

Transport in transition:

Doi moi and the consumption of cars and motorbikes in Hanoi

Abstract

The rapid developments in Vietnam since the economic reforms (doi moi) initiated in 1986 have led to a transformation of urban mobility. In less than 20 years motorbike ownership in the country increased ten-fold, and there are now 4 million motorbikes in Hanoi alone. While the two-wheelers dominate traffic, car ownership has increased rapidly in the last decade. This article approaches the consumption of cars and motorbikes in the Vietnamese capital from a social practice theory perspective. It particularly emphasises material conditions for practices in terms of systems of provision, available technology, and infrastructure. This emphasis, the paper argues, is necessary to account for large-scale changes in consumption in a context of rapid economic development. These conditions, however, have co-evolved with mobility practices and the local geography of consumption. Private cars in many ways represent a break with the dominant two-wheeled conditions and practices, but bring along social distinction, safety and comfort. In turn, a new automobility regime is emerging in the outskirts of Hanoi. The paper analyses these material, social and bodily pillars of practices, and based on fieldwork in Hanoi approaches the changing urban mobility in the interplay between development and everyday life.

Key words: Vietnam, transport, practice theory, mobility, development, Hanoi, doi moi

Introduction

Vietnam has undergone tremendous changes since the initiation of the economic reforms known as *doi moi*¹ in 1986. In the transition from a planned to a market economy, only the rhetoric and propaganda of socialism has survived (Hansen, 2015a). The story of *doi moi* is well known to any scholar with an interest in Southeast Asia (see e.g. Masina 2006; Fforde and DeVylder 1996 and Van Arkadie and Mallon 2003 for good overviews). In short, the

reforms consisted of a range of new policies, such as decollectivizing agriculture, allowing private economic initiatives and private accumulation and, crucially, opening up Vietnam's economy to regional and global markets. The rapid economic growth in the wake of reforms saw Vietnam move from being one of the poorest countries in Asia to becoming a so-called 'emerging economy' and even being regarded by the World Bank (2013) as a 'development success story'².

These developments have of course had a strong impact on the everyday lives of Vietnamese people, something that is particularly visible in consumption patterns. The new availability of goods after *doi moi*, the opening for private accumulation by domestic and foreign actors, and new freedoms in the realm of private acquisition and display of things have contributed to reshaping consumption (e.g. Vann, 2012). For example, shopping centres, supermarkets, upscale restaurants and other spaces of middle-class consumption have been popping up in Vietnam's cities. Nowhere are these changes as visible as in traffic, although this has received only limited attention in the literature on social and economic changes in Vietnam³.

Along with rapid economic development, Vietnam in very few years moved from being a country of bicycles to 'the land of the Honda'. The motorbike⁴ has become part of the great majority of Vietnamese households and has been seen as a symbol of the new economic prosperity in the country. The pace of the transition from bicycles to motorbikes has been extraordinary. In the words of Drummond (2012: 89): 'The changes in transportation in Hanoi over the last twenty years can be succinctly summarized as leaping from "bikes to motorbikes to cars in one generation"'. This leap has seen Vietnam go from 4 million motorbikes nationally in 1996, to the same number in Hanoi alone by 2014. Nationwide, Vietnam by 2014 was home to a staggering 39 million motorbikes (National Traffic Safety Committee in Thanh Nien News, 2014).

While motorbikes now dominate the streets, the car is emerging as a strong competitor in terms of desirability, status and scarce road space. How do we explain the exceptional influx of motorbikes and now the emergence of cars from a consumption perspective? This paper takes a social practice approach as a starting point for understanding these changes, giving particular attention to material conditions for practices. The ‘motorbike revolution’ in Vietnam cannot be understood without a consideration of changing systems of provision, as well as the important role of the bicycles that preceded it, the infrastructures designed for two wheelers and the ‘lock-in’ due to a lack of attractive transport options. The article finds that these material changes have played essential roles in co-shaping the particularities of transport in the Vietnamese capital. Cars, the paper argues, represent a break with practices of two-wheeled mobility, but allow for safer, ‘healthier’, more comfortable and more status-enhancing performance of mobility.

The article begins by discussing the social practice approach applied in this paper before a brief presentation of the research methodology on which the analysis of changing mobility is based. The subsequent part discusses the material conditions for practices in Vietnam and Hanoi, focusing on changes in systems of provision, the agency of built infrastructure and the history and decline of other suitable transport technologies. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of social and bodily factors such as status, health, safety and comfort for explaining the recent increase in car ownership, before discussing possible conceptual developments in light of the empirical material presented.

