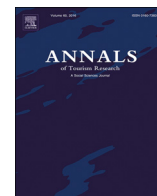




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Hitchhiking travel in China: Gender, agency and vulnerability

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ABSTRACT

Despite its recent emergence as an alternative way of travel, hitchhiking in China remains significantly understudied, with its gender aspects unexplored. Investigating the (re)constitution of gendered Chinese hitchhiking subjects in contemporary China, this paper rethinks the paradox of agency largely unexamined in tourism gender research. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted on the South Sichuan – Tibet Route. The findings demonstrate that gendered subjectivities of the vulnerable female and the invulnerable male in hitchhiking are produced by normative heterosexuality and the principle of reciprocity as interrelated discursive regimes. The paper contributes an understanding of resistance as a contested site that accommodates ongoing political debates and ethical reflections, which requires agency to be continuously posed as a question rather than a solution.

Introduction

In the last decade hitchhiking emerged as an alternative way of travel in China (Zhou, 2020). Whilst it is difficult to trace a specific point of its emergence there, a 2010 documentary of a hitchhiking journey from Beijing to Berlin and two related books subsequently published (Gu, 2012; Liu, 2011) appear to have contributed to the popularity of hitchhiking travel, especially among Chinese backpackers. Hitchhiking travel in contemporary China can be seen as a transposition of the hitchhiking phenomenon of the countercultural era (1960s/70s) in the West, where it was practiced by numerous young people – including the predecessors of modern backpackers, known as ‘drifters’ and ‘wanderers’ (Cohen, 1973; Vogt, 1976), in search of escape, freedom, adventure, discovery and authenticity (Mahood, 2018; Miller, 1973; Rinvoluceri, 1974). Such romantic visions are central to backpacking in China (Zhang et al., 2017), and are pursued by some Chinese backpackers through the practice of hitchhiking (Zhou, 2020). However, as with the mainstreaming of backpacking that gradually obscured the ‘drifter ideal’ in the West (O’Reilly, 2006), the countercultural characteristics have largely mutated in Chinese backpacking into the narratives of ‘xiaqingxin’, which denotes an aesthetic and romantic lifestyle pursued through a specific set of consumption priorities, rather than idealistic involvement in socio-political issues (Kimber et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017).

This emerging phenomenon has received little research interest, apart from a recent contribution by Zhou (2020). In contrast to the voluminous information about hitchhiking travel in the Chinese cyberspace, a selective reading of which indicates a hegemonic gendered narrative: hitchhiking is easier but more dangerous for females whilst safer but more difficult for males. This is also a message implicated in previous research on hitchhiking in Western contexts (e.g. Rinvoluceri, 1974), where assumptions about gender, ease and risk suggest an ambivalent understanding of females’ hitchhiking as both constraining and resistant.

For instance, the female hitchhiker was portrayed as the innocent victim susceptible to sexual violence from the (presumed) male lift-givers (Miller, 1973), whilst also able to seek self-affirmation through the hitchhiking experience (Greenley and Rice, 1974).

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Hitchhiking was seen as an opportunity for self-awareness and personal growth through adventure (Mahood, 2018), which are also sought in travel, especially backpacking (O'Reilly, 2006). Like (backpacker) travel (Lozanski, 2007), the practice of hitchhiking was largely 'masculinized' (Mukerji, 1978). However, it was this gendering that rendered the practice transformative: female hitchhikers could "engage in similar travel patterns as men" and "learn to handle the risk through mastery and intelligence in the same manner that men have" (Greenley and Rice, 1974, p.98). This logic can also be identified in the representation of female solo travellers. Whilst sexual violence remains a major concern for females travelling alone, they reportedly can acquire a sense of self-development and empowerment through negotiating such risks (Jordan and Gibson, 2005; Xu and Liu, 2018; Yang et al., 2018).

Further, the female hitchhiker also figured as the 'sexually transgressive temptress', who embarks on sexual adventure and manipulates the (male) lift-givers using her femininity and sexuality (Miller, 1973). However, the 'femininity' and 'sexuality' presented and utilized by the female hitchhikers appeared 'seductive' (Miller, 1973) – a heteronormative imagination of women's sexual transgression (Gavey, 2005). Such a representation of females' hitchhiking indicates a predacious female sexuality, which is celebrated in certain feminist travel narratives as liberating and empowering (Frohlick, 2010). Female travellers' sexual exploration is viewed as "resistance to gendered expectations of appropriate sexual behavior"; whereas their confidence to transgress sexual roles often relies on self-perception of their own 'sexiness', thus reinforcing to heteronormative femininity (Berdychevsky et al., 2013, p.65). This is particularly the case in a Chinese context, where women engaging in 'yanyu' (romantic/sexual encounters during travel) decidedly retain passive feminine positions in the development of sexual relationships, to the extent that the element of transgression is largely absent (Xu and Ye, 2016).

These two representations of female hitchhikers specifically and female travellers in general seem to, in discerning resistance, both indicate a neoliberal account of (female) agency proliferated by postfeminist discourses, where notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement are incorporated to form new forms of governmentality (McRobbie, 2009). In the former, the emphasis on self-development appeals to individualistic formulations of agency that imagine the agent as a sovereign subject (Gill, 2007). Such emphasis becomes particularly problematic when self-development is achieved through risk negotiation. If it is indeed through proximity to risks that 'travellers' differentiate themselves from 'tourists', foregrounding self-development can serve to construct those who fail to manage risks in hitchhiking/travelling as the inferior 'other', as the status of 'travellers' is premised on competence in staying safe (Lozanski, 2014). In the latter, the turn to women's sexual transgression is symptomatic of the postfeminist representational shift of women from passive sexual objects to active sexual subjects who *choose* to present themselves in an objectified manner (Gill, 2007). The alleged sexual agency in women's sexual exploration can be used to construct the moralizing accusations against female hitchhikers/travellers which holds those who are victims of sexual violence as responsible for their own suffering (Frohlick, 2010).

