Capitalist Transition on Wheels: Development, Consumption and Motorised Mobility in Hanoi

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Since Vietnam embarked on the economic reforms known as doi moi in 1986 the country has transformed from being one of the poorest countries in the world to being regarded by the World Bank as a ‘development success story’. The most visible manifestation of the changes Vietnam has gone through is found in the streets, particularly in cities. In less than 20 years motorbike ownership in Vietnam increased ten-fold, and there are now 4 million motorbikes in Hanoi alone. Furthermore, in the recent decade a new kind of transport transition is increasingly visible in the streets as cars are rapidly increasing in numbers.

This PhD thesis in human geography asks why and how the consumption of cars and motorbikes increased so rapidly in Hanoi over the past decades. Based on ‘motorbike ethnography’ in Hanoi, it approaches consumption through everyday mobility practices and economic development processes. It analyses the development of the motorcycle industry as well as the attempts to develop a domestic automobile industry in Vietnam, but mainly focuses on the many meanings and practices of motorised mobility in contemporary Hanoi. The thesis finds that a range of material, social and cultural factors are necessary to explain the escalation of consumption of private vehicles, and based on the findings suggests ways in which consumption theory can engage with the multi-scalar processes of rapid economic development.

The thesis consists of an introductory section and the following four academic articles:


