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10 Gendered (Im)mobilities in China: The Impacts of Covid-19 on Women in Tourism

Meghan L. Muldoon, Alexandra Witte and Yu-Hua (Melody) Xu

Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industries have experienced catastrophic losses due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. As the ‘world’s largest industry’, tourism has seen massive economic losses across the airline industry, hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, theme parks, museums and virtually every other tourist sector globally. To provide an example in a microcosm, Broadway in New York City earned \$1.83 billion in revenues in the 2018–2019 season. With Broadway shuttered during the pandemic, that lost revenue multiplied exponentially out to all restaurants, hotels, taxis and street vendors reliant on Broadway patrons for income (Whitten, 2020). This is only one example among many, and while larger companies may be able to weather Covid-19 by scaling back, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are even more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, frequently resulting in permanent closures (ILO, 2020). Inevitably, this has meant that the industry’s workforce has been on the receiving end of job losses, reduced hours, increasingly precarious work conditions and less and less financial security, as evidenced by several studies (Baum *et al.*, 2020). In many ways, the impacts on the industry reflect previous experiences during SARS or MERS (Choe *et al.*, 2021; Wen *et al.*, 2005), yet the scale of Covid-19 in terms of its geographical spread and temporal endurance is unprecedented in living memory. Tourism and hospitality are not predicted to recover until 2024 at the earliest, and even then, not everywhere (UNWTO, 2021a).

Early on in the pandemic, it became evident that many of the impacts on livelihood, employment, income and work mobilities are gendered (Assoumou Ella, 2021; Zulver *et al.*, 2021). As women across the world are

more likely to shoulder a higher share of the domestic work and caretaking, regardless of whether they are also full time employed away from home, the challenge to balance paid and domestic labour has increased for many women globally during Covid-19 (Adisa *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, evidence shows that women are also more likely to be laid off or suffer decreased hours and salaries, as well as decreased career mobilities (Tyson & Parker, 2019), with gendered cultural norms further exacerbating such impacts (Adisa *et al.*, 2020; Evertsson, 2014). With regards to tourism and hospitality, Baum *et al.* (2020) go so far as to characterise women as the ‘dying canaries in the coal mine’ due to pre-existing gendered disadvantages in the industry being amplified during Covid-19.

While some work has been done in various Western contexts, Baum *et al.* (2020) also identify that we know much less about the impacts of Covid-19 on gendered motilities in tourism and hospitality elsewhere. This chapter focuses on the gendered experiences of hospitality and tourism workers in three tightly bound yet differentiated regions in the Asia-Pacific region: Mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau. This research explored how experiences of work mobilities during Covid-19 within these regions’ respective tourism and hospitality industries are represented and discussed online from a gendered perspective. In doing so, we aim to further our understanding of the practices of tourism workers in China, focusing on issues of inclusion, choice, (im)mobilities, (in)visibilities and power through the lens of gender during Covid-19.

We will begin by offering a brief overview of how the pandemic’s impacts on hospitality and tourism and travel regulations within China, Hong Kong and Macau have framed the current situation for their respective tourism and hospitality industries, followed by a brief overview of the gendered impacts of the pandemic discussed in the literature. We will then outline our approach to data collection and analysis, focusing on critical discourse analysis of online data, before discussing our findings from the data collected to date.

