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**Constructing Space and Self through Risk Taking – A Case of Asian Solo Female Travelers**

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## **Abstract**

In response to the increasingly risk-conscious environment in contemporary society, a growing body of literature has been dedicated to tourist risk perception. While risk is widely assumed to be a negative element in tourism, this perspective overlooks the fact that risk and tourist experience are intrinsically connected. This study takes a different approach by focusing on tourist risk-taking behavior, specifically, the risk perception and risk management of Asian solo female travelers, with an aim to contribute theoretical insights to the partial, conventional understanding of tourism risk. Located within a feminist framework, this study reveals how existing tourism space remains gendered and Western-dominated, how Asian women grapple with risks through various gendered spatial and bodily practices, and how negotiating risk is also a way to negotiate gender identities. A number of recommendations are provided for future research and for the tourism industry to foster a friendlier space for the *Others*.

## **Keywords**

Risk, solo female travelers, Asian tourism, feminist geography, constructivist grounded theory

## **Introduction**

Tourism is often perceived and staged as a pleasure undertaking. This characterization applies especially to leisure travel, which is voluntary recreation based on discretionary income and time. Therefore, tourism literature has generally assumed a rational tourist behavior where risk, often viewed as the antithesis of pleasure, is to be avoided (Williams and Baláž 2015). Nevertheless, corporeal travel requires people to move from a familiar physical and social space to an unfamiliar milieu, which implies inevitable uncertainty and risk to tourists' well-being.

Concerns about travel risk are further amplified in society, which manifests an increasingly risk-conscious institutional and social environment (Laurendeau 2008). Risk has so permeated daily life and popular discourse that contemporary society is dubbed the *risk society* (Beck 1992; Lupton 2013). Given the influence of risk on the travel industry, an increasing amount of research has been dedicated to tourist risk perception, with an aim of providing recommendations for the industry to measure, minimize, and manage risk (Karl 2016; Kozak, Crofts, and Law 2007; Sönmez and Graefe 1998). Many of these studies construe risk as an objective and real threat “out there” to be identified and subsequently prevented (Williams and Baláž 2015). In contrast, a handful of scholars have taken a different approach by recognizing the inextricable connection between risk and travel experience and the social construction nature of risk. This stream of research focuses on “anomalous” risk-taking behavior, mostly found in sex (Berdychevsky and Gibson 2015), adventure (Dickson and Dolnicar 2004), backpacking (Elsrud 2001; Reichel, Fuchs, and Uriely 2007), and solo female travel (Myers 2010).

Unaccompanied females have been subjected to the risks of unwanted attention and sexual harassment when traveling in the tourism space that privileges men's movement (Pritchard and Morgan 2000b; Wilson and Little 2008). While statistics of sexual harassment for leisure travel are unavailable, figures from the business travel segment reveal that the risk of sexual harassment for female business travelers is 5.6 times higher than that for men (Global Business Travel Association 2016). In the case of leisure travel, most women have been made aware of the presence of risk, as travel guidebooks and social media commonly offer safety tips for solo female travelers to avoid the "dangers" of dealing with men (Caesar 1999; Carlson 2015; Seward 2016; Wilson, Holdsworth, and Witsel 2009). The awareness of risk is further reinforced by frequent media reports of sexual assaults and murders of female travelers (Arsu and Goodman 2013; Cockburn 2016; Mohamad and Mustafa 2011). Despite this awareness of risk, some women undertake solo adventures in search of the sense of empowerment, autonomy, and freedom (Cockburn 2016; Jordan and Gibson 2005; Wilson and Harris 2006). This choice renders solo female travel a voluntary risk-taking endeavor to a certain extent (Elsrud 2001, Myers 2010). The distinctive nature of risk faced by solo female travelers and their risk-taking behavior provide the impetus for this study, which seeks to understand how these women perceive and manage the risks of traveling alone and why they take such risks in the first place.

While the few studies on solo female travelers have consistently recognized women's sense of insecurity (Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Wilson and Little 2008), little research in this area has conceptualized risk as an independent subject of investigation. More importantly, while the body of risk research in tourism is growing (Yang and Nair 2015) and a recent review by Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, and Arcodia (2017) reported that 70% of existing tourism

risk literature has identified gender differences in risk perception—for instance, several studies found that female travelers perceived a greater physical risk compared to males (Reichel et al. 2007; Park and Reisinger 2010), few studies have theorized risk from a feminist or gender perspective. This scarcity is not surprising given that the tourism risk subfield has been criticized for under-theorizing and as lacking in theoretical foundations (Korstanje 2009; Williams and Baláž 2015). In addition, because risk is a social construction, prior research has suggested that women from different cultural backgrounds may feel the nature and effect of risk differently (Gustafson 1998; Lupton 2013). Hence, what one cultural context considers risk may not be applicable to another (Green and Singleton 2006). In response to these gaps, this study explores the risk experience of Asian solo female travelers, with the aim of expanding existing literature on solo travel from risk and cultural perspectives and of contributing gendered and non-Western insights to risk research in tourism. The voices of Asian solo female travelers are almost absent from existing tourism literature, even though various industry reports have indicated the growing popularity of the Asian solo female travel market (Amadeus 2013; eGlobal Travel Media 2014; PATA 2016). Therefore, by exploring how Asian solo female travelers perceive and deal with risk, this study also offers timely recommendations for the tourism industry in catering to this emerging market.

