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# Gender, Everyday Mobility, and Mass Transit in Urban Asia

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Mobility is a key word for understanding gender and class formation. In a recent review of feminism, gender, and mobility, historian Georgine Clarsen reminds us that movement never occurs through neutral physical space; it involves gendered bodies through gendered spaces, by means of transport technologies that are often deeply gendered. Furthermore, gendered meanings, practices, and experiences change greatly over time and location.<sup>1</sup> For all these reasons, mobility is—and has to be—contextualized. This article takes inspiration from Clarsen and investigates recent literature on the issue of gender and everyday mobility in urban Asia across a number of academic disciplines.

This topic builds on the gender and transport tradition, where feminist scholars have made daily mobility central to their work and the larger field of transportation studies by clarifying how women's travel practices differ from men's and analyzing what gender-based factors are associated with these differences.<sup>2</sup> Given recent globalization, transnational labor migrations, and ongoing processes of urbanization, an emphasis on everyday mobility as an analytic category offers a critical medium for examining widening social differentiation in the past and today.<sup>3</sup> Patterns of everyday mobility in Asia are especially crucial examples to focus on given the quick pace of industrialization and urbanization in many

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1. Georgine Clarsen, "Feminism and Gender," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, ed. Peter Adey, David Bissell, Kevin Hannam, Peter Merriman, and Mimi Sheller (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 94–102.
  2. Robin Law, "Beyond 'Women and Transport': Towards New Geographies of Gender and Daily Mobility," *Progress in Human Geography* 23, no. 4 (1999): 567–588.
  3. Beth E. Notar, "'Coming Out' to 'Hit the Road': Temporal, Spatial and Affective Mobilities of Taxi Drivers and Day Trippers in Kunming, China," *City and Society* 24, no. 3 (2012): 281–301; Nihan Akyelken, "Development and Gendered Mobilities: Narratives from the Women of Mardin, Turkey," *Mobilities* 8, no. 3 (2013): 424–439; Berna Yazici, "Towards an Anthropology



Asian nations. Moreover, a large number of young women work in the newly expanded—and increasingly feminized—manufacturing and service sectors in Asian urban areas.<sup>4</sup> These women have come to symbolize the emerging middle classes that represent youth, purchasing power, mobility, and modernity.<sup>5</sup> These transitions offer the opportunity for scholars to understand how and by what means shifting ideas of gender have come to shape the practices and meanings of mobility in particular historical contexts.<sup>6</sup>

Urban public transit systems represent one of the most productive venues through which scholars have investigated gendered mobility. These systems have always been public spaces where strangers come into close physical proximity with one another. They create occasion for social relations—especially public gender relations—to be challenged.<sup>7</sup> Mass transit systems are becoming even more important sites as the urbanization and feminization of the urban labor force continues. This shift has brought an increasingly heterogeneous population (including a growing number of women) on streets and moving around cities, naturally contributing to new tensions. While public transit is not necessarily the dominant mode of transport in all emerging Asian megacities, investments in urban rail systems in particular have dramatically increased in these cities in recent years.<sup>8</sup> In urban areas, public transit systems are essential means of mobility and sites of contestation where social boundaries are redrawn and social relations renegotiated.<sup>9</sup>

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of Traffic: A Ride through Class Hierarchies on Istanbul's Roadways," *Ethnos* 78, no. 4 (2013): 515–542.