Development, practices and mobility

In recent years there has been a revival of interest in practice theory and its applications to consumption (see e.g. Warde 2005, 2014). This recent interest draws on the work of scholars

such as Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1984), and can be seen as a competing approach to both the methodological individualism of economic approaches and the emphasis on cultural expressivism in cultural approaches (Warde, 2014). Most of the neo-practice theorists draw on Reckwitz (2002: 249) definition of a practice (as *praktik* rather than *praxis*⁵) as:

a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

In the study of consumption, practice theory importantly involves a shift of focus from actions and discrete acts to common social processes, as well as a re-appreciation of the material in co-shaping consumption (Warde, 2014). Warde however also recognizes some important shortcomings of the practice approach to consumption so far, such as on the role of specific social and economic structures in co-steering consumption patterns:

theories of practice have been much better at re-describing and analysing in a distinctive way details of the use of commodities in the performances of everyday practices than they have in elucidating the institutional or systemic conditions of existence of those practices (Warde, 2014: 297-298).

Warde’s point on the need to account for systemic conditions is arguably even more crucial when studying consumption in the context of rapid development. Development processes typically involves changes in aspects such as employment, housing, income, the availability of goods and physical infrastructure, all strongly affecting consumption. The question is to what extent practice approaches can account for structural changes without losing the focus on ‘doings’ and the mundane.

The work by Sahakian and Wilhite (2014) on making ‘practice theory more practicable’ has taken the debate in the direction of a closer integration of conditions and practices. Related to the definition of a practice by Reckwitz introduced above, Sahakian and Wilhite (2014: 28)

operate with three pillars of practices: *‘the body* – including cognitive processes and physical dispositions; *the material world* – including technology and infrastructure; and *the social world* – including settings, norms, values and institutions’ (emphasis added). While their focus is on how to change practices, this also provides a good starting point for discussing the different factors shaping practices. Studying urban mobility in a context of rapid development, this paper argues for particular attention to material dimensions. A useful way to systematize economic influences on practices is by applying Fine’s (2002) concept of ‘systems of provision’. A sole focus on provision of goods, however, runs the risk of economising consumption and drowning everyday practices in production-centrism. In trying to elucidate Warde’s emphasis on ‘the institutional or systemic conditions of existence’ of practices, this paper thus focuses specifically on the interplay between urban everyday life and the material conditions enabling and constraining practices.

Mobility as practice

Transport and mobility is relevant to a wide range of practices in the urban every day. Getting from home to work, picking up children from school, going to see friends, to shop, to cafes and restaurants are practices where ‘moments of consumption’ (Warde, 2005) take place. All the bits and pieces, all the practices that form the everyday are connected by some form of transport, as the ‘spatialities of social life’ presuppose movement of people (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 208). Mobility depends on and develops along with different socio-technical systems for transportation (Geels 2005), and the ‘system of automobility’ has seen the car become a dominant means of transport globally (Urry, 2004). Vietnam, however, has so far developed a transport system dominated by what Pinch and Reimer (2012) refer to as ‘moto-mobility’. How this has been determined by the specificities of Vietnam’s development is discussed below.

Urban mobility is simultaneously integrated in a range of practices and *consisting of* a range of practices. Practices of mobility are what Schatzki (1996: 98) labels as complex ‘integrative practices’. What brings all practices of urban mobility together is, for different purposes, the goal of getting from A to B in a city (excluding practices such as ‘cruising’). The main questions from a consumption perspective is *how* and *by what means* participants in mobility practices get from A to B, as well as *why* these particular means are used. Approaching consumption as ‘the acquisition and use of things’ (Wilhite, 2008: 3), the central goal of this paper is to understand how specific technologies have come to dominate mobility in the streets of Hanoi.

Studying mobility practices: Fieldwork on two wheels

The research behind this paper is based on fieldwork in Hanoi over a total of seven months in 2012 and 2013. During this time semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with policy makers and transport experts, car and motorbike retailers, representatives for car and motorbike manufacturers and, mainly, 30 car owners and 16 motorbike owners. The latter group of informants mainly belonged to what broadly can be described as the new middle class in Hanoi⁶, although their incomes ranged from average to very high. In addition this research has benefitted from a very large number of informal talks about cars and motorbikes with people in different parts of Vietnam during numerous visits to the country since 2010. The informants were chosen through snowball sampling, based on the networks of informants, colleagues, acquaintances, as well as different research assistants⁷. Within this snowball approach, the main sampling strategy was to select informants with different backgrounds and occupations as well as different age categories and genders⁸.

Observation also constituted an important part of fieldwork. Practically all the fieldwork was conducted from a motorbike. As is common in Hanoi, I drove a motorbike more or less

everywhere I went during my stay. For interviews I would meet informants at a place of their choosing, whether at home, in their office or at a local coffee shop. This took me to a wide variety of localities in the city, often with a research assistant sitting on the back of my motorbike or following me on her or his own motorbike. Furthermore, the travel from my apartment to my office in Hanoi meant that I regularly participated in the everyday practice of commuting in Hanoi, often involving heavy traffic in the morning and afternoon peak hours. This played an important role in shaping my understanding of mobility in the Vietnamese capital, and provided a vehicle, most literally and figuratively to observe and participate in a central part of everyday life in Hanoi.