Covid-19’s impact on tourism and hospitality

While countries responded in various ways to the pandemic, ranging from temporary total lockdowns (e.g. Macau, Hong Kong, Mainland China) to so-called light-touch COVID-rules (e.g. Sweden), tourism mobilities have been drastically reduced globally. The UNWTO has termed 2020 the ‘worst year in tourism history’ (UNWTO, 2021b), with a reduction of international arrivals by 74%. The first quarter of 2021 saw a drop of 83% compared to 2020 (UNWTO, 2021a), with a return to 2019 levels to be expected only by 2024 or even later. The Asia-Pacific region has experienced the most extreme decline in international arrivals, primarily due to this region instituting some of the strictest travel restrictions in the world.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) implemented an almost complete ban on international arrivals of foreign nationals in late March 2020. A slight relaxation in September 2020 applied only to foreign nationals with valid residence permits. Concessions have started being made to travellers with certain COVID vaccines since March 2021 (China Briefing, 2021). The Special Administrative Region (SAR) Macau implemented a total ban on arrivals of non-residents (excepting Chinese nationals, including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan), which has not been lifted at the time of writing in December 2021 (exceptions apply to international arrivals serving the public interest) (Macau Government Tourism Office, 2021). This travel ban includes Macau's population of non-resident foreign workers with valid work permits. Hong Kong equally shut its borders to non-residents in March 2020 but started allowing non-Hong Kong residents in for specific purposes starting in late April 2020, with quarantine measures in place (Brazier, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, these three regions' tourism industries have suffered significantly, despite travel between Mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau and domestic travel within Mainland China not being suspended completely. Partial travel bans, frequent changes in regulations regarding vaccination requirements, testing and quarantine periods have contributed to this drop in domestic and inter-regional tourism. Mainland China has reported a decrease of 52.1% in its domestic tourism market between 2019 and 2020 (Xinhua, 2021). During the Chinese New Year, a significant travel time typically, the hotel industry in China lost 67 billion Yuan (approximately US\$9.44 billion) in revenue (China Hospitality Association, 2020). According to the same report, by April 2020, 74.29% of hotels in China reportedly ceased operations. As the most dependent among the three on tourism and hospitality due to its focus on the gaming industry, Macau saw a 50% decrease in the territory GDP in the first half of 2020 (Liu *et al.*, 2021; McCartney *et al.*, 2021). With a decrease in visitor arrivals of 46% year-on-year in the first quarter of 2021, based on an already existing drop of 68.9% between Q1 in 2020 and 2019, Macau's overall economy and tourism and hospitality, in particular, continue to suffer (McCartney *et al.*, 2021). Hong Kong experienced a decrease of 93.6% in visitor arrivals in 2020 compared to 2019 (Hong Kong Tourism Board, 2021).

Covid-19 and gender

With the severe repercussions the pandemic has had and still is having on the economy, labour markets have also suffered globally. Recently, the UN announced that by 2022 over 200 million people would have been pushed into unemployment, with women and young people suffering the most (UN, 2021). The same report announced that women had experienced a 5% fall in employment, compared to 3.9% for men. Moreover,

among those employed, 108 million workers were categorised as ‘poor’ based on their earnings compared to 2019.

The UN’s findings that women are on average more severely affected by the fall in employment are also supported by a survey of 129 countries by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020). Partially, this can be explained by the dominance of female workers in those sectors hit hardest by the pandemic, including hospitality and tourism (ILO, 2020; UN, 2020). Statistical evidence indeed suggests that to be true for Hong Kong and Macau (Statista, 2020, 2021). While no statistical evidence exists for the PRC, women tend to form the majority of staff in tourism and hospitality in most countries, especially in lower-level positions (Baum *et al.*, 2016; Kensbock *et al.*, 2016). Although China has made progress in reducing the gender wage gap in recent years, new data suggest that improvements for women in the workforce are unlikely to return to pre-COVID levels due to the pandemic (Brussevich *et al.*, 2021).

Even pre-pandemic, research has found that the nature of employment in the industry leaves workers in hospitality highly susceptible and vulnerable to crises (e.g. Robinson *et al.*, 2019; Tapia & Alberti, 2019). The industry’s wages are among the lowest across industry comparisons (Casado-Díaz & Simón, 2016), meaning that many workers live paycheck-to-paycheck and have little to no financial cushion when faced with job loss or reduced working hours, in both the formal and informal tourism sectors. Further, many hospitality workers count among the less educated demographics and these workers also have relatively limited options open to them when they need to seek out alternative employment (Baum *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, Baum *et al.* (2020) argue that Covid-19 has not necessarily brought about entirely new workers in tourism and hospitality but has amplified pre-existing problems such as precarious employment, low wages and problematic working conditions in the industry.

Women in hospitality were also more likely to be laid off or have their hours reduced than men in the industry (González-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021). Losing one’s job has been further found to impact present earnings and negatively affect future income and career advancement, which, once more, affects women more than men (Brand, 2006). These adverse effects increase when job loss occurs during times of crisis, such as a global pandemic (Davis & von Wachter, 2011).

