

Cars and Car Crashes in the City of Angels

My PhD project, entitled “Cars and Car Crashes in the City of Angels: Bangkok’s Collision with Cultural Capitalism” is investigating how Thailand’s socio-economic transformation and incorporation into a global capitalist system may explain, to a degree, the growth in car ownership in Bangkok.

The reliance on the private motor vehicle as a personal transport mode has produced some very negative public health consequences for Thailand. These consequences include an average 13,000 road deaths annually, air and noise pollution, and the loss of social capital. By social capital, I mean a disruption to the social life and connectedness of communities when roads divide neighbourhoods. This PhD project is propelled by the magnitude of these public health problems in Bangkok specifically.

To date, most research on the transport problem in Bangkok has been conducted in the field of transport economics and public policy. The approach I am taking aims to fill a gap in knowledge about car usage in Bangkok. This approach focuses on the growth of the number of urban workers and consumers in Bangkok that has occurred as part of Thailand’s entrenchment in a global capitalist system. In my recent fieldwork in Bangkok I have sought to understand, through in-depth interviews and observation, the attitude of the new urban workers of Bangkok (many middle class) to car ownership and usage. I have speculated that their need for mobility in the industrial and urban setting of Bangkok has been influenced not only by limitations in transport planning and investment, but also by the institutions of a global capitalist society. These institutions (car corporations and marketers especially) have captured the new needs for mobility of the workers of Bangkok by attaching certain identities to car ownership. These identities include, for example, being ‘cool’ as the young driver of a specific brand, or having prestige and a sense of exclusivity as the driver of a prestige car brand. These identities are, of course, not only global. They are formed through the melding of global influences with local aspects of Thainess.

In addition, I am finding that these identities are part of a wider change in the identities of Thai people as Thailand has moved from an agriculturally-based society to a global capitalist one. Consumerism is one of the most obvious features of these evolving identities in Bangkok.

By understanding how Thai identities have come to include global references, and specifically how this may also have encouraged car ownership, I believe policy makers may have some very useful new knowledge to take into account as they attempt to deal with the reliance on private car usage in Bangkok and its negative public health consequences.

Matthew Williams

PhD Candidate

The National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health

The Australian National University