean, and quiet ways suggests a desire to relocate to an imaginative elsewhere: a time when a group of friends could gather unhurriedly and peacefully reflect on their lives. The automobile provides a material and metaphorical vehicle to achieve these dreams.

The countryside is also bound up in Vietnam's car-driven aspirations. Much like To's analysis of the urban rich (*đại gia*) whose second home purchases shape the rural land markets outside of Hanoi, in 2013 a respondent of mine named Vinh and his wife bought a country home in the town of Bến Tre, a couple of hours drive south of Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁷ This is a house he claims to have purchased primarily for his first grandson after he was born. While Vinh has a large two bedroom apartment in the suburbs, and his grandson lives with his parents in a large home in another exclusive part of the city, he believes the urban threats posed to his grandson are grave: water, air, and noise pollution, crowds, and crime are his biggest concerns for his family's wellbeing in Ho Chi Minh City. He explains that his home in Bến Tre, which is used on weekends and during holidays, is a way to reproduce the Saigon that he remembers growing up in. Not by accident Vinh's patrilineage traces to Bến Tre itself, furthering his desire to bring his "urban" family full circle to a familiar countryside. In important ways the drive to and from Bến Tre forms a crucial piece of the "countryside" experience because it provides a protective shelter to relax and chat before the family arrives at the house. When I asked what he expected to do if their family expanded and they could not fit in to his car, Vinh brushed off my concern by rebutting: "I will buy a bigger car! Or we will rent an additional car and driver". Money was not a restriction to achieving a cooperatively experienced comfortable and rustic period in transit.

In Vietnam the urban rich are called *người làm tiền nhiều của* (literally translated as "people who make money (and) have a lot of property") because they "possess multiple and large properties and abundant consumer goods".¹⁸ This definition is accurate but for the purposes of this paper misses the spatial meanings attached to these material goods. What is happening in urbanizing Vietnam right now plays on processes of "ruralization" that go hand in hand with expanding material wealth and consumer choice. For many middle- and upper-class Vietnamese ruralization is time stamped with a mythical past that is captured and articulated in present-day urbanizing Vietnam. In Vinh's case much more than Ai's, Vietnam's "re-ruralization" is only possible because of his economic accomplishments in Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁹ But both of these research participants, perhaps ironically, approach the city as an expedient means of addressing urbanization's problems: the city is overcrowded and dirty yet also saturated with the particular kinds of opportunities to accumulate wealth that cannot be found elsewhere. Whether or not they accept their complicity in the city's contradictions is unclear but Ho Chi Minh City is not seen as the spatially fixed "finish line" where wealth and status are to be enjoyed. Indeed, automobiles are a kind

of time capsule capable of transporting those with money comfortably and safely through the city and to a return to the countryside.



7.1 Vietnam is a land of motorbikes, but for how much longer? Photograph taken opposite Ho Chi Minh City's downtown bus station, 2015.

Driver Education—Ruralizing Urban Space

Those urban residents without the finances to purchase an automobile are pursuing likeminded opportunities to adopt a rural sensibility in city life. In a recent development the young and aspirational are plying Ho Chi Minh City's roads as students of the exploding driving school scene. Driver education students in countries such as the United States generally believe that operating a motor vehicle is a rite of passage often accompanied by parents who gift the usage or ownership of a car. In Ho Chi Minh City, where the practice of driving an automobile does not have a historical legacy and most of the older generation are financially unable or psychologically unwilling to drive an automobile, the decision to learn how to drive without the prospect of owning a car makes sense for a number of reasons. Firstly, driving practice occurs in the city's outlying enclaves where there



7.2 Automobiles like Ai's are protected from the traffic depicted in this photo in Ho Chi Minh City, District 10, 2016.

are higher quality multilane roads, a lot of green space, fewer commuters, less traffic noise (including honking), and fewer elements of surprise to contend with. In short, these are spaces with a countryside aesthetic seen as more amenable to safety and comfort behind the wheel.