4. Hoai Anh Tran and Ann Schlyter, "Gender and Class in Urban Transport: The Cases of Xian and Hanoi," *Environment and Urbanization* 22, no. 1 (2010): 139–155; Robbie Peters, "Single Working-Class Women and the City in Java and Vietnam," *Asian Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (2016): 26–52.
5. Catherine Earl, *Vietnam's New Middle Classes: Gender, Career, City* (Copenhagen: nias Press, 2014).
6. Clarsen, "Feminism and Gender," 100; Kyoko Kusakabe, ed., *Gender, Roads, and Mobility in Asia* (Rugby, U.K.: Practical Action, 2012); Ragnhild Lund and Anna Karlsdóttir, eds., "Gendered Mobilities in Asia," special issue, *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift—Norwegian Journal of Geography* 67, no. 4 (2013).
7. Marian Aguiar, *Tracking Modernity: India's Railway and the Cultural of Mobility* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Alisa Freedman, *Tokyo in Transit: Japanese Culture on the Rails and Road* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
8. Michael A. Niedzielski and Edward J. Malecki, "Making Tracks: Rail Networks in World Cities," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102, no. 6 (2012): 1409–1431.
9. Anru Lee, "Subways as a Space of Cultural Intimacy: The Mass Rapid Transit System in Taipei, Taiwan," *The China Journal* 58 (2007): 31–55; Anru Lee and Chien-hung Tung, "How Subways and High Speed Railways Have Changed Taiwan: Transportation Technology, Urban Culture, and Social Life," in *Popular Culture in Taiwan: Charismatic Modernity*, ed. Marc Moskowitz (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 107–130; Melissa Butcher, "Cultures of Commuting: The Mobile Negotiation of Space and Subjectivity on Delhi's Metro," *Mobilities*

Women's everyday mobility is a central focus for feminist gender scholars because they have long argued that a woman's ability to be mobile has a direct impact on her access to resources and opportunities—which increase her ability to succeed. In other words, mobility is empowering, and because it is empowering, more mobility—especially for women—is a good thing. However, Hanson critiques the notion that mobility is unconditionally positive.<sup>10</sup> She challenges the idea that mobility is necessarily empowering while immobility is necessarily disempowering. Hanson contends that each can empower and oppress depending upon the situation.<sup>11</sup> Hence, it is imperative to know how an observed pattern of movement shapes someone's life. It is likewise problematic to assume that gendered variations in mobility can be explained away through the man vs. woman binary. Other forms of identity such as age, marital status, class, and race/ethnicity may also affect differences.

The recent scholarship reviewed in this article represents an advance in the study of gendered, everyday mobility. These works demonstrate that mobility as a gendered process is a result of gender intersecting other axes of identity. Key to this notion is a focus on how one's life cycle stage affects the abilities, purposes, and possibilities for mobility for women and men alike. Echoing Hanson, these articles also highlight that whether mobility is empowering or disempowering depends on the context and is tied to politics. The practice of mobility consists of an assemblage of gender, power, economics, and cultural ideals that may enable and/or hinder one's ability to be mobile. This phenomenon is captured by the paradoxical situation faced by the young female workers that are the subject of many of the articles discussed in this article. On the one hand, the changing global labor market presents young women with new employment opportunities and thus enhanced mobility. On the other hand, the women also face threats of gender-based violence during trips to and from work and other public spaces. Finally, recent works make it clear that women's mobility is not just about women, but also men. While past gender and mobilities scholarship has paid great attention to how various cultural assemblages impact women's daily mobility, and in turn their subject formation, less attention has been paid to similar effects on men. However, new scholarship explores the complex ways male subjectivities

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6, no. 2 (2011): 237–254; Michael Fisch, "Tokyo's Commuter Train Suicides and the Society of Emergence," *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2013): 320–343.

10. Susan Hanson, "Gender and Mobility: New Approaches for Informing Sustainability," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2010): 5–23.

11. As an example, Sorpanzetti's study on motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok shows how urban (im)mobility is a tool of political mobilization. Similarly, Lee's research on the "absolute traffic" in Jakarta, Indonesia, indicates that immobility can provide a basis for community. See Claudio Sorpanzetti, "Owners of the Map: Mobility and Mobilization among Motorcycle Taxi Drivers in Bangkok," *City and Society* 26, no. 1 (2014): 120–143; Doreen Lee, "Absolute Traffic: Infrastructural Aptitude in Urban Indonesia," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39, no. 2 (2015): 234–250.

are reworked—and hegemonic masculinity destabilized or reinforced—as a result of the same process that facilitated women's new economic opportunities and their enhanced mobility.<sup>12</sup>

