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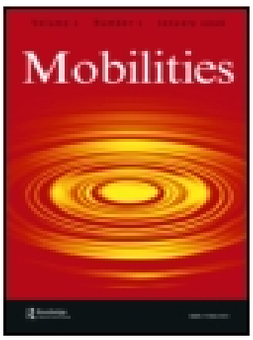

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ARTICLE

Anxious immobilities: an ethnography of coping with contagion (Covid-19) in Macau

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ABSTRACT

In February 2020, Macau became one of the first regions where the pandemic of coronavirus or Covid-19 affected the totality of social and economic life leading to increased anxieties over movement and distance. Although Macau has had very few actual cases of the virus – 46 in total – and no deaths from it, the Macau government rapidly instituted a lockdown. The aim of this article is to reflect on how the social experience of being in lockdown can provide insights into understanding the type of experience or condition that we provisionally term 'anxious immobility.' Such a condition is characterized by a total disruption of everyday rhythms and specifically anxious waiting for the normalization of activity while being the subject of biosocial narratives of quarantine and socially responsible. The paper is based upon 3 months of ethnographic research conducted by two researchers based in Macau. We also reflect upon some aspects of the politics of mobilities in the light of disruptions and friction points between Hong Kong, Macau, mainland China, and the rest of the world.

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Introduction

> *The bus driver is coughing repeatedly. A woman sitting in the front of the bus stands up and goes in the back of the bus. She holds to the handrail with a tissue in her hand. The videos on the screen are showing gymnastic exercises one can do at home, instructions how to put on a mask correctly and how to wash hands. The written instructions in the bus also suggest not to assemble, to check one's temperature regularly and not to go across the border from Macau. Entry into the bus is only allowed if one is wearing a mask. It is rare to have empty seats on a public bus in Macau, as one often has to struggle even to get inside. But this is a very different time in Macau in February 2020 and the bus is nearly empty.* (Author's ethnographic diary February 2020.)

In February 2020, Macau was one of the first regions where the pandemic of coronavirus or Covid-19 affected the totality of social and economic life leading to increased anxieties over movement and distance. Although Macau has had very few actual cases of the virus – 41 in total – and no deaths from it, the Macau government rapidly instituted a lockdown. Anxiety in this respect is demonstrated in the vignette on public bus above and the general obedience of people that could be observed not to assemble, to stay at home, and avoiding meetings or gatherings in public places, including transport, shops, and restaurants. The aim of this article is to reflect on how the social experience

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of being in lockdown can provide insights into understanding the type of experience or condition that we provisionally term 'anxious immobility.' Such a condition is characterized by a total disruption of everyday rhythms and specifically anxious waiting for the normalization of activity while being the subject of biosocial narratives of quarantine and social responsibility of remaining immobile. The paper is based upon 3 months of ethnographic research conducted by two (male) researchers based in Macau. The first author speaks Mandarin, English, and Portuguese while the second author speaks only English. Through our ethnographic research (January–April 2020) we also aim to reflect upon some aspects of the politics of mobilities in the light of disruptions and friction points between Hong Kong, Macau, mainland China, and the rest of the world.

Macau is a special administrative region of China that borders with the city of Zhuhai in Guangdong Province and since 2018 has been linked to Hong Kong via the 55 km long Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau sea bridge. Macau has a population of approximately 620.000 people and occupies a territory of roughly 44 square km – it is the most densely populated city on earth. A large part of Macau has been reclaimed from the sea and later occupied by a strip of casino resorts (the Cotai strip) whose revenues ($2.84 billion in 2019) have made Macau also one of the richest places in the world (Shriber 2020).

Macau is comprised of three large areas: Macau, Taipa and Coloane connected by bridges and via land reclamation projects. These three areas are quite distinct in terms of ambiance and spatiality and therefore one cannot speak of a homogenous atmosphere in Macau. Nevertheless, Macau is a fortified city-state, almost 99% surrounded by water and thus has many features of 'islandness' and 'smallness' (Baldacchino 2014), specifically – insularity, which put very concrete strictures on its urban development.

From 1557 to 1998 Macau was formally a Portuguese overseas territory, and is an interesting case of 'shared governance' where Portuguese ruled along with Chinese until its formal handover to China in 1999 (Simpson 2018). Unlike Hong Kong, Macau was fairly enthusiastic to embrace the mainland because of economic and social problems including the gang violence from triads (Simpson 2018). Following Portugal's return of Macau to China in 1999, the local government liberalized the city's 150-year-old casino monopoly concession with six key international casino entrepreneurs (three of them being US-based) taking over quasi-governance functions of Macau.

