

# Mobile Street Vendors in Hanoi: Features and Dynamics of a Distinct Socio-economic Group

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**Abstract:** In this article, I will present some results of my research about mobile street vendors in Hanoi. As street vendors have been extensively studied and analyzed in the social sciences<sup>(1)</sup> various concepts to describe street vendors emerged over time. Although these analyses provide important insights and theoretical ideas on the topic of street vending, crucial aspects of mobile vendors' lives are lacking. During fieldwork I found out that the usual theoretical concepts, classifications, and categories only partly apply to the everyday life and experiences of mobile street vendors in Hanoi. Thus, I want to add an anthropological perspective to the study of street vending by putting the vendors themselves at the center of my analysis.

**Key words:** Mobile street vendors, Hanoi.

## Introduction

While private petty trade in Hanoi is documented back to the era when the city was Vietnam's imperial capital (1010-1802), it has experienced significant changes during French colonial rule, the two Indochina wars and the high Socialist era. During the centrally planned economy (1954-1986), private trading activities were officially banned (Turner, 2009: 1212). Furthermore, commodity circulation was controlled through the household registration system which further hampered private vending activities (Abrami, 2002: 97). However, private petty trade persisted and even accelerated in rural and urban areas. After reunification in 1975, urban centers continued to grow and black market trade surged (Turner, 2009: 1212). Thus, since the legalization of private enterprises and trade after 1986's *doi moi* reforms, "traders have [merely] continued to undertake the same tasks within a new [...] structure" (ibid: 1215).

In the course of the *Doi moi* (renovation) reforms and decollectivization, use rights

for agricultural land shifted back to household units (Pham and Hill, 2008: 64).<sup>(2)</sup> Despite these opportunities for private usage, large parts of the rural population remained poor (Ibid: 62). This was mainly due to a high population growth in the Red River Delta, the decline of employment opportunities in agriculture and the use of land for infrastructure and intensive farming. Additionally, the state abandoned formerly subsidized health care and education in favor of a contribution system. As a consequence, the demand for cash income in rural areas increased

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(1) Recent anthropological literature on street vending includes *Who Rules The Streets? The Politics of Vending Space in Lusaka* by Hansen (2004), *Crime, Maya Handicraft Vendors, and the Social Re/Construction of Market Spaces in a Tourism Town* by Little (2008), *The Politics of Urban Space among Street Vendors of Cusco, Peru* by Seligmann (2010), *Street economies in the urban Global South* by Tranberg et. al. (2013).

(2) Land was reallocated on the basis of family size, i.e. families with many children and older women received less than other families (Kabeer and Van Anh 2000: 8).

significantly (Rigg, 1998: 506). Households were forced to adapt to these new circumstances by diversifying their income (Pham and Hill, 2008: 63). Peasants in the Red River Delta always had to search for additional income, for example in traditional handicrafts or petty trade between harvests. Yet the need for cash income became particularly prominent in the course of the reforms (Nguyen, 2001: 21). Thus, more and more people migrated to the cities, mainly in pursuit of additional income opportunities such as petty trade (Ressuraction and Van Khanh, 2007: 212). Since then, mobile street vendors have become an integral part of everyday urban life in Hanoi.

### **1. Street vending – an overview**

As Bromley (2001: 1) notes, “[s]treet vending is an ancient and important occupation found in virtually every country and major city around the world.” In general, street vendors subsume market vendors, pavement sellers and mobile vendors (Cohen et. al. 2000: 4). Thus, they either sell from fixed places or move around the city - some use carts or bicycles as means of transportation, others simply arrange their goods on the pavements. Street vendors sell a variety of goods and provide services ranging from consumer items to shoe-cleaning. In cities, popular locations for street vending are the fringes of market places, bus stops and big intersections (Nunez, 1993: 80). Street vending can be a full-time, part-time, or seasonal economic activity. Street vendors may work alone or as family-businesses, some even engage in commission or wage labor for bigger companies. Most of them operate on a small scale and their income is relatively low and irregular compared to stall-holders in public markets (Bromley, 2000: 3). Selling

on the streets requires little capital and is generally considered a low-skill occupation by many scholars: “Street vendors are mainly those who are unsuccessful or are unable to get regular jobs” (Bromley, 2000: 4). This perception does not take into account discriminating structures in transitional economies that exclude parts of the population from participating in regulated economic activities. In addition, many scholars ignore that street vending may require skills or is a skill in itself.

