Spatial (Im)mobilities and Aspirations: Voice of a Young Adult Learner in Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper continues the strand of research on educational aspirations for upward social mobility with an emphasis on physical mobilities as observed in a Vietnamese student from a less privileged background. The authors utilised qualitative methods including reflexive journaling and life history interviews to engage in conversations with the participant over the course of five months regarding her geographical movement, aspirations, higher education experiences, and the (im)mobilities she enacted or encountered in daily life. Drawing on the concept-clusters framework of aspirations, the authors demonstrate the social, cultural and familial association with the student's aspirations for and within education, particularly higher education, which was framed by the current neoliberal social imaginary in Vietnam – the dominant imaginary of having a good (material) life. By mapping her spatial journey from her parental home and hometown to boarding middle and high schools for ethnic minority students, and then to university in the capital city, the authors argue that this journey is symbolic of a progression towards adulthood, independence, and importantly, escape for upward social mobility that is carried out alongside, and as a consequence of, the progression from school to higher education, and rural-urban migration.

Keywords: youth mobility; aspirations; place; social mobility; higher education; geographical movement; Vietnam; Global South.

Introduction

Understanding educational aspirations and social mobility has been a key pursuit in policy and research as it contributes to social justice and education equity. Social mobility, in general, describes the changes that occur in a person's position in the social structures of society that arise from unequal distributions of resources and opportunities, thus indicating a change in that person's ability to access and manage resources within that structure" (Bonfert, 2024, p. 2). Education, and higher education in particular, is a key aspect in the study of social mobility. In order to actualise the aspiration for upward social mobility through higher education, many students, especially those from rural areas, have to move away from their home to a new place, oftentimes in urban areas. How spatial (im)mobility influences the aspirations of transforming lives among young people from less advantaged areas is important to the understanding of their experiences in higher education. Despite the efforts made to date, however, the topic has not been exhausted since most studies examining youth mobility are in Western contexts (eg., Mendoza et al., 2024; Bathmaker et al., 2016) while more diverse empirical focus on people across geographic borders including those from the "global south" is less prevalent in the literature. To enrich the scholarship, this paper focuses on the geographical mobility and aspirations of social mobility of a young student, Nga (pseudonym) in a developing country context, Vietnam. Despite the country's post-war rapid economic development and the significant increase in the number of middle-class population, the dynamics of spatial production and life trajectory navigation, and the construction of aspiration of Vietnamese young people have rarely been examined in extant scholarship. This study features one single case of Nga, a Vietnamese female student of ethnic minority in her final undergraduate year migrating from her hometown, an impoverished rural village in Central Vietnam, to Hanoi, the capital city, for university education in a reputable institution. We seek to understand the role place played in forming the Nga's aspirations, and the social and spatial (im)mobilities that impacted her aspirations.

In what follows, we will first present a critical review of youth mobility and the role of place in higher education before delineating the conceptual framework of the study, the concept-clusters of aspirations. This is followed by a methodological section, specifying the participant, data collection methods, and data analysis used in this study. The findings and discussion section narrates Nga's life history based on the framework. We then discuss how this study enriches our understanding of socioeconomically disadvantaged students' aspirations from various facets of the phenomenon. In so doing, rather than only focusing on the challenges or difficulties that Nga encountered in life and thus seeking social mobility through education success, we highlight her (im)mobilities as strengths to engineer her personal, educational, and career development opportunities and trajectory. We conclude with a discussion of equity, mobility and accessibility in higher education, which provides implications for the literature of aspiration, specifically in the Global South context.

Literature review

Aspiration and social mobility

Aspirations have been defined as hopes for future life, goals, wants or future desires, and it is viewed as the outcome of biographical and social processes. Aspiration is a cultural capacity, formed "in interaction and in the thick of social life" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67). Harrison and Waller (2018) understand aspiration as a "contextualized," involving constructions of "future possible identities, situations or ways of being" (p. 917), or "possible selves" (Henderson et al., 2018). To understand aspiration, we must consider capacity to aspire which is defined by Appadurai (2004) "as the ability to read a map of a journey into the future" (p. 76). For Appadurai (2004), the capacity to aspire has a focus on the future, and the importance of strengthening one's 'voice' in order to "produce those forms of cultural consensus that may best advance their own collective long-term interests in matters of wealth, equality, and dignity" (p. 64). He stresses the importance of the moral and cultural meanings of cultivating one's capacity to aspire and the complex relationships between socio-cultural influences and life experiences that shape aspirations of young people and their families. What is critical in the understanding of an individual's aspiration is their ability to engineer and read the "map of a journey into the future" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 76). Such a map is full of aspirational nodes, which in the case of students coming from more privileged communities and backgrounds encompass familial resources and networks. Those having less advantage, by contrast, may have a "thinner, weaker sense of the pathways" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69) while producing their maps into the future. Higher education can make up for such a disadvantage. In her work, Henderson (2018) has argued that higher education contexts are strongly linked to the concept of "possible selves" because "subjects are required to produce and work towards coherent narratives of educational and career futures" (Henderson, 2020a, p. 4).