Secondly and much like my wealthy respondents discussed above, practicing how to drive in Ho Chi Minh City's fashionable tony areas means a respite from the city's intensities. In line with Wachsmuth once again, my driver education respondents continue to see their city as a "site of progress and the future, but also of depravity, impersonality, and imbalance".²⁰ Being mobile in a car, if only for a small part of the day, draws on the countryside's identity as a "site of tradition and the past, but also of morality, togetherness, and harmony".²¹

Thirdly and building from the previous point, mobility matters in urban Vietnam. Driving an automobile means having a greater opportunity for physically moving more efficiently and more quickly through and beyond the city. And yet in Vietnam the "where" of the operation of the automobile matters because class status can also be accumulated by time spent in the quieter and more "sophisticated" parts of the city.

This forms the final point of this section and the one most pertinent to the paper's arguments: even a morning or afternoon driving an automobile pieces together class mobility, transforming identity, and a sense of rural elsewhere. One of my research participants in her early thirties named Quynh described to me the potentialities inherent in driving an automobile. Besides safety, comfort, and a shift in her class standing, Quynh recalled a conversation she had with her parents about starting driving lessons. Rather than voicing concern, her mother and father embraced her choice because it meant that they could eventually purchase a family car and more frequently visit their relatives in the countryside. For Quynh, learning to drive is about aspiring to belong to a wealthier class of people but for her parents the value of driving is collective and a way to return home more regularly and comfortably. For the whole family the car is an aspirational channel to reshape their future in terms that are more closely associated with a rural-based past. While ownership of an automobile is not financially possible at present, aspirations associated with automobile ownership such as learning how to drive and obtaining a driver's license can be. These are intermittent steps taken to at once separate oneself from the city and invest in a future-oriented countryside ideal.

Conclusions

In Ho Chi Minh City the automobile is a portable way to venture into a space imagined as rural and which is regularly represented as existing in a previous era. Associating the present and future as modern and urban is nothing new in urban studies, and rural studies research is dominated by narratives connecting pastness with rurality.²² This chapter has sought to emphasize a lack of permanency in a mega-city such as Ho Chi Minh City. This lack of permanency is meant in two respects: it is neither spatially permanent nor temporally permanent. Instead, and following from my respondents, the city is noted for its instrumentality in attaining a more permanent rural *elsewhen*. In my analysis the city is a launching pad but only secondarily a destination; in a rapidly transforming society like Vietnam, the countryside is made possible (and even solidified) because of urban growth and the establishment of a middle class. This speaks to both the distinctions between and relationality among the city and the countryside in Vietnam. According to Wachsmuth, “it seems like the only thing that has been forgotten in [the recent] explosion of new critical urban research is the stubborn tenacity of the city concept itself”.²³ Yet perhaps the same thing could be said of the resolve of the countryside. In this line of thinking the stand-alone virtues of the city are minimized and the aspirations connecting people to the countryside through the city are underscored.

Notes

- 1 In Vietnam see Michael Douglass and Liling Huang, “Globalizing the City in Southeast Asia: Utopia on the Urban Edge—The Case of Phu My Hung, Saigon” *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 3, 2 (2007) 1–41; and in Cambodia see Tom Percival and Paul Waley, “Articulating Intra-Asian Urbanism: The Production of Satellite Cities in Phnom Penh” *Urban Studies* 49, 3 (2012) 2873–88.
- 2 See for example Tim Karis, “Unsettled Citizenship: National Projects and Personal Geographies in Vietnam” *Migration Studies* 4, 2 (2016) 238–52.
- 3 Such questions have been revisited and revitalized by recent work on planetary urbanization. See Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid, “Towards a New Epistemology of the Urban?” *CITY* 19, 2/3 (2015) 151–82; David Wachsmuth, “City as Ideology: Reconciling the Explosion of the City Form with the Tenacity of the City Concept” *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 31 (2014) 76–90. On the “thoroughgoing urbanization” of Southeast Asia, see Gavin W. Jones, “The Thoroughgoing Urbanization of East and Southeast Asia” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 38, 3 (1997) 237–49.
- 4 See Wachsmuth, “City as Ideology,” 80.
- 5 Jamie Gillen, “Bringing the Countryside to the City: Practices and Imaginations of the Rural in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam” *Urban Studies* 53, 2 (2016) 324–37.
- 6 Tim Bunnell, Jamie Gillen, and Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho, “The Prospect of Elsewhere: Engaging the Future through Aspirations in Asia” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 108, 1 (2018) 35–51.
- 7 On these matters Arve Hansen’s work is preeminent, see Arve Hansen, “Hanoi on Wheels: Emerging Automobility in the Land of the Motorbike” *Mobilities* (2016); Arve Hansen, “Driving Development? The Problems and Promises of the Car in Vietnam” *Journal of Con-*

