

Bringing the countryside to the city: practices and imaginations of the rural in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Abstract: By zeroing in on the spatial tensions of the urban experience, this paper examines the countryside's role as a set of everyday practices and imaginative discourses in the growth and transformation of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The argument centers on how urban residents draw on material practices and symbolic discourses of the "rural" to imbue the city with meaning. In doing so, this paper adds another dimension to the literature on Southeast Asian cities by illustrating how Ho Chi Minh City institutions and residents enliven the value of the countryside through urban development. Related to this, I highlight how the folding of the countryside in to the city does not deprive either rural or urban space of meaning. In sum, the findings contribute to debates surrounding the Southeast Asian region in urban theorizing, the countryside's role in linking the "rural" and the "urban", and the classic "push" and "pull" factors involved in rural-urban migration by rethinking the urban/rural binary in Vietnam.

Key words: urban/rural binary, countryside, rural, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Tariq Jazeel and Tim Bunnell for their support through the conceptualization and writing of this paper. Colleagues in the Social and Cultural Geography group and the Politics, Economy, and Space group at NUS Geography helped a great deal, too. Thank you to audiences at the Geographies of Aspirations workshop (National University of Singapore), the Doing Asian Cities workshop (Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore), the Association of American Geographers meetings in New York, and the University of Hawaii Geography department for sharing their ideas with me. Jane Jacobs, Jim Glassman, Allen Tran, and Le Si Duy provided valuable feedback as well. Lastly, I'm grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewers for adding a great deal to the paper.

Funding: The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Singapore Ministry of Education AcRF Tier 2 Grant on 'Aspirations, Urban Governance and the Remaking of Asian Cities', grant number: MOE2012-T2-1-153.

Introduction

This paper introduces how the “rural”—as a set of everyday practices and imaginative discourses—becomes a spatial force shaping Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam’s largest city. The arguments follow from more recent urban literature that has questioned the normative assumptions of a city’s borders and adopted a less “bounded, easily demarcated or contained” (Robinson, 2005: 162) conceptualization of cities in order to address “the complexity of city social and political life (and) the diversity of economic activities and flows” (*ibid.*). Relatedly, the paper draws from and intends to contribute to literatures that trouble the divisions between the countryside and the city (e.g., Olsson, 2012; Lacour and Puissant 2007; Rigg and Ritchie 2002; Jones, 1997) by investigating how rurality is “imagined, represented, and contested” (Woods, 2009b: 429) in urban Vietnam. This paper’s core argument is that Ho Chi Minh City’s process of urbanization cannot be adequately understood without a careful consideration of the countryside’s role in its development, and in particular from residents’ everyday activities and their understandings of the changing face of the city. This position responds to Jackson’s contention that “urban geographers...have been reluctant to question their wholesale commitment to social science, which almost invariably sees the natural world as external to the social” (2005: 2). In Ho Chi Minh City I assert that the “rural” is not natural and external to the city’s growth but is an important component in the way in which the city is practiced and understood by residents. Thus, the paper approaches the question of “what is a city?” through the lens of the interaction between the countryside and the city. Instead of considering how the city expands *outward* in its development, swallowing up periurban areas and dissolving rural practices and ideas, Ho Chi Minh City citizens demonstrate that a counteracting phenomenon is also occurring: city

residents are drawing on material practices and symbolic discourses of the rural to imbue the city with meaning.

In making this contention I outline three linked points. First, in Asia there is a tendency to concentrate on how actors and their practices become more mobile and fluid¹ once they are able to leave the countryside (Thao, 2013; Nguyen, Rigg, Luong, and Dinh, 2012; Agergaard and Thao, 2011; Earl, 2004). This point reinforces the divisions between urban and rural territories and practices. This paper argues for a more complex and fluid picture of the urban/rural binary in Southeast Asia—one that has been outlined most classically by McGee (1991; 1967) and more recently by scholars like Elinoff (2012), Harms (2011a, 2011b), Bunnell (2002), Rigg (2003), and Jones (1997)—by tracing the practices and imaginations of urban residents in Vietnam’s primate city. Instead of asking how rural migrants “become urban” in Vietnam (Nguyen, Rigg, Luong, and Dinh, 2012), this paper is concerned with how the rural transforms the urban experience (see Karis, 2013). It is an intention of this paper to add a layer of analytic richness to existing studies of Southeast Asian urbanization by examining the relationship between the rural and the urban without seeking to deprive either category of their significance to everyday urban life.