In international education, aspiration is often studied as a factor in the decision-making process of students, taken as a projected benefit gained from educational border-crossing activity, thus being static and unwavering. Wu and Sou (2023), however, argues that aspiration can be "variously (dis-)continued, realized, transformed and/or reconfigured as the students confront challenges in a new environment" (p. 760), which may steer the direction of students' previously planned mobility. The two researchers contend that aspiration implies a balanced sense of rationality, subjectivity, and ambition. This understanding, within the international student mobility literature, suggests that students' aspirations of geographical mobility are at the intersection of economic, social-cultural, and psychological factors such as future employability, international outlook and cosmopolitan, immigration, life betterment and social mobility, and global cultural capital accruement (Phan, 2022; Mulvey, 2021). In migration studies where aspiration is frequently the centre of inquiry, researchers have proposed that aspiration is "highly fluid and constantly being transformed" (Wang & Chen, 2021). The initial, pre-migration aspiration is subjected to reconstruction when migrants, both low-skilled as the domestic workers as in Boccagni (2017)'s research or highly-skilled as Western scholars working in Sino-foreign universities as in Wang and Chen's (2021) work, face reality in the host country. This reality

check can lead to “an ongoing emotional unfolding to disruptions, frustrations and redefinitions” of aspiration (Wang & Chen, 2021, p. 3438). However, in the Global South context, aspiration for mobility among youth is prevalent. Akhter and Chauhan’s (2024) study indicates that in India, aspirations of youth are deeply rooted in their cultural social background, and these aspirations are constrained by the prevailing socio-economic conditions and government policies, thereby limiting the potential for upward social mobility. Research on youth in Taiwan by Yang and Koo (2024) argue that globalization significantly shapes youth subjectivities and migration aspirations as they navigate shifting economic landscapes. Gough’s (2008) analysis of Lusaka’s youth in Africa reveals that their mobility is economically driven, reflecting the broader economic decline and health crises affecting the region. Due to deteriorating local conditions, young individuals frequently engage in downward mobility, which alters their life trajectories substantially. In another study by Langevang and Gough (2009), young people in Ghana find that their mobility is conditioned by factors including “labour market characteristics, gender and generational relations, and their spatial location on the outskirts of the city and the margins of the world” (p. 741). These limitations, however, do not stop them from developing real or imagined travel that takes them to other parts of the city, into rural areas and across the nation's borders.

In studies that intersect higher education and migration, one strand of research on aspiration focuses on students who are refugees. Scholars such as Baker et al. (2018), Gale and Parker (2015) and Irwin (2020) argue that the interrelated familial, social, historical and contextual factors influence students’ participation in higher education. Therefore, the project of raising aspirations that institutions pursue is important to encourage refugee students to attend university, which will ensure greater socio-economic and cultural inclusion and successful settlement of refugee and migrant communities. Having a similar focus on students from immigrant background, Soong et al. (2022) examine “intergenerational aspirations” among refugee students in Australia which are described as “fulfilling one’s wish to attain a desired aim which are implicitly inspired by their parents’ aspirations for a better future” in a new country (p. 2).

The literature review showcases how aspiration and social mobility among youth emerge as multifaceted issues closely linked to economic structures, educational access, and geographical mobility. The interaction between societal barriers and individual aspirations creates a complex environment which is fraught with constraints imposed by systemic social, political and cultural factors.

Higher education, place and spatial mobility

In previous studies (Leyshon & Bull, 2011; Eriksson, 2017), young people are found to position themselves in relation to the place where they have grown up. Even though they develop attachment with their place of origin, “in a highly mobile society people may participate extensively in local institutions and develop community attachments yet be prepared to leave these communities if local conditions fail to satisfy their immediate needs or aspirations”

(Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974, p. 329). Place can also function as a marker of social status or mobility, affecting how young people view their options and their mobility. For example, young people from rural or marginalized urban areas may internalize external stigmas associated with their places of origin (Malatzky & Couch, 2023). According to Keating et al. (2024), youth mobility aspirations (or lack thereof) are shaped by "their experiences of (and attitudes towards) the place they grow up in and their built environment" (p. 1292). Youth's relationship with place is not static but subject to changes, which is often negotiated through experiences of inclusion, exclusion, mobility, and aspirations (Skelton & Valentine, 1998). Place can also impact their intention to leave or stay as part of their imagination of their future being, or a particular kind person they want to become. Such intention is factored in students' mobility for higher education. Universities are understood as being positioned "within a national geography and occupying a material place in particular localities" (Henderson, 2020, p. 333). In that sense, universities are an element in a narrative of a place, and play an important part in the place-making process of students, including those who move away from home for higher education.