One way of moving away from such an account of agency is shifting the focus to the impact of discourses of agency at the level of subject constitution (Madhok, 2013). Packer (2008) argues that the popular 'truth' of hitchhiking being dangerous (which is responsible for the demise of hitchhiking post mid-1970s) is discursively produced through assumptions of gender, ease and risk. From this perspective, Mukerji's (1978) observation that hitchhikers constructed road realities through sharing road knowledge and recounting hitchhiking experiences can be seen as attesting to the discursive power of storytelling. Any attempt to recount experiences of hitchhiking, thus, is inevitably a discursive (re)production of those experiences being recounted.

Departing from the contradictory representations of the female hitchhiker as victim and temptress, this paper is less interested in the 'accuracy' of these representations (i.e. whether they can be empirically observed), and more so in the subjectivities of hitchhikers produced through gendered discourses. The aim of this paper is thus to investigate how hitchhiking travel in contemporary China is experienced and articulated in light of gendered discourses of hitchhiking, and how, through this, gendered hitchhiking subjects are (re)constituted. Hitchhiking in contemporary (Western) contexts has only recently been recognized as a research topic (Laviolette, 2016; O'Regan, 2013), and hitchhiking in non-Western contexts such as China remains largely unattended. The only empirical study of Chinese hitchhiking to date (Zhou, 2020) is an analysis of online blogs, and the author, noting the limitation of the source of data, called for further studies of the subject through other research approaches.

The present paper's focus on gender is important in that the gendered discourses of hitchhiking can provide gender research in tourism a case for a reappraisal of agency, a notion central to feminist enquiries (Madhok et al., 2013). Whilst such a reappraisal can be informed by research on female travellers, hitchhiking is a unique case in that it is based on asking for lifts – a practice that invokes a giving/receiving relationship between the lift-giver and the hitchhiker characterized by the principle of reciprocity (Rinvoluceri, 1974; Zhou, 2020), which should be taken into consideration in understanding hitchhiking travel as a gendered phenomenon. Its culturally specific focus on China may also help tourism studies to broaden and deepen understandings of gender beyond its implicit Anglocentrism (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). This paper is theoretically informed by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and her conceptualization of vulnerability. Its empirical basis relies on the lead author's ethnographic fieldwork as a Chinese male hitchhiking traveller along the South Sichuan – Tibet Route in China.

Literature review

Judith Butler and the paradox of agency

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990) proposes to understand gender as *performative*, arguing that the seemingly essential nature of gender is an illusion created and maintained through "a stylized repetition of acts" (p.140) and that:

[t]he possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility

of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction.

(p.141)

Whilst such theorization has been (mis)read as both voluntarism and determinism respectively, Butler's intention is to propose an understanding of agency beyond the voluntarism/determinism opposition (Lloyd, 2007).

Influenced by Foucault's notion of *subjectivation*, Butler (1993) proposes that one is both *subject* to the regulatory power of heteronormative gender norms and, through that subjection, becomes a *subject* able to contest such norms. Deploying Derrida's notion of 'citationality', Butler (1993) suggests that gender performativity should be understood as the forcible 'citation' of norms through which the subject comes into a sexed and gendered being, instead of a voluntarist subject freely choosing a sex or gender. Yet, that one is compelled to continually reiterate these norms to be that sex and gender suggests one is not completely determined by them (Butler, 1993).

Butler thus refuses a notion of agency based on a 'free' and 'autonomous' subject that seems to be privileged in the understandings of self-development (through overcoming risks) and exploration and/or utilization of one's sexuality as resistance in females' hitchhiking (Greenley and Rice, 1974; Miller, 1973), solo female travel (Yang et al., 2018) and women's sexual exploration during travel (Berdychevsky et al., 2013). In contrast, Butler understands the subject as simultaneously subordinated and enabled, which renders her account of agency useful in making sense of the paradox of constraints and resistance in hitchhiking travel as a gendered practice.

Critics argued that Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes the structure of signification more than the capacity of individuals, hence lacking attention to the 'creative dimension' of action and interaction in the process of (re)signification that is indispensable for a more substantive account of agency (e.g. McNay, 2004). However, the onus of Butler's perspective is not to focus on the agentic performances of a self-grounded actor – a (mis)reading of gender performativity through Goffman's concept of 'performance' (Lloyd, 2007) avoided in this paper. Instead, Butler's (1995, p. 163) insight that "politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its agency are articulated and made possible" is adopted and agency is understood as "a complex choreographed scene with many kinds of elements – social, material, human – at work" (Butler in Bell, 2010, p.151) rather than merely individuals' capacity to act/perform.

The notion of *subjectivation* embedded in the theory of performativity is reconsidered in Butler's (2004, 2009, 2016) conceptualization of vulnerability. Vulnerability denotes the fundamental capacity of being affected and affecting (as the responsiveness to being affected) that is shared by all humans and is neither negative nor positive. This notion of vulnerability is closely associated with the concepts of *precariousness* and *precarity*: the former is an existential concept referring to the tenuousness of lives that can be expunged at will or by accident, whereas the latter "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death" (Butler, 2009, p.25). In short, precariousness is a particular form of vulnerability and precarity is precariousness exacerbated (Gilson, 2014). Based on this conceptualization, Butler (2016) argues resistance can be enacted through the deliberate exposure of the vulnerability to failing infrastructural conditions as a way to demand the ending of precarity. Thus, vulnerability should be understood as the mobilizing force for, rather than the opposition to, resistance.

In relation to solo female travellers (Jordan and Gibson, 2005) and female hitchhikers (Greenley and Rice, 1974) it could be argued that by being present in precarious tourist spaces, they can attempt to resist precarity. However, the emphasis on female self-development through solo travel or hitchhiking poses resistance against constraints. As constraints are often regarded as associated with female vulnerability (often understood as susceptibility to harm), vulnerability is at once assumed as something negative, and resistance in a way becomes characteristic of countering one's vulnerability. Self-development, therefore, is difficult to distinguish from the cultivation of an invulnerable, or less vulnerable self-identity. This critique can also apply to the formulation of female travellers/hitchhikers exploring and/or utilizing their sexuality to transgress gender norms (Berdychevsky et al., 2013; Miller, 1973), which implies a sexual confidence that is easily read as sexual invulnerability.