## Gendered Mobilities and the Man-Woman Binary

The idea that Japan is a world leader of railway technology constitutes a significant part of the modern nation's self-image. This belief has enhanced the import of (commuter) trains as vessels of cultural meaning and production. In her work, Barbara Thornbury analyzes films and novels concerning Tokyo's urban transit systems to explore the cultural and gendered space of the nation's rail lines.<sup>13</sup> Thornbury's cultural analysis provides a nuanced understanding of women's mobility by examining the various representations of female passengers of all ages. In addition, it cautions scholars against falling for the facile "alluring promise of mobility" for women in both life and on the rails.<sup>14</sup>

Two distinct kinds of female passengers dominate Thornbury's discussion—full-time homemaker wives and young, single, working women/students. Housewives are expected to use commuter trains only during off-peak hours. They run errands and visit after the morning, male, rush-hour crowds have cleared, during the "in-between hours" of the day. Accordingly, in her analysis of one short story, Thornbury argues that the housewife protagonist's regular rush-hour travel subverts societal expectations for the commuter system. She asserts her agency by traveling, though in this case not for errands, but to murder the woman with whom her husband is having an affair.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the housewives, urban transit systems appear to provide freedom to young working women and female students. Yet, behind this seeming freedom lie dangers and discomfort. In recent decades, *chikan* (groping) incidents have been widely discussed in public, in the media, and in literary works as a safety issue inherent to public transport facilities with crowded conditions. As a consequence, women-only carriages were introduced to several routes of Tokyo's commuter railways in late 2000, a point that I will come back to later in this article.

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12. Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Kamalini Ramdas made the same observation in "21 Years of Gender, Place, and Culture: Gender, Migration, Mobility, and Transnationalism," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 21, no. 10 (2014): 1197–1213.

13. Barbara E. Thornbury, "Tokyo, Gender and Mobility: Tracking Fictional Characters on Real Monorails, Trains, Subways and Trams," *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 43–64.

14. While Thornbury's article focuses on women's mobility, I am by no means indicating that women are the only ones affected by life course. For example, see Farha Ghannam, "Mobility, Liminality, and Embodiment in Urban Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 38, no. 4 (2011): 790–800.

15. Thornbury, "Tokyo, Gender and Mobility," 61.

## The Question of Mobility as Empowerment

Feminist scholars have long argued that a woman's ability to be mobile directly affects her access to resources and economic opportunities. In this vein, many have contended that innovative transport technologies bring an emancipatory effect for women by allowing them to move through public space and to transverse both physical and social boundaries with greater ease. However, recent literature on gender and urban mobility in Asia questions this tight link between mobility and emancipation by pointing out that transportation technologies can be highly gendered in design, distribution, and general affect.<sup>16</sup>

For example, Allison Truitt's work examines how motorbikes in Vietnam resemble and emulate cars in the Western world's culture of "automobility," by embodying a promise of autonomy and freedom of movement.<sup>17</sup> To Truitt, motorbikes manifest the emergence of the Vietnamese middle class and signal a reordering of social stratification. Yet, she shows that users of motorbikes still apply gendered conceptions of mobility to the vehicles. Married women celebrate the ease and comfort brought about by motorbikes, but they do so in the context of performing expected daily duties. Young, unmarried women, on the other hand, sit on the back of their boyfriends' motorbikes and wrap their arms around the drivers' waists or rest their arms on the drivers' thighs—gestures rationalized as precaution for the passengers' safety but certainly also signs of intimacy and challenges to society's gender norms. Even the vehicles themselves are classified in terms of masculine and feminine, with the Bonus labeled a male bike, and the Angel a bike for women. Desires are readily gendered.

Jan Brunson has observed similar phenomena in Kathmandu, Nepal, where motorcycles are considered boys' vehicles and scooters the mode for girls. Brunson shows that the rise of scooters in contemporary Nepal has allowed young, affluent, unmarried women to move from the back of a motorbike to the driver's seat.<sup>18</sup> This shift has allowed for successful challenges to gender norms and facilitated the movement of courtship and intimacy to out-of-the-way places. Yet, Brunson also cautions against overzealous optimism about the emancipatory effect of scooters, as the new site of courtship is not only spatially on the outskirts of the Kathmandu Valley, but also "on the margins of disciplinary forms of surveillance such as watching community members or everyday modes of bodily discipline and self-policing."<sup>19</sup>

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16. Alisa Freedman, Laura Miller, and Christine R. Yano, eds., *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

17. Allison Truitt, "On the Back of a Motorbike: Middle-class Mobility in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 1 (2008): 3–19.