Secondly, implicit to debates surrounding the growing importance of the urban in Asia is to question what place “the rural” has in society (e.g. Barker, Harms, and Lindquist, 2012; Peters, 2012; Taylor, 2011; Rimmer and Dick, 2009). In this paper the countryside’s role in urban development is enlivened by tracing some of the ways in which city life is changed by practices that are described as “rural” in nature. The claim made here is that in Ho Chi Minh City the countryside’s value to the city has perhaps become more foundational in light of Vietnam’s recent urban development. I

¹ Albeit with the acknowledgement that these fluidities are highly unequal, see Wong and Rigg, 2011.

assess how city residents incorporate elements of the rural in to the city to make it a more livable and meaningful place. In this sense I seek to rethink what constitutes the classic “push” and “pull” factors of the city and the countryside by demonstrating that the city does not always “pull” rural residents in to the city and transform them in to urban dwellers. How is the countryside shaped and used in city life, and how does the city transform as a result of the incorporation of the rural?

Lastly, the third point to make is to illustrate that Ho Chi Minh City is not necessarily less of a city, nor does it lose its urban characteristics, when its residents draw on the rural to describe it. In other words, the city is not deprived of its “urban-ness” when the rural imbues it with meaning. The paper reinforces the point that the city’s interplay with the countryside is a much more crucial node by which to analyze processes of urbanization than to examine the oppositions between the two spatial areas (see Lacour and Puissant 2007). This stance has implications for how we conceptualize the urban and urban territorialization (Watson, 2011) in Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and the Global South more generally.

The paper unfolds as follows. The next section situates cities in Southeast Asia and Vietnam in relation to debates surrounding the complexity of the urban-rural divide. The subsequent section outlines contemporary Vietnamese processes of urbanization since the onset of “đổi mới”, the market reform period begun in the late 1980s that has rapidly urbanized the country (though see Labbé’s work historicizing urbanization in Hanoi (2014)). Though work on the causal factors leading to Ho Chi Minh City’s rapid urban growth has been developed (Luong, 2009), with few exceptions the connections between and boundaries separating urban and rural space have not been sufficiently addressed. Ho Chi Minh City, as Vietnam’s most populous

city, is the “engine” that drives the rest of the country (Nguyễn Võ, 2008; Taylor, 2003) and an appropriate space within which to rethink the urban-rural binary.

The empirical portion of this manuscript is separated in to two sections: the first addresses practices represented as “rural” in Ho Chi Minh City and the second sheds light on metropolitan inhabitant imaginations of the countryside. By way of a disclaimer, the empirical section is not concerned with strict definitions of the city and the countryside in Ho Chi Minh City because following Jacobs (2012: 412) “the spatiality of city dwellers is stretched between here and there...(and) where cities end and rurality begins is unclear”. Instead, the arguments in this paper are interested in disclosing how the spatial categories of rural and urban are understood in Ho Chi Minh City, how the countryside is strengthened and reinforced in the city rather than abandoned or forgotten, and how the countryside’s meanings are transformed as a result of Vietnam’s urbanization. The conclusion is used to review these arguments with respect to relocating the center of urban “theory-making” to the Global South (Roy, 2009).

Questioning the rural-urban division in Southeast Asia and Vietnam

This paper considers Ho Chi Minh City as a site to investigate the “fading of the city into the countryside” (Roy, 2009: 820). If cities in the Global South like Ho Chi Minh City are at the vanguard of new calls to formulate “urban theorizing from below” (*ibid.*, 820) then this paper aims to demonstrate a certain falseness inherent to the rural-urban spatial division. Though separated analytically for conceptual clarity and organization, one of my overarching arguments in this paper is that contemporary urban processes are often driven by historically contingent rural experiences (Elinoff, 2012) and that imaginations of the countryside inform the aspirational goals of urban residents. I aim to recover the now commonplace assertion made through much

empirical evidence covering urban Southeast Asia that rural-to-urban migrants and their practices are considered “backward, greedy, undeveloped, uneducated, and uncivilized” by the urban middle- and upper-classes (Elinoff, 2012: 383). In other words, what Woods calls the “performativity of rural life and rural experiences” (2009b: 440) is often framed in “regressive” ways in urban development schemes in Southeast Asia (see Hirsch, 2012; Rigg and Ritchie 2002). Under these characterizations government officials and the urban wealthy consider the city to be under their exclusive domain and rural-to-urban migrants to be in need of improvement once they arrive in the city. In Ho Chi Minh City, for example, district authorities outside of the city “lamented the ways in which their capacity to make local decisions was overruled by authorities from the urban core, who disparaged their capacity for making informed decisions, and often dismissed them as under-educated rural simpletons” (Harms, 2011b: 460). Karis similarly notes that some Hanoians are prepared to defend their territory because they are “being besieged by ruralisation” (2013: 263) and its corresponding ill-fitting behaviors. He also discusses the ways in which migrants from rural Vietnam bring cultural activities from their home villages to Hanoi and how they are received by native Hanoians (for an associated tension among Indian migrants in Singapore, see Velayutham and Wise, 2005).

