



## What Has the Hotel Sector Endured? A Systematic Review of Their Responses to the Global Crises

Junyi Xu<sup>1</sup>, Kanokkarn Kaewnuch<sup>2\*</sup> and Jing Fu<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Graduate School of Tourism Management, National Institute of Development Administration, Thailand

<sup>3</sup> School of Tourism and Culture Industry, Chengdu University, Chengdu, China

<sup>1</sup>E-mail: junyi.xu@nida.stu.ac.th, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6760-8078>

<sup>2</sup>E-mail: Kanokkarn.k@nida.ac.th, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6627-9812>

<sup>3</sup>E-mail: fujing@cdu.edu.cn, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6627-9812>

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### Abstract

**Background and Aim:** During times of crisis and recovery, the hotel industry's resilience is essential to maintaining employment, tourism, and economic stability. Its resilience fosters long-term prosperity and community development by supporting regional companies and international travel infrastructure. This study reviewed the impact of COVID-19 on the Chinese hotel industry and focused on crisis management practices, exploring how crisis management strategies were implemented during the pandemic and providing recommendations for future crisis preparedness in the hotel sector.

**Materials and Methods:** The study adopted a systematic literature review from a chronological perspective, focusing on relevant concepts of crisis management and the application of these concepts in the hotel industry.

**Results:** The research also categorized the measures taken by stakeholders at the individual, organizational, and governmental levels. At the employee level, there was a focus on maintaining communication, reducing staff, and offering psychological support. On the organizational level, hotels implemented operational adjustments, such as adopting new technologies, and developed marketing strategies targeting local tourists. On the government level, policies such as financial support, tax relief, and domestic tourism promotion were critical for supporting the hotel industry through the crisis.

**Conclusion:** The findings highlight the importance of proactive crisis management planning and the need for continuous adaptation to unforeseen challenges.

**Keywords:** Chinese Hotel Sector; COVID-19; Crisis Management; Systematic Literature Review

### Introduction

No matter whether before or after the pandemic, the hospitality and tourism industry has always been acknowledged by researchers and field workers as vulnerable, sensitive, and susceptible to crises or disasters due to political, economic, and environmental forces, particularly the hotel sector, which exposes itself to numerous and various forms of threats and crises from external factors such as banking, political situations, and the environment (Filimonau et al., 2020; Pforr & Hosie, 2008; Sellnow & Sarabakhsh, 1999). Historically, disasters and crises take many forms, from terrorist attacks like the 2006 Egypt and Mumbai bombings and the 2001 US 9/11 attack, to man-made disasters such as the 2008 Monte Carlo Hotel fire, and natural disasters like the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami and the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake (Sharpley, 2005). Disease disasters, including the 2003 SARS epidemic, the 2009 H1N1 Swine flu, and foot-and-mouth disease, have also devastated the global tourism and hospitality industry (Sellnow & Sarabakhsh, 1999; Tew et al., 2008; Zhong et al., 2021). Some researchers highlight natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and bushfires as having the most dramatic impact (Hall et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2008; Zenker & Kock, 2020). However, infectious diseases also pose significant challenges. The rapid global spread of SARS after its initial detection in Hong Kong led the WHO to issue an unprecedented travel warning. Consequently, Hong Kong, a key tourism destination and Asian economic center, suffered unprecedented losses across tourism, hotels, aviation, and retail in 2003 (PATA, 2003). On December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged a Wuhan Municipal Health Commission report of 'viral pneumonia' cases in Wuhan, China (World Health Organization, 2019). Subsequently identified as COVID-19, an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it rapidly spread globally, resulting in tremendous losses. This study aims to examine research during this specific period to understand how



Chinese Home-Grown Hotel Chains endured the pandemic and to identify preparedness measures for future unexpected situations.

### **The Losses of Global Crises on China's Hotel Industry**

The pandemic's widespread nature, affecting countries worldwide, intensified the challenges faced by the tourism sector, with restrictions on international travel and lockdowns further exacerbating the situation (Abraham et al., 2020; Filimonau et al., 2020). China, as the first country to experience the COVID-19 outbreak, faced severe economic and social repercussions. In the early stages, the government implemented strict lockdown measures, including travel restrictions and health monitoring via the use of a mobile health code system (World Health Organization, 2022). The hotel sector, which forms a key part of China's tourism industry, suffered extensive losses. In 2020, China's tourism revenue suffered a sharp decline due to lockdown measures, international travel restrictions, and stay-at-home orders imposed across the country (Abraham et al., 2020; Filimonau et al., 2020). From 2020 to 2023, China's Golden Week holidays experienced a significant rebound in domestic travel, with 2023 marking a return to and even surpassing pre-pandemic levels in both travel volume and revenue (Li et al., 2021; AP news, 2023). This downturn was compounded by the closure of borders and the classification of areas as medium or high-risk zones, leading to travel restrictions and reduced mobility (Rahmafritia et al., 2021). By 2020, China's domestic tourism had plunged drastically, with the number of trips falling to 2.879 billion, generating just 2.23 trillion CNY in revenue, a loss of nearly 4.4 trillion CNY from the previous year (Macchiarelli & Naisbitt, 2021). This impact was far more severe than the 2003 SARS outbreak, which caused a loss of 276.8 billion CNY (National Bureau of Statistics PRC, 2021). As a result, the hotel industry faced one of its worst years on record, suffering from decreased business travel and limited leisure tourism, leading to a major financial crisis within the sector (Filimonau et al., 2020). The long-term consequences for the tourism and hotel sectors were evident as the pandemic forced hotels to reconsider their crisis management strategies (Santana, 2003; Faulkner, 2001).

