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**Cars and Car Crashes in the City of Angels:
Bangkok's Unhealthy Collision
with Cultural Capitalism**

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October 2009

**A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University**

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this submission is my work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, and no material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma of a university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.



Matthew Williams

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Acknowledgements

The person who deserves my warmest thanks is Dr Jane Dixon, the Chair of my Panel. The start of my PhD was not smooth, but Jane's encouragement, patience (she once said she felt like my secretary, rather than my supervisor), and genuine kindness guided me throughout that first difficult year, and over the entire 4.5 years of my candidature. I was truly lucky to have had such a wonderful supervisor.

Secondly, I appreciate the financial support, in terms of both a stipend and travel costs, from the Thai Cohort Study and the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at The Australian National University.

The College of Public Health at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, generously provided me with a base during my fieldwork in Bangkok in 2006, and assisted in recruiting interviewees and subsequently translating during interviews.

Thanks to Dr Barbara Leigh, Adjunct Professor at the University of Technology, Sydney, for initially inspiring my interest in South-East Asia and encouraging me to undertake a PhD.

Other people who have provided valuable feedback and advice along the way include Professor Tord Kjellstrom and Dr Cathy Banwell.

This PhD opened up a new world to me and allowed me to meet some interesting, warm and intelligent people. Thanks to my dear friend Buu. I wish we had met earlier in my fieldwork in Bangkok. Thanks also to that meeting, I have had a chance to become involved with Thai orphans after a fortuitous meeting with Andy Rothenberg from Mt Sinai Hospital in New York. Please visit our website <http://www.thaideklek.org>

PM	particulate matter
PM ₁₀	particulate matter less than 10 microns in diameter
PM _{2.5}	particulate matter less than 2.5 microns in diameter
SES	socio-economic status
SPM	suspended particulate matter
TAI	Thai Automotive Industry
TDM	Traffic Demand Management
TFP	travel feedback programs
UDI	Urban Development Institute
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

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Abstract

The depletion of oil resources, global warming, 1.2 million road fatalities globally per year, and the rush by the citizens of newly industrialising nations in Asia and Latin America to consume automobiles is a pressing problem acknowledged by the United Nations, numerous governments, and global non-government organisations. In 2007, for the first time in the history of the world, the proportion of the population living in urban centres exceeded 50 per cent. The trend towards urbanisation is greatest in the densely populated nations of Asia and poses urgent questions about how to manage this transition in order to build humane, environmentally friendly cities in which public health and social equity are paramount. One of the key predictors of success for burgeoning cities will be the kinds of transport systems they provide.

The twentieth century's answer to mobility was the automobile. The experience of automobility over time has demonstrated that this path to motorisation was a significant public policy failure. The physical infrastructure of automobiles divides cities and neighbourhoods and blights landscape. Their emissions contribute to global warming, respiratory illness, heart disease and cancer, and car accidents are a leading cause of death and injury. Bangkok infamously followed the Western path to motorisation, with egregious consequences for public health and transport injustice. Road accidents were the second leading cause of mortality in Thailand in 2000, and in 2002 they cost the Thai economy 2.5 per cent of Gross Domestic Product. Ignoring mass transit, the Thai Government invested heavily in the automobile industry as a pillar of economic growth. Transport economists and planners have consistently framed the problem as a technocratic one, isolating the issue to "road users, traffic systems, and road capacity". These investigations have yielded very relevant insights and data, yet have neglected the driver at the wheel.

This research aims to provide policymakers in Thailand and in other modernising nations with ideas for preventing the further escalation in negative public health impacts of "car addiction" and traffic injuries. Specifically, the research repositions the automobility crisis in Bangkok as a socio-material

phenomenon arising from Thailand's entrenchment within the global economy. As Thailand's society transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial capitalist economy, the urbanisation of Bangkok propelled Thais to purchase cars for social and material reasons. Consumerism became an anchor upon which Thais projected something of their identity, and within the hierarchy of Thai culture much esteem was accorded to those who owned cars, especially expensive cars. Beyond their utilitarian functions, cars hold much symbolic value for Thais, expressing upward socio-economic mobility and success. As such, a *culture of automobility* grew in Bangkok.

This car culture is complex. Thais embrace the car as an identity referent and marker of status, yet they simultaneously recognise the inherent paradoxes in car consumption: air pollution and poor public health; restricted mobility and transport injustice. The contradictory promise of the automobile has, then, spawned resistance to the car among Bangkokians, who imagine a much-enhanced quality of life and urban environment in a future Bangkok in which car usage is restricted.

This thesis concludes by critically reviewing policy efforts to control automobility in Singapore and Bogota, and draws on traffic management literature to argue that all of these attempts provide a useful template for Bangkok to draw on in order to address its own transport problems. However, I stress that Bangkok and other nations that are currently replicating its path to motorisation will have limited success unless they acknowledge the socio-cultural reasons encouraging drivers to take to the wheel. Finally, I suggest that the car needs to be de-marketed in Bangkok in conjunction with the timely expansion and marketing of quality mass transit. As long as the transport discourse of policymakers in Thailand and other nations experiencing rapid motorisation fails to see drivers as social actors, making choices to purchase cars for both material (practical) and social reasons, it will be difficult to get them out of the car.