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Altered landscapes, altered livelihoods: The shifting experience of informal waste collecting during Hanoi's urban transition

Carrie L. Mitchell

University of Toronto, Department of Geography, Sidney Smith Hall, 100 Saint George Street, Toronto, Canada ON M5S 3G3

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ABSTRACT

A growing body of literature is concerned with urbanization processes in contemporary Vietnam and how the country's globalizing cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are increasingly becoming spaces of consumption. However, much less is known about how these changing spaces accommodate labour, and in turn support livelihoods. Using published empirical data on Hanoi's informal waste collectors from 1992 [DiGregorio, M., 1994. Urban Harvest: Recycling as a Peasant Industry in Northern Vietnam. East–West Center, Hawaii, pp. 1–212] and my own data, including a survey of 575 waste collectors and 44 interviews, collected on Hanoi's informal waste collectors in 2006, I explore the experiences of informal waste collectors (waste pickers and itinerant junk buyers) in Vietnam's capital city of Hanoi. I argue that Vietnam's globalizing economy and urban transition have been a catalyst for the growth of the informal waste collector population in Hanoi as well as a partial player in the gendering of this group and the work they undertake.

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1. Introduction

The year 2006 marked the 20th anniversary of *Doi Moi*, the economic 'renovation' policy officially introduced by the Vietnamese Government in 1986. Twenty years on, the economic metamorphosis brought about by these policies has profoundly altered the country, particularly the urbanization process in its largest cities. Indeed, it is argued that Vietnam is beginning one of the most intensive urban transitions in the world (Douglass et al., 2002). The country's official move from an economy based on socialist central planning to one driven by market forces has allowed for "the formation of urban labor markets as well as property markets and markets for goods and services" (Leaf, 2002, p. 24). There is now a growing body of literature concerned with urbanization processes in contemporary Vietnam. However, much less is known about how Hanoi's changing economic and urban landscapes accommodate labour, and in turn support livelihoods. In this paper I explore the experience of informal labour in Vietnam's globalizing capital city of Hanoi.

After *Doi Moi's* introduction in the late 1980s, migration to urban areas became a major form of spatial mobility in Vietnam (ODI, 2006). Much of the migration in the last decade has been spontaneous and often temporary and circular in form (Geertman, 2007; Resurreccion and Khanh, 2007). The growing economic opportunities in Vietnam's globalizing cities, and the ability to migrate freely as part of the *Doi Moi* package of reforms,[1] have acted as a catalyst for what the popular press has dubbed "ruralization", of Vietnam's major cities (Douglass et al., 2002). This concept of "ruralization" refers to two processes: (1) the spatial expansion of the city into areas that were formally regarded as countryside; and (2) the increasing presence of rural commuters and migrants within urban areas engaged primarily in informal activities (Douglass et al., 2002). Although migration is not a new phenomenon, particularly to the Red River Delta region of Northern Vietnam (Hardy, 2003), temporary and circular migration is an increasingly popular choice for rural residents aware of the wealth of opportunities in the city, and in need of supplementing their low rural incomes. These migrants, referred to as floating migrants, typically reside in a guesthouse or temporary dwelling, without a household registration book (*ho khau*) and without registration with local authorities, for a period of time of approximately 1–3 months (Geertman, 2007).[2] After a short period of time in the city, many temporary migrants return to the countryside during rice planting and harvest seasons when the demand for labour is highest (Resurreccion, 2005).

E-mail address: carrie.mitchell@utoronto.ca

[1] In rural areas of Vietnam, Doi Moi reforms altered the nature of the rural economy by shifting production from the farm collective to the household unit and easing restrictions on internal migration (Resurreccion and Khanh, 2007).

[2] An accurate estimate of the total population of KT4, or temporary, migrants is virtually impossible, given that guesthouse owners, who should register their guests with the police, often fail to do so (Geertman, 2007).

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One of the many occupations migrants enter into when they arrive in Hanoi is informal[3] waste collecting. Increasing consumption has, unsurprisingly, produced a burgeoning quantity of waste in the city. Remnants from Hanoi's newly built housing stock, discarded consumer durables, and a miscellany of other leftover materials serve as a visible vestige of Vietnam's economic growth; a ready labour force to forage for waste is a potent reminder of the social unevenness of rapid and intense development.

Using published empirical data on Hanoi's informal waste collectors from 1992 (DiGregorio, 1994) and my own data collected on Hanoi's informal waste collectors in 2006, I investigate how this group is impacted by the changing urban and rural dynamics ushered in by *Doi Moi*. This paper contributes to a growing body of literature concerned with urbanization processes in contemporary Vietnam (McGee, 1995; Drakakis-Smith and Dixon, 1997; Drummond, 1998; Leaf, 1999,2002; Smith and Scarpaci, 2000; Douglass et al., 2002) while simultaneously responding to McGee's (2002) call for more case studies on the impacts of urban processes for individuals in different urban areas of Southeast Asia. As I will discuss later in this paper, migrants' presence in Hanoi's informal waste-recovery industry is not a new occurrence; however, the number of migrants undertaking waste-recovery as off-farm employment (usually temporarily, but also permanently in some cases) has substantially increased in recent years. Vietnam's globalizing economy and urban transition have been a catalyst for this growth, as well as a partial player in the gendering of the industry and the work within it. Overall, the findings of this research suggest that the livelihoods of Hanoi's informal waste collectors are forged through various processes of change occurring at multiple geographic and economic scales. Before discussing these points in detail, I will briefly discuss some of the characteristics of informal waste-recovery industries and some of the trends in academic literature concerned with this group of urban actors. I will also highlight the research methods used in this study.