In summary, this study explores the risk perception of Asian solo female travelers, analyzes their risk management strategies and spatial practices when navigating in the gendered tourism space, and investigates the implications of risk taking on women's lives. To achieve these objectives, constructivist grounded theory was employed to develop interpretive understandings of risk that are based on Asian women's lived experiences.

## **Situating the Research**

### *Gendered Risk in a Gendered Space*

Cultural and feminist geographers construe spaces and places as socio-cultural constructions rather than as mere physical areas (Pritchard and Morgan 2000a). Space consists of three layers. A social space is constructed within a physical space and is represented through symbolic spatial practices (LeFebvre 1991). Space is where “power, identity, meaning and behavior are constructed, negotiated and renegotiated according to socio-cultural dynamics” (Aitchison and Reeves 1998, 51). While this understanding of space is advocated in geography and leisure studies, it has received limited attention in tourism, where positivist and management research prevails (Pritchard et al. 2007). Only a few scholars who locate their work within a critical or feminist framework have conceptualized tourism space from a socio-cultural perspective (Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Pritchard and Morgan 2000a,b; Small 2016; Teo and Leong 2006). These scholars suggest that tourism space and landscape are gendered, sexualized, and racialized, particularly privileging the travel experiences of heterosexual Western men.

An investigation into the origin of tourism reveals that when the term “tourist” was developed in the mid-18th century (Graburn and Jafari 1991), it assumed a Western masculine undertaking that involved adventurous exploration in the less developed world, and often implied exotic sexual encounters with foreign women (Chambers 2010; Enloe 1989; Pritchard and Morgan 2000b). Before the 20th century, women’s participation in leisure travel was uncommon and was limited to those from the upper class (Chiang and Jogaratnam 2006; Jordan and Gibson 2005). Although women now account for almost half of the travel market and make 80% of the travel decisions (Bond 2015), the contemporary

tourism space is still subject to criticisms for being highly masculinized and imbued with sexual implications owing to the perceived liminality (Bui, Wilkins, and Lee 2014; Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Pritchard and Morgan 2000a,b; Small 2016; Teo and Leong 2006). This perspective is reflected in the widespread objectification and sexualization of women's bodies in tourism promotional materials (Pritchard and Morgan 2000b; Sirakaya and Sönmez 2000; Small, Harris, and Wilson 2008) as well as in women's perception and consumption of tourism space (Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Wilson and Little 2008). In particular, prior research has found that female tourists identified certain tourism places to be avoided to prevent risks, which in many cases are associated with women's bodies and range from unsolicited gaze to sexual assault (Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Wilson, Holdsworth, and Witsel 2009; Wilson and Little 2008). Valentine (1989, 385) aptly termed women's inhibited spatial and temporal practices as the "geography of women's fear." In the event of negative incidents, society frequently holds women responsible for crossing into the "unsafe" spatial and temporal territory (Wilson, Holdsworth, and Witsel 2009). This understanding of the gendered tourism space where women's mobility is restricted contests other common interpretations of tourism space as a *heterotopia* (Foucault 1984), a potential site for empowerment where gender norms can be transgressed (Small 2016; Zhang and Hitchcock 2014), or a *liminoid* space (Turner 1969), where social expectations, including gender norms, are temporarily vacated (Aitchison 2005; Graburn 2004; Mura 2010). As far as Asian women are concerned, this perspective adds further ramifications to the conceptualization of tourism space because until recently, tourism has been dominated by Western travel traditions and consciousness (Chambers 2010; Teo and Leong 2006). Therefore, when Asian women venture into this presumed gendered and racialized space, they risk being not only sexualized but also marginalized.



### *Negotiate Risk, Negotiate Gender*

While risk, fear, and danger are familiar concepts in the literature of solo female travelers (Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Wilson and Little 2005, 2008), few studies have conceptualized the risk perception and voluntary risk-taking behavior of these travelers. Risk perception is an individual's subjective assessment of the real risk (i.e. the possible negative outcomes and their likelihood to occur) (Fuchs and Reichel 2011) while voluntary risk taking is a response to the perceived risk where individuals choose to participate in an activity despite being aware of the presence of risk (Uriely and Belhassen 2006). Existing risk literature has mainly focused on risk identification and measurement, determinants of risk perception and its (mostly negative) impact on travel decision, and risk management (see Yang and Nair 2015 for an exhaustive list of literature for each theme). Relatively few studies have contributed an in-depth and socially informed understanding of tourists' voluntary risk-taking behavior (Elsrud 2001; Uriely and Belhassen 2006). This stream of literature suggests that risk taking in the liminal tourism space is a form of "emancipatory practice of rejecting dogmatic traditions" (Elsrud 2001, 614), a viewpoint that is shared and further expanded by scholars in the domain of edgework (i.e. voluntary risk taking) who have provided frameworks instrumental in understanding risk taking in contemporary society (Lyng 1990, 2005) as well as its connection with gender (Laurendeau 2008; Olstead 2011). These frameworks may shed light on the research of solo female travelers.

