USE OF THESES

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

Matthew Williams

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
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>particulate matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM$_{10}$</td>
<td>particulate matter less than 10 microns in diameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM$_{2.5}$</td>
<td>particulate matter less than 2.5 microns in diameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>socio-economic status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPM</td>
<td>suspended particulate matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAI</td>
<td>Thai Automotive Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDM</td>
<td>Traffic Demand Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TFP</td>
<td>travel feedback programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDI</td>
<td>Urban Development Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNFCCC</td>
<td>United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</td>
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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.
Chapter One:
Cars and Car Crashes in The City of Angels

1.1 Angels on Wheels: Is This Really Heaven?

Bangkok initially regales the visitor with its charm. Delivered into its tropical lackadaisical heat by jet airplane, eased through its new airport by the infamous Thai smile, the visitor wears an expectant grin. The clichés of food, sun, beaches, friendly locals, and sanuk maak (a Thai phrase meaning “lots of fun”, and heard very often in Thai discourse) comfort the visitor as he or she flies white-knuckled and seatbelt-less to his/her hotel in the rear of a taxi piloted by a kamikaze dive bomber with suicidal driving tendencies. The visitor’s first experience of “autopia” portends further “collisions” with Bangkok’s car culture.

While the tourist felicitously confirms some truth behind the many clichés, and gorges on Bangkok’s delights, the paradisiacal glow wanes slowly in the slipstream of fumes from cars, motorcycles, tuk-tuks, pick-up vans and an ageing bus fleet. With so many angels on so many wheels, it is challenging to look “heavenwards”. In fact, to do so is to bump against a horizon that appears closer and greyer than it should be, and to discover that the air is smudgy with the particulate matter of the city’s private vehicle dominated transport. At times, the visitor laments the disappearing footpath as he or she jostles with crawling cars on the flanks of roads. He/she loses a coherent sense of place and finds Bangkok evades drawing him/her in. Rather, it is a city that seems to disgorge outwards into many incoherent micro-places, bounded by roads, soi (Thai language for small street or lane), freeways and overpasses. The visitor realises this city has little sympathy for pedestrians. There is no meandering path to take. Walking becomes purely functional (or dysfunctional when prevented by the car and its ubiquitous infrastructure) and, if possible, something to be avoided. Finally, the visitor succumbs to the inevitable forlorn conclusion, yet hardly a revelation: Bangkok has surrendered itself to the car with detrimental consequences for the health of its population and the general well-being of its residents. Bangkok is a city in which the car “underpins the sensory experience
of that city” (Landry, 2007, p. 46), and in ways which are both unpleasant and unhealthy. Landry depicts typical car rather than pedestrian-friendly cities thus:

Too often the urban background of what we see, smell and hear is car-related: a sound wall is generated by the background hum of engines, punctuated by beeps and horns; the lingering, pervasive smell of petrochemicals permeates the air; the fuel-burning activities of engines and the thermodynamic properties of asphalt affect the temperature; and our sightline is dominated by metal and asphalt. (Landry, 2007, p. 46)

Bangkok is the unhealthy exemplar of such a city. In recent years, Thailand has averaged 13,000 road traffic deaths annually (WHO and World Bank, 2004) at a high cost to the Thai economy. In 2002, the economic cost of road crashes in Thailand was estimated to have been THB140,000 million, equivalent to approximately US$3,500 million. This constituted 2.56 per cent of Thailand’s gross domestic product (GDP) in that year (Luathep and Tanaboriboon, 2005, p. 3424).

As rates of car ownership continue to rise, these health costs are set to increase. Recent modelling of vehicle ownership levels in Thailand until the year 2026 predicts a significant upward trend based on low-, central- and high-income growth forecasts (Sillaparcham, 2007, p. 103). These predictions reiterate the urgency of acting to contain a growing “car addiction”. Table 1 below sets out the predicted rises in ownership levels for four transport modes. Levels of private car and motorcycle ownership are the highest, and expected to rise.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2026</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low-income growth forecast</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cars</td>
<td>7,716,454</td>
<td>8,684,151</td>
<td>9,758,044</td>
<td>10,952,496</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motorcycles</td>
<td>16,793,313</td>
<td>17,988,189</td>
<td>19,190,368</td>
<td>20,393,196</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trucks &amp; HGVs</td>
<td>747,139</td>
<td>805,478</td>
<td>869,232</td>
<td>939,205</td>
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<td>Buses and coaches</td>
<td>147,947</td>
<td>163,177</td>
<td>179,620</td>
<td>197,378</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>25,404,853</td>
<td>27,640,995</td>
<td>29,997,264</td>
<td>32,482,275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central-income growth forecast</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cars</td>
<td>8,432,656</td>
<td>9,902,086</td>
<td>11,570,752</td>
<td>13,456,172</td>
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<td>Motorcycles</td>
<td>17,511,659</td>
<td>18,986,969</td>
<td>20,372,338</td>
<td>21,637,720</td>
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<td>Trucks &amp; HGVs</td>
<td>777,849</td>
<td>856,713</td>
<td>944,577</td>
<td>1,042,743</td>
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<td>Buses and coaches</td>
<td>158,705</td>
<td>180,669</td>
<td>204,477</td>
<td>230,079</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>26,880,869</td>
<td>29,926,437</td>
<td>33,092,144</td>
<td>36,366,714</td>
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<td>Cars</td>
<td>9,041,961</td>
<td>10,867,767</td>
<td>12,960,803</td>
<td>15,330,408</td>
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<td>Motorcycles</td>
<td>18,057,124</td>
<td>19,626,430</td>
<td>20,998,380</td>
<td>22,127,128</td>
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<td>Trucks and HGVs</td>
<td>803,280</td>
<td>896,319</td>
<td>1,001,221</td>
<td>1,119,542</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buses and coaches</td>
<td>167,688</td>
<td>194,066</td>
<td>222,550</td>
<td>252,785</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>28,070,053</td>
<td>31,584,582</td>
<td>35,182,954</td>
<td>38,829,863</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sillaparcharn, 2007, p.103
Although air quality in Bangkok has improved (see Chapter Two for a detailed discussion of traffic-related air and noise pollution), it continues to be poor as the city sprawls outwards. In terms of vehicle-kilometres travelled, the biggest contributors to traffic-induced air pollution are private cars. Table 2 indicates the passenger and vehicle-kilometres travelled in Bangkok in 2005, according to different transport modes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transport Mode</th>
<th>Capacity (Passenger)</th>
<th>Number of Fleets</th>
<th>Vehicle-kilometre Travelled per Year</th>
<th>Passenger-kilometre Travelled per Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>Taxies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>53,000</td>
<td>286,200,000</td>
<td>572,400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuk-tuk</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7,500</td>
<td>20,286,000</td>
<td>40,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTS Sky Train</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2,032,380</td>
<td>1,728,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>City Buses</td>
<td>35–60</td>
<td>8,177</td>
<td>288,036,000</td>
<td>6,623,370,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Microbus/Van</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5,519</td>
<td>238,400,000</td>
<td>2,384,208,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express Boat</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>472,320</td>
<td>28,350,000</td>
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<td>MRT-Subway</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>1,944,000</td>
<td>972,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motorcycle Taxis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>28,800,000</td>
<td>57,600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Cars</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,700,000</td>
<td>1,834,560,000</td>
<td>3,672,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorcycles</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2,300,000</td>
<td>1,490,400,000</td>
<td>1,490,400,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Thanaprayochsak, 2005

Throughout the world, approximately 1.2 million deaths, and between 20 and 50 million injuries or disabilities are annually attributable to cars (WHO and World Bank, 2004). The public health, ecological and economic problems of car...
dependence are being replicated in many countries, especially throughout Asia. In 20 “middle-income” countries there is now a burgeoning class of one billion new consumers “with an aggregate spending capacity, in purchasing power parity terms, to match that of the US” (Myers and Kent, 2003, p. 4963). Constituted by new members of the OECD, including Mexico, South Korea, Poland, Turkey, and the populous nations of China and India, “the symbols of their affluence are car ownership and meat consumption” (McMichael, 2009, p. 2). The purchasing power of these new consumers means that within the next 15 years, the number of private four-wheeled motor vehicles on the world’s roads is anticipated to double to 1.3 billion (Dahl, 2005, p. 238). Cities continue to draw huge numbers of people out of the countryside in East Asia and other parts of the developing world, such that Landry argues “We are witnessing the largest movement of people in history” (2006, p. 21), because “We are inexorably leaving the rural world behind; Everything in the future will be determined by the urban” (Landry, 2007, p. 19). Middle- and low-income countries will bear the greatest burden of road traffic deaths. Ninety per cent of these deaths occurred in low- and middle-income countries in 2002 (WHO and World Bank, 2004), and it is predicted that traffic-related accidents will become the third leading cause of death globally within the next 20 years, affecting Asia most greatly (WHO and World Bank, 2004).

The conflation of several problems—peak oil, the rise in the number of new consumers aspiring to car ownership worldwide, the effects of climate change, and the public health problems impacts of automobility—underline the urgency of acting to reduce people’s dependence on private motor vehicle transport. The focus of this thesis is Bangkok, a city which enjoys the romantic epithet “The City of Angels” (an English translation of its Thai name Krung Thep), but which also enjoys infamy for its traffic jams and vehicle pollution. Importantly, Bangkok’s embrace of the private automobile provides a warning to other Asian cities taking the maligned road to automobility, and portends similar egregious public health and environmental consequences.
1.2 Automobility

The term “automobility” combines the words “autonomy” and “mobility” to refer to “modes of autonomous, self-directed movement” (Featherstone, 2004, p. 1). Automobility defines the predominant system of private motor vehicle transport which pervades developed, and growing numbers of developing, nations. In the cities of many developing nations, such as Bangkok in Thailand, private vehicles include cars as well as a substantial number of motorcycles. Automobility is so constitutive of modern quotidian practices, that conceiving of life “unwheeled”, especially in the cities and megacities in which more than 50 per cent of humanity now lives (Clammer, 2003, p. 403), would require a mental disjuncture. Transactions of personal business, the maintenance of households, accessing revenue-earning activities, (most notably jobs), the pursuit of love, nurturing friendships, and caring for sick relatives, tend to be enabled by the car. The iterative performance of these activities through the car is so routinised that “the habituated car-driver experiences a barely conscious awareness” as he/she capers through the city (Edensor, 2004, p. 110).

Urban and car scholars alike note that cars define the urban form and experience. Sennett observes that urban space has rendered itself a “mere function of motion” (1994, p. 15), while Miller argues that “The relationship of much of humanity to the world became increasingly mediated in the course of the last century by a single machine—the car” (2001, p. 1). Cars contour people’s engagement with the world because they demarcate the lived experience of physical and social environments. Along with the infrastructure which supports them, they frame people’s vision of the city. Moving through an automobilised time-space, drivers and passengers pan across horizons, snapshots and vistas framed through the car windscreen and dashboard. Cars and their infrastructure have redefined and re-routed space, by effectively privatising swathes of public space to facilitate many individual private passages through the world’s cities. Thus it is that a private consumer good has rendered great areas of social space navigable largely through the concrete and steel structures which physically mark and testify to the automobile’s right of way (Freund and Martin, 1996, p. 3). The plethora of accoutrements
accompanying automobility, and that dominate built urban environments, include the infrastructure of car parks, petrol stations, traffic signals, roads and highways (Freund and Martin, 1996, p. 4). As such, a preponderance of cars has transformed each citizen's experience, whether they are riding in them or watching them snake through the cityscape. Freund and Martin (1996, p. 3) depict this as a "massive transformation of psycho-social space—the landscape, its organization, and the social relationships of the actors who inhabit, use, and traverse it".

The references people make to the city are tangential to what the car allows them to see. People refer to the park they drive past on their daily commute, the shop they can only duck into courtesy of the 15 minute parking limit out front, the enormous billboard which confronts them as they take the bend past the cinema. A person's trajectory through the city is punctuated by car-friendly stops in suburban car parks, drive-through outlets, the great domes of consumption offering free three hour parking, and artfully-begotten precious car spaces along city streets. In these pauses outside the car, people momentarily reconfigure their vision of the city outside the car's confines.

Once outside the car, drivers negotiate a footpath towards their destination. They smell a flower bed, step aside to make way for a stroller-pushing mother, and remark at the ominous clouds bearing down on the skyscrapers. Still gazing heavenwards, pedestrians thankfully notice a rupture in the cloud cover, the faintest spectre of blue sky nudging through. Back on the ground, they refocus, walk with conviction, and bump into a colleague out shopping. Pleasantries exchanged, they forge ahead, and a new junction opens up. There is the choice of a small lane never taken before or the familiar route which they have driven through so often. Enticed by the freshly-scrubbed facades of nineteenth century buildings hitherto unnoticed in a car-scape they have traversed daily, the pedestrian audaciously steps into the lane, snuffing out the familiar.

Time presses, deadlines ring through the personal organiser, mobile telephony reminds people of the next destination. They return to the car, and "to each his own bubble, that is the law today" (Bull, 2001, p. 186). Functioning also as a mobile office, the car is used to multi-task and juggle competing schedules...
(Featherstone, 2004, p. 8). The acquaintance with public space and a new city frontier is cut short. Physically cocooned in the car once again, the driver feels okay, quite good actually. They turn up the air conditioning, adjust the music volume just-so, plug the mobile phone into the hands-free socket. The experience of driving is mediated by technology such that the interface between humans and technology produce a “driver-car [which] is a hydrid assemblage of man and machine” (Featherstone, 2004, p. 11). As the speedometer picks up, the driver furtively glances back at the new discovery in the rear-view mirror, now happily encapsulated in their car. Regret at leaving? Very quickly compensated for by the car’s physical and emotional comforts. Of course being in the car as much as people are also has consequences for what they don’t experience outside the car.

Sheller has explored the visceral and mental dimension of automobility in her work on automotive emotions, writing that:

In societies of automobility, the car is deeply entrenched in the ways in which we inhabit the physical world ... it transforms the way we sense the world and the capacities of human bodies to interact with that world through the visual, aural, olfactory, interoceptive and proprioceptive senses. We not only feel the car, but we feel through the car and with the car. (2004, p. 228)

Sheller’s work represents an original attempt to understand the affective dimension of driving, and how knowledge of this may be translated into more efficacious efforts to influence car usage. She defines automotive emotions as “the embodied dispositions of car-users and the visceral and other feelings associated with car use” (2004, p. 223). Her argument is that understanding this dimension is equally important as understandings of technical and socio-economic factors, if policymakers are to come to terms with entrenched car cultures.

Others refer to the “humanity of the car”, thus conferring upon it the status of a machine that is so integral to our cultural practices that we see ourselves as human through the car (Miller, 2001, p. 2). The work of Miller conforms to what Urry and Sheller refer to as a “new mobilities paradigm” (2006), which grounds understandings of automobility in the social sciences. This paradigm claims to
transcend "the dichotomy between transport research and social research, putting the social into travel" (2006, p. 207) through studying mobility in a generic sense for the purposes of work, pleasure, and family. Urry and Sheller argue that mobility is as central to modernity as is urbanity; and that as we live in automobilised societies, the social sciences and urban analyses can usefully provide insights into how cars shape urban life (2006, p. 208).

This thesis draws upon these foundations to foreground what has hitherto been neglected, the socio-cultural hold of the car upon drivers and, in fact, aspiring drivers and future generations of drivers. It recognises that automobility connotes a social and culturally-bound process. My reference point is Bangkok, a city enjoying infamy for its car saturation, and my rationale is the public health and environmental damage wrought by the car on that city. The research is also prompted by awareness that if mobility is colonised and privatised by car corporations, taking mostly the form of individualised or privatised movements through urban space, humanity denies itself the opportunity also to truly engage in public spaces on an interpersonal level. The road-raged one finger salute becomes the impoverished replacement for acquaintance and engagement on the street. Far better to be defined by such engagement, than by the car we drive.

As I will later explain, the motorisation of Thailand, and Bangkok specifically, took inspiration from American models and aid. Post World War II, beginning in the United States and spreading to other developed economies, there emerged a mass market and a degree of democratisation of consumption. What had previously been unavailable to the working classes became more accessible. This mass market was based largely on the principles of Fordism, a term which refers to the system of mass production created by Henry Ford, significantly in the form of the car assembly line (Miles and Miles, 2004, p. 30). In the Fordist economy, workers had a surplus of income, enabling them to purchase a growing variety of consumer goods. This period marked the first time in the history of humanity in which capitalism as the overarching economic system provided a suite of goods for the vast majority in the First World, and privileged classes in poorer countries (Sklair, 2002). Wants and needs became harder to distinguish, and the social significance of consumption helped to entrench an
expanding but subtle ideology of consumerism (Miles and Miles, 2004, pp. 30–31). Concomitantly, the growth of advertising further entrenched an emerging consumer culture, making visible, and enticing, the new offerings of the market. Between 1945 and 1950, car production in the US soared from two to 40 million, and by 1960 had reached 62 million (Miles and Miles, 2004, p. 32). Sklair argues that in the 1960s the electronic revolution meant that capitalism entered a definitive globalising phase due to productivity, marketing and the distribution of goods worldwide (2002, p. 108).

Gradually, in many developed world cities, especially those of North America and Australia, the “emergence of private affluence on a mass scale” (Whiteley, 1993, cited in Miles and Miles, 2004, pp. 32–33) provided the material conditions for a consumerist society. With the consolidation of capitalism, consumer lifestyles incrementally displaced traditionally fixed status groups and classes (Featherstone, 1991, cited in Miles and Miles, 2004, p. 33). Urban space was restructured to reflect these economic changes, manifest most obviously in the spread of suburbia and a car culture which serviced shopping malls and supermarkets.

The encroachment of cars on urban space over the course of the second half of the twentieth century and until the present day actually reflects an “abandonment” of cities to cars and motorways, rendering urban heritage “vandalized”, according to Ashton (1997, p. 166). The attendant problems of noise and air pollution, car accidents and injuries, the physical and social division of neighbourhoods due to road infrastructure, and a resulting loss of physical exercise, are commonly recognised as the unfortunate cul-de-sac that modern cities have entered. This thesis about automobility’s hold over Bangkok justifies itself on these grounds: that with detrimental public health and environmental consequences Bangkok has been abandoned to the car. How this abandonment has come about will be teased out in the chapters to follow.
1.3 The Path to Motorisation in Thailand: Understandings of its Stubborn Persistence

Thailand’s first automobile was imported into the country by a foreigner during the reign of King Rama V. King Chulalongkorn, as he was also known, was regarded as a great moderniser, and European automobiles came to symbolise the prestige of the Thai elites at the time. In fact, 10 Daimler Benz (today’s Mercedes) were imported from France and presented as gifts to senior officials of the monarchy. As was the practice with white elephants and royal boats, these cars were named individually by the King as a sign of their status (Cate, 1999, p. 36). It was not until the second half of the twentieth century, however, that cars became an increasingly pre-eminent mode of individualised transport.

During this period, Thailand underwent a dramatic economic transformation, marked by movement to an export-oriented economy, and the growing commercialisation of agriculture (Askew, 2002). The nature of this development in the decades following World War II, especially the role of the US and multilateral development institutions such as the World Bank, provides some of the context for understanding Thailand’s path to motorisation. Overseas development aid and technical support by the World Bank, spurred much of the growth (Askew, 2002), and the economic assistance provided by the US from 1950 was also a very significant component. American conceptions of development equated, of course, with “economic growth through private capitalism”. The US began to build highways to facilitate the establishment of its cold war base in Thailand to fight both real and ideological wars against communism. In July 1953, the US Security Council proposed that Thailand be transformed into an “anti-communist bastion” for the spread of US influence in the region (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005). Communism “threatened” a significant proportion of East Asia at this time. In the countries neighbouring Thailand, there were sporadic anticolonial and leftist outbursts in 1947–1948. In 1949, communists had seized control of China to the north. In 1950, communist North Korea and the South were drawn into war, with the US supporting the South. In an account by Townsend (2003), the highways built by the US in Thailand linked airfields which were used by the US air force and CIA
for covert intelligence efforts and bombings in the region. Design and building support for highways also came from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The support of King Bhumibol was especially significant for the American cause as he was strongly opposed to communism. These bases became indispensable for America’s involvement in the Vietnam War.

Meanwhile, in the West, automobile dependent suburbia began to emerge. Various epithets engage with the idea of a sprawling, car-dependent metropolis: the “rubber city” (Schaeffer and Sclan, 1975, in Townsend, 2003, p. 2); the “limitless city” (Gillham, 2002); and “edge cities” (Townsend, 2003). Thailand followed suit. Between 1947 and 1957, there was a 650 per cent increase in the number of private motor vehicles in Bangkok and Thonburi, accounting for 87 per cent of all private cars in Thailand (Askew, 2002). Canals were filled in to build roads and, by 1960, Bangkok had transited to an automobile and road-based city (Askew, 2002). In 1959, Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, who had assumed power in a 1957 military coup and was given tacit support by the US, banned three-wheeled “samlors” (pedicabs) from Bangkok (Askew, 2002). By 1968, trams no longer criss-crossed Bangkok as well (Poboon, 1997). Askew, who has written the most comprehensive account of the car in Thailand, notes that:

By the 1990s overpasses, elevated freeways and private tollways snaked through the metropolis, dividing once-contiguous community settlements, displacing slums, fragmenting the scale of the urban landscape, and transforming everyday experience in the city. (2002, p. 83)

Traffic congestion was already chronic and was declared a "national crisis" in 1993. Askew observes that a “two-tiered transport system” had emerged in Bangkok (2002, p. 84) inasmuch as the elite and middle classes exercised influence in policy decisions favourable to more roads and motorisation, while the poorer classes suffered from a lack of adequate public transport. In a short space of time, motorisation in Thailand had come to establish social and health inequalities which have continued to be entrenched to this day by the privileging of private vehicle transport over mass transit. As I point out later, the fieldwork revealed that lower socio-economic groups suffer injustice by being excluded for
financial reasons from a private vehicle dominated transport system. Additionally, as pedestrians they are more vulnerable to injury and more exposed to the pollutants emitted by cars and motorcycles. This is a theme which I will return to and discuss in Chapter Seven, where I highlight the social exclusionary factors marking car consumption as paradoxical.

The idiosyncrasies of the Thai political system also explain something of the path to motorisation. Cate refers to two dimensions of the Thai political system which inhibit attempts to deal with the traffic problem.

First, Thai political parties, dependent on charismatic leaders, lack institutional depth. Unstable multiparty coalitions make up contemporary Thai governments; no elected government has served out a full term since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Second, the dispersal of power and authority to multiple government bodies (or “territories” claimed by coalition members) leads to the interagency conflicts, competitions, ad hoc planning, and symbolic solutions that characterize the official response to the traffic situation. (1999, p. 38)

There is also the matter of corruption. Over the years, road-building projects have benefited politicians and their cronies in construction, via handsome kickbacks (Askew, 2002). This theme was raised in an interview with Craig Townsend, Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, Concordia University (KI Interview, June 2006). He explained that there is an elite of landowners in Bangkok who develop land for private profit and lobby the government to build roads to their property in order to increase the property value. Both Townsend and Mr Tawatchai Laosirihongthong, Director of Traffic and Transport Development and Research Center, King Mongkut’s University, (KI Interview, June 2006) pointed to the fact that many politicians in Thailand are road contractors. Mr Laosirihongthong explained that the Ministry of Transportation is accordingly the most lucrative ministry and one which many politicians would like to enter.

Theorising the path to motorisation in Thailand, as elsewhere, has traditionally occurred within the domain of transport economics. Du Pont and Egan (1997, p. 25) argue that a significant part of the problem is that in Bangkok
transportation studies and treatments of the problem have consistently originated from an engineering and/or economic perspective. Consequently, their focus has been technical in nature: that is, how to manage traffic. Ross, Poungsomlee, Punpuing, and Archavanitkul (2000, p. 160) agree, lamenting how national and metropolitan administrations in Thailand have been unsuccessful in dealing with the traffic problems of Bangkok because they have focused on symptoms, rather than causes. Like Cate (1999, p. 38), they argue that Bangkok's environmental problems in general, to which transport is the major contributor, stem from a particular political culture prone to instability, a lack of political will, and advancing self-interested decisions of stakeholders over public interest (2000, pp. 151, 160). Consequently, Bangkok's mixed built environment and land use has emerged in a very laissez-faire regulatory context, reflecting a combination of formal, but especially informal, decision-making processes where stakeholders and others have different goals. A hierarchical political culture, in which power is firmly entrenched and exercised from the top, underlies the regulatory system (Ross et al., 2000, pp. 157–158). Poignantly, Ross et al. conclude that:

Amelioration of the traffic problems requires simultaneous attention to the transport system, people’s behaviour patterns, and the institutional and extra-judicial decision-making processes involved in reshaping the built environment and transport system. (2000, p. 160)

The authors argue that traffic conditions reflect to some degree behaviour patterns, in part shaped by frustration with poor quality mass transit and slow travel times, and encourage Bangkok commuters to aim to buy their own car. As greater numbers of drivers take to the roads, traffic becomes even more snarled, creating then a political demand for the construction of more roads (2000, p. 157). However, only 11 per cent of Bangkok’s land surface is actually covered by roads, constituting a low percentage in international terms. Aggravating this is an awkward configuration with a small number of wide roads forming boundaries around very large blocks and inadequate small sois making up internal distributor roads (Ross et al., 2000, p. 159).
Agreeing with Ross and colleagues, I argue that understanding behaviour patterns is essential to form meaningful and policy-oriented understandings of Bangkok's automobile culture. However, the approach I take to understanding this behaviour is framed by theoretical constructs which differ from those provided within engineering and economics, which leads to asking different questions. The research questions follow in section 1.5.

Transport economists argue consumer demand for private automobiles testifies to the “inferiority” of public transport (Townsend, 2003, p. 23). Emanating from the discipline of economics, this reasoning is favourably disposed towards motorisation. The resulting explanation is that growth in incomes leads to a growth in motorisation, as consumers make independent choices within a free-market economic system (Townsend, 2003). Townsend notes that there is also “a concept of linear technological change which is in the public interest, and which is inevitable and value-free” (2003, p. 25). Cars are emblematic of this logic inasmuch as their continual technological improvements continually reduce costs and allow consumers to conquer space and time (Townsend, 2003).

Associating wealth with motorisation implies that motorisation is inevitable. According to Townsend, there was:

> the assumption that governments should create the conditions under which individual consumers could most efficiently fulfil their interest in owning and operating private motor vehicles. (2003, p. 25)

Thailand also followed the technocratic linear modelling of cities and transport, largely filtered through Western-centric and modernist models of urban growth from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and Japan’s “developmental state”. This latter term refers to “the close relationship between private and public sectors” in Japan and became a “distinguishing feature of Japan’s domestic political economy which shaped Southeast Asian cities” (Townsend, 2003, p. 88). According to Townsend, Japan’s developmental state had its own practical purposes and interests in extending its economic and industrial interests in the region. The JBIC (Japan Bank for International Cooperation) provided low-interest loans which, among other things, were used to build major road infrastructure. Japanese construction conglomerates were
directly involved in Japan’s ODA (overseas development assistance), with the objective of accumulating their own benefits. At the same time, Japan established a significant and growing motorcycle and car manufacturing presence in Thailand, as it did in other South-East Asian cities. Beginning in the mid-1980s there was a great surge in foreign direct investment in Thailand, much of it originating from Japan. In 1987, Japan overtook the US as the major source of foreign direct investment (FDI) (Askew, 2002).

Thailand today is a regional hub for car manufacturing, comfortably re-establishing itself after the financial crisis of 1997. Japan especially has a strong auto manufacturing presence. In 2004, Business Week ran a special feature on the Thai auto sector. It reported that in 2002, the industry received a significant boost from a reduction in tariffs to five per cent on cars traded between Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines (Balfour and Bremner, 2004). Two years later, Nissan invested US$190 million in car manufacturing in Thailand, raising its stake from 25 per cent to 75 per cent in two local assemblers of vehicles (Balfour and Bremner, 2004). Business Week also reported in 2004 that Toyota Motor Corporation was investing US$750 million in the building of a research and development centre in Thailand. Ford, Mazda, Mitsubishi, Honda and General Motors have all indicated they are increasing their investments in Thailand (Balfour and Bremner, 2004). There are claims that Thailand today is becoming a global auto competitor, as auto manufacturers are attracted by its skilled labour force and relatively low labour costs.

The World Bank tends to be a source of Anglo—American ideas on the running of an economy and a polity (Wade, 2001, in Townsend, 2003, p. 86). The greatest share of voting power in the World Bank is held by the US, and they are the only member state able to veto key constitutional issues. The US also has significant sway in choosing the president (Townsend, 2003). The World Bank’s view of progress tends to be linear and encompasses decentralised and motorised cities (Townsend, 2003). Townsend notes that:

In the World Bank’s teleology of urban transport, the ideal cities are Los Angeles and Detroit which are representatives of Thomson’s (1977) archetype of a full motorisation strategy. (2003, pp. 86–87)
While the role of the World Bank (and American development policies specifically) in Bangkok’s embrace of automobility are well-documented, researchers also point out that American urban development plans for Bangkok were not entirely “imposed” onto Bangkok (Askew, 2002). Askew notes the “tacit” support provided for private motorisation by industry, government, and the urban middle class was a contributing element. In addition, the legal structures and political will for American plans to be wholly supplanted in Thailand were absent (Askew, 2002).

What emerges, then, is a picture of American-inspired World Bank modernist ideals for motorisation in Thailand, unchallenged by the Thai administration which had formed a close alliance with the US in the Cold War, and which received much economic aid from them. Following the publication of a World Bank report in 1958, the dictatorial regime of Field Marshall Sarit established the NEDB (the National Economic Development Board) and the BOI (the Board of Investment). Advisory roles were held by Western-trained technocrats. The World Bank report also led to the first of Thailand’s well-known five-year development plans (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005). American firms were permitted 100 per cent ownership, unlike the minority share ownership imposed on other foreign investors (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005). Sarit rapidly advanced state-coordinated economic development (Askew, 2002). In 1960, Litchfield and Associates, an American consultancy team, was called on to develop the “Greater Bangkok Plan 2533”, which aimed to establish land-use zoning and urban growth directions for three decades. The model was one of a modern Western city (Askew, 2002). In actual fact the plan was never implemented, but it does demonstrate the nexus between American World Bank-inspired urban planning and the Thai Government. With their full support, Bangkok had already embarked down the path of a Western-style motorised city by 1960.

Other researchers have drawn different conclusions with regards to Bangkok’s current traffic problems. Based on a systematic inquiry into land use and transport development in Bangkok, in addition to an international comparative study, Poboon notes that Bangkok’s transport trajectory is divisible into three
key periods: “a water-based transport and walking period; a transport modernisation period; and a motorisation period” (1997, p. 381). In the first period (1782–1868), reliance on water-based transport (also motorised these days) and walking was compatible with the densely-populated and small city area, defined by a mixed land use. Cate (1999, p. 34) points out that many Bangkok residents lived on or near the edges of the Chao Praya River. Bangkok was commonly known as the “Venice of the East” because its most prominent geographical feature were the canals which traversed the city and along which Bangkokians navigated their city. Transportation and social life centred on the canal system, with the canals also providing food and helping to absorb wastes (Ross et al., 2000, p. 156). They add that ecologically and culturally the network of canals constituted a very viable system for these purposes, but ultimately as Thailand’s economy became further entrenched in the global economy and Western ideas filtered into the country, the canals were filled and paved over to allow road transportation (Ross et al., 2000, p. 156).

The second period (1868–1946) was marked by a decline in water transport and the development of public transport, especially trams. Non-motorised modes of transport, especially walking and cycling, continued to constitute a significant part of all trips taken, as cars and motorcycles were virtually absent from the general population. The city remained dense, with a mixed land use. Post World War II, Bangkok entered the period of motorisation, as cars, pick-ups and motorcycles were rapidly acquired by Bangkokians. Throughout this current period, mixed land uses and densities have been quite high overall and typical of an Asian city. This density (well over 100 people per hectare) is suited to walking cities, and is conducive to a well-developed public transport system (Poboon, 1997). That, however, has been largely absent throughout Thailand’s post-war motorisation period. In the late 1980s, as air and noise pollution in the inner ring of Bangkok worsened, Bangkokians with the financial means moved in pursuit of the suburban dream to the periphery of Bangkok, where new housing estates also testified to growing aspirational middle class wealth in the booming economy. New highways and the culture of the private car facilitated their flight (Ross et al., 2000, p. 159). Buses dominated public transport (Poboon, 1997). The link between middle-class expansion, suburban sprawl
and growing car ownership, especially since the 1980s, is also an unfortunate consequence of government policy protecting middle-class interests at the expense of those unable to afford cars in Bangkok.

In Bangkok, in particular, middle-class attitudes and policy option preferences underscore a strong predisposition to protect strongly its members' particular stake of unrestrained car ownership and high dependence on the car for travel. (Charoentrakulpeeti et al., 2006, p. 708)

Data from 1999–2005 indicates continuing sprawl in Bangkok has exacerbated the problem of car reliance by leading to the “donut effect”: the decline of the population in central and inner city areas, while the population of outer suburbs continues to grow (Burapatana and Ross, 2007, p. 59). As Burapatana and Ross point out, “The donut effect always leads to an increase in automobile numbers” (2007, p. 66). The authors capture this phenomenon in Bangkok, illustrating how the population density of two suburban districts (Sai Mai and Bang Bon) increased between 1999 and 2005, while in two core city centre districts (Dusit and Sathon), the population density declined (Burapatana and Ross, 2007, p. 66).

The 1999 opening of the SkyTrain, and the 2004 opening of Bangkok’s subway line are welcome, but have been overdue and are still not extensive. While the city’s structure is suitable for walking and cycling, the role of both these modes is minimal, and the lowest of all Asian and European cities surveyed (Poboon, 1997). Consequently, per capita energy consumption related to transport was found to be the highest of all Asian cities (Poboon, 1997). Furthermore, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, transport consumed the greatest amount of energy of any sector in Thailand, growing at a rate of 2.75 per cent per year until the 1997 financial crisis (Todoc, Todoc, and Lefevre, 2005, p. 347). During this time, “car ownership per capita more than tripled: from one car for every 100 persons in 1984 to more than three cars for every 100 persons in 2000” (Todoc et al., 2005, p. 347). This problem of energy consumption by cars is aggravated by the fact that, in transport economic terms, purchase and running costs for private automobiles in Bangkok is
relatively low, and significantly lower than in Singapore, Tokyo, and Hong Kong (Poboon, 1997). In these cities, private automobile use and ownership is curtailed by financial disincentives, such as Singapore’s expensive COE (Certificate of Entitlement).

Poboon’s most important insight relates to Bangkok’s urban form. He came to the conclusion that “Bangkok’s city structure mitigates against private vehicle use” (1997, p. 386), arguing that there is “a dramatic mismatch between vehicle use and urban form: higher levels of vehicle use than can be properly accommodated in Bangkok’s dense, tightly woven urban fabric” (1997, p. 387).

Bangkok’s traffic crisis appears to stem, not so much from high absolute vehicle ownership levels and vehicle usage rates per person, but from what might be termed a significant mismatch among its transport patterns, urban form and transport infrastructure. (Poboon, 1997, p. 386)

Specifically, the amount of land occupied by roads in Bangkok is relatively low: 8.5 per cent. Thus, it falls significantly behind the norm of 20–25 per cent in other major world cities (Gate, 1999, p. 33). What few researchers have done is to nominate Thailand’s transport transition as a social determinant of health and a driver of health inequalities. Figure 1 depicts the transport transition according to Poboon (1997). I have added the public health consequences in the present phase of motorisation in terms of exposures and health outcomes.
1.4 Lacunae in Current Understandings of Bangkok’s Path to Motorisation

These understandings derive from transport economics, transport infrastructure, and land use perspectives. Together they offer a valid and insightful paradigm through which to draw conclusions on Bangkok’s path to motorisation. They are
also approaches which can be contextualised within a modernist framework for understanding development as a linear, uni-directional process. Within the economist’s operational paradigm, the car is reducible to an item with both use and exchange value, which is the end product of a production chain (Kopytoff, 1990). This paradigm necessarily excludes, however, understandings of the car as a “culturally marked” product (Kopytoff, 1990, p. 64).

Poboon’s 1997 thesis identified the cultural dimensions of car ownership as an area requiring investigation and understanding in Bangkok.

Another factor likely to be significant in addressing traffic issues in Bangkok is the distinct characteristics of Thai culture. Thus, to obtain a better understanding of the contribution of cultural factors to traffic issues and possible ways to address these issues, a comprehensive study is required. (Poboon, 1997, p. 398)

Poboon concluded that there exists a “cultural love affair” with cars and that they “have become a central icon of status in modern Bangkok” (1997, p. 261).

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Poboon concluded that there exists a “cultural love affair” with cars and that they “have become a central icon of status in modern Bangkok” (1997, p. 261).

lewrsiwong agrees, explaining rising car ownership levels in Bangkok thus:

In Thai culture, the general population always give greater levels of esteem to those considered as higher class persons; this group is a numerical minority group and, at present, defined according to economic wealth. As a result, everyone likes to own and use a car, as the car is a symbol of “high class”, drawing higher respect and a priority of consideration from the others. (cited in Poboon, 1997, p. 261)

He adds that:

The car is much more than a mere means of travel in Thai society. It is a symbol and proof of success in one’s life, even more so than a house. A house cannot be brought along to show the success of its owner, but a car can. There is a very marked love affair between middle class people and the car; as such the car is an essential means of shifting one up to the middle and higher classes. (cited in Poboon, 1997, p. 261)

Towards the end of my fieldwork in Bangkok in August 2006 an editorial appeared in the Bangkok Post entitled “Trouble breathing in the ‘city of life”
Trouble breathing in the ‘city of life’”, 2006). The article questioned the veracity of Bangkok’s new moniker, “City of Life” which its Governor had recently declared, vowing to improve the quality of life and the environment for Bangkokians. The editors argued that Bangkok’s air pollution and the respiratory problems it causes for its residents would continue to nullify any claims the Bangkok might make to being a “City of Life”. The motor vehicle was identified as the main problem.

It’s time to stop treating symptoms and concentrate on the root cause, which is the motor vehicle itself. We can, and have, banned cigarettes from public places but ignored the far larger problem of the car plague, associated air pollution and getting non-essential vehicles out of the city centre. If people can be cured of their addiction to polluting motor vehicles and weaned onto healthier alternatives, the reward will be cleaner air and better health for all. (“Trouble breathing in the ‘city of life’”, 2006)

The editors decried Bangkokian’s “addiction” to their cars. The question this thesis sets itself is to understand this particular “addiction”. Consequently, I will investigate the cultural forces bringing the Thai driver to the wheel, leading to the persistence of a car-based culture. The enthusiasm for the auto industry and car ownership being shown by the Thai Government and Thai people is causing significant public health problems and is contributing to social polarisation (see Chapter Two). If this problem is left unchecked it will divert valuable GNP and human resources away from more sustainable forms of social development.

The case of Thailand as a middle-ranking Asian economy is also an exemplar of the issues that will be faced by other emerging Asian economies.

I will move beyond transport enclave debates around automobility. I acknowledge the actors, both historical and current, that have been raised in these debates, including transport policymakers, multilateral development organisations and lenders urging Los Angeles-style motorisation, economists, and property developers. Yet, I add another actor in Thailand: the consumer of vehicles. Transport planners, adhering to a “systems approach” paradigm, call the same actor a “road user” and investigate his or her behaviour at the intersection with two other factors: the vehicle and road infrastructure. I label
him/her a “consumer” for two main reasons: (1) his/her life within a consumer society; and (2) his/her resulting symbolic attachment to cars.

Moving beyond purely transport economic conceptions of accelerating motorisation, I propose that the consumption of cars in Bangkok is a “cultural and cognitive process” (Kopytoff, 1990, p. 64). The car as a commodity becomes part of a “moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions” (Kopytoff, 1996, p. 64). In this moral economy, the “object”, the car, is brought into meaning and becomes a cultural artefact (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus, 1997). Associated with the car is a specific set of “meanings and practices” (du Gay et al., 1997, p. 11). It acquires an identity. Researchers, such as Kaskan (1997) would argue the identity of the product extends to the owner of that product, such that in a global capitalist economy, such as Thailand’s today, we can talk of “commodity-constituted identities” (Kaskan, 1997, p. 218). In the interests of curtailing its public health impact on the city, I will investigate the particular identities Thais attribute to car ownership (e.g. being a member of hi so, meaning “high society” in Thai English) with a view to understanding Bangkok’s car culture.

The context for investigating motorisation in Thailand as an entrenched “car culture” is the penetration of global capitalism in Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century. This process marked a dramatic socio-economic transformation from an agrarian-based economy to a global capitalist consumer society. I contend that the economic and cultural impact of this transformation offers grounds for understanding the Thai Government’s, and especially the Thai people’s, embrace of the automobile. The Thai Government, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, has strongly promoted the auto industry as a bastion of economic growth. More significantly, this thesis argues that the country’s socio-economic transformation, beginning especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century, produced the material and affective conditions for the proliferation in the number of car consumers in Bangkok. The new workers drawn to Bangkok’s industrialising economy required mobility in a city which was following the Western path to urban sprawl and the expansion of road networks through Bangkok’s suburbs. In the absence of widespread and
efficient mass transit, car consumption became a practical necessity for those who could afford it. Functionality, however, has never been the sole motivator for car consumption. Within Thailand's new consumer economy, this thesis contends that cars became an aspirational good for many Thais, symbolically resonating success and the driver's belonging to a particular socio-economic group. The status accorded cars derives also from an enduring respect in Thai society for those with authority and those deemed socially superior. The status bestowed upon prestige consumer goods, such as the automobile, by global consumer society is reinforced by Thailand's hierarchical culture, where the ownership of consumer goods represents a new tier in the hierarchy pyramid.

Thailand's socio-economic transformation and the entrenchment of a consumer society will be discussed in Chapter Three. This discussion will both contextualise my approach in this thesis to automobility as a socio-material mode of consumption, and elucidate the findings that follow in Chapters Five and Six.

Figure 2 provides a conceptual overview which brings together many of the elements described above. In turn, the overview gives rise to five interconnected research questions.
Figure 2: Thesis Overview: Conceptual Framework of the Relationship Between Global Capitalism, Automobile Consumption, and Urban Health and Social Equity in Bangkok

1. Global Trends Manifest in Thailand
2. Global & National Determinants of Mobility Choice
3. Socio-Material Expression of Mobility Needs
4. Urban Health & Social Equity Outcomes in Bangkok

Global Capitalism:
- Urbanisation of Bangkok
- Consumerism

Political Economy of Automobile Industry:
- Global & Thai
- The Cultural Economy of the Automobile Industry

The Consumption of Cars in Bangkok:
- Symbolic & Utilitarian

- Road Fatalities/Injuries
- Disease Related to Air and Noise Pollution
- Diseases Related to Physical Inactivity
- Inactive Commuting
- Social Inequalities

Enduring structures in Thailand: culture; religion; economic system
1.5 Research Questions

- What are the public health consequences of Bangkok's automobile culture?
- How has the incorporation of Thailand into a globalised capitalist economy, and the concomitant urbanisation of Bangkok, shaped attitudes to car ownership?
- What other social, cultural and political processes have encouraged the embrace of auto transport, and to what extent has this embrace been strengthened by the practical realities of Bangkok?
- How do Bangkok citizens express their mobility needs—from a practical, a social, and an emotional sense?
- What suggestions can be made to shift the stubborn persistence of an automobile culture in Bangkok, and to help policymakers re-orient debate about the ethics of automobility and achieve better public health outcomes for Thailand?

1.6 Methodology and Data Collection

1.6.1 Research Approach

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach to research because such an approach acknowledges that people bring meaning to phenomena in their life. My task has been to understand the meanings and practices that Thais associate with car ownership. Denzin and Lincoln (2003, pp. 4–5) describe qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of interpretations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self.

Epistemologically this approach is interpretivist. Adopting an interpretivist approach differs from previous approaches to understanding Bangkok’s car
dependence. The more common approaches by transport economists and geographers have consistently held an objectivist ontological position in relation to reality. That is, within the positivist paradigm, they have viewed the car as a tangible object external to its driver. This approach has led to useful understandings of Bangkok’s motorisation, as discussed earlier in this chapter. My own qualitative approach aims to fill a gap in these understandings, coming from the constructivist ontological position where cars in Thailand are accepted as having a life that is continually constructed by the social actors of Thailand’s car culture. That is, the meanings attributed to the car in Thailand are continually created by car owners, aspiring car owners, car corporations and their marketing departments, and the Thai Government’s ongoing promotion of an auto industry.

Interpretivism is commonly explained as an ontological inquiry into the process of ascribing meaning to phenomena by social actors in the world (Bryman, 2004; Schwandt, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). The intellectual ancestry of interpretivism is Max Weber’s (1864–1920) “Verstehen approach” concerned as it was with an “interpretive understanding of social action” (Weber, 1947, cited in Bryman, 2004, p. 13). Bryman (2004, p. 13) points out that in contrast to positivism, interpretivism “requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action”. Schwandt (2003, p. 296) explains interpretivist philosophies by arguing that “what distinguishes human (social) action from the movement of physical objects is that the former is inherently meaningful”. My research aims to identify the subjective meanings attributed to car ownership in Bangkok. It recognises that the knowledge deduced from this research about car Bangkok’s car culture is a series of interpretations, based on the specific set of methods adopted to collect data.

Interpretivism is also aligned with phenomenology. According to Schwandt (2003, p. 297), “phenomenological analysis is principally concerned with understanding how the everyday, intersubjective world (the lifeworld) is constituted”. Ideas and beliefs “are generated and sustained through the interactions between people” (David and Sutton, 2004, p. 40). This view significantly recognises that meaning is a social process, and Bogdan and
Taylor points out that “the phenomenologist views human behaviour ... as a product of how people interpret the world ... In order to grasp the meaning of a person’s behaviour, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person’s point of view” (1975, pp. 13–14).

The terms interpretivism, phenomenology and Verstehen broadly capture the same philosophy in social research: the inquiry into the process of making meaning and what meaning people actually attribute to phenomena in their lives. This process is always social. My own inquiry into Bangkok’s car culture is philosophically influenced by this broad paradigm, as it centers on what car ownership means for Bangkokians and how the attribution of these meanings involves a set of social actors. Car owners, would-be car owners, car corporations, and the Thai Government create these meanings together, all the while infused by the international flows of globalisation, modulated by local Thai culture. As I will explain in the next section, all of these actors are represented in my research.

A social constructivist, phenomenological view can be influenced by a critical realist intent. Critical realism is broadly concerned with the structures or institutions which shape peoples’ lives, yet it recognizes that there is a degree of agency possible so that these structures are continually being redefined (Bhasker, 1989; David and Sutton, 2004). My inquiry into Bangkok’s car culture is an attempt to understand those forces and structures which give the car its specific meanings. If these forces are understood and critiqued, therein lies the possibility for “agency” or the possibility to redefine the meanings associated with car ownership in Thailand in the greater interest in public health.

David and Sutton (2004, p. 43) explain that “critical realism highlights the enduring and pre-existing reality of institutions (the actions of past generations) in creating conditions into which new generations are born and have to work with”. Bhasker adds to this by pointing out that understanding the relationship between social structure and social action is the aim of critical realists (Bhasker, 1989). Brewer explains that the “structures are ‘real’ ... these structures also constrain agency. But they also simultaneously enable agency by providing the framework within which people act and such agency reproduces (and
occasionally transforms) the structure it occurs within” (2000, p. 50). Critical realism is important to this research because it recognises the power of structures to define the meanings surrounding car ownership in Thailand, and also seeks to insinuate agency so that the car’s meanings may be redefined and its attractions somewhat diminished.

1.6.2 Data Collection

The integrity of any research is a matter of establishing trust in the data collected and in the interpretation of that data. As the epistemological stance of qualitative research is interpretivist, it implicitly recognises that the data collected is a series of interpretations. Moreover, the researcher is attempting to interpret subjective meanings held by the other participants. For these reasons, it is important that triangulation is adopted. Triangulation strengthens the trustworthiness of research by including a variety of methods of data collection, several data sources, and may even involve more than one investigator (Silverman, 2000, p. 98; Brewer, 2000, p. 75; Patton, 2002, p. 247). Seale (1999, pp. 59–60) argues that triangulation can establish greater plausibility and credibility in the research. Postmodernists recognise that peculiar to each method of data collection adopted is a certain perspective, so that each method reveals something different from the other (Brewer, 2000, p. 76). This argument also points to the need for triangulation.

This study relied primarily on one method of data collection, in-depth interviews, as I deemed it the best possible way to understand the meanings Bangkokians attach to car ownership, but also included a degree of observation and photographic record. To create wider triangulation, it was important that the interviews sit alongside a wide range of data sources. Beyond car owning and non-car owning Bangkokians, I interviewed key informants to illuminate those forces and cultural factors which inform and texture the disposition of Bangkokians to owning a car. Another key source of data was the range of expert opinion obtained from professionals in public health, transport policy and car marketing. I also analysed as many English language Thai auto industry market reports as I could easily obtain.
While interviewing was chosen as the method likely to provide the most reliable insight into Bangkok’s car culture, a photographic account of car promotion and advertising was also undertaken. Promotion and advertising are one of the most pervasive forces which shape the car’s meanings. I complemented the collection of advertising texts with observation and photographic record of young people’s participation in events at the “Style by Toyota Cafe”, a venue which markets Toyota cars to youth through engaging their membership and participation in social activities in downtown Bangkok. I describe these two methods of data collection in further detail later in this chapter.