To articulate agentic resistance in terms of self-development or sexual confidence as in females' hitchhiking (also solo female travel and female travellers' sexual exploration), which can be understood as approximating an invulnerable ideal, demands some rethinking, especially through the sense of *ethical responsiveness* in Butler's concept of vulnerability, or specifically that of precariousness (Butler, 2009). Precariousness emphasizes less the tenuousness of individual life than the sharing of this tenuousness that indicates a fundamental interdependency constitutive of human life (Butler, 2009). The pursuit of invulnerability, therefore, can constitute a willful ignorance of unwilled, prior and constitutive relationality, which serves as "the basis for the forms of ignorance that make possible oppression precisely because it enables one to isolate and close oneself off" (Gilson, 2014, p.93).

Gilson (2014) also suggests that invulnerability can function as part of a logic of resistance – a strategic denial not of fundamental relationality, but dominant forms of relationality that relegate one to the oppressed status. Strategic invulnerability as resistance, however, must be underpinned by *epistemic vulnerability* – a positive vulnerability characterized by the openness to not knowing and learning from situations of being the unknowing, foreign and uncomfortable party, and ultimately an openness of altering ones' beliefs and self (Gilson, 2014). Such openness is indispensable "not only on the part of those who are relatively privileged but also on the part of those who are relatively oppressed or do not stand to benefit from the status quo" due to the "intersectional nature of difference and the interlocking nature of oppressions" (Gilson, 2014, p.94). Therefore, ethical responsiveness requires us to be aware that in responding to frights and threats, we may, even if inadvertently, frighten and threaten others (Butler, 2004).

Butler's theory of gender performativity has been drawn upon in research on tourism and gender, such as in (Veijola & Jokinen, 1994) where Butler's idea of parodic repetition is alluded to as a way of 'resignifying' gendered bodies in tourism. Aitchison (2000)

also draws upon Butler's (1990) critiques of the gender/sex dualism to examine the dualistic nature of representing 'Others' in leisure and tourism research. However, the conceptualization of vulnerability that further refines Butler's account of agency has not been explored. In studying violence in independent travel in India, Lozanski (2007) cautions that whilst local Indian men's sexual harassment towards Western female travellers is an oppressive exercise of patriarchal privilege, retaliatory violence from sexually harassed Western female travellers as a means of confronting the Indian men can invoke a colonial aggression. In this case, to reconcile this antagonism requires the recognition of vulnerability to violence as a shared condition (Lozanski, 2014). This serves as a compelling case of the 'interlocking nature of oppressions', which urges an understanding of resistance in tourism gender research that takes into consideration 'ethical responsiveness' embedded in the Butlerian conceptualization of vulnerability.

Gender in contemporary China

Chinese scholars turning to the West for intellectual inspiration can be an effective strategy that benefits the pursuit of critical understandings of gender in China (Wang, 1997). Criticality emerges precisely from the tension and debates induced by the introduction of 'Western' theories in (re)thinking 'local' issues and through the 'local' issues the 'Western' theories rethought (Spakowski, 2011). In this sense, Butler's theories can provide valuable insights in a Chinese context (although not without limitations). Yet, it is necessary to attend to the nuances of gender in contemporary China. Of particular interest is the emergence of the neoliberal female subject in contemporary China celebrating consumerism, individualism and sexual confidence (Chen, 2012, 2016). The proliferation of this female subject that resembles the (Western) postfeminist subject (Gill, 2007) has been attended to in various strands of Chinese feminist debates, and constitutes the core element in those raised by grassroots feminism (sometimes coined derogatorily as 'tianyuan feminism' by some anti-feminist critics in China's cyberspace) (Wu and Dong, 2019). However, this section does not delve into these feminist debates but rather focuses on the discourses of femininity and the reconfiguration of sexual culture in post-Mao China, which can inform gender relations in hitchhiking travel in China.

Formed alongside the discourse of modernity proliferated by the 'reform and opening' initiated in China in 1978, a discourse of femininity emerged first as an expression of Chinese women's revolt against the Maoist state's violent erasure of sexual difference, but was gradually "co-opted by increasingly powerful commercial forces" due to exposure to globalized Western-style consumerism (Wang, 1997, p.147). Fashion magazines, advertisements and other (consumerist) forms of media promoted representations of modern Chinese women as, on the one hand being seductive, hedonistic, and independent – the alleged modern Western feminine ideal – and on the other exhibiting unique qualities of Oriental, or specifically Chinese femininity, such as submissiveness and gentleness (Chen, 2016; Johansson, 1998). These representations in consumer culture contribute to cultivating modern (gendered) subjects in contemporary China (Chen, 2016). Thus, if the counter-culture characteristics of the hitchhiking phenomenon in 1960s/70s West has indeed mutated into lifestyle consumption in hitchhiking travel in contemporary China, it can be rightly argued that new gendered subjects are being cultivated through the representations of female (and male) hitchhiking travellers.

This discourse of femininity is an important element in the 'beauty economy' in China, which refers broadly to the commodification of feminine beauty (Xu and Feiner, 2007). In the beauty economy women are both significant consumers of the beauty market and the sexualized objects of consumption. In the former, purchasing power becomes increasingly celebrated, especially among young, wealthy urban Chinese women, to the extent that empowerment is sought through (specific ways of) consumption (Chen, 2016). Against this backdrop of consumerist China, the formulation of women's resistance through consuming certain (heroic) forms of tourism, such as solo travel (Xu and Liu, 2018) and potentially hitchhiking travel (Zhou, 2020), requires serious rethinking, as seemingly empowering ways of consumption may turn out to be new forms of conformity and coercion.

When sexualized as objects of consumption, women's economic agency is reduced to "their achievement of 'beauty', or more accurately, their ability to appeal to the male gaze" (Xu and Feiner, 2007, p.310). In this sense, the 'beauty economy' is "an integral feature of China's wider sexual economy" where masculinity is increasingly identified with earning and career success and femininity (or precisely feminine beauty) increasingly seen as an important asset for women that can be used in exchange for material wealth and financial security (Zurndorfer, 2016, p.7).