Edgework was initially conceptualized as an escape for individuals from the social constraints of the increasingly institutionalized society in the post-industrialized world (Lyng 1990). This theory was later revised to consider voluntary risk taking as a process of resisting and reconstructing social conditions rather than as a reactive response (Lyng 2005). Through

this process, individuals discover and (re)construct their identities, including gender identities (Laurendeau 2008; Olstead 2011). This stream of research suggests that both risk and gender are active social constructions that intersect in construction of the risk experience, and that society perceives women's and men's risk-taking behavior differently. In general, women's risk-taking behavior is more likely to be negatively evaluated than men's, because risk taking is associated with the construction of masculinity, whereas risk management is a desirable value of femininity (Laurendeau 2008; Lozanski 2015; Olstead 2011). This social understanding of risk and gender is the basis for a framework of the *gendered risk regime*, which demonstrates that “the ways people ‘do’ risk are also—and simultaneously, and always already—ways that they negotiate gender” (Laurendeau 2008, 304). Risk taking thus provides an avenue for women to (re)construct and negotiate gender identities and to resist and challenge social expectations. The gendered risk regime emphasizes that risk and gender are actively constructed by individual agency, the social structure within which individuals are located, and cultural frameworks that shape values, meanings, and subjectivities (Laurendeau 2008). Within this regime, social structures and cultural frameworks influence, but not necessarily determine, individual gender-risk performances. While individuals have the agency to interpret, resist, and negotiate socially constructed risk and gender, their embedded cultural background mediates their interpretations and responses (Williams and Baláž 2015).

The literature has indicated two gender frameworks for investigating the risk experiences of solo female travelers. First, drawing on feminist geography, gendered travel risk can be conceptualized as a spatial representation of patriarchy underlying the gendered tourism space. Second, the risk practice of solo female travelers can be analyzed against the gendered

risk regime derived from the edgework literature. This latter approach focuses on how women perceive and negotiate risk, and how risk taking shapes not only their gender identities but also the social and cultural construction of risk and gender. These frameworks provide a theoretical point of departure for interpreting the lived experiences of Asian solo female travelers. However, the readings of Asian women's experiences are not bounded by these frameworks in this grounded theory study.

## **Methodology**

### ***Constructivist Grounded Theory***

Solo travel experiences of Asian women were collected and analyzed using a constructivist version of grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). In contrast to classic grounded theory, which is characterized by a positivistic outlook with rigid guidelines (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998), this interpretive approach acknowledges the existence of multiple socially constructed realities, and values knowledge that is situated and context-specific (Charmaz 2014). Therefore, the main purpose of constructivist grounded theory is to generate interpretive understandings of an under-researched social phenomenon rather than to claim an objective and generalizable theory. In line with this understanding, the data were collected and analyzed by the first author, who is a solo female traveler from Malaysia with Chinese heritage and has lived in Taiwan for 5 years and Australia for 3 years. The cultural background, travel experience, and gender of the primary researcher equip her with an “insider’s understanding of the studied world” (Charmaz 2014, 36) to develop interpretive, situated knowledge of Asian solo female travelers. In particular, her experience of living abroad has allowed her to understand the gendered travel experiences through multiple cultural lenses, specifically Confucian (Taiwan), Islamic (Malaysia), and Western (Australia) feminist perspectives. Her interpretation of the findings was cross-checked by the co-authors, who are a Malaysian Chinese female who is an experienced gender researcher and an Australian male who is an expert in Confucian studies. The expertise, cultural background, and gender of the co-authors have ensured a critical and credible interpretation of the data.

### ***Data Collection***

As in most grounded theory research, the data collection and analysis formed an iterative process (Charmaz 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The direction of further data collection was determined by concepts derived from existing data through theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2008). In this study, the data collection comprised two phases of semi-structured in-depth interviews, with field work in between. After collecting and analyzing 10 interviews, the researcher organized a field trip to Thailand to conduct on-site interviews and participant observation—the field site selection was informed by preliminary findings indicating that Thailand is a popular solo travel destination for Asian women. Through active participant observation (Spradley 2016), the researcher experienced, perceived, and negotiated the risks affecting Asian solo female travelers in an actual tourism setting, gaining experience that enabled her to see things from the participants' perspective. The findings that emerged from the field work served as the basis for additional interviews. This process was concluded at 35 interviews, when additional interviews were found to contribute limited new theoretical insights or properties to the emerged findings. In other words, data collection ceased when theoretical saturation was achieved (Charmaz 2014). As Table 1 shows, the 35 interviewees came from 10 East and Southeast Asian countries or societies, and their solo travel left footprints across the globe, from Asia to Europe, America, and Oceania. Some participants were recruited from advertisements posted on online travel forums and social media platforms while others were referred by existing participants. For interviews conducted during the field work, potential participants were approached in backpacker hostels. Those who qualified as participants were Asian females with at least one solo travel experience.

Insert Table 1 about here.

As the researcher is based in Australia but the targeted travelers were women from Asia, online Skype interviews were used alongside face-to-face conversation to reach otherwise inaccessible participants. Past studies have reported no difference in terms of the quality of data yielded between face-to-face and Skype interviews (Deakin and Wakefield 2013; Hanna 2012), because of the visual and synchronous features of online conferencing tools (O'Connor et al. 2008). Resonating with this claim, this study identified no significant variations in the quality of data collected using the two methods. A key success factor was to advise the participants at the recruitment stage that they were required to be in a quiet place with a stable network connection for the interview. Most participants live in East and Southeast Asia and hence, there was no major time difference (around two to four hours of difference). The online conversations felt more relaxed, probably because they were conducted at the participants' home in their spare time. The most disastrous issue we had with the online interview was when the external Skype recording software stopped working in one of the interviews. The interviewer typed out detailed notes immediately after the interview to rectify the situation and had since then used a physical recorder in addition to a second recording software to prevent a similar incident.