New and old material conditions for practices: *Doi moi* and mobility in Hanoi

Even as late as the 1990s, Hanoi was famous for the number of bicycles in the streets, a trend initiated during French colonialism (Arnold and Dewald, 2011). To understand the transition away from non-motorised to motorised two-wheeled transport, the changes in the systems of provision associated with *doi moi* in terms of manufacturing of motorbikes is a good place to start. While motorbikes were very much present in Vietnam and Hanoi pre-*doi moi*, it was the bicycle that was the main means of transport. Koh (2006) has found that in 1981, Hanoi was home to 600.000 bicycles and 56.000 motorbikes. Many of my informants reflected on Hanoi in the 80s and 90s as a tranquil city, where bicycles and pedestrians dominated the streets. Many of them also remembered the appeal of motorbikes during that time, and the novelty they represented in the streets. Before reforms, the motorbikes in Hanoi usually came either from former South Vietnam (through France) or from the Soviet Union, and were out of reach for most Hanoians. East Asian manufacturers had however noticed the potential market for motorbikes, and when Vietnam opened up for foreign investments as part of the reforms, the policy regime of restricting imports made Japanese and Taiwanese firms set up business in the

country in the mid-1990s (Fujita, 2013). This increased the availability of motorbikes, and the two-wheeler in many ways became the very symbol of development and reforms in Vietnam (Truitt, 2008).

Still, however, the motorbike was too expensive for most people, and the bicycle kept an important role. It was not until the early 2000s that the motorbike market really took off, along with what Fujita (2013) has termed the ‘China shock’. This consisted of Chinese copies of Japanese motorbikes making their way across the border, often illegally or circumventing import laws by arriving in the form of knockdown component kits and assembled by a rapidly increasing number of local entrepreneurs in Vietnam. This made available cheap (but usually low quality) motorbikes, but also had the effect of pushing down prices significantly on Japanese brands and eventually led to the development of more affordable Japanese models specialised for the Vietnamese market (Fujita 2013). Nationwide, the sales of motorbikes more than tripled from 500.000 in 1999 to 1.7 million in 2000 (Hansen, forthcoming).

The extraordinary consumption of motorbikes cannot be understood without these changes in the system of provision for motorbikes. From a closed planned economy dependent on imports from the Soviet bloc, Vietnam opened the gates to global and regional capitalism. The combination of the appetite for motorbikes, the investments made by Japanese and Taiwanese manufacturers, and the competition from China ensured the supply of affordable technology. Nevertheless, production determinism obviously cannot explain why people to such an extent started using motorbikes to perform mobility. As put by Warde (2005: 141), ‘[t]he effect of production on consumption is mediated through the nexus of practices’. Producers cannot dictate preferences, but they can try to convince participants of a practice that their product can enhance performance. With reforms people in Hanoi started to have some money to spend, and a large number of them were seemingly convinced that the significant investment that a motorbike represented at the time was worthwhile. This will be further discussed below, after

considering another crucial part of the material world through the built infrastructure of Hanoi, as well as the physical attributes of the motorbike allowing for a substantial continuation and enhancement of the performance of already existing practices.

Technology and built infrastructure

Sahakian and Wilhite (2014) discuss how practices have *distributed agency*, and the knowledge embedded in body, objects and social contexts have the capability to influence our acts. Concerning the agency in objects, '[o]ur dispositions towards getting around, heating and cooling our homes, and eating foods [...] are directly affected by the power of infrastructure and technology to act upon our actions' (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014: 29). The particular infrastructure of Vietnam's capital, as well as the history and availability of transport technology has been decisive in shaping mobility practices.

In Hanoi, the new economy brought along rapid urbanization, new employment, new housing and new leisure activities (Drummond, 2012), and thus required increased mobility, both intra-urban and rural-urban. Vietnam quickly developed a good network of buses and trains nationally, but failed to keep up with the rising demand for intra-urban public transport. With the old tramway from French colonial times removed in the early days of *doi moi*, the government facilitated the establishment of private bus companies. Within Hanoi, however, these have far from met the demand for transport, and the bus has anyways remained an unpopular means of transportation for those who can afford to avoid it⁹. Around the height of the motorbike 'revolution', the government in addition restricted the use of the popular *xe lam* (or 'tuk-tuk') in 2001 (Thanh Nien News 2012), the three-wheeler that still plays a central role in traffic in many other parts of Southeast Asia. This left the relatively expensive taxis, the *xe om* (motorbike taxi), or private motorbikes as the motorised transport options. And as bicycle infrastructure was not prioritised, and many saw riding the bicycle as too dangerous in

the increasingly motorised traffic, the role of the bicycle as a means of transportation started to diminish. Anyways, as Carruthers (2012: n.p.) points out, ‘[p]rosperity and complex city lifestyles where sites of dwelling, work, consumption and leisure are distant from each other create the need and desire for the kind of flexible mobility that only a private form of transport like the motorcycle can deliver’.

The interplay between increased demand for transport, government policies and available technology has thus co-shaped transport consumption in Hanoi. For the practice of urban mobility, this meant that participants in Hanoi have had a restricted set of available options. They could of course use their feet, but the use of Hanoi’s built infrastructure often makes it a city unfriendly to pedestrians. Motorbike parking¹⁰ and a wide range of businesses often crowd-out pedestrians from sidewalks, and Leather et al. (2011) finds that in today’s Hanoi the poor infrastructure is forcing people to abandon walking and cycling even though trip lengths often could make these convenient options. This was also reflected in my interviews with motorbike owners in Hanoi, and is well summarised by the answer of a young informant when asked why she used a motorbike whenever she moved around in the city (with one trip on a public bus and a few taxi trips in her lifetime the only exceptions):

It’s convenient for me, I think. [...] It’s my only choice, right. I cannot walk around Hanoi, I cannot drive a car, I don’t have one and I can’t, so yeah, motorbike is like the only choice. [...] So [...] I cannot imagine my life without a motorbike. No, that would be terrible! (Interview, November 2013).

The motorbike is now a vital part of everyday life in Hanoi, and represents the vast majority of the 80-90 percent modal share of private vehicles in the city (Asian Development Bank, 2012). The motorbike was able to fulfil a growing need for rapid mobility in a new economic context in the absence of sufficient options for public transportation. Furthermore, the

motorbike was in many ways the perfect next step from the bicycle. Not very different from it, almost as easy to operate, but so much faster! The motorbike furthermore allows for changes in the substance of practices, but it does not force these changes. In other words, it allowed Hanoians to travel further and to new places while being able to continue going all the places they did on a bicycle, just faster. As Truitt (2008: 5) has put it, ‘Unlike bicycles, motorbikes promise effortless mobility or, rather, mobility that relies on fossil fuel rather than human exertion. A motorbike user enjoys mobility without physical exertion, accelerating with a twist of the handle and braking with a slight tap on the foot pedal’.

The motorbike, following as I argue in the tire-prints of the bicycle, also fit well into the physical and economic spatialities of Hanoi. Significant parts of Hanoi’s built infrastructure are characterized by narrow roads and complex networks of small alleys (*ngo* or *nghach*¹¹ in Vietnamese). This has developed in a dialectical relationship with means of transportation; the networks of narrow alleys making bicycles and later motorbikes good options for transport, and the dominance of two-wheelers in turn allowing for these networks to be expanded. Also the geography of consumption has followed this development, as shops, cafes and other businesses usually only have space for two-wheelers to park, and many shopping practices are even carried out without leaving the vehicle. The infrastructure thus makes the motorbike a highly flexible means of transportation. Hanoians bring their motorbikes everywhere, and motorbikers can drive right to the front door of any store, market, cafe or office. Back home, the motorbike usually follows the rider inside the house. At night time a very high percentage of Hanoian homes will have one or several motorbikes parked in the living room. Practically any practice can be carried out with a motorbike, such as driving children to school, commuting to work, hanging out with the girlfriend or boyfriend, transporting objects of impressive size (including furniture and quite large animals), or shopping at the market or roadside shops. In other words, although I have here mainly approached the motorbike

through the practices of urban mobility, it takes part in and co-shapes a large variety of other practices.

The above discussion shows that while the production explanation for the popularity of the motorbike is crucial, it does not give us the whole picture. The fact that the motorbike allows for mobility to be performed with less effort and higher convenience than the bicycle, as well as the relationship between motorbikes and the geography and demography of Hanoi, are equally important to explain its popularity. From the perspective of distributed agency, the dispositions towards two-wheeled mobility have shaped and been shaped by infrastructure, the geography of consumption, and available technology.

Furthermore, the combination of a growing demand for mobility and a lack of alternative means of transportation in Hanoi have created a 'lock-in' effect, as is indicated by my young informant above. There seems to be a general feeling among Hanoians that driving a motorbike is the only option for getting around town. While this may not be completely accurate, it does hold a great deal of truth. At least the motorbike is the most accessible option for participating in everyday practices and for carrying out the integrative practices of urban mobility in the new Hanoi. The high dependency on the motorbike, as well as the extreme numbers of them in the streets of Hanoi, in turn limits the attractiveness of non-motorised transport. The question now is thus usually not whether the bicycle will regain popularity, but to what extent the car will and should represent the 'next step' in transport consumption.