Most street vendors in cities around the world are not registered as urban residents and/or licensed vendors and are thus denied access to state services such as public facilities, child care, and shelter (Cohen et. al. 2000: 7). In Vietnam, mobile street vendors are neither urban residents nor do they have a license. In consequence, street vendors face limited social upward mobility and little possibility to expand their business (Ibid: 6).

It is crucial to note that many scholars considered street vending as a phenomenon that would disappear in the course of modernization and the emergence of supermarkets and shopping malls (Cross, 2000: 30).<sup>(3)</sup> But market forces did not operate as expected and street vending persisted throughout the spread of neoliberal economic reforms.

Street vending is often understood as a manifestation of poverty and underdevelopment, so that its disappearance is identified as evidence of progress towards economic growth and prosperity: “The more a country is developed, the less important is street

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<sup>(3)</sup> Whether modernization theorists, Marxist-influenced theorists, or formalist/substantivists alike, this was a common cross-theoretical perception in the 1960s - 1980s.

vending” (Moustier and Nguyen, 2007: 6). As a development expert working at the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Hanoi put it: “As the urban population gets wealthier and has the ability to store food longer, there is less demand for street vendors. And convenient chain stores are opening up. So people tend to go to those more. The wealthier the population is, the more able they are to store food, the less time they have to buy food, the less demand there is for street vendors.”<sup>(4)</sup> (Interview 6<sup>th</sup> of March 2013)

The topic of street vending in northern Vietnam has been amply addressed by various scholars, among them mainly economists and geographers (Jensen and Peppard, 2003; Agergaard and Thao, 2010; Hiemstra et al. 2006; Moustier and Nguyen, 2007; Lincoln, 2006; Abrami, 2002; Turner, 2009; Turner and Schoenberger, 2011). The key focus of these studies has been on the livelihoods and economic aspects of mobile street vendors, and on rural-urban dynamics such as remittances and household decisions (Adger et. al 2002; Kabeer, 2000; Pham and Hill, 2008; Rigg, 1998; Summerfield, 1997; Dang et al. 1997; Locke and Zhang, 2009; Nguyen, 2001). While these studies offer important insights into the main characteristics and different aspects of mobile street vendors in Hanoi, very little has been written about how street vendors perceive their status and evaluate their own position in relation to the state and other vendors. Street vending has been mainly conceptualized within the realm of “informality” (see among others Hart, 1973; Bromley, 1979; Celik, 2010; Cross, 1998; Bhowmik, 2003; Cross and Morales, 2007; Lund et al. 2000; Hansen, 2004; Lincoln, 2008). The term “informal economy” is used

as a label for economic activities that take place outside the framework of state regulation (Sassen, 1994: 2289). The concept was first introduced by Keith Hart to describe the economic activities of petty entrepreneurs in Ghana who the government considered as “unemployed” (Hart, 1973).<sup>(5)</sup> Hart argued that these people were not “unemployed”, but rather positively self-employed. He proposed that their economic activities should be contrasted with the “formal” economy of state employment and organized business as “informal income opportunities” (Ibid: 68). The concept was quickly adopted by various disciplines, especially the development sector. It finally offered a term to describe the so-called ‘urban poor’, the ‘vulnerable’, the ‘unemployed’, and the ‘underemployed’ in positive terms. The informal economy was mainly considered a consequence of absent modernization, mass migration to the cities and government failures to reduce poverty and the lack of regular employment.

In the development sector, street vending

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<sup>(4)</sup> Dân số đô thị ngày càng đông đúc và có nhu cầu dự trữ thực phẩm lâu hơn cũng như cuộc sống của họ trở nên bận rộn hơn thì nhu cầu mua hàng từ những người bán dạo trên đường cũng trở nên ít dần. Họ không xuống đường và mua những thứ cần thiết nữa. Và sau đó hàng loạt những cửa hàng thiết yếu được đưa vào hoạt động. Một vài cửa hàng như Kmart chẳng hạn. Và mọi người có xu hướng đến đây mua bán nhiều hơn. Dân cư càng đông đúc thì họ càng dự trữ nhiều thực phẩm hơn và ít có nhu cầu cũng như dành ít thời gian cho việc mua bán rong. Những người bán rong thường rất hiếm gặp ở những đô thị như thế này.)