### ***Data Analysis***

The interviews lasted 1.5 hours on average and yielded 48.3 hours of recordings, which were transcribed verbatim. Nearly 80% or 27 out of 35 interviews were conducted in English, five were conducted in Mandarin, and the remaining three (two Japanese and one Vietnamese) involved interpreters. The Mandarin interviews were transcribed and translated by the

primary researcher/interviewer who is proficient in both Mandarin (native) and English. Original words were kept in a few cases where there was no adequate English word to fully express certain concepts in Mandarin. Translation is essentially an interpretive act (van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, and Deeg 2010). To ensure an appropriate interpretation of the participants' experiences, the interviewer sought frequent confirmation of her interpretations during the interviews and made follow-up contacts with the participants for further clarification when necessary. For the three interviews assisted by interpreters, the data were mainly used for verifying and expanding the emerged findings rather than for quoting. Unlike prior literature which recommends analyzing the data in the original language (Smith, Chen, and Liu 2008; van Nes et al. 2010), this grounded theory study opted to analyze the translated text to enable effective *constant comparison* (Charmaz 2014; Corbin and Strauss 2008) within and across interviews.

In contrast to the stringent coding procedure advocated by classic grounded theorists (Goulding 2005), this study followed Charmaz's (2014) guidelines for a flexible approach. The analytical process was initiated by line-by-line *initial coding*. When appropriate, rather than forcing the data into preconceived theoretical concepts, *in vivo codes* were used to more accurately represent the participant's view. This study discarded the traditional *axial coding* that uses a predefined scheme to organize the relationships, properties, and dimensions of codes and categories. Rather, *focused coding* was employed, where the most prominent and recurrent codes were selected to synthesize larger segments of data. The researcher took detailed notes not only during the field observation but throughout the whole course of data collection so as to be aware of her influence in interpreting the data and in abstracting theoretical concepts. The practice of memo-taking is in accordance with constructivist

grounded theory, in that instead of distancing the researcher from the researched, it attends to the researcher's reflexivity (Charmaz 2014). Emphasis on narratives is another important feature that distinguishes constructivist grounded theory from the preceding versions (Charmaz 2014). Instead of speaking for the participants, this study gave voices to these women by presenting the findings in their own words. The following section reports and discusses how these Asian women perceive and manage the risks of traveling alone, and describes the implications that underlie Asian women's risk-taking behavior.



## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***The “Gendered and Cultured” Perception of Risk***

All participants acknowledged that traveling alone involves a certain amount of risk. When asked what form of risk concerned them the most, the participants unanimously pointed to gender-induced risk, ranging from unwanted gaze to “being approached by men” (Risa), and to “being sexually harassed in some way, yeah or rape” (Esther). Eka lamented that because she is a girl, she is more vulnerable to sexual risk: “I mean I am a girl, if they want to do anything to me.” This view was shared by Narisa, who felt that some men “try to get in my pants because I’m a lone woman traveling.” Li even suggested, “As a female that is the thing [sexual harassment] you will definitely go through when you travel alone.” The participants’ perceptions and narratives of powerlessness regarding the seemingly inevitable sexual risk support the notion of the gendered tourism space (Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Pritchard and Morgan 2000a,b), where women’s mobility is restricted by socially instilled fear and their bodies are subject to surveillance through “the leering eyes of men” (Shani).

A few scholars have conceptualized risk as a social and cultural construction (Elsrud 2001; Green and Singleton 2006; Gustafson 1998; Laurendeau 2008). Adding to this stream of literature, this study offers evidence of the effect of Asian cultures on women’s perception of sexual risk. For instance, Thien recounted how difficult it was for her mother to accept her solo travel decision because of the risk involved: “She [Thien’s mother] just cried. She said, ‘how can you do that? You are a girl, how can you do that?’” Thien later explained the social consequence of sexual assault in her home society: “Vietnamese people are really worried about the social opinion, the public opinion. So if I get anything, like sexual abuse, it’s not a good thing because the family will get the bad thing [social judgment].” Social judgment is

especially relevant in patriarchal Asian societies where female chastity is valued (Lee et al. 2005; Reid and Bing 2000). In these collective societies, women's behavior is scrutinized by the community and any nonconformity is likely to affect not only women's personal reputation but also their family's honor. As a result, Tracy, who remained true to traditional Asian thinking that had been instilled by her mother, believed that "rape is what I fear the most because it's irreversible and it's worse than being murdered." Tracy and Thien's accounts demonstrate how women's risk perception is amplified by cultural values and their accompanying gender expectations.

Another risk that is exclusively relevant to the solo travel experience of Asian women is the risk of being discriminated against or receiving unfriendly treatment: "I think discrimination is a kind of risk. Because I am Asian, people got a lot of stereotype. I still can feel it even though people didn't say it to me, but their behavior, I can feel [it]" (Jia). This type of risk was perceived in both Western and Asian destinations. Phi observed a paradoxical treatment of Western and Asian travelers: "I'm Asian. It would be harder for me to travel to, like Europe, because I may not [be] as welcomed as you know, white people . . . Western women would be more welcomed when they travel to Asia." This view was shared by Nurul: "I think it is not easy for Asian women to travel alone in a Southeast Asian country where the local people love Western people more compared to the Asian people themselves. They have like a double standard sometimes." The ways these women perceive the risk of discrimination suggest a multidimensional *othering* in these cross-cultural encounters with Jia and Phi contrasting the Asian self from non-Asian *others* while Nurul felt being marginalized or *othered* by Asian hosts. Nurul's opinion further implies another layer of risk when culture/Asian ethnicity intersects gender/women. This view was supported by a few other

participants: “Some men think that Asian women are weak . . . easy. . . Western women are tough, too tough for the local men” (Siti); “I don't think they will make jokes on the Western female . . . But because I am Asian, they will do this to me” (Tracy).