Enter the car

Widespread car ownership represents a more recent phenomenon in Hanoi traffic, but after the mid-2000s cars have become a more common sight. Between 2005 and 2011 car ownership in Hanoi increased by 222 percent, and there are now more than 200.000 cars in the city (World Bank, 2014). This is very far from the about 2 million new motorbikes that

entered the city in the same period (World Bank, 2014), but the car's much higher demand for street space still makes this a significant development (World Bank, 2011; Hansen, forthcoming).

Doi moi has certainly made cars easier to acquire. As with the motorbike, reforms have both increased the availability of cars and for some provided the financial means to purchase one. Furthermore, as discussed by Hansen (forthcoming), Vietnam has targeted the automobile industry to become a 'spearhead industry', i.e. one of the core industries to drive the overall economic development of the country. Nevertheless, cars have not experienced the same explosive growth in numbers as motorbikes. An important part of the reason for this is the fact that cars have not been subject to the lower prices that was the case for motorbikes after the 'China shock'. Detrimental to the attempts to develop a domestic automobile industry, the Vietnamese government has limited car ownership through very high taxes and fees, in turn unintentionally favouring motorbike ownership (keeping in mind the lack of public transport, as discussed above). This has made cars very expensive and accessible only to the relatively wealthy. There are signs that the policies are changing, and there is now much discussion of limiting the number of motorbikes. Furthermore, due to requirements from the ASEAN free trade agreement (AFTA), Vietnam will have to remove restrictions on imported cars by 2018. This could lead to an influx of imported cars from other Southeast Asian countries, and could potentially lower prices significantly (see Hansen, forthcoming).

In addition to much higher financial costs, the car represents a break with the two-wheeled performance of mobility. Hanoi's built infrastructure and geography of consumption make the car in many ways highly inconvenient and inflexible. The cars cannot access the many mazes of the capital¹², cannot stop to allow the driver to shop, eat or drink along the streets, and cannot be parked inside the living room. Parking is indeed a chronic nightmare for car-owners in Hanoi, as available parking space in the capital has been calculated to be able to

accommodate 10 percent of the total number of cars (Hanoi People Committee 2011). Thus, the car disallows the old practices of the bicycle, and is not an improvement on the motorbike in terms of performing the practice of mobility faster. However, those able to afford a car are to an increasing extent living in ‘new urban areas’ of Hanoi. These have been rapidly increasing in numbers, are situated outside of the city centre, and are usually surrounded by road networks built to accommodate cars in addition to coming with parking facilities for cars (Hoai Anh Tran, 2014). These are also complemented by car-friendly supermarkets and giant shopping malls, together reducing the ‘need’ to enter the central parts of the city.

Again, the changes in systems of provision together with higher incomes have made cars easier to acquire, although less so than motorbikes. While the infrastructure of Hanoi is not particularly car-friendly, in a co-dependent relationship with urban planning, the real estate market and new spaces of consumption, the allure of cars is currently contributing towards the construction of a new Hanoi outside the city centre in which increasing car ownership is embedded in the expectations of future mobility. Furthermore, the appeal of the car is often related to the social and bodily pillars of practices through a combination of status and concerns for comfort, health and safety.

The allure of the private automobile: Safety, health and status

Motorbikes still dominate the streets of Hanoi, and still represent the most essential technology for moving around and spatially connecting practices in the city. Private cars are still in many ways inconvenient in the central parts of the city. They do however add dimensions to mobility that the motorbikes do not. Most visibly, the private car brings significant status in the new economy in Vietnam. While motorbikes used to fill this role, cars now greatly outperform two-wheelers in terms of the symbolic value attached to their

ownership (Hansen & Nielsen, 2014)¹³. In ways that would have been socially impossible before economic reforms, the cars in Hanoi in important ways serve as ‘distinction on wheels’ (Hansen, 2015b). Furthermore, while it was stated above that motorbikes can be used to fulfil almost any mobility demand in Hanoi, this does not always involve convenience or comfort. The car is generally seen an improvement over both bicycle and motorbike, where driver and passengers are exposed to the hot sun in the summer, cold in winter, and the risk of being drenched in the frequent Hanoi rain showers. The motorcyclist gets wet and dirty in the many Hanoi floods, suffers discomfort on trips over longer distances and is subject to the dangers of meeting a car or a bus on narrow roads. In the words of one motorbike owner:

Because of the dust, the pollution, the motorbike is not convenient. And the weather. And the traffic, the traffic jams, it's so polluted. It's really bad. Or when it rains or it's too hot. In the middle of the summer you don't want to go outside, let alone drive a motorbike. And it [driving a motorbike] makes you very, very dirty (Interview, October 2013, own translation).