On the other hand, the arguments in this paper illustrate that there is a need to qualify the lionization of the Southeast Asian “rural” as being a bastion of spatial purity alongside a frenetic and depraved city. Indeed, it remains the case that for many in Southeast Asia “the ‘rural idyll’ supposes a peaceful nature, an open, beautiful, protected, and pleasant countryside” (Lacour and Puissant 2007: 735). For example, “kampung”, or “village” in Malay, is elevated as a gleaming example of Malayness compared to “the morally problematic Malaysian city life characterized by

a lack of civic consciousness and community spirit” (Bunnell, 2002: 1695, and for similar examples from China, see Oakes, 2012; Chio, 2011). While Harms is interested in the flexibility of the categories of the rural and the urban, he argues that “the spaces of the city are typically divided into the categories of rural and urban...but what these categories mean can shift...according to context” (2011b: 458). The “rural”, he states “represents not only a place, but a way of life” where some urban residents exist “as repositories of a “village cultural character” (bản sắc văn hóa làng xã)” (2011b: 459). Peters’ respondents lament that they are invisible in a chaotic, wealthy, and crowded Ho Chi Minh City; they are “cô hồn” (wandering ghosts) who are “symbols of anonymity in the city” (2012: 553) and whose “unsettled lives” (*ibid.*: 559) in urban life are by turns settled and meaningful in their countryside homes.

This paper offers a less divisional relationship between the city and countryside than the evidence offered above, especially as the urban-rural association relates to Ho Chi Minh City’s urban growth and change. It seeks to show that practices and imaginations of the countryside are implemented in more subtle and everyday ways that render the urban-rural division problematic. Following from Brenner, et al., the paper’s overarching argument questions the separation of the rural and the urban as it relates to everyday life in the city: “the town/country divide that once appeared to offer a stable, even self-evident, basis for delineating the specificity of city settlements, today appears increasingly as an ideological remnant of early industrial capitalism that maps only problematically onto contemporary urban processes” (2011: 226).

Indeed, it is tempting to consider the city to be engaged in a “zero-sum game” with the rural; the city holds a particular type of regimented spatial character that is

under threat of being undercut by rural practices and sensibilities. Likewise, the countryside's pristine, stable, and natural environment is at risk of being diluted by an influx of destructive urban trends. This paper shows that these assessments are more spatial myths than representations of reality. The relationality of the city and countryside in Ho Chi Minh City does not rob it of its "city"-ness: it remains a growing, contested, and highly differentiated urban space (for examples of this in Ho Chi Minh City see Hoang, 2011, Kim, 2008). Both the rural and the urban occupy a central place in contemporary Vietnamese society and are equally lambasted as cultural backwaters in need of development, particularly by governmental authorities whose authority in part rest on officially categorizing space as either rural or urban in order to pursue their growth agendas (Harms, 2011b: 461). To this point Harms adds that "being identified as rural signals a mode of life which has both material and symbolic dimensions" (*ibid.*: 464). I would augment this argument by mentioning that the urban also represents a mode of life with practical and emblematic dimensions, and it is the interplay between the rural and urban in Ho Chi Minh City that is explored below.

In sum, we lack an understanding of how urbanite understandings of the countryside feed new forms of urban becoming, disillusionments, and desires; how the rural generates and governs specific arrangements of institutions, people, and imaginations in the city; how it frames goal-setting; how the countryside factors in to urban livability; how it serves as a imaginative spatial "fix" for the uncertainties of the urban environment; and how urban potential is useful in supporting the countryside and its ideals. Moreover, what are the ramifications when the "everydayness" of the city is labeled, practiced, and represented as a set of "rural" activities? On the issue of spatial complexity rural geographers have made important

connections between the rural and the urban because they showcase the “renewed interest in the empirical investigation of the spatial settings in which rural and urban identities are most entangled and rural-urban distinctions most elusive” (Woods, 2009a: 852). The next section contextualizes Ho Chi Minh City’s growth as the country has become urbanized under the market reforms of the 1980s and introduces the countryside’s role in urban development in Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh City: growth and anxiety in Vietnam’s largest city

The Vietnamese government’s market reform policies (called *đổi mới*, or “new change”) have been heralded as a critical juncture in the explosion of Vietnam’s urban productivity and have been pointed to as a primary driver of the country’s recent urban population growth (Rama, 2008). There is significant existing research showing that Vietnam’s market reform policies have been urban-led policies, such as relaxing rural-urban migration restrictions, easing tax and real estate impediments for foreign-owned businesses, designating cities as provincial municipalities, and allowing city authorities to target outlying, periurban areas for annexation and development (Labbé and Musil, 2014; Tai and Sidel, 2012; Kim, 2008). Ho Chi Minh City is considered the shining star of the Vietnamese state’s market reforms if judged by percentage of the country’s Gross Domestic Product and external trade (Gainsborough, 2010; 2003). Luong highlights official data on the rapid increase of migrants to the city since market reform began: “The net migration inflow to Ho Chi Minh City, the largest urban center in Vietnam, increased from 14,872 a year from 1984 to 1989, to about 100,000 a year in the 1989-99 period, and over 200,000 a year from 1999 to 2004” (Luong, 2009: 1).