It is also important that the interpretivist researcher is reflexive in approach and explicit about the constraints upon the process of data collection and analysis. Woolgar argues that qualitative researchers “must locate their data in the context of the social processes that brought them about, and recognise the limits of their representation of reality” (1988, pp. 26–27). In the discussion of data collection methods and analysis in the next sections, I will explain the limits of the methods adopted and be explicit about how this may have affected data quality.

(i) Interview Sampling and Recruitment of Transport Users

In accordance with the idea of purposive sampling, I pursued a sampling framework of individuals who would reveal a range of attitudes to car ownership (Silverman, 2000, p. 104). I needed both to sample the questions and the target group of interviewees. I thought it necessary to interview all transport users in Bangkok, not simply car owners. Car owners could tell me much about what owning a car meant to them, but it was also imperative to understand whether other transport users aspired to own a car, and for what reasons. My sampling frame aimed for 20 car owners, 10 bus riders, 10 SkyTrain riders, and 10 motorcyclists. In addition, it was important to capture the range of socio-economic groups, firstly to understand the social status differences in meanings accorded car ownership, and secondly to understand how Bangkok’s autocentrism has reinforced social and health inequalities.

The College of Public Health at Chulalongkorn University provided a base throughout the fieldwork. With the assistance of my colleagues at the College, it
became relatively easy to begin trialling my questions and sampling the research participants. The College introduced me to a few individuals matching the criteria of my sampling frame. One was a senior staff member within the College, while the other two worked outside the College. I met with them, trialled my questions, and snowballed interviews from there. The questions were adjusted somewhat after the pilot as I was able to better define the kinds of information, feelings and attitudes I was looking for. This initial trialling of questions confirmed also that without the opportunity to establish a relationship with the interviewees prior to the interview, conversation was unlikely to be organic and natural. Questions were consequently a necessary guide or stimulus at least. The recruitment of interviewees via snowballing became reasonably straightforward. My main contacts were other staff and students within the College of Public Health, and two friends in Bangkok. Combined, these initial contacts were able to generate further contact with a wide range of individuals of varying socio-economic status, and who used different modes of transport to get around Bangkok. I met these individuals in varying locations throughout Bangkok, often in their place of work, but also in cafes or other informal settings.

I interviewed a total of 49 transport users. As planned, I interviewed a proportionately greater number of car owners than other transport users because this group could tell me the most about their feelings regarding car ownership. The final mix of interviewees included 23 car owners, 11 motorcyclists, 10 bus riders, and five Sky Train riders. Of course, some used a combination of these modes of transport in their daily routine. A combination of bus and Sky Train use was quite common, for example, as the limited coverage of the Sky Train required some users to catch a bus to Sky Train stations. Individuals were categorised into transport groups, according to their predominant mode of transport. There is one subway line in Bangkok which opened in 2004. I chose not to include a specific sub-set of subway riders because it is such a minor feature of Bangkok's transport network. Some people also have access to boat transport on Bangkok's canals. Again, this comprises such a minor segment of transport in Bangkok, that I deemed it unnecessary to
isolate these people as a group on their own. See the Chapter One Appendix for a complete list of interviewees.

Interviews were conducted in English with those who could speak quite fluently, and in other cases I relied on an interpreter as explained earlier in this section. Obviously there was a level of formality to many interviews because it was the first and often the only time to meet that person. The interview questions proved to be a very useful guide as the topic was also not something which lent itself to free-flowing unguided conversation.

(ii) Interview Format and Questioning of Transport Users

As Brewer (2000, p. 63) points out:

interviewing is based on two assumptions that are critical to the technique, namely that respondents’ verbal descriptions are a reliable indicator of their behaviour, meanings, attitudes and feelings, and that the stimuli (the questions) are a reliable indicator of the subject of the research.

There is no guarantee that a person’s verbal responses are a truly accurate or a complete reflection of their feelings. In addition, in my case, there was a language barrier which needed to be taken into account. While I speak Thai at a very elementary level, my language skills were hardly sufficient for conducting interviews. When the interviewee had minimal or no English, I relied on an interpreter. In a number of cases, however, the interviewees (typically the more educated and therefore those more likely to have the money to own cars), spoke reasonably fluent English, and were quite easily able to handle the lexical range necessary to discuss the particular subject matter of car ownership and transport usage. The interpreters were not professionally employed as such, being either postgraduate students at Chulalongkorn University’s College of Public Health, where I was based throughout my fieldwork, or in another case, a Thai friend who had completed a Masters degree in Sydney and was fluent in English. The postgraduate students were PhD candidates who were relatively fluent in English. In addition, on a few occasions, a research fellow in the College interpreted for me. Certainly, specific meanings may be lost in translation, yet aware of this, I made an effort to verify the words used by the
interviewees and clarify them when I could. I concentrated especially on key vocabulary (mostly adjectives) used to express feelings about their car, or the car they aspired to own.

I prepared a list of questions to guide me yet didn’t want the list to impose any overriding order on the conversation as it might evolve naturally. Brewer (2000, p. 66) argues that to ensure that respondents’ replies are as truthful as possible, unstructured interviews are the most desirable. He argues that “there may be some questions worked out beforehand, or a guide to topics that need to be addressed, but open questions are used and there is a relative absence of structure” (Brewer, 2000, p. 66).

As Sutton and David (2004, p. 87) point out, “the structured interview seeks to maintain high levels of reliability and repeatability”. Indeed, I suspected that a set of quite specific meanings attached to car ownership would be borne out in the interviews and come to be repeated by the participants. This proved to be the case, and a saturation point was reached at which the same themes or meanings were continuing to emerge. In contrast, unstructured interviews, as Brewer (2000, p. 66) points out, are more often used when there is a good relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, and thus tend to be used in the context of participant observation. In my case, while I was able to establish some level of a relationship with some of the interviewees, through working side by side at the College of Public Health for example, in many instances, there was no opportunity at all to build rapport before the interview. I opted for the middle ground, and prepared a list of questions, believing that totally unstructured interviews would not yield the specific information I needed.

As for the types of questions, many were open-ended as I wanted to invite the interviewee to explore and explain attitudes and feelings to car ownership from their own perspective. In qualitative research, such questioning is seen as the most efficacious method of achieving this (Patton, 2002, pp. 343–347). David and Sutton (2004, p. 88) refer to six types of questions which provide a comprehensive guide for the interviewer. These include “warm-up questions to establish trust and rapport”, “demographic questions (to) elicit factual data about the respondent”, “core questions (to) address key themes of the
research”, “prompts and probes (which) seek to elicit additional information about a core question”, and “clarifying questions (which) seek to check the meaning of a response”. I generally followed this pattern, concentrating on the core questions to elicit meanings surrounding car ownership. The core questions were made descriptive, as Jorgensen (1989, p. 86) points out, “descriptive questions explore the general contours of some matter in fairly comprehensive detail” and begin with phrases such as “tell me about” or “that’s really interesting, tell me more about it”. By employing descriptive questions, I wanted to provide as much freedom as possible for the interviewee to explain in their own manner their feelings and attitudes. See the Chapter One Appendix for a list of interview questions.

(iii) Key Informant Interviews

A smaller, though very important set of in-depth interviews were conducted with experts in public health, pollution, transport planning, transport injury, and automobile marketing. The aim of these interviews was to draw expert data on:

- the public health impacts of automobility in Thailand
- the specific impact of vehicle generated pollution on public health and changes in pollution levels over time in Bangkok
- strategies employed to market cars in Thailand
- transport planning and policy in Bangkok
- transport planning and policy in Singapore (in order to understand policy responses in a nation well known for its efficient public transport, and controls over vehicle purchase and usage).

The experts were selected on the basis that they could provide valuable information or data from their own specific field, and contribute significantly to the overall study.

Recruitment of these interviewees was more time-consuming and difficult. I often had to send several emails or make several phone calls before an appointment could be confirmed. Persistence proved the best recruitment strategy for this group. Finally, I was able to conduct interviews with 20 key individuals in the fields mentioned above, some of whom are well known for
their contribution to their particular field. Seventeen of these were conducted in Bangkok, and three in Singapore. For each individual, I prepared a specific set of questions or version of a standard set of questions, depending on their expertise and what information I was seeking from them. The great majority of these interviews were conducted in the individual's place of work during business hours. See the Chapter One Appendix for a generic list of key informant interview questions and a list of key informant interviewees.

(iv) Photographic Record and Observation

On two occasions I visited the “Style by Toyota Cafe” in central Bangkok to observe and photograph both the cafe and activities within the cafe. I first stumbled upon the cafe when out in Bangkok and was later told of its purpose by Toyota’s Marketing Manager (KI interview, June 2006). Essentially it is a venue to market and instil early Toyota brand loyalty in young Bangkokians. Young people take out membership of this “cafe” and are then able to use its computer terminals and participate in social activities organised by the “cafe”. For this reason, it is strategically positioned in Bangkok’s central “Siam” shopping enclave, an area which attracts teenagers and young adults both for its shopping and entertainment options. In section 4.4.1 of Chapter Four, I look at the cultural construction of the Toyota driver in detail through discussion of the data I gathered at the cafe. I also took photographs of automobile advertisements and/or promotional events throughout Bangkok. These also appear in Chapter Four.

1.6.3 Data Analysis

I relied on thematic analysis (also known as grounded theory or narrative analysis) to discern categories of attitudes, meanings or themes associated with car ownership and usage amongst my interviewees. Such analysis is typical of an inductive approach to research as it identifies categories from the field notes, rather than hypothesising categories prior to searching for them in the data (Kellehear, 1993, pp. 38–39).
After each interview, I typed up the respondents’ responses in my office. Specific themes began to emerge which helped me to further refine my questions for subsequent interviews. The process of weaving back and forth between interview responses and refining questions was especially important in the early stages as it enabled me to target specific themes, including themes I had not imagined prior to beginning the research, such as the concerns of many females for their safety in taxis. Once I returned to Australia, I gathered all the interview responses from transport users and classified them according to transport type (e.g. car, motorcycle, bus and SkyTrain) and socio-economic group. I then tried to identify themes that recurred within and across transport and SES groups, and categorised the responses accordingly. These themes are discussed in detail in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. The process of clarifying and categorising themes continued over many months as I wrote my main findings chapters and returned constantly to the data.

The categorisation of themes was simultaneously problematic and affirming because of the inevitable crossover between themes. The idea of purchasing a car to express socio-economic status, for example, was actually very broad and consequently divisible into various sub-themes which were essentially more specific versions of the general theme of social status or success. For example, “socio-economic ascendancy for internal migrants to Bangkok” and a “sense of achievement” ultimately express economic success and social status. The fact that many sub-themes could be re-traced to the wider symbolism of success and social status also affirmed the overarching message coming through the interviews: cars are inseparable from social status for many Thais.

When initially typing up and reading through the key informant interview responses, and later analysing responses in detail, I looked for confirmation of themes which had appeared in the transport users interviews. It was interesting and valuable to confirm whether or not the various professionals I spoke to predicted or confirmed the “meanings” attributed car ownership by the interviewees. In all cases they did this, concurring either on some or many of the themes.
1.6.4 Strengthening the Research

Initially, I thought participant observation of car owners especially, and non-owners to a degree, might provide a meaningful optic into Bangkok’s car culture. Spending time with car owners as they traversed Bangkok and observing how they deployed cars in their daily life and the way they talked about them, seemed not only interesting, but also a good means to gather data in an uncontrived setting. However, several issues encouraged me to opt for interviewing instead. Firstly, I realised that behaviour alone would not tell me enough of how the participants felt about car ownership, or why they wanted to, or aspired to own a car. To gather such information, in-depth exchange was necessary. Secondly, once in the field, it became clear that the logistical problem of finding individuals with whom I could spend extended amounts of time during their daily practices was significant. Daily life is composed primarily of earning a living and many other routine activities of shopping, running errands and socialising. It is, therefore, in many ways impractical to follow individuals throughout their day without having first built trust and familiarity. When in Bangkok, I quickly realised that few people would be able to commit to this.

Any research relying on interviews conducted with speakers of a language different from the researcher’s own native language is challenging, and may undermine the validity of the data. As my Thai language skills are basic I had to rely on interpreters recruited informally from The College of Public Health at Chulalongkorn University, where I was based, and Thai friends. An interpreter was not always required, however, as a significant number of the interviewees belonging to the medium to high socio-economic group had good English skills. Some, for example, had studied in English-speaking countries. Nevertheless, specific nuances may have been lost in translation, and the language barrier may have stalled discussions to some degree and made them less open-ended and free-flowing.

Finally, had time and money permitted, I would have liked to conduct a focus group to further broaden my research. The aim would have been to assess the impact of car advertisements, identifying what car promotion messages specific groups identified with, what feelings advertisements aroused in them, and how
advertisements may actually change and/or reinforce their perceptions of brands. Advertising plays an instrumental role in consumption, and for that reason, it would have been interesting to see how car advertising impacted on Bangkokians.
Appendix: Chapter One

Table 3: Key Informant Interview Questions

1. What do you think are the main reasons Bangkokians buy cars?

2. Do you think there is much status attached to car ownership in Thailand? If so, why? What contributes to the creation of this sentiment among Thai people?

3. Is there anything uniquely Thai about this attitude towards cars?

4. (Car Marketing professionals only) What factors / sentiments do you appeal to in the marketing of your car brand in Thailand? Why have you chosen to focus on those factors? Are they any different from the factors appealed to in other countries?

5. How do Bangkokians perceive mass transit in their city?

6. How could mass transit be improved?

7. Which cities do you think are the benchmarks for creating a sustainable and active transport system in Bangkok?

8. Do you think Bangkokians would see any advantages in a less car-dependent city?

9. What do you think are the barriers to the creation of such a transport system reducing car dependence in Bangkok?
Table 4: List of Key Informant Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Name, Family Name</th>
<th>Position &amp; Organisation</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BANGKOK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Abdul Tungsawan</td>
<td>Manager Vios and New Model Passenger Car Marketing, Toyota</td>
<td>June 26, 2006</td>
<td>Toyota Head Office Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Suebsakul Thaweephol</td>
<td>Marketing Consultant, Digital Fusion</td>
<td>December 23, 2006</td>
<td>Style by Toyota Cafe, Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Pannate Rangsinturat</td>
<td>Manager of Marketing Strategy and Research, Daimler Chrysler (Thailand) Ltd</td>
<td>June 7, 2006 &amp; December 26, 2006</td>
<td>Daimler Chrysler Head Office, Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Patpong Angkahirun</td>
<td>Officer, Study &amp; Analysis Section, Thailand Automotive Institute</td>
<td>July 12, 2006</td>
<td>Thailand Automotive Institute, Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Tairjing Siripanich</td>
<td>Director 'Don’t Drink Drive Foundation'</td>
<td>May 16, 2006</td>
<td>Dr Tairjing’s home in Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Chamroon Tangpaisal Kit</td>
<td>Director of Transport Safety Bureau</td>
<td>June 1, 2006</td>
<td>Transport Safety Bureau, Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Tawatchai Laosinhongthong</td>
<td>Director of Traffic and Transport Development Research Center, King Mongkut University</td>
<td>June 9, 2006</td>
<td>Cafe in Bangkok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Name, Family Name</td>
<td>Position &amp; Organisation</td>
<td>Date of Interview</td>
<td>Location</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Oranit Washirapunsakul</td>
<td>Consumer Research Manager, Automotive Resources Asia Ltd. (Bangkok)</td>
<td>May 15, 2006</td>
<td>Automotive Resources Asia Ltd., Bangkok Head Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Paibul Suriyawongpaisal</td>
<td>Professor of Community Medicine, Mahidol University</td>
<td>May 17, 2006</td>
<td>Mahidol University, Bangkok</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Suriya Prasatbuntiya</td>
<td>Director of 'Disaster and Safety Integrated Management Bureau, Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation' (DDPM), Ministry of Interior</td>
<td>May 29, 2006</td>
<td>DDPM Office, Bangkok</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Danucha Pichayan</td>
<td>Policy and Planning Analyst, Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), Office of the Prime Minister</td>
<td>July 28, 2006</td>
<td>NESDB Bangkok</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Craig Townsend</td>
<td>Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Planning and Environment, Concordia University, Montreal</td>
<td>June 15, 2006</td>
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<td>Director of Logistics Strategy Division, NESDB, Office of the Prime Minister, Bangkok</td>
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<td>Dr Patcharawadee Suwanathada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Panya Warapetchrayut</td>
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<td>Mr Lew Yii Der</td>
<td>Director of Policy, Land Transport Authority, Singapore</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Gerard Ee</td>
<td>Ex-President of Automobile Association of Singapore</td>
<td>July 4, 2006</td>
<td>Private office in Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Anthony Chin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr Chia Yong San</td>
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<td>July 3, 2006</td>
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<td>Dr Paul Barter</td>
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<td>July 7, 2006</td>
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<td>Who do you work for?</td>
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CAR OWNERS

1. Car Make/s:  
   (How many cars in your household? For whom?)

2. Age of Car:

3. How long will you keep this car? Why?

4. Method of Purchase (e.g. instalments, cash, personal loan): If instalments, was a big deposit required?

5. Decision to purchase this particular car based on (e.g. car advert? Peers? TV serial? Other?) :

6. Is owning a car important for your position/status in Thai society?

7. Are you more concerned about having a nice house, a nice car, a higher education, world travel?

8. Are you satisfied with your car? Is there another car you would prefer? Why? How long were you satisfied with your car after you bought it?

9. Do you identify yourself with your car? Does your car represent you in all respects? Which car do you fully identify with? Why?

10. Does your particular car complement any other possession or purchase? e.g. your house? Suburb? Clothes?

11. Is your car a "retreat" or "escape" from the world? Pls explain how you feel when you can get in the car, close the door, and shut out the world?

12. Where do you get information about cars?

13. Which cars appeal to you? Why?

14. What do these brands symbolise/represent for you?  
   Honda  
   Toyota  
   BMW  
   Mercedes  
   Porsche
15. Is a car important for your “quality of life” in Bangkok? Is it important for everybody else’s quality of life?
16. Does the weather in Bangkok affect your choice to use/own a car?
17. How would your life be different without a car in Bangkok? Worse or better?
18. What, if anything, would persuade you to give up your car or use it less?
19. What functions do you use your car? Do the shopping malls you visit in BKK have good car access? Are they easiest to visit with a car? Are they easy/easier to arrive at walking?
20. Can you describe a typical day? How much time would you spend in your car?
21. Any particular occasion that your car is very necessary? Dating? Important event? Work? Social function?
22. How often do you wash your car? Or have it washed?
23. Is this important?
24. How do you feel when you drive your car? (sense of “freedom”? empowerment? Pride?)
25. What other functions does your car have? e.g. mobile office?
26. Do you decorate the interior of your car in some way? Why?
27. If the tax on cars was raised, would you still buy one?
28. Do you think the Thai Gov’t should control car ownership as they do in Singapore? How would citizens react if the Gov’t did this?
29. Is the cost of fuel today a concern for you? Will you give up your car if the cost of gasoline continues to rise?
30. Everyone complains about traffic jams in Bangkok, but everyone seems to put up with this problem. If you could take public transport and get to your destination more quickly, would you give up your car, or use it less? What characteristics should public transport have if you were to use it?
31. What does your car make possible for you that would be impossible, or difficult without it in public transport? (e.g. access to work, friends, partners, hobbies?) Why does this happen?

32. How do you think life was in Bangkok before there were any cars? Do you think every activity you do now was possible? What difficulties do you think there were?

33. What positive aspects would you find in a car-free society?

NGN-CAR OWNERS

34. What transport do you use to get around Bangkok?

35. Would a car improve your “quality of life” in Bkk? How?)

36. (Motorcyclists) How did your purchase your m/cycle? Did you need a big deposit?

37. (Motorcyclists) Does it meet your needs? What problems do you have with this way of getting around?

38. How many hours a day do you spend on public transport? How many days per week do you spend on public transport?

39. Do you mind being seen by others (peers, colleagues, etc.) using transport?

40. Would you like to own a car? Why? Why not? Why don’t you have one?

41. Are you more interested in having a nice house, a nice car, higher education, or world travel?

42. Which cars appeal to you? Why?

ALL TRANSPORT USERS

43. Is/Would owning a car in Bangkok (be) a sign of success for your family/peers in your hometown? i.e. Do/Would they see it is a sign of success in your new city life?
44. How far do you live from work? From a shopping centre (type with a supermarket for weekly shopping)?


46. What do you think of Bangkok’s public transport at present?

47. What do you think would be the best way to improve public transport in Bangkok?

48. Would improving public transport be a bad thing for car users?

49. Do you like walking in Bkk? What stops you from walking more?

50. How enjoyable do you find cycling around Bkk? What stops you from doing it more?

51. Would the potential pollution impact on your decision to buy a car?


53. What do you think of Bangkok’s public transport at present?

54. What do you think would be the best way to improve public transport in Bangkok?

55. Do you like walking in Bangkok? What stops you from walking more?

56. Do you like cycling in Bangkok? What stops you from cycling more?

MALES

57. Do you need a car to date? Why? Why not?

FEMALES

58. Do you like guys to pick you up in a car? What would you think if he didn’t have one? If he arrived in a taxi? By bus? By SkyTrain?
HEALTH PROMOTION MESSAGES

59. Do you regularly see messages about safe driving?

60. What messages/campaigns?

61. Where? How often, can you estimate?

62. Do they impact on the way you drive?

63. Can you tell me about the most effective/powerful/influential safe-driving campaign that you remember?
2.1 Automobility and Public Health: A Global Perspective

The health impacts of transportation fall into three areas: traffic crashes; vehicle pollution; and physical activity and fitness (Litman, 2003, p. 3). Globally, approximately 1.2 million deaths, and 20–50 million injuries or disabilities, are annually attributable to cars (WHO and World Bank, 2004). The economic cost of road crashes is US$518 billion globally, and in middle-income countries, such as Thailand, this accounts for a 1.5 per cent loss of GDP. In 2002, 90 per cent of road traffic deaths occurred in low- and middle-income countries (WHO and World Bank, 2004). It is predicted that by 2020 such deaths will increase by 83 per cent in these countries. Many of the deaths are among pedestrians, bicyclists and light motorcyclists. The most vulnerable segment of the population is the poor, who are disproportionately represented in traffic fatality and injury statistics (WHO and World Bank, 2004). Recognising that traffic-related accidents will likely become the third leading cause of death globally within the next 20 years, affecting Asia the most (WHO and World Bank, 2004), it is urgent that richer understandings of this global public health problem be sought and transformed into preventive practice and policy. The gravity of this problem is such that in May 2004, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution to improve global road safety. The WHO Report (2004) has also predicted that the second leading cause of the loss of DALYs (annual disability-adjusted life years) in low- and middle-income countries will become road traffic injuries.

Environmentally, the burden of cars is well documented. Fletcher and McMichael (1997, Introduction) state that the toxic effect of vehicle exhaust emissions includes respiratory disorders and the aggravation of heart disease. Litman (2003, p. 3) adds that the air pollutants produced by cars may also be a contributor to cancer. The main airborne pollutants emitted by cars include hydrocarbons (HC), carbon monoxide (CO), nitrogen oxides (NOx), carbon dioxide (CO2), and suspended particulate matter (SPM) (Poboon, 1997).
Suspended particulate matter is a term covering various finely separated solids or liquids released into the air. In Bangkok, SPM is the most significant component of air pollution (Poboon, 1997). Lead used to be an important component of air pollution in Bangkok until it was banned in 1996, and was believed to have impaired the intellectual development of children (Fletcher and McMichael, 1997). Yet, air pollution has other sources apart from cars, causing a variety of diseases. Precision, therefore, in determining the aggregate health impacts of motor vehicle pollution, is difficult (Litman, 2003, pp. 3–4). The fact remains, however, that the emissions from automobiles are a major pollution source, reductions of which could provide clear respiratory health benefits (Litman, 2003, p. 5).

Beyond fatalities, injuries and pollution, the motorisation of cities has adversely impacted upon urban environments in other ways. The physical and mental well-being of growing numbers of individuals worldwide is intimately tied to the urban centres in which the majority of humanity now resides. This is especially the case in the burgeoning mega-cities of Asia, such as Shanghai and Bangkok, where growing wealth has brought great numbers of cars onto the roads. WHO definitions of health include the notion of “well-being”. The well-being of many urbanites is affected by the quality of their urban environment, which includes environmental and social factors. However, “well being” includes much more than the absence of physical hazards such as those generated by traffic. Researchers acknowledge that urban sprawl and the attendant growth of motorways dividing neighbourhoods, and cars clogging cities, has a social impact. In inner Los Angeles, more than two-thirds of the area is taken up by parking spaces and roads (Fletcher and McMichael, 1997, Introduction). This division of communities disrupts social relations and divides neighbourhoods. Peter Newman (1992, in Fletcher and McMichael, 1997, p. 12) observes:

The standard approach to (building) roads has been to see them as a conduit for traffic where little was allowed to get in the way of a smooth flow ... This is reductionist engineering that forces cities into a mould of concrete and bitumen, denying the importance of streets as meeting
places, recreations areas, flora and fauna havens and the aesthetic glue that holds the city together.

Dora and Phillips (2000) label this phenomenon the "community severance effect". Its features are a lowered sense of community, and reduced social support. This reduction in social contact is known to increase mortality, to the extent that those with little social contact may have double the risk of mortality than those socially-connected (Dora & Phillips, 2000). Traffic stress is also recognised as impacting upon health. The stressors include the "hassles of driving and parking, the potential for unintentional injuries, and pecuniary hardships and inconveniences of vehicle maintenance and purchase" (Gee and Takeuchi, 2004, p. 406). In Gee and colleague’s (2004) study of perceptions of traffic stress in Los Angeles, data suggested that these stressors are associated with greater evidence of depressive symptoms and a diminished health status overall. Traffic congestion and noise is associated with irritability, sleeplessness, increased blood pressure, and aggressive behaviour (Dora & Phillips, 2000).

Litman’s third category of transport-related health impacts, physical activity and fitness, is the consequence of increasingly sedentary lifestyles. One significant contributor to this is reliance on the private car as the sole mode of mobility. Again, it is hard to quantify exactly the degree to which automobile dependence is responsible for diseases associated with sedentary lifestyles, yet the impacts are believed to be large (Litman, 2003, p. 5). Litman (2003, p. 5) notes that "Diseases associated with inadequate physical fitness cause ... more deaths and more potential years of life lost than road crashes". Some researchers frame this argument by focusing on how the built environment and urban form has particular health consequences related to physical (in)activity and obesity (see Bauman, 2004, p. 59). When physical inactivity leads to or aggravates obesity in individuals, the health risks conferred are very significant. In developed countries today, physical inactivity and associated obesity comprise the leading cause of preventable mortality and morbidity (Bauman, 2004, p. 59). While there are a multiplicity of factors contributing to inactivity, the transport environment of car dependence and inactive commuting are clear proximal factors in people’s levels of physical activity (Bauman, 2004, p. 60). Transport
systems are thus a macro level influence negating individual choice at times (Bauman, 2004, p. 60). When the built form of the urban environment is predisposed to a transport environment in which the car becomes the most feasible modal choice for individuals, inactive commuting is almost an inevitability. This is frequently the case where suburban sprawl exemplifies the urban form of cities, as it has in the US and Australia.

Yet, the developed world riding literally on its prosperity, no longer suffers alone for this. Increasing wealth in a number of industrialising nations throughout Asia means they are witnessing the emergence of this phenomenon. Bell, Ge, and Popkin (2002, p. 281) found that in China “household ownership of motorized transportation was associated with obesity in men and women, and the acquisition of a motorized vehicle increased the odds of becoming obese in men”. Traditionally Chinese cities have been well-suited to active commuting due to their mixed land uses and high densities, meaning that many people live within walking or cycling distance of their place of work (Bell et. al, 2002, p. 282). Walking and cycling still prevail, yet economic growth has seen the uptake of motorisation at an increasingly zealous pace by those financially disposed to own a car. Bell and colleagues speculate that “one reason may be that cars have become a symbol of economic success” (2002, p. 282).

Suburban sprawl has occurred in Bangkok as well, in an unfortunate adoption of Western development and urban planning models. To become active, then, people need to be encouraged to use public transport, and to include walking or cycling in their journey (Bauman, 2004, p. 62). Networked transportation systems in areas of increased urban density need to feature prominently in the physical configuration of urban environments (Bauman, 2004, p. 62).

However, not everyone is affected equally by this transport transition and its attendant health consequences. People from different social classes, relying on different transport modes, move through time and space differently and, as a consequence, experience different exposures to the various health impacts of transport. How social position affects health outcomes is depicted in Figure 3, which adapts a figure from the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2005).
This thesis will take into account the interrelationship between social position and health outcomes throughout the fieldwork, as described in Chapter One, section 1.6.

### 2.2 Automobility and Public Health in Thailand

Understandings of Thailand’s public health burden arising from growing automobility can be enriched by framing this phenomenon within Thailand’s overall health-risk transition. Lim and colleagues (2009, p. 2) define the term “health-risk transition” as “the change from a health determinants mix dominated...
by ‘traditional hazards’, such as water and sanitation, malnutrition and vector-borne diseases, to the ‘modern’ hazards of urban pollution, tobacco smoking, road accidents (and) mass-produced high calorific foods”. Demographic factors underlie this change and determine its extent, as do changes in health determinants within a population. Socio-economic changes are, of course, closely linked to overall health changes (Sleigh, Seubsman, Bain, and the Thai Cohort Study Team, 2007, p. 1). These socio-economic changes have been dramatic in Thailand, and are documented later in this thesis.

In Thailand’s case, the demographic transition, beginning in the mid- to late-1960s, has been a typical one. That is, over the last 50 years, both the birth and death rates have gone down, while life expectancy and the size of the population have risen. Overall Thailand’s population growth rate has decreased significantly in the last 50 years (Sleigh, Seubsman, Bain, and the Thai Cohort Study Team, 2007, p. 1). Infant mortality rates have drastically reduced, from 110.7 per 1000 births in 1950 to 19.8 per 1000 births in 2000. Life expectancy, nevertheless, is at the level of Sweden and Australia in the 1960s (Seubsman, Vilainerun, Khamman, Somboonsook, and Prapamontol, 2007).

A significant marker of the health transition has been the movement from communicable diseases dominating the public health profile at the end of the 1960s to the rise in prominence of non-communicable diseases since the beginning of the 1970s (Seubsman et al., 2007). Cancers and cardio-vascular-related conditions are among the most prevalent. In the top 10 of disease burden in 1999 for males and females, strokes and liver cancer scored in the first five for both sexes (Bundhamcharoen, Teerawattanananon, Vos, and Begg, 2002).

Changes in types of work and work practices also define this transition. As Thailand has shifted from an agrarian-based economy to an industrial/manufacturing one, and towards service/knowledge jobs, the health risks have concomitantly changed. While improvements in health have occurred due to a reduction in poverty and better nutrition and health care, other risks arise. Exposure to chemical, physical and psychosocial hazards in workplaces are now problems, leading to increased chronic illness and mental health problems. Growing health inequalities are also attributable to a widening gap in
the wages and conditions of high-skilled knowledge jobs and low-skilled factory, seasonal and agricultural jobs.

In the 1960s, traffic accidents were already a significant cause of death in Thailand, and today they remain a defining feature of the health transition. In 1999, traffic injury ranked second for males and seventh for females among the top 10 disease burden (Bundhamcharoens et al., 2002). Kjellstrom and Hinde have noted that Thailand’s health transition has led to a significant increase in traffic crash mortality, especially among males. Levels of road accident mortality are now above Australia and Sweden (2006, p. 113). Beyond injuries and death, the environmental burden of automobility in this transition has wider health impacts. The phenomenon of automobility and public health within Thailand’s health transition is explained in detail below, with particular reference to Bangkok, the focus of this thesis.

Thailand, and in the worst case Bangkok, has embraced private motor vehicle transport with quite disastrous consequences for public health. As referred to earlier, the health impacts of extensive automobility can be categorised into three groupings: traffic crashes; vehicle pollution; and physical activity and fitness.

(i) Traffic Crashes

In recent years, there have been on average 13,000 road traffic deaths annually in Thailand (WHO and World Bank, 2004). Economically, the cost of road crashes in Thailand is very pronounced. In the year 2000, road accidents rated second in terms of years of life lost (593,263), coming after HIV. See Table 7.
Table 7: Years of Lost Life of 10 Leading Causes of Mortality, All Ages, 2000
Source: Wibulpolprasert et al. in Luathep and Tanaboriboon, 2005, p. 3414

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health Problem</th>
<th>Years of Lost Life (years)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HIV/AIDS</td>
<td>1,481,685</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road accident</td>
<td>593,263</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paralyze</td>
<td>289,517</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liver cancer</td>
<td>280,771</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>210,235</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injured by others</td>
<td>202,478</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other infection</td>
<td>190,281</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>185,904</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drowning</td>
<td>162,410</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ischemic Heart</td>
<td>161,893</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the most recent study to estimate road crash costs in Thailand, Luathep and Tanaboriboon (2005), focusing on road accidents in the year 2002, looked at seven cost components to determine aggregate national economic losses. These components included: (1) hospital and medical costs; (2) lost output (i.e. lost productivity from people injured or killed); (3) property damage costs (vehicle and road furniture); (4) insurance and administrative costs; (5) emergency medical service cost (e.g. wages of rescue team); (6) police administrative cost; and (7) human cost (emotional and physical pain for victims and families). The authors concluded that for 2002, when all seven costs are
The total economic losses due to road crashes in Thailand are estimated to be THB140,000 million (about US$3,500 million), or 2.56 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2002 (Luathep and Tanaboriboon, 2005, p. 3424). See Table 8.

Table 8: National Economic Losses Due to Road Crashes in Thailand, 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Luathep and Tanaboriboon, 2005, p. 3422</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of casualties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatal casualties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious casualties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slight casualties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All casualties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property damage only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two national holiday periods in Thailand are infamous for their high number of road crash injuries and deaths. They are New Year, and Songkran (Thai New Year, falling in April). Looking at New Year accidents in 2004 and Songkran accidents in 2003, Luathep and Tanaboriboon (2005, p. 3423) determined total economic losses to be THB7487 million and THB5959 million, respectively. See Table 9.
Table 9: Economic Losses due to Road Crashes During Two Holidays
Source: Luathep and Tanaboriboon, 2005, p. 3423

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of casualties</th>
<th>New Year holidays</th>
<th>Songkran holidays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatal casualties</td>
<td>851</td>
<td>559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious casualties</td>
<td>15,874</td>
<td>14,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slight casualties</td>
<td>25,900</td>
<td>23,385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All casualties</td>
<td>42,625</td>
<td>38,277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property damage only accidents</td>
<td>32,119</td>
<td>29,129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total losses (million baht)</td>
<td>7,487</td>
<td>5,959</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ii) Health Impacts of Motor Vehicle Related Air Pollution

Atmospheric pollution is an established health hazard globally. Bangkok suffers its consequences to a grave extent. In 1990, over one million Bangkoksians (out of a total 10 million in the capital’s population) sought treatment for respiratory infections that were directly linked to air pollution (Kenworthy, 1997). Similarly, in Bangkok in the early 1990s prior to the phasing out of lead in petrol in 1996, the concentration of lead in newborn babies was considered two to five times greater than levels deemed dangerous in the US (Kenworthy, 1997, p. 229). High concentrations of lead are recognised by medical scientists as impairing cognitive development in children, with the fear, according to one report, that by
the age of seven, an average Bangkok child’s IQ may have diminished by four points (Kenworthy, 1997). These effects are long lasting and will remain in the affected people throughout their lifetime. In 1997, Kenworthy estimated that particulate matter (PM) in the air may lead to 14,000 deaths per year, and stress derived from stalled traffic may account for over one million cases of nervous dysfunction and anxiety (Kenworthy, 1997). Incomplete fossil-fuel combustion is a significant contributor to air pollution, and is aggravated by traffic congestion and growing numbers of fuel-driven vehicles (Ruchirawat, Navasumrit, Settachan, Tuntaviroon, Buthbumrung, and Sharma, 2005). PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons) and benzene are two carcinogenic and genotoxic pollutants found in atmospheric pollution and pose a hazard when inhaled through contaminated air (Ruchirawat et al., 2005). A recent study of five heavily-congested areas of Bangkok (including three schools) indicates that certain occupational groups, such as traffic policemen and street vendors, are at greatest risk. Bangkok school children were found to be exposed to greater levels of PAHs (five-fold) and benzene (two-fold) than rural school children (Ruchirawat et al., 2005). No level of exposure is considered safe.

A 1998 study entitled “Health Effects of Particulate Matter Air Pollution in Bangkok, Executive Summary” (Pollution Control Department, Bangkok, and World Bank) concluded that in Bangkok “there may be as many as 4,000 to 5,000 premature deaths each year in the metropolitan area attributable to short-term exposures to outdoor airborne PM (assuming a total population of 10 million)” (p. 4). The report authors also found that:

for highly exposed adults who do not spend much time in air-conditioned environments, the difference between the highest and lowest daily PM$_{10}$ concentrations during the winter months ... approximately doubles the probability of having acute respiratory symptoms on a given day. (PCD and World Bank, 1998, pp. 4–5)

Various studies of cities throughout the world have found a correlation between mortality and increases in PM concentrations on a specific day (PCD and World Bank, 1998, p. 7). In Bangkok’s case, the report concludes that “the effects of PM$_{10}$ on daily mortality in Bangkok are statistically significant and are of a
magnitude comparable to or higher than those found in other cities throughout the world" (PCD and World Bank, 1998, p. 9). Additionally, "Statistically significant relationships were also found between PM$_{10}$ and respiratory-related mortality and cardiovascular-related mortality" (PCD and World Bank, 1998, p. 9). The results were similar across age groups. Finally, the report authors analysed data based on hospital admissions in five major Bangkok hospitals from 1992 to 1993. Focusing on respiratory and cardiovascular hospital admissions, across all ages, they found that the relationship between PM$_{10}$ levels and cardiovascular and respiratory hospital admissions was statistically significant. This was after controlling for other factors which could influence daily difference in hospital admissions, such as season, daily temperature, and day of the week (PCD and World Bank, 1998, p. 10).

It is true that over the past decade Thailand has made some good progress with air pollution (PCD, World Bank and United States-Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002). Roadside concentrations of CO, sulphur dioxide (SO$_2$), and oxides of nitrogen (NO$_x$) have been decreasing since 1993 (PCD, World Bank and United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002). Enforcement of emission standards for particular vehicles in 1992 is attributed as the cause, as well as improvements in gasoline quality (PCD, World Bank and United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002, p. 16). It is also encouraging that government measures to limit the use of leaded gasoline have significantly reduced concentrations of lead (Pb) in the air (PCD, World Bank and United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002, p. 16). In 1996, the phasing out of lead in gasoline was completed, such that today Pb concentrations in the air in Bangkok are well below WHO guidelines (PCD, World Bank and United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002). Two-stroke motorcycles are the greatest source of air pollutants in Bangkok, but the implementation of standards for "low-smoke lube oil and emissions" are impacting very positively on air quality. The conversion from two-stroke to four-stroke engines continues.

The report authors conclude that:

Air quality in Bangkok has improved enormously compared with previous decades largely as a result of there being far fewer buses, trucks and
motorcycles emitting smoke. (PCD, World Bank and United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, p. 17).

Despite these advances, levels of transport-related air pollution in Bangkok remain significant and unhealthy. Bangkok residents, as opposed to other Thai citizens, suffer more chronic respiratory diseases (PCD, World Bank and United States–Asia Environmental Partnership). Another report from the Pollution Control Department, entitled the “State of Thailand Pollution Report 2004” (PCD, 2004, p. 29) points out that PM less than 10 microns in diameter (PM$_{10}$) (the most dangerous form as its size makes it easy to inhale) remains above the standard and has been increasing over the previous few years (see also du Pont and Egan, 1997). Especially alongside road corridors in Bangkok, PM concentrations are above standards and, therefore, pose a health risk (PCD, World Bank and United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002). Vehicles are the main source of PM. The PCD report (2004, p. 30) noted that “particulate matter and ozone gas remained the major crisis since both air pollutants have exceeded the standard condition and climbed higher if compared to the previous year”. At air quality monitoring stations at various points in Bangkok, it was observed that throughout 2004 PM averages exceeded the standard 10.6 per cent of the time. This was a clear increase over the figure of 5.0 per cent in 2003 (PCD, 2004, p. 32). Air pollutants have considerable health impacts. Beyond simple irritation, they can cause cardiac problems, as well as acute, long-term impairment of lung function (PCD, World Bank, United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002). Diesel PM emissions are the most serious in Bangkok as they are made up of very fine particles, less that 2.5 microns in diameter (PM$_{2.5}$). These diesel pollutants in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR) emanate principally from diesel-powered vehicles lacking emissions controls. Some sections of the ageing bus fleet and older pick-up trucks are the most serious offenders.

Estimates of the health impacts and costs of PM in the year 2000 have been made for six cities in Thailand. The results for Bangkok, which suffer the consequences of PM the most, appear in Table 10.
More recent research on the effects of PM$_{10}$ in Bangkok, measured over a period of five years, suggest that there is a statistically significant association between daily mortality and daily concentrations of PM$_{10}$. Excess risks from PM$_{10}$ were observed for many of the cardiovascular and—respiratory—disease subclasses of mortality. (Vaciakan, Vajnapoom, and Ostro, 2008, p. 1181)

Noise pollution in urban areas is also considered a stressor which impacts on general well-being. Noise pollution in Bangkok for the period 1997–2004 has varied little, indicating that noise levels at roadsides have remained above standard (PCD, 2004, p. 43). See Figure 4 (PCD, 2004, p. 43). Transport related noise pollution is often seen as a "luxury" problem in developed nations and therefore garners less attention in developing nations, such as Thailand. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that in dense and rapidly motorising cities of the developing world, noise will come to constitute a significant public health issue in future years (GTZ, "Noise and its Abatement", Module 5c, 2004, p. 1).

Scientific research links noise to an array of health effects. These effects include, elevated stress levels, which impacts on cardiovascular and immune systems, and adverse impacts on reading development and language acquisition in children. Researchers also point to higher levels of neurosis and irritability in people exposed to stressful noise levels, leading to a diminished quality of life. At 70 dB(A), noise is considered to be very loud, and Figure 4
confirms that if anything noise pollution has only gotten worse since 1997 (GTZ, "Noise and its Abatement", Module 5c, 2004, p. 1).

Figure 4: The 24-hour Average of Noise Level at Roadsides in Bangkok and Vicinity 1997–2004
Source: State of Thailand Pollution Report 2004, Pollution Control Department, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Thai Government

(iii) Physical Activity and Fitness

Physical activity epidemiologists repeatedly show that inadequate physical activity related to transport usage is also a significant contributor to health problems (Litman, 2003; Frank, Engelke, and Schmid, 2003; Frumkin, 2006; Tudorlocke, Ainsworth, and Popkin, 2001). Today the public health community universally acknowledges the role of physical inactivity as a determinant of poor health status related to the onset of chronic disease, such as cardiovascular disease, as well as premature mortality, and a reduced quality of life (Frank et al., 2003, p. 39). Epidemiological studies have consistently demonstrated the link between mortality over the long run, and sedentary lifestyles (Frank et al., 2003, p. 39). Typical of the assessments, one particular study concluded that “men who engaged in moderate physical activity had a risk of dying that was only 73 per cent of that for the least active group of men in the study” (Leon et al., cited in Frank et al., 2003, p. 42). Additionally, the onset of four chronic
diseases (cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) is closely linked to long-term physical inactivity, as well as other behaviour patterns such as tobacco use and inadequate nutrition (Frank et al., 2003, p. 43). Researchers also note that rising levels of overweight and obesity in many car dependent nations (though reference is made specifically to the US and Australia for example) pose significant and preventable health risks. A sedentary lifestyle alone does not usually cause obesity and overweight, but in combination with a poor diet and other adverse health behaviours, it can confer significant health risks. Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, gallbladder disease, and osteoarthritis are all associated with overweight and obesity (Frank et al., 2003, p. 47). Finally, apart from its role in reducing the risk of premature mortality and chronic disease, physical activity is important in promoting quality of life. According to Frank and colleagues (2003, p. 47), the strength of muscles, healthy joint function, bone density, and more positive mental health are all related to regular physical activity. Sustained physical activity over a lifetime is especially beneficial for the elderly by delaying the onset of chronic disease and disability.

When a large number of trips are taken in cars, rather than by bike or on foot, the positive health impacts (physical exercise) of these two modes of movement are lost. Compared to other Asian cities, the level of walking and cycling in Bangkok is “atypically low” (Kenworthy, 1997, p. 225). Kenworthy attributes this to Bangkok’s pedestrian-unfriendly environment, and a lack of bike lanes and other facilities (1997). Noise and traffic fumes are a strong disincentive to walking in many parts of Bangkok. Instead, many Bangkokians rely on motorcycle taxis to travel to shopping areas and main roads to catch other transport. Walking and cycling are two types of physical activity which are sustainable over the long term and easy to adopt because they are relatively cheap modes of mobility. Given the right built environment and infrastructure, they are utilitarian modes of exercise which can be included in one’s daily activities of commuting, shopping, picking up children, and socialising (Frank et al., 2003, p. 65). Thus, walking and cycling can potentially capture the largest group of people, as they require low levels of exertion and are affordable (Frank et al., 2003, p. 65). Advocating a modal shift to walking and cycling in urban

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environments, Dora and Phillips (2000, pp. 30–31) reported that regular and sustained physical activity can lead to:

- a 50 per cent reduction in the risk of developing coronary heart disease (a similar effect to not smoking)
- a 50 per cent reduction in the risk of developing adult diabetes
- a 50 per cent reduction in the risk of becoming obese
- a 30 per cent reduction in the risk of developing hypertension
- reduced osteoporosis
- relief of symptoms of depression and anxiety
- prevention of falls in the elderly.

People are disinclined to take up physical activity, such as walking and cycling, unless they can do so in an environment which is pleasant. This correlates to clean air and the presence of greenery (Dora and Phillips, 2000). Bangkok’s urban environment is tightly structured due to the prevalence of canals, and is unsuited to a heavy population of vehicles. The resulting traffic congestion, pollution, and lack of walking space, mitigates against walking and cycling and the potential they hold for positive health outcomes. Bangkok’s footpaths are known for their poor quality, which tends to discourage walking for some people. Heat and humidity aggravates an overall unpleasant walking environment (Ross and Punpuing, 2001, p. 46). In Chapters Five and Six I refer to such findings in my own research. People buying cars in Bangkok are able to shelter themselves to some degree from some of the discomforts of Bangkok’s environmental problems. However, as Ross and Poungsomlee (1992, p. 43) note, the cumulative effect of opting for air-conditioned comfort is to collectively exacerbate environmental problems related to traffic and energy consumption, and to adversely impact on other commuters.

Due to a range of reasons outlined in Chapters Three and Four, many cities, including Bangkok, have traditionally privileged motorised transport over non-motorised transport in the form they have taken. Neighbourhoods tend to be scaled to cars, rather than pedestrians and cyclists, and transit systems are not integrated synergistically with non-motorised movement, so that people can walk or cycle to transit stops. In Bangkok, poor walking facilities in many areas
make it difficult for people to walk to transit stops, unless they are quite close. Many rely on motorcycle taxis. The size of the distance one needs to travel and concerns over traffic safety, especially where dedicated bicycle lanes do not exist, as they don’t in Bangkok, are both very important considerations for people (Frank et al., 2003, p. 75). Among my research participants, I encountered only one individual who regularly cycled in Bangkok, even though he found it was dangerous. Other participants unanimously discounted the idea of cycling, saying it was too dangerous in Bangkok’s traffic.

2.3 The Public Health Effects of Automobility are Set to Worsen: The Urgency to Act

Registrations of private passenger cars (fewer than seven people) across Thailand have risen progressively since 1999, according to the latest data from the Thai Ministry of Transport. Table 11 indicates this.

Table 11: Total Number of “New” Vehicle Registrations Under the Motor Vehicle Act 1979 (Unit: Thousand Vehicles)


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private vehicle (no more than 7-seater)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private vehicle (more than 7-seater)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private truck</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>---------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
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<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorcycle</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>683</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1,187</td>
<td>1,643</td>
<td>1,944</td>
<td>2,012</td>
<td>2,002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other vehicle</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>1,132</td>
<td>1,564</td>
<td>2,134</td>
<td>2,549</td>
<td>2,691</td>
<td>2,679</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sales figures also point to a progressive rise. The sale of private domestic vehicles in Thailand reached a record high in 2008 of 239,954 according to the latest figures from the Thailand Automotive Institute (http://www.thaiauto.or.th). The first half of 2009, however, shows a decline on the first half of 2008 in terms of private car sales and particularly in the sale of one tonne pick-up trucks. This has been attributed to the global financial crisis and decreasing agricultural commodity prices limiting the ability of farmers to purchase pick-ups (http://www.thaiauto.or.th). Setting aside the economic crisis, it is apparent that Thais continue to pursue private vehicle ownership in ever-greater numbers. See Table 14 in the Chapter Two Appendix for vehicle sales figures.