<sup>(5)</sup> However in his famous study on two Indonesian market towns, Clifford Geertz already differentiated between a “bazaar” economy where economic activities are rather unregulated and spontaneous and a state-regulated “firm-type” economy. Geertz argues from a cultural perspective that the bazaar economy hampered the development of a western style firm centered economy (Geertz, 1963).

is foremost characterized as a self-entrepreneurial economic activity and “an important occupation for the urban poor in developing countries” (Kusakabe, 2006: 7). By providing the urban population with cheap consumer goods, services and food, street vendors are seen as fulfilling a central function. This certainly also applies to Hanoi where the distribution of goods and distribution of services vendors is taken over by mobile street vendors: “It is very convenient to buy flowers and incents directly in front of my house instead of going to the market “ a 35 year old Hanoi woman says during an interview.

From this point of view, street vending creates jobs, fights poverty and subsidizes urban living (Bhowmik, 2005: 2261). However, this euphemistic perspective neglects the structural inequalities that determine the chances for social upward mobility of street vendors. Besides, it ignores the ambivalent aspects and discriminating structures in which street vendors operate and thus “remain[s] locked within (...) public stereotypes” (Wacquant, 2002: 1469). It also neglects the fact that street vendors have to exploit themselves as much as they can by increasing their working hours (Austin, 1994: 2121). “I have to work until all my goods are sold”, says Thuong<sup>(6)</sup> a 47 year old fruit vendor from Hung Yen, “sometimes I work until 9pm, sometimes I finish early”.<sup>(7)</sup> I never saw a mobile street vendor sacrifice a day of business unless their children got sick; there was a wedding in the hometown, or a religious/traditional festival taking place.

However, the main problem with the concept of ‘informality’ is the lack of a clear definition, let alone analytical framework. “Informality” in its purest sense is the

neglect of the formal, a lack of bureaucratic form (Hart, 2006: 25). Everything that is not officially documented thus becomes informal. “From the standpoint of high civilization, whatever it cannot control or comprehend is ‘informal’ – that is, irregular, unpredictable, unstable, even invisible” (Hart, 1986: 845). Radical critics of the concept even argue that the informal economy does not exist in any empirical sense – what exists is employment that is not registered officially, and thus lacks workers’ rights, social insurance and tax payments (Sangmeister, 2009: 70). Therefore, the usefulness of the concept of informality to describe street vending activities needs to be questioned. For example, in Hanoi vendors organize themselves by establishing long-term social relationships and developing daily routines: They know where resting during lunch is possible, where they can find a toilet, when it is safe to sell at a certain spot and when not. Depending on the time of day, specific spots are occupied by different vendors.

## **2. Different perceptions of mobile street vendors**

During my fieldwork between July 2012 and November 2013 I noticed that different perceptions about mobile street vendors exist. In fact, mobile street vendors are conceptualized and described in various ways: For Tourists, for example, mobile street vendors are “the real Southeast Asia” and embody an “authentic Vietnam”, something they want to see when visiting Hanoi. “I think this is so special about Hanoi: You have a big Asian city but at the same time

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<sup>(6)</sup> All names have been changed to guarantee the anonymity of my informants.

<sup>(7)</sup> “Chị phải làm việc đến khi bán hết hàng, và chị không thể về nhà sớm hơn được. Thành thạo chị phải làm đến 9h tối, đôi khi thì kết thúc sớm.”

there are still street vendors”, says a 43 year old tourist from Australia. In the Old Quarter it is very common for tourists to take pictures of or with street vendors. Moreover, the UNESCO categorizes mobile street vending as part of Vietnam’s cultural heritage (Maneepong and Walsh, 2009). Street vendors are seen to embody the country’s distinct culture and history, and to contribute to the “face of the city”. In Hoi An a sanitized version of mobile street vendors was thus introduced: A “fake” mobile street vendor wearing a conical hat and shoulder pole roams around the Old Town merely to entertain tourists. Those romanticized notions neglects the hard work mobile street vendors do, and the difficulties they encounter: “It’s for living, not that I want to go. It’s hard out there! I go street vending for my living expenses only. It’s hard! I don’t want to go”<sup>(8)</sup> says Ha, a woman who has been selling various goods for almost 20 years.