As it now stands Ho Chi Minh City can claim to house 10% of Vietnam’s population inclusive of temporary and permanent inhabitants (Dang, 2008: 185), a figure that asserts Ho Chi Minh City’s primacy and transient population in Vietnam.

Moreover, the relatively young age of Vietnam's citizens gives Ho Chi Minh City a strong sense of prospect or potentiality, as if the city's "best" (e.g., stronger economic growth, continuing rapid urban population increase, a better educated population) days are in front of it (Elliott, 2012; Peters 2012).

Research on Vietnam's northern capital illustrates that privileged urban middle- and upper-classes escape from Hanoi's population explosion by seeking "refuge from the hectic city life" in the countryside where they own second homes (To, 2012: 144). Preliminary studies on contemporary upper-class and middle-class Vietnamese argue that for those who can afford to purchase second homes in the countryside both urban and rural Vietnam provide them with the "best of two worlds": the city delivers a generous living and the countryside is a self-contained space where one can bask in the peace, quiet, and authenticity of the countryside (Bélanger, Drummond, and Nguyen-Marshall, 2012). However as To notes, in contemporary Vietnam second-homes are more frequently purchased and inhabited by those with ties to the state government, where easy access to state coffers, the relative wealth of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and strong business connections lead to an often well-heeled segment of government official (2012). What institutions have been developed to provide a rural experience in Ho Chi Minh City for residents who don't have the wealth to purchase a second home in the countryside? Moreover, only tangentially (if at all) do commentators speculate on the social transformations and changing identities of temporary urban inhabitants without access to SOEs or well-developed business connections. The ways in which the tensions between rural and urban space are actively and imaginatively produced in light of Vietnam's project of urbanization are largely unknown. It is to the practices of urban residents illustrate how the rural "lives" in everyday Ho Chi Minh City that I now turn.

Practicing the countryside in the city: Vignettes from the leisure sector

This research is drawn from fieldwork conducted in Ho Chi Minh City between 2012 and 2014. The author implemented a qualitative methods framework in the field. Interviews, participation in city tours, leisure site visits, and analysis of relevant media content and business promotional materials were undertaken during fieldwork. The discursive imaginations section draws on twenty-seven semi-structured and structured interviews with urban actors working in the services industry over a period of six weeks in 2012 and 2013. The practices section discussed next contains vignettes about practices broadly defined as “leisure” practices in modern-day Ho Chi Minh City that are often described and represented as “rural”. In many ways the difference between “practices” and “discourses” represents a false binary in depicting behaviors in everyday urban life (see Harms 2011b). Discourses and practices both transform the meanings of the city landscape, for example, and representing the city through speech is a “doing” much like material practice is. Similarly, practices are not “silent” behaviors but “speak” as transformative acts like discourse does. As mentioned above, I separate practices and discourses of the countryside in the city solely for conceptual clarity rather than as accurate representations of the ways in which the rural and urban unfold in Ho Chi Minh City.

The domestic leisure industry is highlighted here because it is arguably one of the cornerstones of identifying a “new” urban Vietnam, where citizens are armed with more money, free time, and consumer choices to fulfill diversions from work and family responsibilities (see Gustaffson, 2011; Hien, 2012; Truitt, 2012). Many elements of the leisure sector (including food and places to relax) are represented in contemporary Ho Chi Minh City as activities that have their origin in or arise from the countryside (nông thôn) or familial home (quê hương). For the purposes of this

section I seek to tease out the ways in which these practices are used to offset the chaos and intensity of the city, to understand how these activities draw the countryside to describe “unique” urban practices, and to more fully understand the “rural’s” role in Ho Chi Minh City’s growth.

For example, in contrast to the week-long (or longer) family vacation outside the home typical in the West, in urban Vietnam it has long been commonplace to take short half-day or day-long excursions to the countryside to visit relatives or to pay homage to the gravesites of dead relatives on the anniversary of their passing (đám giỗ), or to attend weddings (đám cưới). In present-day Vietnam movie theatres, bars, and gyms have sprung up alongside traditional karaoke clubs and coffee shops to meet the leisure needs of city residents. Additionally, the availability of more wealth and leisure time in Vietnam has factored in to the emergence of “rural” enclaves, resorts, and spas that are popular destinations for a segment of Ho Chi Minh City’s residents desiring a brief holiday from city life but without the time or interest in physically leaving it.