### ***The “Omnipresent” Geography of Risk***

The notion of the geography of women’s fear (Valentine 1989) has been applied in research on Western solo female travelers (Wilson and Little 2008). The current grounded theory study extends the idea of a restricted geographical boundary of women’s mobility, but from a risk and Asian perspective. For instance, Europe was not identified as a destination of concern in a study based solely on Western solo female travelers (Wilson and Little 2008), but in the present study it emerged strongly as a risk-affected region for Asian solo female travelers.

According to the participants, the risks of solo travel exist in a wide array of destinations and places to an extent that Eka, Li, and Nurul lamented, “risk is everywhere.” This study identified 21 countries and regions as unsafe. In particular, Europe, Africa, South Asia and the Middle-East were labeled as high-risk destinations. Reasons included patriarchal societies where “they don't respect females” (Rui); cultural stereotypes in Europe, where Asian women were perceived as “free chicks” (Tracy); high crime rates as reported in the news: “because you know that's a lot of media reports on females being unsafe, you know, in India . . . as in the number of sexual assaults, rapes” (Shani); and political instability, especially in “places that have war going on” (Yuri). The unsafe destination image is augmented by the experiences shared by other travelers as well as the advice from locals: “So my African

friends, they told me, you look very different if you go there. . . . They kind of say, women is really dangerous, you know you might have problems like rape” (Akiko).

Within a destination, the participants identified a number of places and times that were perceived as having strong risk, or in some cases where unfortunate incidents took place. These places include streets, tourist attractions, entertainment venues, public transportation, and both paid and non-paid accommodation. While most participants agreed that they perceived greater risks in the evening when moving around at the destination, some participants suggested that other times of the day could be risky as well. As Aishah put it, “There is no timing.” Table 2 summarizes the spatial and temporal distribution of risks at a local level.

Insert Table 2 about here.

While adding to Wilson and Little’s (2008) list of unsafe places, the findings challenge their idea of a “safety sphere” that shelters main tourist centers, as the participants in this study identified risk and reported being harassed at various tourist attractions which fall within that so-claimed safety sphere. The discrepancies between the current study and prior research amplify the notions of the social construction of both risk (Elsrud 2001; Green and Singleton 2006; Gustafson 1998; Laurendeau 2008) and space (Aitchison and Reeves 1998; LeFebvre 1991). This study further reveals the omnipresence of risk across physical, social, and temporal tourism spaces. This perception of pervasive risk resonates with Beck’s (1992) claim of the risk society.

### *The Management of Risk: Mitigation and Acceptance*

The discussion has thus far shown that these solo female travelers are aware of the omnipresence of risk. However, rather than avoiding solo travel, the participants mitigate risk by adjusting their spatial practices and body representations and by safeguarding themselves with a number of artefacts.

Participants' most common risk mitigation strategy is the strategic use of space, including temporal space. Most participants circumvented destinations they perceived as unsafe: "as a girl, a female Muslim, I need to find a place that is safe for me to travel alone" (Nurul). This spatial strategy is manifested in the participants' travel profiles in Table 1, which show that most participants had avoided regions (e.g., the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia) that they associated with the risks of war, political instability, and women's safety in a patriarchal society. While Europe was widely identified as a region with high risks of discrimination, stereotyping, and unfriendly treatment, a third of the participants were unconcerned about visiting Europe. This lack of apprehension may be explained by the type of risk and the severity of the perceived consequences. Narisa and Chun, who encountered direct verbal discrimination, simply left the hostile space to mitigate the risk before it turned into something more severe.

A majority of the participants professed that they would also avoid isolated places and would not go out at night. According to Esther, "isolated is like those streets and back alleys that has nobody, because if something happen to you, you scream out, nobody's gonna hear you." Siti commented, "It's like unsafe, there are many naughty men . . . avoid traveling alone during night time." Although the participants' avoidance of remote areas and evening

activities is in line with prior research (Wilson, Holdsworth, and Witsel 2009; Wilson and Little 2008), this study reveals that the avoidance of entertainment venues is another risk mitigation strategy for Asian women traveling alone: “To protect myself . . . common sense things. I don't go to the bar” (Eka); “I don't go party by myself, I mean, hello, are you crazy?” (Esther). Jia explained, “If I am traveling alone just by myself, there's nobody can take care of me, and also, there's much more chances for girl being doped.” Several participants pointed out that they have no interest in nightlife and drinking, which they associated with Western culture. The participants’ spatial strategies can be summarized with Narisa’s words: “Don’t be at the wrong time and place then I would be safe.” Nevertheless, the question of which time and place are considered “wrong” is highly subjective, gendered, and culturally bounded. This question is further complicated by the perception of omnipresent risk.