Higher education plays a role in the social mobility processes which is "complex and has many nuances that depend not only on access to it but on the intersection of standpoints" (Mendoza et al., 2024, p. 445). Social mobility, in turn, is frequently interlinked with spatial mobility, particularly for students from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds. In the literature, it is not difficult to find a dominant educational narrative that likens education as a rite of passage to adulthood and powerfully associates success with spatial movement between places (Holdsworth, 2006). From a Global South context, a study by Lee et al. (2012) proposes that educational aspirations act as a key determinant in interrupting cycles of low-income status across generations, directly influencing educational attainment and, consequently, future economic opportunities of students in India. As yet, the capacities of young people to partake in higher education are shaped by their geographical contexts (Corbett, 2007). In Western settings such as in the UK, those who can afford to move away to study are often more privileged while 'local' students are often seen as having lower social class (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Holdsworth, 2006). Mobility is considered a key component in the construction of a journey into the future for young adults. Sir Peter Lampl, Founder and Chairman of the Sutton Trust, in his foreword of Donnelly and Gamsu's (2018) work on social, ethnic and spatial inequalities in student mobility, maintains that university is "frequently the first important opportunity for geographical movement in the life of a young person" (p. 2) and this geographical movement to big cities can be "an 'escalator' for social mobility" (p. 2).

Long distance move, however, means higher cost, longer travel time, and possible cultural barriers. These economic costs are frequently noted as a significant barrier for young people living in regional areas. Thus, moving long distances to attend university is more common among students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds (Chesters & Cuervo, 2022). Similarly, students hailing from urbanized areas with concentrated educational institutions and robust support systems tend to exhibit higher rates of university enrollment and completion

compared to their rural counterparts, who often lack access to similar resources (Machin & Vignoles, 2004). These issues raise concerns over (in)equalities in access to university education (Chesters & Cuervo, 2022). When rural students manage to relocate to metropolitan areas, they tend to lack a sense of belonging in relation to urban campus life because of differences in physical space, greater diversity in the metropole, and increased competition within education (Heinisch, 2018; Farrugia et al., 2014; Guiffrida, 2008; Phan & Le, 2025). Therefore, place is important for young adults in higher education, because where they were born may decide where they go for university education. Place acts as a critical factor in shaping educational outcomes, perpetuating or addressing inequities.

Conceptual framework

In this paper, we employed the concept-clusters for aspirations in higher education. In their systematic review to understand aspiration in higher education as both a "public issue" and a "private trouble," Gale and Parker (2015) synthesized works from various aspiration scholars and identified four overlapping concept-clusters to explain it. *Social imaginary* is a key premise which asserts that individuals' aspirations are influenced by their circumstances and their imagined place in the world. Consequently, neoliberal imaginary is a collective perspective that privileges self-maximization through education and subsequent advancement through labour market opportunities. *Taste and distinction* are Bordieu's (1984) concepts that indicate culturally cultivated dispositions to make aesthetic judgments about patterns of consumption, recreational activities and occupations, which vary between different groups and are considered "markers of class" (Gale & Parker, 2005, p. 143). *Navigational capacity* relies heavily on resources stored in the archives of experience available to the aspirers in order to practice, repeat, explore, conjecture, and refute. Finally, *desire* or *possibility* is a socially influenced personal belief about what constitutes an appreciable life and how to build ourselves to fit into the world through other people's acknowledgement.

This concept-clusters framework provided the most comprehensive tool to detangle our research problem, therefore we adopted it for our data analysis. At the same time, in the context of Global South higher education, we found it fundamentally critical to enunciate the Vietnamese traditional values in parallelism with neoliberal values in constituting the social imaginary within which aspirations are being discussed. This resulted in the following figure, which encapsulates the theoretical framework of the current research:

[Figure 1]

Methodology

This article is part of a larger qualitative project investigating 10 Vietnamese students' spatial belonging and learning space in Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam. These students were in different stages of their undergraduate programmes, some of them were born and raised in Hanoi while the remaining came from rural areas or other provinces. The students were recruited from

the authors' professional networks and individual referrals. We adopted a qualitative approach for this research project because it is well suited to revealing the complexity and dynamics of students' spatial production and mobility. Ethical approval for this project was granted by the first author's institution. In this paper, we report on a single case of Nga's lived experiences, as her narrative is exemplary. Nga is an underprivileged student. She is of Thái ethnic minority and was born into, as she described in the life history interview, "a very poor family in a very poor village" in a province of Central Vietnam. Her native language is the ethnic Thai language.

Life history interviews can be viewed as a dialogic research process that allows for participant's agency to narrate their life experiences and events through stories using their own words (Hay & Cope, 2021). The life stories approach allows us to conduct an in-depth study into the spatial experiences that have promoted and (re)constructed Nga's aspiration for upward educational and social mobility, and the strategies, negotiations and transformations that such aspiration and spatial production generate.