2. Informal waste-recovery activities

2.1. Characteristics and demographics of informal waste collectors

Informal waste-recovery industries operate under economic pressure "motivated by demand for recovered materials and the income needs of the labor force" (DiGregorio, 1994, p. 58). In Hanoi, this system consists of a complex hierarchy, which includes a three-tiered network of waste collectors (city-based waste pickers, dumpsite pickers, and junk buyers),[4] intermediaries (receivers, dumpsite depot operators, and sidewalk depot operators) and dealers (DiGregorio, 1997). Similar hierarchies exist in other cities (Sincular, 1991; Medina, 2000; Li, 2002; Hayami et al., 2006). In this paper I will deal primarily with the bottom tier of the waste-recovery system based in the city of Hanoi, and when I refer to this group (city-based waste pickers and junk buyers) collectively I will call them "informal waste collectors". When the discussion warrants more specified occupational categories, I will use the terms "waste pickers" and "junk buyers".

Typically, waste pickers scavenge for waste at transfer sites in the city, refuse bins and waste carts, and on the street. They do not purchase waste; rather, their income is derived from the sale of 'found' objects. On the other hand, junk buyers, as the name suggests, buy waste. Their customers are typically households, restaurants, small hotels/guest houses and institutions (office buildings, both private- and government-owned). In Hanoi, the iconic junk buyer carries a bamboo shoulder pole with baskets that hang off either side, allowing them to move large quantities of waste at a time. Traditionally, a waste picker, on the other hand, is someone who uses tongs or iron hooks to search through garbage bins and bags left on the street or in waste transfer areas. However, these are merely generalizations; in practice, junk buyers also ride bikes and waste pickers do not always use equipment. Furthermore, these occupational categories are flexible since people who are primarily junk buyers sometimes pick waste and waste pickers sometimes engage in junk buying. Regardless of these variations, it is still useful to draw on previously defined occupation categories.

In terms of the demographics of the industry, there are no particular characteristics that can universally apply to all waste collector populations. The task of waste collecting is undertaken by young and old, as well as by both men and women. In some countries, the occupation is undertaken by a combination of the urban poor and rural migrants; in other countries the occupation is partially fuelled through external migration. Because few authors carry out large-scale random sample surveys, it is difficult to determine the exact demographics of cities' waste collector populations. However, prior studies in Vietnam suggest that in the early 1990s, the gender divide amongst waste collectors operating in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City was relatively even (DiGregorio, 1994; Mehra et al., 1996). In Hanoi, DiGregorio found that women accounted for 58% of surveyed waste collectors. In 2006, my research found that this figure had risen to 94%. Moreover, the average age of waste collectors in 2006 was 38 years. This is a stark shift from the early 1990s when DiGregorio found that more than one quarter of the waste collector population in Hanoi was between the ages of 10 and 19. An analysis of the rationale behind these shifts, particularly the shift in gender, will follow in subsequent sections.

2.2. Trends in informal waste-recovery literature

As a number of authors point out, official attitudes towards collaboration with informal waste-recovery actors is generally "overwhelmingly hostile" due to the fact that the activities of this group of workers are often "socially stigmatized as dirty, unhealthy, chaotic and illegal" (Baud et al., 2001, p. 11–12; also see Mehra et al., 1996; Nas and Jaffe, 2004). This group is often seen as a source of embarrassment for cities, and an impediment to development (or modernity), and thus is not recognized for its contribution to urban waste management (Romanos and Chifos, 1996; Ngo, 2001; Nas and Jaffe, 2004; Medina, 2005). As Sincular succinctly notes, "the occupation at once requires and bestows low status" (1991, p. 139). As a result, a number of authors are now calling for more empirical research in order to place informal waste-recovery industries on the political agenda in developing countries (Nas and Jaffe, 2004; Medina, 2007). Furthermore, they argue that informal waste-recovery industries are integral to sustainable urban development and thus more case studies and comparative research should be conducted to validate and/or expand present contextual models.

Indeed, sustainable urban development is one of the emergent issues found in recent literature concerned with informal waste-recovery activities. Baud et al. (2001) argue that in cases where

[3] The term "informal" is used to describe the relationship between workers and the state; while informal waste-recovery workers are providing an essential service to municipal governments, their contribution is informal, or without official sanction or recognition. I do not extend the term informal to the internal structure of the trade. In fact, the internal configuration of the informal waste-recovery trade is quite 'formal' in the sense that it is highly organized and has a recognized structure (which may vary by locale).

[4] City-based and dump-site based waste pickers are sometimes referred to as "scavengers". However, the negative connotations associated with this term have led me to prefer the use of the more neutral term "waste picker".

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