Macau also occupies a unique position in being the only place where it is legal to gamble in China, with around 100,000 people crossing the borders into Macau every day in (MGTO Statistics 2019). Simpson (2019) has further argued that Macau also plays a fundamental role not only as an economic or experimental setting, but as a place where the Chinese post-socialist subject is produced and turned into an urbane, high-quality, civilized citizen – primarily through luxury consumption. Macau is thus a very privileged region in China, as the casino revenues allow very low rate of personal taxation, annual dividend payments to its permanent residents and additional subsidies for electricity, which are paid to non-permanent workers and permanent residents alike.

The city of Zhuhai has rapidly developed across the border in mainland China. Indeed, Macau and China are now so intimately connected that some children go to school in one place and return home to another across the border on an everyday basis. Many residents also live in cheaper Zhuhai, but work for a higher salary in Macau. These intimate everyday connections and continuities across the border were severely disrupted during the pandemic causing many of the residents to rethink their dual-place mobility.

In 2002 the plan of connecting Macau and Hong Kong with mainland hubs of Shenzhen and Zhuhai was agreed with the bridge conceived as a key symbol of greater mobility within the Greater Bay Area (KPMG 2018). In this article, we show how the Greater Bay Area plan became disrupted through re-bordering processes and a failure to coordinate and unite against one common adversary. The Covid-19 pandemic that broke out also coincided with the annual Lunar New Year movement of people in China (*chunyun*) – leaving many Macau workers literally stranded. In this article, we

also argue that Macau is a significant ethnographic 'laboratory' to understand the social impacts of the virus. Indeed, it has even been referred to as a place where lessons could be learnt (Keegan 2020).

Macau has been shaped by a unique constellation of socio-cultural and geographical factors that have made it a place characterized by relatively high mobilities of people as well as money. Macau thus provides a significant example of a global highly mobile place with a high concentration of tourist and expat flows, high-end luxury travel, and low-end migrant workers mobility, mass cross-border travel and large mobility-facilitating infrastructure projects, significant mobilities of money through remittances and offshoring, as well as specific cargo and ferry mobilities. Moreover, in Macau movement is a key commodity and any delay or stillness is frequently viewed as an aberration that undermines the very affective atmosphere of the city such that the casinos only very rarely close.

While some 'rapid assessments' of impacts of COVID-19 on mobility and tourism have already been published by scholars (Gossling, Scott, and Hall 2020; Sigala 2020) we do not attempt to assess the economic impacts of the Covid-19 virus, which without a doubt will be complex, nuanced, and will vary from region to region even within an individual country. Instead, we aim to map out the complexity of immobilities that constitute the condition of contagion and thus contribute to the nascent research area of mobilities and health. Following the call to expand the field on transnational health, well-being, and mobility (Kaspar, Walton-Roberts, and Bochaton 2019) we take this agenda a one step further by showing the interrelationships of health and immobility through dialectic between the highly mobile effect of the spread of a contagious virus and the resulting health and safety-related deep stasis, stillness, and anxious immobilities. In terms of its effect on the everyday rhythms of life, it is highly relevant to conceptualize such anxious immobilities as a complex condition of static and dynamic elements resulting in practices of slowing down and coping with accidental immobility and related emotions.

We thus follow several scholars who have aimed to continue to unsettle the hierarchical prioritization of mobility over immobility (Birtchnell and Buscher 2011; Cook and Butz 2016) by showing how immobility is always relationally co-constitutive of mobility (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). Mobility dependency often becomes only visible when it is disabled, impaired, or ruptured. Immobility enforcing stillness complies mobile subjects to appreciate their relationship to mobility through remobilization and the reclaiming of mobility as a resource (Cook and Butz 2016). In the following section, we thus review the literature regarding stillness and immobilities and how ideas of health and safety are related to a whole range of immobilities, shortages and queuing, disrupted circulations, and a general slowing down.