The first author interviewed Nga twice on two separate occasions, each interview lasted about two hours with questions covering her lifespan from childhood to adulthood and conducted in Vietnamese. Before interviewing, the participant was reminded that she could terminate the talk at any point she wanted, and she was encouraged to only share experiences she was comfortable with. She was further assured that the researchers would provide appropriate referrals to support services if she found it necessary and that we were committed to safeguarding her well-being throughout her participation and in the period following the interview. Consent for the interview to be audio-recorded was also obtained at this point. The recordings were later transcribed for data analysis.

Along with life history interviews, the participant was also asked to keep a reflective journal over two months to record her daily movements, activities, feelings and emotions in multiple spaces she was engaged with. We designed an entry template with prompts to help the participant reflect systematically and rigorously while also leaving space to include images and creative productions. Throughout the journaling process, we responded to the participant's writing to keep the journal dialogic and interactive. Doing so served two purposes: (1) conducting our ongoing analysis of the data; and (2) encouraging the participant to keep journaling by embracing a sense of readership. A week after the journaling process ended, the first author conducted an online semi-structured interview with the participant. The purpose of this interview was to further explore how the spaces surrounding the participant empowered or inhibited certain behaviours, and to clarify certain points arising from the written entries. The interview lasted 90 minutes, in Vietnamese. Again, the interviewer followed all the standard protocols for consent seeking and recording the conversation. Altogether, the participant contributed about 330 minutes of audio recording and 17 written journal entries.

During data analysis, each researcher did close reading of both the journaling and interview data to preliminarily code through both manifest and latent codes, and uncovered the

nuances of participants' writing and responses (David & Sutton, 2011) before exchanging our draft codes and reaching consensus. We then together clustered the codes into categories and then general themes in subsequent rounds of coding (David & Sutton, 2011). To these ends, Gale & Parker's (2015) adapted aspiration framework was applied to shed light on different aspects of aspiration. At the end of the analysis process, we utilized ChatGPT to generate a cartography of Nga's spatial mobility to artistically represent her roots and routes as well as the aspirations traversing boundaries. Responding to recent trends in qualitative research to treat artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool that can process ordinary language queries about a dataset (Morgan, 2023; Rhaman et al., 2023), we incorporated AI into the analysis process and had it return a form of data representation that relatively illustrated the overarching theme of the study.

Findings and discussion

In this section, we present our findings in five themes corresponding with the conceptual framework. Since we utilized various data sources around one participant, we distinguish between excerpts from life history interview (LHI), follow-up interview (FI), and journal entries (JE), for the purpose of clearer data representation.

Vietnamese traditional social imaginary

Socialist Republic Vietnam is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country in South-East Asia with an area of about 331,000 square kilometers (128,000 sq mi), a population of over 100 million, and a syncretic culture resulting from various socio-political turmoils. During 1,000 years under the Chinese colonization (111 BC to 938 AD), Vietnamese animistic beliefs were mixed with China's Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (He et al., 2011). During almost 30 years under the French colonisation (1858–1885) and 20 years tangled in the Cold War between Communist Soviet Union and Anti-communist United States (1955-1975), Western beliefs including capitalism and neoliberalism came in contact with socialist values such as patriotism and social welfare. As a result, Vietnam's modern society manifests Confucian and Taoist, Buddhist, Western and Socialist values in each aspect of daily life.

This complex value system is clearly reflected in the lived experiences of individuals like Nga, whose stories illustrate how Confucian patriarchy and collectivist ideals shaped her rural upbringing. Her father was seen as the most powerful decision maker in the family, who could resort to violence to reinforce his influence on other members. Her mother was described as submissive to the status-quo, having no intention to question her husband's authority or defy his actions. Nga recalled a domestic violence incident she witnessed when father had beaten mother until unconsciousness at the apathy of her paternal grandparents despite Nga's plea for help. This made her recognize the mistreatment of her mother, her younger sister, and herself because her family did not have a male heir at that time.

Building on this traumatic experience, Nga observed that such gender-based injustices were normalized within her rural community, a place where formal education, especially for

women, was scarce. Her reflections point to a deeply ingrained social logic in the Vietnamese society, which subordinates individual well-being and justice to the group's benefits:

> People in my village did not go to school, especially women who are very submissive. My maternal grandmother was similar, she taught my mother the same. Once I talked to my mom, telling her that if my partner ever laid his hand on me, I would leave him despite having children together. My mom said "Gosh, if I had done anything like what you've said, you wouldn't have mom and dad. You have to accept it. Many times, the fault is yours". My mom was brainwashed, it's an ideal passing down on generations. (LHI)

This quote depicts a patriarchal and collective rural community, which dictates that social harmony is the ultimate objective of a good citizen, therefore one must place one's own interests and desires beneath the common good of the group (Han & Altman, 2010). Nga, however, believed that education was important to resist and overpower the patriarchal mindset that colonized her mother and grandmother's lives. "I have to study hard," Nga reinstated several times in the interview. Her determination reflected another Confucian tenet that is wholeheartedly adopted and embraced in Vietnamese society, investing in education. Education is a "distinction" (Bourdieu, 1984) as it marks and causes the differences between Nga's idea of life and relationship and that of her grandmother, mother and many other women from her village who "did not go to school". She showed her determination to be different from these female models in the interview, saying that "I am educated, I won't listen to my mom. I learned that if something has a negative effect on myself, I have to remove it from my life. If I lived like how my mother has been doing, I would die." "I am educated," Nga affirmed, and she attributed her self-emancipation from the patriarchal values and oppressions of women to education which was made possible by mobility.