The emergence of this new form of sexual economy cannot be dissociated from the reconfiguration of sexual culture that resulted in greater sexual freedom, especially among urban youths (Farrer, 2002). Indeed, sex has become separated from reproduction, marriage and even love to various extents (Jeffreys and Yu, 2015), which contributes to foster "a confluence of blurred and shifting boundaries bound up in a matrix of wealth, femininity, and sexuality" that is the sexual economy in contemporary China (Zurndorfer, 2016, p.7). This new sexual culture has to a degree transformed women's attitudes and experiences of sex (Chen, 2012; Jeffreys and Yu, 2015).

However, the greater sexual freedom brought about by this new sexual culture has accorded men more opportunities for sexual activities and sexualized consumption with fewer costs as 'sex' becomes an expression of a man's status and good taste, whereas for women, sex, to a large extent, must be continuously articulated through love, affection and emotional intimacy (Ho et al., 2018). Yet, it is precisely in a time that female sexual autonomy becomes imaginable that female sexuality becomes a controversial issue. In particular, women's sexual motives are increasingly seen as the decisive moral criterion for their sexual practices (e.g. female engagement in sexual relations should be for feelings rather than material ends [Farrer, 2002]). It may thus be argued that the representation of the female (hitchhiking) traveller engaging in 'yanyu' (or sexual encounters specifically) is possible due to the reconfiguration of sexual culture in China, whilst the absence (or even refusal) of formulating resistance in terms of 'yanyu' (Xu and Ye, 2016) can be explained by the powerful conservative voices that persist in contemporary Chinese sexual culture.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study that drew on the principles of ethnography due to its capacity in providing first-hand information on social and cultural phenomena (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This is important for an understudied phenomenon such as hitchhiking travel in contemporary China. This ‘grounded’ approach, based on rich and multiple-sources of data in situ (O’Reilly, 2012), was fruitful in acquiring a deep understanding of hitchhiking travel as a gendered phenomenon. In particular, multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) was employed due to the mobile nature of hitchhiking, which often requires the researcher to move with participants (Miller, 1973; Rinvoluceri, 1974).

The fieldwork was conducted by the lead author (May–August 2017) on the South Sichuan – Tibet Route, the section of the G318 Highway (Shanghai – Shigatse) that connects Chengdu (Sichuan) and Lhasa (Tibet). This route has become increasingly recognized as a tourist attraction in its own right. As the road conditions improved and tourism infrastructure emerged, the modes of travel on this route diversified. It has become a particularly popular route for hitchhiking travel, among other modes of travel such as cycling and driving (Zhou, 2020).

Data was collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation, which included the lead author travelling/hitchhiking along the South Sichuan – Tibet Route with (though sometimes without) hitchhiking travellers and staying in hostels there where hitchhiking travellers were intercepted. Whilst the lead author had not hitchhiked before, being in his late twenties and having backpacked previously allowed him to immerse in the hitchhiking scene relatively easily. The participatory-observational data were recorded through daily fieldnotes in Chinese.

Interviews were conducted with Chinese hitchhiking travellers (25: 12 females, 13 males), who were recruited through a hybrid of convenience and snowball sampling. All the interviewees were in their twenties except two in their thirties. The sole inclusion criterion was the practice of hitchhiking: interview participants should have travelled by hitchhiking, or preferably have been travelling by hitchhiking during the period of/upon encounter with the lead author. 11 interviews were conducted face-to-face (all in hostels except one in a restaurant) and 14 through WeChat voice call, which helped to overcome certain constraints of time and space that might have stopped some participants from being interviewed (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). All interviews were conducted in Chinese, digitally recorded and on average lasted an hour. Participant names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

The interviews were semi-structured, usually starting with the interviewees recounting their hitchhiking journeys, and then flexible follow-up questions based on their narratives were asked, focusing on the role of gender. The lead author hitchhiked with eight of the interviewees and met in person and interacted with all other interviewees to various extents except for two who were introduced virtually by other interviewees. Whilst the ‘depth’ of the interview seemed not to be influenced by whether or not the lead author previously hitchhiked/interacted with the interviewees, observations during hitchhiking with the interviewees allowed the lead author to interrogate incidents that are relevant to the research but could have been disregarded in the interviewees’ account of their experience, providing useful contextual experience that enriched interviews as well as data analysis.

The fieldnotes and interview data were transcribed into Chinese by the lead author. Since translating is an interpretive act that may lead to the loss or distortion of meaning, data was interpreted in its original language with translation integrated into the process of interpretation. The interview and fieldnote data were analyzed through theoretical thematic analysis, which is largely driven by theoretical enquiry, with less emphasis given to themes emerging from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analytic approach did not involve the prescriptive step-by-step process of coding data, as such a process could potentially overly fragment individual stories recounted in the interviews and recorded in the fieldnotes. Instead, thematizing was achieved through careful reading and re-reading of the data guided by Butler’s theoretical insights. The approach to data analysis was therefore to ‘think with theory’ (St. Pierre and Jackson, 2014), which is especially beneficial in exploring highly theorized notions such as gender, power and agency (e.g. Hanna, 2014).

The lead author is a self-identified gay man, which renders his hitchhiking experience valuable in formulating a queer critique towards the heterosexual assumptions inherent in hegemonic gendered narratives with regards to ease and risk in hitchhiking. However, such a queer critique is not pursued here, as a detailed account of the lead author’s reflexive experience is the subject of a separate paper. Nevertheless, it is necessary to reflect upon the impact of the lead author’s sexual identity on the process of data collection and data interpretation. The sexual orientation of the lead author was not disclosed in the field, primarily due to homosexuality remaining marginalized in Chinese society (Ho et al., 2018). The concealment of sexual orientation, to an extent, affected field relations, as to reduce the possibility of accidentally exposing his homosexuality the lead author, if inadvertently, avoided developing particularly intimate relationships with participants. Without disclosing his sexual orientation the lead author was thus assumed to be a heterosexual man in the field. In negotiating this discrepancy between self-identifying as homosexual and being identified as heterosexual by others, the lead author experienced the force of heteronormativity in shaping his gendered experiences in hitchhiking. Therefore, the participants’ recounting of their gendered hitchhiking experiences is interpreted as residing in what Butler (1990) terms the heterosexual matrix, as implicated in the findings, which are discussed in three sections: gendering hitchhiking subjects, sex and reciprocity, and the possibility of resistance.