Disruptions, immobilities and health

In 2010 the Eyjafjallajokull volcano eruption in Iceland sent tons of volcanic ash into the air and as a result over 10 ten million flight passengers became stranded with air routes disrupted for several weeks (Woolley-Meza et al. 2013). Unforeseen and unexpected events (so-called black swans) such as volcano eruptions demonstrated the vulnerability of the European aviation system for emergency situations, in particular affecting safety (Birtchnell and Buscher 2011). Thus, it is surprising that there has been so far relatively little sociological investigation of socio-technical system resilience to disasters (see Guiver and Jain 2011; Woolley-Meza et al. 2013). At the same time, mobility scholars have dedicated relatively little to conceptualizing the experiential immobility during ill-health (Kaspar, Walton-Roberts, and Bochaton 2019).

The SARS outbreak in 2003 generated a significant amount of scholarship measuring the impacts of disease on mobilities and in particular tourist flows through largely quantitative tools (see Wen, Gu, and Kavanaugh 2005; Zeng, Carter, and De Lacy 2005). Studies on the impact of SARS provide an important context on short-term impacts of turbulences generated by outbreaks or 'unexpected events.' Some scholars described the action of the Chinese government as an 'over reaction' (Zeng, Carter, and De Lacy 2005) or 'extreme' (Gu and Wall 2006) which implied a lack of knowledge about the potential consequences of the disease and ways for its successful containment. Keogh-Brown

and Smith (2008) argued that in the context of SARS, border closures would have been expensive but ineffective, while an increased investment in surveillance could be more cost-effective. However, studies on SARS have reflected very little on the effects of the contagion on individual well-being and on the functioning of everyday social life. Importantly, however, some studies of SARS did emphasize the spread of fear and panic by intense media publicity with the media envisaging catastrophic impacts (Henderson and Ng 2004; Keogh-Brown and Smith 2008). Furthermore, Wen, Gu, and Kavanaugh (2005) investigated how SARS impacted the sensitivity of tourists in China and how it heightened their concern for safety and public hygiene while traveling. As we will demonstrate, the biosocial narrative of public and individual hygiene during COVID-19 has been a crucial characteristic constitutive of the condition of anxious immobility.

The disruptions of everyday immobilities and in particular its durational aspect relate to mobilities scholarship on stillness and isolation (Bissell and Fuller 2011; Buser 2017; Vannini 2011), waiting (Bissell 2007; Gasparini 1995; Schweizer 2008; Straughan, Bissell, and Gorman-Murray 2020) and strandedness (Birtchnell and Buscher 2011; Cook and Butz 2016; Grieco and Hine 2008). Scholarship on the cultural understanding of risk and contagion (Douglas 1984; Wald 2008) complements scholarship on mobilities as it provides a specific relationality of stillness and immobility as anxious due to the uncertainty of duration and the affective atmosphere of danger. David Bissell (2007) reminds us that waiting has been long neglected as a frequent and often inevitable experience of mobile everyday life. Every period of stillness contains the possibility of rupture or suspension suggesting that waiting is not a slowed-down rhythm, but instead an 'incipient rich duration' (Bissell 2007, 279). Straughan, Bissell, and Gorman-Murray (2020) discuss stuckness as a specific form of waiting or immobilized waiting, and emphasize the gendered relational dimensions of waiting as labor. Although scholars have challenged the perceptions of waiting as unproductive and negative (Bissell and Fuller 2011), waiting as limit to future-oriented action has been much less conceptualized (Straughan, Bissell, and Gorman-Murray 2020).

We argue that waiting and slowing down in the state of contagion is characterized by ambivalence of 'waiting it out,' a different modality of waiting – less passive, but with imposed restrictions on activities, thus actively waiting it out or reinventing the durational impasse through the modification and adaptation of daily rhythms. Waiting in contagion or in anxiety can also give rise to boredom, which is aggravated by the rupture of the circadian rhythms due to general disruption of all activities or the continuous repetition of the same activity. For example, in her Wuhan Diary (2020), Fang Fang mentions a family member playing cards with her parents all day long and thus being more 'bored out of their minds' than scared. As there is little motivation to go outside or do anything there is also complete closure of public activities. A 'forced vacation' however is far from play time. As this is a forced vacant time (vacation) of indefinite duration, it is conducive to an elongation of now-time, stilling, and slowing (Anderson 2004). Waiting is described by Gasparini (1995) as an annoying experience that may turn into an intolerable one, which at the same time engenders the virtue of patience, which implies giving value to slowing down.