Although less affected by the industry’s precarious employment conditions, women in supervisory and managerial positions are also experiencing gendered impacts on their work lives. Already accounting for a relatively small percentage of senior-level workers in tourism and hospitality (Dashper, 2020), women are further likely to experience amplified gender inequalities due to persisting unequal labour divisions at home (OECD, 2014). As Costa *et al.* (2017) found pre-pandemic, women in higher-level positions were often seen as less effective hospitality managers than their male counterparts due to their perceived lesser flexibility

stemming from ongoing expectations that women shoulder the majority of domestic labour (Carli, 2020). With the pandemic and resulting school closures and reduced access to help from their social circles, women's time and work dedicated to caretaking for children or elderly relatives have also increased (Chen & Mooney, 2020). Even when able to work from home, women's higher likelihood to be the primary caretakers frequently means it is disproportionately more difficult for them to find time to concentrate on their paid work from home. Though domestic labour has also increased for men, continuing inequities leave more women than men with the reduced time they may focus on their jobs (Miguel-Puga *et al.*, 2021).

Additional pressures may be experienced by tourism and hospitality workers overall due to their increased exposure to Covid-19. Those working in quarantine hotels face a higher risk of infection due to direct contact with quarantine guests (Teng *et al.*, 2020). With quite stringent and widely effected regulations for quarantine for travellers across China, Hong Kong and Macau, many hospitality companies saw a much-needed income source in becoming a designated quarantine hotel offering their workers a better chance at continued employment. However, it comes at the cost of higher infection risks for frontline workers in hospitality. These risks are also experienced by those working in the frontlines of the travel industries, including at airports, airlines, train stations and other arteries of mobility, as recent outbreaks at the Hong Kong and Nanjing airports have shown. As Teng *et al.* (2020) found, many frontline workers are experiencing added stress due to fear of being infected or carrying the infection to their families and friends.

Covid-19's impacts on the hospitality and tourism industry are significant, relating to job losses, reduced hours and income, or reduced career mobilities, which add to stresses resulting from increased domestic labour demands in addition to their paid work and the mental and physical health impacts of increased exposure to the virus. Many of these impacts are exacerbated for women (European Commission, 2021; Reichelt *et al.*, 2021). The following will offer a brief overview of our data collection and analysis approach before exploring the narratives and discourses uncovered during our research.

Methods

In order to learn more about the impacts of the Covid-19 epidemic on women's mobilities in tourism in China, we used critical discourse analysis to understand how women are represented in texts relating to tourism and Covid-19, as well as how women themselves understand and express their experiences resulting from the pandemic. Critical discourse analysis's interest lies in uncovering relationships of power embedded within texts that reflect and (re-)create real-world power imbalances (Rose, 2001; Waitt, 2005). We turned to publicly available online texts to understand better how

women's experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic are being shared and structured online. Employing a Foucauldian-informed poststructural approach to discourse, we interrogated the online texts looking for how certain 'truths' are promulgated via the texts while also paying attention to silences, or discourses that are obscured or declared as 'untruths' in the prevailing discourse (Hannam & Knox, 2005; Rose, 2001; Waitt, 2005). As described by Grimwood *et al.* (2019: 237), we understand discourses to be 'power-laden ways of making sense of and engaging with this world'.

Discourse analysis is never neutral, and we as researchers each bring our own biases and positionalities to our understandings of the texts. We have employed several strategies to ensure credibility and transparency in this work. A team of six undergraduate student assistants at a joint Chinese-American university was responsible for the initial data collection and coding. Student assistants were trained for qualitative research and text coding. Newspaper articles, opinion pieces and blog sites from Mainland China, Macao and Hong Kong were searched using the keywords: 'women', 'gender', 'tourism', 'equalities' and 'mobility'. A total of 168 individual texts were identified over three months in the fall of 2021, in both English and Chinese, which were then sorted according to high, medium or low relevance to our research questions by one of the principal investigators. Texts included blog postings, posts on Zhihu.com (a Chinese questions and answers site), Xiaohongshu.com (the Chinese equivalent of Instagram), Baijiahao.baidu.com (a platform for independent writers, bloggers and journalists) and several online news sites located in the three regions of the study, as well as in the US and the UK.

The authors of the texts on the news sites are journalists with named credentials accompanying the texts. Residents write the texts from social media of Mainland China, Macao and Hong Kong. However, collected social media texts are concentrated in Mainland China. Although an effort was made to access blogs and discussion sites in Hong Kong and Macau, the researchers were restricted to sources written in English or Mandarin, therefore likely missing salient social media texts relevant to the Hong Kong and Macau context. Thus, future research could investigate Cantonese blogs and discussion forums to further insights into the effects Covid-19 has had on women's mobilities within tourism and hospitality. Most of the social media texts collected were posted by women, while some were posted by women's families or friends reporting their stories. However, very little other information regarding their identities is available due to the nature of these platforms.