Forecasts have been made of health costs associated with PM10 concentrations for Bangkok from 2001 to 2020 according to various scenarios (see Figure 5) (PCD, World Bank, United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002, p. 24). At the lowest rate, which assumes a two per cent annualised national GDP growth rate, and a 1.5 per cent annual GPP growth rate for Bangkok, health costs would decline slightly until 2009, and increase gradually after that. The reason for this is that over the initial period the declining rates of PM are higher than Bangkok’s GDP growth rates. Post 2009, the diminishing rates of PM are outstripped by income growth and growth in the value of "statistical life" (PCD, World Bank, United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002, p. 24). As those bodies responsible for this forecast point out, a reduction in traffic volumes, especially during peak hours, would be necessary to avoid this potential health damage and associated economic costs (PCD, World Bank, United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002, p. 24).
Recent data collected for a single but common group in Bangkok—roadside street vendors—highlights the severity of the traffic-related health impacts. Kongtip et al., (2008) found that compared to residential street vendors, roadside vendors suffered a significantly higher incidence of respiratory and other health symptoms. They concluded that continued exposure to traffic-related air pollutants, and a lack of adequate rest may translate into chronic symptoms or diseases in the future, including cancer. Table 12 indicates the greater odds of roadside vendors developing respiratory and other health symptoms compared to residential street vendors.
Table 12: The Adjusted Odds Ratio with 95% Confidence Interval (CI) of a Series of Daily Reported Symptoms was Estimated for Roadside and Residential Areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom of Deteriorated Health/Well-being</th>
<th>Odds</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper Respiratory Symptom</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>2.71–4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose Congestion</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>1.97–3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sore Throat</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>3.15–6.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.90–1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Respiratory Symptom</td>
<td>7.82</td>
<td>6.21–9.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cough</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>2.53–5.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phlegm</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>5.61–8.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other Health Symptoms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Odds</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headache</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>1.75–3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fever</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.02–2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye Irritation</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.85–4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dizziness</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.97–2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weakness</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.52–3.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kongtip et al., 2008

Just as extensive motor vehicle reliance has contributed to climate change through exacerbating global warming, so climate change in turn will worsen living conditions.

Over recent years, spikes in the price of petrol, and the politicisation of the issue of climate change and global warming have turned world attention to the issue of energy consumption. Global warming is a phenomenon which occurs when greenhouse gas emissions are trapped in the atmosphere causing a rise in global temperatures. Thailand is especially vulnerable when oil prices rise, as 95 per cent of its oil is imported. According to Suthakij Nuntavorakarn, an
energy researcher at the Health Systems Research Institute in Bangkok, the
Thai demand for oil is “addictive”, (“Critics say Thai energy plan lacks the whole
demand”, 2005).

Thailand ratified the Kyoto Protocol in 2002 and is obliged under the United
Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to monitor its
GHG (Greenhouse Gas) emissions by establishing inventories of its emissions
(PCD, World Bank, United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002, p. 20).
Changing weather patterns and forecast rising sea levels caused by GHGs may
significantly affect Thailand with its vast coastline. Already in 2004, the west
coast of Thailand suffered the effects of a tsunami originating in the Indian
Ocean, leading to widespread damage, and significant loss of life. Bangkok is
located in a low-lying coastal area, and for that reason is especially vulnerable
(PCD, World Bank, United States–Asia Environmental Partnership, 2002, p. 20).

In 1998, the energy sector in Thailand, constituting mostly fuel consumed for
transportation, was the greatest contributor to climate change, accounting for
51 per cent of total emissions. Transport relies on the consumption of fossil
fuels, the emissions from which constitute GHGs. It is forecast that CO₂
emissions in Thailand may increase by 3.6 per cent per year between 2010 and
2020 (PCD, World Bank, United States–Asia Environmental Partnership,
Table 13: Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Sector, 1998


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greenhouse Gas Emissions Sources</th>
<th>CO₂—Equivalent Emissions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Cg) Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total net national emissions</td>
<td>297,611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Energy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Fuel combustion</td>
<td>144,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Fugitive emissions</td>
<td>7,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Industrial process</td>
<td>10,752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Agriculture</td>
<td>69,214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Land use change and forestry</td>
<td>50,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Wastes</td>
<td>15,026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.4 Conclusion

This PhD project is propelled by the magnitude of the public health impact of private motor vehicle transport in Thailand. A more sustainable, economic and just approach to health which strikes an ecologically sound balance is necessary in Thailand. Bangkokians suffer physically and mentally due to the Western path they have followed towards motorisation. Ashton (1997) has written of this path in general. His words resonate for Bangkok, now dubbed the “Los Angeles of the East”.

In accepting this (i.e. negative impact of motorisation), we are not only accepting the tragic medical consequences of physical and mental harm, but we are failing to optimise what has occasionally been and what can be
a pinnacle of civilization. Indeed, the city is, and should be, at the heart of “civilization”. (Ashton, 1997, p. 166)

Thailand has made limited advances through its banning of leaded petrol in 1996, and its movement away from two-stroke polluting motor cycles. In 1999, two new SkyTrain lines opened adding a significant, efficient and comfortable mass transit alternative to the inner core of the city. In May 2009, two new stations were added to the SkyTrain route, extending its reach across the Chao Praya River. An underground subway line added to this expansion of public transport in 2004. However, in the context of increasing car ownership and the profound impact of climate change from carbon emissions, the urgency to act and control car reliance in Bangkok is great. As an editorial from the Bangkok Post (“Trouble breathing in the ‘city of life’”, 2006) depicts it:

It is time to stop treating symptoms and concentrate on the root cause, which is the motor vehicle itself. We can and have banned cigarettes from public places, but ignored the far larger problem of the car plague, associated air pollution, and getting non-essential vehicles out of city centres. If people can be cured of their addiction to polluting motor vehicles and weaned onto healthier alternatives, the reward will be cleaner air and better health for all.

This chapter has argued that car dependence impacts negatively on health outcomes due to car fatalities and injuries, the air and noise pollution it produces, and the physically inactive lifestyles it encourages. It has produced evidence demonstrating that Thailand, and especially its car saturated capital, Bangkok, bears a significant and costly health burden owing to its extensive reliance on private automobile transport. The public health argument for a modal shift to more physically active commuting is convincing. Yet this message needs to infiltrate collective thinking at several levels in order for it to be translated into action. Bangkok citizens, policymakers, and the decision makers in transport need to shift their perceptions of the motor vehicle and understand that for all its convenience, the car is actually making them ill.
Appendix: Chapter Two

Table 14: Vehicle Sales in Thailand

Source: http://www.thaiauto.or.th/research/documents/status09/status0907.pdf
Accessed: September 30, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private Car</td>
<td>209,110</td>
<td>188,211</td>
<td>191,763</td>
<td>182,767</td>
<td>239,954</td>
<td>138,569</td>
<td>117,657</td>
<td>-15.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car for business</td>
<td>36,038</td>
<td>40,163</td>
<td>36,907</td>
<td>42,619</td>
<td>41,033</td>
<td>24,499</td>
<td>30,897</td>
<td>26.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick Up 1 tonne</td>
<td>368,991</td>
<td>469,657</td>
<td>449,796</td>
<td>405,865</td>
<td>334,282</td>
<td>203,178</td>
<td>126,030</td>
<td>-37.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11,967</td>
<td>6,401</td>
<td>3,695</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>626,026</td>
<td>703,432</td>
<td>682,161</td>
<td>631,251</td>
<td>615,269</td>
<td>366,246</td>
<td>274,584</td>
<td>-25.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase/Decrease</td>
<td>17.41%</td>
<td>12.36%</td>
<td>-3.02%</td>
<td>-7.46%</td>
<td>-2.53%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Three:
The Penetration of Global Consumer Capitalism in Thailand: The Cultural Context for Automobility

3.1 Preamble

Chapter One set out the terms for my study of automobility in Bangkok: to understand how the entrenchment of global capitalism in Thailand has provided the material, but particularly the affective, conditions for the embrace of private automobile transport. My conceptual overview (Figure 2, Chapter One) illustrates how global capitalism has insinuated two fundamental social processes into Thailand: the urbanisation of Bangkok, and consumerism. This chapter will now elucidate these global capitalist manifestations by firstly explaining Thailand’s dramatic socio-economic transformation, especially post World War II. It was this transformation which firmly established Bangkok as the nation’s global capital, and the epicentre for the absorption and diffusion of global consumer trends. I will then move on to discuss the sociology of consumerism in order to illuminate how consumption of cars in Bangkok is a social expression of personal identity and relative social position. The centrality of cars to personal and social identity will be confirmed by the findings to follow in Chapters Five and Six. I also briefly explain some of the enduring markers of Thai ness and how they interact with global cultural trends to strengthen the status attributes of the automobile in Thai culture. This interaction is also captured in my conceptual overview (Figure 2, Chapter One). It is the confluence of global consumer culture and the specific hallmarks of Thai ness which, I argue, have endowed the car with significant status in Thai society and explain how the car is consumed for symbolic reasons, as much as for its functionality.
3.2 The Age of Globalisation

3.2.1 What is Globalisation?

There is general consensus that globalisation is both an economic and cultural process and that consumerism is the defining feature of global capitalist culture (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005; Sklair, 2002; Clammer, 2003; Scholte, 2005; Wilson, 2004; The UN, 2003). Sklair captures this, arguing that understanding globalisation involves understanding two phenomena: “the emergence of a global economy based on new systems of production, finance and consumption driven by globalizing transnational corporations (TNC)” and “the idea of a global culture, focused on transformations in the global scope of particular types of TNC, those who own and control the mass media, notably television channels and the transnational advertising agencies” (2002, p. 36). This global culture, he points out, is responsible for the spread of particular consumption patterns and an “ideology of consumerism” globally (Sklair, 2002, p. 36). The UN's World Youth Report (2003) defines global culture specifically as a consumer culture in which consumer goods link individuals worldwide through similar consumption patterns. It points out that economic and cultural processes are indivisible. The UN (2003) also comments on the political implications of this particular intertwining, arguing that global culture is essentially divisive as it reinforces socio-economic differences between those with the resources to enjoy the goods of this consumer culture, and those without. This idea of socio-economic inequality will be elaborated on in Chapter Seven, when the consumption of automobiles and social exclusion in Bangkok are discussed.

Communication mediums are essential for the spread of global consumer culture, as Scholte points out: “A great deal of globality is manifested through communications, that is, exchanges of ideas, information, images, signals, sounds and text” (2005, p. 67). The images of consumer products are transmitted globally via a variety of media. In this sense, globalisation is increasingly synonymous with supraterritorial processes and connections (Scholte, 2005; Clammer, 2003), with the result that cities become less distinctive spatialised concentrations in a particular geographical locality and
3.2.2 The Globalisation of the Thai Economy

Since the nineteenth century, global political and economic forces have infiltrated Thailand (Uhlin, 2002, p. 152). The transnational circulation of products, people and money have long been a feature of the country, with travelling Chinese vendors traditionally constituting the main commercial influence penetrating Thai life (Wilson, 2004, p. 18). Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, however, Thailand was:

- profoundly influenced and constrained by Europe (England and France in particular), Japan (which occupied the country during World War II), and later the United States. King Mongkut (1824–1851) was known for his particular interest in western scientific knowledge and his questioning of some tenets of Buddhist cosmology. (Tanabe and Keyes, 2002, p. 8)
- His signing of the Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855 marked a significant reorientation towards the West and away from China. However, it was the reign of his son, King Chulalongkorn, from 1868 to 1910 which drew Siam, as Thailand was then known, closer to the West. Chulalongkorn was regarded as a reformer and travelled extensively, making at least two visits to Europe from which he drew ideas for the reform of Siam. Askew (2002, p. 34) points out that “Bangkok’s emergence as a centre of modernity under Chulalongkorn was a direct result of the monarchy’s engagement with the western-dominated cultural and technological order of the nineteenth century”. He describes Chulalongkorn as the “supreme consumer of modern artefacts from the West”, responsible also for introducing the first motor cars into Thailand (Askew, 2002, p. 34).

The 1960s marked a significant new phase in global capitalism, and drew the Thai economy further into the global economic system. It was in this decade that the electronic revolution began, greatly enhancing the productivity of capitalist processes of production, marketing and distribution of goods. At the same time, the rapid globalisation of the mass media ensured the diffusion of images subtly and not so subtly bidding consumers to seek fulfilment in material...
goods (Sklair, 2002, p. 108). Two of the principal ways in which capitalism has propelled globalisation relate to the heightened mobility of assets, and the expansion of markets. Scholte points out that “transplanetary markets” are possible because technological advances in communication, global management, transport, and data processing have been enabled by capitalism. In addition, capitalism has encouraged global sourcing as firms transfer production to countries offering the lowest costs and the most ready access to resources (2002, p. 138).

These two defining features of global capitalism—urbanisation and consumerism—which became much more pronounced from the 1960s onwards, also transformed the Thai economy, beginning especially in the 1970s. The liberalisation of trade and finance allowed Thailand to take advantage of these phenomena and firmly anchored the country within the global economy (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 199). From the 1970s onwards, and especially in the booming 1980s and 1990s (until the 1997 economic crisis), Thailand’s entrenchment within the global capitalist economic system was confirmed by a decisive break with its agrarian past, and a clear orientation to export manufacturing. The automobile industry, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Four, benefited greatly from elite support for the new orientation, and became a centrepiece of Thailand’s political economy. As transnational automobile firms both strove to expand their markets and source cheaper sites for production, Thailand became very attractive, especially following the deregulation of the auto industry by the Thai Government in 1991. The US, but especially Japanese car manufacturers, intensified their operations in the country (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 204).

The generic usage of the term globalisation often connotes Westernisation and a subsequent homogenisation of cultures worldwide. However, it is wrong in Thailand’s case to assume that globalisation has been synonymous with Westernisation alone. Solely in economic terms, Japan—one of the new Asian Tigers in the latter half of the twentieth century—made very considerable investments in Thailand, most notably in automobile assembly. The Japanese had invested in Thailand since the 1960s, but in the course of the 1980s

First thing in the morning,
Grasp White Lion toothpaste and enjoy brushing teeth,
Then make some tea with National electric kettle
And smooth down hair with Tanjo pomade
... Wear a Seiko watch when leaving home.
Listen to government news broadcasts on Sanyo radio.
Drive a Toyota to pick up girlfriend.

(Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 202)

Mirroring trends internationally, but especially those in Japan and other East Asian societies, golf emerged as a recreational form attracting considerable status. The larger golf courses were constructed from Japanese investment (Askew, 2002, pp. 78–79). Thailand was well positioned at this time to take advantage of the boom of the East Asian “Tiger” economies and aspired to emulate Japan’s economic success. In the early 1980s, “Thailand lurched into the ‘Asian model’ of export manufacturing”, so that between 1984 and 1989 there was an average 24 per cent increase in exports (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 203). At the same time, the East Asian Tigers, led initially by Japan and followed by Taiwan and South Korea, relocated great numbers of manufacturing plants throughout South-East Asia and China, leading to a great surge in FDI in Thailand, especially originating from Japan (MacIntyre, 1993, pp. 261–265). After 1987, Japan moved to become Thailand’s largest source of FDI (Askew, 2002, p. 70).
3.3 Urbanisation

In the year 1900, only 10 per cent of the world’s population were urban dwellers (160 million people). This grew to 34 per cent by 1950 (730 million) and 50 per cent in 2007 (3.2 billion) (Landry, 2007, p. 22). Where once the cities of developed countries were consistently the largest in the world, there has been a decisive shift to developing countries. In 1900, all of the largest cities of the world were in the North. Today, the only cities of that hemisphere that are among the top 10 largest cities globally are New York and Los Angeles, and by 2015, none of the top 10 will be in the North (Landry, 2007, p. 22). This concentration of the population within urban centres poses many questions about the future of urban life, how best to manage resources, preserve the environment, provide the optimum conditions for the greatest well-being of individuals, and how to provide mobility for residents in an equitable, healthy and sustainable manner. The urbanisation of Bangkok, as is the case in many other megacities, has for decades neither addressed the challenge of mobility satisfactorily, nor equitably. Yet, signs of change have emerged.

3.3.1 Bangkok: The Primate City

Large urban centres, such as Bangkok, are the amphitheatres of globalisation and exemplars of the environmental, social, economic and, not least, mobility issues facing an urbanising planet. They are the sites in which consumption patterns and new fashions and tastes are sedimented through the interplay of global forces. These urban cultures embody globalisation itself (Clammer, 2003, pp. 403–404). Thailand’s dramatic transition from an agrarian-based economy to an industrial capitalist one, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, decisively established Bangkok as a primate city: that is, a large metropolis which alone dominates the entire country. Various scholars (Ross and Pongsonlee, 1992; Askew, 2002; Baker and Pasuk, 2001) have argued that Bangkok is the fulcrum of Thailand’s entrenchment within the global economy. Ross and Pongsonlee (1992, p. 11) explain how primate cities commonly typify urbanisation throughout South-East Asia and are characterised by a rapid growth in rural to urban migration. They argue that three factors
explain Bangkok’s rise to the status of Thailand’s major city: its function as the centre of the nation’s economic activities; its geographical location; and its role as the seat of social services and political and administrative power. The most salient feature of Thailand’s industrialisation was the inexorable rise of Bangkok as a mega-city, with Askew claiming that “Bangkok ... functions as the pre-eminent symbol of modernity in Thai society—the crucible where ‘the new’ is embraced, synthesised and projected” (2002, p. 101), a view shared by Zukin who similarly argues that cities diffuse tastes (1995, p. 260). Bangkok’s urbanisation has meant that “the city has become a focal place for the diffusion of imitative lifestyles and consumerism found in Western society” (Ross and Pongsonme, 1992, p. 11). It is the twin and co-dependent phenomena—urbanisation and consumerism—which provided the conditions for the uptake of automobility as a dominant mode of transport in Bangkok.

3.3.2 The 1940s to 1960s: The Entrenchment of Capitalism and the Emergence of Automobility

It was in the decades after World War II, but particularly from the late 1950s, that Thailand experienced a dramatic socio-economic shift, and large-scale urbanisation. The industrialisation of the economy, through more intensive adoption of capitalist systems and greater articulation with the global economy, was driven by the Thai Government and local Thai businesses (Wilson, 2004, p. 18). What had previously been an agrarian-based economy was transformed into an export-orientated industrial economy, with Bangkok at its centre (Askew, 2002, p. 49). Baker and Pasuk (2005, p. 140) have labelled the immediate post-World War II years from the mid-1940s to the 1960s as the “American Era”, reflecting the US’s ideological and economic impact on Thailand throughout this period.

The US’s primary motivation for seizing on Thailand at this time was ideological. Hedging against the perceived threat of communist influence from Thailand’s neighbours to the north (China) and to the east (Laos), the US wanted to “consolidate Thailand’s membership of the ‘free world’ camp in the Cold War” (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 140). In July 1953, the US Administration formally proposed “developing Thailand as an ‘anti-communist bastion’ in order to
extend US influence—and local acceptance of it—throughout the whole of Southeast Asia” (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 146). This development meant, of course, adopting the economic principles of private capitalism in order to spur economic growth (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 140). Capitalism is universally defined as an economic system founded on private ownership of the means of production and the generation of profit. Scholte (2005, p. 137) claims “Capitalism characterizes a social order where economic activity is oriented first and foremost to the accumulation of surplus”. Wilson describes capitalism as “an economic system oriented to ‘the market’ (ultimately a global market) that uses money to measure value, pay people for work or debts, and conduct exchange” (2004, p. 19). The penetration of the liberal market economy into Thailand marked the end of an era in which small-scale agriculture defined both the Thai economy and Thai society. Agriculture was commercialised and smallholders were exposed to the market. “Against this backdrop, the old Thai social order faded into history” (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 140). In an authoritarian political climate, dominated by ruling generals, the chiefs of business conglomerates and bureaucrats, American development policies were pushed through, such that by the 1950s Baker and Pasuk claim “Thailand had become a US client-state under military rule” (2005, p. 146). The size of American military aid was staggering, exceeding the Thai military budget two and a half times, and greatly enhancing the hold of the army over the country (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 146). When General Sarit came to power in a swift coup in September 1957, the US Government welcomed him with US$20 million in economic aid (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 148). Askew (2002, pp. 53-54) points out that Sarit’s “revolutionary” dictatorial regime avowed a commitment to a programme of economic and social development (patthana), which aimed to unify the nation against the dangers of communism and to advance modernisation. It was Sarit who imported Western technocrats into key advisory roles within the Thai Administration and established the National Economic Development Board (NEDB) and the Board of Investment (BOI) (Askew, 2002, p. 53).
The transformation of Bangkok was marked by significant in-migration from rural areas and the suburbanisation of the landscape. A small urban elite and middle-class began to appear in the 1950s. The consumption levels of these new groups increased markedly over the decade (Ingram, 1971, p. 226). At the same time, the consumption of private cars in Bangkok and neighbouring Thonburi grew by a dramatic 650 per cent in the 10 years from 1947 to 1957 (Manop, 1973, p. 17). From the end of the 1950s, Thailand maintained an average seven per cent per annum growth rate, among the fastest rates in the developing world (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 166). The physical form of Bangkok began to resemble that of a modern motorised Western city, especially under the influence of the "Greater Bangkok Plan 2533" created by an American consultant firm in 1960 (Askew, 2002, p. 54).

As car ownership grew, new suburbs appeared with cinemas, schools and shopping centres, and significant status was attached to foreign products, especially American ones. The population of Bangkok swelled in the 1960s, growing from 1.8 million to three million (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 162). As Baker and Pasuk argue, "The American era redefined what was modern and aspirational, especially for the urban middle class" (2005, pp. 149–150). By 1960, the paving over of many canals meant automobility had overtaken canal-based transport and Bangkok had already become a city whose transport infrastructure was based on roads (Askew, 2002, p. 54). American aid was also directed to highway construction, facilitating the large migration of people from the rural countryside to work in factories, as construction labourers, in shops and restaurants, and as domestic servants in the burgeoning metropolis of Bangkok (Askew, 2002, p. 56).

In summary, the influence of America both economically and culturally during this period played a significant part in the early establishment of private automobile-based transport in Bangkok. Automobility became further entrenched as the economy truly globalised in the decades to follow and other nations, most notably Japan, invested heavily in automobile manufacturing in Thailand.
3.3.3 The 1970s to 1990s

The most marked feature of this economic transformation and process of urbanisation, and an essential prerequisite for the establishment of automobility, was the growth of a new and upwardly mobile middle-class in Bangkok. It was this class who had the money to purchase cars, both as a necessary means to navigate burgeoning suburbia and the commute to white collar jobs, but also to demonstratively express their new socio-economic status. The reach of tertiary education spread so that the numbers of those holding tertiary qualifications grew 20-fold between 1970 and 2000 (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 207). In the 1960s, more than 80 per cent of the population identified themselves as farmers, but “by the 1990s … society was differentiated by occupation, wealth, and lifestyles that were without precedent” (Tanabe and Keyes, 2002, p. 18). For five out of six consecutive years at the apex of the economic boom in the 1980s and 1990s, a million Thais annually moved from work in agriculture to industrial and service occupations (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 209). Many of the new middle-class moved into prestigious housing estates (mubanchatsan) which had began to appear throughout Bangkok, and which could often only be reached by private car. Architecturally, these estates captured aspirational imaginaries of status and modernity in Western-inspired Tudor or Californian-Spanish design (Askew, 2002, p. 77). They co-existed with luxurious shopping malls which marked the urban landscape as monoliths of consumerism and middle-class affluence. Chua and Tan point out that throughout Asia’s burgeoning metropolises in the 1990s, housing estates, shopping malls, private cars and mobile phones were an iconic package of status and new consumer purchasing power (1999, pp. 145–149). Askew notes, “Huge mall complexes served an expanding middle-class population whose lifestyle patterns depended on the automobile and conspicuous consumption” (2002, p. 82). By the mid-1980s in Bangkok, there were seven shopping centres, 39 department store branches, and 17 more malls in the process of construction (Wilson, 2004, p. 108).

The authorized sprawl of shopping complexes based on speculative investments sculpted a new geography of the city oriented around
commercial venues and brought a shopping complex within reach of all Bangkok residents with some cash to spend. (Wilson, 2004, p. 108)

The economic boom is routinely depicted as a Bangkok boom as it was the middle-classes of Bangkok who benefited from it the most (Askew, 2002, p. 90). However, Mulder points out that modernity and globality had not erased the vestiges of an older Thai order steeped in traditional ideas (1997, p. 10). Cosmopolitanism may be the universal hallmark of middle-class urbanity, but in Bangkok it was inflected by a resilient Thainess which often deferred to traditional hierarchies and modes of thinking. “Presenting one’s social mask”, for example, endured alongside this new cosmopolitanism (Mulder, 1997, p. 306). Mulder concludes that the members of this new urban middle-class were “mass educated, consumer culture oriented, socially inattentive and interested in personal progress rather than political problems” (2000, p. 124).

Television dramas sprang up around themes reflecting these new urban lifestyles. The dominant leitmotif of family dramas, for example, focused on pursuing the path to riches while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of one’s soul. Even the settings for these dramas became global, and were played out in glamorous locations such as London and Monaco (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 223).

The 1980s and 1990s (until the 1997 economic crisis) were known as the “boom years”. The prevalence of agriculture in the economy had begun to wane, and from 1984 was overtaken by industry in terms of its contribution to GDP (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 212). By the year 2000, only 10 per cent of GDP and seven per cent of exports were provided by agriculture (Baker and Pasuk, 2005, p. 212). The manufacturing of electronics, shoes, clothes and processed food from the mid-1980s to the 1990s reshaped the Thai economy so that its growth was among the fastest in the world (Wilson, 2004, p. 104). Mulder argues that these boom years “impelled Thai society into the future leaving its ‘old’ moorings in a patrimonial ‘bureaucratic polity’ that lorded it over a mainly agricultural society behind” (1997, p. 16).

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the absolute size of the economy (GDP) grew five-fold (Baker and Pasuk, 2001, p. 202). Mass society emerged at
this time as technological advances in communications technologies, the
spread of the mass media, and new roads and transport led to a time–space
compression drawing Thais ever closer together. Between 1980 and 1990, the
Japanese Government funded the electrification of rural Thailand so that TV
stations could extend their reach and promote consumer durables nationally
(Baker and Pasuk, 2005, pp. 222–223). The spread of the mass media is an
essential element of economic and cultural globalisation, as I have explained in
the preceding section. As such, this was a time when Thailand was drawn
decisively into the orbit of global culture and the global consumer goods it
offered, including automobiles. Perhaps it was no accident that Japan, a nation
whose automobile production operations were extensive in Thailand, funded the
electrification of the countryside. A TV in every living room may mean a Toyota
in more driveways.

Baker and Pasuk argue that “Four things transformed the Thai village’s relations
with the outside world: paved roads, tour buses, television sets, and two-stroke
Japanese motorcycles” (2005, p. 221). These motorcycles, which grew in sales
from 50,000 per year in the mid-1970s to two million per year prior to the 1997
economic crisis, drew rural Thais out of their villages, connecting them to the
rest of the nation and the market (2005, p. 222). A motorcycle this year could
mean a Toyota the next.

In Bangkok, the local government continued to invest in road building and
ignored substantial investments in mass transit. Freeways, overpasses, and
tollways ironically became monuments to the nation’s economic progress, but in
reality fragmented the landscape, subdivided communities, and had no impact
on reducing traffic congestion, which by 1993 was declared a national crisis
(Askew, 2002, pp. 83–84). Askew adds that this concentration on road
infrastructure “created a two-tiered transport system reflecting class differences
in the population and the dominance of the elite and middle class transport
preferences in policy considerations” (2002, p. 84). Transport injustice became
a further marker of socio-economic disparities, privileging those able to afford
cars over the many who could not. The majority had no choice but to navigate
the metropolis on a hopelessly inadequate public transport system, dominated
by buses which were increasingly stalled in the traffic gridlock created by the more privileged car owners. As already prefaced, I return to the theme of socio-economic inequalities and automobility in Chapter Seven, both in general and by referring to my own findings in Bangkok.

The boom years ended with a dramatic drop in the value of the Thai baht in 1997, precipitating a widespread economic crisis throughout the Asian region. Thailand’s economy had been growing faster than any economy in the world, and suddenly it also became the centre of the Asian economic crisis (Reynolds, 2002, p. 308). A number of the newly rich, or those who had gotten into significant debt to purchase the pre-eminent symbol of Bangkok wealth and status—a Mercedes Benz—were forced to sell their beloved cars at a considerable loss (Reynolds, 2002, p. 309). It is logical at this point to discuss the phenomenon which had so insistently captured the hearts and minds of Thais throughout the boom years: consumerism. It was this force which, among others, served to embed automobility in Bangkok.

3.4 Consumerism

In the previous section I explained Thailand’s socio-economic transformation, with particular emphasis on the urbanisation of Bangkok and its establishment as a primate city. Bangkok became the economic epicentre of the nation, and the home of a new suburbanised middle-class whose leitmotif was consumerism. In this section, I will initially discuss the triangular relationship between globalisation, urbanisation and consumerism, and then discuss the different stages in the development of a consumer culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. An overview of key theoretical explanations of consumerism and its manifestation throughout Asia, and in Thailand specifically, will help to explain the symbolic appeal of the automobile in Bangkok, and illuminate the findings to follow in Chapters Five and Six.

3.4.1 Globalisation, Urbanisation and Consumerism

The intersection of the forces of globalisation, urbanisation and consumerism are powerful predictors of the role of consumerism in daily life. The spread of
global capitalism has led to a progressive concentration of people within cities worldwide. Globalisation is not unique to the twentieth or twenty-first century, but as Harvey (1999, p. 421) points out, “what is currently important is to understand its contemporary processes, especially as they impact on urbanisation, and indeed how they create the massive urbanisation now experienced by many developing societies”.

The globalisation of the capitalist economic system not only explains the proliferation of increasingly large urban centres, each acting as nodes in a global marketplace of economic transactions, but also the diffusion of consumerism as a way of life. According to Scholte (2005, pp. 164–165), the intimate relationship between consumerism and globalisation is based on three factors. Firstly, the principal consumer goods are transnational; for example, Sony electronics, cars, and Barbie dolls. Secondly, the technology which has enabled the intense globalisation of recent decades is often the focus of consumer desire itself, such as air travel, the mass media and TV programs. Finally, the invitation to indulge desires, on which consumerism depends, is often played out in global contexts, through transnational mass media such as television, radio and international magazines, and latterly through offshore call centres, cable television and online shopping. Although globalisation creates supraterritorial spaces and transnational linkages, it is in the urban centres which have grown with globalisation that the forces of consumerism are generated, ritualised and played out. Mass society concentrated in urban centres exposes individuals to a vast array of consumer goods. Zukin and Maguire (2004, p. 190) point out that urbanisation is one of the essential structural changes necessary for the development of a consumer society. Miles and Miles (2004, p. 11) underline this by arguing that “The city is the main arena within which desires are stimulated. The city legitimises consumerism as a way of life”.

The study of consumerism and its relationship to urbanisation supersedes previous modernist visions of social life as being determined by people’s relationship to production. In the postmodern city, it is instead the consumption of goods and services which has become the cultural touchstone in people’s
lives. Jayne (2006, pp. 57–58) points out that “the city, which historically was politically, economically, socially and spatially organised around production, is now said to be underpinned by consumption”. As such, urban life is increasingly aestheticised, so that people’s experience of the city transcends its physicality. “The city is an emotional experience, as well as an architectural one” (Miles and Miles, 2004, p. 6). Where once functionality and mass production determined the configuration of modern cities, in postmodern cities image and appearance mediate people’s experience of urban life (Jayne, 2006, p. 58). Clammer (2003, p. 404) similarly points out that the propagation of images is as central to urban cultures as is the manufacture of products. The ubiquitous imagery of cars in Bangkok, which I will illustrate in the next chapter, when I discuss the cultural construction of automobility, exemplifies this. Now I will turn to a discussion of consumerism, a field of epistemology which grew rapidly in the latter quarter of the twentieth century, in an attempt to understand how the pervasiveness of consumption mediated people’s experience of daily life and textured their identities.

3.4.2 The Sociology of Consumerism

The sociology of consumerism has attracted greater attention in recent decades, especially since the 1970s. The reach of global capitalism was so vast that the study of consumption required differentiation from a focus on production (Beng-Huat, 2000, p. 3). Scholars (Campbell, 1995; Featherstone, 1991; Sklair, 2002; Miles and Miles, 1998; McCracken, 1990; Urry, 1995; Chua, 2000) have increasingly focused on the act of consuming as more than “the selection, purchase, use, reuse and disposal of goods and services” (Campbell, 1995, p. 104), and have instead turned their attention to understanding consumption as a social act. Miles (1998, p. 4) made the distinction between consumption and consumerism, arguing that while consumption is a mere economic transaction involving the purchase of goods and services, “consumerism is a way of life. From this point of view, consumerism is the cultural expression and manifestation of the apparently ubiquitous act of consumption”. Miles (1998) has led scholars to investigate how the cultural practice of consumerism systematically structures social lives in capitalist
societies. He argues that the ubiquity of consumerism, its ritualised practices, and its seamless role in routine daily life are what demands attention. While not morally condemning consumerism, he argues that its apparently “inconsequential” place in people’s lives renders it an important field of study (1998, p. 5). At the same, Miles argues that consumerism is based on the “illusion” of freedom, when in fact “such freedoms are inevitably constructed and constrained” (1998, p. 5). I will return to this theme of the “consuming paradox” in Chapter Six.

In this context, the study of the car is worthy of attention. Car consumption in Bangkok has, over several decades, become a fairly routinised practice where money is available to individuals. It has for many years also been seen as inconsequential. However, growing awareness of the public health ramifications (as explained in Chapter Two) of extensive automobility in Bangkok, suddenly cast a different light upon the apparent inconsequential nature of car consumption. Acting on this awareness demands fresh understandings of the drivers of this consumption, which is what this thesis aims to do. Miles differentiates consumption from consumerism by arguing that consumerism is “psycho-social”. He points out:

Consumerism can be defined as a psycho-social expression of the intersection between the structural and the individual in the realm of consumption. The consuming experience is psycho-social in the sense that it represents a bridge that links the individual and society. (Miles, 1998, p. 5)

In this sense he is interested in “the interaction between the personal appeal and the ideological power of consumerism” (Miles, 1998, p. 5). I concur with this conceptualisation of consumerism, and in the case of the automobile in Bangkok am seeking to understand how car consumption is a psycho-social expression of Thais’ relationship to the culture of global capitalism. In this instance, the “individual” is the Thai car consumer embodying the enduring attributes of Thainess, while the “structural” is the overarching economic and cultural system of global capitalism permeating Thailand. The interaction of these two elements generates an emotional response to auto ownership. It is
this psycho-social emotional response which I will illuminate in my findings and discussion in Chapters Five and Six.

3.4.2.1 Fordism

The pervasiveness of consumption is unique to the twentieth century, but became especially diffuse with the expansion of the working-classes after World War II who had a surplus income with which to buy goods and services (Miles, 1998, pp. 6-7). In the post-war years, Fordism (1940s to 1960s) emerged as a system of mass production and mass consumption originating with the ideas of the American industrialist Henry Ford. The foundation of this system was standardisation of process engineering entailing standardised manufacturing processes, components, and standardised products (Jayne, 2006, p. 36). The car assembly line was the initial manifestation of this system. The key feature of the system was that the mass production of standardised products made a plethora of consumer goods available to the working-classes at low prices (Jayne, 2006, p. 36). As such, Fordism marked the arrival of not only mass production, but also mass consumption. Jayne concludes that “The rise of Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company was a symbol of the complete transformation from an agricultural to an industrial, mass-production, mass-consumption economy” (2006, p. 35).

Whiteley (1993) argues that the introduction of credit cards in 1950 symbolised a transformation in consumer society, at least in America and other rich Western nations. Together, these forces propelled rich economies into a new era identifiable by a new “consumer culture”. At the same time, the rise of advertising interpellated consumers to use their surplus income to join the consumer culture. The growing omnipresence of these invitations to spend on discretionary goods further entrenched consumerism.

3.4.2.2 Post-Fordism and Consumption

By the late 1970s and 1980s, the limitations of Fordism as a system of production were apparent. While the consumer society had flourished under its mantra of high output and low cost, the system reached its limits and ironically seeded its own demise. The saturation of the consumer market, increasing demand for differentiation, and rapid turnover of trends and tastes made
possible by Fordist marketing and advertising meant products were selling with diminishing margins (Jayne, 2006, p. 63). In response to this crisis, capitalism entered a new phase based on a more flexible mode of production. As Sklair (2002, p. 108) points out, the electronic revolution of the late 1960s, affecting product design, the productivity of factories, and the marketing of goods and their distribution, allowed capitalism to enter a truly global phase. The move to post-Fordism in the following decade completed this economic transformation, and portended a dramatic evolution of the consumerist society. By 1980, Lunt and Livingstone (1992, p. 24) maintain that

Involvement with material culture is such that mass consumption infiltrates everyday life not only at the levels of economic processes, social activities and household structures, but also at the level of meaningful psychological experience—affecting the construction of identities, the formation of relationships, the framing of events.

The post-Fordist production system was characterised by the flexibility of labour and plant, in order to produce customised goods in smaller volumes (Jayne, 2006, p. 63). While Fordist consumption had been driven by the producer, post-Fordist consumption was dictated much more by the tastes and desires of the consumer (Miles, 1998, p. 9). Lash and Urry (1994) also characterise this system as demand-driven, and based on individualised lifestyles, demarcated not so much by the consumption of material objects, but signs which distinguished oneself from other classes. They argue that there is an "increasing component of sign-value or image embodied in material objects" (1994, p. 4). It was now even clearer that definitions of consumption had to move beyond the domain of economics if they were to capture the complexity of advanced consumer culture.

Baudrillard, a pivotal theorist on consumption in the twentieth century, wrote:

the fundamental conceptual hypothesis for a sociological analysis of "consumption" is not use value, the relation to needs, but symbolic exchange value, the value of social prestation, of rivalry and, at the limit, of class discrimination. (1981, pp. 30–31)
Consumer society never actually fulfilled one's needs, but regenerated itself by manufacturing dissatisfaction and a perpetual state of longing. Baudrillard argues, "Just as industrial concentration results in an ever increased production of goods, so urban concentration results in a limitless promotion of needs" (1998a, p. 65). Campbell affirms this position by arguing that consumerism can be understood as the particular interaction between "illusion and reality" which "creates longing as a permanent mode" (1987, p. 90). As Miles (1998, p. 26) points out, Baudrillard's contribution to debate was to note that it was mythical to claim that consumption could satisfy needs because human needs are insatiable and thus never entirely fulfilled. Baudrillard also argued that needs were not inherent to individuals, but were manufactured through the processes of marketing and advertising. Rather than the market expressing the desires or needs of the consumer, consumer behaviour and perceptions of needs were purposefully manipulated by advertisers (Corrigan, 1997, p. 19). However, Baudrillard made the critical point that we are encouraged to need for the sake of desire itself, without necessarily having our need focused on a particular object (Corrigan, 1997, p. 20). To be a consumer means to experience a constant unsettling desire. Thus, Baudrillard argues that people do not purchase objects to accomplish specific tasks, but to socially differentiate themselves from others. In this sense, then, consumer goods have a sign value which is no longer related to a particular function. Instead, they obey a "logic of desire" (Miles, 1998, p. 26).

Commodities and objects, like words and once like women, constitute a global, arbitrary, and coherent system of signs, a cultural system which substitutes a social order of values and classifications for a contingent world of needs and pleasures, the natural and biological order. (Baudrillard, 1988 [1970], p. 47)

One of the principal instruments used by corporations to replenish "needs", and perpetuate desire, is product design. Design summons individuals by obeying the never-ending call for novelty which is the hallmark of post-Fordist consumerism. It was in the late-1920s in the US that design emerged as a clear strategy of industrialists to generate profits (Miles, 1998, p. 38). Stylistic
variation could be used to create what Baudrillard later referred to as the "limitless promotion of needs" (see above). Poignantly, it was the American car industry in the 1920s and 1930s that realised the economic advantages of strategising design, and based production cycles on the assumption that consumers would purchase a new car triennially (Miles, 1998, p. 38). As such, the notion of "built-in obsolescence" came to guide production. In 1934, typical car ownership in the US extended over five years. By 1959, it had contracted to two years, with many car manufacturers aiming to reduce it even further to one year (Miles, 1998, p. 39).

The "system of signs" which Baudrillard later referred to was distilled and continually reproduced by design. The significance of design was borne out in my interviews with Bangkok car consumers, who frequently invoked the imagery of particular car models (e.g. "cute", "like a rocket", "smart") when explaining what attracted them to a specific brand. Chapters Five and Six will bring this out. In addition, my interviews with marketing managers (Automotive Industry Asia and Daimler Chrysler Thailand) in Chapters Four, Five and Six will also confirm the centrality of appealing design as a criterion for Thai car consumers, as well as the function of compulsory obsolescence in generating novelty and desire in car consumers.

The growing sophistication of the consumer in the 1980s led to great diversification in the marketplace and the fragmentation of consumption according to niche lifestyles. As such, consumption was much more than a utilitarian process, but was instead a socio-cultural practice emblematising group membership (Bocock, 1993, pp. 27–28). Simultaneously and not without coincidence, the discourse of "lifestyles" was popularised. Featherstone notes that:

within contemporary consumer culture it (lifestyles) connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One’s body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer. (1996, p. 83)
The creation of lifestyles centred around a particular assemblage of consumer goods, experiences, and appearances is a reflexive process, an ongoing project of self-expression and transformation where people are forced to become who they are meant to be (Featherstone, 1996, p. 86). McCracken argues that:

in Western developed societies, culture is profoundly connected to and dependent upon consumption. Without consumer goods, modern, developed societies would lose key instruments for the reproduction, representation, and manipulation of their culture ... The meaning of consumer goods and the meaning creation accomplished by consumer processes are important parts of the scaffolding of our present realities. Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible. (McCracken, 1990, p. xi)

Bourdieu, alongside Baudrillard, is widely considered another of the twentieth century's key commentators on consumption. For Bourdieu, class demarcation is an innately operating logic within human society, and is guided by his notion of "habitus". Lifestyles become a product of that habitus (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 172). Cockerham, Rutten, and Abel (1997, p. 326) explain Bourdieu's concept of habitus as a routinised disposition to action or behaviour deriving from one's own social position. Behaviour itself simply reproduces one's class position. Thus, "Habitus provides a cognitive map of an individual's social world and the dispositions or 'procedures to follow' appropriate for that person in a particular situation" (Cockerham et al., 1997, p. 327). For Williams (1995, pp. 585–586), "the habitus provides individuals with class-dependent, pre-disposed, yet seemingly ‘naturalised’ ways of thinking, feeling, acting and classifying the social world and their location within it". The concept of habitus pre-disposing individuals to class-based behaviour is significant for a discussion of consumerism in that habitus guides consumption behaviour and is employed as means of conceitising differences between social groups. As such, high socio-economic groups affirm their superiority through the purchase of high status goods and high culture. Consumerism feeds the process by continually producing needs, as Baudrillard points out, and creating novelty and desire through product obsolescence, as discussed above.
As Featherstone (1996, pp. 18–19) observes, Bourdieu’s class-based consumption patterns are constantly redefined, as specific “marker goods” are adopted by lower socio-economic groups, forcing the social classes above to re-establish their prior social difference through purchasing new goods. Consequently, knowledge of the market’s latest offerings and the relative cultural value of these goods becomes key to building and branding one’s lifestyle. Bourdieu believed that consumption patterns were not totally dependent on habitus, but also on the “interaction between individual and society” (Miles, 1998, p. 22). My interview findings in Chapters Five and Six will affirm Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. The interview results suggest that specific car models are consumed by Thais to reproduce their own social class, and specific and often more unattainable models are aspired to demonstrate upward social mobility. For example, many of the working- or lower-middle-classes confirmed their membership of this group through purchase of a “pick-up” truck. It’s ruddy reliability, practicality, relative affordability, and masculine strength, positions its owner as the hard-working Bangkok street vendor who has achieved modest economic independence through the purchase of a pick-up. BMW ownership, in contrast, testifies to upper-middle-class membership, most likely as a business man or woman.

The discussion above suggests that the social construction of lifestyles is dependent upon the differentiated consumption of goods, services and experiences (e.g. tourism). As such, consumerism becomes a powerful identity referent. I will now turn to a discussion of this point specifically, and will illuminate how the consumption of cars expresses identity, but more specifically, a particular lifestyle.

3.4.3 Consumerism and Identity

The penetration of identities by consumerism, coinciding with a decline in the influence of traditional signifiers of identity such as nationality, religion, and ethnicity, has been extensively covered in literature on consumerism (Beng-Huat, 2000, p. 2; Jayne, 2006; Garcia Canclini, 2001; Miles and Miles, 2004; Zukin and Maguire, 2004, p. 189; Tanabe and Keyes, 2002; Kasian, 2002, p. 216; Mulder, 2000; Wilson, 2004). Focusing specifically on South-East
Asia, Beng-Huat (2000, p. 2) argues that increasing wealth has driven people throughout all layers of society to acquire material goods in an effort to keep up with expectations. For Zukin and Maguire, the emergence of consumer society depends not only on the development of markets, but also on “the weakening of state, religious or other normative control over material means of expression” (2004, p. 189). This displacement of localised and often religiously-based identities has occurred as global consumerism and mass society, drawn together through advanced information and communication technology, has offered people new ways to conceive of and define themselves. Thus, individuals express themselves through a global menu of transnational products and services writ tantalisingly large over the billboards, neon, and plasma of their cityscapes, and delivered digitally into their homes (Tanabe and Keyes, 2002). Such conceptions of self are increasingly less anchored in categories such as ethnicity, class and gender (Jayne, 2006, p. 66). García Canclini goes further by pointing to a rootless deterritorialised world where identity is defined less and less by nationality and “more and more by participation in transnational or deterritorialised communities of consumers” (2001, p. 24).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the “Asian Tigers” (Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan) as they were known, experienced dramatic rates of economic growth, propelling them to the status of newly-industrialising and then industrialised nations. In each of these societies, the newly rich, especially, relied on discretionary expenditure to express their socio-economic position. Beng-Huat (2000, p. 2) points out that “all social strata struggled to keep up with the acquisition of objects, which were within their ‘normative’ horizons of expectation”. Predictably, these horizons were, according to the logic of consumerism, in a constant state of flux and were continually redefined by new expectations and desires. The major cities of South-East Asia (Bangkok, Manila and Kuala Lumpur) followed the East Asian Tigers, and from the 1990s there was a rapid consolidation of consumer culture and attendant social stratification based on the particular commodities one consumed (Clammer, 2003, p. 407).
3.4.4 Thainess Modulates the Global Consumer Identity

Thailand’s economic transformation, as explained in section one of this chapter, transplanted a new ethos of consumerist values from which Thais could draw on to express their identity. Wilson (2004, p. 8) has written extensively on the intimate connection between social life and the economy in Thailand, arguing that the development of capitalism in Thailand over the latter half of the twentieth century and into this century has availed Thais of a repertoire of identities informed by consumerism. She points out that capitalism is not a benign economic system, but instead “The engagement with capitalist markets educates, and disciplines participants, training them in public presentations of self, in modern values and reference points, and in appropriate behaviour” (2004, p. 193). Through her study of shopping malls in Bangkok, Wilson (2004, p. 127) argues that consumer commodities and the images generated by popular capitalist culture enable Thais to enact a range of identities. Thais employ aspects of the “global” (specific products, English language, music, etc.) to leverage their relative social status. Cars, as I will exemplify in the findings chapters to follow, are one of the most significant of these global goods.