Another prevalent risk mitigation strategy is associated with the representations of body, where the participants dressed down and hid their bodies in order to negotiate their access to the gendered tourism space: “I just tried to hide my skin . . . and no makeup. But in Korea, I never went out with no makeup, always wear dress. But when I travel, I just pretend like a beggar” (Choi); “When I travel alone, I try to make my dress looks not too sexy. It’s like I don’t want to give the opportunity to men like they will have some intentions” (Yee). Only two participants (Tracy and Jia) explicitly stated that they were not concerned about exposing their bodies. The dressing strategies of the majority of the participants accord with the safety advice commonly found in travel guidebooks, where women are told to “dress sensibly and ‘morally’, to avoid danger” (Wilson, Holdsworth, and Witsel 2009, 8). Some participants went further to hide their femininity. Siti wore “not girly clothes, it’s kind of boyish,” and Esther tried to look “very butch, very unfeminine.” The ways these participants modified

their appearance reveal the body politics and embodied power relations that pervade contemporary tourism space (Pettman 1997; Pritchard and Morgan 2000b). As indicated in prior research, in contrast to the active men's bodies that can wander freely in this space, women's bodies are regarded as passive objects of desire that are subject to male gaze (Pettman 1997).

The modified representations of women's bodies are extended through the artefacts the women carried to protect themselves. Numerous participants believed that women should take care of their own safety since it is their choice to travel alone and expose themselves to risk: "When you decided to travel [alone] in certain country, it's a duty and responsibility for you to handle all of the risk" (Binh). This perception that women hold the responsibility has been widely discussed in the literature (Grubb and Harrower 2008; Wilson, Holdsworth, and Witsel 2009). Asians were reported to hold this perception more strongly than Westerners because of their need to resist the assumption that Asian women are not capable of traveling alone. This notion of resistance will be detailed in the next section but it is because of this belief that many participants protect themselves by carrying artefacts such as a fake wedding band (Tracy), homemade pepper spray (Thien), bell or whistle (Qi and Yue), Swiss army knife (Tracy), and cigarette: "I don't smoke, but I always lighted up a cigarette when walking alone in dodgy street. If a bad guy comes near me, I can stick that cigarette into his eyes" (Esther).

Despite these mitigation strategies, some participants acknowledged that risk cannot be completely eliminated, and they accepted risk as an unavoidable element of the solo travel experience: "Risk is part of the essence of traveling alone. . . . You can't avoid it [risk] at all"

(Risa); “You accept everything dangerous might come to you. . . . You just go, you don't worry” (Thien). Some participants prepared for the adventure with the mindset of “if you're going to die you're going to die” while others rationalized risk taking as “simply a necessity” (Tracy) and “would take the risk in order to go out to see the world” (Aranya).

### ***The Meanings of Risk Taking: Constructing Self and Gender Identities***

Since the participants were aware of the risk of traveling alone and accepted risk as part of the experience, this study also examined how risk taking has influenced these women's lives. Many participants indicated that risk taking is not a desirable undertaking for Asian women, who are expected to be dependent and domesticated. These gender expectations are in line with prior literature (Schröter 2013; Tang and Tang 2001) in suggesting an image of Asian women as fearful (Yee, Aishah, Thien, and Tam), weak (Tracy, Binh, Phi, and Ting), and obedient (Akiko, Eka, Katsumi, Risa, and Shani)—an image that is opposite to that of independent solo travelers or adventurous risk takers. As a result, most of these solo female travelers have encountered disapproving responses from their friends and family. Typical comments were “Are you crazy?” (Choi, Narisa, Aishah, Ting, and Wen) and “Why do you want to do that?” (Choi, Mei, Tracy, and Thien). Asian women who challenged social expectations by embracing solo travel were often perceived as different by their home societies: “As Japanese woman, obviously I don't fit in to their expectation” (Katsumi). This *othering* process of being contrasted with other women of their cultural groups extended to the differentiating perception of the self (Essers and Tedmanson 2014). Yue aptly commented, “I guess I'm a little bit different, but I doubt I'm the only one.” Her observation was supported by many participants.



Insert Table 3 about here.

The accounts presented in Table 3 demonstrate varying degrees of *self-othering*, from not seeing self as too different though doing uncommon things, to distancing self from the typical image, to becoming different, and to actively wanting to make a difference. Interestingly, several participants associated more strongly with a masculine identity: “I don't think I'm a normal girl because I'm like a boy. I always think I am a boy” (Tracy). This perception of a transcended self and gender identity was shared by Jia: “I am like a boy. My family, they want me settle down as soon as possible but I don't want . . . They are kind of like disappointing with me. They said, you don't have anything like Chinese [women].” While some of these variations in self and gender identities can be attributed to individual personalities and upbringing, many participants attested that solo travel had been a transformative and self-discovering experience, through which they gained self-confidence and became more independent and courageous. These newly acquired qualities run counter to the social expectations of Asian femininities detailed earlier. Resonating with Laurendeau's (2008) notion of the gendered risk regime, this finding demonstrates how participants reconstructed and transformed their self and gender identities through taking and negotiating the risk of traveling alone.

## Implications and Conclusions

This study explores the risk perceptions and response strategies of Asian women who traveled alone and the meanings of risk taking in these women's lives. Consistent with prior research on Western solo female travelers (Jordan and Aitchison 2008; Wilson, Holdsworth, and Witsel 2009; Wilson and Little 2008), Asian participants identified sexual risk as a main concern. Nevertheless, the social consequence of this risk appears to have been amplified in their lives through the influence of traditional cultural values regarding chastity (Lee et al. 2005). This study extends the literature by revealing discrimination, including unfriendly treatment, as another type of risk experienced by these Asian travelers. This risk is rarely mentioned in the Western-focused tourism literature. The Western centrism in tourism is arguably a form of neo-colonialism (Chambers 2010; Teo and Leong 2006; Winter 2009), where the experiences of Western male travelers are privileged whereas experiences of *others* are marginalized (Aitchison 2001). While sexual harassment/assault and discrimination have emerged as the two most prominent types of risk affecting the solo travel experiences of Asian women, it is important to recognize that the intensity of the perception of these risks vary among the participants, depending on their past travel experiences and the socio-cultural conditions (e.g. development status, crime rate, and emphasis on traditional values) in their home countries. Further research is warranted to thoroughly explore the determinants and the complex relationships between these determinants in shaping Asian women's risk perception.