The research assistants drew up initial line-by-line codes, and each text was coded by one research assistant and then cross-checked by another. One of our faculty members, a Chinese native speaker, supervised the students' coding process. Once the initial codes were completed, the three principal investigators, faculty members at a European, a Hong Kong and a Chinese university, undertook further coding and developed

the themes presented in this chapter. The principal investigators all identify as women. All nine investigators working together on this research are women; future studies in this area could be diversified and expanded by including the voices of other genders.

In undertaking this study, we were guided by two research questions: *How are women's mobilities understood with China's tourism and hospitality industry? How have the tourism and hospitality industry impacted women's mobilities due to the Covid-19 pandemic?* Critical discourse analysis is always concerned with uncovering 'effects of truth' within the text that establish and (re-)privilege specific ways of knowing about the topic at hand. The following section describes the themes that emerged through our close reading of the online texts and what this analysis shows us about women's mobilities in China due to Covid-19.

Analysis

Through our analysis, many themes emerged pointing the fragility of the tourism industry and the particular vulnerabilities of women within that sphere. The themes that were identified are *career change*, *backwards mobility/immobility*, *uncertainty vs. faith* and *the in(visibility) of women*. We discuss each of these in turn below.

Career change

Unsurprisingly, the decimation of the tourism industry has led to several people being forced to change jobs or even careers. Within the texts, some writers conceptualise these changes as opportunities, as the unexpected shock and rapidity of the Covid-19 epidemic forced them to take a chance and perhaps pursue a dream they had always had, opening a new enterprise, or switching to a career that may have once seemed out of reach. Others have celebrated that a career in the tourism industry provides one with an array of soft skills valued in a range of industries. Several organisations are named which have been responsible for hiring a substantial number of former airline workers due to their soft skills. There is lateral mobility for some former tourism industry workers.

Unfortunately, the experiences that many women share online are of downward mobility. Not all industries recognise the skills developed through working in the tourism industry, and many workers have to start over again at the bottom in a new career pathway despite having invested in years of experience. F is a flight attendant experiencing salary cuts due to the COVID restrictions. She said:

Dismissal is inevitable, many colleagues who rank higher than me have resigned...I am learning knowledge and skills in cosmetic medicine, I hope I could switch my gear to that industry in the future.

Others have turned to start-ups that have not been successful or have focused on creating online videos. As might be expected, particularly during a pandemic, none of these avenues was seen as easy solutions for being made redundant. Thirty-year-old M graduated with a tourism major and worked in the tourism industry for seven years. M had recently been laid off and was looking for opportunities outside tourism, remarking:

It wasn't until this year when I started looking for jobs that I understood what 'despair' means. There are rare chances for an interview. Even if you got interviewed, there would be no follow-ups due to your age or lack of experience in that industry...finally a game company gave me a chance for an interview, but when I checked it online, it...looks like a fake, a shell firm.

The knock-on effects of these situations are also being made visible in women's stories. Women wrote of having had to take lower paying positions that left them unable to support their children. Others are unable to find work anywhere in the city where they live, pleading via their blogs for information about organisations hiring in other cities, willing to uproot their lives. Yet, more often than not, the comments these posts receive the original poster to remain where they are, the job situation is not better elsewhere, and they run a significant risk in relocating to a new urban centre.

Moreover, posters also spoke about a career change, ending their dream career even when successful. For example, T, who worked as a flight attendant for one of Hong Kong's airlines, found a job working as a venue manager in a restaurant. However, she commented: *'We lost not only our jobs, but also our dreams'*, indicating the emotional impact that this enforced lateral mobility within her career has had on her and others like her.

Furthermore, narratives regarding the increased visibility of gender role perception in society and the job market during Covid-19 emerged. Women often tended to adjust their careers for family life in two-parent working families due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and they continue to be disproportionately responsible for childcaring and caring for family members who become sick. Many of the texts examined in this study are deeply concerned with the impacts of Covid-19 on the gender wage gap and the higher levels of insecurity women face in the job market due to a remaining prevalence of traditional gender roles. For example, in an anonymous letter sent to the South China Morning Post, the writer comments:

Many still subscribe to the outdated thinking that 'men are breadwinners, women are homemakers,' regarding men as more important and reliable in the workforce – and leaving women the first choice when it comes to the firing line.