Findings

Gendering hitchhiking subjects

The notion that it is easier but more dangerous for females than males to hitchhike is supported by the interview participants, particularly through the claim that “the best combination for hitchhiking is a boy and a girl” (Gao/male/21). This combination is

considered as able to best balance ‘ease’ and ‘risk’ (Zhou, 2020). The ‘risk’ in this case is almost invariably considered as sexual violence. This does not mean that (female) hitchhiking travellers do not recognize other possible dangers, but that such dangers seem not to be as threatening. For instance, Lu (female/24) acknowledged dangers of hitchhiking on the South Sichuan – Tibet Route such as robbery. However, such risks do not concern her as much as rape, if at all:

...what I was most afraid of is being raped...Robbing is not too bad...

Rape (or sexual violence in general) is unique compared to other crimes in that it generates “intense shame, stigma, and emotionality” for the victims (Koss, 2010) due to a strong victim-blaming tendency partly resulting from widespread ‘rape myths’, such as ‘a woman who hitchhikes is asking to be raped’, which was popular in the 1970s West (Burt, 1980). This rape myth is also present in hitchhiking travel in contemporary China, although in different forms. Yuan (female/28), for instance, reflected on an unpleasant incident where the lift-giver attempted to get her drunk and afterwards expressed his (sexual) affection towards her:

[If] the female when hitching, pay attention to clothing and language (watch what you say)...[she] can avoid many risks...It was exactly because I...talking too much...leading to unnecessary misunderstanding from their side.

This experience of Yuan's does not involve sexual violence. However, its seemingly ‘harmlessness’ should not be used to deny the sense of susceptibility caused by such unwanted sexual attention. Yuan's account resonates with the depiction in the rape myth of hitchhiking that sexual coercion is to be expected by the female hitchhiker and it is her responsibility to do something to avoid it. This heteronormative discourse implies the positioning of the female as a disempowered object of male desire and sets up a female subjectivity in which she understands herself as vulnerable. The account of Jiao (female/21) demonstrates this:

...that day I was scared to death. There were two male drivers...he frequently stopped the car...in the wilderness...or for smoking, or for going to the loo, or...other things...every time he stopped, I was frightened...[I] was worried about...that sort of things [sexual violence].

Although Jiao reported that in reality she had no unpleasant encounter with these two male lift-givers, for her, as for Yuan and some other female participants, hitchhiking travel to an extent was experienced as an exposure to potential sexual violence regardless of whether or not it was indeed dangerous once the subject position of the vulnerable female was taken up. This does not mean that female hitchhikers like Jiao voluntarily chose this subject position. In a Butler (1993) understanding, it is through the ‘taking up’ of that position that one comes into a (gendered) being at all. Yet, gender performativity denotes not a subject formation that is once and for all but includes a continuous repetition of acts that are required to consolidate that subjectivity (Butler, 1990). In this sense, hitchhiking is one of the many contexts of the instantiation of gender and the gendered subjects’ experiences of hitchhiking are part of that ongoing gender (re)formulation.

Equally, it can be argued that the male hitchhiker emerges from the ‘taking up’ of a certain subject position provided by heteronormative discourses. For instance, Xu (male/28) commented:

I as a male will not be intimidated by female drivers anyway...a female going hitchhiking, will be relatively concerned about the...male drivers...if males use violence, it's difficult for females to resist. But...females, will not use violence...It's mainly sexuality. In terms of sexuality the girls are in a relatively vulnerable position...

Xu's account demonstrates how the male hitchhiker (and lift-giver) is constituted as invulnerable. In contrast to this is that “it's difficult for females to resist” male violence. As such, vulnerability seems to become the defining characteristic of the female hitchhiking traveller and invulnerability the male one. One becomes a male or a female hitchhiker precisely through ‘taking up’ the subject positions of being invulnerable or vulnerable, where that ‘taking up’ is a forcible citation that compels the subject to comply with norms (Butler, 1993) and become a ‘proper’ gendered hitchhiking traveller.

Xu's account also implies that sex-related risks can be dealt with by the male, which has implications for the widely shared notion that the female is better off travelling with a male companion for the sake of safety. The male hitchhiker, if travelling with a female companion, not only needs to be invulnerable but also protective, as he is often considered to “play the role of the bodyguard” (Gao/male/21), being responsible for taking care of his “relatively weak” female companion(s) (Chen/male/36).

Here, males are constructed as both dangerous lift-givers and ‘protective’ hitchhiking companions in hitchhiking discourses, despite that male companions, often met through the Internet or in hostels, are usually strangers to female hitchhiking travellers before the hitchhiking journey, just like the male lift-givers. The (female) participants were generally vague about this matter. Whilst this can be understood through a sense of security from the group identity as hitchhikers or the reassurance from better-informed judgement on the male companion than on the male lift-giver (e.g. having more time to know about the male companion prior to hitchhiking together), an interesting interpretation is to consider the differing operations of reciprocity between the female hitchhiker and the male lift-giver versus those of her male companion in constructing these male figures. In the latter the relations are considered as mutually beneficial (the male wants to increase ease whilst the female wants to reduce risk), which renders the relation as reciprocal from the beginning. In the other case, the relation is established through (but not determined by) ‘giving/receiving’, which often leads to “feelings of indebtedness” for hitchhikers (Yuan/female/28), who then might feel obliged to ‘give something back’ to achieve reciprocity (see Rinvoulucru, 1974). For instance:

...if I didn't provide something for the driver, a form of equivalent exchange was absent...So, I talked to the driver...that...feels like a kind of, err, equivalence exchange in a sense...

(Gao/male/21)

This ‘giving/receiving (and returning)’ indicates a prominent power relation between lift-givers and hitchhikers characterized by the principle of reciprocity. According to the interviewees and regardless of gender, typical strategies of reciprocating the lift-givers include making efforts to talk and providing drinks/refreshments. Yet, this paper is less interested in the actual strategies used to

achieve reciprocity than in the interplay between the principle of reciprocity and normative heterosexuality as components of the gender discursive regime of hitchhiking travel. This hitchhiker – lift-giver relation cannot be reduced merely to that between ‘giver’ and ‘receiver’, as these subject positions in hitchhiking intersect with, among others, gendered subject positions. To explore this intersectionality, it helps to look at an alternative representation of the female hitchhiker as the temptress, which contradicts vulnerability.