Thảo Điền Village Resort is a case in point. Opened in late 2008 (and revamped with a new hotel in October, 2012) by the owner of a popular group of Ho Chi Minh City restaurants (Quán Ăn Ngon), the complex includes a small boutique hotel, four restaurants, beach access, live water puppet and musical shows, an area reserved for business meetings and small conferences, and a spa, pool, and health club. What differentiates it from a “universal” resort is that it is not found at a beach or mountainous area far away and spatially distinct from the city. Indeed, the primary selling point for the resort seems to be that its favorable proximity to the city center (only seven km from the central business district) serves to enhance its rural character and value. A brochure advertising the site begins, “Set in a secluded, verdant garden

and occupying 1.2 hectares along the Saigon River, Thảo Điền Village Resort is a tropical hideaway that's a mere twenty minutes away from the city center". The resort serves as an alcove space with separate spatial characteristics—rural, beautiful, peaceful, relaxing—but also able to compliment the luxuriousness and convenience that the city provides. As Tuan, the Events Manager explained in an interview with a Ho Chi Minh City monthly magazine, "What sets us apart is that we're literally a 15 minute shuttle ride from the city center. It's the perfect location for those who have had enough of the city but still want the full range of services" (Pham, 2013: 48). The resort website's front page includes a rotating set of thirteen photos of the venue, yet only one of them includes guests. The rest of the images convey a natural space on the water that seemingly lacks any of the human-centered characteristics of the overpopulated core of downtown Ho Chi Minh City². The Thảo Điền Village Resort illustrates that Ho Chi Minh City's urban space includes opportunities for residents to experience the countryside without losing access to city amenities, time to travel long distances, or their urban identity. In fact, for those who can afford a meal or overnight visit to Thảo Điền their experiences and activities demonstrate their ability to enjoy the full range of the city's offerings, including countryside life.

In recent years the countryside dining experience has been making inroads on the Ho Chi Minh City restaurant scene and in Vietnam in general (Avieli, 2013; 2012). Cục Gạch Quán, or the "Brick" Ho Chi Minh City restaurant chain exemplifies increasing interest in countryside food and the rural culinary experience in urban space. With its central location set in a French colonial villa on a narrow side street in Ho Chi Minh City's central district, Cục Gạch Quán offers diners an opportunity to get back to their roots and enjoy a traditional "Vietnamese family moment" in the

² <http://www.thaodienvillage.com/>, last accessed 3/11/14

city's heart. The menu is expansive and includes countryside dishes difficult to find in Ho Chi Minh City like Canh cá điều hồng nấu măng chua (Pinkfish soup with bamboo shoots). Tranquility is the dominant theme of the restaurant's layout: there is a small pool on the first floor stocked with koi (a symbol of prosperity in Vietnam), a number of different private rooms for small parties, and an overall attitude that the owners explain is generated from "the memory of grandmother's (food) stall"³. The linkage between strong family values, an unspoiled landscape, and rural space is a persistent one at Cục Gạch and, as Avieli (2012) and Nguyễn-võ (2008) show, throughout Vietnam: the restaurant's website is replete with descriptions of the beauty and purity of the rural Vietnamese environment, it explains how the countryside sustains core Vietnamese values and is represented in the restaurant, and it illustrates how the restaurant functions as an homage to the country's past. More specifically, Cục Gạch connects its food to these descriptions, laying out a dining experience "where sincere, peaceful and quiet souvenirs (memories) can be created in a warm and cozy place, where the true values of a "countryman" are reigning (sic) under the motto "eat green, live healthy", (where) every action (is) designed to demonstrate respect to our environment". The suggestions implicit in this description of the restaurant (outside of its attractive dimensions) is that the city and its activities are lacking in core Vietnamese values, where consumption practices are trending toward unhealthiness⁴, where a respect for the natural environment is thought to be left behind in the name of progress, and where creating lasting memories among a community has become a challenge.

A final example of a site where the rural is practiced in the city is Bình Quới Tourist Village. Situated across the river from Thảo Điền Village Resort, Bình Quới

³ <http://www.cucgachquan.com.vn/>, last accessed 3/11/14

⁴ Vietnam's obesity problem is a growing concern for the global public health sector and the Communist Party (see Cuong, et al. 2007).

is also set close to the urban core of District 1 in Bình Thạnh district. It represents a distinct geographical space in Ho Chi Minh City in that it is physically separated from the rest of the city as a result of the construction of a small canal that creates an oxbow around the area. Its physical separation from the rest of the city contributes to its uniqueness in the urban environment. Indeed, Bình Quới is one of the oldest spatial examples of the “countryside in the city” in Vietnam. Operated by the city’s largest state-run tourism company, Saigontourist, the expansive area has many leisure options for local guests: it has a number of food stalls and restaurants, space for picnics, wooded and riverside walking paths, concert space, recreational opportunities like tennis, swimming, and fishing, and boat rides on the Saigon River.