The car allows its users to move around in the city while all the time being inside the comfortable shell of the private automobile, staying pale, cool and dry in the process. Another informant, a young Hanoian businesswoman owning both a car and a motorbike, reflected on how *‘it's more convenient to be inside the car. Because it's clean and, you know, [on a motorbike] after coming back home my face will be black because of the dust’* (Interview, March, 2013, own translation).

The importance of the physical properties of the car increases in the context of heavy urban pollution. As Hansen (forthcoming) discusses, air pollution is a serious problem in Hanoi, with the level of respirable particles up to 10 times the WHO recommended levels (East-West Center et al. 2007), something that is leading to respiratory disease and premature deaths every year. The popular facemasks worn by most motorbike drivers make driving more comfortable, but do not keep these particles out. A private car then becomes a heavily

polluting way to escape pollution. This was highlighted by car owners in Hanoi, and has interestingly made driving a car being considered as a healthy option. Avoiding pollution and protecting the health of drivers and their family was indeed emphasized by many of my car-owning informants as the main reasons for acquiring a car. As one young, female car (and motorbike) owner stated: *'family has a big effect on what we want to use for transport. Because I have a baby, so I want to protect her from air pollution and things. So if I go with her I prefer to use car or taxi. But if not, if only me or my husband I prefer to go by motorbike'* (Interview, October, 2013). Measurements made by the East-West Center et al. (2007) have shown that in many ways the car is indeed 'healthier' than motorbikes. The use of air-conditioning in cars significantly reduced exposure to particle emissions, and those most exposed were those on motorbikes¹⁴. Furthermore, motorbikes involve significant risk, something that the very high traffic casualty levels in Vietnam bear witness to (Short and Pinet-Peralta 2010). Due to this, a male foreign professional told me how he felt safer having 'some tons of German steel' around him in the Hanoi traffic¹⁵, while a male government official presented this pragmatic reason for acquiring a car: *'If you go by motorbike you use meat to cover the motorbike, but if you go by car, you use metal to cover yourself'* (Interview, April, 2012, own translation)

My car owning informants would thus mainly focus on comfort and concerns for health and safety when explaining their reason for acquiring a car. Crucially, however, very few of them got rid of their motorbike after they acquired a car. This allowed them to be flexible in their performance of mobility, using the motorbike to travel to the narrower streets of downtown Hanoi when the weather was nice, while using the car in bad weather, when more than two persons were travelling together, or when it for other reasons may seem more appropriate. In other words, car owners are able to perform the practices of mobility in a safer and more comfortable manner, and can use the motorbike to perform practices where cars are 'locked

out'. Furthermore, depending on the type of practice(s) connected through mobility, different technologies are used. While going alone to the market is fine by motorbike or even bicycle¹⁶, bulk shopping at a supermarket, or taking the family across town, makes the car a more tempting option. A businessman may use his motorbike to hang out with friends, but would opt for an expensive-looking car when meeting business partners (Hansen, 2015b).

Another dimension introduced by cars is not necessarily directly related to *urban* mobility, but rather to escaping the city. In the relatively new practices of domestic tourism, many of my informants highlighted the possibility of taking the family on weekend trips as an important reason for buying a car. Similarly, the common practice of returning to the *que*, or rural hometown, at least once a year was highlighted by many informants. While the bus network allows for public transport here, a car adds a dimension of flexibility and freedom. In the words of Sheller and Urry (2000: 743-744),

It is possible to leave late by car, to miss connections, to travel in a relatively timeless fashion. People find pleasure in travelling when they want to, along routes that they choose, finding new places unexpectedly, stopping for relatively open-ended periods of time, and moving on when they desire.

The car provides a private space for drivers and passengers while allowing for flexibility and comfort in the process of reaching the destination. Interestingly, several of my informants noted that although they greatly appreciated not having to rent a car, they would still rent a *driver* for their private car when going on longer trips. This could be a sign of the importance assigned to owning a car, but also points to the low-cost of labour and the purchasing power of the Vietnamese middle class.

Providing a unique way of performing 'middle-classness' as well as the possibility of getting around and out of town while staying safe and comfortable has given the private car a central position in the aspirations of the Hanoian middle-class. Foreign automobile manufacturers

have been in place in Vietnam since the 1990s, and are still waiting for the expected boom in car ownership (Hansen, forthcoming). Nevertheless, *doi moi* has so far made Hanoi a predominantly ‘moto-mobile’ city, and the high density of central areas of the city provides scripts for the continuation of two-wheeled transport. The dominance of two-wheeled mobility has recently been further strengthened by the increasing popularity of electric bicycles and electric scooters¹⁷. Even the bicycle is returning in new and more expensive forms, although seemingly more as a means of exercise (and, arguably, distinction) for the well-off rather than as a competitive technology in the practices of urban mobility. Hanoi thus remains highly motorised, and certainly remains a very interesting case for studying the complexity of consumption and mobility.