In keeping with the principle of consumerism becoming ascendant with the weakening of traditional institutions, the centrally-controlled and more rigid identity referents—Nation, Religion and King—each represented by a specific colour on the Thai flag, have come to have less of a role in defining Thainess (Kasian, 2002, p. 208). Instead, Kasian argues that “commodity-constituted identities” generated by the institutions and artefacts of global consumer culture, especially advertising, offer Thais another means to define themselves. Commodities actually come to penetrate a sense of self, according to Kasian (2002), allowing Thais to grasp onto a particular “commodity-constituted identity” being offered by the institutions of global capitalism, most saliently by the advertising industry. The appellations of the advertising industry are so powerful that transnational products could be consumed under the guise of “Thainess”. Jory (1999, p. 468) points out, for example, that many Thai consumers in the 1990s considered global products such as Lux Soap, Walls Ice Cream and even, for some, Pepsi and Coca Cola, as Thai. This illustrates
the ability of advertisers to sell more than a specific commodity, but to actually “dress” that commodity in an identity of their choosing to be bought by consumers on their terms. Whether one bought perceived Thainess in a Sony CD player, or middle-class membership in a particular car, advertising connected Thais to that perception and created the particular identity they literally bought into. Reynolds similarly highlights this phenomenon in Thailand, arguing that “To compete successfully and consume knowingly in the international markets of the post-Cold War world, Thais must adopt the trappings of the global competitor and the global consumer” by buying international brands (2002, p. 312). Products that have the appellation “inter” in their brand name are highly sought after, suggesting some desirable “foreignness” marking off exclusivity and prestige (Reynolds, 2002, p. 313). Mulder (2000, p. 135) presents a similar argument to Reynolds but frames it in terms of the individualisation of mass urban society. He argues that Thais’ “individual-centred choices are made in the drive for self-improvement and careerism, and in the lifestyle phenomenon that at the centre of consumer culture enables people to accumulate the status symbols they need in order to assert their identity” (Mulder, 2000, p. 135). According to owners of particular consumer goods, while a universal phenomenon, found particular resonance in Thailand’s hierarchical culture, which accords esteem and respect vertically to those occupying higher social positions. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the economy had been thriving, guided by authoritarian governments giving over the Thai economy to the market logic. As a developing nation undergoing dramatic economic growth, and the rise of a new middle-class of consumers, this esteem and respect now encompassed consumers of certain brands, and by market-driven default, consumers of particular “lifestyles”. Thainess, then, reinforced global consumerism’s status associations. They legitimised each other. The automobile’s appeal embodied this merging of Thainess with global consumer identities.

In November 1997, the Prime Minister at the time, Thaksin Shinawatra (ousted from government in a coup in September 2006) famously declared, “A company is a country. A country is a company. The management is the same” (“A company is a country, a PM is a CEO”, 2004). As Phongpaichit explained (“A country is
a company, a PM is a CEO”, 2004), the problem with this was that “When a country becomes a company and government becomes management, the people are not so much citizens with rights, liberties and aspirations, but rather consumers and factors of production”. Perhaps Phongpaichit’s commentary captured the essence of the 1980s and 1990s in Thailand. Thais had become great consumers, urged on by their government, whose legitimacy, like most governments in the Asian region, was founded on continued economic growth. Beng-Huat (2000, p. 9) argues that throughout Asia, there was an unstated “covenant” between governments and their citizens, who compromised their political freedoms in exchange for enhanced living standards. As a consequence of this, and in order to prove their success in generating economic growth, governments encouraged consumption. However, when the financial crisis struck, widespread rumination and reflection ensued: perhaps economic growth and consumption had been chased too relentlessly and greedily. The car had accelerated too fast and lost control. The crisis was perceived by some to have been brought on by Western economic imperialism and the ravages of globalisation. A number of books appeared with very rhetorical titles such as “Thailand in The Age of Its Cultural Enslavement” and “Declaration of Independence from the IMF” (Reynolds, 2002, p. 324). In a series of books, the former Foreign Minister of Thailand, Dr Thanat Khoman, “concluded that the economic crisis reflected attempts by developed countries to conquer the developing world without the use of arms” (McCargo, 2001, p. 90).

Discourses around localism arose as a response to the perceived havoc unleashed by globalisation and greed. These discourses were initially fuelled by, and then continued to claim legitimacy from, the King’s annual birthday address to the nation on December 5, 1997. In his speech, he famously drew on the Buddhist concept of the Middle Way to argue that Thailand had gone too far in its embrace of globalisation and Western economic models. To remedy this, the King advocated a return to greater self-sufficiency. He exclaimed:

Being a tiger is not important. What is important is to have enough to eat and live, and to have an economy that provides enough to eat and live ...

If we can change back to a self-sufficient economy ... we can survive ...
It's like walking backwards into a canal ... We need to move backwards in order to move forwards. (Pasuk and Baker, 2000, p. 193)

The King was criticised for this perspective, seen by many as narrow and isolationist, and as Reynolds (2002, p. 332) points out, it would be hard to conceive of Thai consumers, wanting to “walk backwards into a canal”, when they seem more preoccupied with “inter” (i.e. international) brands. The significance of the actual economic crisis, the collective angst surrounding it, and the King’s speech in response to the crisis, was that it symbolised the extent to which Thailand had changed in its embrace of market logic and consumerism. Thaksin’s famous words about a country being a company seemed fortiorily true in some senses. The market had brought wealth and sleek shopping malls. Yet, simultaneously it had strengthened socio-economic inequalities and literally brought Bangkok to a near standstill in the early 1990s when Bangkok traffic was declared a national crisis (Askew, 2002, pp. 83–84).

In some poignant way, the consumption of cars and the policy failure to provide a sufficient mass transit alternative, leading to widespread gridlock in Bangkok, and then the dramatic 1997 crisis, epitomised the excesses of consumerism, and perhaps signified most dramatically that consumption was not a never-ending source of pleasure. Consumerism had endowed Thais with a range of identities, but had also seeded its own identity crisis in the soul-searching after 1997. Thainess had been spending up big to assert its new consumer self, but reacted by attempting to distance itself from its former lover, branded responsible for its 1997 crash. At some stage the party would stop, and the engines would stall, caught in the gridlock of aspirational spending. The King’s speech may not have pointed to a realistic alternative acceptable to the Thai people, but it did highlight some of the symptoms of Thailand and Bangkok’s problems at the time. The significance was not his proposed remedy, but that the remedy and the strength of his reaction, reiterated the problem.

3.5 Conclusion: Thailand’s Socio-Economic Transformation

This chapter has argued that Thailand’s socio-economic transformation, especially post-World War II, provided both the material and the affective
conditions for the uptake of automobility as a socio-material form of consumption. I have illustrated how this transformation was led by the intersection of three co-dependent and complementary factors: the globalisation of the Thai economy; the urbanisation of Bangkok; and the penetration of consumerism. Within the hierarchy of Thai society, consumerism allowed for the psycho-social expression of wants and relative social position. As such, it became a significant identity referent for Thais, who began to consume cars as a means of marking out and negotiating their social status. This status was literally driven through a new suburbanised landscape, modelled on Western city forms, and which increasingly required a car to carry out daily “home-work-shopping-socialising” routines across sometimes large distances poorly serviced by public transport. The next chapter logically extends on this theme of Thailand’s socio-economic transformation to illustrate how this transformation was, to a degree, underpinned by political efforts to establish the auto industry as a cornerstone of economic growth. In this regard, I will discuss the political economy of the auto industry, both globally and in Thailand, and then move on to discuss the cultural economy of the car in Bangkok.
Chapter Four:
The Political and Cultural Economy of the Thai Automobile Industry

4.1 Preamble

In Chapter Three, I argued that automobility in Thailand is a socio-material mode of consumption, and that global capitalism, as both an economic and cultural phenomenon, has largely determined the commodification of mobility. In this chapter I will focus on other factors which have served to embed automobility both socially and materially in Bangkok: the global political economy of the automotive industry; the political economy of the Thai auto industry; and the cultural construction of automobility in Thailand. This chapter begins with an overview of the global automobile industry, pointing out how the industry has literally powered globalization. National governments, charged with the responsibility to promote economic growth and raise the living standards of their citizens, have found legitimacy in their promotion of the auto industry. Next, I extend this argument to a local level and argue that the political economy of the automobile industry in Thailand has enabled it to become the largest automobile and auto parts manufacturer in South-East Asia, ultimately entrenching automobility even further as a socio-material phenomenon, as well as operating as a powerful national symbol. I then argue that the forces of automobile marketing and advertising which pervade Bangkok turn the city into a site for consumption, where advertising messages penetrate the daily routines of Bangkokians encouraging them to buy cars, or to aspire to car ownership. In this sense, automobility is culturally constructed by a range of capitalist institutions and is “naturalised” as the most desirable form of mobility for Bangkokians.
4.2 The Political Economy of the Global Automobile Industry

4.2.1 The Scale and History of the Automobile Industry

Throughout the course of the twentieth century the car came to symbolise economic development, modernity, and progress itself. The automobile industry as a whole is frequently taken as "a paradigm case of a globalized industry" (Paterson, 2000, p. 261). As Dicken (2007) points out, the global automobile industry is comprised mostly of large transnational corporations, which lobby and engage with national governments keen to cultivate internationally competitive automobile production industries within their own countries. Figure 6 shows the composition of world vehicle production in 2000 according to company share of the market. It clearly shows that 16 major transnational corporations dominated production of new vehicles globally in that year.

Figure 6: World Vehicle Production 2000

Source: Middlehurst and Neilsen (2002), Thailand's Automotive Industry, p. 33
For more than a century, nations have come to regard a strong automobile industry as instrumental to their own economic development. The industry is immense in size, affecting a range of spin-off industries involved either directly in car manufacture or associated industries, such as oil production. Each automobile comprises well over 3000 distinct parts, each manufactured in its own specific industry, such as steel, electronics, glass, rubber and metals (Abbott, 2003, p. 120). In 1946, Drucker (cited in Abbott, 2003, p. 119) noted:

The automobile industry stands for modern industry all over the globe. It is to the twentieth century what the Lancashire cotton mills were to the early nineteenth century: the industry of industries.

Paterson (2000, p. 261) confirms, "A successful car industry has been widely taken to be a necessary condition for a successful economic development strategy by national states in the twentieth century". In the US, the progressive removal of railways from the 1930s onwards was the primary and initial stimulus for the establishment of extensive automobility (Freund and Martin, 1996, p. 16). In fact, since the 1920s, Freund and Martin argue that "the auto industry has been the prime engine powering peacetime business growth. The US auto industry's tag line is 'What America drives, drives America'" (1996, p. 16).

America dominated auto production globally for most of the twentieth century, as the production principles of Fordism enabled generic and efficient mass assembly production of cars. Henry Ford, founder of the Ford automobile company, lends his name to this early twentieth century form of production. From its introduction in 1913 until the early 1970s, the Fordist assembly line production of automobiles was the archetype of mass production itself. Fordism emblematised more than a fundamentally new production technique, however. Its significance lay also in the decisive impact it had on incomes, patterns of work, and lifestyles. Jessop explains that Fordism was

a virtuous cycle of growth based on mass production, rising productivity based on economies of scale, rising incomes linked to productivity, increased mass demand due to rising wages, increased profits based on full utilisation of capacity, and increased investment in improved mass production equipment and techniques. (1991, p. 136)
The system depended on achieving significant economies of scale and worker specialisation in order to produce the necessary volume of cars (approximately two million annually) at a price the new workers of the American and global economy could afford (Dicken, 2007, p. 285). More than 90 per cent of all cars produced globally were manufactured by American firms or their European subsidiaries at the close of the 1950s (Freund and Martin, 1996, p. 17). Not coincidentally, the rapid expansion of private car transport occurred at the same time as mass suburbanisation in the US, prefiguring what took place in Thailand 30 years later. In the first half of the twentieth century, American urban planners embraced the concept of suburban sprawl, as urban dwellers sought to escape inner city ghettolisation for the luxury of detached homes and gardens in increasingly far-flung residential areas. Residences and sites for work and other daily activities became progressively dispersed, such that widespread motorisation in the absence of railways (which were being dismantled) effectively allowed individuals to conduct their daily routines across sometimes significant geographical distances. Following World War II, the suburbanisation of cities also took hold in Europe and Australia (Freund and Martin, 1996, p. 17).

The global automobile industry transitioned to a new phase in the early 1970s, as Japan decisively entered the market challenging the efficiency and cost-competitiveness of American and European firms. The arrival of Japan as a major global auto producer was captured by the new epithet, "Toyota-ism", denoting the post-Fordist era (Abbott, 2003, p. 123). The automobile industry was transformed, as "lean" production replaced decades of mass production techniques. In essence, lean production relies on technological innovation, and in particular two technological developments: “the increasing use of ‘shared platforms’ between different vehicle models”; and “the ‘modularization’ of certain components and the development of component ‘systems’” (Dicken, 2007, p. 285).

4.2.2 Global Production Patterns

The faster rate of growth of car ownership taking place recently in developing countries reflects not only the saturation of the auto market in industrialised nations, but also the fact that automobility is assumed to have a direct and
linear relationship with development (Paterson, 2000, p. 263). The notion that the car and the car industry are synonymous with economic development became a legitimising and powerful rationale for successive countries to establish auto industries nationally. European and Asian economies have, since the 1970s, become significant competitors to the US auto industry. Figure 7 shows world vehicle production by region 1950–2000. It also shows that there has been a decisive shift in vehicle production from the West to the East, especially since the 1970s.

Figure 7: World Vehicle Production by Region 1950–2000
Source: Middlehurst and Nielsen (2002), Thailand’s Automotive Industry, p. 32

In the year 2000, Western Europe and North America were overtaken by the Asia–Pacific region in terms of vehicle production. Thirty per cent of global automobile production (17.94 million vehicles out of a global total of 59.77 million units) occurred in the Asia–Pacific in that year (Middlehurst and Nielsen, 2002, p. 39). The four major ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) markets of Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, accounted for 1.8 per cent of world vehicle production, with Thailand and Indonesia recording the most rapid growth in production (Middlehurst and Nielsen, 2002, p. 39).
Today, Japan leads automobile production globally, followed by Germany, the US, France, Korea, Spain, and China (Dicken, 2007, p. 280). Thailand ranks thirteenth globally as an exporter of automotive products, and constitutes the largest exporter in South-East Asia (see Table 15 in the Chapter Four Appendix for a summary of the world’s leading exporters of auto products).

4.2.3 Global Consumption Patterns

Coinciding with an eastward shift in vehicle production, consumption patterns have also shifted. As the demand for automobiles has slowed in North America and Western Europe, (accounting for an excess capacity of 25–30 per cent), global auto manufacturers are focusing on burgeoning sales in Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. It is anticipated that the most significant growth will occur in Asia, with car consumption in China already growing at a very rapid rate (Dicken, 2007, p. 284). This growth in sales in the emerging economies of Asia reflects the expansion of these economies, bringing automobile ownership within the reach of ever greater numbers of their citizens. As this thesis argues in the particular case of Thailand, the relatively recent entrenchment of global capitalism in many Asian nations, most recently and successfully in China, must also explain to a great degree how economic development in these nations is serving to embed auto-centred transport. Growing wealth, rapid urbanisation, and the proliferation of an urban middle class requiring mobility but also disposed to discretionary spending, provide the conditions for the rapid uptake of automobility. Today, the automobile market is increasingly defined by its fragmentation into distinct markets. In order to satisfy the demands of wealthier car consumers, the differentiation of models according to more subtle demographic profiles is increasingly necessary. Simultaneously, customers in emerging markets demand low-cost basic models (Dicken, 2007, p. 284).

4.2.4 The Role of National Governments

The impetus provided by nation states to the automobile industry has been pivotal to its symbolic and market-based success for over 100 years. National governments have acted to regulate the degree of access to local markets, grant support to domestic auto firms by the state, and to discriminate against
foreign firms (Dicken, 2007, p. 286). In the great majority of countries, automobile imports have been regulated by deploying both tariff and non-tariff barriers. However, tariffs have declined greatly, especially since the liberalisation of the auto industry in the 1990s (Dicken, 2007, p. 286). As the US and European dominance of the industry has declined somewhat since the 1970s, the governments of emerging economies have, especially since the 1990s, tailored particular policies favourable to the growth of automobile conglomerates within their own countries. Among emerging markets, such as Asia, Dicken argues that three types of “automobile regime” non exist (2007, p. 287). He categorises Thailand as an “emerging regional market” or “ERM” (Dicken, 2007, p. 287). Humphreys and Oetter (2000, p. 55–56) explain that this market comprises countries which have “sought to increase the efficiency of their motor industries by reducing protection and increasing competitive pressures and by using access to the domestic market as a lever to promote investment by transnational companies”. As referred to earlier, Thailand has become the largest producer of automobiles within South-East Asia. Yet, among ASEAN nations, Thailand’s industrialisation and its promotion of the auto industry occurred within a domestic political context quite different from its neighbours. Unlike in the Philippines, the Thai Government lacked a highly centralised political leadership, as was the case under President Marcos. And, in contradistinction to Indonesia and Malaysia, “Thai policy did not have to balance its industrialization project with ethnic redistribution efforts” (Doner, 1991, p. 190). Doner argues that:

> The result was a growth of local firms attempting to increase local auto manufacture and a strengthening of functional ties between these firms and their public sector counterparts. These developments, in turn, facilitated the region’s strongest auto policy achievements. (1991, p. 190)

In the next section, I turn to the political economy of the automobile industry in Thailand. This thesis contends that the Thai Government’s promotion of the Thai auto industry through a unique policy framework has been a significant factor in embedding automobility as a socio-material mode of consumption in Bangkok.
4.3 The Political Economy of the Automobile Industry in Thailand

I have argued throughout this thesis that the consumption of cars needs necessarily to be understood as both a practical and symbolic response to the growth of global capitalism within Thailand, and the consequent urbanisation of Bangkok.

An appreciation of the political economy of the auto industry in Thailand is important as it operates with some relative autonomy, while being affected by the forces of globalisation. By fostering the international competitiveness of the Thai auto industry, the government aims to attract multinational car corporations to Thailand, extend economic growth, and decisively position Thailand within the global capitalist economy. In this sense, the promotion of the auto industry, especially in the absence (as has been the case in recent decades) of a comprehensive plan to expand mass transit, has served also to embed automobility. As Gate (1999, pp. 35-36) has noted, “governmental policy favors both the production and domestic consumption of automobiles as a cornerstone of the modern Thai economy, through trade agreements and governmental promotional policies”.

The Thai automobile industry began in 1962 in a large part thanks to the Industrial Development Act 1960. By imposing high import tariffs and providing tax privileges, this piece of legislation effectively protected the local automobile industry from imports (Middlehurst and Nielsen, 2002, p. 55). Thailand today remains the focus of automobile and auto parts manufacturing within the South-East Asian region as a direct consequence of Thai state policy (Dicken, 2007, p. 312). Since the 1960s, a panoply of government policies, targeting both tax and local operations, have combined with significant economic growth to nurture the establishment of a very strong local Thai auto industry (Middlehurst and Nielsen, 2002, p. 55). Various government departments, ministries and agencies have held responsibility for policy formation over this time.

The industry’s first decade (the 1960s) was characterised by a certain degree of fragmentation, in which a great number of foreign firms controlled automobile
assembly (Doner, 1991, p. 191). In many cases both local Thai capital, as well as foreign capital, drove the establishment of the Western and Japanese firms which came to monopolise the local market. Today, the Thai auto industry remains dominated by Japanese conglomerates, as is the case throughout South-East Asia (Abbott, 2003, p. 144). As the industry in Thailand took off, and more Thais owned cars, there were of course ramifications for the expansion of component industries as well. For example, when vehicle registration figures exceeded 500,000 in Thailand, a great number of small machinery factories appeared in Bangkok to satisfy the demand for replacement parts (Abbott, 2003, p. 121). The scale of the industry encompassed more than vehicle assembly alone and generated significant economic activity beyond the automobile plants themselves.

By the end of the 1960s, however, the industry was destabilised by the rapid growth of inefficient foreign-controlled assembly operations which, owing to their dependence on imports, led to significant balance of trade problems (Doner, 1991, p. 191). This was the origin of the automotive policy reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Under the tutelage of American auto industry expert, J. B. Organ, the Thai Government was urged to rationalise the industry, placing a limitation on the number of auto assemblers allowed to operate in the market (Doner, 1991, p. 191). In 1969, the Automotive Development Committee (ADC) was established in an attempt to centralise policy formulation across a range of government agencies and departments (Middlehurst and Nielsen, 2002, p. 56). Working closely with the Association of Thai Industries (ATI), the ADC concluded that the Thai auto industry had been too liberal in allowing unfettered foreign access to the industry, resulting in problems of “overcompetition” (Doner, 1991, p. 192).

Consequently, in July 1971 a series of plans were announced for the reform of the auto industry, aiming to both expand local content and to rationalise the market by limiting models, engine sizes and vehicle types (Doner, 1991, p. 192). In the following years, Thailand’s auto industry grew increasingly prosperous and made considerable gains in size, due in significant part to the policy direction provided by the Thai Government. The general robustness of
the economy in the 1980s and early 1990s gave significant impetus to the auto industry also. As Abbott (2003, p. 98) notes, there was discussion that Thailand would achieve the status of a “newly industrialising country”, as economic growth consistently averaged close to double-digit figures, and actually broke the double-digit figure mark. However, the 1997 economic crisis (precipitated by a dramatic 50 per cent devaluation in the value of the Thai baht against the US dollar, subsequently settling at around two-thirds of its previous value), precipitated a crisis within the auto industry. As consumer spending plummeted, two million Thais lost their jobs, and in 1998 the economy contracted by 11 per cent (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005, p. 254). A significant drop in car sales reflected the widespread loss of consumer confidence. Figure 8 demonstrates this.

Figure 8: Thai Auto Production, Sales and Exports 1981–2001
Source: Middlehurst and Neilsen (2002), Thailand’s Automotive Industry, p. 53

Sales of passenger cars fell from over 500,000 in 1996 to fewer than 200,000 in 1998. However, opportunity was wrested from the crisis and the industry
underwent a dramatic rehabilitation” in an attempt to deal with the exposed weaknesses (Middlehurst and Nielsen, 2002, p. 57). In September 1998, the Thai Government established a non-profit organisation, the “Thai Automotive Industry” (TAI), as a joint venture between private industry groups and the Thai Government. Its aim was to promote the international competitiveness of the ATI. In July 2006, I met with an officer from the “Study and Analysis Section” of the TAI in Bangkok to obtain an overview of the organisation’s role. He explained that the vision of the TAI is:

To serve as an institution for the development of the automobile industry in terms of raising the level of capability on a permanent basis and to become a globally competitive automobile production centre in Asia.

(KI interview, July 2006)

The TAI is involved in a range of activities, including policy research, advising on appropriate industry regulations, and the promotion of international competitiveness through continual enhancement of the quality of auto products. The Thai Government’s sponsorship of the organisation demonstrates its ongoing commitment to the auto industry as a means of also underpinning the Thai economy. The officer of the TAI with whom I spoke explained that the auto industry is one of five major industries targeted by the government for special support. The Thai Government–private auto industry nexus, which the TAI embodies, is exemplary of the synergistic collaboration between politics and private industry, helping to sediment the auto industry within Thailand. It simultaneously serves the interests of government, which derives legitimacy from the economic growth the industry encourages, and private industry, which is able to grow their markets and sell more cars.

The presence of such a large industry relies also on domestic consumption, as the Officer from the Thailand Automotive Institute explained. Car manufacturers are very good at “pushing Thai customers to buy cars”, he commented, in the manner in which car marketing and advertising infiltrates daily life in Bangkok especially. The Officer also pointed out that financing options are increasingly more attractive to car consumers as they require small deposits (even THB50,000 in some cases). This point was also raised by Dr Tairjing Siripanich,
Director of the NGO "Don't Drive Drunk" who works for the Bureau of Non-Communicable Disease at the Ministry of Health. He explained that one significant reason for car reliance in Bangkok is:

capitalism, which makes cars more available to people. Under capitalism, corporations compete to get your money, and to make a profit. Car companies and motorcycle companies compete to get your money, so Thais may not have much more money than before but it is now easier to buy a car or motorcycle, with a very small deposit and instalments spread out over time. (KI interview, May 2006)

Dr Sripanich also added that "If Thais have money, they will buy a car; if not a motorcycle because that will show their wealth" (KI Interview, May 2006).

The increasing availability of finance to purchase a car serves also to reinforce automobility as a mode of consumption in Bangkok. The competition between financial institutions which drives lenders to offer attractive car finance packages is also an outcome of the entrenchment of global capitalism in Thailand as companies are forced to compete with each other to sell financial products and services. Middlehurst and Nielsen (2002, p. 115) point out that 70 per cent of vehicles were purchased through hire purchase arrangements prior to the 1997 economic crisis. Agreements typically required a 25 per cent deposit and instalments over two years. Following the economic crisis, however, the Bank of Thailand moved to lower lending rates and ease the terms of hire purchases agreements in an effort to boost consumer spending. Middlehurst and Nielsen (2002, p. 115) also point out that financing and hire purchase divisions are now a common feature of major automobile corporations in Thailand, and are seen as key to local marketing. Cheap finance packages are commonly offered as manufacturers compete for customers. The ease of availability of finance has undoubtedly made car ownership possible for more Thais.

In the 2006–2010 Master Plan of the Thailand Automotive Institute (provided at KI interview by Officer of TAI, July 2006), the "Vision 2011" states "Thailand is the automotive production base in Asia that adds value to the country with strong domestic supplier base". It contains data to show that in 2005 Thailand
ranked fourteenth in the world for automobile production, and seventeenth in the world for domestic sales. Table 16 in the Chapter Four Appendix sets out the relative national positions in terms of auto production and sales in 2005.

From a record of 1.1 million units of auto production in 2005, Thailand has set itself a target of two million units per year in 2010 (Thailand Automotive Institute, 2006). Refer to Figure 9. Since 2005, the Thai industry has continued to expand production and reached a new record of 1,301,149 vehicles in 2007 (The Thai Automotive Industry Association, n.d.).

**Figure 9: Overall Production Target for New Vehicles in Thailand by 2010**

![Overall Production Target for New Vehicles in Thailand by 2010](image)

This section has highlighted the fact that the automobile industry clearly remains integral to the Thai economy and a centrepiece of economic growth. Since its inception in the early 1960s, the Thai Government has targeted the industry as a pillar of national economic development. This thesis argues that the political economy of the national auto industry has been a logical outcome of Thailand’s quest to embed itself within the global economy and, as a consequence, has served to entrench automobility as a socio-material mode of consumption in Bangkok. The size and strength of the industry has relied heavily on domestic consumption, as well as export income. This has translated into an overwhelming presence of car advertising and marketing throughout Bangkok, promoting the consumption of automobiles. It is this “cultural construction” of automobility to which I will now turn.
4.4 The Cultural Economy of the Automobile Industry in Thailand: The Toyota and Mercedes Drivers

As mentioned in Chapter Three, today over 50 per cent of the world’s population lives in cities, and by 2050 this proportion is anticipated to reach two-thirds of a total world population of nine billion (Landry, 2007, p. 77). The new workers and middle classes of the world’s (especially the developing world’s) cities enact their daily lives as both producers and consumers in a global market place. Urbanness, as the dominant and growing living condition of the world’s population, is textured by constant exhortations to consume and emotional appeals to express something of oneself in the commodities available for consumption. The car is the iconic commodity and transport modality of urban life, and is a central feature of suburban consumer lifestyles. Marketers and advertisers are keenly aware, as Campbell (1987, p. 48) has argued, that “consumer behaviour is just as much a matter of emotion and feeling as it is of cognition” and that “affective attachment can be said to be more basic to consumption than any issue of rational calculation”. Accordingly, the minutiae of daily consumption, the plethora of uber-cool advertisements announcing uber-cool lives that can be bought underlies the shimmering promise of consumption and is felt viscerally as people traverse cities in their daily routine. As Miles and Miles testify, “Urban change is not simply manifested at a physical level. The city is an emotional experience as well as an architectural one” (2004, p. 6).

Advertising is its own aesthetic in the postmodern urban environment. Its omnipresence draws constant attention. Jayne argues that, “In the postmodern city, the projection of image lies at the heart of the attractiveness of style in the city ... design and appearance rule” (2006, p. 58). The number of consumer products introduced into the world each year since 1970 has increased 16-fold (Landry, 2007, p. 113), leaving us “permanently hungry” and “in danger of living solely through consumption” (Landry, 2007, p. 155). Landry also (2007, p. 151) points to a relatively new phenomenon known as the “experience economy”, which he describes as a “new mantra and union of everyday consumption and spectacle”. In an attempt to make indistinct the boundary between entertainment and consumption, companies aim to render
consumption an "experience" in itself, blending elements of shopping, learning and "cultural activities".

Bangkok and its social milieu can be conceptualised as a "site of consumption" in which traditional Thai concepts of "face" and hierarchy are increasingly projected onto material goods, especially positional goods such as the car. For the low socio-economic groups, the seductive imagery of car advertising in the consumptionscapes of ubiquitous shopping malls, as well as in Bangkok streetscapes, is a daily reminder of the transport modality that dominates, and from which they are excluded due to lack of financial capital.

4.4.1 Constructing the Toyota Driver

Toyota holds the largest share of the market for passenger and commercial vehicles in Thailand (KI interview with Mr Abdul Tungsuwan, Manager of New Model Passenger Car Marketing, June 2006). Advertisements for Toyota cars abound in print media, TV commercials, and promotional displays and events throughout Bangkok. My 2006 fieldwork in Thailand coincided with the intense marketing of the Toyota Yaris. Actually, it corresponded specifically with the second of three stages of marketing the Yaris, as explained by Mr Tungsuwan, (KI interview, June 2006). The phase comprised approximately three months of "bombardment communication" on TV, radio, in newspapers and magazines, and on Thai TV dramas with a young audience. The Yaris campaign, as explained by Abdul, was a pan-Asia one originating from Toyota Asia-Pacific. Thus, use of the English word "groovy", accompanied by the image of a young attractive Western male, was designed to project an international aesthetic, a sensibility appealing to a "monoculture" of international urban car consumers sharing a similar lifestyle defined by a certain age (average age, 30 years), income, and level of education (more than 75 per cent of Yaris drivers in Thailand hold at least a bachelor degree). See Picture 1.
The Yaris in Thailand is more expensive than it is in Japan (its home country), and as Thai salaries are lower than in Japan it is relatively less affordable. However, its price tag apparently imbues the Yaris with more status among young Thai car consumers, according to Mr Tungsuvan. Significantly, he also
explained that approximately 75 per cent of Yaris consumers purchase their new vehicle by taking advantage of finance packages which require only a 15 per cent deposit and the balance paid in instalments lasting up to four years. The ready availability of finance, often arranged or offered by the car corporation itself, has been a strategy to make cars more “affordable” and thus bring car ownership within the reach of greater numbers of people.

The Yaris driver is more than these statistics, though. The qualitative difference is that he or she is, or projects himself/herself, as an “innovator”: someone who “stands out”. She is “groovy” because of her car, and her car is “groovy” thanks to her. This pan-Asian pitch exemplifies what Zukin and Maguire refer to as the homogenisation of consumers, whereby marketing managers “aim to eliminate national, cultural and ethnic differences in the pursuit of a universal consumer culture” (2004, p. 188). The UN (World Youth Report, 2003, chap. 3), in a paper on global youth culture, similarly describes this process as an attempt by multinational corporations to create uniform consumer markets and tastes across cultures in order to make their products widely acceptable and desired.

The first stage of the Toyota Yaris campaign (the “pre-introduction phase”), as explained by Mr Tungsuan, involved arousing the curiosity of the target audience using “teaser ads”. Advertisements appeared throughout Bangkok, especially on TV, but did not reveal the entire car, thus teasing the audience enough to stimulate curiosity. The advertisements were accompanied by slogans such as “something exciting is coming”, without actually mentioning the Toyota name. The core slogan, “Be Groovy” did accompany these advertisements though. This stage of marketing the Yaris is a practice Zukin and Maguire explain as one in which people are socialised to be consumers before the product is actually available on the market through the dissemination of imagery and printed texts (2004, p. 190).

In fact, the entire Yaris campaign exemplifies a common phenomenon of postmodern consumer culture, especially concentrated in cities. Clammer (2003, p. 404) explains how images of consumer products infiltrate everyday life such that global capitalism also constitutes a “pervasive cultural force”. It is
what Featherstone refers to as the “aestheticization of everyday life” (1996, p. 67). In consumer societies, such as Bangkok’s:

The centrality of the commercial manipulation of images through advertising, the media, and the displays, performances and spectacles of the urbanized fabric of everyday life therefore entails a constant reworking of desires through images. (Featherstone, 1996, p. 68).

Indeed, the manipulation of desires, especially through promoting the symbolic value of products such as cars (“grooviness”, or membership of a “unique” upper class socio-economic group, for example), is essential to the survival of capitalism. By constantly creating desires for novelty within consumers, global capitalism ensures its own survival by obeying its raison d’être to generate profit (Sklair, 2002, p. 62). Advertising is the predominant medium of this system, and the majority of advertising revenue in capitalist societies is constituted by advertisements for cars, as well as processed food, drink and household products (Sklair, 2002, p. 167). When interviewed, Dr Paibul, Professor of Community Medicine at Mahidol University Bangkok (KI Interview, May 2006), who specialises in and has written about road traffic injuries in Thailand for many years, said that among other factors, the mass media (predominantly advertising) has a great influence on car ownership in Thailand, promoting a culture of consumerism and materialism. He believes car ownership trends in Thailand are analogous to trends in China where the level of car ownership is growing significantly. “When people become wealthier”, he said, “the automobile is one important way of demonstrating luxurious life”.

Scholars (Landry, 2007, p. 154; Zukin, 1995, p. 261; Wilson, 2004; Miles and Miles, 2004, p. 173) concur that advertising today is constitutive of public space, such that social interaction and the mere fulfilment of daily routine are exercised in the constant presence of advertisements exhorting us to consume. They explain how the centrality of consumer culture means that public space is increasingly appropriated by corporations to promote their products. Miles argues that city space has become “colonised” by the practices and artefacts of consumption (2004, p. 173). Zukin similarly points to the commercialisation of public space as part of the wider “symbolic economy” of cities which she defines
as "a continual production of symbols and spaces that frames and gives meaning" in cities. She argues that in cities:

economic growth has been thematized and envisioned as an image of collective leisure and consumption. As part of the process, collective space—public space—has been represented as a consumable good ... public space has been joined with retail space, promoting privatised, corporate values. Sony Plaza (in New York) re-imagines the Parisian arcades that Walter Benjamin describes, imposing a corporate order on the strolling crowds, transforming the dream experience into a Sony Wonder. (1995, p. 260)

In fact, representations of automobiles in Bangkok are a core element of Bangkok's symbolic economy. Cars are part of the symbols and spaces of Bangkok via promotional events, and widespread advertising on billboards, street signage, on TV monitors inside shopping centres, even ironically on the sides of the SkyTrain. Bangkok is a city replete with shopping malls. Bangkokian's enthusiastic embrace of this twentieth century consumer monolith suggests shopping has seduced Thais as much as any other nation, but perhaps these malls also offer an air-conditioned escape from Bangkok's heat, its rainy season, and the traffic-related pollution. As Wilson (2004, pp. 110-111) has theorised, Bangkok's malls are social sites, places in which Bangkokians regularly engage and interact with others, all the while mediated by the experience of consumption. These venues are increasingly multi-purpose and house shops, cinemas, department stores, and other attractions such as "Ocean World" in Siam Paragon, one of Bangkok's latest up-market malls, which opened in 2005. As such, shopping and entertainment are merged, allowing one to spend a complete afternoon or more shopping, socialising and entertaining oneself in a mall. Siam Paragon occupies a prime site between two other malls in the Siam area of central Bangkok and is serviced by the main SkyTrain interchange station with walk bridges delivering one directly into the mall. This shopping mall is illustrative of the central position that car advertising and marketing occupies in Bangkok's "consumptionscapes". Overhanging the central escalators at either end of the large complex are plasma screens

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replaying a series of advertisements, which catch the gaze of shoppers as they ascend the escalators. On my frequent visits to the mall, situated near Chulalongkorn University where I was based throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that Toyota advertisements dominated. Minutes apart, the same images for Toyota passenger cars and pick-up trucks were constantly replayed. Shoppers could hardly avoid shopping without seeing the word Toyota or images of Toyota cars flashed before them. See Pictures 2 and 3.

Picture 2: Large Plasma Screens Overhanging Escalators in Siam Paragon Shopping Centre, Bangkok, Run Rolling Advertisements for Toyota

Source: Photo taken by myself, May 3, 2006, Bangkok
Apart from the rolling advertisements on these screens, there were frequent promotional events for cars in the central strolling areas of the mall and outside the mall. In the height of the Toyota Yaris campaign (as referred to earlier), promotion of the Yaris was merged with an MTV music awards event in the outdoor space linking Siam Paragon to the adjacent mall, Siam Center. These malls, and the entire shopping area of Siam, attract a late-teen and twenty-something population, a crowd both likely to watch MTV and to drive, or aspire to drive a Toyota Yaris. Excited fans of MTV and mere passers-by mingled, chatted and occasionally swayed to the music, weaving their way through the Yaris cars on display, and sometimes stopping to take photos of the car. This event was both private and commercial, managing to package the private leisure time of these young Bangkokians in a quasi-public space linking two malls, with a commercial endorsement of the Yaris and the suggestion that to
drive a Toyota Yaris would indeed be as “groovy” as singing on MTV; see Pictures 4 and 5.

**Picture 4:** MTV Asia Awards 2006 Promotional Event for Toyota Yaris in a Space Linking Siam Square and Siam Paragon Shopping Centres in Central Bangkok

*Source: Photo taken by myself, April 30, 2006, Bangkok*
Inside Siam Paragon, various car brands were on display. There was a Mini Cooper painted by a Thai designer and strategically positioned in front of the Hugo Boss store, leading one to suppose that the "cool" of the Cooper and the "cool" of Boss are synonymous (see Picture 6). Dressed in Boss, and seated in your Cooper, you could literally drive your "status" (both your clothes and your car) throughout Bangkok. The painting of the car by a Thai designer reminds us that the aestheticization of the car through meticulous attention to image is central to car consumption.
As I pointed out in section 3.4.2.2 of Chapter Three, it was the American car industry in the 1920s and 1930s that first realised the benefits of strategising design to create never-ending novelty, product obsolescence, and ultimately higher profits. The most obvious presence of cars was, however, one section of a floor of Siam Paragon occupied by luxury car merchants. Contiguously situated, as if vying to impress each other, were mini-showrooms for brands such as BMW, Maserati, Bentley and Ferrari. These particular brands are obviously not accessible to the average Thai car consumer or the majority of shoppers in Siam Paragon. Their prominent position in the mall, easily within sight of shoppers as they disembark the escalator, suggests the symbolic hold of car ownership, even the ephemeral dream of the luxury BMW or Ferrari beyond one’s reach, carries above its weight. Consumerism is as much about the unattainable dream
acquisition, as it is about what one can afford. Whether one can afford a Maserati or simply a Toyota, or must satisfy oneself with taking the cheapest non air-conditioned bus in Bangkok, car corporations constantly hold out the dream of car ownership, and better-than-the-car-i-have-now car ownership.

Toyota, however, has expanded the concept of commercialisation of public space by opening “The Style by Toyota Café”, strategically positioned in the same Siam shopping enclave in central Bangkok. Frequented by young people and bordering by the prestigious Chulalongkorn University and elite high schools, the position of the “café” ensures a captive audience of teenage and twenty-something predominantly middle class consumers who, as Mr. Tungswan, told me, are able “to get to know about Toyota products” (KI interview, June 2006). The café comprises three multi-purpose levels, and is wired with terminals where young people can explore car technology, among other things. See Pictures 7, 8 and 9.

Picture 7: “The Style by Toyota Café” in the Siam shopping Enclave, Central Bangkok
Source: Photo taken by myself, December 23, 2006, Bangkok
"The Style by Toyota Café" Members Become Familiar with Toyota Products Through Computer Games on Terminals Outside the Café Entrance, and on Terminals Inside

Source: Photo taken by myself, December 23, 2006, Bangkok
Picture 9: A "Style by Toyota Cafe" Member Plays a Computer Game Involving Cars Inside the Cafe
Source: Photo taken by myself, December 23, 2006, Bangkok
Mr Suebsakul Thaweephol, an external marketing consultant for “Digital Fusion” employed by the Toyota café, explained to me that he was employed by Toyota to increase the population in the café (KI Interview, December, 2006). The aim is to extend familiarity with Toyota products, and as Mr Tungsuwan put it, to build brand loyalty at an early age so “Marketing is blended with games and other entertainment content” (KI Interview, June 2006). Consequently, the café is designed as an open space for a target audience of 15–24 year-olds to “hang around” in, and also to participate in structured activities, which they can access only via membership of the café. Every month there is a new activity and theme. The activities invariably combine promotion of Toyota. When I visited the café in December 2006, young teenagers were being taught photography skills. This involved photographing a young provocatively-dressed female model, posing with a Toyota Hybrid car (see Picture 10). It was part of the “Hybrid Creative Arts Studio” month, aimed at promoting the Toyota Hybrid. The café aims to attract different communities of young people, including, for example, music lovers or computer users. By engaging their interest and bringing them together with other young “Style by Toyota Café” members sharing similar interests, Toyota not only commercialises public space, it has effectively commercialised the leisure of these young Bangkokians.
Wilson (2004, p. 189), in writing specifically about Bangkok, refers to this as the “intimacy of capitalism”. Wilson’s view, which this thesis fundamentally supports, is that economic systems, specifically corporate capitalism, texture social relations and cultural forces. She argues that “the ongoing and dynamic interaction between market economies and intimate realms of life is critical to understanding how global capitalism involves and affects social life” (2004, p. 189). She continues, “As markets stage more and more of daily life in Bangkok, people realize their identities and relationships through commercial venues, and capitalist systems recast intimate life” (2004, pp. 189–190).

Shopping venues “provide arguably the major quasi-public spaces of the city: the spaces for social life, social reproduction, and public engagements...
increasingly are commercial ones” (Wilson, 2004, p. 110). These young members of the “The Style by Toyota Café” relate to each other through a commercial venue that “seamlessly” blends their own leisure pursuits and personal interests with instilling early brand loyalty to a consumer product (the Toyota car and company) which, in coming years if not already, they will most likely invest in. Miss Oranit Washirapunsakul, the Consumer Research Manager with Automotive Resources Asia, explained that such a focus on establishing and maintaining brand loyalty is a central feature of a new turn in marketing today, known as “customer relationship management” (CRM) (KI interview, May 2006). This relational marketing is typical of the post-Fordist economy, reflecting the increasing sophistication of marketing practices that colonise increasingly diverse niches of consumers. In “The Style by Toyota Café”, the young consumer, young person, young motorist and the future motorist are indistinguishable. “Being” and consumption are unconsciously allied with each other. Citizenship and civic participation often occurs through acts of consumption. The work of Garcia Canclini (2001, p. 22) reiterates this. He argues that we experience social networks and a sense of social belonging through various acts of consumption. He writes:

In the past, the state provided the framework (albeit unjust or biased) that contained the variety of forms of participation in public life. Nowadays, the market brings together these forms of participation through the medium of consumption.

(Garcia Canclini, 2001, p. 22)

4.4.2 Constructing the Mercedes Driver

As Mercedes-Benz in Thailand has the largest market in South-East Asia, understanding the construction of the Mercedes persona through marketing and advertising is poignant. Mercedes is a symbol of success and prestige worldwide. In the case of the Thai Mercedes consumer, traditional social hierarchies in Thailand merge effortlessly with the marketing pitch of Mercedes brand. That is, the projection of prestige by Mercedes marketing is not a difficult message to sell to hierarchy-conscious Thais. Mercedes historical presence in Thailand is a long one, having been sold there since the 1930s (Middlehurst
and Nielsen, 2002, p. 259). The brand was apparently popular with the Royal
Family at the time also. In the years 1994–1995, sales of Mercedes ranked
fourth highest in the passenger car market, an indication also of the easy credit
bubble which, in 1997, dramatically burst initiating the Asian Economic Crisis

In June and December of 2006, I conducted interviews with Miss Pannate
Rangsinturat, Manager of Marketing Strategy and Research for Daimler
Chrysler Thailand, the company that owns the Mercedes brand. She explained
that a “lifestyle questionnaire” conducted by Mercedes in Thailand in 2006
confirmed that “brand reputation”, that is the prestige and success with which
Mercedes is associated, was the principal reason for Thais to purchase a
Mercedes. Prestige, ahead of quality and durability, was also confirmed as the
chief attraction of Mercedes by Ms Oranit Washirapunsakul, Consumer
Research Manager with Automotive Resources Asia (KI Interview, May 2006)
(see Picture 11). Miss Rangsinturat added that this association “is about
emerging markets”. In countries that are becoming rich, a prestigious car and
condominium are seen as a package testifying to success. Unlike in Europe, a
Mercedes in Thailand still clearly differentiates a person from the great majority
of car consumers. Vehicle styling and design, Miss Rangsinturat also explained,
are very important criterion for Thai consumers when investing in a car. Thus,
the key to selling Mercedes to Thais is an “elegant and luxurious design”.
Advertisements for Mercedes typically capture two important looks: the family;
and the executive. This mirrors the typical identity profile of a Mercedes owner
in Thailand. Such a person, according to Miss Rangsinturat, is in their mid-30s
to 50s, is most likely to be male (the gender ratio being 70 per cent male to
30 per cent female), is often ethnically Thai–Chinese, a business person who
may also be a self-made entrepreneur (the business community in Bangkok is
dominated by Thai–Chinese), and will generally be tertiary educated.
Yet another habit of highly successful people.
The S-Class. For people of eminence, a car of distinction.
Before discussing how Mercedes targets consumers, it is salient to point out that to conceive of car marketing as a uni-directional, top-down process from the marketing department of an auto multinational to an individual car consumer is too simplistic. The Mercedes driver, like the driver of any car brand, neither existed before Mercedes marketing department reached him/her, nor is he/she a creation of Mercedes marketing alone. The Thai Mercedes driver exists quite neatly at the intersection of global (consumer capitalism) and local forces (cultural respect for hierarchy) in Thailand, and is part of a "circuit of culture" where the "meanings and practices" of Mercedes ownership are neither extrinsic to the product itself, nor an intrinsic feature of it (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus, 1997). Five processes constitute this circuit: Representation; Identity; Production; Consumption; and Regulation (du Gay et al., 1997) (see Figure 10 in Chapter Five). These processes are interactive and the product itself not only represents the consumer’s behaviour, but actually transforms it (Zukin and Maguire, 2004). The meanings attributed to products, in this case the Mercedes car, are inextricably linked to the culture in which they operate. As Zukin and Maguire, 2004, has argued, understanding the social history or social context of a culture illuminates the evolution and appeal of particular products (2004, p. 177). The historical context for the embrace of cars in Thailand has already been explained in earlier chapters. The social context in Thailand for the embrace of Mercedes as an emblem of prestige is a certain rigidity of class hierarchy which projects great respect on those deemed socially superior, according to such attributes as education, family background, and often wealth itself.

However, with the transnational flows of globalisation, the meanings accorded Mercedes ownership, or the ownership of any brand, are also inflected by global (capitalist) culture. Thus, it is at the conjuncture of these forces that car ownership finds its status, at the point where global consumer culture meets the local Thai deference to authority, status and hierarchy. Moreover, these meanings are partly attributable to the way they are represented in advertising. Ms Wahirapunsakul argues that one of the most important influences on Thai car consumers today is "attractive advertising" (KI Interview, May 2006).

"Meaning is constructed—given, produced—through cultural practices: it is not
simply ‘found’ in things” (du Gay et al., 2003). Much meaning is conferred upon the car in Bangkok through advertising and the way advertising captures and attenuates cultural respect for authority and status, which today is increasingly given over to certain consumer goods such as the car. It is from this mien, and in contradistinction to previous transport economics attempts to understand the problem of the car in Bangkok, that this thesis conceptualises the car and seeks to ameliorate its negative externalities, that is by understanding that it is also a cultural artefact.

The cultural construction of the Mercedes driver in Thailand, via “representation” at least, occurs through five media, Miss Rangsinturat explained (KI Interview, June 2006). These include print advertisements in newspapers and lifestyle or car magazines, direct marketing (“Mercedes Magazine” is sent to all current Mercedes owners, and “Mercedes car journal” is sent to Mercedes card holders), TV advertising, “product presence” in Thai TV dramas, and “Active Safety Driving Experience”. The latter method involves marketing Mercedes through a driving/safety demonstration offered in a particular location in Bangkok two to three times per year. Miss Rangsinturat explained that Bangkokians are able to come to the venue and test-drive a car and leave in the knowledge that “quality is what sets Mercedes apart”. There is an accoutrement of consumer durables and non-durables that coalesce to collectively depict the Mercedes persona. These items (Rolex watches, Prada clothing and Louis Vuitton bags, for example) are employed in advertisements to signal the wealth of the Mercedes driver. Embellished with these iconic consumer markers of “status”, the Mercedes driver is rendered almost a non-person, and rather a neat package of carefully chosen aspirational goods, a commodity him or herself. Kasian (1997) argues that cars figure prominently in the material expression of the self in Thailand and provides a salient example of a Mercedes advertisement (see Example 1).
Example 1: This Advertisement Offers Special Credit Card Membership to Prospective or Actual Owners of a Mercedes car

“You know who I am. Tell them who you are with a Mercedes Card.”

No longer Thai, a Thai-Thai, or even an un-Thai, but simply a Mercedes person.

(Kasian, 2002, pp. 218-219, emphasis in original)

I asked Miss Rangsinturat about this Mercedes card and she explained that it is offered in conjunction with “Kasikorn Bank”, a major Thai bank. It is a loyalty/credit card, the purpose of which is to “maintain loyalty”, so Mercedes customers “feel exclusive and special”.

