Stranded Travellers in Europe: How Chinese Travellers Managed Risks Associated With Travelling During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *The spread of COVID-19 has led to a substantial decline in the global tourism industry. However, the risk management that international travellers have had to cope with while travelling abroad during the initial phases of the pandemic has not yet been suitably assessed. This study examines the urgent risks that Chinese travellers in Europe have faced at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak and these travellers' later thoughts on international travel, thus focusing on international travellers who were in a vulnerable position with regard to coping with uncomfortable feelings and concerns. The article proposes social strategies such as an advance notification system, building an AI recording the lodging experience and creating inclusivity and multiculturalism as effective tools to mitigate risks and address safety concerns. In addition, the research advocates for a holistic understanding and practical approach to how social work can alleviate the impact of the pandemic while pointing out the necessity for an integration of the profit-orientated international travel industry with effective risk management strategies.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, international travelers, risk assessment, risk management, social work, Europe, China*

I. Introduction

In the past two years, countries across the globe have been implementing travel restrictions in an effort to prevent the further spread of COVID-19. When COVID-19 first emerged in January 2020, coinciding with the Chinese New Year celebrations, many families were travelling around mainland China or abroad. During that period, many of them were unable to leave Europe to travel back to China because of a drastic reduction in flights, which left Chinese passport holders around the world trapped without any means of getting home. Some of those Chinese tourists could not even complete their journey because certain travelling companies targeted the closure of attractions and routes to Chinese travellers since the end of January 2020.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak began, and up to nowadays, the absence of Chinese tour groups in the Europe has left hoteliers, restaurateurs, tour operators and retailers counting their monetary losses. While countries around the world have historically been eager to cash in on the rising spending power of travellers, the pandemic has intermittently disrupted many aspects of daily life, including travel choices. As world's economies now emerge from the stasis engendered by its coronavirus containment measures, it is important to understand how long it will take for consumers to regain the confidence to leave their homes for leisure travel. However, only a few scholars examined the impact of the crisis on stranded passengers in foreign countries. With this in mind, this research analyses 30 interviews with Chinese travellers who have travelled to Europe in the first few months of 2020 with regards to their attitudes to travelling for leisure in order to understand concerns that have been raised over the effectiveness of travel restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19.

II. Risk perception

Risk perception can be interpreted as the subjective assessment of the risk of a threatening situation based on the characteristics and severity of the threat (Moreira,2008; Sjoberg et al., 2004). In particular, risk perception in tourism is associated with experiences that carry hazards and travellers' perceptions of risk vary according to individual characteristics, social structures and cultural beliefs (Boholm,1998; Sjoberg et al., 2004) as well as personal characteristics and demographic factors (Carr,2001; Seddighi et al.,2001). Other influences include cultural background and travellers' past experience, as well as sources of information in the media and

surrounding social groups (Lepp&Gibson, 2003; Sonmez, 1998). The travel risks associated with external factors may also include natural disaster events such as volcanic explosions, tsunamis as well as terrorist threats and attacks that threaten the safe operations of airlines and may cause fatal aircraft accidents and illness. The recent consequences of dengue fever, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), malaria, H1N1 influenza, Ebola virus and COVID-19 are examples of risk factors associated with tourism, which can be highly contagious and thus cause significant health concerns.

During the initial stages of the pandemic, travel-related measures were almost universally adopted, including pandemic screening, travel restrictions and border closures, as motivated by the potentially large economic and social consequences of spreading the disease. However, in addition to the above risk perceptions, possible health risks during travel and stay at the travel destination may have also affected the risk perceptions of tourists. When it comes to health risks, tourists' perceptions of potentially dangerous destinations are more significant and comprehensive than perceptions of other types of risks (Jonas et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand the association between stranded passengers and risk perception (Grolt,2015) given that perceived risk and safety greatly influence travel intentions and tourists have a variety of options at their disposal when choosing their next destination. Tourism intention is the tendency of people to analyze and plan their future tourism choices, along with the enthusiasm deriving from participating in some tourism activities (Kozak,2001; Zeithaml et al.,1996). Stranded travellers, however, have only few options given that they may be unable to leave their destination country or have limited options to choose from. Here, the theory of protection motivation is employed to explain travel intention and its association with perceived risk (Rogres,1975, cited in Qi et al. 2009) which holds that risk perception and associated cognitive assessment processes do influence the change of travel intentions or attitudes (Qi et al., 2009).