Bình Quới is particularly popular with Vietnamese when they mark a special occasion. For example, tourists can rent a room at the on-site hotel if they would like to spend a night by the river. The hotel also serves out of town guests who join wedding parties that are regularly hosted on the grounds (Bình Quới is also a popular destination for wedding photography). Public holidays are treated as special events at Bình Quới. “Tet”, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration, features spectacular decorations, unique hotel packages, festivities, and food offerings. Vietnam’s Independence and Reunification holidays attract a large number of people who use their days off to relax in a quiet area without having to leave the city itself.

Lastly, Bình Quới showcases itself as indicative of the “authentic” village experience in Vietnam through the presentation and performance of the country’s regional food specialties. Like Cục Gạch restaurant mentioned earlier, the Bình Quới buffet experience features foods prepared by chefs whose dress and cooking style portray north, central, and southern Vietnamese villages. They dress in a traditional wardrobe and offer visitors a sampling of different “countryside” foods from around

Vietnam. Guests do not need to physically travel to these places throughout Vietnam to experience the different culinary types of “village” activities in the country.

The three practices discussed above paint a more complete portrait of urban-rural relationality in Ho Chi Minh City. They illustrate how rurality is integrated in to the everyday practices of the city and are not “left behind” as is often assumed to be the case in rural-urban migration studies. What are some of the ways in which rural space is discursively constructed in the city? What purposes does the countryside serve for the imaginations of Ho Chi Minh City residents? What is described as existing in rural space now that a high percentage of Vietnam’s people live in cities? It is to these questions that the paper now turns.

Imaginative visions of the countryside in Ho Chi Minh City

For many in Ho Chi Minh City the city is not and may never be their home because it lacks the basic requirements for safety, health, and sturdy family life that lie in abundance in the countryside. For this group of people the amount of time spent living in one place—the commonly understood marker for establishing where “home” is for residents in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom (Blunt and Dowling, 2006)—has little relevance as they remember, desire, and expect to return to their permanent ancestral (quê hương) or family (nhà) homes. In turn, Ho Chi Minh City residents produce spatial discourses that represent “the rural” with “both reverence and paternalistic subordination to the urban centre” (Harms, 2011b: 457). Ho Chi Minh City is imagined as a powerful yet temporary tool to amass wealth, solidify connections, run a business, or work in a chosen field but suffers from some of the same problems Western urban commentators cite in their analyses of Asian cities: the city is described as deprived (Hoang, 2011), polluted (Mitchell, 2009), unsafe (Carruthers, 2008), and lacks the appropriate conditions for family life and

community building because it is a haven for individuality and selfishness (Drummond and Thomas, 2003). In short, this section seeks to show the ways in which rural space serves as a discursive proxy for the aspirational possibilities and challenges of Ho Chi Minh City residents in light of the country's urban-minded reform era policies.

The impermanency of urban life is a cornerstone of respondents' sentiments about their time in Ho Chi Minh City because they continue to look to the countryside as their "real" and "permanent" home. These are people who are fearful of "losing their roots" (mất gốc) to an urbanized society and idealize the rural "base" for Vietnamese kinship ties. In some cases they convey the importance of these rural areas not through reconciliation with their families or a return to "traditional" ways of life but through a critique of the weaknesses of the current urban environments they currently inhabit. In this sense established conceptualizations of the rural-urban divide prevalent in many accounts of Southeast Asian cities are replicated in the discourses of urban residents. Physical health holds perhaps greatest concern for some of the respondents in Ho Chi Minh City. One interviewee named Anh grew agitated when discussing problems he incurs in Ho Chi Minh City:

"They (the Vietnamese government) aren't doing the changes (đổi) well. Look at the pollution on the streets. Listen to the noise. Look at all of the traffic. My health (sức khỏe) is worse now because of city life....I came here to make money, not to die young....I have a cough during the dry season and during the wet season I have the flu. These ailments are a normal part of life in Saigon".