Development, mobility and everyday life

The discussion above shows that *doi moi* has provided the material conditions necessary for the consumption of motorbikes and cars as parts of the overall practice of urban mobility. Changes in systems of provision along with rising incomes have made this possible. For motorbikes, the prevalence of bicycles together with Hanoi’s infrastructure and consumption geography has made for a smooth entry of the new technology into existing practices. Cars represent a break with the dominant two-wheeled mobility, but overall the material characteristics of the car offer for practices of mobility to be carried out in a safer and more comfortable manner. From Sahakian and Wilhite’s three pillars of practices, the paper has discussed how the material (provision of goods, infrastructure, technology), social (concern for family, status, old and new forms of social interactions) and the body (health, safety, ‘effortless’ mobility) together have ‘structured’ (Giddens, 1984) the specificities of mobility in Hanoi.

The findings are context specific, and the analysis first and foremost relevant for Vietnam and Hanoi. As Warde (2005: 139) puts it, ‘the substantive forms that practices take will always be conditional upon the institutional arrangements characteristic of time, space and social context’. Still, it is possible to draw some conceptual implications relevant for the study of consumption in general, particularly when concerning changing consumption patterns in a context of rapid development. That macroeconomic changes must play a part in such an analysis is clear, but, as pointed out by Miller (1995) and Fine (2002), the economic dimension has tended to disappear in social and cultural approaches to consumption. The practice approach adopted in this paper allows for systems of provision to be included as an agent of change and a condition for practices. Practice theory thus opens for discussing consumption in the meeting of systems of provision with the social and material landscapes of everyday life. Rather than a new approach, this article thus represents a slight shift of focus, by combining a bottom-up study of everyday practices with an account of structural changes. Specifically including economic development in a paper on social practices, it has thus been an attempt to analytically include economic shifts without reducing individuals to ‘passive subjects reproducing discourses and structures of consumption framed by producers’ (Mansvelt, 2005: 14).

Methodologically, the research behind this paper has studied practices mainly through participating in them and through discussing them with some of their ‘carriers’. It has also included the consideration of larger processes through studying documents and talking to policy makers and economic actors. But mainly the research has been conducted through engaging in everyday life in the streets of Hanoi. It is in the streets the changes discussed in the paper materialize. That the technology is available is a necessary but insufficient variable in the explanation of the consumption of goods in the performance of practices. It is individuals with reflexive capacities who are carriers of the practices discussed, who consume

the relevant technologies and inhabit the streets of Hanoi in their cars and on their motorbikes and bicycles. But their agency is shared with material and social structures and embodied dispositions (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014). In other words, while an individual can decide to buy and use a motorbike, this decision is just a small part of the overall process that led to this specific performance of agency. As I have suggested in this paper, in Hanoi this decision must be understood in the context of practices of urban mobility, whose substantive features in turn must be understood in the context of the development of the motorcycle industry, the urban infrastructure and geography of consumption in Hanoi, and the wide range of practices connected by ‘moto-mobility’. Through this combination, driving a motorbike has become ‘normalised’, in turn conditioning further recruitment to the overall practice of two-wheeled motorised mobility. The question for the future is to what extent it will remain ‘normal’, or if the ‘motorcycle Kuznets curve’ (Nishitatenno and Burke, 2014) will materialise in Hanoi, in other words if the motorbike will diminish in importance as economic growth reaches a certain level. If so, following the argument made in this paper, this will again co-develop with changes in income, norms, infrastructure, systems of provision, and available technology. Together with national and local government policy interventions, these factors will determine the future substance of Hanoian mobility and thus to a significant extent the substantive features of Hanoian everyday life.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most visible materialisation of reforms and development in Vietnam are to be found in the streets of its cities. As this paper has discussed, the extraordinary consumption of motorbikes must be understood in relation to the macro-level changes of *doi moi* in conjunction with the local history of mobility, the built environment and everyday practices of

mobility and consumption. In a context of increased need and desire for mobility, motorbikes fulfil a demand not met by any other technology. Motorbikes connect the social spatialities of the new Hanoi, and allow its inhabitants to participate in a wide range of practices associated with the post-*doi moi* Vietnamese society. Cars do not represent the kind of ‘revolution’ that the motorbike did, as Hanoi is already ‘motorised’. They do however allow the same practices to be carried out in a safer and more comfortable manner, while also allowing its driver to be mobile and display social status at the same time. The physicality of cars provides for safer, ‘healthier’ and cleaner performance of mobility, in many ways compensating for the inconvenience of narrow streets and lack of parking facilities.