18. Jan Brunson, "'Scooty Girls': Mobility and Intimacy at the Margin of Kathmandu," *Ethnos* 79, no. 5 (2014): 610–629.

19. *Ibid.*, 613.

Mobility can be concomitantly empowering and disempowering, in the sense that enhanced mobility comes with greater danger and a heightened reality of violence. Correspondingly, women's safety in urban public space, literally and discursively, is a critical topic in gender and mobilities studies. Lately, much of the literature has been focused on the policy of women-only transportation in urban transit systems as a solution to women's safety concerns in an increasing number of countries across the globe (such as Japan, India, Egypt, Iran, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia, and Malaysia).<sup>20</sup>

A reserved coach for women in every Delhi Metro train was introduced in late 2010 in response to an increasing number of women passengers and reported cases of sexual harassment. Anuja Agrawal and Aarushi Sharma argue that this policy opens new sites for contestation and reaffirmation of gender relations and ideologies. Specifically, the authors isolate the passages between the cars and the entries and exits to the women's coach as spaces ripe for gendered confrontations.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, segregated transport alone has not sufficiently changed women's overall relationship to the city. The authors conceptualize gendered mobilities through women's ongoing relationships with highly masculinized public spaces. Advocating women's rights to the city is at the core of the article. While they acknowledge that women's ability to move and their subjectivity are—and can be—in a state of change, masculinity seems to be treated as a constant but not a contingent factor in the article. The mutually constitutive nature of women's and men's social roles and women's and men's subjectivities are slippery but crucial subjects.

## Mobility and the (Re)construction of Male and Female Subjectivity

In late 2000 women-only coaches were implemented in Tokyo's commuter trains as a solution to sexual harassment problems, especially groping. Mitsutoshi Horii and Adam Burgess consider why groping was “selected” as a problem in Japan after the 1990s, when women have been exposed to the risk as long as urban public transit has existed.<sup>22</sup> The authors connect the growing public profile of young, unmarried women in public after World War II to a rise in sexual ha-

20. For comparative studies, see Amy Dunckel Graglia, “‘Pink Transportation’ in Mexico City: Reclaiming Urban Space through Collective Action against Gender-Based Violence,” *Gender and Development* 21, no. 2 (2013): 265–276; Amy Dunckel Graglia, “Finding Mobility: Women Negotiating Fear and Violence in Mexico City's Public Transit System,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 23, no. 5 (2016): 624–640, doi: 10.1080/0966369X.2015.1034240.

21. Anuja Agrawal and Aarushi Sharma, “Gender Contests in the Delhi Metro: Implications of Reservation of a Coach for Women,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 22, no. 3 (2015): 421–436.

22. Mitsutoshi Horii and Adam Burgess, “Constructing Sexual Risk: ‘Chikan,’ Collapsing Male Authority and the Emergence of Women-Only Train Carriages in Japan,” *Health, Risk & Society* 14, no. 1 (2012): 41–55.

harassment cases, including groping. While the introduction of women-only train cars is widely believed to stem from a resolve to protect women from groping, the authors show that many women were motivated to use women-only train carriages for reasons unrelated to harassment, but nonetheless gendered. Most of the interviewed women complained about the presence and odor of older (often drunk) men in regular cars. In this case, then, many women constructed the safety issue within a language of female cleanness and unhygienic men. Furthermore, although young men seem to be the ones who grope most frequently, it is middle-aged men who are depicted on antigrope posters. The support and use of women-only cars, then, is not solely associated with harassment, but is also closely related to the decline of a culturally specific type of masculinity, the middle-aged “salaryman,” in contemporary Japan.<sup>23</sup>