Later, after explaining that the population gains and the failure of the Ho Chi Minh City government to keep up with infrastructure needs have left many small-business owners looking elsewhere to live and work, he revealed that he expects to open a "branch" office in one of Ho Chi Minh City's peri-urban areas in Long An province. There, Anh said, "I can be close to my wife's hometown" in Bến Tre and he will be

able to leave the daily operation of the main office to his coworker, whose children are already grown up. “I do not want my children to be breathing this air everyday”, he confided. (Anh, 44 years old)

For the purposes of this paper Anh’s comments reveal a central point made about Vietnam mobilities and the urban/rural divide: the production of urban space does not necessarily lessen the production of the countryside in the city. In Anh’s view, the city is unable to achieve its potential if it neglects incorporating some of the countryside’s favorable features. Those who own their own business like Anh have the ability to transcend the urban-rural divide and work/live in both places. Opening up a branch office in the peri-urban areas of Ho Chi Minh City can be interpreted as a way to enjoy both “rural” and “urban” dimensions of Vietnamese society: Anh takes advantage of urban prosperity and better health available in the countryside (in the form of less exposure to pollution and shorter commute times) on the fringes of the metropolitan region. He has effectively chosen to overcome what he sees are the city’s “urban” problems by combining the city’s best features with the countryside’s. His compromise illustrates the ways in which representations of rural life inject the city with meaning. More specifically, his comments illustrate the spatially inflected motivations behind where residents decide to open businesses and where they choose to reside. This point also resonates with an earlier argument that with Ho Chi Minh City’s growth has come a corresponding demand to enhance the city with a more “rural” character.

If the city can pose significant health risks to those who move to the city, it is also a space that jeopardizes the safety of the city’s residents. This point was made clear during an interview I conducted last year when discussing the national Vietnam law enacted in December, 2007. This law requires every adult operating or riding on a

motorbike (the de facto mode of transportation in Ho Chi Minh City) to wear a helmet. A young business owner named Tue lamented that there had been far too many accidents that could have been prevented had the law been initiated earlier. Tue told me that the city's poor safety record was a primary reason that, despite his success building a tourism company in Ho Chi Minh City, he did not expect to stay in Ho Chi Minh City much longer:

“There are fatal accidents everyday in this city. They happen on every street! Too much work, too many appointments to make, too many trucks on the road carrying all of the things we need to buy. I will stay with my company for another year and then I will find something else to do near my wife's hometown in Dalat. She does not like staying in Ho Chi Minh City and she worries for our children's safety (an toàn). I was successful building this company, I can build another one in the countryside and also have peace and happiness there” (Tue, 42 years old)

In this quotation the relationality between the rural and the urban is represented in oppositional terms: the countryside is an attractive, protective alternative for a family living in the city. Categorizing the city as a space of “individualism” as Tue does follows from Drummond and Thomas's arguments (2003) about the negative transformations occurring in Vietnamese cities and establishes its spatial opposite by injecting rural areas with the qualities associated with strong kinship ties and safe streets. More generally, Tue's comments expose problems with the underlying assumption behind some of the literature on Southeast Asian urbanization that the economic “pull” factors dragging rural people to the city outweigh other factors luring or keeping them in the countryside. Instead, it is possible to think of both spaces as pulling someone like Tue in opposite directions. Tue believes that the skills behind his economic successes in the city—perhaps acquired as a result of his time in the city—can be translated in rural Vietnam, too. In light of this point the pull factors driving rural-to-urban migration in Vietnam are not the inevitable end of the spatial

story: respondents like Tue are pulled back to the countryside arguably as a result of the successes arising from the initial draw of the urban.

Indeed, it often seems to be the case that urban space unfolds not from the qualities of the city but because of how pristine, untouched, and desirable the countryside remains. Another respondent named Thach conveyed that the Party's push to flood the cities with foreign direct investment has made the country's rural areas more attractive than ever. "Only grandparents, uncles and aunts, and some children live in the countryside today", he told me. "I work for them, but I also work in Saigon to keep the countryside closed from the kinds of problems in the city. The healthcare facilities in the city are strong according to Western principles, but my hometown has traditional medicine and soothsayers who can make better judgments on health than in the city...and they are much cheaper too!" (Thach, 47 years old).

Making positive judgments about the countryside's ability to heal and reconcile families broken up by business opportunities in the city is a common refrain in Ho Chi Minh City and mirrors conceptualizations of "the rural as a source of national identity" (Harms, 2011b: 457). On the other hand, the countryside is "a reminder of national underdevelopment" (*ibid.*) and rural space represents bureaucratic restrictions, limited business relationships, and weak profit margins. This opposition is most apparent for Tuan. For him, Ho Chi Minh City is a space free from the constraints of the rural areas, which are hampered by "traditional" ways of doing business. However, he was quick to say that his hometown includes several ways to maintain safety of one's possessions. Therefore, he feels that the rural areas of Vietnam are free from the greediness prevalent in the city:

"If I owned a...business in the countryside I would not have money...(yet) my home here (in the city) is under constant threat to be robbed! If I am out of town...my neighbors know this and they can break in to my apartment and take my belongings. In my hometown when I am not there I can call my brothers and uncles and they can

stay at my home and protect my possessions without a problem. (In the countryside) you rely on family not on the government. In Saigon when you call the police to report a robbery they ask you to pick them up from their office (to investigate)!” (Tuan, 36 years old).