While mainland Chinese cities were the first to be affected and to take 'wartime' measures to contain the spread, as pandemic spread the lockdowns were not a shared global experience. Conditions of immobility differed significantly in terms of strategy, stringency, and outcome (Ren 2020). However, the nuanced nature of these immobilities has remained unobserved for several reasons: because doing actual fieldwork in lockdown is quite difficult. Secondly, realization of the unfolding crisis became more or less evident in March when the contagion that originated in mainland China was upgraded to a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). In what follows we discuss the personal, social, and political experience of living in Macau under contagion from its initial spread in January in three aspects, the disrupted materialities that ensued, the embodied nature of the experience, and finally, the wider political dimensions.

It's material: casinos and consumption

With the initial lockdown in Wuhan, subsequent shut-downs and closures went across mainland China and reached Hong Kong and Macau. On 5 February 2020 the major industry of Macau – the casinos – were shut down for an initial period of two weeks. On reopening, numerous travel and transport restrictions have continued to severely limit individual and group visas to Macau, while casinos are limited to the number of tables they can have open as well as the number of seats at each table in order to maintain some semblance of social distancing (Duprey 2020). The longest shut-down of casinos in the history of Macau forced the casinos to send many of their workers on non-paid leave, while those that left were not replaced or preferred to stay in their home countries. The casinos are still characterized by the uncertainty of working until further notice with some productions laying off 90% of their non-Macau resident staff.

While some cafes and restaurants turned to takeaway only service, a few retained their operations but the places were desolate and uncannily empty. That meant faster service, but it did not make up for social comfort:

> *I am sitting in a large restaurant, there are only 4 tables occupied. Two school age kids are playing a computer game. One woman is just sitting and checking her messages. Another man is having a standard meal. There are no lines, no people. No usual hustle and bustle. It is starkly, uncannily empty*. (Author's ethnographic diary, 15 March 2020.)

Many bars, meanwhile, temporarily ceased their operations, and many iconic family-owned but tourist-oriented restaurants such as 'Escada' closed for good (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Escada restaurant. Source: authors

Wearing face masks when even potentially ill with a virus was commonplace in China, Hong Kong and Macau even before the current outbreak; however, demand for facemasks as a preventative measure to stop the spread of the coronavirus led to a sharp increase in demand. The Macau government sought to regulate the provision of masks via its resident-permit scheme whereby residents could buy a pack of ten masks every 10 days from a pharmacy. Queues outside pharmacies stretching for over a hundred meters could be seen in Macau already in January, sometimes with police presence (see Figure 2 below). While Macau managed to secure a stockpile of masks, the shortage of masks in mainland China meant that the mask became one of the most demanded global health products, flows of which had to be regulated. The panic of the shortage of supplies also hit the shops, as the rice and noodle shelves went empty in many of the large supermarkets in Macau.

Similarly, banking also became limited. Although ATM machines have automatized many everyday processes of dealing with money, some financial transactions in Macau require face to face interaction, the showing of identification and the production of a signature. It became difficult for these transactions to be performed as selected branches opened and only allowed one person to enter at a time leading to large queues. Temperature checks were routinely performed by security staff.

From 4th February it was no longer possible to take a ferry between Hong Kong and Macau. The ferry was not only the preferred means of transport of tourists but also a much faster and convenient option linking Macau with central Hong Kong. The HKZM bridge remained open, but the relative isolation of the bridge head means that one has to endure a series of bus trips to reach central Hong Kong. As the virus took hold the trip by bus between Hong Kong and Macau initially required nine security checks including manually filling out a health declaration form. In late March, however, buses stopped operations entirely and resumed only in June to allow some of those stranded in Macau to exit and for Macau residents to return.

Hourly disinfection of elevators became part of everyday safety control, while the streets were routinely cleaned with disinfectant. Hygiene was perhaps the most pronounced material aspect of conventional belief in fighting the virus outbreak. Washing hands became a practice of individual

Figure 2. Queueing for masks. Source: Authors

responsibility for warding off the infection. Indeed, the main ritual responsibility was the performance of cleanliness – separating oneself from the invisible dirt and thus creating a clean, pure spatiality to symbolically reduce anxieties. The repetition of certain new routines became apparent as people ceased kissing, hugging, and shaking hands. Instead, they would bump elbows as means of social connection or wave from a distance. Hand sanitizer also became a significant commodity and part of everyday social practice. Sharing of food, meanwhile, became particularly less apparent with some restaurateurs actively discouraging it and signs were placed encouraging cleanliness on buses and in restaurants (see Figure 3 below).