Brigitte Steger contextualizes the decline of the “salaryman’s” reputation within the recent neoliberal economic turn in Japan, which has marginalized this position within the Japanese economy and society.<sup>24</sup> This shift has led to a questioning of gendered social roles, namely, men as the breadwinners and women as the homemakers. Demographic changes in recent years also indicate that women have been “[defecting] from expected life courses”—that is, marriage—in order to look for a more active social and economic life. This has resulted in a rapid decrease in birth rate, and in hopes of stemming the decline the Japanese government has introduced measures to encourage fathers to participate in childcare—a practice that further subverts traditional gender roles.<sup>25</sup>

Women’s enhanced mobility, the gradual shift in gender roles, and the redefining of masculinity each play out in public spaces such as urban commuter trains. The representation of middle-aged salarymen as the stereotypical image of the groper has been well established. Young women’s public expression of disgust and repulsion against this group of men, therefore, exemplifies their critique of Japan’s hegemonic masculinity and their demand for access to public space.

If public transit systems have come to stand in for forced proximity and possible harassment, women-only coaches present one solution. Alternative means of transportation such as private cars or cars for hire also purportedly provide seclusion, protection, and thus safety. The irony, of course, is that, in the case of a car for hire, the driver is most often a male stranger, raising another set of concerns.<sup>26</sup>

The risk of putting single women in cars driven by male strangers is highlighted by Sareeta Amrute’s study of the mobility of sexual violence against young

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23. *Ibid.*, 47.

24. Brigitte Steger, “Negotiating Gendered Space on Japanese Commuter Trains,” *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 13, no. 3 (2015), [www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol13/iss3/steger.html](http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol13/iss3/steger.html) (accessed 1 January 2016).

25. *Ibid.*, 18.

26. Anouk de Koning, “Gender, Public Space and Social Segregation in Cairo: Of Taxi Drivers, Prostitutes and Professional Women,” *Antipode* 41, no. 3 (2009): 533–556.

female employees in India's booming call center industry. Amrute contends that "moving rape" should be understood within the contradictions of India's post-liberalization moment. Young working women are promoted in the narrative of liberalization as modern and upwardly mobile. Since the women are key representatives of the increased buying power that holds the nation together, companies hire cars to transport them, aiming to both keep them safe and control their movements. The risk of sexual violence is outweighed by the need for male labor to transport female labor. This reflects a new social and economic relationship at work in cars. While female call center workers are claiming partial membership in the middle and mobile classes, the male drivers shift being a figure of authority over women to being the guards of a new lifestyle of which they are not a part. Female and male subjectivities have to be—and are—reworked in the process. Ultimately, these new relationships are turning the car from a simple vehicle into a symbol and carrier of modern urban Indian life. For women, the vehicle increasingly becomes a "place of 'violence and desire' where 'displacement collides with dreams for a better life.'" <sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Literature on gender and mobility must better document the differences between how men and women relate to mobilities. Urban transit is a site where gender, power/inequality, agency, and subjectivity come together. By taking into account assemblages of sociocultural factors, the works reviewed in this article provide a much-needed understanding of gender and everyday mobility. The literature challenges the static binaries of "women's mobility" and "men's mobility" by showing its complexity and diversity. Gendered mobility practices are shaped not just by gender's interaction with other markers of identity, but also by the fact that an individual may possess different abilities, purposes, and possibilities for mobility during different parts of their life cycle (e.g., married woman vs. single female). This conclusion leads to my second point: the effect of being mobile is far from universally positive. This literature shows that it can be concurrently empowering and disempowering. In the case of hired cars, a young working woman's enhanced mobility can paradoxically become a safety threat. Finally, recent work shows that acquiring mobility is often linked to the struggle to acquire new subjectivities. While past studies on gender and mobilities have focused primarily on women's positions and perspectives, recent literature reveals how male subjectivity is reworked and re-presented in new patterns of urban mobility. The presence of young working women in urban spaces is a representation of new global economic trends and also a challenge to masculine

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27. Sareeta Amrute, "Moving Rape: Trafficking in the Violence of Postliberalization," *Public Culture* 27, no. 2 (2015): 331–359.

control. Masculine contestation of women's public visibility—such as through sexual violence—therefore epitomizes the gendered challenge created by new global economies. This new reality shows new contours in the relationship between mobility, gender, and subjectivity.

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