Miss Rangsinturat suggested that “emotional values” rather than “functional values” are promoted when marketing cars in Thailand. The emotions appealed to invariably centre on the projection of “status, being trendy, elegant, and sophisticated”. Mercedes in Thailand also has a fairly unique niche market commonly referred to as the “rich kids”. These are the children of wealthy families for whom Mercedes has been the car of choice for generations. Typically, their parents will continue the Mercedes-driving tradition by buying their children a Mercedes as a reward for gaining entry to a prestigious university, such as Chulalongkorn University. One might say the upmarket badge of (Mercedes) automobility also “badges” the academic success of these young Thais. To be successful is to drive, and preferably to drive a Mercedes. Beyond the “rich kids”, Mercedes is attempting to expand their customer base to the younger generation in general, those in their mid-twenties, and in their first job after completing university. The cultural construction of the Mercedes persona begins at an early age. Miss Rangsinturat told me that regular research is conducted to “understand them better and build brand passion in them”, with the aim of encouraging this generation to aspire to Mercedes ownership in the future.

This recalls the aims of “The Style by Toyota Café” referred to earlier in this section. Even before these young Thais can afford a car, or in some instances before they are legally old enough to drive, their perceptions of the most desirable form of mobility (i.e. automobility) are being actively influenced by
multinational car corporations. Yet, it is never simply automobility itself, but is always a particular type of auto, whose ability to attract buyers is also curtailed in years by the policy of car corporations to build in obsolescence in design, and thus ensure novelty perpetually fuels the desires of car drivers. Miss Rangsinturat explained that Mercedes headquarters in Germany is responsible for building in this design obsolescence. Finally, Mercedes mirrors the trend of other car corporations in offering more accessible finance packages to purchase their cars. Small deposits are required and the balance of instalments over time on sometimes quite low interest rates. However, as Miss Rangsinturat pointed out, making Mercedes too accessible, through for example zero per cent interest rate options as some companies do, would contradict all other efforts to project elitism. If too many people could buy a Mercedes in this way, Miss Rangsinturat explained, it “would hurt the image of existing customers and wouldn’t be exclusive anymore”.

The association of particular luxury brands with status is captured by Kasian in an advertisement for Volvo; see Example 2.

Example 2: This Advertisement Projects The Luxury of a Volvo as an Escape from Bangkok’s Traffic, Heat and Pollution

Outside the Volvo it’s hot, noisy and polluted. Inside the Volvo, it’s cool, very quiet and very, very comfortable. The Volvo Executive is an island of luxury and tranquility in a sea of impatience and discomfort. Of course, everyone knows that Bangkok’s traffic is getting worse by the month. And even a Volvo, with its deep leather seats, auto air-conditioning, CD player and stretch-out legroom, cannot make the traffic jams any shorter. Thank goodness, I’m in a Volvo.

One may as well say: “Thank goodness, I’m a Volvo.”

(Kasian, 2002, pp. 218–219, emphasis in original)

Kasian extends the argument about identity and consumer goods, arguing that the phenomenon of expressing identity through consumer goods in Thailand involves “a liberation of national identity signifiers ... an influx of commodities-as-signification units” (2002, pp. 220–221). That is, he argues that commodities
are increasingly replacing national identity referents as signs of personal identity. This is echoed by Garcia Canclini who argues “We are leaving behind the era in which identities were defined by ahistorical essences. Today, instead, shaped by consumption, identities depend on what one owns or is capable of attaining” (2001, p. 16). More than middle class, more than your profession, more than Thai, you may also be the car you drive.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three significant factors that have served to entrench automobility in Bangkok. Firstly, I have shown how the political and economic power of the global automobile industry is a potent force for the spread of motorisation; and national governments, foster the development of the auto industry as a pillar of economic growth. Since the 1960s, Thai Government policy has nurtured the growth of an internationally competitive auto industry that is now the largest in South-East Asia. Secondly, automobility has depended on both export expansion and local consumption. Consequently, Thai consumers are routinely exhorted to consume automobiles through pervasive marketing and advertising throughout Bangkok. Thus, the political economy of the auto industry in turn drives and reinforces the cultural economy of the automobile. In this regard, the third factor I have focused on is the symbolic construction of drivers in Bangkok, through sophisticated marketing and advertising strategies. I have argued that the symbolic construction of Toyota and Mercedes personae exemplifies the reach of multinational corporations into personal lives through the creation of identities around car ownership. Global capitalism penetrates the quotidian lives of Bangkokians and blurs the boundaries between consumption, leisure and entertainment, and between private and corporate space. In the marketing pitch to Thai car consumers, car corporations seek out and reinforce resonance with enduring elements of Thainess, and effectively construct personal identities around the car one drives or aspires to drive.
# Appendix: Chapter Four

## Table 15: The World’s Leading Exporters of Automotive Products

Source: Dicken, 2007: 282

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exporter</th>
<th>% Share world exports</th>
<th>Annual % change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU 15 external</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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Table 16: Automobile Production and Sales 2005
Source: Thailand Automotive Institute, Automotive Industry Master Plan 2006–2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Production</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>U.S.A</td>
<td>11,962,152</td>
<td>19.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>10,729,531</td>
<td>17.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>5,758,710</td>
<td>9.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>5,708,421</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>2,539,865</td>
<td>4.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>3,628,613</td>
<td>5.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2,748,226</td>
<td>4.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2,693,901</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2,781,714</td>
<td>4.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>1,797,773</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Mexico</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>India</td>
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<td>Russia</td>
<td>1,340,947</td>
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<td>Thailand</td>
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<td>Italy</td>
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<td>Belgium</td>
<td>951,493</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>879,277</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>714,871</td>
<td>1.15%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Domestic Sale</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Share</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>U.S.A</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
<td>5,943,071</td>
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<td>China</td>
<td>5,761,921</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Germany</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>U.K.</td>
<td>2,808,153</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>2,547,911</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Italy</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Spain</td>
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<td>Brazil</td>
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<td>Canada</td>
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<td>India</td>
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<td>Russia</td>
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<td>Mexico</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Korea</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
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<td>Thailand</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>565,147</td>
<td>0.93%</td>
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</table>
## Automobile Production and Sales 2005

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Production</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>551,267</td>
<td>0.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>508,718</td>
<td>0.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1,182,153</td>
<td>1.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>61,947,061</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domestic Sale</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19 Belgium</td>
<td>652,772</td>
<td>0.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Netherland</td>
<td>546,020</td>
<td>0.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Other</td>
<td>5,606,781</td>
<td>9.24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>60,689,357</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Five:
The Socio-Material Expression of Mobility Needs:
Symbolic Consumption of Cars

5.1 Preamble

This thesis has taken automobility research out of the transport economics and planning silo in which it has been traditionally conceptualised, and has repositioned the automobility crisis as a socially, materially and culturally embedded mode of consumption in Bangkok. Chapter Four discussed two very significant consequences of the propagation of global capitalism for the uptake of automobility in Bangkok: the promotion of the auto industry as a pillar of economic growth, and the cultural construction of automobility by auto multinationals, supported by the institutions of advertising and marketing. Both of these forces have contributed significantly to the consumption of cars in Bangkok for symbolic and practical reasons.

In this chapter, I will present the main findings of my interviews with Bangkokians, breaking down the symbolic appeal of car ownership into a variety of meaningful categories. These findings indicate clearly that cars in Bangkok unsettle the economist’s definition of a commodity that is “an item with use value that also has exchange value” (Kopytoff, 1990, p. 64). Rather, for Bangkokians, cars are simultaneously “culturally marked as a certain kind of thing” (Kopytoff, 1990, p. 64), and that marker is often status and success. The personal and collective meanings expressed by the research participants are shaped by global trends and their manifestation in the social milieu of Bangkok, as well as the enduring structures of Thai culture, religion, and economic practices, (captured in Figure 2, Chapter One). All of these trends and processes interact to shape attitudes to the private car among Bangkokians. As such, the meanings inherent in car consumption in Bangkok are historical, global, personal and national all at once. The utilitarianism of the car, while undeniably significant, was presented to me by the interviewees as secondary to the car’s symbolic values, and will be discussed in the chapter that follows.
The sentiments of Bangkokians towards car ownership are presented according to socio-economic status (SES). The responses come from car owners, motorcyclists, bus riders, and SkyTrain users. The division according to SES serves to explicate how financial capital enfranchises individuals to participate in a consumer driven auto-centric transport system in Bangkok, where mobility is largely commodified by car corporations. The analysis draws the reader to reflect on the greater urgency expressed by low SES groups who, disenfranchised by a lack of financial capital, chase both the car’s symbolic virtues and its utilitarian functions. In so doing, social inequalities are naturalised and reinforced in a circuitous manner whereby exclusion from the social and material benefits of the car in Bangkok encourages a collective demand for more of the ultimately inequity-producing auto-centric transport system. In Chapter Seven I also point out that resistance to this system appears to be emerging, even if ambivalently, in Bangkok.

In the social determinants of health literature, categorising individuals into SES groups tends to be based mostly on income, education and occupation (Dutton, Turrell, and Oldenburg, 2005). This approach works relatively well for the Anglo-centric societies in which it was developed. Among my research participants there was sometimes an apparent anomaly or contradiction between their level of education and their income. For example, some individuals held a Master’s degree, but earned a very modest income as they were employed by the public sector. In Thailand, public sector employment is prestigious, yet known for being quite poorly paid. The decision was made to define SES largely according to the level of education, rather than income. This decision to make education level a primary criterion was based mainly on the recognition that current incomes may not reflect future earning potential, especially for those with tertiary qualifications. It is generally accepted in the literature that while education may not accurately predict present income, it tends to indicate one’s capacity to accumulate assets and wealth over a lifetime (Dutton et al., 2005). Therefore, while current earnings may preclude some from car ownership in Bangkok, educational qualifications, which are highly valorised in Thai culture, may generate the future income needed to purchase a car. As such in this thesis, low SES generally refers to individuals with a high school education or less.
Those with post secondary school qualifications, usually a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree, are categorised as medium to high SES. This group may be broadly defined as “middle class”, a category capturing a range of professional occupations from public servants, to educators, media and communications personnel, middle managers of companies, and hospitality staff. The range of incomes in this group was quite wide. The strong growth in the numbers of the Bangkok middle class has been a direct consequence of Thailand’s entrenchment within global capitalism and the attendant socio-economic transformation since the 1970s. This group are the main car consumers.

In relation to gender, the research design itself did not set out to specifically illuminate differences in the attitudes of males and females to car ownership. Thus, no specific distinction is made in the findings below between males and females. However, in discussion of the results, any recurring differences between the attitudes of males and females to car ownership will be highlighted.

5.2 The Symbolic Value of the Car for Car Drivers

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 car owners and drivers, both male and female. The group included original Bangkok residents and people who had moved to Bangkok from provincial Thailand seeking study, and or work, opportunities. Most (18 males and females) were of a medium to high SES, reflective of a certain level of affluence required to purchase a car. A small number (five males) were of a low SES.

5.2.1 Medium to High SES Car Owners

Broadly defined, this group associates car ownership with success, and believe that the car reflects one’s status in Thai society. A few said while this was the case for Thai society in general, it did not reflect their own attitude. Nu, a 33-year-old male born in Bangkok said that owning a car is a sign of success for Thai people, because “Thai people judge people with look … in Thai society there’s lots of pressure to have a nice car”. Knot, a 28-year-old personal trainer who owned a three-month-old Honda when I met him, said he “feels proud … [car] shows I am successful … a car is one symbol to show you are successful”. 
Or, a 30-something female researcher said if she had more money she would buy a BMW because it "looks smart ... looks successful ... feel so proud". This theme of the "look" may also reflect the collective roots of Thai culture finding expression in a material good: a synthesis of the global (global consumer culture in the form of a global car brand) and the local (collective Thai culture’s emphasis on the maintenance of "face"). Wat, a 43-year-old businessman from Bangkok who had extensive experience working in the car industry, said:

For Thai people, car is their face ... Thai people care what people [sic] gonna talk about him ... the more expensive the car, the more rich you are in others' eyes ... car is important for their status ... maybe will become less important in 10 to 20 years ... they'll be more Western ... individual and not care what others think ... still Thailand is a collective society ... lack of confidence.

Kaew is a housewife and mother in her forties, whose husband is a doctor. The usage she makes of her car is very much practical, and affords her children educational opportunities, as she is able to drive them to after-school tuition. However, Kaew’s attachment to cars is not purely practical. She also expressed a desire to own a Mercedes, exclaiming "everyone likes to achieve this dream". Mercedes is a very popular brand among Bangkok’s hi so (Thai English for “high society”) and is very conspicuous on Bangkok streets, where it first appeared in the 1930s. The Brooker Group, a private research firm in Bangkok, produced a comprehensive report entitled ‘Thailand’s Automotive Industry’ in 2002. It noted "A 'Benz' has long been amongst the most coveted status symbols in Thailand. The three-pointed star is an icon of influence and is believed to ward off both evil spirits and pedantic policeman" (p. 261). Srinet is a 40-year-old Mercedes driving businesswoman. She told me, "Mercedes is a symbol for success ... even if they have a big debt ... and you only need a small deposit in Thailand." Easy access to car credit and the need to provide only a small deposit may encourage some Thais to take on considerable debt to purchase the symbolic capital that accompanies Mercedes ownership, or indeed car ownership in general. Middlehurst and Nielsen (2002) point out that "During the boom years of 1994–1995, Mercedes Benz was the fourth best
“selling passenger car brand in Thailand; a testament to the easy credit bubble that burst in 1997” (p. 261).

A sub-category of “success” which emerged in interviews with all transport users was what I term here as “socio-economic ascendency for internal migrants to Bangkok”. That is, for those people originating from rural Thailand or provincial towns and cities, car purchase symbolised progression to a higher SES, achievable in the capital, Bangkok. Its resonance seemed stronger because they had, at some point, moved from rural areas to Bangkok for this specific purpose: raising their socio-economic position. They are very proud to be able to literally drive their four-wheeled symbol of success back to their hometown, as proof of their material success in Bangkok. “Or”, a female in her late thirties, told me “My town’s people think owning a car shows successful ... when I drive home, people think I am rich”.

Success also likes to differentiate itself, however. Different car brands denote different lifestyles and gradations of success. Laya is a female in her late twenties whose father owns a petrol station in Bangkok. He bought her a Mercedes, a fairly common phenomenon among Bangkok’s wealthy, according to the Marketing Manager for Daimler Chrysler (Mercedes) in Bangkok. Laya told me her parents bought her the Mercedes because it is “high status in Bangkok and unique”. Laya is happy to distinguish herself from other car drivers and feels “proud” to be seen in her car. She said if she had a new model Mercedes she would think “Oh, I am extraordinary ... deeply inside I like something luxurious, especially car”. Srinet explained how Mercedes is used to express social position. She said, “If you are top management ... drive Mercedes to go to nice restaurant in hotel to show people where you stay in society”. Other car brands express different lifestyles and socio-economic groupings. For example, Pat is a 26-year-old female DJ who holds a Bachelor’s degree, and had recently bought a Toyota Yaris when I met her in Bangkok. The car was being heavily marketed during my fieldwork, relying on the single English word “groovy” as the key slogan. Pat was impressed with the stylish design of the Yaris and says she was immediately attracted to it because of its “cute exterior”. She told me, “I feel like I am sitting inside a rocket because of its
cute design. I feel groovy when I drive my Yaris ... feel cool”. Pat’s car depicts her as a young, successful, stylish urbanite, equally cool and at home in any global city.

Strong sentiments about the romantic leverage the car apparently bestows men in Bangkok were often expressed by the research participants. Kat said, “If a man owns a new car, especially a European car, he can get a beautiful girl”. Bump, a 28-year-old male and Master’s graduate similarly avowed that “in Thai cars show status ... if I say to girl, I didn’t have a car, she say ‘Nothing to talk with you, bye bye’ ... I think car is one function for girls to choose her man ... a car determines beauty of girlfriend”. Gee, a 31-year-old male, was unique among the research participants for the fact that he preferred his bicycle to his own car, and all other means of transport in Bangkok. However, Gee also noted that a car is useful for dating as “girls in Bangkok like guys to have a car”. While not all females I interviewed claimed that they preferred their male lovers or potential male lovers to own a car, the comments of Mercedes-driving Laya affirm what Bump and Kat said. Laya said, “My female friends always ask what kind of car a guy drives if one of their friends meets or dates a guy, because it shows how much money he has”. Pao, a 22-year-old female, said “I like guys to have a car because he is guy so he should have a car”.

5.2.2 Low SES Car Owners

This was a small group of five car owners, three of whom owned a pick-up or van for very practical reasons to earn money as vendors. All five expressed strong symbolic attachment to car ownership. The feeling of pride and a sense of achievement at being able to pay off their own car, often bought on instalments, was very pronounced. James is a 31-year-old male who works in a gym in central Bangkok. He is paying off a car over five years of instalments and said that when he has paid it off he will feel “very proud” because he will “own it”. Driving his car around Bangkok makes him feel “confident”. Jo is a 30-year-old male, married with one child, who completed Grade 9. He does administration work at Chulalongkorn University and owns a pick-up, but said that if he had a lot of money he would buy a Mercedes because it is “tough, safe ... and appearance, image”. San is a 48-year-old male who completed primary
school. He works as a street food vendor and motorcycle taxi driver. He owns a pick-up, which he uses to buy food for his restaurant stall. Ideally, he said, he would like a Mercedes because he would “feel proud ... safe ... fulfil myself ... in a good position”. Mac is a 28-year-old male who owns a small drink stall on Thanon Convent (Convent Street), a well-known street in the Silom business and nightlife area of Bangkok. This street draws a crowd of people throughout the day and into the evening looking for street food. Mac owns a van that he paid off over six years of instalments. He told me he felt “happy and proud when I bought my van because I have a small car before”. In sum, this small group were very attached to their cars, expressing a keen sense of achievement and pride at being able to purchase one.

The romantic capital of car ownership was also expressed by some in this small group. For James, a young 31-year-old single man, having a car was also important for dating. He said “A car is important ... at my age I should have a car to pick up girls”. Thirty-year-old Jo is married, but he told me “If I am single, I would like a car to date girls ... girls want guys to have a car”. Table 17 summarises, using the words of the interviewees, the major themes for both medium to high SES and low SES. What becomes apparent is the way the two groups share symbolic attachments.
Table 17: The Symbolic Value of the Car for Car Drivers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Symbolic value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium to high</td>
<td>Success/status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Thai people judge people with look ... owning car is a sign of success. In Thai society there’s lots of pressure to have a nice car”—Nu, male, 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Mercedes is high status ... high class in Bangkok” —Laya, female, late 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Mercedes is a symbol for success ... even if they have a big debt ... and you only need a small deposit in Thailand&quot; —Srinet, female, 40</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;I feel proud ... shows I am successful ... a car is one symbol to show you are successful”—Knot, male, 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;For Thai people car is their face ... Thai people care what people gonna talk about him ... the more expensive the car, the more rich you are in others’ eyes ... car is important for their status”—Wat, male, 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;If I had more money, I would buy BMW because stylish design ... feel so cool, successful, proud&quot; —March, male, 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of achievement</td>
<td>&quot;Mercedes ... everyone likes to achieve this dream” —Kaew, female, 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Symbolic value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium to High</td>
<td><strong>Romantic capital/sexual attractiveness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(continued)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;A car determines beauty of girlfriend&quot;—Bump, male, 28</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I like guys to have a car because he is guy so he should have a car&quot;—Pao, female, 22</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;My female friends always ask what kind of car a guy drives if one of their friends meets or dates a guy, because it shows how much money he has&quot;—Laya, female, late 20s</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Girls in Bangkok like guys to have a car&quot;—Gee, male, 31</td>
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<tr>
<td>Differentiating membership of lifestyle groups</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Mercedes is unique&quot;—Laya, female, late 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I feel groovy in my Yaris ... like the advertisement&quot;—Pat, female, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;if you are top management ... drive Mercedes to go to nice restaurant in hotel to show people where you stay in society&quot;—Srinet, female, 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-economic ascendancy for internal migrants to Bangkok</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;My town’s people think owning car shows successful ... when I drive home, people think I am rich&quot;—Or, Female, 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Symbolic value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Success/Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If have lot of money, I buy Mercedes because tough ... and appearance, image” —Jo, male, 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If I have Mercedes, I feel proud ... safe ... fulfil myself ... in a good position” —San, male, 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It feels like achievement to own a car ... feel proud” —Jo, male, 30</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I feel happy and proud when I bought van because I have small car before” —Mac, male, 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romantic capital/sexual attractiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“A car is important ... at my age I should have a car to pick up girls” —James, male, 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If I am single, I would like a car to date girls ... girls want guys to have a car” —Jo, male, 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3 The Symbolic Value of the Car for Motorcyclists

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 11 motorcyclists. All but one were male. Nine interviewees (all male) were of a low socio-economic background, reflective generally of their capacity to own a motorcycle, but not to be able to afford a car. Two interviewees (one male and one female) were of a higher socio-economic group and held Bachelor’s degrees. This small number is most likely due to the fact that higher SES groups tend to opt for car ownership. These two interviewees interestingly reflect resistant identities, eschewing car ownership, at least for the present. The group included original Bangkok residents and people who had moved to Bangkok from provincial Thailand seeking study and or work opportunities.
5.3.1 Medium to High SES Motorcyclists

This group of two people were less interested in owning a car than the low SES group. Aung, a 37-year-old female, relies on a motorcycle to get around Bangkok. For her, car ownership held no symbolic value. She said she would like to own a car if she had enough money, but not to drive it in Bangkok because of the traffic. Rather, she would use it to carry family and relatives around in the countryside. Rath, a 31-year-old male, mostly relies on a motorcycle to get around Bangkok, but also use buses and the SkyTrain. He said cars hold no attraction for him and he would only buy one when he got married in order to look after his family.

5.3.2 Low SES Motorcyclists

Almost all of this group would like to own a car but are precluded from car ownership because of personal finances. Symbolic attachment to cars as a measure of success, status, achievement, and progress to a higher SES group (or at least the appearance of belonging to a higher SES group) was more pronounced among this group than among car owners. Bat is a 46-year-old male cleaner and father of three children who relies on a motorcycle to move around Bangkok. He said that if he had a car it would raise his status: “If people see me with car, they would think I am high society”. Somporn, a male driver at Chulalongkorn University in his forties, completed Grade 9 of high school and also uses a motorcycle to navigate Bangkok. He said that if he had money, he would buy a BMW “because it’s middle or high class”. This desire to express a higher socio-economic identity was quite common among this group, and poignantly less pronounced among the medium to high SES car owners, whose car purchase already expressed a high or reasonably high socio-economic identity.

For many of those originally from outside Bangkok, car purchase would symbolically mark off one’s move from rural Thailand to finding success in the capital, Bangkok. Khe is a 23-year-old male who works as a shop assistant at the KFC fast food chain. He had been in Bangkok for only a year when I met him. He rides a motorcycle, yet if he had the money to buy a car he said, “I feel proud, and my parents too … they don’t have a car … use bus … people in my
hometown think I am successful if I have a car". Being able to drive home from the metropolis, Bangkok, to where they had moved to pursue education and wealth, denoted material success. Aek, a 32-year-old male who works at KFC in suburban Bangkok, said, “I would like car to go to hometown ... people in hometown will think I am successful”. There was a strong association between success in the city and car ownership.

Overall, this group relates car ownership with success and status. Mai is an 18-year-old male who works as a fruit vendor in the Siam shopping area of central Bangkok. He shares the motorcycle of his friend and aspires to own a car one day. He said, “In future, I'd like car ... feel more proud, successful”. Somrak is a 38-year-old male who works as a "messenger" at Chulalongkorn University. He travels about 30 kilometres to work on his motorcycle each day. He says his motorcycle is not enough to get around and he would like to buy a pick-up. Then he would feel "proud ... success". He could also use it to work as a street vendor. Aek said that although he likes the fact that his motorcycle allows him to get around Bangkok faster than a car, he would buy a car if he had the money. He said he'd like a BMW because “it's beautiful ... I'd feel proud and successful”. Mod is a 25-year-old male who works as a driver for staff at Chulalongkorn University. He aspires to car ownership for symbolic and practical reasons. He said that if he had enough money, he would buy a BMW because of its “good image and luxury ... I would feel proud, like I am driving everywhere with my friend”.

Regarding the issue of romantic capital, Aek explained that it would be "cooler to date girls" with a car as "girls like guys to have a car". Khe also said that owning a car would be good for meeting girls as "girls like guys to have a car". Table 18 summarises the sentiments expressed by motorcyclists towards car ownership. The expressions used by the low SES riders echo the expressions used by the low SES car drivers. The recurring phrases and sentiments indicate how pervasive the car advertising and marketing campaigns are.
Table 18: The Symbolic Value of the Car for Motorcyclists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Symbolic value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium to high</td>
<td>The two interviewees professed no symbolic attachment to car ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Success/status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“In future, I'd like car … feel more proud, successful”—Mai, male, 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“My parents would be proud … they don't have car” —Khe, male, 23</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If I have BMW, I feel proud … feel like am driving everywhere with my friend”—Mod, male, 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If I have car, it raise my status … feel proud … success” —Bat, male, 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I feel proud … success if I have a car”—Somrak, male, 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sign of moving up to a higher socio-economic group</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If I had money, I'd like a BMW because it's middle or high class—Somporn, male, 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If people see me with car they would think I am high society” —Bat, male, 26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

161
Low (continued) Socio-economic ascendancy for internal migrants to Bangkok

“People in my hometown think I am successful if I have car” — Khe, male, 23

“I would like car to go to hometown ... people in hometown will think I am successful” — Aek, male, 32

Romantic capital/sexual attractiveness

“cooler to date in a car ... girls like guys to have a car” — Aek, male, 32

“Girls like guys to have a car” — Khe, male, 23

5.4 The Symbolic Value of the Car for Bus and SkyTrain Riders

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 10 bus riders and five SkyTrain riders. The group included males and females, low SES and medium to high SES individuals, original Bangkok residents, and those who had moved to Bangkok at some stage for study and/or work opportunities. All the SkyTrain riders had a Bachelor’s degree, or Master’s degree in one case, and thus belonged to the medium to high SES group. Some used a mixture of bus and SkyTrain. However, the majority used one mode of transport predominantly or exclusively. Many bus riders held at least a Bachelor’s degree and were therefore categorised as medium to high SES. Belonging to this group does not automatically mean that car ownership is affordable, especially for government workers who tend to be poorly paid in Thailand.
5.4.1 Medium to High SES Bus and SkyTrain Riders

Among medium to high SES bus and SkyTrain riders, the symbolic virtues of car ownership were also quite strong. However, as I will describe in the discussion section, there was some ambivalence for the car among this group, and especially so among female SkyTrain riders. The small group of SkyTrain riders that I interviewed (five only, and all females) seemed less attached to the car as a marker of status, proclaiming Bangkok traffic was better avoided, the SkyTrain was more convenient, or they simply had no interest in cars. Overall, however, a majority of interviewees claimed they would like to own a car, not only for practical reasons.

The symbolic sentiments expressed by this group were not markedly different from the group of car drivers. Ae, a 23-year-old female, mostly relies on the SkyTrain to get around Bangkok, but also takes the bus. Ae exclaimed that “If I buy a car with my money, feel proud … if I have BMW, I feel proud … look luxury … look smart”. Ae’s statement speaks of two sentiments that came up throughout the interviews. Firstly, the sense of pride at being able to save the money to buy a car, or in many cases to pay it off by monthly instalments was quite pronounced, though much more so among low SES groups, both car owners and aspiring car owners. Secondly, the pride associated with driving a luxury brand, a BMW, was a common feeling expressed by my interviewees. Another female SkyTrain and bus rider, 30-year-old “A” said, “I’d like BMW because looks beautiful … feel proud”. Nu, a 31-year-old male bus rider said “I would like Mercedes because people know is expensive … looks expensive so feel good”. Kat, a 27-year-old male and Bachelor’s degree graduate who had been in Bangkok for only a year when I met him on my fieldwork. Kat relies on bus transport in Bangkok, but aspires to own a car, saying it ‘would be a symbol of wealth for me’. His comments confirm a trend evident in my findings that car ownership is a symbolic marker of upward socio-economic ascendency for those from rural Thailand who move to Bangkok. He said, “Owning a luxury car in rural area is important for your position … in the countryside especially it shows you are wealthy … would make me more proud”. This sentiment was also expressed by Wut, a 24-year-old male, studying a Master’s degree full-time and lecturing
part-time. Wut had only been in Bangkok for one month when we met and relied on the SkyTrain and buses to get around. His father was a farmer and his mother worked in health care. He would like to own a car because of its convenience. He also said that if he had a car and drove back to his hometown in it, then "... show you success in something ... go back to hometown in countryside ... show that oh you success ... very great about your job".

Some males also referred to the romantic capital of car ownership, as in all the other groups of transport users. For example, Kat said, "If a man owns a car, he can get a beautiful girl".

5.4.2 Low SES Bus and SkyTrain Riders

Three bus riders out of a total of 10 whom I interviewed belonged to a low SES group. None of the five SkyTrain riders whom I interviewed belonged to this group. All low SES bus riders expressed a strong sentiment about car ownership symbolically marking off their move from rural Thailand to Bangkok, which was simultaneously a sentiment about success. Ao is a 25-year-old male who has been in Bangkok since the age of 18. He said, "People in my hometown would think I was successful if I owned a car". Ad, a 45-year-old female cleaner, said "If I own a car, my relatives upcountry would think I am wealthy ... even if they don't know I have to buy by instalments". Pikul is a 48-year-old female who has been in Bangkok since the age of 20. She completed Grade 4 of primary school. Her parents were farmers. She told me "I'd feel very proud to own a car ... especially feel proud to take my cousins upcountry around in car". For all of these people, purchasing a car would be a source of pride, success and achievement. Driving a luxury car especially would offer much symbolic capital because it would suggest belonging to a much higher socio-economic group. Ad said, "If I have a lot of money, I would buy a BMW because is symbol of middle class ... feel very proud ... I used to stare at women driving BMWs". Pikul said she would like to buy a Toyota pick-up as she could use it for work as a vendor. However, if she had the money, she would buy a Mercedes because "it's luxury car ... would feel very proud". Ao would like to own a car saying "I'd feel proud because I earned the money to buy it myself" and "it would be good to have a car to date because some girls like it". 
Table 19 summarises the sentiments expressed by bus and SkyTrain riders towards car ownership. As with car owners and motorcyclists, symbolic attachments extend across SES groups, yet were less pronounced among SkyTrain riders.

Table 19: The Symbolic Value of the Car for Bus and SkyTrain Riders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Symbolic Value</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium to High</td>
<td>Success/status</td>
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</table>

"Car be a symbol of wealth for me, if I have"
—Kat, male, 27, bus rider

"I would like Mercedes because people know is expensive ... looks expensive so I (would) feel good drive Mercedes"
—Nu, Late 20s, male, bus rider

"I'd like BMW because looks beautiful ... feel proud"
—"A", 30, female, SkyTrain & bus rider

"If I buy car with my money, feel proud ... if I have BMW, I feel proud ... look luxury ... look smart"
—Ae, 23, female, SkyTrain & bus rider

Socio-economic ascendency for internal migrants to Bangkok

"Owning a luxury car in rural area is important for your position ... in the countryside, show am wealthy ... feel more proud"—Kat, male, 27, bus rider

My town's people think I am successful if have car in Bangkok ... any car”—Nuu, late 20s, male, bus rider

Romantic capital/sexual attractiveness

"If a man owns a new car, especially a European car, he can get beautiful girl”—Kat, 27, male, bus rider
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Symbolic Value</th>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Success/Status/Sense of achievement</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>“If I had a car) I’d feel proud cos I earned the money to buy it myself”—Ao, male, 25, bus rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I would feel proud definitely to own a car because unusual for a cleaner to own a car”—Ad, female, 45, bus rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I’d like Mercedes because luxury car … feel very proud”—Pikul, 48, female, bus rider</td>
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<td>Socio-economic ascendancy for internal migrants to Bangkok</td>
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<td>“People in my hometown would think I was successful if I owned car”—Ao, male, 25, bus rider</td>
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<td>“If I own a car, my relatives upcountry would think I am wealthy … even if they don’t know I have to buy by instalments”—Ad, female, 45, bus rider</td>
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<td>“I’d feel very proud to own a car … especially feel proud take my cousins (up country) around in car”—Pikul, female, 48, bus rider</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sign of moving up to a higher socio-economic group</td>
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<td>“I would buy a BMW because is symbol of middle class … feel very proud … I used to stare at women driving BMWs”—Ad, 45, female, bus rider</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romantic capital/sexual attractiveness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“be good to have car to date because some girls like it”—Ao, 25, male, bus rider</td>
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5.5 Discussion: A Complete Way of Life

This chapter has presented findings on the car’s symbolic appeal for car owners and non-car owners. For most individuals, car ownership is associated with material success and its manifestations in high status, socio-economic ascendancy, and romantic appeal (males). Here, I will discuss these associations in the context of global consumer culture and, to some degree, its interaction with attributes of Thainess.

For all SES groups, the car was associated with material/financial success. This was expressed variously as success in a generic sense, success in relocating from rural Thailand and improving one’s socio-economic status in the capital, Bangkok, romantic success as a male, or merely giving the appearance of success (e.g. buying a car through regular down-payments, while making it appear effortless to others). Nevertheless, there were some notable differences among certain categories of transport users and SES groups, which I will discuss below.

Most medium to high socio-economic group members whom I interviewed consisted of car owners as well as SkyTrain users. The symbolic attachments to car ownership that they shared were very similar, although it is worth noting that a number of females, especially those who used the SkyTrain, tended to have less symbolic attachment to car ownership. Instead, they said they either were not interested in owning a car at all or, in many cases, only wanted a car to be able to drive out of Bangkok (often to their hometown), rather than have to deal with Bangkok traffic.

The sense of fulfilment, achievement and pride associated with car ownership for low SES groups was quite marked. And importantly though not surprisingly, the majority of motorcyclists did say they would like to progress to car ownership if the money was available to them. It is possible, then to speak of a collective transport transition from bicycle, to motorcycle, to car ownership (and perhaps a final return to the bicycle, albeit a brand-name bicycle) that coincides with economic growth over time, and which at an individual level socio-materially expresses one’s own growing wealth. Mr Chamroon
Tangpaisalkit, Director of the Transport Safety Bureau with the Ministry of Transport in Bangkok attested to this, exclaiming:

Car ownership is the way of the economies growing up. First people buy motorcycles, then they buy cars when the economy is richer, then they go back to bicycles again, like Europe. If they are rich, they may thinking [sic] about environment ... back to nature, for example, Austria and Holland. When rich for first time, people want to show a car, so is still a symbol in Thailand ... to show your situation ... show to public you are wealthy to do something. (KI Interview, June 2006, Bangkok)

For the low SES group, and especially for those drawn to Bangkok to make a living, there is even more symbolic capital in car ownership than for the medium to high SES group, precisely because, I would argue, this group lacks the financial capital to purchase one. Exclusion encourages attempts to beget inclusion. Many members of the low SES group expressed the sentiment that car purchase would raise their status, or make them at least appear to belong to a higher SES group. Although there was evidence of agency among this group (which will be discussed in Chapter Seven under the theme of “resistance”), there was more evidence of agency among higher SES groups. My interpretation of this is that the possibility to manifest agency at lower SES levels is much less, because while these individuals remain disenfranchised within a transport system such as Bangkok’s which is heavily auto-centric and thus subsumes the messages and identities projected by the marketers of global car corporations, the psychological (and indeed the practical) pressure to own a car is even greater. At this SES level, and especially when the transport system has for decades engendered a culture of private car ownership, the urgency to buy symbolic capital for one’s daily mobility is even greater because the message is that car ownership is the capital you need to be mobile with pride. When owning and driving a car in Bangkok constitutes a complete way of life and indeed “state of mind” with constant references to the daily rot thi (Thai for “traffic jam”), those excluded from this “way of life” (even with its obvious frustrations) feel pressed to join it and so raise their status.
Thailand, but especially Bangkok (as the crucible of the Thai economy and consumerism), has increasingly embedded itself in the global economy over recent decades, as I argued in Chapter Three. Within this consumer culture, specific commodities are used to position oneself in the social hierarchy. Featherstone explains this phenomenon by arguing “within consumer culture there ... persist prestige economies, with scarce goods demanding considerable investment in time, money and knowledge to attain and handle appropriately. Such goods can be read and used to classify the status of their bearer” (1991, p. 27). My findings confirmed repeatedly that a car is one of these goods in Thailand. Ms Pannate Rangsinturat, Manager of Marketing Strategy and Research, Daimler Chrysler Thailand Ltd (the company which owns the Mercedes brand) told me that particularly in developing countries, a car is “the first thing you go for to show your wealth”. Luxury brands in Thailand, such as Mercedes, are strongly related to social status, especially among contemporary Thais, which Pannate described as “well-educated, travelled, more Westernised” (KI Interview, June 2006). She added:

We (i.e. Thais) still care how others look at us ... that answers why luxury brands have been increasing ... we want to look good, successful, prestigious in others’ eyes ... some people would like a nice car more than a nice house, because you can show your car. (KI Interview, June 2006)

This theme of looking successful in others’ eyes recurred a number of times throughout my interviews. It can be read as part of the same thematic group (success/status/sense of achievement/romantic capital), as each of these meanings become concretised in the eyes of others, i.e. in their look. The sense of status and success is legitimised by ones’ peers in Bangkok society, who confer these meanings in their socially constructed gaze; i.e. to gaze upon another as successful in their Mercedes is not a given. Rather, this gaze exists because of the way in which global consumer culture structures the social and cultural milieu of Bangkok, conferring status and prestige upon specific consumer goods, including the car.

Thais engage with capitalist systems in their new urban workplaces, both industrial and service-oriented. However, they engage with and reproduce
capitalist systems most notably through their consumption practices and the social identities they enact through consumption. Global capitalism in Thailand has recast relationships and identities in the shadow of its market philosophies. This expression of oneself through consumption practices is captured by Livingston, who points out:

mass consumption infiltrates everyday life, not only at the levels of economic processes, social activities and household structures, but also at the level of meaningful psychological experience—affecting the construction of identities, the formation of relationships, the framing of events. (1992, p. 24)

Wilson, who writes specifically about Thailand, points out that global capitalism has arrived in Thailand “with its own figures, (and) personae that represent new modes of work and new styles of being” (2004, p. 191). These new personae in Bangkok include successful hi-so, Mercedes-driving Sino-Thai corporate executives, middle class, white collar, Honda driving nuclear and extended families, SUV aspirational, and style-conscious Generation X and Y consumers of pan-Asian cool embodied in the Toyota Yaris.

Mr Tawatchai Laosirihtong, Director of the Traffic and Transport Development Research Center at King Mongkut University (KI Interview, June 2006), was asked to explain Thais’ attraction to cars. He told me that the first thing Thais want to buy when they have money is a car, whereas in Australia it may be a house, he said. Tawatchai said there were two reasons for this. Firstly, a car “makes you mobile” and this has obvious practical benefits. (I will discuss this point of Tawatchai’s in more detail in Chapter Six, where I summarise the utilitarianism of the car in Bangkok.) Secondly, he pointed out:

cars bring Thais status. The majority of Thais think a car is a sign of success ... car advertisements focus on luxury, not on green technology ... the ‘look’ is important ... so Thais are also very interested in designer labels.

He said he agreed with many others who say that in Thailand “cars are face, not feet”.

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These sentiments were reinforced by Mr Suriya Prasatbuntiya, Director of the Disaster and Safety Integrated Management Bureau, Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Ministry of the Interior (KI Interview, May 2006). In his opinion, two main factors explain the automobility crisis: poor mass transit; and the high status of the car in Thailand. “People want to show they get rich. A car make them important or like higher level”, he said. Another expert who has worked extensively on the issue of road safety and injury in Thailand is Dr Tairjing Siripanich, Director of the NGO “Don't Drink Drive Foundation” in Bangkok. He also works for the Bureau of Non-Communicable Disease at the Ministry of Health. He told me, “If Thais have money, they will buy a car, if not a motorcycle, because that will show their status ... motorcycles are very cheap ... no deposit is needed” (KI Interview, May 2006). Indeed, a majority of motorcycle riders I interviewed aspired to car ownership, attracted not only by the practical affordances of owning a car, but also by the symbolic capital it promised to offer them.

The sentiments expressed by car owners such as Kaew, Kat and Wut, for example, reflect the meanings projected by car corporations and car marketers (institutions of global capitalism), who through the differentiated branding of cars, construct identities around each car. These identities encompass specific lifestyles, aspirations and socio-economic groupings. Thais use commodities, especially the car, to differentiate lifestyle groups. Cockerham, Rutten, and Abel (1997, p. 321) argue “Lifestyles consist of self-selected forms of consumerism, involving particular choices in food, bodily dress and appearance, housing, automobiles, work habits, forms of leisure, and other types of status-oriented behaviour”. Slater (1997, p. 59) explains this concept in terms of the rise of the “choosing self”, which may be explained as the process whereby the industrialization and urbanization of society means identity is much more individualised and avoids description according to traditional referents such as place of birth, nationality and class. “Simply put, modernity’s legacy is a mass crisis of identity: we are faced with the need to ‘become what one is’” (Bauman, 2000, p. 32). For many, consumption is a means to deal with this legacy, a way to “improve” oneself or, if that fails, at least to give the appearance of having “improved” oneself.
Automobility as a phenomenon has been described in terms of three ages, each age being distinct for the way in which the car is invested with meaning as a consumer object. Gartman sees the automobile “as an item of individual consumption in a broader culture of consumerism that charges objects with meanings and identities beyond their immediate utility” (2004, p. 191). The first age (1900–1925), he argues, was “the era of the large specialist crafted luxury car ... upper class status symbols”. This was superseded by the Fordist age (1925–1960) of mass individuality, producing functional but basic cars on a mass scale. After approximately 1960, urban subcultures began to demand qualitative differentiation in the vehicles which expressed their unique individuality, leading to the third age (1960 to the present day). It is identified by postmodernists as the age in which “the car is produced, purchased and used ... as the mark of identity in one of a multitude of lifestyle groups” (Gartman, 2004, p. 191). So when my interviewees profess a desire to drive a luxury brand, they express in the one sentiment more than aspirational desires to express socio-economic ascendancy through the upwardly mobile consumption of cars. They simultaneously wish to employ the car as a very visible marker of their own personality and intrinsic individuality. One interviewee, Mod, a 25-year-old male and motorcycle rider even imagined that driving a BMW would be like “driving everywhere with my friend”. Mod imagines an intimate connection with his BMW, which would reflect his own material aspirations, generating a loyalty between two like-minded individuals, one of which happens to be a car. Of course, the irony of this individuality is that it is market controlled and market determined by global car corporations. I will discuss this point as part of the theme of the “consuming paradox” in Chapter Six.

The discourse of my interviewees suggest their car ownership both brands, and is branded by, their respective lifestyles. They are the “unique” and “groovy” individuals the car marketers in Bangkok and in multinational headquarters imagined in marketing meetings. They are the embodiment, and the consumer, of a marketer’s branded pitch all at once. Thus, Pat, a 26-year-old female DJ exclaims, “I feel groovy in my Yaris ... like the advertisement”, and Laya, a female in her late twenties is happy to drive her Mercedes because it makes her feel “unique”. They are the lifestyle car consumers par excellence, the car
marketer’s dream. They represent the third stage of lifestyle choices and branding that Gartman (2004, pp. 169–170) refers to. Pat and Laya, both females in their twenties, would not be "seen dead" in each other’s respective cars. Their choice to drive a Toyota Yaris and a Mercedes respectively is also a choice to be what the other is not, an affirmation of selfhood vis-à-vis their car brand, signalling themselves out as the groovy and unique Bangkok urbanites they are, or that Toyota Marketing and Mercedes Marketing have also co-opted them to be. The question of whether Pat was groovy before the Yaris arrived in Bangkok (actually, it first caught her eyes while on holiday in Sydney) or Laya was unique before her particular Mercedes appeared on the market is perhaps redundant. As Zukin, (2004, p. 178) reminds us, “production and consumption are not two poles of a commodity chain, but continually interacting processes in a ‘cultural circuit’, where products both reflect and transform consumers’ behaviour”. Du Gay et al. (1997) further explain the concept of the cultural circuit in diagrammatic terms (see Figure 10). We could say that Toyota and Pat made each other “groovy”, and that if it wasn’t for Mercedes Laya would not be “unique”, or that if it wasn’t for Laya Mercedes couldn’t pitch to a "unique" lifestyle group.

Figure 10: The Circuit of Culture
Source: du Gay et al., 1997
Such identities are, of course, transient, and subject to the same built-in obsolescence as the car these Bangkokians drive. Capitalism is a system driven by profit. In order to continually generate profit, companies both fulfill customer needs and manufacture desire in the marketplace. To replenish desire, dissatisfaction must be produced, and consumers’ desires must be projected onto ever-new products, such that the identities with which these products are associated are also continually re-fashioned. As Zukin points out, companies plan the “physical obsolescence and emotional obsolescence” of products (2004, p. 179). I asked Ms Pannate Rangsinturat, Manager of Marketing Strategy and Research, Daimler Chrysler Thailand about this and she confirmed that the German headquarters for Mercedes is in charge of building in obsolescence into the various Mercedes models. Bangkok’s hi so, then, may expect to be continually enticed or frustrated by ephemeral nature of their four-wheeled status. And, while Pat may be the groovy personification of her “groovy” Toyota Yaris today, the only guarantee is that neither Pat nor her car will be “groovy” for an extended period of time. Pat will desire a new car which reflects her evolving identity, as much as Toyota or any other car company in Thailand, will both seek to project and create that future identity.

The adoption of consumer goods by Thais to express particular lifestyles and social identities forces a return to the question of local–global interactions or how the globalised market economy articulates with elements of Thainess. The meanings attributed to car ownership by these Bangkokians are also a product of the synergy between the enduring structures of Thai culture, and the meanings projected by global consumer culture vis-à-vis cars. As many scholars have written, consumer goods offer “global cache”, yet it is mistaken to claim that Thais adopt the foreign goods offered by global capitalism without any reflexivity on their part. Wilson (2004, p. 149) affirms this point by arguing “In Thailand, the foreign, the global, the Western are not one homogenous “other” but are affiliated with different inflections and applications for Thais”.

Commodities are bought into through the prism of local Thainess. The global car brands that Thais buy are also “badged” by local social and political realities or by the enduring attributes of Thainess. For example, the symbolism projected
by global automobile brands such as Toyota and Mercedes is reinterpreted and validated in local terms. Wilson’s work on the articulation of capitalist systems in Thailand with social life and identity captures this. She argues “Bangkok’s social worlds are still shaped by enduring status hierarchies, and workers use transnational corporations, commodified intimacy, and knowledge of Western culture to leverage their status and power in their worlds” (Wilson, 2004, p. 193).

In the case of the automobile, Thai status hierarchies are embodied and replicated in car ownership, and in ownership of specific brands. Thus, Thais draw on the status attributes of global culture, and reconfigure the “meanings” by projecting local meanings onto the automobile. Morris (2002, p. 284) explains this process by arguing that cultures assimilate external cultural elements (in this case global “meanings” attached to car ownership) by interpreting them and reconfiguring them. She argues, “a predefined structure gives shape to meaning elements” (2002, p. 284). That is, the predefined structures of Thainess shape the meaning elements of global culture attached to car ownership. The reconfigured meanings are eventually incorporated into the “deep structure” of the local culture. For example, the Thai cultural phenomenon of the Mercedes-driving hi-so individual embodies the global status referents of Mercedes ownership with respect for status hierarchies in Thai culture (the “predefined structure”) and even leverages on the cultural cache of speaking English through the use of the term hi-so.

Kaew’s sentiments regarding Mercedes ownership exemplify this (see section 5.2.1). For Kaew, the purchase of a Mercedes would complement her family’s high status. As her husband is a doctor, she explained that she needs to “look good” at weddings, for example, so car transport is essential, also to protect her jewellery. Within the hierarchy of Thai culture, doctors, as in many cultures, are held in high regard. A Mercedes car for her and her family represents the dream to complement her high SES identity in Bangkok. Such a car would contribute another signifier to their positioning among Bangkok’s upper middle class. The signifier is an item that offers mobility for her and her family but, significantly, it is a consumer item, a material good in which one of her dreams is bound. The ownership of a Mercedes would be psychologically meaningful to her in that it would be another identity referent in the social world.
Bangkok, in which she and her family live. In this sense, car consumption is socially embedded inasmuch as it takes on symbolic virtues for Kaew and others, which encourage them to buy cars. Collectively, then, the consumption of cars also becomes materially embedded; that is, the car in Bangkok has become a predominant transport mode on which people depend physically to carry out their daily routines of work, socialising, caring for family and relatives, shopping, etc.