Expanding on the notion of the geography of women's fear (Valentine 1989), this study identified a number of physical and temporal spaces where risk was perceived to prevail by Asian solo female travelers. Some of these spaces and places (e.g. Europe and tourist attractions) were not mentioned in prior literature focusing solely on the solo travel

experiences of Western women (Wilson and Little 2008). To negotiate access into the seemingly restricted geographical boundary, the participants adopted various strategies, which included avoiding certain destinations, places and times, dressing down and carrying protection tools, and rationalizing risk taking. The ways these Asian solo female travelers dealt with risk demonstrates how, through gendered and embodied spatial practices, they constructed a “safe” space within a physical tourism space (LeFebvre 1991). While striving to construct a safe space, many participants also accepted risk as part of the solo travel experience. This finding corroborates prior research that suggests that solo female travel is a voluntary risk-taking endeavor (Elsrud 2001; Myers 2010).

In fact, risk taking has become increasingly common in contemporary society where the discourse regarding risk is ubiquitous (Beck 1992). Risk taking provides individuals with a means of escaping and even challenging or reconstructing social conditions (Lyng 1990, 2005) and in this study, the Asian gender norms. Many participants took the risk of social disapproval to travel alone, an undertaking that is perceived by some Asian societies to be inappropriate for women. The risk of being discredited by one’s home society or gaining a negative social image has been mentioned in prior studies concerning backpacking (Reichel et al. 2007) and tourist substance use (Uriely and Belhassen 2006), where the impact of this social risk is mainly associated with future career success. This study contributes a gendered understanding to this stream of research by demonstrating how the participants negotiate their gender and self-identities through taking the social risk. In particular, many participants perceived themselves as different from the social expectations of Asian women. A few participants even associated more strongly with a masculine and non-Asian identity because risk taking was understood as a Western, male undertaking. Resonating with the gendered

risk regime (Laurendeau 2008), by negotiating risk, these Asian women were also negotiating their gender identities. This study extends the existing gendered risk regime by adding a cultural dimension as it demonstrates how risk taking through solo travel is not only gendered but also a behavior that is perceived to be dominated by Western consciousness. In brief, this study reveals that the mobility of Asian solo female travelers was restricted by the gendered and racialized tourism space and yet, by taking the risk to challenge this restriction and to construct a “safe” space for travel, these women were at the same time reconstructing the self.

The findings of this study may cast light on the tourism industry in catering to the rising solo female travel market in Asia (PATA 2016). The risk management strategies discussed thus far imply that the responsibility of Asian women’s safety is mainly theirs. While several hotels in North America and Europe have introduced women-friendly floors (Enelow 2016; Maiden Voyage 2014), this practice may have limited effectiveness because, as this study shows, risk is perceived in a wide array of places within a destination and well beyond the hotel walls. In addition, many female-friendly packages that are offered in the hospitality industry highlight the feminine extras (e.g., makeup amenities, full-body mirrors, and shower bench for leg-shaving). These practices have been criticized for reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and failing to recognize that women do not form a homogenous group (Enelow 2016). Indeed, these stereotypical extras might not particularly enhance the solo travel experience of Asian women, who need to deal with the risk of unfriendly treatment on top of the safety risk. Tourism practitioners, destination managers, and local governments who genuinely want to cater to the female and non-Western travel markets need to think beyond these marketing perks and consider more deeply and appropriately the prioritized needs of

these travelers, and ensure an equal space for everyone without privileging the experience of certain groups of travelers and marginalizing that of *others*. Attainable strategies that can be implemented by any scales of tourism and hospitality organizations include organizing evening group tours that enable women's mobility at night and providing female travelers a local sim card with hotel and local emergency contacts. Larger organizations with more resources can consider developing multi-lingual mobile applications that allow travelers to share safety advice, identify hazardous areas, update their locations in real time, and seek help when in danger. These applications will also collect important data (e.g., destination-specific risks, high-risk spots, and demography of travelers who are likely to be affected) that can assist destination managers and local authorities in making informed decisions when planning and constructing a safe tourism space. For destinations where greater risks of discrimination (e.g., differentiated service and unfriendly attitude) prevail, local governments and tourism councils can organize campaigns and training of tourism operators to raise the awareness of cultural sensitivity and foster a friendly destination climate. The above strategies will also demonstrate the tourism industry's efforts to be responsive to the needs and concerns of the female and non-Western travel market.