Regarding the persistence of unequal income, Sevin Yeltekin from Carnegie Mellon University suggested that women's incomes might decline so considerably that it will now become 'impossible' to return to pre-COVID levels.

Women face additional barriers when jobs are scarce, as many job advertisements will expressly declare that available positions are for men only (a common practice despite being illegal) due to job expectations that are perceived as being incompatible for female workers, such as travel for work, long hours or physical labour. Women are also more likely to be marginalised in the hiring process due to perceptions that women will leave the workforce to marry or have children and will be unwilling to work as hard as men. Finally, an increasing emphasis on instilling 'manliness' in young boys has led to some traditionally female jobs – such as kindergarten teachers – being reframed to prioritise male workers in those positions (Hernández, 2016). While these gendered work aspects in China have been true for some time, with the combination of the Covid-19 pandemic and the significant over-representation of women in vulnerable positions in the tourism industry, many of the texts examined in this study express deep concern about the losses to gender equality in the workforce in China. Several texts, however, use the example of the Covid-19 pandemic to demonstrate how vulnerable and under-resourced women's labour is in China and that the government must use this opportunity to turn its attention to the problems women face in the workforce to protect them against future shocks to the economy.

Backwards mobility/immobilities

With job losses in many industries, financial concerns are a significant focus of many texts analysed. People speak of having significant debt loads with no relief from the government to support them with their bills. For some, this has meant making the difficult decision to return to their hometowns, where possibly the cost of living is lower and/or they can return to live with their parents, disrupting, possibly permanently, the lives that they had established for themselves. This type of backwards mobility was at times seen to present opportunities, as in the case of J, a young woman who left her job in the tourism industry in Beijing to return home and begin an export business selling local produce online. For many others, however, the lack of economic opportunity was their reason for migrating away from home in the first place. A particular group that emerges as vulnerable in this regard is migrant workers.

However, although domestic migrant workers from rural areas are an essential part of China's economic success over the past decades, the discourse surrounding migrant workers is not always a friendly one. It may even be carefully theorised that a return of female migrant workers may be considered a potential solution to China's issue regarding an

oversupply of unmarried men, especially in rural areas. This has recently led the Shanxi Think Tank Development Association and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference of Hunan Xiangyin County to propose in 2021 that the government should incentivise urban women to move to the countryside, which was met with massive criticism in the Chinese online community (Li, 2021; Turland, 2021). However, rural women being forced to return to rural areas may just be seen by some as a relatively acceptable solution.

Another explanation why backwards mobilities, especially among rural migrants, *may* be considered a positive development is directly related to tourism. With Covid-19 shifting the focus in China – as elsewhere – to domestic tourism pathways, there is a revitalised emphasis on the development of tourism in rural areas, especially home-sharing businesses that have attracted most leisure tourists during COVID (Huang *et al.*, 2021). The movement to 'touristify' many of China's rural villages is heavily focused on women, who are presented as content to remain at home and take care of the house and family. Moreover, these women are positioned as lacking education and therefore being 'naturally' confined to jobs focused on taking care of home and guests. Rural village tourism is perceived as a potential source of economic growth for the entire village, and this success relies upon women beautifying their homes and providing a comforting and welcoming atmosphere to guests. In Gansu province, the calls for the development of rural village tourism refer to 'her power' in the role that women must play in making the villages beautiful and desirable. The secretary of Gansu Tourism ThinkTank, Ms Gao, said:

Many female Minsu hosts appeared in Langjie Village, most of them were among 30-40. They need to take care of the elderly and children and cannot emigrate for work, so they cherish this opportunity. Some of the hosts only got elementary school education. They would be very satisfied with a 2000 yuan monthly income; they work devotedly and feel accomplished and happy.

However, this equating of women's power and physical attractiveness silences anything else that women may have to contribute to developing the local tourism product. Thus, through their utter lack of mobility alternating with enforced backwards mobilities, rural women are being called upon to save the economic fortunes of entire villages.