III.   Methodology

This paper draws from qualitative interviews to investigate risk perception and risk response of Chinese tourists stranded in Europe during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through searching relevant groups of WeChat, the most common Chinese social media app, I joined a group of 300 people, all of whom were stranded passengers in Europe between January and March 2020. Eventually, I added 30 group members and interviewed them via WeChat audio calls that lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. Interviews were conducted on social media rather than face-to-face interviews to avoid geographical issues, thus facilitating interaction.

Joining such social media group that was explicitly created by stranded travelers enabled finding suitable interviewees more accurately and effectively. In order to ensure a sufficient number of interviewees, three rounds of recruitment were conducted between February 2020 and August 2020. Initially, a public post was created to explain the scope of the present study and gather interest among group members. Secondly, interview outlines and details about the research were sent to group members who showed interest in being interviewed for this research. During this stage, further information was collected regarding the potential interviewee intention, the amount of time they had been stranded for, their age and status. Finally, 30 individuals were enrolled and interviewed via audio or video call, after scheduling suitable interview date and time. Prior to any conversation, interviewees were sent compliance statements and information sheets about the interviews, detailing the aim and scope of the research.

IV.   Travel uncertainty during pandemic

Since January 2020, EU Airlines started suspending most flights to China due to the COVID-19 outbreak, with British Airways becoming the first airline to do so (Merler & Vespignani, 2020). Thousands of Chinese travellers were prevented from leaving the UK and the EU, thus facing delays to their journey, indefinite wait for official replies from flight companies and embassies, and loss of financial support. These factors created fear of future travelling or at least uncertainty regarding many factors that affect potential travel. By interviewing some of those individuals who were prevented from leaving the UK, this article exposes both these individuals' risk perceptions and many of the shortcomings in the international travel system faced with the urgency of dealing with a pandemic.

During this period, Amy Wang (pseudonym) was travelling with her family in the UK and EU to celebrate the 2020 Chinese New Year. Amy Wang is a Chinese student in the UK. When confirmed COVID-19 cases began to emerge in February, she was travelling with her parents in France, where there were only 3 confirmed cases of COVID-19 at that time. When the Amy's travelling group arrived in England, there were still zero confirmed cases. As she explained during the interview, even though the airline announced that they would keep the situation under review and would provide regular updates, the authorities in charge had not imposed any

measures, and there was great uncertainty regarding upcoming travel restrictions. Amy Wang continued to reveal her concerns about international travel following her experience:

> Amy Wang: "It was a terrible experience. I have travelled a lot due to living abroad in 2018 and 2019, so I know how visa application and travel procedures works, but my parents don't. They were under a lot of pressure at the time since they could not stay in the EU due to their visa expiring and they also had work duties back in China. We discussed the situation with airline companies and the Embassy. However, there was no way of solving the problem, so we just had to wait. We were very concerned about the airline insurance, the possibility of booking a new flight or application for a visa extension, and whether we could travel again."