During my research I noticed the differences between Hanoi residents and rural-urban migrants such as mobile street vendors. I did research in the Truc Bach area, close to Chau Long market. I talked to market vendors inside the market as well as mobile street vendors who gather outside the market building. I soon noticed that interactions between customers and market vendors at Chau Long market were much friendlier than those with street vendors. During a survey with Hanoi residents, where I asked them what they think about rural-urban migration and mobile street vendors I found out that Hanoians have an ambivalent attitude towards mobile street vendors. Many of them consider mobile street vendors as an important part of Vietnam’s cultural heritage and are aware

how hardworking mobile street vendors are. “Street vendors are part of Hanoi’s culture, they give Vietnam a distinct look.”<sup>(9)</sup> At the same time they also perceive them as a symbol of underdevelopment. I soon came across so-called “we-group” claims and inclusion/exclusion patterns. “We” and “them” were often used to describe the relationship with mobile street vendors who were mostly called migrants (*người đi cư*). “I never talk to them. Sometimes when I say sentences with deep abstract meaning, they get confused and mad at me”<sup>(10)</sup> said a 74 year old woman.

Mobile street vendors also said that they do not interact much with Hanoi residents except for business. A small survey among other migrant groups has shown similar results: Young migrant workers meet with other rural-urban migrants (who in some cases come from the same village) in their spare time and rarely make friends with Hanoi residents. “There are clear differences such as language, voice, discipline, and education. Those original Hanoians they do not speak with a local accent, are disciplined, qualified, respectful, and calm. But the people from the provinces are short tempered and rude.”<sup>(11)</sup> This discourse is further fueled by the media which portray migrants as bringing a rural lifestyle to Hanoi. Mobile

<sup>(8)</sup> “Vì cuộc sống thôi chứ không muốn đi đâu em ạ. Vì cuộc sống thôi chứ đi ra đây khổ lắm! Không muốn đi.”

<sup>(9)</sup> “Hàng rong là nét văn hóa của hà nội xưa, hàng rong tạo nên nét đặc trưng của Việt Nam”

<sup>(10)</sup> “Bác chả bao giờ nói chuyện với họ. Nói chuyện không hợp nhau. Đôi khi mình nói câu chuyện nghĩa bóng xa xôi thì người nhà quê không hiểu cứ giật cục, nổi nóng”

<sup>(11)</sup> “Có sự khác nhau rõ nét như về ngôn ngữ, giọng nói, nề nếp, giáo dục, học thức. Những người Hà Nội gốc Hà Nội chuẩn, họ không nói ngọng, nói giọng địa phương, có nề nếp, có trình độ, có trên dưới, điềm đạm, từ tốn. Còn những người ngoại tỉnh, họ xô bồ, nóng nảy.”

street vendors are regarded as a visual pollution that bother tourists and sell poisoned goods from China. "Firstly, street vendor are not honest, they make lots of profit. If you have time, go to Long Bien market, the market is loaded with rotten fruits, thrown everywhere. They are all Chinese fruits; and street vendors sell them to Hanoians."<sup>(12)</sup> This contradicts the romantic notion that foreigners and tourists have of mobile street vendors in Hanoi. I will now present the experience and claims of mobile street vendors themselves in order to draw a more balanced picture.

During my research I found out that ascribed identities and self-perception change when street vendors move between the city and the countryside. Many street vendors are wives and mothers in the village but rural-urban migrants who do hard manual labor in the city. Whereas in the city many street vendors don't feel like they "belong" or are welcomed and treated very well – many of them experienced physical violence by wholesalers as well as disrespect by Hanoians – they usually hold a different position in the village that is closely connected with their family's status. Village life is usually preferred and mobile street vendors would rather work and live in their hometown if given the choice. Whereas Hanoi is associated with "social evils" ("tệ nạn xã hội"), "noise" ("tiếng ồn"), "traffic" ("ách tắc giao thông") and "foreignness" ("sự xa lạ"), the hometown is "safe" ("an toàn"), "quiet" ("yên tĩnh"), "peaceful", ("binh yên") and "familiar" ("thân thuộc") as many my informants told me. Hung<sup>(13)</sup>, a 37 year old woman selling shoes on Hanoi's street and who spends the majority of her time in the city said it was difficult to get used to village life after being away for a long time.