Uncertainty versus faith

In the private blog postings included in this analysis, there are exciting juxtapositions visible in how much posters believe in the future of the tourism industry. Some advocate resilience, seemingly based on the notion that the Chinese economy is strong and that tourism and hospitality will

soon recover. N, an employee of a chain hotel, explains how her company has struggled to survive since COVID. Seeing all the efforts being made, N kept positive about her job:

Ever since I graduated, I've been working in the hospitality industry for over ten years. I love communicating with customers and serving different customers every day. I think this is quite fun. I hope I can always do a good job in this position. Therefore, even if I am concerned, I don't have any plans to change my job...Now our occupation rate is growing, we insist on implementing all the COVID prevention steps on a daily basis ...COVID is rampant overseas, so we cannot slack off. I hope the pandemic will pass soon.

On the other hand, some seem less confident in this. Several posts indicate that the posters do not feel that their job is secure, even if they are still employed. This is supported by several online posts listing travel and hospitality companies going into liquidation or laying off workers in huge numbers. Such uncertainty has clear emotional impacts, with posters expressing fear and anxiety and feeling depressed. Most of these sentiments were expressed by workers in the aviation and international tourism industry. S, a Chinese employee at an international airline, had been grounded in China due to Covid-19 and was suspended from duty, receiving a baseline salary. In her post, she mentioned preparing for an accreditation test for translator and interpreter in response to feeling uncertain about the stability of this arrangement:

For individuals, the financial income has shrunk sharply. Although I got the base salary as they promised, the situation has not turned out well at all. Who knows if the paycheck will arrive on time next month? Even if my flights were recovered, I am afraid the salary and benefits will not be as good as before.

Implied is a degree of desolation and lack of faith that the industry will recover, or perhaps simply a belief that it will recover too far in the future to be of any good to individuals now. In the case of L, the uncertainty became a certainty in the form of finally losing her job. Having worked for a tourism company that specialised in the Chinese outbound tourism visa business, her job was suspended several times due to the constant recurrence of COVID outbreaks overseas:

At the beginning of COVID, I believed in China's ability to control the pandemic. I believe that this might have a short-term impact on us, but not detrimental. However, after I got back to work just for a week, outbreaks happened again overseas, and now it is still not fully controlled. Then we have to go home with the base salary again. One more week passed, I received the notice of the company's dissolution. I officially lost my job.

Feelings of uncertainty also stemmed from a perceived lack of policy support for workers by the government. One posting referred to government support for businesses, but workers were not mentioned. It is unclear whether this represents an actual lack of support in helping workers who have lost their employment or simply a perception that is being shared online. Yet, little to no attention is given in the mainstream media to questioning the government's support for working families.

While stories of uncertainty and perceived lack of support were found within social media texts, a very different narrative could be found in the news media in general, supported by several social media texts. Instead, these were focused on how China has beaten the Covid-19 through the combined efforts its people and national government and how China is surging forward while the rest of the world continues to flounder under the pandemic. H worked for a tourism training company in Shenzhen. After the initial domestic COVID outbreak, she had been laid off for six months and decided to switch her role to a Didi¹ driver. Even though she commented:

The good news is that with the weather becoming warmer, the pandemic has been controlled well domestically, tourism is recovering. Now I have returned back to tourism and started to host some group activities. Believing in the country, the government, and the nation. We people have the determination to be united and beat the virus. After the pandemic, it is tourism that will experience an outbreak.

Much of the public media posts were about favourable policies issued to help tourism recover when it comes to tourism. While the spirit of resilience should be encouraged during hard times, we still need to question how certain groups, in this case, women in the tourism and hospitality industry, maybe marginalised both as the result of pre-existing vulnerabilities being exacerbated through crises and lack of targeted support for such groups, and through a lack of media attention bringing these issues into public consciousness.

A somewhat more critical view emerged regarding the Hong Kong and Macau media landscape, directed both at industry and government. For example, the Hong Kong news media reported that the criticism from parts of the hospitality industry directed at the government for recently implementing the mandatory use of its 'leave Home Safe' app for patrons at restaurants and similar venues. Previously, customers could also leave a paper record of their name and phone number. However, as Hong Kong is set to re-open quarantine-free travel with the mainland, the app is becoming mandatory, raising fears that many Hong Kongers who are reluctant to use the app will refrain from patronising hospitality businesses. At the same time, other restrictions also remain in place, restricting the ability of restaurants and other businesses to navigate these new requirements strategically (Yau, 2021).