The city appeals to Tuan’s business sense and training but conflicts with his sense of familiarity and appropriate codes of conduct that appear in rural Vietnam. The city is incomplete because it can only fulfill certain aspects of a wholesome life, which should include both open market mechanisms and appropriate “rural-based” social behavior and values.

Respondents in Ho Chi Minh City who are not living with their families frequently mention getting to a place financially where they can return to the countryside and provide their families with a “normal” or “ordinary” (bình thường) Vietnamese life (Karis, 2013; Peters, 2012). The city is meaningful as a means to an end, as a physical space to use and take advantage of before eventually returning the countryside “home”. Minh Đức, a freelancer who works on a one-off, unpredictable contractual basis with large non-state tourism companies as an English-language tour guide, spoke at length about the exhausting consequences the global economic downturn has had on his income and how he has supplemented his income by teaching English to Vietnamese students in the evenings. He lamented being “stuck” in the city, unable to find comparable work that provides high income in the countryside but yearning to return home to be with his family.

“In the rural area I can live a normal life, like the one my parents led when I was a child. But now my family relies on me to send money home every month, and my parents and uncles and aunts are old and cannot work, so I have to send them money too”, he said. Later he explained his central conundrum: he wants to go to the countryside regularly to visit his family and relax but when he goes home he is condemned by his family for not staying behind in Ho Chi Minh City to work. When

it was suggested that perhaps “he can never go home again”, insinuating that he has become a city dweller, he grew agitated. “This phrase does not make sense in Vietnam like in your country (the United States). Home is the reason we work, (why) we follow the correct path. My family has no interest in moving to Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). They want to stay (at home) forever. It is my position in my family to bring them the things they need” (Minh Đức, 35 years old). Living in Ho Chi Minh City is for Minh Đức to be pulled in two different spatial directions. In his mind, communal Vietnamese society ensures that profit-making and enjoying the fruits of one’s labor are a family affair. But suffering in the city remains a solitary exercise.

More than coping strategies enacted by people who are homesick for a rural way of life, the argument posed here is that the discursive spatial relationship associated with city and the countryside in modern-day Ho Chi Minh City has consequences for the ways in which the city is understood and the role that the rural plays in the unfolding of the city. Looking at the countryside’s relationship to the city is a key means of understanding how discourses travel in between space, blurring and solidifying the lines distinguishing the rural from the urban in Vietnam.

Conclusions

This paper argues for a more complete picture of how urban and rural spaces are produced, blurred, distinguished from one another, and interact by assessing practices and imaginations of the countryside and the city for residents of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The “everydayness” of “rural” practices in Ho Chi Minh City and imaginations drawn from discourses of countryside life are investigated with an eye on the tensions and complementarities between urban and rural spaces. The focus on lay institutions and actors in Ho Chi Minh City is an attempt to move beyond

macro- and meso-level analyses of Vietnam's *đổi mới* era policies that emphasize the Communist Party's or capitalism's control over Vietnam's drive toward urbanization.

When staking out this position the paper argues that bringing the countryside to the city does not deprive either rural or urban space of their meanings but complicates and transforms established understandings of the rural-urban binary, rural-urban relationality, rural-to-urban migration, (im)mobility, and urban citizenship. The consequences for this argument are a rethinking of the traditional “push” and “pull” factors involved in the production and tension of the rural/urban binary. For example, conformist wisdom tends to marginalize the rural from processes of urbanization, privileging “pull” factors like diverse job opportunities and higher wages when explaining what attracts rural people to cities. I illustrate that the “pull” of the countryside for city residents contributes to a form of urban development that is charged with replicating the countryside in the city and is fed by ambivalent feelings of city life. Furthermore, this example hints at issues regarding uneven urban development; periurban growth and decline; questions of citizenship and mobility; and the countryside's relationship to Vietnam's growth.

This paper also uses Ho Chi Minh City to represent two foundational spatial categories in a more fluid but no less complex way. For Robinson, “the wider city-region...unsettles any easy delimitation of the spatial extent of cities” (2005: 762). The argument in this paper seeks to disrupt the rural-urban binary in much the same way Robinson seeks to in her discussion of the city-region. Today, for example, Ho Chi Minh City urban residents do not seem as interested in the actual “ruralness” of the things they covet and consume as much as they wish to attach meanings and judgments of rurality to practices that transcend the division between the city and the countryside. In sum, this paper is a response to Bunnell, et al.'s appeal to “bring a

greater number and diversity of cities from the region into the crucible of global urban knowledge production” (2012: 2786) by using Ho Chi Minh City to illustrate how the spatial binary of rural-urban and the rural’s place in urban development must be reconsidered.

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