Wald (2008) in her analysis of contagion argued that cleanliness has become a new measure of citizenship, and this clean citizenship is directly linked to Macau being a laboratory for exemplary citizen training – what Simpson (2019) has called a risk averse, anticipative, self-surveilled post-socialist subject. Cleanliness becomes a key feature of a healthy citizen as exemplified by intensified personal hygiene and obedient self-surveillance through the tracking of contacts, filling in health forms upon entry to public buildings or public facilities and acceptance of multiple temperature checks. Cleanliness thus was again reconstituted as a measure of a civilized, socially responsible, and mobile citizen in the state of potential contagion. Conversely, staying active and healthy, however, was considerably impeded by the fact that many private and public leisure facilities such as gyms and swimming pools were closed immediately. Even public parks and nature trails were designated as off-limits. Nevertheless, one could still see some senior residents meeting up in the early hours to practice *tai chi* in the public squares – a fact that reminded us of the persisting duality of how health can be managed in modern China – via personal diet and exercise (*yangsheng*) and medical-based hygiene (*weisheng*).

Macau is the most densely populated place in the world and besides the socio-economic specificity, it has a high density of high-rise apartment blocks (see Figure 4). Density in itself is a very peculiar feature of most small island-states (Baldacchino 2014). While this density may seem monstrous and even dystopian to an outsider, the human vivacity of these monumental housing complexes is actually a characteristic feature of many Asian metropolises even if they are perceived by many westerners as unclean and unhealthy. Thus, a lock-down in a high-density vertical urban environment where sometimes even fresh air is limited also allowed residents to socialize a little by talking to one another from one flat in one building to another one. This is clearly very different from a 'complete closure' in an isolated country house with a garden in Lombardy or Yorkshire. The urban atmosphere in lockdown had a certain impact on the experiences of anxiety for the local population for whom the lack of open green space in Macau contributed to an atmosphere of stifling 'stuckness.' The unusual density and the fact people living in highly packed megablocks could also potentially create further problems for the containment of the disease where one of the reasons why the Macau authorities preferred to play safe and keep the borders closed.

The lock-down also allowed the Macau government to showcase itself as a professionally prepared and exemplary city-state politically committed to the wider Chinese national project of health surveillance in line with the perspective of 'hygienic modernity' (Rogaski 2004). For some of our interviewees, Macau was seen as one of the ideal places for lock-down with 'safety from the virus, good food and a friendly atmosphere where people do not fight on the streets (unlike in Hong Kong)' (personal communication). Other residents in Macau further argued that the pandemic could provide a subtle opportunity for further control of the casino businesses, particularly in the context of the ongoing US–China trade war. Macau in this respect has been much more pro-Beijing than Hong Kong in terms of following instructions and guidelines in order to remain in favorable light (Zhu and Valles 2020). Indeed, 'many of the casino construction schedules have been disrupted and could not resume works due to a lack of incoming labour from mainland China' (personal communication). This put the whole gaming industry in Macau in a state of 'lingering anxiety.'

Drawing on the work by Bohme on aesthetics (2017) and 'atmoculture' (Brighenti and Karrholm 2018), another crucial point to consider is that Macau is comprised of different layers of consumption atmosphere. Despite its relative smallness, Macau has a distinct urban cosmopolitics and urban

Figure 3. Poster encouraging hygiene. Source: authors

assemblages that create spaces of comfort and retail atmospheres. This 'atmoculture' is comprised of atmospheric production and management (Brighenti and Karrholm 2018) and is rooted firstly in its narrow streets and small shops in the historical center of Macau and, secondly, in the large air-conditioned, scented shopping malls of the integrated tourism resorts that replicate thematic spaces of Europe – London, Paris, and Venice. With the pandemic and the reduced inflow of mainland visitors both of these spaces became desolate, with many small shops shuttered, quiet and empty except some of the local convenience stores and eateries. The retail atmosphere in Macau has been

Figure 4. Housing in Macau. Source: authors

geared aesthetically towards mainland Chinese consumers; however, this time it had to re-orientate and accommodate more locals with many promotions to reinvigorate retail spaces.

