Reflections from Hanoi: Waiting, work, and everyday life with Xanh SM Drivers

Over June and July 2026, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Hanoi with drivers for Xanh SM, Vietnam's electric ride-hailing fleet, based largely around Vinhomes Ocean Park, the 420-hectare development on the city's eastern edge where the fleet was launched. I spoke with around seventy drivers — in their cars, at charging stations, in the long waiting hours between bookings — and spent a full week of working day with one driver, from his 4:30am cup of black coffee until he signed off. The thesis is about a job that consists entirely of motion, performed by men who spend most of it held still.

The day is organised as a debt. A driver must reach a fixed revenue figure before his base pay unlocks; below it, he has worked eleven hours and earned almost nothing. So, the day does not begin at zero, it begins in deficit, and the hours are spent working it off. What that produces is a peculiar relationship to time: the driver is not selling hours; he is buying back a day he already owes. Roughly half of that day is spent waiting — for a battery, for a ping — and the waiting is not rest. It is the body held in readiness, which is work that the meter does not count. Drivers strategise hard against this. They start before dawn for the higher early fares, they take night shifts, they learn which hours are worth the charge. The agency is real and it is exercised almost entirely inside the terms set for them; grievance travels sideways, driver to driver, rather than upward. *Đi làm cho người ta thì chịu thôi* — you work for other people, so you put up with it.

The containment turned out to be physical as well as temporal, and I found it in the infrastructure rather than in anything anyone told me. The vehicle is provided for completely — a charging point roughly every two hundred metres, service network, battery management. The person driving it is provided for not at all: no toilet, no canteen, no shade. Even the cabin is not his; the rating system reaches inside it and decides what can be eaten there and how it may smell. So drivers keep a second map of the city, passed between them and invisible to the platform — which coffee shop lets you sit, which petrol station has a usable toilet, where you can eat cheaply near the gate. Much of that map runs on the unlet shophouses and pavement stalls at the compound's edge: the older, cheaper Hanoi the development was built to replace, still in daily use by the workforce that keeps it running.

Highlights

- **A full day with Uncle H.** From the 4:30 start through the arithmetic of the revenue target and the decision about which hours were worth working. Following one driver through an entire shift turned an abstract labour model into something with a length I could feel.
- **The charging station.** The richest site in the project, and the one where nothing happens. Two hours on a plastic stool while a car charged, listening to drivers compare fares, argue about how trips get allocated, and explain the system to one another. When one driver complained, another told him to go buy his own car then — and everyone laughed. That joke did more analytical work than any interview I conducted.

- **Lunch at the edge.** Drivers eating in the compound's unsold shophouses: the street-food economy the development was designed to supersede, operating inside its own empty inventory, feeding its workforce.
- **The last hundred metres.** I booked dozens of rides to addresses down Hanoi's *ngõ* and *ngách* specifically to watch what happens when the car cannot fit down the lane, and who ends up walking — the passenger or the driver. Drivers were emphatic that this has changed in ten years, and not in their favour.
- **The first ride in from the airport.** I asked the driver why the city was already so foggy so early in the season. He replied, with some amusement, that it was not fog. The first of many corrections drivers made to what I thought I was looking at.

Photos

1. **Charging station, wide, dusk or night.**



A driver connecting at a charging point. Roughly half of a working day is spent like this — waiting for a battery or waiting for a booking — and none of it is paid. The infrastructure around him is built entirely for the vehicle: charging points roughly every two hundred metres inside the compound, a service network, battery management. There is no toilet, no canteen, no shade for the person. Charging stations became the richest site in my fieldwork precisely because they are where nothing happens, and where drivers talk to each other rather than to passengers.

2. **At the mouth of a *ngõ*.**



A *ngõ* in central Hanoi. A large share of the city's addresses sit down lanes like this one, and the fare is calculated as though the car can reach them. It cannot. The driver stops at the mouth, calls the passenger, and a negotiation begins over who covers the rest of the distance — the customer walking out, or the driver reversing, waiting, and absorbing the minutes. Drivers told me this used to be unremarkable: ten years ago passengers simply walked to the car. Now some cancel on the spot, and the cancellation lands on the driver's record.

3. **A meal in the shophouse row:**



Drivers eating at a roadside spot near the compound edge. The platform provisions the vehicle completely — a charging point roughly every two hundred metres, a service network, battery management — and the driver not at all: no toilet, no canteen, no shade. So drivers maintain a second map of the city, passed between them and invisible to the app: which places let you sit for an hour, which have a usable toilet, where a meal is cheap and fast. Much of that map runs on exactly the informal, low-cost Hanoi the new developments were built to supersede.