Sex and reciprocity

In opposition to construction of the female through vulnerability an alternative understanding was also observed: *the desiring and manipulative female who utilizes femininity and sexuality to her advantages in hitchhiking travel*. This image is not unlike earlier Western representations, where female hitchhikers “pick up male travelling companions and casually, albeit tacitly, exchange sex for meals, shelter, rides and companionship, moving from partner to partner as their route or inclination takes them” (Miller, 1973, p.18). As such, the male lift-giver becomes vulnerable as a potential target of the invulnerable female hitchhiker.

This reversal of vulnerable subject positions is not unproblematic. In particular, the female hitchhiker as the ‘exploiter’ is portrayed as seductive rather than violent, *implying* sex through, as some (male) participants suggested, wearing a miniskirt when hitching (fieldnotes-06/07/2017) or by for instance saying to the male lift-giver: “Brother, you give me a lift, when we arrive there we can share a room to save money” (fieldnotes-25/07/2017). The ‘seductive’ form of sexual agency for women indicates the persistence of normative heterosexuality in this alternative discourse (Gavey, 2005). Heteronormative femininity underlying the perceived vulnerability of the female remains intact, or rather is incorporated in the construction of the invulnerable female hitchhiker.

Further, the seemingly desiring female hitchhiker is also said to use sex as a means to acquire, or an object to exchange for, non-sexual things such as rides, shelter or meals (Miller, 1973). Indeed, participants in this research predominantly viewed sex, or the sexualized body, as used to exchange for something else rather than a pursuit in its own end, as demonstrated by their recounting of various accounts of female hitchhikers circulating in (and beyond) the hitchhiking community:

There are a lot on the Internet...travelling the Sichuan – Tibet Route...girls...didn't spend money, then, hitchhiking. Then [they] basically are...all sorts of selling their bodies

(Yi/female/22)

I saw piles of [comments]...others pay with cards and you pay with your pussy

(Xu/male/28)

In this sense, female sexuality is locked into the principle of reciprocity in hitchhiking (Rinvolutri, 1974). Female sexuality is often considered as endowed with exchange value, perhaps especially so within the ‘beauty economy’ and ‘sexual economy’ in China (Xu and Feiner, 2007; Zurndorfer, 2016). The equivalence of female sexuality and money is particularly explicit in the comment by Xu above, which seems to also convey a sense of ‘either/or’, in which the lift can only be paid by ‘cards’ (money) or ‘pussy’ (female sexuality). As Jun (female/22) commented on female hitchhikers utilizing their femininity and sexuality:

I think if [you are] really poor, [and] really don't have money, don't go out. I think if you go out you surely must bring money with you...

These accounts referring to money seem to indicate that the perceived free lifts are never ‘free’. Here we can see the violent operation of the principle of reciprocity as the regulatory ideal in hitchhiking, which has a particularly devastating implication for female hitchhikers: in search of lifts free of charge in monetary form she has automatically chosen to pay with her sexuality, and to avoid paying with sex, she, as suggested by Jun, is better off avoiding hitchhiking travel altogether. Such accounts, perhaps unexpectedly, reiterate the hitchhiking rape myth: asking for (‘free’) lifts is asking for sex – an unfortunate corollary of the intersectionality of normative heterosexuality and the principle of reciprocity.

Paradoxically, the value of female sexuality is often considered as exceeding the ‘lift’ to include, in complicated ways, food, accommodation and more (Miller, 1973). In somewhat extreme cases, female sexuality may even accord the female hitchhiker with opportunities of becoming a ‘gold-digger’:

But if a girl...hitches an off-road car, then [the driver] is obviously rich, then she intentionally wants to hitch by selling her pussy, ...indeed there is a small number of girls, she is quite money-worshipping, she is willing to do such things...imagine that if he is a lorry driver, she is certainly not willing to do so.

(Xu/male/28)

In Xu's account, even if the female hitchhiker desires a male, she most likely desires one with wealth, which suggests that what she wants is his wealth more than his male sexuality. Whilst such an articulation might not be well-thought out by Xu in the time-constrained interview (and implies a form of sexism from Xu as a man), it reflects a wider discourse of sexual relations in contemporary China: material conditions have become an increasingly important concern in choosing partners for women (Zurndorfer, 2016). The sexual power of the female hitchhiker is thus constructed as being able to assist in fulfilling desires for material abundance by bringing about not only lifts, food and accommodation during the journey, but all the potential benefits and privileges that may come with a wealthy (sex) partner.

In this sense, the principle of reciprocity in hitchhiking is from the outset gendered, operating in a way that disadvantages female hitchhikers. They are either considered as automatically choosing to pay with sex if not paying money for lifts, and hence asking to be sexually exploited, or if choosing to utilize her sexuality to her advantage, she is immediately vilified and her morality questioned by the predominant gender and sexual norms:

if [she] is willing to...there is no problem about it, although this is an unhealthy, immoral [practice].

(Wang/male/26)

It may be tempting to conclude that the desiring and manipulative female hitchhiker belongs to a narrative of the hypersexualized female hitchhiker constructed by males, and the portrait of the vulnerable female hitchhiker is a relatively 'accurate' representation. After all, many female participants expressed a sense of susceptibility to (sexual) violence (with some cases of unwanted sexual attention) whilst avidly disidentifying with the representation of female hitchhikers voluntarily engaging in sexual encounters. Yet, it may be argued that such disidentification paradoxically contributes to produce the invulnerable female hitchhikers as the immoral and/or inferior 'other', hence sustaining that representation. For instance, Jun (female/22) distinguished herself from the (perceived) female travellers being 'abducted' – that is, fooled into (sexual) relations on the route, through presenting herself as "sensible" and hence impossible to 'abduct'. For Jun, female (hitchhiking) travellers' voluntary participation in romantic/sexual encounters is often the effect of the male's exploitation of their immaturity, particularly their naïve desire for material gains (or indeed its sophisticated combination with love) in such encounters:

...those who were tricked...might be immature, and they might...be poor.