The (in)visibility of women

The starkness of the Covid-19 crisis has amplified existing gender disparities, expectations and marginalisations in many parts of the globe. China is no exception. Women represent nearly 70% of the healthcare profession globally (OECD, 2020), and in the early stages of the pandemic, women and men rushed to provide medical support to the ill in Wuhan and other areas. Much of Chinese media was dedicated to lauding the selfless acts of these healthcare providers, and individual stories of bravery went viral. Images celebrating the efforts of the healthcare heroes often showed male doctors' faces, despite the more significant numbers of women working on the frontlines of the pandemic. Women's stories were highlighted. It was usually in conjunction with their role first as a woman and mother. In one instance, a female healthcare worker was lauded for working while pregnant; another received accolades for returning to work at the hospital only a few days after suffering a miscarriage. Thus, women are made visible in their sacrifices during the pandemic, but only with their roles as women. Otherwise, the heroes promoted early on were primarily male, and women's work in the crisis was overlooked to some extent. While this in and of itself is not particularly surprising in male-dominated cultures, what was astonishing was the backlash that this ignited on Chinese social media and the government's seeming inability to contain it.

Thousands of blog posts, video commentaries and other social media posts protested the invisibilisation of women on the frontlines of the fight against Covid-19 (BBC, 2020). The Chinese government can usually censor social media posts; however, the volume of this pushback was so great that the government could not contain it. In addition to the public outcry, academics and feminists in China also accused officials of not considering the needs of female health workers. The protests highlighted the inhumane conditions women were working under, such as not having access to sanitary products, which led to many citizens mobilising to ensure that the women had access to the supplies needed. A propaganda poster celebrating the healthcare heroes was changed from an image of a masked man to a masked woman. While the Covid-19 crisis has rendered many women immobile and invisible, the voices of women and supporters of women have found a powerful megaphone through social media, allowing them to become mobile in unprecedented fashion within Mainland China. While none of these texts speaks directly to women's work lives in the tourism industry, the deluge of texts demanding better working conditions for women in healthcare may be an opportunity to extend those dialogues to other industries predominately staffed by women.

The often-contradictory ways in which women are made both invisible and hypervisible in the context of the pandemic, the direction of visibility seemingly determined by the potential for news to emotionally

capitalise upon (pseudo-)exclusive female traits, also became apparent in the few news articles from Hong Kong focused on women in the hospitality and tourism industry. For example, one article in this study focused its attention on shifting the blame for a particular outbreak of the virus on hostesses² in the city rather than their clients. The hostesses were characterised as carriers of the disease and cast as Other, being predominantly from away as Thai/Mainland Chinese/Taiwanese workers and undocumented workers. Thus, these women are made visible in how they are outside of mainstream society and are held accountable for spreading Covid-19, tacitly excusing citizen Hong Kongers (mainly the male clients of these hostesses) from being the source of this particular outbreak. Another article from Hong Kong cited the massive job losses among hotel cleaning workers in the city without noting that the vast majority of hotel cleaning staff are women, thus invisibilising the precarity of women's work in times of crisis (Leung, 2021). Similar observations can be made for mass lay-offs among airline workers in Hong Kong, which are being reported regularly (e.g. Lee & Choi, 2021). However, it remains unspoken that women make up the majority of airline's employees. For example, about two-thirds of Cathay Pacific's, Hong Kong's flagship airline, employees were female in the year before the pandemic (Cathay Pacific, 2019). Thus, the exacerbated impact on the female workforce of Hong Kong's travel and hospitality industry often remains implicit at best.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is by no means unknown that Chinese women face many inequalities in the workplace. Indeed, the China Labour Bulletin (China Labour Bulletin, 2004) goes so far as to label the treatment of working women in China as that of second-class workers. Despite the frequent references to Mao's assertion that 'women hold up half the sky', issues of gender disparity are increasingly being silenced in Chinese society (the CLB, for instance, operates out of Hong Kong). Feminist activists have been arrested for protesting sexual harassment (Yang, 2021). Under the CCP government, popular hashtags such as #MeToo and #Feminism have been censored, and many feminist voices have had their social media sites shut down by the government (Yang, 2021). What surprised us in this study was not the shortage of online texts relating to gender and mobility in the tourism industry but rather that we could locate as many texts as we did.