In their text *Reinventing the Local in Tourism*, Russo and Richards (2016) discussed the relationship between tourism and society in the context of new forms of 'shared' experiences and the move towards the co-production of place meanings by hosts and guests. Cheaper travel, virtual travel learning environments such as Tripadvisor, and destination hospitality platforms such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing had arguably led to a renewed focus on experiencing tourism 'like a local' in a more

authentic and sustainable manner (Germann Molz 2009). Restaurants and services have needed to attract, cater for and care more about the locals, making them 'tourists at home'on 'staycations.' Restaurants that have managed to survive the pandemic closure have been those with a more diverse customer base that catered to locals, expatriates, as well as tourists (Hannam and Zuev 2020).

It's personal: the embodiment of lockdown

While in Macau people were allowed to walk the streets during the two week shut-down from February 2nd to February 16th the empty streets were particularly unnerving as they contrasted with the usually congested nature of Macau's tourist-laden streets (compare Figures 5 and 6 below). The state of waiting in anxiety is similar to seeing an empty street as it is both uncanny and 'indefinable' (Dostoevsky in Svendsen 2005). Indefinable because of the absence of any movement, any activity, it is literally shut – all you could see were several high-end jewelry shops that were open 24 hours a day. The situation of lockdown is an extreme reminder of a temporary death of life and a kind of clinical immobility.

A crucial factor in the constitution of the atmosphere of anxious immobility in Macau were vehicles fitted with loudspeakers with recorded messages communicating the measures to be taken by individuals to contain the disease. The loudspeakers communicated the invisible threat. Self-isolation at home or even when outside – social distancing – became a new kind of condition albeit with similar features to other types of isolation due to mobile work anxiety (Apostolopoulos et al. 2016), detainment in refugees camps (Mavrommatis 2018) or being incarcerated in prisons (Goomany and Dickinson 2015; Taylor, Payer, and Barnes 2018).

Despite a feeling of relative safety in Macau, boredom ensued for many families with few children going out to play in the city parks. After a forty-day period of relative isolation, there was a renewed feeling of existential enduring, as for many working from home was prolonged indefinitely and impatience grew about the Macau government not having a clear plan of action. 'My daughter … has been very bored. There is nothing left for her to play with at home' (Cheung, Wong, and Chan 2020). Suddenly, children cannot go to sleep at night, and parents cannot work properly because the children are bored staying at home. This feeling of anxiousness was even more pronounced in

Figure 5. Macau when busy. Source: authors

Figure 6. Macau when empty. Source: authors

a hypermobile place such as Macau where people rely on Hong Kong International Airport as their key travel hub:

> *If you are in Macau you are just bored. You can't even go to Hong Kong now. But if you are not a permanent resident and most of the foreign workers aren't even if you are top executive in a casino you cannot leave Macau as there is no knowledge when the border will be open again. You are trapped. You don't know when you can return. When you can move again*. (Author's ethnographic diary – extract from a conversation with a foreign professional, Macau).

The rhythm of everyday life is also usually punctuated by both small and large events – dinners with friends, business lunches, televised sport competitions. These become obsolete and the rhythmic difference between the working week and the weekend becomes dissolved. Teleworking also disrupts the normal rhythms of the day and the night. In one of our conversations, a young foreign professional mentioned that she felt as if she had become 'bat-like,' sleeping more during the day and less during the night. Indeed, European expatriate workers in Asia commonly feel a temporal dislocation with their families due to living in different time-zones (Butler and Hannam 2014). Working from home became interspersed by the relaxations of cooking food and watching television but also a degree of laziness and a lack of motivation to work such that frequent naps during the day are taken. This made night-time sleep difficult and sometimes impossible, leading to a new nocturnal bodily rhythm and frequently excessive alcohol consumption in order to try to get to sleep. Moreover, those with mental health issues relating to depression and insomnia found their conditions exacerbated. Different patterns of sleep anxiety can be related to documented difference in cultural acceptance of sleep (in the West and in China) (Hsu 2014). Nevertheless, becoming bat-like was not just characteristic of foreign expatriates but also for many locals, whose lives had been forced into relative inactivity as shops and businesses closed down:

> *There are no customers. Very few. We have to pay for the gas and the daily car lease. I used to work one shift now I work 24 hours a day. I sleep in my car. I stayed in the car for three nights and three days. This is so bitter. Tough*. (Author's ethnographic diary – extract from a conversation with a young taxi driver and permanent resident of Macau.)