This juncture of the global capitalist marketplace and the traditional "moral economy" of Thailand was confirmed by Mr. Patpong Angkahirun, an Officer with the Study and Analysis Section of the Thailand Automotive Institute (KI Interview, July 2006, Bangkok). He told me "yes, sure, every segment of cars has status in Thailand because of seniority ... hierarchy in Thai society, so people want to show this with a car". He added, "cars support your career success ... for example, if you work in a high position, you should have a nice car to show". Thus, he agreed that the global branding of Mercedes as a prestige car set apart from the masses of car consumers is particularly emphasised by Mercedes Marketing in Thailand, where it finds a considerable market in Bangkok among the city's hi so, who often choose to drive a Mercedes as a "mobile" expression of their wealth and position. Mr. Patpong said, "Thai people love Mercedes ... had a lot of status ... Mercedes is number 1 for high end cars in Thailand". Bangkok's hi so can and literally do "drive" their wealth through Bangkok for all to see. As Srinet, a 40-year-old female Mercedes driver, said "Mercedes is a symbol for success ... even if they have a big debt ... and you only need a small deposit in Thailand ... if you are top management, drive Mercedes, go to nice restaurant in hotel to show people where you stay in society". Yet it is not only the top end cars which carry status. As Patpong explained, there are gradations of status within Thai society, and within the car market. Status only has meaning as a relative phenomenon. Honda Jazz and Toyota Yaris are equally signs of status within Bangkok's social milieu. These "cute" cars depict "young, modern, upwardly mobile lifestyles", Miss Oranit Wasiropunsakul, Consumer Research Manager with Automotive Resources Asia, explained (KI Interview, May 2006). Thus, Pat feels
“groovy” capering through Bangkok in her Toyota Yaris, a car that positions her as a young, successful and “cool” urban professional.

I asked Miss Oranit to explain the marketing of cars in Thailand, and the segmentation of the car market. She explained that car marketing shares many similarities with Malaysia and Indonesia, because in all these South-East Asian countries the car is a strong status symbol. “The first thing you can afford is a car, so you buy it to show your success”, Oranit said (KI Interview, May 2006). She contrasted this to developed countries such as the US and Japan where she argues the status of cars is considerably less because general affordability renders cars less of a status symbol. Regarding the segmentation of the car market in Thailand, Miss Oranit confirmed that well-off Thais are interested in Mercedes and BMW, principally for prestige, but also for quality and durability. Young professional Thais in their twenties and thirties are interested in “cute, sexy and fuel efficient cars”, preferring Honda Jazz, Toyota Yaris and Toyota Vios. The top sellers for the middle-class and middle-aged are pick-up trucks (principally Toyota), and are generally bought by small business owners, white collar workers, and public servants. Thus Pikul (48-year-old female cleaner and bus rider) perceives that with the purchase of a Mercedes she could feel very proud. Pikul moved to Bangkok at the age of 20 and she is now 48. Over the past 28 years her life in Bangkok has coincided with tremendous economic transformation in Thailand and the inexorable rise of Bangkok as a city increasingly entrenched in the economic and cultural phenomenon of global capitalism. Where once she and Thais in general, especially those living an agricultural life as her parents did, defined themselves through the collectivistic moral economy and kinship systems of the village, and a sense of “Thainess” firmly rooted in nation and religion (Buddhism), today Pikul and many other Thais enact their social identities through the referents of global consumer culture. For Pikul, and others of a similar low socio-economic background, this thesis finds that the car is a very significant identity referent in the global consumer culture of Bangkok. It is an anchor upon which many Thais project something of their selfhood and level of material success.
Pikul’s dream of owning a Mercedes is also about demonstrating her socio-economic ascendancy, rising from a peasant background to an urban middle-class life in Bangkok. Thus, if she had a car, especially a Mercedes, she would feel proud to drive back to her hometown and take her cousins around in her car. This theme was very strong among low SES non-car owners. I would argue that its significance can be understood by Thailand’s historical context; that is, as part of Thailand’s transitioning from a predominantly poor agricultural economy to an industrial one over the past half a century, marked by rapid urbanisation, cars are employed by internal migrants to Bangkok to symbolise their personal journey from agrarian roots to at least modest financial success in the city. For policymakers, it reminds of the need to displace the car’s symbolism at this time when it is most strong and most likely to result in more cars on the road. In Thailand’s case, that opportunity has passed, but it may be a lesson for nations currently experiencing the same phenomenon of rapid economic growth and urbanisation, such as China and India, and those likely to experience this historical shift in the future.

The association between car ownership and romantic desirability as a partner was manifest across all socio-economic groups. This thesis has not specifically examined gender, nor sought to understand the interesting variable of masculinity and car ownership. Nevertheless, some gender specific attitudes have inevitably emerged in the field. Comments by male interviewees about cars and dating suggest that car ownership is one factor in the social construction of masculinity for many Thai males and, by inversion, the social construction of femininity for some females. Many males employ the car to express a certain level of financial and professional success, and thus suitability as a romantic partner. When Bump exclaims, “I think car is one function for girls to choose her man ... a car determines beauty of girlfriend”, and James says, “A car is important ... at my age I should have a car to pick up girls”, they both acknowledge and perpetuate this construction of Thai masculinity. As car owners, both young men integrate this consumer good into their cultural practice of dating and romance. They effectively enact their masculinity through the market system of global capitalism, which commodifies mobility, and at least texturises perceptions of romantic capital or desirability in men. Those females
who desire their partner to own a car reinforce this social construction of masculinity around the car, and simultaneously reinforce the construction of a femininity that desires a reliable, competent and successful male partner, identified among other things by the car he drives. As Pao said, “I like guys to have a car because he is guy so he should have a car”, or as Laya told me, “My female friends always ask what kind of car a guy drives if one of their friends meets or dates a guy, because it shows how much money he has”. Practically speaking, cars also make dating much easier in Bangkok.

5.6 Conclusion

The impress of cars in Bangkok is cultural, psychological, and material all at once. The sentiments expressed by all transport users in Bangkok, from low to high socio-economic backgrounds, suggest that the psychological and material dimensions of cars and their infrastructure in Bangkok makes automobility a complete “way of life” and state of mind for Bangkokians. As long ago as 1973, Banham wrote that in Los Angeles “autopia” constitutes one of four basic ecologies in the city. He wrote, “[the] freeway system in its totality is now a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life” (p. 213). My research similarly points to the fact that such a state of mind exists in Bangkok.

Discussion about cars, what constitutes a desirable car, the trials of the daily commute, frequent references to rot tit (traffic jams) and the ubiquitous imagery of car advertising and promotional events throughout Bangkok testify to this. Cate writes that:

References to traffic serve a variety of social purposes. In Bangkok, a standard greeting or apology includes the phrase tit maak (meaning “really stuck” or “stuck a lot” in English), referring to the Thai traffic jam, rot tit. If guests do not arrive for a party, or ceremony, or visitors for an appointment, it is understood that the traffic was probably the reason. (1999, p. 28).

Cate even suggests that “traffic—rot tit—names a new spatial and social place” (1999, p. 33).
This thesis reinforces the theory proposed by Freund and Martin (1996, p. 9) that modes of consumption, in this case the car, are associated with their own "socio-material" practices. Freund and Martin argue that:

Auto transport, or more specifically the development of a specific mode of consumption, functions at least to some degree as a means of social reproduction. Once established and sedimented it ensures a continuity of consumption, aided by marketing... ensuring a turnover and circulation of commodities. One function of this mode of consumption, once established, is to assure its own social reproduction—through the dependence that is created at cultural, psychological, and material levels on the commodity for everyday functioning (Freund and Martin, 1996, p. 9).

However, the daily experience of rotate, which denies the promised "freedom" of auto ownership, as well as Bangkok's vehicle-generated pollution, actually counteract or diminish a number of the automobile's benefits in Bangkok. As such, it is possible to simultaneously speak of the disutility of the car, an ironic paradox of car consumption. In Chapter Six, I discuss the theme of the consuming paradox in the context of automobile consumption in Bangkok, presenting data that suggest that car reliance in Bangkok produces a number of problems that detract from its utility and convenience. These problems have spawned resistance to auto ownership and usage among Bangkokians, a subject to be covered in Chapter Seven, followed by policy options in Chapter Eight.
Chapter Six:  
The Socio-Material Expression of Mobility Needs:  
Everyday Utility of Cars in Bangkok and 
the Consuming Paradox

6.1 Preamble

The previous chapter presented clear findings that the car holds much symbolic appeal in Bangkok. In this chapter, I will firstly present and discuss findings from my research on the utilitarian value of cars in Bangkok. Many individuals expressed symbolic attachment to the car, while simultaneously expressing its utilitarian value. I believe this reflects how in the historical absence of adequate mass transit alternatives, and the privileging of auto-centric transport instead, symbolic attitudes to car ownership have been sedimented through the institutions of global consumer culture: car multinationals; advertisers; and marketers. These symbolic attitudes perhaps became more exaggerated because they were not challenged by an alternative in Bangkok, that is, by attractive mass transit. In turn, such attitudes reinforced car dependence at a material level, creating an unhealthy level of dependence that is also utilitarian. However, car dependence ultimately negates many of its promised benefits. My research indicates that the various externalities of car consumption in Bangkok paradoxically render car usage problematic by creating transport injustice, reinforcing social and health inequalities, and sometimes hampering mobility as much as it facilitates it. This chapter captures, then, the utility and disutility of the automobile in Bangkok and so prefaces the emerging resistance to car ownership and usage which I will discuss in Chapter Seven. This resistance offers an opportunity to leverage on the recognised paradox of automobility in Bangkok, and displace some of the symbolism surrounding car ownership. Provided other conditions are met, most notably investment in mass transit in Bangkok, there may be an opportunity to slowly change Bangkok’s car culture. The final chapter will present and discuss a range of measures being taken by other cities throughout the world to curtail both car ownership and usage.
6.2 The Utilitarianism of the Car in Bangkok

This chapter begins by acknowledging a variety of causes for the physical dependency on cars in Bangkok. It is not the aim of this chapter, however, to provide a comprehensive and detailed account of how Bangkokians use their cars. The findings and discussion that appear here nevertheless provide enough insight to draw conclusions about how the utilitarianism of the car in Bangkok complements its symbolic appeal, and helps to further entrench car consumption as a socio-material phenomenon.

Bangkok, like many Western cities in the second half of the twentieth century, pursued a land use policy favouring suburban sprawl. This policy seems to still predominate, while many developed nations have since moved towards building more compact cities with residential housing clustered around mass transit nodes throughout the city. Both Dr Paibul, Professor of Community Medicine at Mahidol University (KI Interview, May 2006), and Mr Chamroon Tangpaisalkit, Director of the Transport Safety Bureau at the Ministry of Transport (KI Interview, June 2006) explained that the physical design of Bangkok encouraged car dependence. Sixty per cent of Bangkokians live approximately 20 kilometres from the centre of Bangkok, and they are not well-serviced by public transport, Mr Tangpaisalkit explained. Consequently, he said, they buy a car, or a motorcycle if they lack the money to buy a car.

Across all socio-economic groups, Bangkokians complained to me that one reason they needed a car or wanted to buy a car was the inadequacy of public transport. It is the lack of perceived viability of alternatives to the privately owned car that frames the responses to the utility of the car described in this chapter.

I discuss the problems of mass transit in Bangkok in greater detail in section 6.5.1 in the context of the paradoxes car consumption engenders. As such, here I will summarise the problems briefly. Mass transit was generally described by most of my research participants—regardless of whether they owned a car or not—as late, dirty, overcrowded, insufficient, and sometimes unsafe. Buses received the worst appraisal for their rude and unsafe drivers, getting caught in
traffic jams, emitting foul pollutants, and being frequently late. People in cars, then, while still exposing themselves to the danger of an accident, are at least able to protect themselves from the apparent dangers of taking buses, especially private buses in Bangkok. It was generally agreed that buses were cheap and some people said they opted for buses rather than the SkyTrain because the SkyTrain is too expensive. Air-conditioned buses fared better than non air-conditioned buses because they are obviously more comfortable in Bangkok's year round heat, and protect passengers from the pollution, which is felt more strongly along Bangkok's roads. All the research participants spoke well of the SkyTrain, the only complaint being that it is too expensive for some. It was liked for its speed (it cannot get caught in traffic like buses), air conditioning, and cleanliness, and was generally deemed an attractive and efficient transport option. All the interviewees would like to see the SkyTrain extended in Bangkok. Many complained that it did not reach their house. For these reasons, many said a car was necessary in Bangkok.

Across all SES and transport groups, Bangkokians told me that cars provided an escape from Bangkok's pollution and rain, but especially the heat. As James said, “Thais wanna escape hot weather in cars”. Bangkok experiences hot weather and high humidity throughout the year. While some buses, the SkyTrain, and Bangkok’s single underground metro line are air-conditioned, cars offer the greatest door-to-door escape from the heat. Cars also protect their occupants from pollution. Bangkok’s air quality has shown improvement, but remains poor, as discussed in Chapter Two. Ironically, the pollution, which is a by-product of extensive motorisation, encourages some people into cars to escape it, and ultimately creates more atmospheric pollution.

For car drivers, the phenomenon of driving children to distant schools across Bangkok was related to the general inadequacy of public transport. This particular utilitarian function sits well under the general category “Fulfilling family duties”. Mr Tawatchai Laosinhonthong, Director of the Traffic and Transport Development and Research Center at King Mongkut University, explained “parents are always driving children to schools far away. We don’t want children to take public transport ... think it’s dangerous” (KI Interview, June 2006).
Mr Abdul Quium, Economic Affairs Officer for the Transport and Tourism Division of UNESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), Bangkok, told me:

School trips constitute about one-third of all trips on school days. The best schools are in Bangkok and students come from all over Bangkok to these schools. Often they are dependent on private vehicles to do this … these schools don’t have large parking facilities, so sometimes if early parents keep circling the school waiting to pick up children, and adding to traffic problems. (KI Interview, June 2006)

Kaew, a mother in her forties (referred to in Chapter Five) proclaimed that education is her priority for her children. She relies on her car to drive her children significant distances to good schools, as well as to after school tuition. Cars are thus seen by many parents as necessary to give children access to a better education in Bangkok, and therefore greater life opportunities. All socio-economic groups said that a car allows, or would allow them, to better look after their immediate family and relatives. In a collective society like Thailand’s, familial responsibilities constitute a significant duty; some might argue even a burden. Many interviewees explained how a car enables them to drive their parents around Bangkok for both practical and social trips. Bump, a single 28-year-old male (referred to in Chapter Five) said to me “very difficult to look after family without car”. Somporn, a driver at Chulalongkorn University who has one child and relies on a motorcycle to get around Bangkok, told me “If I have car, could take my family around … more comfortable”.

Another theme that recurred throughout the interviews with car owners is the idea of the car as a private world unto itself, an escape, and even a “second home”. Given that Bangkok drivers spend considerable amounts of time caught in traffic jams, this is not surprising. Mr Tawatchai Laosinhongthon, Director of the Traffic and Transport Development and Research Center at King Mongkut University of Technology (referred to earlier) explained that in Bangkok “car is like a second home, because you don’t have a good public space. Thais do many things in their cars, eating, etc … there are also TVs and good sound systems” (KI Interview, June 2006). Tawatchai’s reference to the lack of good
public space in Bangkok confirms my own observations based on living there during my fieldwork. Firstly, Bangkok is a city that discourages walking because it provides very poor infrastructure to do so. The combination of heat and poor walking amenities frequently drove me indoors to seek more comfort. Very often that meant air-conditioned shopping malls. A significant number of car owners expressed this sentiment of privacy and a world unto itself in their car. Sup, who spends four to five hours per day in his car travelling around Bangkok, told me “My car is like a retreat ... I can create my own world in car ... sing loudly, practice karaoke”. Opal said, “My world is in my car ... my life will be definitely worse without a car”. Public transport, no matter how comfortable and efficient, cannot compete with the car for privacy.

One sentiment that was quite often expressed by females was the association between cars and safety. A car was desired by a significant number of females, especially current car owners, in order to protect them from public transport dangers. The perceived dangers of buses (for males and females) are referred to earlier in this section. However, females specifically feared being kidnapped and or raped in taxis. These fears about taxis were only expressed by females, and highlight a gender inequality which disadvantages females unable to afford cars. Often high-end cars such as BMW were perceived as very safe. The perception seemed to be that such cars would protect one better in an accident, or make an accident less likely. Lek, a 31-year-old female car owner told me “I’d like BMW ... would feel safe because trust BMW technology”. Mercedes were also widely considered to be a safe brand. Safety and protecting one’s family are sentiments widely appealed to in the marketing of high-end cars. Ms Pannate Rangsiriturat, of Mercedes Marketing (referred to Chapter Five) told me that globally Mercedes appeals to three core values: safety and reliability; prestige; and environmental responsibility (KI Interview, June 2006).

Accessing jobs and fulfilling job requirements is enabled by the car. One of the most significant findings revealed in my interviews is that pick-up trucks are desired by low socio-economic groups in order to increase their earning capacity as a street vendor. Pick-ups hold significant status among this group and allow individuals and families to transport goods across Bangkok to sell in
street stalls, from the back of the pick-up itself, or to transport food and drink for the many street food vendors in Bangkok. Jo, a 30-year-old male who is married with one child, told me “My wife sells bread in front of factory ... my life worse without car because no business”. Mac is a 28-year-old male who runs a drink stall on the famous Thanon Convent (Convent Street) in Silom. He owns an Isuzu van, which he paid off over six years of instalments. He uses it mainly for his business, to buy and carry goods to his street stall. He told me he was very proud when he bought it and that it would be “very difficult to work without van”. His livelihood depends on it. On the same street I met San, who works both as a motorcycle taxi driver and a street food vendor. His small restaurant stall has been his main source of income for eight years. His wife and nephew also work with him and help to oversee the stall when he spends periods of the day ferrying passengers around the area on his motorcycle taxi. San told me “I need pick-up for my business ... use pick-up to buy things for restaurant stall 7 days a week”.

Among the medium to high socio-economic group, several individual car owners explained how it would be very difficult or impossible to carry out their jobs if they didn’t own a car. For example, Sup works as an Area Manager for KFC, requiring him to visit KFC stores throughout metropolitan Bangkok. He told me, “I need a car to drive around for work ... about 4 to 5 hours per day”. Pat, a female DJ, also said “I need car to travel to many places for my job”. Cars in Bangkok allow some people to perform the various functions of their job, and simply allow others to access their workplace every day, especially where it may be very difficult to do so on public transport. As such, many Bangkokians depend to some degree on cars to maintain their livelihoods. Table 20 summarises the utilitarian sentiments of the car drivers.
Table 20: Findings: The Utilitarian Value of the Car for Car Drivers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Utilitarian Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium to High</td>
<td>Overcome inadequacy of public transport</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Public transport is not good and not safe”—Lek, female, 31</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Can’t live without car, because public transport late, crowded, polluted”—Laya, female, late 20s</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Owning car is important because public transport not enough”—Or, female, 30s</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Can’t survive without a car in Bangkok ... part of life because transportation not good”—Srinet, female, 40</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fulfilling family duties</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Impossible ... very difficult to take children to school or after school tuition without car”—Kaew, female, 40s</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Very difficult to look after family without car”—Bump, male, 28</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I also use car to drive my parents around”—“M”, male, 25</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of safety (for females)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Women can be kidnapped or killed in taxis. Women are scared to take taxis, so they want a car. Though with the call centre it’s better now”—Srinet, female, 40</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I’d like BMW ... would feel safe because trust BMW technology”—Lek, female, 31</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“My car is just for safety and comfort”—Lek, female, 31</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I feel safe ... my private space”—Laya, female, late 20s</td>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Utilitarian Value</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medium to High (continued)</td>
<td>“If I lost my car tomorrow, I feel nervous, not safe, uncomfortable… taxis are dangerous for women… often crimes against women in taxis in Bangkok… rape and killing for money”—Pat, female, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Women can be kidnapped and killed in taxis… women are scared to take taxis, so they want a car”—Srinet, female, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessing job/fulfilling job requirements</td>
<td>“I need a car to travel to many places for my job” —Pat, female, 26</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I need a car to drive around for work… 4 to 5 hours per day”—Sup, male, 32</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Second house’/a retreat/privacy”</td>
<td>“Like a retreat… I can create my own world in car… sing loudly, practice karaoke”—Sup, male, 32</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“My world is in my car… my life will be definitely worse without a car”—Opal, female, 40s</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Car is my private space”—Laya, female, late 20s</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Feels very private in my car”—Pat, female, 26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Convenience/“Freedom”</td>
<td>“I can go anywhere in my car… freedom”—Ex, female, late 20s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Overcome inadequacy of public transport</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Public transport is very bad”—Jo, male, 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Utilitarian Value</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Low (continued) | Fulfilling family duties  
“Car is very important to look after my family”—Jo, male, 30 |

**Increase earning capacity as a street vendor**

“*My wife sell bread in front of factory ... my life worse without car cos no business*”—Jo, male, 30

“I use van for my business ... buy things and carry to street stall ... very difficult to work without van”

“I need pick-up for my business ... use pick-up to buy things for restaurant stall 7 days a week”—San, male, 48

**“Second house”/Retreat/Privacy**

“My car is like my second house ... very comfy ... my own property ... an escape”—James, male, 31

**All groups**

Avoid pollution, heat and rain

“Thais wanna escape hot weather in cars”—James, male, 31

“Hot weather also makes me want car”—Or, female, 30s

“Car is important in heat and rain”—Pip, female, Early 20s

“I only use car in rain”—Gee, male, 31

Motorcyclists, like car owners, aspired to car ownership in order to be able to fulfil family duties, generally expressed as being able to “take family members around”. However, the utilitarian function that held the strongest appeal for motorcyclists was using a car to earn more money for themselves, or their family. They aspired to own a pick-up like street vendors referred to earlier. Aek, a 32-year-old male motorcyclist explained that if he had a pick-up it would allow his parents “to do some business”. Mod, a 25-year-old male said, “If I have...
money, I will buy a van ... could earn money, like a private bus driver". Interestingly, however, this group saw less practicality in car use than other transport users. The greatest virtue of their motorcycle was being able to weave through traffic and enjoy relative freedom unavailable to car owners stalled in their vehicles. Unlike, other groups, therefore, motorcyclists don't see the car as a means of overcoming the inadequacy of mass transit, and don't see it as potentially offering convenience. See Table 21 for a summary of the utilitarian functions of the car for motorcyclists.

Table 21: The Utilitarian Value of the Car for Motorcyclists

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Utilitarian Value</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium to High (only 2 interviewees belong to this group)</td>
<td>Fulfilling family duties</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;[If still in countryside], I'd buy a van to take family ... relatives on trips&quot;—Aung, female, 37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Fulfilling family duties</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;If have car, could take my family around ... more comfortable&quot;—Somporn, male, 40s</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;I would like car to take family around&quot;—Bat, male, 26</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Provide earning capacity as a vendor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;I would like an Isuzu pick-up ... carry many things for business&quot;—Mai, male, 18</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;I would buy a van ... could earn money ... like a private bus driver&quot;—Mod, male, 25</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;I would like pick-up to sell stuff, but now not enough money&quot;—Somrak, male, 26</td>
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<td>&quot;I'd like pick-up because my parents can use to do some business—Aek, male, 32</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Bus and SkyTrain riders shared similar sentiments regarding the car's utilitarianism to other groups, yet while the general convenience of owning a car was valued by car owners, interestingly it was emphasised more by bus and SkyTrain riders, who perceived that (a future) life with a car would be better. The dream of being able to pick up and go anywhere, at any time, is quite strong among those who rely on public transport (see Table 22). Those with a car expressed this sentiment less than public transit users, something which I believe may reflect the consuming paradox of car consumption; that is, that the "promised freedom" is not delivered. This point is discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter. Bus and SkyTrain riders imagined the door-to-door convenience of car ownership. This is, of course, related to the inadequacy of public transport, a point discussed earlier in reference to car owners and mass transit users. It is worth noting, however, that bus riders especially complained of the general poor service in Bangkok. Their daily experience of poor safety, dirtiness, and speeding and impolite drivers strengthened their desire to own a car.
Table 22: Utilitarian Value of the Car for Bus and SkyTrain Riders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Utilitarian Value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium to High</td>
<td>Fulfilling family duties</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“If I have car, take my parents anywhere”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>—Dar, late 20s, female, bus rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Overcome inadequacy of public transport</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Bus drivers not polite, rough … race other buses. Sometimes walking is faster than bus”—Kat, male, 27, bus rider</td>
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<td>“Buses are too noisy, dirty and drivers speed … ticket collectors are rude … have to wait a long time … private bus drivers are very bad”—Tum, female, 30s, bus and SkyTrain rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Private buses are very terrible … low standard … sometimes driver is drunk … drives very fast … sometimes hits pedestrians”—“M”, male, late 20s, bus and SkyTrain rider</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I don’t like buses because too many people … drive too fast … traffic jams and staff not polite. Bangkok needs more SkyTrain … sometimes I take because air conditioning … but no SkyTrain near my house”—Pie, female, 23, Bus and SkyTrain rider</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Buses take too long because traffic jams … need more SkyTrain and MRT (underground metro)”—Dar, female, late 20s, bus rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Skytrain is better than bus … because has air conditioning so can protect my make up and clothes”—Pum, 30s, female, SkyTrain rider</td>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Utilitarian Value</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Medium to High</strong></td>
<td>Convenience</td>
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<td>(continued)</td>
<td>&quot;If have car improve my quality of life ... My life be better cos could go anywhere&quot;—Nu, male, late 20s, bus rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;If I have car (would) improve my quality of life in Bangkok only sometimes, when the traffic is less, such as Songkran)&quot;—Oil, 23, female, SkyTrain rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;If I had a car, my life better ... go anywhere, anytime&quot;—Ae, female, SkyTrain &amp; bus rider</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td>Fulfilling family duties</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Car (would be) convenient with family&quot;—Pikul, 48, female, bus rider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overcome inadequacy of public transport</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Private bus drivers are very rude&quot;—Ad, female, 45, bus rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Buses overcrowded ... have to wait long time. Private bus drivers are very rude. Need more SkyTrain in Bangkok&quot;—Pikul, female, 48, bus rider</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide earning capacity as a vendor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Could carry many things ... work as a vendor&quot;—Pikul, 48, female, bus rider</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Could use pickup to sell stuff in market&quot;—Ad, 45, female, bus rider</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
6.3 The Consuming Paradox

The consumer has become a god-like figure before whom markets and politicians alike bow. Everywhere, it seems, the consumer is triumphant ... And yet the consumer is also seen as a weak and malleable creature easily manipulated, dependent, passive and foolish. Immersed in illusions, addicted to joyless pursuits of ever-increasing living standards, the consumer, far from being a god, is a pawn, in games played in invisible boardrooms. (Gabriel and Lang, 1995, p. 1)

My research suggests that the consumption of cars in Bangkok is a paradoxical phenomenon. Chapter Two captured the most serious paradox of car consumption: egregious public health consequences. In the remainder of this chapter, I will move on to discuss the paradox of car consumption in general, and also through specific reference to the paradoxes it produces for Bangkokians in their daily lives. As a seemingly inevitable consequence of this, I have found that there are emerging signs of resistance to car ownership and usage in Bangkok.

As the economies of the Asian Tigers (South Korea, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan) took off in the 1970s and 1980s, consumerism sedimented itself throughout East Asia and soon spread to South-East Asian nations such as Thailand. In relatively poorer economies such as Thailand, however, consumer goods have not been as accessible to the same proportion of the population as they have in richer nations. Throughout all of these nations, consumerism has revealed its limitations. Inequality of access to goods, the failure to deliver promised dreams, the very ephemeral satisfaction of desires, sometimes poor health consequences, environmental degradation, and the simulation of freedom are some of the paradoxes of consumption. Undoubtedly these problems co-exist with certain positive attributes, especially with the power to create one’s own biography (Miles, 1998, p. 158). Yet ultimately even one’s own biography can never be entirely unique as long as it is circumscribed by the decisions and exigencies of global corporations: what the UN (2003) describes as the limited “menu” of global capitalism. It is the juxtaposition of these forces—apparent freedom and poor health and social inequalities, for
example—which highlights the paradoxical nature of consumption. Miles (1998, p. 147) thus argues “consumerism is ultimately as constraining as it is enabling”. He emphasises that this paradox has two dimensions: the relationship between consumerism and inequality; and the ideological character of consumerism which reinforces the status quo inasmuch as any freedom is “partial” simply because it will always be limited by its propensity to serve the status quo (1998, p. 153). I will employ Miles (1998) notion of the “consuming paradox” in reference to car consumption in Bangkok to highlight how it is a socially divisive phenomenon.

Various writers have touched upon the notion of the consuming paradox, either directly or indirectly through discussion of the inequities, curtailed freedoms or the negative material consequences of consumption (Freund and Martin, 1996; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Gartman, 2004; Campbell, 1987; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Harvey, 2003; Landry, 2007). Their writings reiterate the necessity of critiquing consumption and seeking a more comprehensive scholarship and debate on the role it plays in people’s lives. As mentioned in Chapter One, with the emergence of a class of one billion new consumers in 20 “middle-income” countries whose total purchasing power equals that of the United States (McMichael, 2009, p. 2), there is growing urgency to understand the nature of consumption and its paradoxes. In critiquing consumption, a logical point of departure is to remember that consumption is the essential driver of the capitalist economic system. The reproduction of the system is contingent upon the willingness of individuals to consume goods and services. As Sklair (1991, p. 82) points out, “Without consumerism, the rationale for continuous capitalist accumulation dissolves”. With this in mind, Landry (2007, p. 37) reminds us, without at all condemning capitalism per se, that “The market economy has no mechanism within itself that ensures ethics or trust. It is the embodiment of self-interest”. This begets the question: Whose interests are ultimately served by the market economy?

In the era of neo-liberalism and deregulated markets, corporations and their shareholders may be the ultimate beneficiaries. Miles (1998) concurs with this view, arguing that consumerism has the ideological function of preserving the
status quo. Harvey (2003, p. 940) takes a similar position arguing that, "There is as the old saying goes, 'nothing more unequal than the equal treatment of unequals'. The rich grow richer and the poor get poorer through the egalitarianism of exchange". It is not my intention in this chapter or in this thesis to critique capitalism as an economic system. However, as consumerism cannot be decoupled from capitalism, a critique of consumerism might be read as a critique of the system from which it derives.

The socially divisive nature of consumerism is a central theme in any discussion of the consuming paradox. The UN (2003) argues that global consumer culture is a "double-edged sword", which unites as much as it divides. For those who have the financial resources, consumerism creates social bonds with others worldwide who share similar tastes and material aspirations. However, the UN (2003) warns, the majority are excluded from this global consumer culture, leading to a political power struggle at two levels: between richer nations securely rooted in the global economy and poorer nations; and between socio-economic groups within nations. Thus, consumption is always an ambiguous and contradictory phenomenon, which ultimately creates social divisions. For the UN (2003), the power balance is always tipped in favour of richer Western nations and richer socio-economic groups within nations. It is these richer nations and groups whose interests are most served by preserving the status quo, that is, consumer capitalism. This is the ideological dimension of the consuming paradox raised by Miles (1998). Poorer individuals and nations are excluded principally because of money. Gabriel and Lang (1995, p. 32), in their critique of consumption, argue, "Money gives choice. Choice gives freedom. Whatever the area of consumption, from crime protection to clothes, from health to education, from cultural industries to cars, money is the final arbiter". The political mien of consumption extends also to its power to employ social causes as a means to sell more products. Zukin and Maguire (2004, p. 183) point out, for example, that causes such as racial equality, environmental awareness and women's rights are adopted to promote products. The political consequence is that issues of social justice are commodified and merely reduced to the "freedom" to choose one product or another. As such, the consumer "freedom"
exercised by individuals paradoxically also diminishes freedom by neutralising voices of dissent on issues of social justice.

The exclusionary and divisive aspect of consumption is reproduced on a daily basis because consumerism has become naturalised. Individuals perform daily acts of consumption in order to reproduce their lifestyles, and in an attempt to create new lifestyles through what they are able to consume. In this sense, as Miles (1998, p. 155) points out, the perception is reinforced that consumerism as a way of life is both natural and, I would add, neutral in its impact. Paradoxically, however, it is not a neutral force because it creates inequalities. Ironically, higher socio-economic groups depend on these inequalities in order to enjoy the symbolic rewards of consumerism, and to be able to differentiate themselves, through consumption, from those below (Miles, 1998, p. 155). While consumption offers choice to many individuals, their exercise of choice simultaneously disenfranchises great numbers of people who lack the financial resources to consume to the same degree (Bauman, cited in Miles, 1996, p. 151).

Consumerism’s power rests to a significant degree on its daydreaming quality. Cities especially are sites of consumption emblazoned with “promises” of fulfilment and a better life through consumption. The experience of consumerism is, therefore, very emotive. Campbell (1987, p. 48) points out that consumption’s affective dimension is greater than any rationality involved. He argues that modern consumption is underpinned by an illusory daydreaming quality. The greater source of satisfaction is the imaginative daydreaming projected onto the product, rather than the product itself. Campbell reminds us that the

the dynamic interaction between illusion and reality is the key to the understanding of modern consumerism and, indeed, modern hedonism generally. The tension between the two creates longing as a permanent mode, with the concomitant sense of dissatisfaction with “what is” and a yearning for “something better”. (1987, p. 90)

However, for those people who can only daydream about the goods ubiquitously advertised, there is a lingering sense of disempowerment and
exclusion, and even a sense of diminished self-worth. Gabriel and Lang (2006, p. 193) point out, "Inequalities among consumers are already sharp, leaving substantial numbers of them window-shopping with only restricted opportunities to make a purchase and many, in the developing countries, without even windows to window-shop". Ger and Belk (1996) similarly argue that this exclusion engenders a sense of lost control and encourages individuals to withdraw, ultimately continuing a cycle of poverty. This sense of being disenfranchised is borne out in my research findings on car consumption in Bangkok, and will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Earlier in this section, I introduced the concept of consumerism’s circumscribed freedom. The active process of ascribing meaning to consumption activities is often equated with the exercise of power. Yet, as Miles (1998, pp. 154–155) points out, the power to express oneself and to create one’s life through consumption is always defined by capitalist corporations. He concludes, therefore, that:

The real power relationship between the consumers and the producer is inevitably camouflaged by the superficial appeals of apparently liberating and creative consumer lifestyles. Consumer capitalism actively wants consumers to experience what might be described as “pseudo-sovereignty”. (Miles, 1998, p. 156)

Zukin and Maguire (2004, p. 183) extend on this idea of a diminished freedom when they describe how the practices of marketing and public relations “tend to reduce consumers to buying machines”. Marketing managers throughout the world aim to create homogenous monocultures of consumers based on the material aspirations of American consumer society (Zukin and Maguire, 2004, p. 188). To this end, they strategically seek to minimise national, ethnic or cultural differences. Marketing practices such as VALS (values and lifestyle surveys), for example, categorise individuals into market segments of people united by a relatively small number of symbols or material practices. This segmentation has extended beyond the demographics of class, education and income, removing people both “from their social context and the integrity of their individual lives” (Zukin and Maguire, 2004, p. 183). It is in this sense, that
“freedom” is compromised or diminished. Marketers exercise significant power in reducing individual personalities to universal consumer subjects. However, it would be simplistic to argue that consumers are entirely the victims of marketing and that they lack the power to manipulate or resist the ascriptions of global consumer culture. As Zukin and Maguire reiterate, “consumer culture provides tools for resistance, as well as for integration and adaptation” (2004, p. 189). My own research findings bear this out with signs of, admittedly ambivalent, resistance to car ownership in Bangkok. I will discuss this and the question of structure and agency in Chapter Seven.

6.4 The Consuming Paradox of Car Consumption

Cars, alongside housing, are one of the most expensive consumer durables that individuals will purchase in their life. As mentioned in Chapter One, by 2020 the number of private four-wheeled vehicles on the road is expected to double to 1.3 billion (Dahl, 2005, p. 238). Therefore, the urgency to understand the paradoxes of car consumption and draw such discussion into public debate and policy-making is critical. The encouragement and reinforcement of social exclusion is, along with the direct public health impacts, the most serious paradox of auto-centred transport systems. As the literature points out, transport-related social exclusion encompasses a range of exclusionary factors: reduced social capital, access to employment opportunities, access to health services such as hospitals, a sense of being unsafe, a diminished sense of self-worth or a loss of status, and greater exposure to pollution, isolation and a greater likelihood of pedestrian death as a result of living near busy roads (Freund and Martin, 1996; Cass, Shove, and Urry, 2005; Ross and Pourgsomlee, 1992; Hodgson and Turner, 2003; Church, Frost and Sullivan, 2000; Hamilton, Jenkins and Gregory, 1991; Stanley and Lucas, 2008; Social Exclusion Unit, UK Government, 2002).

In the twentieth century, auto-centred transport systems became naturalised throughout the developed world and increasingly throughout the developing world, and with this form of transport transition followed differential access to mobility. Although there are exceptions, where governments have taken action
to neutralise the negative social impacts of car dependence and have turned to more sustainable, healthier and equitable transport systems (see Chapter Eight), in many cities social exclusion has grown in parallel with increased car dependence. The distribution of these social impacts is uneven as it affects non-car owners the most. Yet, the ultimate paradox of car consumption is that a tipping point is often reached where the advantages of car usage are largely negated by the cumulative disadvantages, affecting everyone alike; a phenomenon Hardin (1968) calls the "tragedy of the commons". This theory argues that the aggregate impact of many individuals acting in their own self-interest can be the destruction of a common system or resource base. In other words, when many individuals exercise their right to car ownership, the cumulative impact (traffic jams, and a diminishment of mobility and freedom) begins to destroy the system for all, or at least reduce its benefits. Schipper, Director of Research with the World Resources Institute’s Center for Transport and the Environment (EMBARQ) explains how the growing middle class in China are opting for car ownership to increase their mobility. However, he points out, "the resulting congestion when [just] twenty per cent of the daily journeys are in cars—the case in Mexico City or São Paulo today—means that nobody has more mobility" (cited in Dahl, 2005, p. 240). I will briefly turn the "tragedy of the commons" theme in the next section in specific discussion of the paradoxes revealed in car consumption in Bangkok.

6.4.1 Transport and Social Exclusion

The term "social exclusion" is a contested one. Recent literature has attempted to distinguish it from poverty (Social Exclusion Unit, UK Gov’t, 2002; Hodgson and Turner, 2003; Stanley and Lucas, 2008). Definitions of poverty rely almost exclusively on measures of income, whereas social exclusion, according to Hodgson and Turner (2003, p. 266) is a more expansive concept that focuses also on "relationships of power between individuals, institutions and others". The UK Department for Transport (DETR 2000a) affirms recent theory on social exclusion in general by arguing that it can be differentiated from poverty. Like Walker and Walker (1997), they see it as more dynamic and including exclusion from decision-making processes. They argue:
Social exclusion is multi-causal, relational, and it includes less tangible aspects than poverty such as the loss of status, power, self-esteem and expectations ... We might also add here that another important aspect of exclusion is political exclusion and the inability to influence decision-making, which can be affected by a lack of resources, including time, telephones, transport and articulacy (DETR, 2000a, cited in Hodgson and Turner, 2003, p. 268).

People who are disadvantaged by lack of car ownership in an auto-centred city, often aggravated by inadequate or poorly maintained mass transit, experience a sense of being shut out from social, economic, and cultural systems especially. They effectively experience a loss of power and a sense of disenfranchisement. Sperling and Claussen (2004, p. 11) point out that in the cities of developing countries,

even with low subsidized fares, many poor people still cannot afford transit services. Thus cities face pressure to keep fares very low, although in doing so, they sacrifice bus quality and comfort. Middle-class riders react by buying cars as soon as they can. With low-cost scooters and motorcycles, the flight of the middle class is hastened, transit revenues fall, and operators reduce quality further as they serve poorer clienteles. Quantity of service often decreases as well. In nearly all cities worldwide, public transit is losing market share.

In the developing world, car ownership is restricted to a small minority who benefit from very high levels of investment in road infrastructure, while the great majority suffer the consequences of air and noise pollution, and traffic congestion (Sperling and Claussen, 2004, p. 11). As Dahl (2005) points out, congestion impacts on public transit users much more than car drivers, because buses are forced to take designated routes, while automobiles are able to change their course and detour according to traffic conditions. As congestion worsens, more people are encouraged to purchase cars, leading to the “tragedy of the commons” effect.

While recognition of the interrelationship between social exclusion and transport is growing, the awareness is not yet broad-based. Developing economies have,
so far, lagged behind developed nations in debate and policy formulation on this issue (Stanley and Lucas, 2008, p. 37).

6.4.1.1 Well-being and Social Connectedness

Discussion of social exclusion and transport recently turned to notions of “well-being” and psychological health. Stanley and Vella-Brodrick (2007) argue that well-being includes “mental health, environmental sustainability and freedom from violence” (cited in Stanley and Lucas, 2008, p. 37). Well-being is increasingly understood to be highly dependent upon social capital and social connectedness, as well as trust and reciprocity in relationships (Stanley and Lucas, 2008, p. 37). While its connection with transport is under researched, there is, as Cass and colleagues (2005, p. 543) point out, a clear connection between transport systems, especially car use, and “the ability to maintain friendship, family ties and informal connections, the very socialities that structure and organize everyday life”. In many countries “average distances between members of social, familial and work-related networks have substantially increased since the 1950s … and the poorer the person the less distance they tend to travel” (Cass et al., 2005, p. 545). A report on social exclusion and transport by the UK Government in 2002 found that meeting family and friends was more difficult for non-car owners than for car owners. Eighteen per cent of people without cars reported this difficulty, as opposed to eight per cent of those with cars. The same report found that accessing “leisure centres” and libraries was twice as difficult for non-car owners, as it was for car owners (Social Exclusion Unit, UK Government, 2002).

6.4.1.2 Safety

As mentioned above, “freedom from violence” is integral to well-being. Accordingly, perceptions of safety are significantly related to the patronage of transport systems. Where people are unable to afford a car, especially in auto-centred cities, they will be significantly disadvantaged if fear discourages them from using public transport, or forces them to purchase a car when they would not normally do so or find it a financial hardship. People will avoid taking public transport and limit their mobility if they perceive threats to their safety (Church, Frost, and Sullivan, 2000, p. 200; Hodgson and Turner 2003, pp. 266–267).
These threats relate mostly to public transit spaces with low security and/or a lack of surveillance. Fears for safety on public transport, particularly taxi use by women, were revealed in my own research and will be discussed in the next section.

6.4.1.3 Access to Employment and Health Care

Lack of access to employment and health care are other forms of transport-related exclusion. The absence of car ownership, insufficient mass transit, and transport costs can combine to be prohibitive factors for job seekers. The UK Government’s Social Exclusion Unit, found that having a driving licence doubled young peoples’ chances of securing a job. In addition, in the preceding 12 months, transport problems had prevented over one in six people on low incomes from applying for certain jobs (Social Exclusion Unit, UK Government, 2002). The same report revealed that access to a local hospital is problematic for almost one-third of households without a car. It noted, “Seven per cent of people without cars say they have missed, turned down, or chosen not to seek medical help because of transport problems, double the rate of the general population” (p. 2).

Exposure to road accidents is also greater among the lower classes. The report found that compared to children from the highest socio-economic group, the likelihood of dying in a road accident is five times greater for children from the lowest socio-economic group (Social Exclusion Unit, UK Government, 2002). Similar research on children by Laflamme and Diderichsen (2000, p. 293) reported that children from lower socio-economic groups and children living in low socio-economic neighbourhoods experience higher rates of mortality and morbidity caused by traffic injury than do other children. The research authors concede that the reasons for this are not entirely clear but conclude, “the explanation best supported by the evidence is that the social gradient reflects differential exposure of children to various hazards” (Laflamme and Diderichsen, 2000, p. 296).

In the US, research points out that a lack of transport precludes 3.6 million Americans from obtaining health care (Stanley and Lucas, 2008, p. 38). Cars are also emitters of airborne pollutants. As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, these pollutants have a range of adverse health...
consequences. Ironically, those people without cars are more exposed to these pollutants on the streets than car drivers.

6.5 The Paradox of Car Consumption in Bangkok

Research participants revealed that the consumption of automobiles in Bangkok does engender social inequalities. The social exclusionary factors that emerged from interviews with transport users can be summarised as follows:

- Non-car owners suffer poor quality and insufficient mass transit, specifically bus services, in a city that has focused on private vehicle infrastructure.
- There is a fairly pervasive sense of insecurity about the bus system. Many passengers feel unsafe.
- Some non-car owners are discouraged from using the SkyTrain because of the expense and poorer Bangkokians can’t afford to live in areas currently serviced by the SkyTrain because of the cost of real estate in those areas.
- Some non-car owners from low socio-economic groups experience a sense of diminished social status because they cannot afford cars.
- Some females feel compelled to purchase a car because they fear for their safety in taxis. They reported stories of kidnapping and rape of women by taxi drivers.
- Many car owners and non-car owners complained that they don’t feel “free” in Bangkok’s heavy traffic. This affects everyone alike. However, bus riders crawling through heavy traffic are disadvantaged by the cumulative impact of a system they are excluded from participating in due to lack of financial resources.
- Some males without cars feel less worthy of dating because of their lack of a car. This is reinforced by some females who said they are very interested in knowing what type of car their date or potential date drives.
- Pedestrians suffer the health impacts of exposure to pollutants emitted by cars. Most interviewees said they did not like walking in Bangkok.
Apart from the heat and poor walking infrastructure, pollution was a major disincentive to walking.

I tease out these experiences below.

6.5.1 The Experience of Poor Mass Transit by Non-Car Owners

The daily experience of using mass transit reminds non-car owners of the transport injustice and exclusion they suffer for not being able to afford a car in a city designed for car ownership. Section 6.2 discussed how cars were desired as a practical way of overcoming the poor quality and quantity of mass transit in Bangkok. The irony is that turning to the car for practical reasons perpetuates car dependence and inadvertently legitimises continued oversight of investment in mass transit. Below I reiterate in more detail the problems of mass transit in Bangkok in the context of transport injustice and social exclusion.

The general complaint about mass transit was that it was insufficient in its coverage and frequency. The bus system, the single metro line which opened in 2004, and the SkyTrain were all berated for this. The only group who didn't seem to experience this problem were motorcyclists. On their motorcycle, they were able to weave through traffic jams, past stalled buses, and had much wider access to places in Bangkok than the public transport system. Car owners recognised the serious problems with the public transport system but are able to avoid these problems by owning a car. For example, Srinet, a 40-year-old female car owner said “Can’t survive without a car in Bangkok ... part of life because transportation not good”. This was echoed by Laya, a female in her late twenties, who said, “Can’t live without car, because public transport late, crowded, polluted”.

However, the bus system, which currently offers the greatest coverage of Bangkok, dominated the complaints. It was described by the research participants as being late, dirty, overcrowded, insufficient, and sometimes unsafe. The safety concerns related to speeding and even drunk drivers. Thus, while inequities were experienced by all mass transit users, the group who were most disadvantaged were the bus riders. Kat, a 27-year-old male bus rider who would like to own a car, said “sometimes walking is faster than taking a bus”
because of Bangkok’s frequent traffic jams. Walking, however, is not popular among Bangkokians. Almost all the research participants said they didn’t like walking in Bangkok because of the pollution, heat, and poor infrastructure for walking, specifically the poor footpath quality. Kat, like many other bus riders, complained that the bus drivers are “not polite, rough … race other buses”. A combination of poor service and safety concerns were often expressed by the interviewees. Tum, a female bus and SkyTrain rider in her thirties, complained that “Buses are too noisy, dirty and drivers speed … ticket collectors are rude … have to wait a long time … private bus drivers are very bad”. “M”, a male in his late twenties and a Masters degree graduate told me, “Private buses are very terrible … low standard … sometimes driver is drunk, drives very fast … sometimes hits pedestrians”. Pie, a 23-year-old female bus and SkyTrain rider, pointed out a contradiction introduced earlier in this section—that bus riders suffer in the traffic jams caused by car owners. She said, “I don’t like buses because too many people … drive too fast … traffic jams and staff not polite”. This was reiterated by Dar, a late twenties female bus rider who exclaimed, “Buses take too long because traffic jams … need more SkyTrain and MRT [underground metro]”. Bangkok’s private buses drew the worst criticism. The most common word used to describe the service was “rude”. Bus riders on both public and private services also quite frequently used the word “dangerous” to describe bus services. Opal, a female university researcher in her forties told me “Bus drivers are very dangerous and rude. They don’t stop properly and wait for passengers to get on bus … so it’s difficult for women in skirts”. In sum, non-car owners, but particularly bus riders, experience significant disadvantage in being forced to rely upon Bangkok’s mass transit system to carry out their daily routines. The only positive agreed by all is that buses are cheap.

When referring to the problems of Bangkok’s buses, the interviewees frequently praised the SkyTrain. Efficiency, cleanliness, and air conditioning were its major attractions. Nevertheless, many Bangkokians are excluded from SkyTrain use, because it currently services only the inner ring of Bangkok, where real estate is the most expensive and many people cannot afford to live. If these people did use the SkyTrain, it was necessary to take a bus, or a combination of motorcycle taxi to a bus stop, and then a bus to the SkyTrain. Pie, who is
quoted above, said "Bangkok needs more SkyTrain ... sometimes I take because air conditioning ... but no SkyTrain near my house". "A" is a 30-year-old female Administration Assistant at a university, who relies on a combination of SkyTrain, bus and motorcycle taxi to commute to and from work. However, her income precludes her from living within walking distance of the SkyTrain, so she is forced to either take a 30-minute bus ride to the SkyTrain or a 15-minute motorcycle taxi ride. A number of interviewees complained of the cost of the SkyTrain. Although "Oil", a 23-year-old female Programme Officer at a university, uses the SkyTrain, she finds it "expensive" on her income. "Tum", a female librarian in her thirties, mostly takes the bus, and sometimes the SkyTrain if there is a traffic jam. However, she laments that she can't take the SkyTrain all the time "cos it's too expensive". Some of the motorcyclists also complained of the SkyTrain cost. For example, "Mod" is a 25-year-old male driver at a university, who lives 50 kilometres from his work situated in the centre of Bangkok. He would like to take the SkyTrain sometimes but says that it is too expensive for him. Living so far from the centre of Bangkok, the SkyTrain also does not service his area.