Women in China navigate a complicated web of societal expectations, informed at once by the neo-Confucian revival, which frames women as humble, nurturing and immobile, as well as by the more modern capitalistic forces in which women are expected to effortlessly balance work and family (Gao, 2003; Muldoon *et al.*, 2021; Wu, 2010). Covid-19 has not *made* China a problematic place to be a woman with aspirations of equality. What it has effectively done, however, is to exacerbate existing

Table 10.1 Gendered mobilities in China's tourism and hospitality industry during the Covid-19

Existing issues exacerbated during Covid-19	Women as second-class workers
	Women in general and female migrant workers in particular forming majority of lower-level workforce in the sector – low pay, insecure positions
	Invisibility of gendered issues in hospitality and tourism in public media
Emerging trends and issues during Covid-19	Lateral career mobilities
	Backward mobilities (career and physical)
	Lack of inclusive policies addressing increased demands on women as caretakers during the pandemic
	Use of women as 'performative devices' in state media

inequalities that make it challenging for women to have successful and fulfilling careers in the tourism and hospitality industries. Through this critical discourse analysis, online texts suggested that women are more likely to be employed in precarious positions, making them more vulnerable to economic shocks such as Covid-19. We effectively identify lateral, backward and immobilities narratives within the social media texts (see Table 10.1). The Covid-19 pandemic has made it more difficult for women to maintain employment and situate themselves in new positions or careers. It has caused many to lose their independence by returning to their hometowns or being unable to leave their homes for work. Many have had to leave the workforce to care for children or ailing family members in the home. Many women who continue to leave home for work are in frontline positions in the tourism and hospitality industry or healthcare, and this has them facing ongoing precarity at the risk of contracting and transmitting the virus to their loved ones.

These experiences are accompanied by effective mobilities, with netizens shifting between faith in the ability of China to remain resilient and at least do better than others, to affectivities seemingly more marked by uncertainty, worries about the individual's future and even in some cases, a feeling that the pandemic has ended individuals' dreams. However, these observations stem primarily from the narratives of private citizens expressing their concerns, experiences, fears and emotional upheavals online. At the same time, the official news landscapes remain largely silent regarding the difficulties explicitly experienced by female hospitality and tourism workers in China, instead directing attention to China's success in curbing the spread of the virus. Although the Hong Kong and Macau news explicitly articulate concerns related to the impact of Covid-19 on hospitality and travel, it remains unspoken that women as the primary workforce in

the sector, especially at the lower hierarchy levels, are also primarily affected by lay-offs. We note here that the only news related to gendered inequalities in the context of tourism and hospitality during the pandemic we were able to find related to nations other than China. Herein lies the potential for future research into how Chinese news media mobilise narratives about the difficulties of other nations to present its policies as superior (albeit this is by no means a tactic only visible in China).

While women are shouldering these sacrifices, much of this work invisibly in mainstream media discourse. We are now seeing significant growth in social media platforms to protest the secondary citizen status of women in China. Advocates are increasingly turning to the keyboard to speak of their struggles and demand changes for women who want to work. It remains to be seen whether this online advocacy movement will be allowed to continue once the pandemic has subsided. Through this research, we have found that women's mobilities in the tourism and hospitality industry have come under increasing threat, and many of the gains made in terms of gender equality in China have been eroded at an astonishing pace. At the same time, we end on a hopeful note, as social media is increasingly allowing women and women's allies to speak their truth, support one another virtually and advocate for change. It is difficult to anticipate how the structural changes that women and men in the tourism and hospitality industries will have to navigate will alter their practices regarding their changing roles in the field. On one hand, after decades of (often slow) progress towards gender equality in China, this pandemic has laid bare the myriad of ways women are often treated as dispensable in the tourism and hospitality industries. On the other, the Covid-19 crisis and the light that it shone on women's inequality in the workforce led to a massive outpouring of support online, which may lead to women's increased sense of self-worth as stakeholders in the changing tourism landscape.

Notes

- (1) Didi is a Chinese ride-sharing service roughly analogous to Uber or Lyft.
- (2) Hostesses in Hong Kong refer to women employed by bars and clubs to entertain usually male clients. While hostesses may also be prostitutes (legal in Hong Kong), this is not always the case. The article did not clarify whether it referred to one, the other or both.

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