From Amy Wang's response, it is clear that airline insurance and visa validity are vital concerns for Chinese travellers who would like to travel to the EU and UK again. Typically, Chinese travel agencies provide assistance to travellers with visa applications and flight bookings to Europe. Many European airlines and tourist attractions and destinations were indeed cooperating with those Chinese travel agencies. However, now these partnerships are on the verge of collapse and the industry is facing a credit crisis. In this context, an increasing number of scholars are engaging in advocacy-oriented research who are seeking to move knowledge production in tourism away from neo-liberal market ideologies (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Pritchard, Morgan & Ateljevic, 2011: 14) and towards hopeful tourism, which is based on a greater social justice and emancipation for "under-served life worlds". However, this does not include international travellers, many of whom are often in a situation or are experiencing risks that they cannot control. Beck (1992)'s work on the 'risk society thesis' is probably the best-known theorization of risk, and it formulates risk as being both real and socially constructed. Although Beck recognized that major risk was spread by trade, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused fundamental changes in the perception of risk. During the whole pandemic, international travellers have been considered the main spreaders of COVID-19 (Khan, 2020). In the process of globalization, on the one hand, transport innovations have shaped mobilities, including tourism mobilities (Williams & Baláž, 2013), and air travel has had a positive and powerful impact on travellers' comfort. On the other hand, globalization has led to increased travel and unprecedented growth in the tourism industry. With this growth, comes the problem of population mobility and visa applications. Thus, the risks of cross-border travel have been highlighted by transport innovations and the flow of people brought about by globalization (Bianchi & Stephenson, 2014). In the context of the global pandemic, such risks are magnified. Problems such as visa extensions, the need for flight ticket changes and policy communications between countries need to be considered as new risk factors.

Although the relaxation of travel restrictions is showing its effectiveness in various European countries, some potential problems that may affect people's confidence in cross-border safe air travel and the interests of stakeholders need to be further considered and improved upon. Transnational tourism may be further affected by the media, public opinions and industry stakeholders. Moreover, instructions or recommendations from the authorities vary by state, which may lead to confusion and misinformation and affect travel risk perception. Environmental and international factors are the main critical points of the pandemic, which directly cause travel insecurity and innfluence risk perception of individuals. Through the case of Amy Wang, it can be seen that, although the recovery of people's travel confidence largely depends on the degree of globalisation and economic recovery from a broader perspective, in fact, the uncertainty of international travel also comes from the risk recognition and precautions taking. As mentioned earlier, risk perception is the subjective perception of travel risk by travelers (Moreira, 2008; Sjoberg et al., 2004). The concept of travel risk precaution has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which means travel agencies (e.g., hotels, transport and tour groups) began to realise that there exists a strong relation between stranded passengers, risk perception and thus willingness to travel. Accordingly, appropriate protection mechanisms to understand the concerns of international travelers in advance and plan for return routes are in urgent need to be updated by international travel agencies. These practices can be evidenced by the case of Adam Zhang (below) who is a B&B manager, who is starting to think new ways way to manage his hostel business.

V. The perceptual experience of digital homestay

With global tourism picking up again after the pandemic, many travel agents are hoping to provide a further boost to their travel business in the post-pandemic recovery. In this way, these international travel companies hope to increase their customers' satisfaction and desire for more travel, while promoting long-distance travel. This is especially true when it comes to hospitality industries such as resorts, hotels, and restaurants, because such combined services and interconnected experiences can increase customers satisfaction and loyalty. As Adam Zhang told me, over the past two years, hotels and resorts in Singapore have adopted "contactless" options during the pandemic, including digital registration and ticketing, booking through apps,

mobile and biometric payment methods, which will likely remain in place for the time being. Adam Zhang, who runs a B&B in Singapore, is looking at ways to improve the user experience for international travelers and make them less worried in the wake of the pandemic.

> Adam Zhang: AI engines do all the heavy work for customers and merchants. We tried to use non-human hotel services during check-in, including intelligent reservation robots, voice input check-in. I think this approach can reduce post-pandemic costs and improve the customer experience, especially for those customers who might still be worried about contracting the disease.