- temporary Asia* 46, 4 (2016) 551–69; and Arve Hansen, “Transport in Transition: Doi Moi and the Consumption of Cars and Motorbikes in Hanoi” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 17, 2 (2017) 378–96.
- 8 For two perspectives on this phrasing, see Martin Rama, *Making Difficult Choices: Vietnam in Transition* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2008); and Melanie Beresford, “Doi Moi in Review: The Challenges of Building Market Socialism in Vietnam” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, 2 (2008) 221–43.
- 9 I have written a piece on the motorbike in Vietnam: Jamie Gillen, “Streets of Fire: Motorbike Mobilities in Vietnam” *Area* 48, 1 (2016) 64–9.
- 10 See Hansen, “Driving Development?”.
- 11 See Hansen, “Transport in Transition,” 2.
- 12 See Hansen, “Hanoi on Wheels”.
- 13 On the tensions between the group and the individual in contemporary Vietnam, see the special issue on neoliberalization, Christina Schwenkel and Ann Marie Leshkovich, “Guest Editors’ Introduction: How is Neoliberalism Good to Think Vietnam? How is Vietnam Good to Think Neoliberalism?” *Positions: Asia Critique* 20, 2 (2012) 379–401; and more recently see Ann Marie Leshkovich, “Standardized Forms of Vietnamese Selfhood: An Ethnographic Genealogy of Documentation” *American Ethnologist* 41, 1 (2014) 143–62.
- 14 The practices of Vietnam’s middle classes can be found in the “Contemporary Perspectives” section of a recent edited book, see *The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam*, eds. Van Nguyen-Marshall, Lisa B. Welch Drummond and Danièle Bélanger (London: Springer, 2012).
- 15 Doreen Lee, “Absolute traffic: Infrastructural Aptitude in Urban Indonesia” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39, 2 (2015) 234–50.
- 16 See Lee, “Absolute Traffic,” 236.
- 17 See To Xuan Phuc, “When the Dai Gia (Urban Rich) Go to the Countryside: Impacts of the Urban-Fueled Rural Land Market in the Uplands” *The Reinvention of Distinction: Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam*, eds. Van Nguyen-Marshall, Lisa B. Welch Drummond and Danièle Bélanger (London: Springer, 2012) 143–55.
- 18 See To, “When the *Đai Gia* Go to the Countryside,” 143.
- 19 See Claude Lacour and Sylvette Puissant, “Re-urbanity: Urbanising the Rural and Ruralising the Urban” *Environment and Planning A* 39 (2007) 728–47.
- 20 See Wachsmuth, “City as Ideology,” 81.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 On the expediency and contestations of the past in Vietnam’s urban renewal projects, see Christina Schwenkel, “Civilizing the City: Socialist Ruins and Urban Renewal in Central Vietnam” *Positions: Asia Critique* 20, 2 (2012) 437–70; on common tropes about the urban-rural binary, see Nguyen Tuan Anh, Jonathan Rigg, Luong Thi Thu Huong and Dinh Thi Dieu, “Becoming and Being Urban in Hanoi: Rural-urban Migration and Relations in Vietnam” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, 5 (2012) 1103–31.
- 23 See Wachsmuth, “City as Ideology,” 76.