"I feel more at home in Hanoi. I hardly go back to my hometown"<sup>(14)</sup>. When at home, many vendors claim they seldom talk about their experience in the city with their families as family members do not understand what it is like to work in the city. Hence, there are also perceived disruptions from their hometowns and family. Some vendors claimed that they are more respected in the village since they are working in the city. It is usually not the hard work that is appreciated by fellow villagers but foremost the ability to navigate through Hanoi's streets on one's own, to live away from the family and the money they bring back and the care they can thus provide to their families.

Depending on how many household members work in the city or are able to generate cash income elsewhere the living standards vary dramatically: One mobile street vendor, a woman of 67 who has been working in Hanoi for almost 20 years, was the only bread winner of her family. With her husband being an alcoholic and her son studying in college there was barely any money left at the end of the month. She felt ashamed for her traditional Vietnamese house and her drunk husband. But most mobile street vendors I visited during my research were better off than those villagers who did not work in Hanoi. This benefit comes at a cost: Most of the street vendors live in Phuc Xa, a neighborhood close to the Red River where they share dormitories

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(12) "Hàng rong thì cân điều, không đảm bảo rồi lại ăn lãi nhiều. Nếu cháu có thời gian ra chợ Long Biên, toàn rau củ quả vứt bữa bãi thối nát. Toàn hàng Trung Quốc đây, hàng rong nó bán cho người Hà Nội ăn".

(13) In order to guarantee the anonymity of my informants all names have been changed.

(14) "Giờ sống ở Hà Nội thấy như ở nhà. Chị hiếm khi về quê nữa."

with other rural-urban migrants. About 40-50 people live in one house and one room can host up to 10 people. Usually the rooms are separated by gender, sometimes spouses live together in a room. Toilet, kitchen, and other facilities are usually shared. The living conditions differ dramatically between the city and their hometown and mobile street vendors sacrifice a lot – they work long hours, are away from their families, and have a lower social position than in their hometowns. At the same time, many of my informants also pointed out the benefits of street vending. Thuong says: “If I want to rest today then I can stay at home without permission because I’m freelancing. If I work in a company, an office or work as a servant It’s hard to get a day off.”<sup>(15)</sup> When asked what they would do if street vending was banned in Hanoi, she merely said “then I will find another job”<sup>(16)</sup>. Street vendors are used to improvise and change their means of making a living if necessary.

### Conclusions

Mobile street vendors have become an integral part of urban economies all over the globe. But every street vendor has his or her own individual experiences, history, and family background. Inadequate stereotypes and one-sided generalizations about street vendors still exist today. Common frameworks provide a helpful starting point for deeper analysis – however, it is crucial to move beyond these categories to better understand street vendors’ lives. Mobile street vendors in Hanoi can thus not only be described as romantic remnants of Vietnamese culture, informal sector workers, or rural-urban migrants. Their everyday experiences are much more complex and multi-layered than assumed. At the same time the local configurations distinguish mobile street vendors in Hanoi

from mobile street vendors elsewhere – for example in Saigon where street vendors use mainly push-carts to sell their goods. Hanoi’s mobile street vendors hence also constitute a unique cultural feature of the capital’s urban landscape.

In this article, I tried to draw a more balanced picture that puts mobile street vendors in the center instead of reproducing stereotyped notions of marginality and misery. Anthropology and its research methods enable us to describe mobile street vendors’ lives from an emic perspective and analyze their daily activities in a holistic way. It then is possible to move beyond simplistic viewpoints and prejudices that still dominate the way we think about street vendors.

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<sup>(15)</sup> “Ví dụ như hôm nay mình muốn nghỉ thì mình cứ nghỉ thôi không phải báo cáo vì là bán hàng tự do, chứ còn đi làm công ty hoặc công sở hay giúp việc cũng không nghỉ được.”

<sup>(16)</sup> “thì chị lại đi tìm nghề khác”

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