The importance of crisis management (CM) mechanisms became evident, as many hotels, particularly domestic brands, struggled to adapt. Existing crisis management models, such as those focusing on customer behavior and organizational resilience, were insufficient in addressing the scale and complexity of the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, it is vital to develop an integrated crisis management mechanism, focusing on the collaboration of all stakeholders, to ensure long-term sustainability in future global crises. Additionally, many questions are waiting to be answered in the context of crisis management within the hotel industry. What crisis management practices have been implemented? What mechanisms should be established to ensure effective crisis response? What stakeholders are necessary to make this happen? These models and frameworks aim to prepare stakeholders for negative events and guide their responses when crises arise (Aldao et al., 2021; Tew et al., 2008). To address these challenges, there is a need to create a positive research cycle that can help the community, customers, and the labor and management sectors within the industry achieve greater benefits (Rivera, 2020; Sellnow & Sarabakhsh, 1999).

### **Crisis: Understanding the Definition, Causes, and Management Practices**

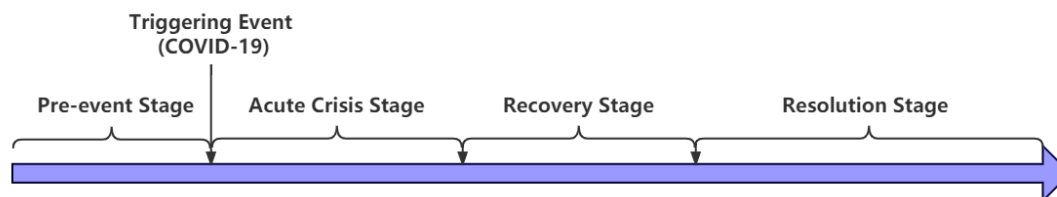
The Cambridge Dictionary (2020) defines crisis as "an extremely difficult or dangerous point in a situation." Santana (2003) noted that the term is derived from the Greek word "krinein," meaning decisions or turning points. Coombs (2015) defined crisis as a threat to stakeholders arising from unpredictable events, negatively impacting performance and survival. Faulkner (2001) emphasized that crises require resource management, while disasters stem from external events. Coombs (2015) defined an organizational crisis as an unpredictable event with a negative impact on various aspects of the enterprise. Uncertainty, urgency, and threat characterize crises (Boin & Lodge, 2021).

On the other hand, tourism, often associated with comfort and joy, is deeply impacted by crises, which evoke tension, fear, and tragedy (Santana, 2004). The vulnerability of the tourism industry largely depends on people's perception of a crisis (Abraham et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2017; Pforr, 2006). The causes of crises in the hotel sector are diverse, including natural crises such as floods, earthquakes, and

epidemics, as well as man-made crises like terrorism, political actions, and industrial accidents (Laws & Prideaux, 2006). These crises can have profound impacts, reducing tourism and affecting regions globally (Santana, 2004). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe and unprecedented impact on the hotel and tourism industry. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2020), global tourism ground to a halt during the early months of the pandemic, with international tourist arrivals dropping 98% in May 2020. This resulted in a loss of nearly \$320 billion in exports, more than three times the losses experienced during the 2009 global economic crisis. Thus, we can conclude that COVID-19 is a surprisingly severe crisis, so crisis management in the hotel sector to counter COVID-19 is inevitable.

Crisis management (CM) is defined as the process of preventing, intervening, minimizing damage, and restoring the status quo during and after a crisis (Rosenthal & Pijnenburg, 1990; Sausmarez, 2007). Coombs (2015) divides CM into four stages: prevention, preparation, response, and revision. This procedural approach helps minimize harm to organizations, stakeholders, and industries. In the hotel sector, CM is seen as a strategic, integrated approach, continuously considering stakeholders' needs at every step, including crisis plans and post-crisis assessments (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). The CM framework in the hotel industry follows a staged approach, such as Fink's (1986) four-stage model, which includes the prodromal, acute, chronic, and resolution stages. This model emphasizes the importance of stakeholders knowing their roles at each stage to safeguard interests (Carlsen & Liburd, 2008).