For the young taxi driver, the normal working rhythm is suspended 'until further notice,' as there is lack of knowledge over what to do and when. His livelihood, like many micro-entrepreneurial residents and migrant workers is not guaranteed. Despite the abundance of time and the means of production, his mobility is highly precarious. As people continue to stay at home and avoid circulation and physical contact the immobility of others is even more significant for him. The breakdown of circadian rhythms and an inability to fall asleep also disrupts the meaningfulness of our everyday activities:

> *My apartment has a rooftop terrace. I can go out when I want, take off the mask, sit there and read, have a cup of tea and watch the life go by, watch the sea buzzards fishing in the bay. Children come out sometimes to play here – I can feel their feet as my apartment is next to the rooftop. I see my neighbor walking with her poodle here and her elderly mom comes out too. On the neighbouring terrace a man in his fifties is walking in frenzied circles. A mother comes out with a toddler to look at the sunset. The fishing sampans and customs motorboats are constantly moving back and forth. For how long are we stuck here? Still these days it is an incredible fortune to have access to fresh air and an open sky above.* (Author's ethnographic diary, March 2020.)

In contrast, many of the Filipino and other migrant workers in Macau do not have this privilege and live in cramped over-populated rooms which further emphasized their fears of contagion.

As the situation was constantly evolving and changing on March 18th the Macau government instituted a full ban on entry into Macau for all non-residents – a ban which remains in place to date (September 2020). The possible opening of the border was constantly discussed on social media among the Filipino workers and the European non-resident workers wanting to return to be reunited with their families. Due to the very specific division of the population into blue-card (non-residents) and white-card holders (residents), the blue card holders preferred to stay locked down in Macau, in order not to lose their employment. The lock-down was accompanied with the experience of lay-offs similar to many other countries; however, the residents received consumption bonuses of around one thousand Euros from the Macau government to spend on goods and services. Thus, the actual experience of lock-down in Macau became increasingly divided between the privileged permanent residents and stuck non-residents – with the latter increasingly joking about a growing social discrimination. Surprisingly, 80% of the local population who had access to the financial subsidy via the consumer e-card scheme struggled to spend the full amount (Moura 2020) with 5% of the residents not even bothering to pick up the card loaded with money to spend.

It's political: the indefinite everyday

> *As the new Macau law restricting movement goes into force, distinctions in accessibility remind me of the division between so called blue card holders who are non-permanent workers and the more privileged permanent residents in Macau. A brawl in a bar popular with expats demonstrates the increased stresses of everyday life in Macau but it also means that one of the regulars is barred from the bar. Not only is he now even more isolated, but he also risks being expelled from Macau as a non-permanent worker.* (Author's ethnographic diary, March, 2020).

Accessibility in Macau was already an issue in February, although going to Hong Kong at this time was still possible. At the same time, due to the closure of all the public institutions, immigration paperwork was on hold, which meant some of the new foreign workers became even more 'stuck.' Indeed, there is often nothing more detrimental than the *duree* of hopeful waiting for documents to be done and escaping the legal limbo of an in-between space (Bendixsen and Eriksen 2018).

At the university, the start of the new educational year was initially postponed for 1 month, since around 80% of the students and staff lived in mainland China. Most of the teaching was switched immediately to an online mode despite staff having had relatively little experience of this teaching method or even time to prepare. The lockdown also changed the normal 'rhythms of academic mobility' (Enriquez-Gibson 2019) as university staff could no longer meet their students face to face, travel, and participate in academic conferences or take any research leave during the summer after teaching finished.

Although Macau enjoys relative freedom including western style Internet access, one of the main problems that enhanced student anxieties to learning was the differential access to Internet access between those in Hong Kong and Macau and those in mainland China. Students in mainland China could not access some of the key online platforms, nor access many educational videos or films.

> *Universities are now announcing they are re-opening in April. But is this real or another face-saving technique? Nobody actually knows – will the staff from Hong Kong be able to commute regularly and how will the students from mainland China come with the obligatory two week quarantine measures. At the same time, the online teaching has proved to be easier for students who are normally shy in classes*. (Author's ethnographic diary March 2020.)

Of course, the information divide between Macau and mainland China is frequently breached by the Chinese universal media application 'Wechat' that is responsible for 75% of all social media communications in China. However, Wechat is administered by the Chinese software giant Tencent and monitored for content by the Chinese government. The mobility of ideas and discussions regarding the impact of the virus were thus perceived to be subject to scrutiny which further fuelled personal anxieties in Macau.