Car ownership is generally expected to increase in Hanoi and Vietnam, and cars are in Hanoi often seen as a step up the ladder from the motorbike. From the provision side, the Vietnamese government is still both pushing for developing the automobile industry and significantly limiting its so far only major market. China, having had similar restrictive policies in the past, turned towards favouring individual car consumption in order to boost the domestic automobile industry (Gallagher, 2006). This is yet to occur in Vietnam, although there are signs that this may happen in the near future. Nevertheless, motorbikes will certainly continue to play a dominant role in Hanoi traffic, now also accompanied by greener two-wheeled technology.

In addition to empirically investigating an understudied case of changing consumption, this paper has aimed to conceptually consider how to approach large scale changes in consumption outside the mature capitalist world. This analysis has thus applied a practice approach to a context of large scale socio-economic change. This has involved placing much focus on the material conditions for practices, particularly infrastructure and systems of provision. The main theoretical point here is that studies of consumption in contexts of rapid development face the challenge of accounting for changing economic conditions without

turning to production-centrism. Theories of practice, with their re-appreciation of materiality and focus on common social processes, and if combined with grounded empirical research, hold the potential for providing the necessary holistic theoretical framework for such an endeavour.

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Notes

¹ *Doi moi* literally translates as ‘change towards something new’, but is usually translated as ‘renovation’ both inside and outside Vietnam.

² While *doi moi* in many ways has been a ‘success story’ it is important to remember that Vietnam is still overall a relatively poor, lower middle-income country, that a significant part of the population is struggling below or slightly above the national poverty line, and that inequality has been increasing rapidly (see Hansen, 2015a).

³ On the supply side, the motorcycle industry has been well researched by Fujita (2013). In the consumption literature Truitt (2008) has discussed motorbikes extensively, while Earl (2014) briefly discusses driving practices for middle-class women in Ho Chi Minh City. Drummond (2012) also touches upon changing transport consumption during *doi moi*.

⁴ I use, as is common practice in Vietnam, the general term motorbike for all kinds of two-wheelers. The most popular types are between 100 and 125 cc fully or ‘semi-automatic’ bikes, many of which could also be referred to as scooters.

⁵ Reckwitz (2002; 249) separates between practice (praxis) and practices (praktik), where the former is a way of describing ‘the whole of human action’ and the latter the ‘routinised type of behaviour’ that is subject to analysis by practice theory.

⁶ As Gainsborough (2010) discusses extensively, the middle class is not easy to define in Vietnam. I use the term in this paper mainly to make clear that none of my informants belong to the poorer segments of Hanoi. My informants held a range of different occupations, such as publically employed researchers, employees of international NGOs, businessmen working in international and domestic companies and government officials.

⁷ I used a total of five different Vietnamese research assistants as a deliberate strategy to get access to informants through their networks. These were all higher educated young professionals (four female, one male). As my Vietnamese language skills are not good enough to perform interviews, my assistants also served as interpreters were necessary.

⁸ When asking for car owners, many knew people they thought I should talk to. And, perhaps relating to the status attached to a car today, the great majority of car owners I met were more than happy to discuss their cars with me. The situation was somewhat different when I was choosing my motorbike informants, since such a high percentage of Hanoians are motorbike owners. The sampling strategy then was to look for informants who were considered to be rather well off, but who did not own a car.

⁹ My informants commonly described rather negative experiences with the bus, and saw it as dirty, uncomfortable and dangerous. Of all my interviews, only one older woman said she had used the bus frequently. However, she felt the behavior of bus drivers had turned towards the worse and now preferred using taxi or her old Honda Dream motorbike.

¹⁰ The local authorities in Hanoi has tried to crack down on the use of sidewalks for parking and business, and during my time in Hanoi in 2012 and 2013 police patrols frequently fined perpetrators. But in the lack of a comprehensive strategy, it so far seems to be failing.

¹¹ A *ngo* is a narrow alley springing out of a larger street, often still keeping the name of the main street. A *nghach* in turn springs out of a *ngo* and is usually even narrower. Sometimes *hem* is used instead of *nghach*.

¹² Every now and then drivers try pushing their cars through some of the small alleys, always causing instant chaos as they completely block the street for others.

¹³ However, certain models of motorbikes still fulfill this function. The luxury market for motorbikes is booming in Vietnam, and particularly the expensive models by the Italian manufacturer Piaggio are popular (Hansen, 2015b).

¹⁴ Being inside a bus actually reduced it even further, but this was usually not raised by my informants as an alternative.

¹⁵ This statement is from a casual conversation in Hanoi (February, 2013), not an interview.

¹⁶ Going to the local wet market was one practice where several of my (female) informants stated that they still used bicycle.

¹⁷ Requiring neither a license nor a helmet, so far these new technologies seem to compete more with bicycles than motorised transport.