The impact of crises like COVID-19 requires a flexible, multi-stakeholder approach for effective management (Guo et al., 2021). In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, there are four stages under the COVID-19 Crisis to the Hotel Sector: Pre-event, Acute Crisis, Recovery, and Resolution. In the Pre-event Stage, it is critical for hotel organizations to prepare for unforeseen crises like COVID-19 by identifying vulnerabilities, setting up management teams, and establishing crisis management plans (Hao et al., 2021). The Acute Crisis Stage marks the immediate response once the crisis unfolds. This stage involves urgent action to manage the crisis and communicate effectively with stakeholders. For example, during the COVID-19 crisis, some hotel enterprises implemented strategies like reducing costs through "asset-light" approaches and cutting staff hours to cope with the sharp decline in occupancy (Miller, 2021; Trongjitraksa & Batra, 2021). In the Recovery Stage, the focus shifts to long-term recovery, where hotel businesses do not simply return to their previous state but adapt to the new normal. This phase is marked by psychological support for employees (Nair et al., 2021), communication efforts to rebuild public trust, and innovations like contactless services to enhance consumer confidence (Kim, Li, & So, 2022). Finally, in the Resolution Stage, the crisis is considered resolved, but this phase also involves rethinking industry practices in light of changing consumer behavior and the "new normal" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Hoteliers must adapt by innovating, focusing on sustainable tourism, and embracing new technologies to foster long-term growth (Rivera, 2020; Benjamin et al., 2020). These stages help hotel organizations navigate the crisis while adjusting to new norms and consumer behavior post-crisis (Benjamin et al., 2020).



**Figure 1** CM Stages under the COVID-19 Crisis in the Hotel Sector

Source: (Author,2025)

### Crisis Management and Stakeholder

Crisis management (CM) is a dynamic and complex process, and understanding the roles and perspectives of various stakeholders is essential in creating effective crisis response strategies. Stakeholders



are individuals or groups that have a vested interest in the outcomes of an organization's operations, and their involvement in crisis management can significantly influence the effectiveness of responses. The stakeholders in the hotel sector can be broadly categorized into internal and external groups, including employees, customers, investors, management, local communities, government agencies, media, and suppliers (Glaesser, 2003; Ritchie & Kom, 2014; Coombs, 2015). Stakeholders' perspectives are crucial in crisis management because their needs and actions directly influence the strategies and effectiveness of the response (Thakur & Hale, 2022). Each stakeholder group has different interests and concerns, and managing these diverse expectations is key to maintaining operations and rebuilding after a crisis. For example, while hotel owners may focus on financial stability, employees may prioritize job security, and customers may be concerned with safety and service continuity (Brown et al., 2019; Zhong et al., 2021). The interactions and relationships among stakeholders also affect crisis communication, decision-making, and the overall recovery process (Carr et al., 1998; Frame et al., 2004).

In times of crisis, stakeholder perspectives provide valuable insights into what each group expects from the crisis management process. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, the hospitality industry faced unprecedented disruptions. The response strategies implemented by hotel organizations often reflected the varying priorities of different stakeholders. Customers, who were primarily concerned with their health and safety, needed clear communication about hygiene protocols, while employees were focused on job security and fair treatment (Kim & Park, 2013; Sellnow & Sarabakhsh, 1999). At the same time, investors and managers looked for strategies that would protect financial assets and ensure long-term sustainability (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2021). Focusing on stakeholder needs allows hotel organizations to develop more comprehensive crisis management plans. A stakeholder-focused approach ensures that the responses address not just the operational challenges but also the emotional and social dimensions of the crisis (Nguyen et al., 2017). Moreover, the involvement of key stakeholders like government agencies and local communities in the crisis response can help ensure that the measures taken align with broader public health and safety goals (Thakur & Hale, 2022).

The measures taken during a crisis are often shaped by the needs and expectations of stakeholders. During the COVID-19 crisis, hotels faced a range of challenges, including maintaining business operations, ensuring employee welfare, and addressing customer concerns. To address these challenges, hotel businesses adopted various crisis management practices based on stakeholder perspectives. These practices ranged from immediate responses to long-term recovery strategies and involved different stakeholders at each stage. In the following, I will present these measures taken from different stakeholder perspectives.