This personal belief in education as a transformative force relates, interestingly, to broader national ideologies. While scholars like Gale and Parker (2015) portray students from low socioeconomic backgrounds as having deficient academic abilities and having no legitimate place in universities, Nga displayed quite the opposite trend in her educational journey. In fact, Nga de-marginalized herself through education. This could partly be attributed to the official rhetoric propagandized in Vietnam's media and circulated in policy documents, which claims education to be the pathway out of hunger and poverty, the only means to gain leverage in the society. This perspective on education was also reflected in Nga's parents' wish for their children to receive proper schooling, even the best in the local hometown: "my parents wanted all three of us to be admitted to the ethnic boarding school, although my youngest brother eventually didn't have what it took to get in", Nga recalled. In this way, national ideologies around education intersected with local family aspirations, creating a unique context in which Nga's determination could thrive.

Neoliberal social imaginary

Nga's narrative of her life was one filled with memories of pervasive financial hardships since her childhood. Her happiest moment went back as far as she could remember as a little girl, when her great-great-grandfather shared a portion of his pension for her to buy a lantern that her mom had repeatedly denied, saying "no matter how much you're kicking and crying I won't have any money for that." As much as "having money" made her so happy, not having it was a constant source of disappointment, frustration and helplessness. She narrated a poignant memory:

> Boarding school required us to wear white button-up shirts. I called home to mom, telling her: "Mom, the school made me wear button-up shirts, I only have one for a whole week, nothing to change out. Can you buy me another one?". My dad was sitting next to her, he chimed in: "Ok mom will buy you a lot of shirts, our family is very rich, we have so much money, you don't have to worry, we'll buy you dozens of them". In retrospect, it still brings tears to my eyes. It was a sarcastic remark, I knew we were very poor, but I had only one button-up shirt and as a girl I couldn't carry it around all week, I don't think it was an unreasonable demand. (LHI)

These early experiences with money, or the lack thereof, helped Nga imagine her social surroundings to center around financial stability and ultimately helped her establish self-capitalizing behaviors soon into adulthood. It became a recurring lens through which she interpreted her environment and imagined her future. She saw herself at the present as "working and having some money, not like a tycoon but enough to contribute to my family." She emphasized the wish to "earn a lot of money," so that her loved ones could be exposed to happy experiences and "modernity", as she articulated, like her. Mentioning a visit to a shopping mall or eating at a nice restaurant as delightful and luxurious, Nga shaped her aspirations according to concrete indices of what appeared accessible and inaccessible, what is and is not *for* her or her people.

Despite ongoing financial challenges, Nga consciously avoided relying on her family for support. This marked a significant shift from the dependency often expected within traditional family structures.

> It has been long since I last asked for [monetary] support from my parents… It has been two or three years since I last told them I needed to buy something, because I have part-time jobs, I can afford what I want. There were many occasions when I was broke, but I would borrow from my boyfriend or my friends and would pay them back at the end of the month when I got my salary. Just imagine I'd call them to ask for money and make them worry…That thought scares me. (LHI)

According to Sellar (2013, p. 248), "in the neoliberal imaginary, aspirations to pursue self-maximization through education and subsequent advancement through labour market opportunities appear self-evidently 'high'". This is particularly evident in Nga's narrative when she insisted on finding a "good job to earn money" and build a life in Hanoi, which was seen as "a way out" for her.

> I have to work hard…Some people are born into wealth or with exceptional talents, they may not need to work hard…But that's not me. I came from zero, my family is very poor, living in a poor village and coming from a minority ethnic background. I started with nothing. I have to work hard, I must be hardworking. If I stopped trying, I would be forever stuck in that poor village and could never escape. I would find wood logs and bamboo shoots in the wood, and plant the crops. I am where I am today because of my hard work. (LHI)

Nga's assertion here ties together the earlier themes of poverty, aspiration, and self-reliance. Her emphasis on hard work as the sole pathway to transformation reinforces the dominant meritocratic belief that success is attainable through individual effort—regardless of structural limitations.

Taste/ Distinction

Appadurai sought to "strengthen the idea of aspiration as a cultural capacity" (2004, p. 62) and used the term to describe cultural orientations toward the future. In Nga's narrative, this cultural capacity is repeatedly mirrored in her taste – her strong fondness of "city life", and how she made judgments on the cultural artifacts of the capital city where she was residing. She distinguished between good/bad, nice/unpleasant, and was able to recognize some markers of class.