As guests begin to travel more and more, and many are capable of using technology to achieve safe travel, hotels, resorts and restaurants should be equipped with high performance, safe, reliable and automated networks, so to promote current and future digital innovation, while constantly providing a safe and enjoyable experience for the guests. Adam Zhang's B&B has done just that, replacing human resources with digital labour, reassuring travelers about hotel health safety and reducing the risk of human-to-human disease transmission in the context of the pandemic, while bringing travelers a new digital hotel experience at the same time. The traditional way of greeting guests from the front desk and answering their calls in person is slowly disappearing in Adam's vision. In the past, companies used to train employees or hire experienced people to verify guests' credentials when they checked in, answer their inquiries and give them their unquestioning attention. However, these methods do not achieve higher efficiency and effect with the increase of the number of guests and market size. The limitation of handling one person at a time limits the time and effort of the hotel business to improve efficiency and reduce guest management. With the introduction of artificial intelligence and digitalization in the hotel industry, chatbots have become the go-to aid for hotel managers dealing with multiple guests. Another popular method is self-service kiosks, which helps improve customer service and eliminates cumbersome registration procedures. The ease with which customers can check in and have a consistent and satisfactory experience helps the hotel to stand out from the rest and strengthen its position in the industry.

As the ongoing sequelae of COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on travel industry and this highly requires technology solutions to deal with the crisis (Gretzel, 2021). Intelligent technologies such as AI booking and robotics room services have been more and more apply to deal with post-pandemic international travelling. This technology promoted human experience and supported key travel business processes and important governance, which provide structured automated services and enhanced traveling experiences. This is because these new technologies and travelling tips provide rich services, while at the same time, increase employee productivity and efficiency (Alt, 2021). In the long run, AI can help realise the smart tourism agenda with emphasis on sustainable resilience of tourism and enhanced well-being of tourists (Xiang, 2021).

VI. Embracing inclusivity and multiculturalism

During the pandemic, there have been cultural misunderstandings and tensions regarding racial relations and debates about whether wearing masks could prevent the spread of COVID-19. On top of that, the geopolitical debate has resulted in narratives that have left Chinese travellers with potentially uncomfortable travel experiences.

Sociologist Kevin Hetherington, in his book New Age Travellers (2000: 264), holds that travellers 'adopt an identity that brings together a series of disparate "ethnic" identities'. The third-generation travellers in China prefer to experience the environment in European countries in contrast to the first- and second-generation travellers that travelled to the West to explore a different world. The third-generation Chinese travellers are often students who are experienced travellers with some knowledge of the culture and history of the West. Since the 2000s, many European students have also travelled to China to study, which has strengthened the connection between China and Europe. The positive memories of studying encouraged them to want to travel again or introduce others to have similar experiences. These 'disseminators' typically write travel blogs on social media to convey their understanding of local culture and provide advice for navigating particular countries. Nowadays, tourism services, the sense of adventure and a marvellous spectacle are not what third-generation Chinese travellers are seeking (Ming, 2013). The family, as a travel unit, focuses more on seeking vacation benefits, namely, relaxation, experiential learning and togetherness. In contrast, a more tolerant and humanistic environment is the preference for third-generation travellers.

VII. Social work response

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, few industries have fallen as far and as fast as tourism. However, while the world begins to recover, restaurants, shops and some tourist attractions have only partially reopened. It is thus time for social work researchers to investigate when, where and why Chinese travellers are

likely to take their next trip. The difference to previous forms of 'risk management' for international travel is that a series of welfare and social care initiatives could be helpful for international travellers who are in a vulnerable position with regards to coping with the uncomfortable feelings and concerns created by the effects of the pandemic. Even though there is a great deal of literature that focuses on travel risk and management (See Reisinger, Y., & Mavondo, F. (2005); Park, K., & Reisinger, Y. (2010)), in the context of a global pandemic, travel-related businesses governmental support help could play a major role in mitigating these risks and fears. As such. following on the problems that have been raised in this article, this final section provides several solutions to the potential concerns of international travellers, within the theoretical framework of social work support.