As such, it is more appropriate to see this alternative representation as reflecting how female sexuality is caught up in different discursive regimes and becomes a contradictory notion in the context of hitchhiking travel, as it is in daily life in contemporary China (Farrer, 2002).

None of the female participants reported experiences of being sexually violated or of utilizing femininity or sexuality to obtain perks in hitchhiking, despite these being the most prominent representations in gender discourses of hitchhiking travel. It was pointed out by various participants (including some females), however, even if female hitchhikers had those experiences they were unlikely to disclose them. The point is, however, not to conclude whether the participants' recounting of their experiences is accurate, as the 'truths' are produced precisely through the recounting (Mukerji, 1978), understood as forcible citations of predominant discourses (Butler, 1993). It is rather to explore the possibility of resistance to these predominant discourses.

The possibility of resistance?

In studies of female solo travellers (Jordan and Gibson, 2005; Yang et al., 2018), and implicated in Greenley and Rice's (1974) study of female hitchhikers, resistance is often formulated in terms of negotiating risks (especially of sexual violence), which generates a sense of self-development. Such a formulation of resistance is subject to reappraisal in this paper. A sense of self-development was not reported by the (female) participants in this research. This can to an extent be explained by the popular strategy of managing risks among female hitchhikers by travelling with a male companion, where the vulnerable subject position of the female is reinforced rather than subverted. In a Butlerian understanding, the possibility of resistance in hitchhiking is sought in the unfaithful repetition of predominant discourses that produce gendered hitchhiking subjects, that is, the non-compliant situations recounted by participants. Thus, resistance is unlikely to be found in the female hitchhikers' risk negotiation that conforms to predominant gender discourses. Yet, Butler (1993) cautions that resistance is not guaranteed in the parodic repetition of gender. Rather it is the *possibility* of resistance, rather than resistance per se, that can be found in such repetition, which foregrounds an ambivalence that must be taken into consideration in thinking through agency. In this sense, proposed absolute forms of resistance can be problematic.

This section considers resistance through the case of a female lift-giver picking up male hitchhikers. This case is not proposed as a form of resistance but rather as a way of *thinking* resistance, which is not based on actual accounts of female lift-givers but instead a contemplation informed by Butler's conceptualization of vulnerability. The female lift-giver is an outcast figure in the gendered discourses of hitchhiking, perhaps because she is largely absent in the scene of hitchhiking in empirical experiences (most participants indicated the rarity of female lift-givers and the lead author had few encounters with them). Some suggested the threats posed by (male) hitchhikers can discourage (lone) female drivers from giving lifts. Indeed, Wei (male/20), one of the few hitchhikers who had been picked up by female lift-givers, mentioned:

She said [she] had thought about the risk of picking up us two males...Because she, came out with her daughter, [they] on the road must fear about danger.

Informed by the power relation between the hitchhiker and lift-giver characterized by the principle of reciprocity, one may insist that despite such feelings of fear the subject position of the female lift-giver is still one less susceptible to sexual violence than that of the female hitchhiker due to her 'giver' position. Equally, however, one may imagine what the rape myth about the female lift-giver might look like if she was included in the gendered discourses of hitchhiking: a woman inviting a strange man to her car is 'asking to be raped'. Such myths align with the representation of female sexuality as always under suspicion in tourism spaces (Frohlick, 2010), and can appear more convincing than those about female hitchhikers, as from a heteronormative perspective what else could a female want other than casual sex when she invites a strange man into her car, whereas a female hitchhiker who enters a strange man's car at least wants a lift, thus rendering the female lift-giver in a particularly unfavourable position. In this latter case, whereby the female lift-giver in Wei's account was fearful but still picked them up, it can be seen as indicating an openness to – and the mobilization of – her vulnerability as a form of resistance (Butler, 2016). Contrarily, to pursue an invulnerable status through not giving lifts (hence not exposing oneself to the perceived threats from the male hitchhiker) can be seen as closing oneself to the signalling hitchhikers (Gilson, 2014).

The cultivation of invulnerability, understood as wilful ignorance of the relationality prior to any sense of individuality, can lead to social distancing and detachment (Gilson, 2014). Social distancing and detachment are prominent in the practice of hitchhiking/lift-giving – after all, it is the heightened sense of risk on both the hitchhiker's and the lift-giver's sides that contributed significantly to

the Western decline of hitchhiking since the mid-1970s (Packer, 2008). Hitchhiking travel in contemporary China seems to be experiencing something similar. During the fieldwork, it was frequently noted that drivers on the route had become increasingly reluctant to pick up hitchhikers. One reason for this, as suggested by (hitchhiking) travellers, lift-givers, hostel owners and local residents on the route, is that the lift-givers are often held responsible when car accidents happen during the lift. Whilst there is certainly a legal aspect to this, in the narratives the emphasis is usually on the insistence from the hitchhiker's side that the lift-giver should, for instance, compensate for the hitchhiker's injury (fieldnotes-19/07/2017). In addition, stories of 'thieving hitchhikers' (e.g. lift-givers having things stolen by those they picked up; fieldnote-14/07/2017) and 'ungrateful hitchhikers' (e.g. hitchhikers that do not help the lift-giver when the car breaks down; fieldnote-14/05/2017) are also circulating.

Such stories are valuable to consider as they reveal that the lift-giver, even if male, is not invulnerable in any absolute sense, especially when violation is not confined to sexual coercion. Recognizing the vulnerability of the lift-givers – both female and male – has implications for thinking through resistance as practiced by female hitchhiking travellers. It seems that responsiveness from female hitchhikers to the alleged danger is largely in minimizing risks and ensuring safety (Greenley and Rice, 1974). For instance, an experienced female hitchhiker suggested she usually avoided hitching lorries, as "nine out of ten [lorry] drivers are perverts" (fieldnotes-18/05/2017). Another example is that Jun (female/22) stopped her hitchhiking companions from accepting a lift offered by several "Tibetan-looking men" (fieldnotes-17/06/2017). In the interview, she openly admitted that her reaction was because the people in the car were Tibetan, and Tibetans, as the popular sayings about hitchhiking on South Sichuan – Tibet Route go, can be dangerous.