This shift in awareness was not simply personal preference—it reflected a growing consciousness shaped by physical movement and exposure to new environments. She admitted that her life view changed a lot since she *got out* to Hanoi, as her hometown was literally constraining her from going further and seeing more things:

> Many times my boyfriend drove me around, we passed by many sky-rise buildings, cars, trains – things I had never seen before, I really loved it. Especially when we saw an apartment complex, I told him I would get one apartment there once I had money. Although I come from a rural town, I love the crowd, the rush, the liveliness with abundance of schools, hospitals, and utilities. (FI)

This appreciation for urban life was not merely about aesthetics or convenience—it was deeply tied to Nga's evolving understanding of value and status. Over the course of her entire life, she had acquired resources and built up a system of symbols to identify and appreciate the "good taste" – those "social goods and preferences" that "carry and confer distinction" (Gale & Parkers, 2015, p. 143). Throughout the journal entries of her daily life, she reviewed the places she had visited, mostly restaurants, cafes, or street vendors:

> I had never stepped foot on Thuỷ Tạ restaurant although I'd visited the Sword Lake many times. The reason, simply, is because I didn't have much money and I assumed the restaurant was expensive. This is the very first time. The restaurant is classy, the view of the Sword Lake from the restaurant was breathtaking. The ice cream here was delicious. (JE, 7 January 24)

Along with the appreciation for the luxury and classiness, every nice place she went sparked in Nga a desire to one day afford to share it with her family. Her family's tastes

including occupations and future family setup, however, did not appeal to her: “they want me to finish university then crawl back to my hometown, contentedly marrying a construction worker who’ll be drunk and beating me all the time – that’s impossible” (FI). She insisted on staying in the *big city*, meaning the capital city, to find a job, further her education, and build her own family there.

A taste for education in general, and higher education in particular, was evident and ubiquitous in Nga’s stories. Fifth grade was a pivotal point in her life, when it suddenly dawned on her how much the horizon could be expanded through access to quality education - the education that, for her, was only for “the best in town”:

> At that time, boarding school was something truly miraculous and an immeasurable source of pride. We must be the top-performing students to qualify. We would be fed and raised by the government, our parents wouldn’t have to spend a penny on tuition, housing and food. My village also had a school about 3,4 km from home but it was nowhere near fanciful. (LHI)

Similarly, her voice was brightened with joy when talking about admission into the only boarding high school in the city after a strenuous entrance exam. Upon entering, she shared a classroom with “extraordinary classmates and caring as well as supportive teachers” and continued to thrive in “a professional and healthy learning and living environment” (LHI). Here, quality education served not just as a means to a career, but as a cultural marker of upward mobility. Ultimately, her choice of higher education in Hanoi, not in her province, further reflected her taste. Hanoi as the place for university education was also informed by her previous spatial experiences in the local district and then the city in her province. Every time she moved to a new place for her schooling, she found it enriching her life experience and worldviews, and therefore was more motivated to expand her horizons.

Navigational capacity

For Appadurai (2004), one’s capacity to navigate towards aspirations comprises a sense of direction and the intermediate nodes along the way. Instinctively, Nga had been gravitating towards a larger space, a bigger place, ever since she was a child. Her stories were filled with directional and physical indicators of movements *outwards* and *further away from* the original root, *onto* intersecting routes and *into* larger dimensions. Figure 2 illustrates Nga’s ripples of outward movements along with each stage in her life.

[Figure 2]

These outward movements were not only geographic but also emotional and psychological transitions that reshaped Nga’s orientation toward her environment. At each new place, she first felt overwhelmed:

> When I first came to Hanoi on the Open day… Wow, my university campus was so large, it was immensely huge. My boarding school was already a big one, but couldn't compare to the

> university. I was used to the peaceful countryside life, where it was quiet. But in Hanoi, with the traffic and population, I felt dizzy and nauseous. (LHI)

… but quickly gained alertness and grew an increasing attachment to it. After four years moving between rental rooms and surviving COVID19, bargaining the price of groceries and household items from street vendors and stores, finding scholarships to reduce the financial burdens for her parents, working several jobs to afford her basic needs, Nga felt that she belonged to Hanoi:

> I really love to go home, since at home I feel comfortable, carefree, peaceful and cozy. However, every time I go home, I miss Hanoi a lot. I want time to fly quickly so I can return to Hanoi. I miss the noise of moving vehicles, miss the traffic jam, miss grilled pork noodles and poboy. I feel like I belong to this city more than my hometown. In Hanoi I feel free to do what I want and go where I need. Surely I won't come back home after graduation. I'm better suited for city life, with more convenience, more job opportunities, and more friends. (JE, 9 February 24).