6.5.2 Safety Fears

A gender disadvantage related to safety fears in taxis exists. Based on media reports of attacks, several female car owners expressed fears of being kidnapped or raped in taxis in Bangkok. As such, they felt compelled to own a car. For example, Srinet, a 40-year-old female referred to earlier in this chapter, told me "Women can be kidnapped or killed in taxis. Women are scared to take taxis so they want a car. Though with the call centre it is better now". Pat, a 26-year-old female DJ, was similarly anxious about taxis. She said, "If I lost my car tomorrow, I feel nervous, not safe, uncomfortable ... taxis are dangerous for women ... often crimes against women in taxis ... rape and killing for money". Besides these specific fears over taxis, a number of female car owners seem to generally derive psychological comfort and a sense of security from being in their own car, and not confronting perceived dangers on the street or on public transport. For example, Laya, a late twenties female said "I feel safe ... [car is] my private space". Lek, a 31-year-old female also said, "My car is just for safety
and comfort ... public transport in Bangkok is not good and not safe”. These women are fortunately able to feel “safe” as they own cars. Whether or not the threats they perceive are real is to some degree irrelevant, because they draw a sense of security from being in their own car.

6.5.3 Social Status

Another form of social exclusion experienced by some non-car owners, particularly males, is a diminished sense of social status. Although they did not explicitly say they felt less worthy because they didn’t own a car, they explained how owning a car would make them feel more proud and successful. As explained in Chapter Five, the sense of disenfranchisement experienced by these aspiring car owners is significant because the transport system that predominates in their daily life is auto-centric. The prevalence of car advertising, the physical dominance of road infrastructure and cars over poor quality mass transit, and the social discourse which puts value on car ownership attenuates the sense of exclusion and relative lack of success some non-car owners feel. For example, “Mai”, an 18-year-old male motorcyclist told me, “In future, I’d like car … feel more proud, successful”. Another male motorcycle owner, 46-year-old “Bat” told me “If I have car, it raise my status … feel proud … success”. Ad, a 45-year-old female bus rider exclaimed, “I would feel proud definitely to own a car because unusual for a cleaner to own a car”. The gender difference regarding social status is interesting here. Males seemed to suffer more than females for not owning a car. This may suggest that discourses surrounding masculinity equate car ownership with being a successful male. This idea was confirmed in several instances by male and female interviewees saying males are more eligible dating partners if they own a car. Some males expressed concerns about being excluded from dating women if they didn’t have a car.

The comments of some car owners also suggest some sense of a relative lack of status or success because of the particular car they drive. For example, San is a 48-year-old male who has a food stall on a street in central Bangkok. He owns a pick-up, which he uses to carry food for his business. However, he explained to me that he would like a Mercedes because then “I feel proud … safe … fulfil myself … in a good position”. March, a 25-year-old male who owns
a Toyota Yaris, told me "If I had more money, I would buy BMW because stylish design ... feel so cool, successful, proud". While these individuals are not socially excluded from Bangkok’s auto-centric transport system, they do experience a sense of lower status because they cannot afford the cars accorded the highest status in Bangkok. Such sentiments are a reminder of the socially exclusive nature of consumerism in general. Consumerism’s greatest paradox is that it perpetuates itself by creating dissatisfaction, and reinforcing social inequalities. To some degree, it depends on these inequalities. If everyone could afford the same products, and if all products were of equal status, then there would be no dream for advertisers to sell, no status to be sold, and nothing to aspire to.

6.5.4 Health

Chapter Two discussed the public health impacts of automobility in detail, and it is arguably these health consequences which are the greatest paradox of car consumption. Based on the almost universal aversion to walking in Bangkok due to pollution and heat expressed by the interviewees in this research, I would argue that non-car owners in Bangkok suffer the disadvantage of being more exposed to airborne pollutants emitted by cars than car owners. Everyone is a pedestrian to a degree on some sector of their daily commute, and car owners also cannot totally avoid Bangkok’s pollution. For example, Opal, the female university researcher in her forties (quoted in Chapter Five and section 6.5.1 of this chapter) emphatically told me how much she dislikes walking in Bangkok due to the pollution, adding, "If you have asthma, you may have an attack". Non-car owners obviously spend much more time exposed to air pollution, either walking, on the back of motorcycle taxis, or in non-air conditioned buses with open windows. People in air-conditioned cars are able to shield themselves from pollution, while the pollution their cars create negatively impacts on the health and comfort of non-car owners. Not all buses are air-conditioned and poorer people are forced to take cheaper non-air-conditioned buses, exposing them to pollution through open windows, especially when frequently stalled in traffic jams. "Kaew", the 40-something housewife whose husband is a doctor, shares two cars with her husband. She is happy she doesn’t have to walk much
in Bangkok nor take the bus because of pollution. As she said, “Passengers breathe in pollution when riding bus”. Pao, a 22-year-old female car owner is happy to have a car for many reasons, and also told me, “I can avoid pollution in my car”. A male bus rider named “M” explained, “usually I don’t like walking because of pollution”. Yet, pollution affects all Bangkok residents. As Ross and Pongsomlee (1992, p. 43) note in reference to Bangkok,

People with cars ensure that they suffer [pollution] the impacts as little as possible. However, by buying a car, then cocooning themselves in air-conditioned comfort, they use adjustment processes which collectively add to the traffic-related environmental problems as well as energy use and have negative impacts on other commuters.

6.5.5 Mobility and Freedom

One of the most ironic contradictions of car consumption in Bangkok is an ambivalent sense of “freedom”. Among the interviewees, a belief that cars offer freedom and convenience co-existed with the realisation that so many people exercising their freedom to buy cars had actually had the inverse effect in Bangkok. Interestingly, car owners spoke much less of freedom and convenience than did bus and SkyTrain riders, who as non-car owners, still held out a perception of freedom and convenience if they owned a car at some stage in the future. This suggests that for non-car owners, cars still held the promise of freedom, whereas car owners had already realised that this freedom was compromised or curtailed by the simple volume of traffic. Ironically, the more people are able to buy freedom (a car), the less freedom there is for everyone caught in traffic jams. For example, Lek, a 31-year-old female doctor, complained that “driving in Bangkok is stressful because of the traffic”. Another car owner, 43-year-old Wat, says his car is important in Bangkok because of the poor quality public transport but told me, “I feel good, comfortable driving outside Bangkok”, rather than feeling “free” driving in Bangkok itself. As James, a 31-year-old male driver said, Bangkok’s traffic “is like a disaster ... can get stuck in a car for 1 or 2 hours”.


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As explained earlier, motorcyclists saw little freedom in car ownership. While they aspired to car ownership for reasons of status, they knew that their motorcycle offered more physical freedom than a car in Bangkok. They enjoyed being able to "zig-zag" through traffic jams on their motorcycle. Bus and SkyTrain riders simultaneously desired a car because they believed they could go anywhere in a car, yet also said sometimes that they would not want a car in Bangkok because of the heavy traffic. For example, "Oil", a 23-year-old female SkyTrain rider, said "If I have car [would] improve my quality of life in Bangkok only sometimes when traffic is less, such as Songkran (Thai New Year)". The group of bus riders experienced disadvantage because buses were frequently late and caught in traffic jams created by car owners. For example, Ao, a 25-year-old male bus rider, complained, "buses often get caught in traffic jams". As a result, he spends 1.5 hours per day on the bus. Dar, a late twenties female, spends 2.5 hours per day travelling on buses and vans because of heavy traffic. Undoubtedly it is true that car owners do have the advantage of being able to "go anywhere", unlike mass transit users. However, this freedom is ultimately compromised by the traffic conditions, and has been a major factor, I would argue, behind an emerging sense of resistance to car ownership in Bangkok. I will discuss this resistance and the opportunities it presents in the next chapter.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has re-iterated the argument that automobility in Bangkok is a socio-material phenomenon, by illustrating the utilitarian functions of the automobile in Bangkok. Together with the symbolic virtues discussed in Chapter Five, it is clear that the automobile's symbolic resonance and practicality are firmly entrenched. In spite of this, Bangkokians are aware of and feel the effects of the contradictions inherent in car consumption. Transport-related social exclusion is the main paradox, but in emerging economies this area is still under researched, with most research focusing on developed countries. The generalisability of such research to developing nations, such as Thailand, cannot be assumed in all instances. Nevertheless, given the greater
socio-economic divisions in Thailand, and the weaker enforcement of road safety regulations, it would be safe to assume that similar patterns of social exclusion may be discovered there.

While not the focus of my research, the contradictory experience of car mobility emerged in key informant discussions and my interviews, and make more urgent the case for curtailing automobility and improving mass transit in the interests of not only better health, but greater social equality and inclusion in Bangkok. These contradictions also provide a context for understanding the elements of resistance to car transport which emerged in the research, and which I discuss in the next chapter. This resistance forms the springboard for the final chapter to discuss possible alternative transport scenarios.
Chapter Seven:
Emerging Resistance to Car Ownership in Bangkok:
An Opportunity to De-market the Car

7.1 Preamble
Chapter Six presented a range of social exclusionary factors arising from car consumption in Bangkok. These preliminary findings on social exclusion, in combination with the overall public health impact of automobility in Bangkok, reiterate the need to displace the city's auto-centrism by improving mass transit, not only in the interests of better health, but greater social equality and inclusion. The emerging resistance to car ownership and usage revealed in my interviews suggest the time is ripe to do this. I begin this chapter by discussing this resistance and then argue that an opportunity to de-market the car may be wrested from the resistant attitudes that are emerging.

7.2 Emerging Resistance to Car Ownership and/or Usage in Bangkok
Across all groups of transport users and all SES groups there were expressions of resistance to car ownership or car use; that is, interviewees either expressed resistance to owning a car themselves, and/or said the Thai Government should control car usage in Bangkok. When they called for controls on car usage they expressed this through comparison to Singapore's famous policies. However, this was in response to my own prompting as I asked each interviewee specifically if they thought the Thai Government should control car usage in Bangkok as the Singapore Government does in Singapore. It is possible, therefore, that some interviewees may have responded in the affirmative to my question because they believed an affirmative answer sounded more appropriate and responsible. However, my strong impression overall was that the interviewees held a very dichotomous and ambiguous position on the issue. Ambivalent attitudes to car ownership were the most outstanding feature here;
that is, many individuals who had expressed symbolic attachment to the car, simultaneously expressed aversion to car ownership altogether, or aversion to car ownership in Bangkok's heavy traffic. In addition, there was a very marked tendency to simultaneously express differing individual and collective positions on the issue; that is, individuals themselves were often reluctant to give up their own car or could not imagine conditions in Bangkok which would make this an attractive proposition. Given the generally poor coverage of mass transit, this attitude is entirely understandable. As a collective proposition, however (i.e. something good for Bangkok as a whole), the idea of controlling car ownership and usage was in most cases very well received. This resistance was also, to some degree, differentially expressed by males and females. It is worth noting that a couple of interviewees (a male car driver and a female bus and SkyTrain user) voiced their opposition to restrictions on car ownership and/or usage, exclaiming that it was an individual's right to own and drive a car, and therefore something that should not be taken away by governments. This is a valid point in any debate on automobile restrictions, yet governments also have a responsibility to act in the interests of all their citizens when their health, mobility and quality of life is compromised by a transport system which is far too dependent on private motor vehicle transport, and which generates significant greenhouse gas emissions.

Because so many Bangkokians have exercised their right to purchase cars, the great paradox is that what car ownership promised (unrestricted freedom to travel throughout Bangkok) has been to a large degree lost. As the comments of interviewees in Table 23 indicate, the main reasons expressed for resistance were: heavy traffic in Bangkok (although many would like a car to travel outside Bangkok); air pollution; and the expense of petrol. Heavy traffic and thus a lack of “freedom” was by far the most often cited reason, followed closely by the pollution generated by cars. This confirms Hardin’s (1968) notion of the “tragedy of the commons”, explained in Chapter Six.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Attitude to Car Ownership</th>
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</table>
| Medium to High | "I feel free on my bicycle ... ignore traffic ... go wherever I want ... government should control cars like Singapore"—Gee, male, 31  
"Life without cars would be fresh, comfortable ... close relationship between people because have to mix more ... It would be good if the world has no cars, but we have to go somewhere"—Or, female, 30s  
"In Bangkok, I don't want to use car cos heavy traffic ... waste time"—Ex, female, late 20s  
"Government should control cars like Singapore because too many cars"—Laya, female, late 20s  
"I would give up my car if I had SkyTrain access ... in Bangkok traffic jams you are not free"—Ging, male, 40  
"A car-free society better, because less traffic and less pollution ... but pollution would not stop me from buying a car ... government should control cars in Bangkok, like Singapore"—Lek, female, 31  
"If the SkyTrain and subway went everywhere, the Government should control cars like Singapore ... but my life would be worse without a car ... nothing would persuade me to give up my car"—Hanya, female, early 20s  
"Yes! Very much! A car is important for my quality of life now ... but I'd use my car less if the public transport was improved and the SkyTrain came closer to my house"—Opal, female, 40s  
"Yes! The Government should control cars in Bangkok like Singapore, but they need to improve public transport first"—Opal, female, 40s |
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<th>SES</th>
<th>Attitude to Car Ownership</th>
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<tr>
<td>Medium to High</td>
<td>“Absolutely, life would be better without cars in Bangkok ... [but] my life would be absolutely worse without car ... inconvenient”—Knot, male, 28</td>
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<td>(continued)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I would use my car less, if public transport was improved ... when the SkyTrain comes closer to my house ... but now car is essential for me because the public transport is very bad ... the Government should control car use like in Singapore, but they must improve public transport first”—Sup, male, 32</td>
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<td>“If public transport was improved, I might use my car less”—Kaew, female, 40s</td>
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<td>“If the Government controls cars like Singapore, more public transport is needed ... encouraging people to use public transport more and use cars less is stupid if public transport is so poor”—Sup, male, 32</td>
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<td>“The Government should control cars in Bangkok in some way ... but if the tax on cars was raised, I’d still buy one because convenient ... there’s a lot of pressure to have a nice car in Thai society”—Nu, male, 33</td>
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<td>“The Government should encourage more use of public transport and bicycles”—Nu, male, 33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opposed to car regulation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The Government should not control car ownership ... it doesn’t help anything ... it would interfere with people’s rights”—Wat, male, 43 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>“Thai Government should control cars ... it’s like a disaster ... can get stuck in a car for 1 or 2 hours ... also cos of pollution”—James, male, 31</td>
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<td>“Too many cars in Bangkok ... Government should control, like Singapore”—Pnuk, male, 42</td>
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The daily experience of being caught in traffic jams, either as a car driver or a bus rider, has made Bangkokians acutely aware that the "freedom" associated with car ownership is very restricted in Bangkok. Luis Gutierrez, who directs the Latin American programs for EMBARQ (The World Resources Institute Center for Sustainable Transport), argues that pressure is building from a middle class public increasingly frustrated by congestion, air pollution and traffic accidents. He argues:

I think that the middle class, who think having a car is equivalent to freedom, are having to modify their thoughts. They're finding the reality is that having a private car doesn't mean they have the freedom to move from one place to another very fast. (cited in Dahl, 2005, pp. 244–245)

For reasons of congestion, a number of interviewees without cars said that they would like a car to travel outside Bangkok, especially to their hometown, but not to use it in Bangkok. Several SkyTrain and bus riders, as well as motorcyclists, agreed. All of the interviewees who used the SkyTrain exclusively or almost exclusively were female, and among this group there seemed to be more resistance to car ownership and much less symbolic interest in car ownership. The fact that this group were all female was an unintended consequence of my sampling. Female SkyTrain users were happy with the SkyTrain as a mode of transport, and some said they didn't want a car as a result. They said a car would not improve their quality of life. However, the positive attitude of these SkyTrain users was common to all transport groups when they discussed the SkyTrain. Car and non-car owners alike generally agreed that the SkyTrain was an attractive transport option (though a little expensive for some, as explained...
earlier in this chapter). A number of female car owners whom I interviewed said they would give up their car or use it less if the SkyTrain was extended to the area they lived in. A possible explanation for the resistance expressed by female SkyTrain users and some female car owners to the car is that the social construction of femininity attaches less status to car ownership than it does for males. This is confirmed also by expressions by some females that they would like their partner or potential partner to have a car, and the particular type of car he should own was important for some females. Overall, my research suggests that if the coverage of the SkyTrain were extended, many people would be tempted to either use public transport more, as they said, or perhaps give up their car altogether. Table 24 captures these sentiments of bus, but especially SkyTrain riders. It underlines their resistance to car usage in Bangkok, and to a lesser extent, car ownership.

Table 24: Resistance to Car Ownership and/or Usage by Bus and SkyTrain Riders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Attitude to Car Ownership</th>
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<tr>
<td>Medium to High</td>
<td>&quot;Life better in Bangkok without cars&quot;—Kat, male, 27, bus rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;The Government should control cars like Singapore&quot;—Dar, female, late 20s</td>
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<td>&quot;Petrol too expensive so I don’t want car now ... and traffic jams ... if I live outside Bangkok, I’d buy a car&quot;—Tum, female, 30s, bus rider</td>
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<td>&quot;I don’t want car because traffic is very bad in Bangkok&quot;—&quot;M&quot;, male, late 20s, bus rider</td>
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<td>&quot;I don’t want car because traffic is very bad in Bangkok&quot;—Pie, female, 23, bus rider</td>
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<td>&quot;A car would not improve my quality of life ... it’s dangerous ... I don’t want car in Bangkok ... too much traffic ... but car is good to go upcountry&quot;—&quot;A&quot;, female, 30, bus &amp; SkyTrain rider</td>
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</table>
SES  |  Attitude to Car Ownership
---|---
Medium to High (continued)  |  “Bangkok would be nicer without cars ... less noise and air pollution ... save energy for Thailand”  
— Oil, female, 23, SkyTrain rider  

“A car would not improve my quality of life ... because I live close to SkyTrain ... SkyTrain is enough for me ... but if I marry and have a family, I want a car ... Some people think owning car is sign of success ... not me. I prefer have lot of money in the bank”—Pum, female, 30s, SkyTrain rider

“I don’t want to drive because too stressful ... had accident before ... make me scared. My life not better with car. I am not interested in cars ... Bangkok would be better if no cars ... no pollution ... Government should control cars in Bangkok”  
— Kae, female, 32, SkyTrain rider

“The Government should control cars like Singapore ... and have some campaigns to encourage people to use public transport ... if I had a car my life would be better ... go anywhere, anytime”—Ae, female, 23, SkyTrain rider

“If the Government can control cars like Singapore, it’s gonna be very good ... the character of Bangkok is gonna be changed ... better ... less pollution ... if I can have a car by my money, I feel so proud”  
— Wut, male, 24, bus & SkyTrain rider

“It’s good for Bangkok if the Government control cars like Singapore ... I don’t want a car in Bangkok because traffic jams, but in my hometown yes ... easy to go anywhere”  
— Karn, female, early 20s, bus & SkyTrain rider

Opposed to car regulation  |  “I don’t want a car in Bangkok because gasoline is expensive and traffic jams ... (but) ... Government should not control car ownership like Singapore because it’s human right to buy if he have money ... Government should provide good infrastructure for drivers, such as roads, traffic lights, etc.”  
— Tum, female, 30s, bus & SkyTrain rider
Although the motorcyclists expressed resistance to car ownership and often favoured restraints on car usage, there was more obvious ambiguity among this group than other groups. While they agreed with the idea of controlling car usage, and some said they didn’t want a car in Bangkok’s traffic, they often simultaneously said in quite strong terms that they would like a car as they would feel proud and it would raise their status. The symbolism of car ownership was very strong for this group, as discussed in Chapter Five. As explained in that chapter, my interpretation of the high level of ambiguity among this group is that while they can see the benefits of less car dependence in Bangkok, their exclusion from car ownership for financial reasons (nine of the 11 interviewees were from a low SES group) actually strengthens their desire to purchase a car in order to feel socially included. Additionally, 10 of the 11 interviewees in this group were male, which may be another explanation for their strong desire for a car. In theory, restrictions appear intelligent, but the reality is that as males their social milieu impresses upon them a masculine equation of success and car ownership. Table 25 clearly captures the ambiguous attitudes of motorcyclists to

<table>
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<th>SES</th>
<th>Attitude to Car Ownership</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>“Government should encourage people to use public transport more ... and control cars like Singapore”</td>
<td>Ao, male, 25, bus rider</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“A car would improve my quality of life because convenient ... and I’d feel proud”</td>
<td>Ao, male, 25, bus rider</td>
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<td>“I would like car but not improve my quality of life because traffic in Bangkok ... just use it to travel on holidays”</td>
<td>Pikul, female, 48, bus rider</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>“The Government should control cars”</td>
<td>Pikul, female, 48, bus rider</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>“The Thai Government should control cars like Singapore because it’s not fair for people without a car ... Bangkok better if no cars ... more happy ride my bicycle around”</td>
<td>Ad, female, 45, bus rider</td>
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car ownership and usage. Often they simultaneously advocated car restraints, yet professed their own aspirations to own a car.

Table 25: Resistance to Car Ownership and/or Usage by Motorcyclists

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<th>SES</th>
<th>Attitude to Car Ownership</th>
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<tr>
<td>Medium to High</td>
<td>“Now car is not necessary ... If I have family and children, I buy a car”—Rath, male, 31</td>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>“I'd like to own a car, but not in Bangkok because of traffic” —Aung, female, 37</td>
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<td>“Government should make a limit ... 2 cars one house ... but rich people wouldn’t like it”—Bat, male, 46</td>
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<td>“I don’t want a car because too much traffic in Bangkok ... but I would like expensive motorcycle or racing car because look sporty, trendy”—Pruk, male, 30</td>
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<td>“Life in Bangkok would be better without cars ... less traffic, public transport move faster, environment better ... I’d like car to go to my hometown, but not in Bangkok because of traffic jams”—Aek, male, 32</td>
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<td>“Government should control cars in Bangkok, like Singapore ... and make campaign to encourage people to use public transport ... but, my life would be better if I had a car in Bangkok ... more convenient ... would feel proud if I had a BMW”—Khe, male, 23</td>
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<td>“Government should make cars more expensive like Singapore ... in the future I’d like a car ... feel more proud and successful”—Mai, male, 18</td>
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<td>“Government should control cars like Singapore, especially second-hand cars ... If I had money, I’d like BMW because it’s middle of high class”—Somporn, male, 40s</td>
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<td>“The number of cars in each house should be controlled ... If I had money, I’d buy pick-up”—Somrak, Male, 38</td>
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7.3 De-marketing the Car in Bangkok

On the basis of my own research findings regarding ambivalence and resistance to car ownership and/or dependence, I will now draw on the theories of Wright and Egan (2000) to make suggestions about the need to acknowledge automobility’s cultural underpinnings in Bangkok and to de-market the car as a status symbol. This section begins my reflections, which will continue in Chapter Eight, about what the Thai Government could do to transform Bangkok’s transport system from its present auto-centrism to a multi-mode active transport system.

Wright and Egan (2000, p. 288) point out that aims to reduce car travel have not always had great success. For example, people may be attracted away from walking and cycling by improvements in bus services, with little or no impact on car usage itself. Further, restricting travel in city centres may do nothing to reduce overall distances travelled, by simply diverting shoppers to supermarkets in the suburbs. Hence, the authors argue that to achieve even modest reductions in car usage, “it is important to understand why people like cars in the first place” (Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 289). Their argument underscores the relevance of my own research, as it acknowledges that car usage involves much more than utilitarian concerns. By drawing on Maslow’s (1954) theory of the scale of human needs, Wright and Egan (2000, p. 289) assert that car ownership and usage not only has practical functions, but has equally compelling symbolic and affective functions. Diagrammatically represented as a pyramid from the most basic to the most abstract, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs are: (1) physiological (e.g. food, water, sleep); (2) safety (e.g. security of employment, health and property); (3) love and belonging (e.g. friendship, family); (4) esteem (e.g. achievement, self-esteem and peer respect); (5) self-actualisation (e.g. creativity, spontaneity, morality) (“Maslow’s hierarchy of needs”, 2009). Each level, Wright and Egan (2000) point out, are satisfied by cars (2000, p. 289).

Recognising the powerful allure of car ownership and usage, Wright and Egan (2000, p. 289) advocate de-marketing the car as a status symbol, with greater attention paid to usage rather than ownership. Exhorting individuals to resist...
ownership, they argue, may actually produce resistance. They also point out that targeting those cars that produce the greatest externalities (i.e. noise pollution, carbon emissions) may be more cost-effective (Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 290). Confirming my findings, the authors refer to the dissonance between individual and collective positions on the car's costs to society. That is, car drivers readily externalise problems, attributing congestion, for example, to other drivers, while failing to acknowledge their own contribution to the problem. Similarly, accidents are the result of poor driving by others, rather than oneself.

My research found the same tendency in Bangkok. As a collective proposition, restraining the car was often praised; yet, individually, Bangkokians were less inclined to give up their own car, in the interests, for example, of reducing pollution. In order then to make it more difficult for drivers to shift blame to others, Wright and Egan (2000, p. 291) argue that travel campaigns should focus on specific types of users and journey purposes. They also refer to the success of other types of campaigns, for example targeting drug abuse, to suggest that targeting future drivers, rather than present drivers, may be more efficacious as children and adolescents are still in the process of forming opinions and have not yet committed themselves to car ownership in the future.

Just as "The Style by Toyota Café" aims to draw not only a crowd of young drivers but also future drivers to their café in Bangkok in order to instil brand loyalty before teenagers reach the driving age, so it may be possible to employ the same technique with the opposite intention: to counter the car's "cool" at an impressionable age. The evidence also indicates that adolescents can impact on family decisions regarding car purchase (Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 291).

Once journey and user categories are established, Wright and Egan (2000) break from advocating traditional campaign themes appealing to a sense of public duty and suggest, instead, that due recognition of the symbolic "pull" of the car means it is necessary to target the self-image and sense of status of car drivers. This does not mean that traditional kinds of arguments, such as those based on public welfare, cannot be appealed to, but rather that the manner in which the argument is put forward is key. They argue:
A memorable and witty message signalling that driving is passé, and that the smart young leaders of fashion are turning to other modes, could be more effective than a direct appeal to the car user’s sense of public duty. It could be passed from person to person through the action of peer group pressure. (Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 292)

The authors suggest themes which fall into two broad categories: those which target car ownership itself, and those aimed at controlling usage. Examples of the first category include:

1. “Only the feeble need cars.”
2. “Buying a four wheel drive or a sports car is an admission of inadequacy.”
3. “Cars are not chic.”
4. “Bores make cars and cars make bores.”

(Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 292)

In order to discourage car usage, it needs to be represented as “unfashionable” and “irresponsible”. Examples might include:

1. “Real men cycle.”
2. “Car users are motoring potatoes (the equivalent of couch potatoes).”
3. “Every mile you drive, turns x square inches of the world into desert (assuming that the quantity x, which remains to be estimated, turns out to be appreciably large).”

(Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 292)

The authors reiterate that for the purposes of de-marketing, the themes should concentrate on status and self-image. Based on my research findings, I would argue that the strength of the status attributes accorded the car in Bangkok justify Wright and Egan’s (2000) recommendation. However, the political economy of the car industry in Thailand reinforces their argument that usage would be easier to target than ownership itself. Discouraging ownership also raises issues of the extent to which cultural change can be justified.
The particular self-image or status association to be targeted should also be locally-specific. In the context of Thai ness, a sense of sanuk (the Thai word for "fun", frequently invoked by Thais in many situations), kreng jay (a Thai phrase, roughly translated in English as "appeasing" others, or the various social and professional groups one belongs to), as well as social hierarchy, and respect for the King are some obvious elements that could be employed or targeted.

Finally, credibility of the source of the message is important. People do not like to be dictated to, nor do they like to be told what to do by governments, whose motivations they may mistrust (Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 293). And, as some of my interviewees attested, cars are a basic freedom. Besides the government, there are various organisations that have a stake in the matter: health authorities; environmental groups; public transport companies; and local authorities. The authors add that to avoid the appearance of dictating behaviour from government officials who "know best", and whose motives may be regarded with suspicion, public figures or celebrities enjoying local respect could be used to deliver the message with "subtlety and wit" (Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 293). In Thailand’s case, I think this point is very valid. In a nation where the car is imbued with "coolness" in many guises and according to various definitions (e.g. "young and hip", a marker of belonging to hi-so, a sign of sexual desirability in males, and an indication of socio-economic ascendancy), for car drivers, aspiring car drivers, and especially peer-conscious future car drivers, the message is more likely to be received as "cool" if delivered by public figures deemed cool. Just as different groups may need to be targeted with different messages, so appropriate role models of "cool" may need to be employed for each group. Finally, public transport itself needs to be projected as other than, or more than, utilitarian. It too must find its own level of cool, and be marketed as such. Wright and Egan’s conclusion captures all of the elements outlined above. They argue:

De-marketing the car involves projecting an image of the user that is recognisable in all of us. It must be linked to a justifiable aim, but engage the user’s self-image at the same emotional level as the advertisements used by motor manufacturers to brand their products. We, the public, must
sympathise with the storyteller, appreciate the wit, and see ourselves as the problem. (Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 293)

I will return to the theme of de-marketing the car in the final chapter where I make suggestions about which groups in Bangkok might best be targeted to de-market the car and to market mass transit.

7.4 Conclusion

The findings discussed above suggest an emerging, yet still quite ambiguous cleavage between the symbolism with which the car is endowed by the consumer values of global culture and local Thainess, and the paradoxical reality that Bangkokers are living. These signs of resistance to automobile consumption and usage suggest that Bangkokers are increasingly aware that they are to some degree living the inverse reality of the car marketer's pitch: much less "freedom" than expected, immobility, environmental pollution, poorer public health, and social exclusion.

As I have emphasised, there is much ambiguity in what many of the interviewees have said, and willingness to use cars less depends on significant improvements in public transport, with the majority favouring an extension of the SkyTrain. However, these findings suggest some degree of fluidity and agency among car owners or potential car owners, and thus portend an emergent opportunity to leverage on this disquiet about automobility in Bangkok. Miles (1998, p. 157) has argued that "consumerism is the foremost arena within which structure and agency is contested. At one and the same time, consumers feel constrained and controlled, yet liberated and sovereign". The ambiguous attitude of the interviewees to car ownership seems to confirm this.

Bangkokers have not unequivocally taken on board the meanings attributed to car ownership by global consumer culture. They continue to wrestle to some degree with these meanings and, in Weberian terms, demonstrate a propensity to make their own "life choices" with regards to car consumption. Weber introduced the term "life choices" in the early twentieth century to refer to self-directed behaviour (Cockerham, 2005, p. 60). Although he believed that social action always occurs in a dialectical context of opportunity and constraint, he
maintained that life choices (agency) dominate over life chances (structure) (Cockerham, Rutten, and Abel, 1997, p. 325). I cannot argue that Bangkokians will ultimately act upon their expressions of resistance. The ambiguous nature of the interviewees’ responses may suggest a capacity to make choices about car consumption, but whether this will occur is unpredictable and heavily dependent upon a range of environmental factors, especially improvement in mass transit.

In addition, Weber’s emphasis on life choices is not unproblematic. Cockerham and colleagues rightly point out that “Life chances influence lifestyles in two major ways; (1) through socio-economic resources and (2) perceptual boundaries derived from socialization and experience in a particular social milieu” (1997, p. 335). Indeed, capturing the emerging signs of resistance and de-marketing the car require a cultural shift in perception: that is, displacing the symbolism the car radiates in the collective imagination of Thais for new, healthier and greener symbols of “cool" mobility. In the next and final chapter, I will discuss how some nations have attempted to curtail automobility, the issues involved and the implications for Bangkok, and then conclude by suggesting how Bangkok may move towards a healthier and more equitable transport system in the future.
Chapter Eight:  
Policy Options and Conclusions

8.1 Preamble

In this concluding chapter, I outline the initiatives taken by two cities well known for their efforts to contain automobility—Singapore and Bogota—and then discuss the issues surrounding the implementation of Traffic Demand Management (TDM) measures in various countries. These two cities and the discussion of TDM measures provide examples of practical steps that can be taken in Bangkok, and the issues facing the city in any future attempt to control automobility. Finally, I conclude with the reminder that policy instruments alone are insufficient and that Bangkok is likely to have more success in curtailing automobility if itAcknowledges what this thesis has found: the cultural forces impelling Bangkokians to get behind the wheel.

8.2 Can the Consolidation of Auto-Centrism be Stopped?

Although the world economy is experiencing a severe economic downturn, likely to have its greatest impact on developing nations, it is these nations which have become the twenty-first century's advocates for motorisation. Beyond the current economic crisis, they are likely to continue their love affair with automobility, unless opportunity can be wrested from the recession and a promised "new world order" also encompasses more sustainable forms of mobility. In an unfortunate repeat of history, Asia and Latin America are for the most part pursuing Europe, North America and Oceania's path to motorisation, but due to the pace of change and the size of their populations, the adverse consequences are set to be even more acute than they were in the West in the twentieth century (Martin, 2007). These nations, China and India especially, view the car as pillars of economic growth, as Thailand and many other nations have over the previous half a century. The political economy of motorisation in these nations co-exists with considerable personal appeal, as it has in Thailand. Whitelegg and Haq capture this particular appeal:

Whitelegg and Haq capture this particular appeal:
Car dependence and ownership is still seen as a very desirable consumer expectation and objective supported by large global expenditures in marketing, advertising and the sale of images. The images are primarily sexual and status-oriented with strong links into power and mastery. Alternatives to the car have a very difficult time when set against this powerful imagery and association. Ultimately, taking a bus in Manchester, Seoul, or Mexico City is not associated with sexual and economic success and is not attractive to successive cohorts of young adults making their way through to full independent mobility. (2003, pp. 275–276)

The list of cities could very accurately stress Beijing, Shanghai and Mumbai today. In line with growing urbanisation and increasing per capita incomes, the new middle classes of these cities are seeking to project their middle-class urbanity through private vehicle ownership. China and India are the two most populous countries in the world and are part of a continent (Asia) making up over half the world’s population. Combined with the fact that it is the least urbanised region worldwide, the potential for motorisation in Asia is great (Senbil, Zhang, and Fujiwara, 2007, p. 46). The public health impacts expressed as mortality and morbidity are projected to be very significant. As I have already indicated in Chapter Two, in the year 2002, 90 per cent of world traffic deaths occurred in low- and middle-income countries, and it is predicted that such deaths will increase by a further 83 per cent in these same countries by 2020. The increase in greenhouse gas emissions in China and India is already increasing sharply. While the number of vehicles per capita remains relatively small, projected increases in automobile consumption will significantly escalate emissions. In Shanghai and similar cities, increases of 400–700 per cent are anticipated over the next 20 years (Sperling and Claussen, 2004, p. 12). These statistics portend an ominous warning for the developing world, both economically and socially. Their increasing greenhouse gas emissions will, of course, become a global problem. Bangkok has replicated the West’s path to motorisation, with serious public health consequences. Already, China, India and Latin America are driving into the same unfortunate cul-de-sac.
Growing concern over global warming, and increasing awareness of automobility’s public health impacts and its social inequities need to be leveraged for policy response purposes. Perhaps the current economic crisis could become this catalyst. Above all, this crisis has demonstrated that global capitalism is not a benign economic system, and neither is its promotion of automobility over other transport modes, as I have argued and documented throughout this thesis. As governments negotiate auto industry bail-outs and General Motors goes bankrupt in the US, worldwide there is greater urgency to produce more energy efficient cars, and create a low-carbon society. But, such a society must, as Rothschild points out, become much more than that. It must ideally “be an investment in ending the auto-industrial society of the late 20th century” (Rothschild, 2009 p. 1). Rothschild suggests that this would involve very significant investment in innovative public transportation, making public transport more secure, attractive and convenient through engaging the information industries in its restoration, and it would be inclusive. That is, it would extend access to many poor people in areas frequently suffering limited and/or poor quality services. Investing in mass transit, according to Rothschild (2009), would actually help to fulfill the old yet paradoxical promise of automotive “freedom”. That is, with vast, efficient and attractive mass transit networks, people could still own a car but not be forced to use it. They would likely use public transport for commutes to work and other routine travel, and would use hybrid vehicles for family and recreational purposes. As an alternative to car ownership, cars could be used for specific trips through car sharing/leasing arrangements. Such a system operates in Sydney. Car share members pay a monthly fee, which varies according to extent of usage throughout the month. They then book a car either online or over the phone for the date and time desired, and pick the car up from designated locations throughout the city, and return it to the same location. Such a system works well for individuals or families well-served by public transport and who only need a car for a few or more trips per week or month (Car Sharing, n.d.).

However, such a shift from an auto-industrial society requires more than investments in public transit. It requires a cultural shift, particularly in those nations of the developing world fast becoming the world’s most avid consumers.
of automobiles, and where cultural attachments are very strong. It requires a shift in perceptions about what car ownership actually “means” and re-directing the car’s symbolism to healthier, more energy efficient alternatives. In the final section, I will come back to this question by making broad conclusions about shifting cultural perceptions/the symbolism of the car in Bangkok and changing perceptions about public transport. But before that I will discuss transport reforms in two cities held up as exemplary attempts to contain automobility: Singapore and Bogota. These cities may provide a blueprint from which to draw ideas and lessons for the required investment in public transport of which Rothschild (2009) speaks, and which Bangkok needs. I will then move on to discuss the issues involved in such a re-vamping of transport systems, by reviewing literature on the introduction of TDM measures in several countries.

8.3 Global Policy Responses and Initiatives to Control Car Usage and Encourage Usage of Mass Transit

(i) Singapore

During my fieldwork in Bangkok in 2006, I met with key informants in Singapore to discuss the economic instruments that Singapore has employed to control automobility in the small island nation. I chose Singapore because the car has significant status associations, as it does in Bangkok, and because it is perhaps the most renowned example of efforts to constrain both automobile ownership and usage. While I am not suggesting that Singapore’s policies can be seamlessly transplanted in Bangkok, it provides a good reference point for attempts by other nations to deal with a particularly strong culture of automobility.

Mr Chia Yong Sian, President of the Motor Traders Association of Singapore, explained to me that a car constitutes one of the five “Cs” deemed desirable by Singaporeans: condominium; car; club membership; cash; and credit card. He told me that in Singapore “There is psychological pressure ... for example, to keep up with your neighbour who has 2 or 3 cars” (KI interview, July 2006). This was elaborated on by Mr Gerard Ee, ex-President of the Automobile Association of Singapore. As Singapore’s economy took off in the late-1970s, there was an
explosion in car ownership, with obvious consequences for congestion. Being a small nation, congestion posed a serious economic cost, quickly propelling the Singapore Government to implement constraints. Mr Ee believes that the prevalence of a Chinese culture in Singapore (as in Hong Kong and Bangkok) means "a very high proportion of car ownership is related to display of wealth". As the economy boomed, property prices were out of the reach of many people, who then turned to the next of the famous 5 "Cs": a car. "What I put in my home cannot be seen, but everyone can see my car", Mr Ee explained. Even though Singapore is a small island, "people are interested in big cars such as SUVs because of their look", he added. (KI interview, July 2006). This culture of car ownership and status is also passed down from parents to children in Singapore, according to Mr Lew Yii Der, Director of Policy at the Land Transport Authority, and even with today's controls, "Still cars have high status value in Singapore ... it's human nature" (KI interview, July 2006).

The Journey: Singapore's Land Transport Story, published by The Land Transport Authority of Singapore, details that country's transport policies over successive decades. It affirms the status accorded car ownership in Singaporean culture, arguing "Nobody fully understands the Singaporean's love affair with the car ... a sparkling new big brand car is a must have measure of success and prestige, a visible symbol of his or her hard work" (Land Transport Authority of Singapore, 2005, p. 82). This culture of car ownership and status has also been attributed to Singapore's small size, leaving people few options for spending their money, apart from a house and a car, according to Mr Fock Siew Wah, the founding Chairman of the Land Transport Authority (Land Transport Authority of Singapore, 2005, p. 82). Dr Hong Hai, Dean of the Nanyang Business School at Nanyang Technological University, argues "We need to change people's value system. In many countries, the car is not a prestige issue, neither here nor there. We had hoped we might get that sort of new value system but apparently we are still a long way from that" (cited in Land Transport Authority of Singapore, 2005, p. 82). Authorities were forced to acknowledge that this car culture was particularly entrenched, resulting in centralised government intervention to constrain it.
Measures to control car ownership in Singapore were based on fiscal restraints until May 1990, when the COE (Certificate of Entitlement) was introduced. Prior to that time, the Singapore Government relied on an area licensing scheme introduced in 1975 (Phang, Wong, and Chia, 1996, p. 145), requiring people to buy an area licence to enter the CBD (similar to London’s present system). The Government then introduced an ARF (additional registration fee) to make cars more expensive. These taxes were very high. For example, in December 1975, the ARF was increased from 55 per cent to 100 per cent of the new car price (Phang, Wong, and Chia, 1996, p. 145). The ARF eventually reached 190 per cent of the open market value of a car, according to Mr Gerard Ee, and yet “this just increased the status of the car” (KI interview, July 2006). People continued to buy cars because of their status, he told me.

Today, Singapore’s efforts to constrain automobility rely on two main measures: the COE; and ERP (Electronic Road Pricing). The latter technology has allowed the Singapore Government to move away from a focus on ownership to a focus on usage, according to Mr Lew Yil Der, Director of Policy, Land Transport Authority, Singapore (KI interview, July 2006). The COE is a licence to purchase which people need to bid for in order to buy a car. The introduction of this vehicle quota system in 1990, based on auctioning licences or permits to purchase a vehicle, was pioneering (Barter, 2005, p. 526). It effectively means that car ownership is not an automatic right. Annual quotas determine the number of permits that are issued each year and are set according to the targeted rate of annual increase in the car population. The quota aims to strike a balance between consumer demand and road capacity (Land Transport Authority of Singapore, 2005, p. 143). In recent years, the yearly quota has been based on an annual 3 per cent growth in the new car population (Mr Gerard Ee, KI Interview, July 2006). A COE permit is valid for a period of 10 years, beyond which time another permit needs to be purchased. Failing that, the vehicle must be exported or scrapped (Barter, 2005, p. 527). As a consequence of Singapore’s vehicle taxes, a basic 1.6 litre Toyota Corolla sedan cost approximately SGD$80,000 (around US$47,000) in late-2004. Owning this car for five years costs approximately SGD$27,500 (SGD$15 per
day) in fixed vehicle taxes. These taxes include, the COE, the ARF, excise duty, and the registration fee (Barter, 2005, p. 527).

Electronic Road Pricing replaced the Area Licensing Scheme in 1998, marking a shift away from controls on ownership to a focus on usage. A number of factors prompted this policy shift. As Barter points out, “Fixed taxes are a blunt tool and unfair at least in the sense that all motorists must pay them regardless of how much their particular usage patterns contribute to congestion or other impacts” (2005, p. 527). Additionally, the Government was concerned that the high cost of vehicles would impact adversely on business costs and national competitiveness (Barter, 2005, p. 527). Simultaneously, the Singapore Government decided that they should not limit the aspirations of middle-class Singaporeans to own vehicles, and recognised that the problem of congestion was a matter of usage itself rather than ownership (Toh and Phang, 1997, p. 31). ERP is a form of congestion charging whereby vehicles are automatically charged at specific times and locations when passing under a set of gantries which surround the city centre and other locations throughout the city (Toh and Phang, 1997, pp. 30–31). It is a flexible system allowing rates to be adjusted according to vehicle types and the hour of the day. For example, using a particular expressway before 7.30 am may cost SGD$0.80, and rise to SGD$3 between 8.30 am and 9.00 am (Land Transport Authority of Singapore, 2005, p. 144).

Despite problems, Singapore has had much success with its efforts to control congestion and encourage people onto mass transit. Singapore, like Hong Kong has relied on four principal strategies to achieve this success: traffic calming; significant investment in mass transit; economic instruments to control ownership and usage (as described above); and “non-auto dependent land uses” (Kenworthy, 2000, p. 2). The latter has involved the integration of high-density mixed land use nearby mass transit nodes, and improving pedestrian and bicycle access to these nodes. According to Kenworthy (2000, pp. 5–7), this particular strategy has been pivotal to Singapore’s success, in conjunction with the economic instruments it uses to control car use. Barter concludes:
One of the most important lessons from Singapore’s experience, along with those of Hong Kong, Japanese cities, Korean cities and many Western European cities, is that deliberately slowing down (or delaying) the motorisation process is often an important factor in easing the task of creating a balanced and effective transport system. (2003, p. 59)

By acting to restrain motorisation in the early 1970s when automobile ownership was significantly less than 100 per 1000 people, the role of public transport was not undermined by rapid motorisation. Consequently, mass transit’s role was able to gradually grow in the context of rising incomes but a relatively small car population (Barter, 2003, p. 59).

Kenworthy (2003, pp. 74–76) from Perth’s “Curtin Sustainability Policy Institute” advocates a range of initiatives to improve Bangkok’s traffic problems. A central feature of any initiative, he argues, must include the type of economic approach that Singapore has taken, including an increase in vehicle taxes, a COE for car ownership as in Singapore, fuel taxes, and an area licensing scheme. He also advocates a reduction in the level of CBD parking, considered to be “excessively high” in Bangkok (Kenworthy, 2003, p. 75). When I asked key informants in Bangkok about their inclination to introduce Singapore-type automobile restrictions, there was a range of responses. While all of them could see the necessity, and potential efficacy of such policies in Bangkok, there were concerns that the Thai political context would mitigate against such centralised controls. Dr Paibul, Professor of Community Medicine at Mahidol University in Bangkok, and a well-known expert on motor vehicle accidents and injuries in Thailand told me, “The only way to control the problem is Singapore-type policies ... with strong leadership like Lee Kwan Yu”. He added that this is only possible “in combination with improved mass transit ... BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) is the cheapest option to implement and the routes can be changed easily”. However, he cautioned that the “physical design” of Bangkok is still problematic. While many developed nations are moving towards compact cities, Bangkok’s land use policies are still oriented towards suburban sprawl, and are thus “outdated”, he said. Dr Paibul believes that the problem of the car “is controllable, but the question is when ... when the Thai public’s awareness rises
to a tipping point, it will tip the balance as in London ... in London, people became fed up with the traffic problem and politicians responded by campaigning for road pricing” (KI interview, May 2006).

Dr Talirjig Siripanich, Director of the “Don’t Drive Drunk Foundation”, who also works for the Bureau of Non-Communicable Disease at the Ministry of Health, was less confident of the possibility of transplanting Singapore’s policies to Bangkok, telling me that “Thailand lacks strong leadership to have Singapore-type policies and Singapore is small” (KI interview, May 2006). Singapore’s compact size made it much easier to regulate the entry of cars to the CBD at specific points around the city. Predictably, all of the key informants emphasised the need to greatly improve mass transit in conjunction with any attempt at Singapore-type restrictions. Mr Chamroon Tangpaisalkit, Director of the Transport Safety Bureau at the Ministry of Transport, said “If public transport is better, in the future we might think of Singapore or London-type policies ... we don’t mind how many cars people have ... just control the usage is important” (KI interview, June 2006). Mr Suriya Prasatbuntiya, Director of the Disaster and Safety Integrated Management Bureau, Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, Ministry of Interior, told me that poor mass transit and the status of cars in Bangkok are the main reasons for the traffic crisis in Bangkok. “Mass transit not work ... and people want to show they get rich ... a car make them important or like higher level”. The current problem with mass transit, he explained, are the limited SkyTrain and subway coverage, the poor quality of buses in general, and the expense of taking an air-conditioned bus for most people. Although Mr Prasatbuntiya believes Singapore-style policies would be good for Bangkok, especially controlling automobile entry to the centre of Bangkok, he is concerned the policies may not be effective “because the problem is too big” (KI interview, May 2006). As Kenworthy (2003, p. 75) has pointed out:

In order to make restraints on private transport politically feasible, public transport would need to improve greatly. A first and absolute priority is the establishment of a mass rapid transit system, notwithstanding the enormous technical, institutional and political complexities that currently
need to be overcome. Buses need to be given effective, enforceable priority in the traffic system in the form of bus-only lanes and bus-actuated signal priority. Water-way transport and paratransit modes need to be greatly improved.