Some of the travel agencies that have suspended activity in 2020 and 2021, are now considering how to best recover from the losses and restart tour programmes consistent with governmental and public health advice by re-establishing a form of normality. However, they tend to ignore "agency" as a factor of change, which can be identified as the human perception of 'risk recovery'. These aspects require a sociological analysis such as an environmental assessment for travellers and the redistribution of welfare and power. In particular, it is necessary to build a 'welfare community' that can address individual travellers' situations so that international travellers can communicate effectively in order to solve problems. A positive example can be found in the Singapore national travel agencies. Travellers in Singapore were initially asked to wear an electronic tracking device while observing COVID-19 stay-home recommendations (Tee Zhuo, 2020). Even though there has been some criticism of this measure, new technology allows people with the dilemma of travelling to feel safer, and this effectively reduces anxieties when people isolate with their families or stay in a group.

Previously, travel companies, airlines and accommodation providers spent a lot of money advertising hardware facilities. However, during a pandemic, hardware facilities are not what visitors really care about. Instead, health management and welfare advice are vital facilities that travellers are likely to pay significant attention to. Recent studies (Huang, 2020) tend to discuss the application of mechanical AI and sensory AI in hotel service delivery services. This pandemic AI-related solution in traveling may open up different possibilities at the intersection of health crises and hotel management. Since in this way, in the context of similar health crises, hotels can adopt routine and repetitive manual services into contactless services on the front line of hotels to improve health management and welfare benefits.

This discussion highlights the needs of customers in the context of COVID-19 that rely on developing trust-based relationships with tourists. Under normal conditions, a travel agency's risk management strategies are designed to ensure that costumers pay on time and be financially solvent in future. However, when travel firms operate in an unfamiliar region or country, they may largely rely on trust in the face of such uncertainty. Trust is difficult to measure, but economists conceptualize it as constituting a way of reducing the firm's transactions costs (Anheier and Kendall 2002).

The 'social constructionist theory' is a useful framework for understanding the ways in which individual cognitive development is influenced by the surrounding cultural context (Fletcher, 2006). In essence, social constructionism gives social workers the tools to embrace inclusivity and multiculturalism by recognizing the ways that shared meanings and constructed knowledge shape individuals, communities, and groups (Sue, Rasheed, & Rasheed, 2015). Hence, moderate intervention in the process of delivering information is a pathway to producing support for the cultural needs and perspectives of impacted clients and communities. In terms of this strategy, universities in the UK did reasonably well. Most of the universities in the UK share the ideology of a multicultural and inclusive community, where diversity is recognised and valued. In campus environments, universities provide professional services and welfare schemes as much as they are able. Most departments encourage students to speak out about any experience of racism, so that students became active bystanders rather than silent passers-by. All these strategies aim to create a society based on mutual respect and understanding, which, in a learning environment makes international students feel comfortable and secure, and could thus be extended to the travel industry to favour travel by increasing travelers' confidence.

VIII.   Conclusion

The risk management faced by travellers while travelling abroad during and after a global pandemic have not yet been suitably assessed. This is crucial since the global economy awaits recovery and, in many ways, this is dependent on international travel. Little is known about Chinese travellers' willingness to travel after the pandemic, and in what conditions they will be confident to travel again. In the case of travel-related businesses, it is necessary to consider approach that rely onn certain social concepts such as an 'advance notice system', AI technologies of lodging experience' and 'creating inclusivity and multiculturalism', in order to make international

travellers confident again. This research provides a perspective on how the travel industry can make active efforts in these fields. In particular, the international travel business needs to change its predominantly profit-orientated business model into a model that incorporates a humanistic involvement 'risk management' element. Furthermore, an effective trust relationship network with customers should be built as soon as possible. Finally, a diverse and tolerant environment needs to be constructed for international tourists so that they may cope better in the face of cultural conflict due to different ethics and habits.

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