While Appadurai (2004) observed a "thinner, weaker sense of the pathways" (p. 69) into higher education and occupations among under-represented and under-privileged groups, Nga's case showed otherwise. She navigated between the nodes along her path and assembled her archives of experience from previous successful navigations. As a student of minority ethnicity living in one of the poorest pockets of poverty in Central Vietnam, it took her a lot more time and effort to transition from a district or provincial government-funded boarding school to a university in the capital compared to a student who already resided there all their life. In a sense, the limited material and financial assistance she could gain as a "first-in-family" student in higher education enabled her to gain access to only the "tour" knowledge rather than the "map" knowledge (de Certeau, 1984). In another sense, however, Nga slowly gained independence from the tour guide, accumulated knowledge of the terrain, found a detour when met with obstacles, and drew her own map.

According to Ray (2006, p. 410), aspirations are created out of the "lives, achievements, or ideals of those who exist in [an individuals'] 'aspirations window'". In Nga's case, her aspirations window encompassed her family members who never had a real chance to live outside her poor village. She aspired to become "successful", having a job with a decent salary to alleviate her family living conditions and transform her social-economic status. Nga reflected in one of her journal entries:

> While enjoying the ice cream, I sorely missed my parents and my little brother. Because we are not rich, they have never been to such a luxurious restaurant. Something surged inside me. There was a desire that grew bigger in me to become very successful and wealthy to afford these good experiences for my family. (JE 7th January 24)

Nga strived to become an "excellent student" who would graduate with academic achievements to enhance her employability in the competing labour market. Her efforts were demonstrated in the way she actively engaged with academic (for instance, student research projects) and student union activities (in order to increase student engagement assessment score)

which were central to Nga's everyday dynamics at university, in terms of both performance and acquisition of social and cultural capital. These achievements would enable Nga to be awarded with scholarships and alleviate monetary pressure, and help reinforce her sense of self, belonging to academic space, and importantly, social acceptance. She also managed to do multiple part-time jobs, mostly private tutoring, to support herself and her family financially. These are important aspirational nodes (Appadurai, 2004) that strengthened her capacity to navigate life and the labour market in Hanoi where many students from rural areas like her tried to find a job upon graduation and settle down.

Desire/ Possibility

While it is often assumed that aspirations mean people can choose from multiple imaginaries of their future and work towards actualising the one that matches their individual taste, we concur with Gale and Parker (2015) that less privileged groups who possess "different spatialised knowledges, less valued cultural and material resources and archives of experience" have limited possibilities, which in turn significantly mitigate their desires. Nga's sense of place and desire to stay in Hanoi was because of the stark contrast between the capital city and her hometown. She made a small comparison to illustrate her desire:

> I think this city offers all that I want. If I want to eat spicy noodles or fishy noodles, all I do is search and there appears a list of eateries for me to choose. In my hometown, a remote mountainous area, no such thing exists, there are not many amenities. (FI)

It is clear in Nga's narrative of her life that her expression of aspiration for a better future, financial security and upward social mobility are articulated through her increasing exposure to and interactions with urban daily movement.

> My village is poor, my family is poor. The first time I went to town was when my parents took me to visit my sick grandpa in the hospital 7-8 kilometers from our home. We rode a motorbike and I was awestruck by everything in town: multi-storey houses, trucks, automobiles, parks, fruit shops, floral shops…When I started at my ethnic boarding middle school, I enjoyed shopping in the markets, watching busy streets…Then when I had a chance to visit the city of my province, I was in a taxi and couldn't stop counting how many levels those tall buildings had. I wanted to return and visit the city because I really liked it. When in grade 9, I learned that the provincial ethnic boarding high school was in the city, so I aimed to pass the examination to get into that school because that's how I'd move to the city. (LHI)

Nga's desire did not always fit the social imaginary of people in her village. As Nga reflected, those who were mobile for education like herself might be subject to criticism by her community for "becoming bad". But she reiterated, "I'm pragmatic, my dream is to have a high-salary job to help myself and my parents and my brother". She formed her dreams and made herself promises to fit into the lives of people closest to her. In fact, she quit a teaching assistant job which was something she loved doing and did pretty well, to accept an office job with double salary but required her to learn everything new: "I don't mind learning new things, the more I

learn the more I know. With that salary I will save for my education in graduate school and upgrade myself in the future." Her future-oriented economic decision making highlighted her agency. Since desire is also mitigated by possibility, Nga sometimes consciously chose what was possible instead of desirable within her limited resources.

At the same time, "grateful" feeling was inherent in her journal entries and interviews: to her great-great-grandfather for buying her the first and only valuable toy in her possession; to her uncle for saving her mom from domestic violence; to her high school teacher for buying her a luxurious drink; to a random Uber driver for giving her kind words; to colleagues at work for showing her the way; to college friends for working alongside her. This pervasive gratefulness ultimately manifests the appreciation for every person and every possibility that could bring her to a larger, better, and nicer space.