Located within a feminist analysis of the risk experiences of Asian solo female travelers, this study has revealed how existing tourism spaces remain gendered and Western-dominated, as reflected in the participants' concerns about sexual and cultural risks and their spatial strategies in responding to these risks. This interpretive research was grounded on the lived experiences of 35 Asian women who traveled alone, and the travel accounts reported in this study were a co-construction between the primary researcher and the participants. While the researcher was committed to a reflexive research practice, the interpretation of the

participants' experiences is highly subjective and value-laden and hence, the findings are not meant to be generalized. It is also important to acknowledge that the participants referred to other types of risk, such as the risk of kidnapping, scam, theft, and getting lost. Because these risks emerged less strongly, they are not detailed in the current study. This study was not intended to formulate a comprehensive strategy for solo female travelers to deal with risk, as advising women where not to go and what not to wear is in essence a way of disempowering them (Wilson, Holdsworth, and Witsel 2009). Rather, this study was aimed at examining the risk management practices of Asian solo female travelers and, on the basis of that examination, to raise a series of questions for future research and for the tourism industry. Some of these questions include: Why is sexual risk considered "the thing you will definitely go through" for Asian solo female travelers? Why do women believe that it is their responsibility to deal with the gendered risk? How else can the industry neutralize the tourism space and make it friendlier and more accessible to ensure a positive experience for female travelers from the emerging markets? While a positive effect of risk taking on gender constructions has been observed, pressing needs remain to raise awareness of the gendered and racialized tourism space and to shift the responsibilities of victimization from women to society at large and the tourism industry in particular.

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**Table1.** Profiles of the Research Participants.

Nationality	Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Destinations (Solo Travel)
China	Rui	25	In a relationship	China, Korea
	Jing	26	Single	Australia, China, Fiji, New Zealand, Tibet
	Ting	28	Single	Australia, China
	Chun	29	Single	New Zealand
	Yue	29	Single	Denmark, Germany, New Zealand
	Pei	31	Single	Australia, France, Malaysia, Singapore, Spain, Turkey
Taiwan	Cheryl	23	Single	Malaysia, Singapore
	Qi	26	Single	China, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore
	Zhang	26	Single	Australia, Malaysia, Singapore
	Yee	44	Single	France, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam
Hong Kong	Wen	22	Single	Thailand
	Trista	23	In a relationship	Iran, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Turkey
Japan	Katsumi	26	Single	Australia, Japan, Ireland, New Zealand
	Risa	27	In a relationship	France, Germany
	Akiko	28	Single	Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan
	Yuri	29	In a relationship	Japan, Hawaii, US
	Sayo	35	Married	Cambodia, Thailand
Korea	Choi	23	Single	France, Japan, Malaysia, UK
	Kim	33	Single	Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Vietnam, Thailand
Malaysia	Li	25	Single	Malaysia
	Nurul	26	Single	Laos, Thailand, Vietnam
	Fen	26	Single	Malaysia, Thailand
	Mei	31	Single	Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand
	Ning	32	In a relationship	Bulgaria, France, Laos, Indonesia, Italy, Malaysia, Myanmar, Netherlands, Romania, Thai, Turkey, Vietnam, UK

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Singapore	Aishah	27	In a relationship, 1 child	Thailand
	Ester	45	Divorced	Australia, Cambodia, France, Hong Kong, Korea, Thailand, Spain, Malaysia, UK
	Shani	49	Married, 2 children	Bhutan, Sri Lanka
Indonesia	Siti	28	Single	Malaysia, Thailand
	Eka	30	Married, 1 child	Czech, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Morocco, Spain
Thailand	Narisa	30	Single	Egypt, France, Pakistan, Singapore, UK
	Aranya	31	Single	Laos, Thailand
Vietnam	Binh	21	Single	Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam
	Phi	24	In a relationship	Cambodia, Vietnam,
	Thien	25	In a relationship	Cambodia, Vietnam,
	Tam	36	Single	Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand

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**Table 2.** The Geography of Risk as Perceived by Asian Solo Female Travelers.

Types of Spaces	Examples of Places	Participants
Public space	Pub or nightclub	Akiko, Aishah, Aranya, Rui, Kim, Yee, Fen, Thien, Ting
	Isolated/remote areas	Kim, Binh, Esther, Risa, Ning, Tam
	Open streets	Eka, Esther, Ting, Yue, Yuri
	Side streets or dark alleys	Eka, Fen, Katsumi, Qi, Narisa
	Parks	Chun, Binh
	Tourist attractions	Tracy, Yee
	Markets	Eka, Narisa
Public transportation	Train or bus stations	Esther, Thien, Kim, Ning
	<i>Tuktuk</i> or auto rickshaw	Fen, Siti, Tracy
	Buses	Cheryl, Nurul, Li
	Trains	Eka, Esther
	Taxis	Sayo, Choi
	Ferries	Pei
Private space	Mixed dorm in hostels	Jia, Cheryl, Choi, Qi, Yue, Katsumi, Ting
	Strangers' cars when hitchhiking	Akiko, Eka, Ning, Thien, Tracy Tracy, Qi
	Homes of couchsurfing hosts	
Temporal space	Night time	Choi, Eka, Esther, Fen and 20 other travelers
	Day time	Pei, Yuri
	Any time	Aishah, Narisa

**Table 3.** The Levels of *Self-othering*.

Levels of <i>Self-othering</i>	Quotes from Participants
Perceiving self as not too different	I don't think that I am different but I just do a little bit extraordinary thing . . . something that is not common for other Malay girls (Nurul)
Distancing self	I don't think I'm a very typical Malaysian (Mei)
Becoming different	I have become more of a rather different from the traditional (Aranya)
Wanting to make a difference	My parents and friends [said], "Don't travel alone, it's no good for young lady." . . . A lot of Chinese people think traveling alone is no good . . . I want to make a difference (Ting)