> *I was planning to go to Lantau island – just across the bridge from Macau, one of the nearest get-away spots. I asked one of my Hong Kong acquaintances about the possibility. Matter of factly, he checked the current situation with death toll live on his smartphone and then reasoned that going to Lantau was a bad idea. A lengthy process with multiple health and border checkpoints was not worth a day trip, besides most of the nature trails in Hong Kong were closed. I could also get stuck across the border for any reason. I decided to stay. Again after waiting for two months, my hope for a bit of exercise was put on hold. I had nothing else to do but to enjoy the unusual emptiness and quietness of Macau. The emptiness was now becoming more habitual and indeterminate*. (Author's ethnographic diary, February, 2020).

In this vignette above, we note the mundane ubiquity of the knowledge about the virus death toll and the individual habit of plugging into the flow of information – which rather than reducing our anxieties only served to highlight them. The death-toll statistics tracker used by one of our informants reminded us of a new transparency enabled by smartphone and diverse practices of tracking, news-feeding and risk assessing. However, often the accuracy of such information led even to more anxiety as people were often stuck on a 'red alert' and unable to go to work or return home despite having no exposure to the virus themselves (Andrejevic and Selwyn 2020). It was also symptomatic that to decrease the accidental burden of immobility we were all searching online for knowledge of a potential antivirus as the ultimate protection. People actively discussed how different governments were responsible for concealing the true figures or not properly designing or supporting health-care systems, that could have potentially allowed us to travel without disrupting our rhythms. As Camus (1947) noted in his novel *The Plague*, access to information and knowledge often becomes one of the key ingredients in assessing the threat of contagion and the anxiety was often nurtured by the fact that the information was treated by agents of power to either hide or emphasize the scale of a pandemic. The fact that the whistle-blower turned national hero Dr. Li Wenliang, who first announced the potential threat of the new virus but was treated with suspicion demonstrates that significance of socio-political stability in the politics of containment. It is perhaps an archetypal example of the 'microbialpolitik' (Fidler 2013) when the doctor is the one who is considered the most dangerous. Nevertheless, the Chinese response was however cooperative in terms of facilitating the global flow of epidemiological information regarding the virus through the fast sharing of its genome.

One of the notable instances of coping with the lack of information and reflection of the state of affairs was the use of dark humor, specifically humor relating to shortages of toilet paper, how to cope with the boredom of being stuck at home, and the wearing of masks. Multiple images were circulating on social media and demonstrated the idea of putting on a brave face despite anxieties. Humor was to some extent the essential serum for coping with a sense of exile for many non-resident workers in Macau who were unable to figure out its probable duration.

Conclusions: from everyday immobilities to global awareness of the virus

The performance of movement becomes an operational imperative in neoliberal capitalism (Bissell 2014) and this imperative applies fully to Macau. With the Covid-19 outbreak, the region which is highly dependent on various mobilities entered a new phase of stillness, which brought a condition of anxious immobility to its various populations. By focusing on everyday life and the complexity of emotions and immobility we have emphasized that we can see a politics of disjuncture between the governments of the Greater Bay Area which was previously initiated as a project of political togetherness and de-bordering. An unprecedented move towards a reduction of mobility within China has been a key dilemma in terms of 'saving face' or maintaining economic stability.

In this paper, we have argued that, firstly, we need to recognize the study of the affective impacts of the experiences of isolation and immobility. Immobility is still studied predominantly from the ruptured short-term mobility viewpoint (waiting for transportation, congestion), and rarely from the point of a long-term, durational, risk-related, and thus highly anxious immobility. While the duration of anxious immobility has been touched upon by psychiatrists, mobility scholars have not ventured sufficiently into this field, and other interdisciplinary studies of health and immobility need to be further developed revealing diverse cultural strategies of coping, dealing, and negotiating with anxious immobilities: from singing together to 'sleeping it out.' Secondly, drawing on Andrejevic and Selwyn (2020), we need to consider what levels of autonomy and freedom can the new media provide in the time of isolation and question the actual impact of technological solutions to immobility (for example, Netflix binge-watching and computer gaming) and especially the development of new smart tracking and surveillance devices scripted as 'benevolent helpers.' Finally, as the entire world is increasingly responding to the pandemic, the authors of this article are not the exclusive carriers of the knowledge of what it is like to be there – we thus need to continue to make experiences of ongoing pandemics more visible and question complex issues of mobility justice (Sheller 2018), specifically, processes of invisible health-related immobilities as well the stigmatization of certain populations as carriers of contagion.

Disclosure statement

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