Nga's aspirations and mobility could be viewed holistically in Figure *3* where the relational, emotional, and material elements conjured to shape her path. What we attempt to encapsulate and accentuate is the complexity, tensions and disruptions in Nga's movements that transcend the limits of written words. "All God's children need traveling shoes" (Angelou, 2010) - to some individuals, higher education is, or should be, a means to come home to a place where they can find unconditional acceptance, regardless whether it is in the global South or North.

[**Figure 3**]

Implications and conclusion

This study sheds light on the social, cultural and familial association with Nga's aspirations for and within education, particularly higher education, which was framed by the current neoliberal social imaginary in Vietnam – the dominant imaginary of having a good (material) life. In this regard, the effects of the neoliberal imaginary of 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986) are found in her account from childhood till adulthood. From her narrative of her life, it is evident that education, imagined by her parents and herself as "an emancipatory force, not only in intellectual terms, but in its alleged capacity to endow individuals with social, cultural and symbolic forms of capital" (Loveday, 2015, p. 571) to advance her social mobility. Nga's capacity to aspire was enabled by the possible future pathways constructed by higher education. For her, it was *education in urban areas* that could transform her life, meaning that geographical mobility for education was critical in the possibility of upward social mobility.

Nga never hid her aspirations, she voiced them. Her aspirations were driven by her social circumstances and her imagined places in the world and intersected with a number of structural vulnerabilities: gender, ethnicity, class, rural-urban disparity, and place of origin. Her mobilities were produced through both her aspirations for upward social mobility and relationships to the *place* where she came from. The spatial journey from parental home and hometown to boarding middle and high schools for ethnic minority students, and then to university in the capital city is symbolic of a progression towards adulthood, independence and importantly, escape for upward

social mobility that is carried out alongside, and as a consequence of, the progression from school to higher education, and rural-urban migration. In previous research such as Allen and Hollingworth (2013), social class plays a key role in youth (im)mobility narratives, for instance, middle class youth would be considerably more likely to want to leave and working class youth more likely to want to stay. It is contrary in Nga's case. Because of her low socio-economic status, she left to challenge the status quo.

Mobility is capital, so is 'going to' university. Without leaving home to 'go to' university, Nga would not have found any other escape route from the structural limitations embedded in her place of origin. Without the opportunity to leave home, Nga may not have found an alternative pathway, as the future in her impoverished hometown was framed by a deeply gendered and hierarchical worldview. Her mother's internalized sense of inferiority and adherence to patriarchal norms, her father's and grandparents' entrenched son preference, and a generational pattern of spatial fixity all contributed to a constraining local narrative that limited her development and future options. This understanding of place enabled her to believe and pursue an educational narrative that ended with leaving home. Corbett (2009), in his study of high school students from a working class background in rural Canada, claims that there is a deep and established connection between formal education and mobility out of rural areas. The way Nga viewed her migration and spatial practices echoes Corbett's (2009) view. Her aspirations and spatial practices reflected an awareness of how staying in the place where one grows up could prevent exposure to certain forms of social and cultural capital and how place-based constraints could be transcended through educational mobility. But mobility was a privilege that Nga was not born with. It was acquired by her hard work and determination to move away from home. For Nga, mobility capital worked two ways. On the one hand, it enabled her to know more about the world outside her small village and shaped her aspirations. On the other hand, it encouraged her to keep being mobile. Nga's mobility capital indicates her ability to perceive herself as a mobile subject who was capable of making the actual move from a rural to an urban area for university education, which is a symbolic achievement—especially significant for those from socially and economically marginalized backgrounds (Henderson, 2020b). Her spatial mobility was viewed by herself as an opportunity to acquire other forms of mobility, including social mobility.

Nga's narrative reminds us of Prince's (2014) argument that the possible future is imagined in place. It is strongly emphasized by Nga that her future was in Hanoi, was emplaced in the urban area and made possible in this city. At the same time, her hometown was excluded from her imaginaries of the future. This inclusion and exclusion, we suggest, stemmed from "spatial stories", or the narratives that mark a space a place (de Certeau, 1984). Her hometown, as a place, was constructed within the boundary of poverty, deep-rooted gender biases, and lack of resources and opportunities, making this place unsuitable for her future. Hanoi, in contrast, promised her a neoliberal lifestyle and employable prospect which she always aspired to. The geographical mobility to Hanoi helps students like Nga direct an aspiration for upward social

mobility. The urban experience and the educational experience, however, serve to reproduce social difference and class stratification, becoming a marker of distinction for Nga, separating her from her hometown where poverty and deep-rooted gender bias has not been eliminated.

Our findings deepen the understanding of the relationship between these academic pathways, spatial experiences and social mobility in the context of higher education in a metropolitan city in a fast developing country such as Vietnam. The findings can be extended across other national and international contexts, and offer new ways of understanding intersecting inequalities in higher education systems and the linkage between urban mobility and social mobility in contexts of developing countries.

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Figure 1. Concept-clusters for aspirations in higher education by authors (Adapted from Gale & Parker, 2015)

Figure 2. Nga's Spatial Histories

Figure 3. Nga's Aspirations and Mobility