Beyond restraints on car usage and ownership, and improvements in mass transit, Kenworthy (2003, pp. 74–76) advocates a range of policies to resolve Bangkok’s traffic problems. These include:

- Improving walking and cycling environments through the provision of more shaded and continuous footpaths as well as segregated cycling routes with bicycle facilities at specific destinations. Kenworthy argues that as 45 per cent of daily trips in Tokyo are made on foot or by bicycle, Bangkok can improve on its current 14 per cent. Encouraging more people to walk and/or cycle on a daily basis, serves two purposes: reducing traffic congestion and improving public health (see Chapter Two on the public health benefits). However, I argue that Bangkok faces more challenges in this regard than Tokyo. As explained in Chapter Seven, the great majority of interviewees said they do not like walking in Bangkok because of the heat and pollution, the paradox being of course that opting for car ownership only aggravates the pollution problem. They also referred to the poor walking infrastructure, where footpaths are either broken or disappear altogether, forcing pedestrians to walk on the road.

- Transit-oriented, mixed-use development needs to be prioritised. Kenworthy points out that many high-density apartments and condominiums with large parking facilities are “being built and sold on the assumption of car travel” (2003, p. 76). Instead, high density mixed land-use developments need to be constructed around mass transit nodes with traffic-calmed environments conducive to cycling and walking. He warns, “Without controls on the form and location of future development in Bangkok and the integration of effective
public transport, every improvement through other measures will be eradicated" (Kenworthy, 2003, p. 76).

- Institutional reform to reduce the number of agencies responsible for transport planning. At present, there are an excess of agencies with overlapping responsibilities.

Bus rapid transit (BRT), which Kenworthy and others (see key informants comments above) advocate for Bangkok, has been employed successfully in a number of countries. Due to its relatively inexpensive cost compared to rail, it is generally preferred by developing countries. Bogota, the capital of Colombia, is frequently referred to as a successful example of a city which has moved decisively away from car-centred transportation to a people-centred transport system, underpinned by the Transmilenio bus rapid transit system. I will now move on to discuss Bogota’s transport reforms.

(ii) Bogota, Columbia

Bogota, the capital city of Colombia, has a population of 6.5 million and for years was experiencing a progressive decline in the quality of life due to a rapid expansion of the car population. Its public transport system relied on a fleet of 30,000 old and polluting buses, with drivers regularly working 12-hour shifts. The system was privately owned. Accidents were not uncommon as buses raced other buses for passengers and even dropped passengers, including women with children, in the middle of roads. As former mayor of Bogota, Enrique Penalosa, points out:

> It was a chaotic system, bad for the city, for passengers, drivers and even for bus owners as it was not a profitable system. And still a majority of citizens were forced to take such buses for their daily transport. A version of this exists in most developing country cities. (Penalosa, 2004, p. 11)

Indeed, Bangkok’s private bus system shares many similarities.

During the administration of Mayor Enrique Penalosa (1998–2000), a range of policies was implemented to transform Bogota’s transportation system into a more people-friendly one. The administration considered the growing dependence on private automobiles as a serious threat to the quality of life of
the city, and took specific steps to encourage people onto public transport and to free public space of cars (Montezuma, 2005, p. 6). Seven policy areas were established:

- **Institutional strengthening:** attempts to establish a single body responsible for the entire transport system encountered political opposition and were ultimately abandoned. However, the institutional responsibilities of the Urban Development Institute (UDI) were strengthened, allowing it to achieve much success.
- **Restraining private car use:** the establishment of the Pico y Placa (“peak and license plate”) program, similar to odd-even license plate restrictions, a car-free day, and a public space policy. The Pico y Placa policy regulates vehicle usage during peak periods by stipulating that only 40 per cent of cars and trucks are allowed on the road during peak periods in the morning and evening. Entry is controlled according to the last four digits on license plates. Although the policy has encountered problems, it is considered to be working well overall.
- **Public space:** over time, increasing amounts of public space had been encroached upon by parked cars and street vendors. The Penalosa administration established a policy to revitalise existing public space and parks, remove parked cars from footpaths, and create new pedestrian public space. Although the policy has managed to free significant areas of public space from cars, it has simultaneously led to a considerable increase in the number of private parking stations.
- **Mass transit:** the introduction of the BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) system, known as the Transmilenio Project. I will discuss this in detail below.
- **Non-motorised transport:** construction of 350 km of bicycle paths. Studies had determined that the density of the city, its relatively low annual rainfall, and fairly short average trip distances (8–9 km), made bicycle use very feasible.
• Road maintenance: previous administrations had attempted with limited success to upgrade and maintain Bogota's road system. The Penalosa administration put forward a plan to expand Bogota's road network by eight per cent over three years, building 1100 lane-km of new roads.

• Traffic Management: these plans were not successful due to political failures and the inability to prioritise a clear strategy.

(Ardila and Menckhoff, 2002, pp. 130–135)

The Transmilenio BRT system

Bus transport is a common mode of transport in poorer cities because the cost of building and maintaining a bus system is considerably cheaper than a rail system. Construction costs of a metro system in low- and middle-income countries tend to be too high. Additionally, metro systems are less suited to sprawling cities (e.g. Bangkok) as the geographical area they are able to cover is limited (Gilbert, 2008, p. 440). Bus rapid transit, in contrast, tends to be relatively cheap and can move considerable numbers of passengers (Gilbert, 2008, p. 440). As a consequence of this, it has been adopted in a significant number of cities throughout Latin America, and increasingly in other parts of the globe, since its initial appearance in Curitiba, Brazil in 1963.

Bus rapid transit is a system which dedicates separate lanes to buses, ensuring they are not immobilised in private vehicle traffic. Mobility is crucial for any efficient mass transit system, both to maximise economic efficiency, and to attract users (Orn, 2005, p. 45). Bogota's Transmilenio system has been directly inspired by Curitiba's and was a core element of Enrique Penalosa's “Mobility Strategy” during his term as mayor of Bogota (Hidalgo, 2004, Eleventh CODATU Conference). The Transmilenio company was created by the Bogota municipality specifically to construct and supervise the operation of the new BRT system (Montezuma, 2005, p. 6). The system began operating on December 18, 2000 and as of September 2007 only 84 km of the intended 387 km system were functional. As such, any evaluation of the system remains preliminary. Forty five thousand passengers can be carried
per hour in each direction (World Bank, 2002, p. 119). The main features of the system are as follows.

1. The construction of the system is occurring in stages. On completion, the system is expected to cover 80 per cent of the transport needs of the city.

2. The use of red articulated buses running along dedicated corridors, including two totally exclusive lanes in each direction. Feeder buses deliver passengers to the main stations. The capacity of each bus is 160 passengers, comprising 112 standing passengers and 48 seated passengers.

3. Public funds have financed the building of the garages, bridges, bus stations and other infrastructure as well as the corridors built along the city’s major roads.

4. Pedestrian bridges convey passengers to designated stations for boarding. These bridges avoid accidents and accelerate boarding.

5. Travel cards purchased before boarding speed up the process. Fares are fixed and are independent of the journey length. Passengers are only charged for the use of articulated buses and not the feeder system.

6. The system includes express services and services which stop at every station.

7. A separate private company collects the fares.

8. Transmilenio SA, a special city agency, runs the system. Originally it drew a three per cent commission, but by 2006, this commission had risen to 6.95 per cent of total fares.

9. A satellite tracking system communicates with drivers and monitors the system.

10. Buses have to be replaced approximately every 10 years.

(Gilbert, 2008, pp. 442–443)
The Transmilenio system continues to run alongside Bogota’s traditional bus system and remains incomplete. The system has faced challenges and continues to do so as it evolves. However, as Gilbert points out:

There is no doubt that Transmilenio represents the jewel in the crown of recent transport reforms. It is a well-designed system that is rightly being copied by many other cities. It has cut congestion and pollution along the main corridors; it has also improved the quality of travelling on the buses. (Gilbert, 2008, pp. 457–458)

However, Gilbert (2008, pp. 458–460) highlights a number of problems. Thus far, the poor of Bogota have not benefited greatly from the system, even though they constitute the bulk of Bogota’s citizenry. This is because large areas of poor neighbourhoods are not currently serviced by the Transmilenio’s routes, and the fares are more expensive than those on the old bus system. In recent years, also, the image of the system has suffered. Following its initial and much acclaimed success, expectations were raised and significant numbers of passengers began using the system. Under the strain of high passenger volumes, which increased waiting times, and the psychological pressure of heightened expectations, the system began to disappoint. Additionally, fare increases have hurt some passengers and encouraged them to opt for the traditional bus system instead.

Perhaps the most critical difficulty facing the Transmilenio, and one which portends similar problems for other cities such as Bangkok, centres on the issue of power, and how to curtail the power of the transport lobby (Gilbert, 2008, p. 458). Gilbert argues, “There are still far too many instances of policies being undermined by legalistic tricks, by dubious decisions of the Ministry of Transport, or by suspicious cases of poor local administration” (2008, p. 459). Traditional bus owners have continued to run illegal buses in Bogota, leading to “unfair” competition, thus detracting from the potential number of passengers that Transmilenio could actually handle. Gilbert also points out that a large amount of public money is directed to the building of infrastructure for the system. However, allocating space for private cars, traditional buses, and taxis constitutes much of the cost for building the Transmilenio’s dedicated corridors.
These infrastructure costs could be cut, and passenger numbers raised, if the Bogota administration could reduce the number of private cars on the city’s streets (2008, p. 459).

The lesson to be drawn from the travails of the Transmilenio is that one system alone cannot solve an entire city’s transport problems. The entire transport system must work in conjunction with any system such as the Transmilenio in order to maximise its efficacy. For example, unfair competition from illegal buses will prevent a BRT system from realising its full potential. Above all, a BRT system cannot have any favourable impact on traffic congestion if car, bus, and taxi numbers continue to be allowed to expand. In spite of the Transmilenio’s success, air pollution remains serious in Bogota and average cross-city speeds haven’t improved (except along the Transmilenio’s corridors) (Gilbert, 2008, p. 459).

Gilbert concludes that while the Transmilenio may be a “minor miracle”, the system alone is incapable of solving Bogota’s transport problems. While such a system is undoubtedly better than traditional bus systems and significantly cheaper than metro systems, transport reform must entail a comprehensive set of measures (2008, p. 460). This conclusion is echoed by Montezuma (2005, p. 7) who points to a suite of initiatives necessary to ensure both the Transmilenio’s success and overall improvements in urban transport for Bogota. These conclusions demand similar attention in Bangkok, where any future attempts to introduce a comprehensive BRT system and reform urban transport must also be tackled on many fronts. Montezuma’s recommendations are:

1. Support mobility for the majority of the population by giving preference to mass transit.
2. Consolidate a multimodal transport system for the metropolitan area and urbanized region.
3. Link transport planning to urban land-use planning.
4. Reform and strengthen the agencies responsible for transport, public space, and urban planning.
5. Stabilize or discourage automobile usage.
6. Create an integrated policy for automobile parking.
7. Create strategies for communication, participation, and involvement by citizens.

(Montezuma, 2005, p. 7)

Montezuma (2005, p. 8) points out that compared with individual motorised transport, mass transport is seven to 10 times cheaper. However, in Bogota as in many cities, the car population continues to grow. Montezuma suggests that road use charging and increasing the cost of parking in Bogota would better reflect the true cost of private vehicle to society at large (2005, p. 8). Indeed, usage charges in Singapore have proved to be quite effective overall, as outlined in the previous section. Yet, as is widely recognised, mass transit solutions in any city must be integrated into an entire mixed land-use vision of the city which builds high density housing around transport hubs, as Singapore has done. The future extension of Bangkok’s SkyTrain and/or the implementation of a BRT system needs to be coordinated with the construction of high density housing around SkyTrain and/or bus stations. In May 2009, two new SkyTrain stations were added to the network, crossing the Chao Praya River for the first time.

In Bogota, Montezuma also notes, the refurbishment of sidewalks has translated into a reduction in parking spaces for businesses, and as such, requires urgent attention. However, he warns the provision of too much parking infrastructure may continue to encourage car ownership and usage. Consequently, a balance needs to be found. Kenworthy (2003) has already pointed to high levels of parking in Bangkok and has warned that parking availability needs to be reduced as a disincentive to car usage.

With regards to bicycle usage, Montezuma notes that the residents of Bogota tend to use bicycles mostly for leisure, and the perception of bicycles as a sign of poverty persists. He argues that “Only when members of all social classes use bicycles will the notion of the bicycle as a step below motorisation (a common idea in the developing world) be erased” (2005, p. 9). A strategy for encouraging bicycle usage in Bangkok needs also to be part of a comprehensive transport plan, as Kenworthy has argued (see earlier in this chapter). Bangkok faces the same obstacle to bicycle usage that Bogota faces,
that is, the perception of bicycles as transport for the poor. However, Bangkok faces the added obstacle of heat and the rainy season. Many of my interviewees said the air-conditioned comfort of cars allowed them to escape Bangkok’s heat, and, ironically, its (car-generated) pollution.

In summary, the overall success of Bogota’s Transmilenio bus system suggests that BRT can be an efficient and relatively cheap mass transit solution, especially for the poorer cities of the developing world, for which the cost of rail tends to be prohibitive. However, policymakers and transport officials seeking to introduce a Transmilenio-style system in Bangkok would do well to learn from Bogota’s experience and appreciate that one system alone cannot solve Bangkok’s transport problems. The implementation of a BRT system in Bangkok can only achieve success as long as it is adopted in conjunction with appropriate land-use policies, the political will and capability to deal with the power of the transport lobby, appropriate policies for controlling the availability of parking spaces, and systematic efforts to discourage private car ownership and usage. However, as I have argued throughout this thesis, automobility is also a cultural phenomenon, demanding more than technical solutions alone. As such, cultural attitudes need to be understood and changed. I will turn to a more comprehensive discussion of this argument in the final sections of this chapter.

8.4 Issues Affecting the Implementation of Traffic Demand Management Measures: A Literature Review of Travel Campaigns and Attempts to Understand Travel Behaviour and Attitudes

Any attempt to control either car usage or car ownership, as well as encouraging more people onto mass transit, inevitably depends to some degree upon the attitudes of car drivers to TDM measures, and general attitudes to public transport as a mode of travel. The thesis has investigated automobility in Bangkok as a cultural practice, and as such recognises that technical solutions to Bangkok’s traffic problem (such as those outlined earlier in this chapter) and the examples of Singapore and Bogota, are contingent also upon the cultural attitudes and practices of transport users in Bangkok. Furthermore, literature
(Stradling, Meadows, and Beatty, 2000; Wright and Egan, 2000; Choocharukul, Van, and Fujii, 2006; Loukopoulos, Jakobsson, Garling, Schneider, and Fujii, 2005; Guiver, 2007; Jopson, 2004; Curtis and Headicar, 1997; Fujii and Taniguchi, 2006; Ibrahim, 2003; Steg, 2005; Forde, 1998; Sperling and Claussen, 2004) suggests that the suitability of TDM measures are not unequivocally generalisable, and the possibility of translating developed world solutions to the developing world should not be assumed. Sperling and Claussen rightly warn that “uniform prescriptions do not work. Motorisation patterns vary widely across the globe, particularly among developing countries” (2004, p. 12). This literature tends to be heavily Western-centric, but provides useful insights into who may be receptive to TDM measures and how that receptiveness may be harnessed. The value of the literature is that it raises a number of issues that policymakers in Bangkok (or in any city) need to be cognisant of when attempting to implement TDM measures. However, understanding attitudes to car usage, car ownership, and also public transport usage must be locally-specific. Informed by culturally-specific knowledge of transport behaviour, policymakers may target travel campaigns and TDM measures more accurately. In the following section, I will review the literature on this area, and building on my own culturally-specific findings presented throughout this thesis, briefly suggest what might be the most efficacious approach to transforming attitudes to car usage, car ownership and mass transit usage in Bangkok.

The literature tends to assess attitudes to TDM measures by defining such measures as “push” or “pull”. “Push” factors are coercive measures, such as the prohibition of car traffic in city centres, while pull factors are voluntary and include, for example, individualised marketing to households of alternative mass transit options available to complete their daily journeys. A British study by Stradling et al. (2000) investigated which motorists were ready to reduce their car use and by what methods they could be helped to change. Stradling et al. (2000, p. 208) point out that:

Travel decisions are driven by the interaction of opportunity, obligation and inclination. In order to persuade individuals to reduce their private car use
it will be helpful to know what they currently use their cars for, whether they would like to change their current level of car use, whether they think that circumstances will facilitate or impede any change, which policy measures they might find effective in encouraging or coercing change and, more generally, what behavioural change measures have proved effective in other areas.

The authors remind us that any attempt by policymakers to induce behavioural change in populations will rarely achieve complete success if it relies on coercion alone. Helping, rather than forcing individuals to change is understood to be the most desirable option. Singapore has employed a “push” strategy, which can involve increasing costs, such as raising fuel prices or increasing parking charges, or “decreasing availability” by such measures as banning car access to city centres and reducing city centre parking. Bogota’s approach is more a “pull” approach, involving other strategies, categorised as “persuasive communications” (e.g. “anti-car use propaganda”), “reduce procedural uncertainty” (e.g. “improve availability of information”), and “improve alternatives” (e.g. “more and better cycle tracks” and “better public transport vehicles and interchanges”) (Stradling et al., 2000, p. 213). The authors found that poor people and old people were more responsive to “push” measures, while the young and drivers of small cars were more susceptible to “pull” measures. While this is not necessarily surprising, and may find some replication in Bangkok, it is noteworthy inasmuch as it should remind policymakers that car drivers are individuals who must be targeted according to their unique socio-economic, age and, I would add, gender demographics.

The authors also refer to literature on behavioural change that specifies a set of conditions that must be met for personal change to occur. Translating this into changing the behaviour of car drivers, they emphasise the importance of the first, second and last conditions. These are: (1) “Current behaviour is causing problems in living for an individual and their significant others”; (2) “The client accepts ownership of the problem and shows readiness for change”; (6) “Once change is achieved, mechanisms to assist maintenance and prevent relapse can be put in place” (Stradling et al., 2000, p. 213). In terms of car usage,
satisfying conditions (1) and (2) means individuals are ready to accept that current levels of car usage in their society are environmentally degrading and unhealthy, and are willing to change. This willingness may also be based on personal circumstances, such as financial stress over increasing fuel prices, etc. The authors emphasise that condition (6) is essential to the success of transport reform and requires significant transport infrastructure changes in order to increase the availability and attractiveness of other transport modalities.

My research indicates that Bangkokians are certainly aware of the problems that car saturation has brought to Bangkok and, as Chapter Seven illustrates, there is emerging resistance to car usage and even ownership in Bangkok, indicating at least some “readiness for change”. However, ambiguity also characterises this resistance, inasmuch as resistance must wrestle with the symbolic appeal of the car in Bangkok. The issue may then become how best to capture that resistance and simultaneously diminish the symbolism of cars in Bangkok in order to achieve behavioural change. I will turn to this question in the final conclusions I make at the end of this chapter.

While Stradling and colleagues (2000) research focuses on a different cohort (Western citizens of a developed nation with a much older car culture) from my own research, its conclusions are significant because it reiterates that car usage has a variety of purposes for individuals, and therefore efforts to reduce usage must target those purposes and provide suitable alternatives which meet individual needs. The authors define needs instrumentally, just as transport economists and planners have traditionally conceptualised transport. Thus, the needs of this cohort are defined by such things as driving to work, transporting children to various activities, and “life and network maintenance tasks”, including visiting friends and shopping. My own research identifies similar needs among Bangkokians (see Chapter Six on the “utilitarianism” of the car in Bangkok). However, in Bangkok’s case, I would argue that meeting the needs of its citizens, as Stradling and colleagues (2000) suggest, means recognising the car’s symbolic cachet as a need requiring fulfilment perhaps equal to its utilitarian functions. That is, the emotions which private auto ownership engenders, such as prestige and upward socio-economic ascendancy, must somehow be re-directed away from cars but simultaneously be fulfilled, albeit in
a transformed sense, by the alternatives offered. For example, if driving a Toyota Yaris makes a young Bangkokian feel “cool”, then that self-image must be appealed to in the alternatives that are marketed to this driver. I will discuss this in greater detail in my final recommendations by drawing on section 7.3 of Chapter Seven.

Stradling and colleagues (2000, p. 215) conclude that “sustainable changes that may be integrated into people’s patterns of life will ensue if people are helped to change, not forced to change”. A Swedish study (Loukopolous et al., 2005) examined attitudes to three specific TDM measures, ranging from coercive (“push”) to non-coercive (“pull”), by randomly surveying 600 employees of various socio-economic groups in a Swedish university. The most coercive measure was the prohibition of traffic in the centre of the city of Cambridge in the UK. The non-coercive measure was “individualised marketing” to interested households in Perth, Australia, of alternative transport modes to their car. Individuals are provided, either by post, over the phone, or even by home visits, with personal advice for their respective trips, including personalised timetables. The third measure, “road pricing” in Singapore, is viewed as falling between coercive and non-coercive. It was this measure that produced the most negative attitudes amongst respondents (Loukopolous et al., 2005, p. 63), while the most popular was prohibition of car traffic. Interestingly, the authors found that environmental concern was pivotal in determining attitudes towards TDM measures. Those people who exhibited more positive attitudes tended to be high in environmental concern, and travel costs (e.g. fees, taxes and extra charges) played less of a role in determining their attitudes than it did for those individuals low in environmental concern. The authors point out that these findings confirm prior research by Stern and colleagues in 1993 based on the acceptance of fees. They conclude, therefore, that those high in environmental concern justify the extra costs on the grounds that the revenue could be directed at improving the environment.

The significance of these findings is that they highlight how important it is to understand the attitudes of citizens to TDM measures when developing car restraint policies. For this cohort, at least, the research suggests that
augmenting environmental awareness among the population may help to improve acceptance of TDM measures. Whether or not appealing to environmental awareness could help to inform policy development in Bangkok with equal success is, however, open to question. This research was, after all, carried out in a Northern European country (Sweden) well known for its relatively sophisticated levels of environmental awareness and practice. Despite overall high levels of economic growth, especially since the last quarter of the twentieth century, Thailand remains a developing nation, with a capital city chronically environmentally blighted by the private car, yet with less sophistication in its environmental awareness. I suspect that, as the Marketing Manager for Daimler Chrysler Thailand (the producers of the Mercedes-Benz), Ms Pannate Rangsinturat told me (KI interview, June 2006), Thais are much less interested in green car technology and environmental issues. Thus, while European marketers of the Mercedes may appeal to environmental concern, Thai Mercedes marketers appeal more to "the look" and self-image. Ms Rangsinturat concluded, "Environmental consciousness is too sophisticated for car buyers in Thailand" (KI interview, June, 2006). Although aware of and lamenting the environmental impact of the car in Bangkok, my interviewees demonstrated significant symbolic attachment to their cars. Bangkok's car culture is not Sweden's car culture. Nevertheless, I believe the widespread discontent over Bangkok's car-generated pollution among my interviewees indicates that policymakers should leverage on environmental concern, even if it may not necessarily be employed in Bangkok with equal effectiveness as in Sweden. My research suggests, instead, that the greater focus should be on Thais' self-image.

Another method adopted by various countries to reduce car reliance has been "travel feedback programs" (TFPs). Fujii and Taniguchi define TFPs as "soft measures designed to change travel behaviour, mainly from automobile to non-automobile travel, in mobility management" (2006, p. 339). By "soft measures", the authors mean specific communicative measures to manage peoples' mobility. One of the most effective measures has been personalised communication, including such things as individualised marketing to households (referred to earlier in this section, in the case of Perth, Australia), and...
personalised travel plans (Fujii and Taniguchi, 2006, p. 39). Their paper reviews literature on the use of TFPs, with a specific focus on Japan. There are a range of TFPs, and they may be implemented in workplaces, schools, or residential areas and focus on daily household car behaviour and commuting behaviour. TFPs focus on behavioural change, generally aiming to stimulate a change in travel behaviour, through, for example, individualised marketing to people about how they could change their daily travel, specific procedures for doing so, and the communication media that could be used. The media includes mail, email, telephone and face-to-face communication.

The authors concentrated on Japanese examples in order to investigate the effectiveness of TFPs. The effects were categorised as an increase in public transport patronage, car use reduction, and a reduction in the levels of carbon dioxide in Japanese cities. As a result of the TFPs employed in Japan, the authors found that public transport usage increased by 50 per cent, car use fell by 18 per cent, and there was a 19 per cent reduction in CO₂ emissions. These findings were found to be quite similar to those studies in developed nations that had implemented TFPs (e.g. Australia, the UK, Germany, and the US). The authors identified the importance of requesting a behavioural plan from the participant in order for TFPs to be effective, although they concede that there is no guarantee that TFPs with behavioural plans will always be more effective than those without. Nevertheless, in this review TFPs with behavioural plans produced the greatest reduction in carbon dioxide, the highest increase in public transport use, and the greatest reduction in car use (Fujii and Taniguchi, 2006, p. 346).

Finally, the authors conclude that TFPs may be as effective in Western countries as they are in other cultures, and advocate further case studies to verify the effectiveness of such “soft measures”. This literature is interesting for the fact that its authors have found this correlation between a non-Western country (Japan), and findings in Western countries. Additionally, it highlights the important role played by measures other than the more coercive TDM measures, such as taxation and prohibition of traffic in city centres, and thus reinforces the argument that a broad-ranging suite of solutions are necessary to
reduce car usage. In the case of Thailand, or Bangkok specifically, the use of TFPs may achieve some success there also, and should not be discounted as a solution. Yet, some preliminary research by Choocharukul et al. (2006), comparing attitudes to communicative mobility management measures in Japan and Thailand suggest that Thais are not as responsive to such measures as the Japanese. Again it cannot be assumed that measures in a developed nation will achieve equal success in the socio-economic, political and cultural context of developing nations.

Choocharukul and colleagues (2006) point out that in Japan a reduction in car use could be achieved voluntarily through the implementation of TFPs; i.e. communicative measures to influence travel behaviour. Additionally, adopting appropriate communication focused on the significance of curtailing car usage in urban areas was found to have a positive influence on attitudes to coercive TDM measures, such as road pricing. However, the authors note that in other Asian countries, including Thailand, similar investigations have not occurred (Choocharukul et al., 2006, p. 70). Consequently, the authors undertook research based on a survey questionnaire to investigate whether communicative transportation measures which had been employed successfully in Japan, could be adapted to Thailand, which is a developing nation. The measures included TFPs, and public campaigns advocating road pricing. The surveyed cities included Bangkok, Ubon Ratchathani, and Tokyo. Five hundred and seventy eight engineering students were randomly surveyed, with approximately 90 per cent being male and the majority aged 20 to 21 years. The authors focused on three attitudinal determinants deemed to inform attitudes towards cars and mass transit. The first group, "symbolic/affective" factors, comprised feelings associated with cars, such as being "rich", "fashionable", "superior" and "aristocratic". The second group, "instrumental" factors, focused on functional attributes such as "pleasant", "convenient", and "useful". The final category, "social orderliness", consisted of the car's social aspects, such as "quiet", "environmentally friendly", and "safe".

The authors found that attitudinal determinants amongst the Thai sample were not as effective as they were in Japan, and came to the conclusion, therefore,
that the use of communicative mobility management measures in Thailand "would not be promising" and are unlikely to be as effective as they are in Japan (Choocharukul et al., 2006, p. 76). They saliently note that "local transportation planners should realize that they could not directly transfer the lessons learned from developed countries, such as Japan, to developing ones, such as Thailand" (Choocharukul et al., 2006, p. 75). The authors concede, nevertheless, that the results are not definitive and further research is required.

The literature discussed above exemplifies debate and broad findings on the importance of understanding attitudes to the implementation of TDM measures, what factors may inform these attitudes, and the importance of understanding also that attitudes may be specific to certain groups. I would add that gender may also be a variable impacting on attitudes. Indeed certain male-specific symbolism and female-specific concerns about public transport that my own research uncovered reinforces this. The claims the research above makes have their own validity, even if fairly preliminary in some cases. Yet, this literature also cautions against generic solutions. My opinion is that policymakers in Bangkok could draw on this literature to inform their own efforts, yet any effort must also be locally-specific.

I will now summarise my research findings, and draw on the theories of Wright and Egan (2000) to make suggestions about the need to acknowledge automobility’s cultural underpinnings in Bangkok and to de-market the car as a status symbol.

8.5 The Car Was Never Without a Driver: De-Marketing the Car in Bangkok

This thesis has investigated a familiar and well-researched problem—Bangkok’s traffic crisis—with the aim of ameliorating its public health impacts. However, I have taken a different route in my investigation. The problem of Bangkok’s traffic has traditionally been conceptualised from a transport economics/planning paradigm. As such, road infrastructure, road users, transport planners, urban geography and road rules have framed research questions and, thus, policy suggestions based on these investigations. As a
consequence, the discourse has often failed to understand the cultural motivations of car owners and aspiring car owners in Bangkok. Research into Bangkok’s infamous traffic crisis had neglected the driver at the wheel. I acknowledge that a range of factors—structural, policy-driven, geographic, economic and political—have contributed to the present problem. The poor quality of mass transit, the headlong push to construct a motorised suburbia, the fragmentation of policy responses, the heat and tropical rain, and the lack of road space had all been raised and rightly acknowledged as contributors. But the car was never without a driver.

Figure 2 in Chapter One diagrammatically captures the economic and cultural forces encouraging the Thai driver to get behind the wheel, and the outcomes for urban health and social equity. Together with the research questions I posed in Chapter One, this diagram conceptually guided my investigation. I will now respond to the original research questions by summarising the findings of this thesis, visually captured in Figure 2, Chapter One. The conclusions drawn will inform the final suggestions I make for how to improve the public health of Bangkok citizens, and reduce transport injustice, by moving away from its auto-centric transport system.

Bangkok’s auto-centric transport system has evolved as a socio-material form of consumption, arising from Thailand’s economic transformation and entrenchment within the global capitalist economy. Transitioning from an agricultural economy to an industrial capitalist one, the economic and cultural globalisation of the Thai economy put in place twin and complimentary processes: the urbanisation of Bangkok and consumerism (see Stage 1 of Figure 2, Chapter One). The burgeoning middle class borne of this economic transformation, as well as the capital’s working class drawn away from the receding agricultural sector to the factories and other workplaces of Bangkok, required mobility. Their response—to purchase automobiles—was practical (material) and cultural (social): cars allowed them to both overcome the inadequacies of mass transit, and provided a strong identity referent in Thai culture, demonstrating upward socio-economic mobility in the capital, financial success, and even romantic desirability as a male. These symbolic attachments
are projected by the values of global consumer culture, but are also firmly anchored in Thainess. In the absence of effective policy instruments (most notably investment in widespread, efficient and attractive mass transit) to filter and displace this socio-material consumption of cars, the *culture of automobility* grew. In fact, the policy of the Thai Government to invest in the auto industry as a cornerstone of economic growth (see Stage 2 of Figure 2, Chapter One) became a political factor in the growing culture of car consumption: besides export earnings, the industry depended heavily on local consumption.

President Bill Clinton’s successful 1992 White House campaign against George Bush senior famously used the catch phrase “It’s the economy, stupid”, capturing the American people’s preoccupation with the economy over Bush’s focus on foreign policy. In a hypothetical campaign to contain automobility, such a slogan would not be misplaced in guiding policymakers. Markets both underpin and shape cultural processes. They inform social norms, commodify cultural practices, infiltrate intimate life, texture social interaction and create their own *cultural and moral economies*. Indeed, they give rise also to the cultural touchstones according to which we express ourselves, and define ourselves and others. The global capitalist economy perpetuates itself through continually satisfying, creating and re-defining consumer needs and desires. The consumption upon which it depends is culturally instrumental in the economic system’s survival. Consumption is also cultural because it is used to express values and identities. The forgotten *driver at the wheel* in Bangkok is also a *consumer* who sees his/her car as a cultural touchstone, symbolising success in its many manifestations, and embodying something of his/her identity. In this way, transport becomes *cultural*. When Bangkokians take to the wheel, they are able to overcome the inadequacy of mass transit and access their workplaces, fulfil social engagements, transport family members around, and visit their local shopping mall. Yet, they do more than that. I see the twenty-first century Thai driver as a Bangkokian expressing her upward mobility, seizing time, space and economic opportunity in a machinic union of herself and her status machine. With little time to cast a glance back towards her village—her’s and her nation’s past—she capers through a panopoly of other urban signifiers of status towards her advertiser’s and her dream, pedal to the floor, somewhere *down the road*. 
Alas, the most accurate transport dictum to guide policymakers would read, “It’s the cultural economy, stupid”.

The paradox of this car consumption is the damage to public health, transport injustice, and the strengthening of social inequalities (see Stage 4 of Figure 2, Chapter One). When coupled with inadequate and poor-quality mass transit, automobility has a disproportionately negative impact on disadvantaged groups.

As Freund and Martin emphasise, “Despite the fact that it is seen as democratic, auto-centred transport in fact disenfranchises many people” (1996, p. 20). The final irony of auto-centred transport is that in some regards its aggregate impact ultimately affects all social groups alike. That is, the contradictions that emerge affect all transport users (private and non-private).

The consuming paradox is no longer about social inequalities alone, but the paradox that the system itself has fewer and fewer benefits for everyone. Freund and Martin capture this:

One important contradiction adhering to auto-centred transport systems is that there is a point beyond which the volume of auto use reduces or even negates the efficiency of auto transport. This contradiction can be documented empirically in congestion costs. (1996, p. 27)

When there are so many cars on the road that it is sometimes faster to walk than to drive a car or ride a bus (as many of my research participants said of Bangkok), the “freedom” and convenience of car ownership becomes illusory. As Gartman poignantly argues, “It is hard to feel like a free individual in a massive gridlock of cars” (2004, p. 192).

Bangkok’s experience portends similar problems in China, India and other countries experiencing the same economic transformation and urbanisation that Thailand did, and who are also anchoring their growth to the automobile. As Freund and Martin (1996, p. 22) warn, “The globalization of auto-centred transport will have its most negative health and safety impacts upon the lower and working classes of the nations of the South”. Yet, a sense of inevitability should neither overwhelm nor discourage policymakers, as long as they use the instruments at their disposal to discourage car usage and encourage the usage of mass transit in a timely manner before automobility dominates the transport
system. This period during the early stages of development is the optimum time to build efficient mass transit. Decision makers need also to remember there is a driver at the wheel.

Acknowledging the centrality of this Bangkokian driver’s cultural attachment to car ownership, which my research has uncovered, I will conclude by featuring the de-marketing of the car as one of the initiatives to discourage car usage in Bangkok, among other policies such as introducing vehicle taxation and congestion charging. These policy suggestions have already been outlined earlier in this chapter through reference to Kenworthy (2003). Below, I have reproduced and adapted Wright and Egan’s (2000) proposal, depicted diagrammatically (see Figure 11). As explained in Chapter Seven, Wright and Egan (2000) emphasise that policymakers need to pay greater attention to the car’s power as a status symbol and a means of self-expression, when designing campaigns targeting ownership and usage. Their emphasis on the significance of the car’s symbolic/affective resonance is confirmed by my own findings and by recent literature which captures a range of symbolic and affective values with which cars are associated (see Steg, 2005). I advocate that de-marketing cannot be peripheral in Bangkok, and must share equal prominence with other measures.
**Figure 11: De-Marketing the Car in Bangkok**

Source: Adapted from Wright and Egan, 2000, p. 290

**OBJECTIVE:** To improve public health in Bangkok

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourage</th>
<th>Encourage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Car ownership</td>
<td>Use of alternative modes</td>
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<td>Travel by car</td>
<td>Public transport</td>
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<td>Walking, cycling</td>
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- **Vehicle taxes:**
  - Road Pricing, fuel taxes, parking controls

- **DE-MARKETING THE CAR**
- **MARKETING facilities**
- **Transport**
- **Traffic management**
- **Land use planning**

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De-marketing the car in Bangkok, in conjunction with a suite of well-timed initiatives to invest in and encourage patronage of mass transit, and the introduction of TDM measures such as those reviewed in this chapter, may help to complete an equation historically bogged down in technocratic discourses and technocratic solutions. And, as many of my interviewees implored, public transport requires significant expansion and improvement before Bangkokians can feasibly reduce their car usage. The car’s symbolism may then, to some degree, be transplanted to the new “cool”: mass transit. Newman and Kenworthy invigorate this debate reiterating the fact that

Technological determinism based on cars can be switched into transit if a quality service is available and the major road and freeway systems are operating close to capacity. Cultural choices vary and the dream of space in the suburbs can be replaced for some with a dream of urban living near to the full range of amenities and attractions. (Newman and Kenworthy, 2000, p. 16)

Significantly, they confirm that cultural choices affect transport behaviour. Yet, the cultural choice is not about suburban versus urban living alone. The cultural choice is also about whether and when to use one’s car, and/or whether to buy a car at all, independent of one’s place of residence. To effectively impact on that choice, the cultural values informing it need to be understood, and judiciously targeted. De-marketing the car in Bangkok does this.

Figure 11 features de-marketing the car among a range of initiatives, both coercive and non-coercive (“push” and “pull”), to limit car usage and encourage mass transit usage in the interests of improving public health in Bangkok. The aim is to shift cultural perceptions about cars and mass transit, and to raise awareness and reiterate the connection between transport, health, and the environment. The aim is not to depict cars as without use, nor intrinsically “bad”. Cars have, and will continue to have, very practical functions, as they will have “affective” or symbolic significance for some individuals. Cars provide access to workplaces, social networks, family members, and entertainment activities. Automobility enables the routine and the spontaneous of daily life. Only by moving, can individuals perform the iterative functions of quotidian life, or
indeed spontaneously rebel against the daily routine and literally drive into the unknown, or take a different turn. Mobility negates stasis. Rather, the point is to realise that there are other modes of transport, or specific modes for specific functions (e.g. public transport to get to work, and cars to socialise), and that these other modes also appeal to our self-image, sense of status and need for respect. In short, to move, whether on foot, by bicycle, or on mass transit, needs to be equated with a new cool which post-dates the, technocratic, modernist, masculine and conquering cool of the twentieth century auto-industrial age. Its dictum is not to tuer la rue (“kill the street”, in French) as Le Corbusier famously intoned. Twenty-first century “cool” is more soft-edged, slightly more feminine, yet hardly weak, environmentally conscious, health conscious, but never self-conscious, urbane and sleek. It aims not to kill the street but to revitalise it by taking cars off it. It tolerates fools showing off in cars just barely, deplores the car “hoon” and is most self-satisfied and smug conquering time and space seated in a slick Bangkok SkyTrain, newspaper in hand, peering at a blue pollution-free sky, and feeling sorry for the car drivers below. In that sense it is almost a snob.

The following suggestions then constitute some basic ideas/guidelines for any attempt by policymakers to inject this twenty-first century cool into mass transit and to de-market the car. They do not, however, constitute an entire campaign. Such a campaign is beyond my expertise, and further research, especially into specific car journey purposes, is needed to ensure such a campaign is appropriately targeted and designed.

**Suggestions for De-Marketing the Car and Marketing Mass Transit in Bangkok:**

- **Three main target groups:**
  - Group 1: youth (future drivers)
  - Group 2: car owners
  - Group 3: aspiring car owners.
As explained in Chapter Seven, targeting future drivers in Bangkok for the same rationale that “The Style by Toyota Cafe” does, but with a different goal, aims to diminish the car’s symbolism among youth before strong symbolic attachments are formed. This group is particularly important to target, as they will constitute the future generation of drivers. The aim of this campaign, therefore, would be to discourage future car ownership and to raise the status of mass transit. The source of the message should be a well-known figure among Thai teenagers, who is considered cool, successful and fashionable. He/she should appeal to Thai youth’s desired self-image to be considered “cool” amongst his/her peers, attractive, successful and fashionable, and should aim to instil environmental awareness, and make the connection between active commuting (i.e. public transport, cycling and walking) and better health. This generation is growing up in an age of global warming and has not known Bangkok without pollution. They will be the generation impacting on their urban environment in the future and, for that reason especially, need to understand how their individual decisions regarding car usage and ownership in the future will impact on the environment they will live in, and on their health. Being green and renouncing car ownership, using a car less, and taking mass transit needs especially to be projected as “cool” for this group. Rather than being implored to fulfil a public duty, this group needs to be shown how to be “cool” like one of their “cool” role models. I think in order to avoid resistance to the message it is particularly important that a sense of public duty is not the centrepiece of the campaign. Youth want to be accepted by peers and do what is “cool”. For that reason they are more likely to respond positively to a young cool role model than a perceived “lecture” from an official and older source.

The campaign should also aim to deconstruct the association between car ownership, masculinity and romantic desirability as an eligible male partner. This gender variable emerged especially among young males, and was often reiterated by young females who said they wanted to date a man with a nice car. Cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity are universal, rather than Thai alone, and the cultural economy of many consumer goods leverages
on gender to sell products. Cars have long been socially constructed and allegorically imagined as four-wheeled “masculine” strength, success, and power conquering time and space. Yet, marketers also specifically target aspiring female car owners, according to Ms Pannate Rangsinturat, Manager of Marketing Strategy and Research, Daimler Chrysler, Thailand (KI Interview, June 2006). Deconstructing the male romantic capital of car ownership may not be easy considering the history and strength of the car’s association with masculinity, but youth especially may be more amenable to this message.

Group 2
This campaign should focus on usage rather than ownership. Cars hold significant symbolic appeal for this group, as well as fulfilling practical needs. Attempting to discourage ownership amongst current owners by explicitly attempting to deconstruct the symbolic associations of status and success cars hold for them, may actually be counter-productive and produce resistance. Rather, the campaign might be more effective if it focused on usage and attempted to replicate similar feelings of status and respect vis-à-vis mass transit, especially the SkyTrain.

As Wright and Egan (2000) suggest, specific sub-groups of car users and journey purposes could be targeted. Further research is required to appropriately identify these groups, but my findings suggest targeting those who use their car to commute to work, those who live near the popular SkyTrain and could therefore be encouraged to use it more, and professionals who may consider mass transit is not befitting their socio-economic status. Gender needs to be taken into account when marketing the SkyTrain as females seemed to especially appreciate it for its comfort, cleanliness, and safety. Being able to protect their clothes and make-up in air-conditioned clean comfort was valued. Many interviewees explained how cars express your success as a businessman or woman. As such the campaign would need to target this self-image, not by directly challenging this association, but by projecting the same successful self-image onto mass transit use. Using one’s car for to commute to work, for example, could be projected as the behaviour of a successful, environmentally aware and informed professional, who also uses his/her car for other trips. The
source of the message could be well-known and unknown successful professionals using mass transit, especially the SkyTrain. Many interviewees said they would use their car less if the SkyTrain was extended to run near their home. Car drivers who participated in my research often said Bangkok’s environment, especially air pollution levels, would be much better without cars. As such, I believe that as with Group 1, the environment should be appealed to. However, the focus may be slightly different by suggesting how these current car drivers are contributing to air pollution when they make unnecessary car trips. Concern for the environment could be projected as part of one’s self-image, rather than as a public duty: the mark of an educated, successful professional is also how he/she acts to influence the quality of the environment in Bangkok.

Many car drivers also said they liked to drive their car upcountry to visit relatives as a car demonstrated their success in the capital, and some said the traffic conditions made driving outside the city preferable to driving within Bangkok. Based on the frequency of these comments, I believe city versus country driving needs to be targeted in campaigns. Again, self-image and status can be appealed to, not by denying the feelings of pride associated with showing off one’s car back in one’s hometown, but by emphasising the practicality and the enlightened and educated sense of environmental responsibility of the successful person who chooses to use his/her car less inside the city. The freedom of taking to the open road is often the theme of many car advertisements. That same theme may be appealed to in order to discourage usage in Bangkok, and to emphasise the greater pleasure of driving on uncluttered country roads.

Group 3
Aspiring car owners are those who currently rely on public transport in Bangkok, but who would like to own a car. They included motorcyclists and bus and SkyTrain riders. The great majority of these people told me they would like to buy a car, especially for symbolic reasons, but also for practical reasons. Interestingly, some interviewees said, especially women, that they would like to own a car to be able to travel outside Bangkok, rather than within the city.
Motorcyclists (predominantly male and mostly from the low SES group) had particularly strong aspirations to purchase a car as a sign of success, despite the freedom to zig-zag through traffic that motorcycles offer them.

Based on these findings, I believe a campaign should target future ownership by attempting to raise the status and emphasise the practicality of mass transit. Undoubtedly, this is not an easy goal, given the aspirations of many to own a car, especially male motorcyclists. Unlike Group 1, these are adults with already very articulated and often entrenched symbolic attitudes to car ownership. My research also indicates that those from a low SES background, in particular male motorcyclists, feel more compelled to purchase a car because non-ownership in a car dependent city such as Bangkok reinforces a sense of social exclusion. Being able to demonstrate some measure of financial success through car purchase is an abiding and understandable aspiration, especially for this group. Yet, I believe that in the interests of improved public health, a cleaner environment and a better quality of life for all Bangkok residents, this group, like others, should be encouraged onto quality mass transit.

Mass transit could be marketed in much the same manner as it is marketed to Group 2, appealing to people’s self-image. I think it is neither feasible nor desirable to pretend that taking the SkyTrain or bus holds as much social status as driving a car, especially for those from a low SES background like many of this group, who associate possible future ownership with much success and status, and especially in a developing nation where car ownership is still financially out of reach for many. However, self-image needs to be targeted by suggesting it is definitely “okay” to take mass transit and even environmentally responsible, “cool” and something which successful professionals and high SES groups also do. Again, the efficiency, cleanliness and “coolness” of using the SkyTrain should be targeted, taking into account the especially favourable attitude of females towards it. Focusing on the practical and symbolic qualities of mass transit may further dissuade from car purchase those people who said they mostly want a car to travel outside Bangkok.

As Figure 11 indicates, the car can only be de-marketed if widespread, efficient, safe and attractive mass transit is an alternative option. Bangkok has much
work to do on this. The suggestions above are preliminary and require further research to scope out and accurately identify target groups, and appropriate sources for the campaign messages. Bangkok has made improvements in its mass transit over the past 10 years, with the opening of two SkyTrain lines in 1999, the opening of a single metro line in 2004, and the latest extension of one SkyTrain line across the Chao Phraya River in May 2009. Plans are in place to extend the SkyTrain lines even further. Policymakers need to be aware, however, that the transport choices of Bangkokians are not functional alone. Rather, they are also underpinned by social and cultural dynamics that attribute much symbolism to the car. That symbolism needs to be targeted in order to achieve an appreciable modal shift to mass transit use.

8.6 Conclusion

This thesis concludes in a time of global economic crisis, announcements by major car corporations about the production of greener cars, plans to build cycling infrastructure throughout cities (e.g. the 2030 Vision for Sydney) (http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/2030, accessed August 17, 2009), increasingly sophisticated plans for green office buildings, market gardens in the suburbs, and much hand wringing over global warming. The ecological age is nudging up against the auto-industrial age, creating momentum for change. Simultaneously, car sales continue to soar in developing nations such as India and China, and car corporations look to developing countries as the major car producers and consumers of the twenty first century. The West now realises that “killing the street” was a major public policy failure of the twentieth century. The question is whether the developing nations of Asia and Latin America will be caught by this momentum in time to prevent automobility from overtaking their transport systems. Bangkok has unfortunately followed the West and has already killed its streets, with adverse consequences for public health, social equity, and quality of life. The future of Bangkok’s transport system, and indeed the transport system of many cities, especially in developing nations undergoing rapid economic growth and urbanisation, will be determined by political leadership, will and action. But, as this thesis confirms, transport is also a
cultural behaviour. In the interests of making Bangkok a more healthy and attractive place to live, the Thai and local Bangkok administrations need to acknowledge this. Culture does not establish unequivocal causation. It is less tangible than some scientists would like, but culture is what we value and how we think. It informs, therefore, how we act. And for researchers, it is another and increasingly significant epistemology. As Eckersley argues,

the most important application of research into culture as a determinant of health may be in the contribution it can make to a much broader political and public debate about the lives people want to lead, the societies they want to live in, the futures they want to create. (2007, p. 206)

Unfortunately, Bangkok is frequently defined by its traffic jams and air pollution. However, my research indicates that Bangkokians do want to live in a less polluted, less car-dependent city. There is momentum for change, even if it is ambiguous. This thesis adds a missing voice to the debate—the voice of Bangkokians—and in that sense may facilitate a future transition to a much healthier city. If the voices of Bangkokians are heard, and there is sufficient political will to harness the momentum for change, the public health of Bangkok’s residents can significantly improve. Reduced car dependence may translate into: fewer road fatalities and injuries; reduced incidence of diseases associated with air pollution, including cancer and heart disease; and enhanced overall physical fitness due to more active commuting, e.g. walking. Chapter Two has already highlighted these three health impacts of car dependence in detail.

At a time when social cohesion is threatened in Thailand as rural and urban poor protest with increasing anger at the growing gap between rich and poor, it is salient to remember the social inequalities driving this unrest manifest themselves also in transport, as this thesis has highlighted. Political efforts to provide a mass transit system in Bangkok that is accessible to all, and does not privilege middle class car owners at the expense of everyone else, would signal some effort to address social inequalities.

Finally, this research enlarges the debate about the future of Bangkok’s transport, and the kind of city Bangkokians want to live in by confirming that
drivers are social actors making choices to purchase and drive cars for both material (practical) and social reasons. As long as the transport discourse of policymakers in Bangkok and elsewhere ignores the social actor at the wheel, it will be difficult to get him/her out of the car.


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