As with Lozanski's (2007) analysis of violent encounters between Western female travellers and local Indian man, these cases speak to the interlocking nature of oppression, specifically along lines of gender, class and ethnicity, which should cast doubt on a general formulation of self-development as resistance. Such a formulation is premised on precisely the knowledge of female hitchhikers' vulnerability – understood almost invariably as a negative condition, specifically susceptibility to sexual violence – produced by the predominant gender discourses that it seeks to challenge. Consequently, resistance becomes sought in the cultivation of confidence and competence in addressing the alleged risks, and ultimately a transformation from being vulnerable to invulnerable, a transformation that cannot be entirely dissociated with unjust prejudices towards, for instance, working-class lorry drivers and Tibetans as an ethnic minority in China.

It is important to consider a form of resistance that can reconcile, rather than intensify, antagonism between hitchhikers and lift-givers based on assumptions of gender, class and ethnicity. A female lift-giver picking up male hitchhikers provides a case for imagining an alternative response to fear and threat; one that does not envisage a transformation from vulnerability to invulnerability. To base such an imagination on the case of female lift-givers does not imply it is impossible for female hitchhikers to resist. Indeed, female hitchhikers declining lifts from (male) drivers that seem dangerous can be articulated as a strategic adaptation of invulnerability (Gilson, 2014). However, resistance through strategic invulnerability must be based on the knowledge rather than suppression of one's vulnerability (Gilson, 2014), understood as an ontological condition that indicates a fundamental relationality (Butler, 2009). Strategic invulnerability, therefore, must involve "understanding the repercussions of closing oneself to certain kinds of relations and situations and judging such closure to be a necessary tool of resistance" (Gilson, 2014, p.91); and epistemic vulnerability characterized by an openness to learn, unlearn and re-learn from and through others, can help to cultivate such 'understanding' and 'judging' (Gilson, 2014). Informed by the principle of epistemic vulnerability, therefore, perhaps resistance should remain a continuously contested site that accommodates ongoing political debates and ethical reflections.

Conclusion

This paper sought to investigate hitchhiking travel in China as a gendered phenomenon by examining the mechanisms by which gendered hitchhiking subjects are (re)constituted through experiencing and articulating the practice. It found that gendered hitchhiking subjects come to be through 'taking up' either vulnerable or invulnerable positions offered by the predominant discourses in hitchhiking regarding gender, ease and risk. This pair of gendered subject positions of the vulnerable female subject and the invulnerable male subject intersects with another pair – the powerful lift-giving subject and the less powerful hitchhiking subject, which is characterized by the principle of reciprocity. The in-depth analysis of the equally widespread yet much more controversial representation of the desiring female hitchhiker reveals that the principle of reciprocity in hitchhiking, as a discursive regime, is from the outset gendered: the normative heterosexuality embedded in the predominant discourses of gender, ease and risk, and the principle of reciprocity in hitchhiking travel produces multiple 'truths' of gender, rendering female sexuality in particular as a site of contention with regard to constraints, resistance and agency. Turning to Butler's (2004, 2009) conception of vulnerability, this research considered the possibility of resistance to gender and sexual norms in hitchhiking travel through the case of the female lift-giver picking up (male) hitchhiking travellers, arguing that resistance may be rethought through the mobilization of vulnerability – not so much through the attempt of transcending that vulnerability in/through such mobilization but through being epistemically vulnerable (Gilson, 2014), to be reflexive in practicing resistance, and to be aware of the new forms of conformity and coercion that such resistance may unleash.

As the first in situ empirical study of the emerging phenomenon of hitchhiking travel in contemporary China, this paper contributes to knowledge by providing grounded understandings of hitchhiking as an alternative way of travel in contemporary tourism (O'Regan, 2013; Zhou, 2020), especially with regards to its gendered aspects. Its major contribution lies however in rethinking the paradox of agency that remains largely unexamined in tourism gender research. Recent studies of solo female travellers and female tourists engaging in sexual exploration explore the constraints confronting and/or resistance experienced by subjects, appealing especially to the ideal neoliberal autonomous subject whilst leaving out the subjects from critical examination (e.g. Berdychevsky

et al., 2013; Jordan and Gibson, 2005). The present paper, influenced by Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, in contrast understands the articulating, practicing and experiencing of hitchhiking travel as part of the ongoing process of gender formation and subject constitution. Through engaging with Butler's (2009) conception of vulnerability, the paper demonstrated an alternative understanding of resistance that takes into consideration new forms of conformity and coercion that may be induced in practicing resistance. If such an understanding challenges the 'project of female empowerment' that has become 'fashionable' in tourism gender scholarship, it is only because the notion of agency should be continuously posed as a question rather than a solution.

Whilst Butler's theories served as a queer intervention in gender studies, this has not been reflected in the present paper. In a Butlerian understanding, an account of the exclusion of homosexuality is critical in understanding gender in hitchhiking and must be further explored in future research. Whilst this paper utilizes a Butlerian theoretical lens, this is not the only one that can provide valuable insights for understanding gender in hitchhiking, or more generally gender in tourism. Using Butler's theory on gender performativity in understanding hitchhiking travel in China has its limitations, such as that it fails to facilitate theoretical exploration of the deep entanglement of social class with gender conflict (Wu and Dong, 2019), manifested in, for instance, the Chinese sexual economy (Zurndorfer, 2016). Therefore, further theoretical engagement, especially inspiration generated in Chinese feminist debates, can help to amplify tourism's contributions to the fierce theoretical discussions that are commonly found in gender and feminist studies, which Cohen and Cohen (2019) argue are still largely lacking in tourism gender research.

This paper departs from contradictory representations of female hitchhikers as victims and temptresses implicated in both past studies of hitchhiking in the West and narratives of hitchhiking in China's cyberspace. Nevertheless, the paper could not offer a comparison between gender relations in this Chinese context and those in Western contexts, as in previous studies of hitchhiking gender has not been critically investigated, despite its repeated acknowledgment as a significant factor. Furthermore, the emphasis on gendered subjectivities of female hitchhikers in this paper has inevitably led to a lack of attention towards those of male hitchhikers, as well as the dynamics of hitchhiking pairs/groups (c.f. Cai et al., 2019), the exploration of which can potentially reveal new understandings of the phenomenon and should be pursued in future research on hitchhiking travel.

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