### **Crisis Management Practices in China's Hotel Industry**

On the individual employee level, the impact of COVID-19 on employees in the Chinese hotel sector was profound, with many workers experiencing job insecurity, reduced working hours, and mental health challenges due to the pandemic's uncertainty (Khan et al., 2021). To address these issues, hotel businesses implemented various crisis management practices to maintain employee morale and performance. Luu (2021) emphasized that communication with employees, particularly about their prospects and the support provided by the organization, played a crucial role in maintaining their confidence. In response to the crisis, many hotels provided online and offline training to improve staff skills and engaged in activities designed to keep employees motivated during the pandemic (Agarwal, 2021; Zhong et al., 2021). Additionally, the hotel industry adopted flexible human resource strategies, such as reducing labor costs through layoffs or unpaid leave, while others embraced AI technology and automation to minimize physical contact and ensure safety (Filimonau et al., 2020; Gonzalez-Torres et al., 2021). Research from the Southeast Asian context offers further support for the importance of employee-centered strategies during a pandemic. Qun et al. (2022) reported that employee factors were the most influential for Thai tourists in choosing a hotel during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, outweighing service processes and tangible factors. Therefore, small and medium-sized hotel establishments should focus on developing and improving staffing by integrating training programs into their businesses. A clean and safe service process and improving the hotel environment into the new tourism environment standards should be emphasized (Qun et al., 2022).





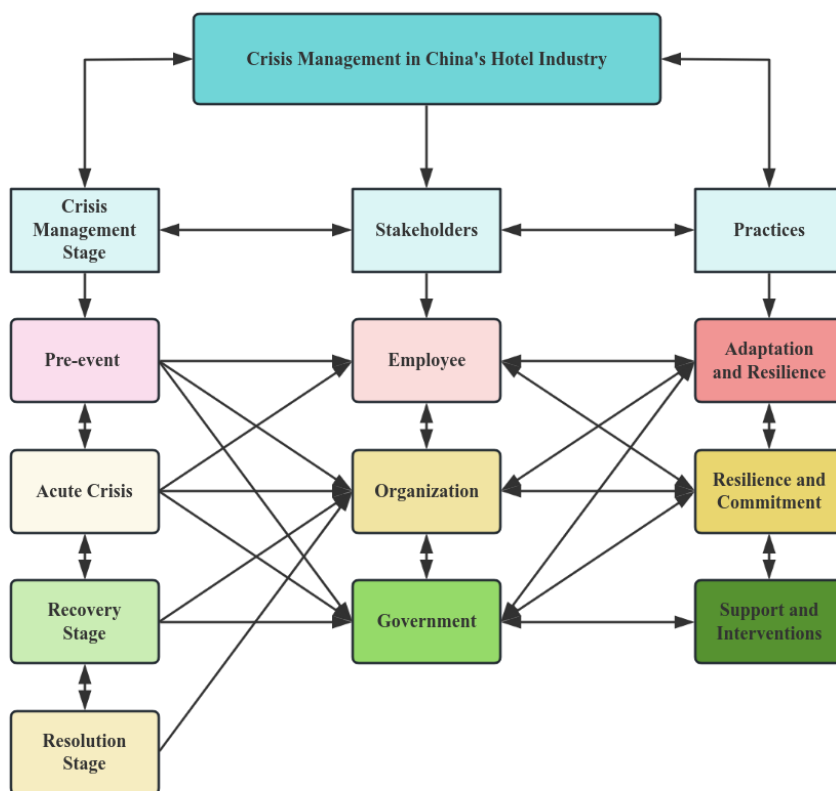
At the organizational level, resilience was a key factor in the ability of Chinese hotels to manage the COVID-19 crisis. The concept of organizational resilience refers to a hotel's capacity to adapt, absorb shocks, and transform in response to a crisis (Setiaji & Dewi, 2022). Organizational resilience in Chinese hotels was largely influenced by financial health, the adaptability of their structures, and their ability to quickly make decisions. This flexibility was demonstrated in the research of Qun et al. (2022) on medium-sized hotels in Thailand, where effective crisis management involved not only systematic management meetings to review revenues and expenses, but also developing innovative budgets and stringent cost-cutting measures. The hotels demonstrated the adaptability of their organizations by allocating reserve funds for emergencies, collaborating with financial institutions to assist their businesses, and utilizing technology to replace some service positions to enhance efficiency without increasing physical contact (Qun et al., 2022). Many hotels shifted to asset-light strategies, such as selling off real estate assets while retaining management control, to reduce operational costs (Macau Daily Times, 2020). Moreover, the adaptability of hotel organizations to crisis conditions was crucial for ensuring that management could respond rapidly to changes in the environment (Seville, 2008). This flexibility in decision-making was enhanced by a networked organizational structure that allowed for quicker responses to emerging issues (Comfort, 1994). The ability to adapt and make decisions in real time proved essential in mitigating the immediate effects of the pandemic and ensuring the hotel's long-term survival (Setiaji & Dewi, 2022).

On the government Level, the role of the Chinese government in crisis management was pivotal in supporting the hotel sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government quickly implemented stringent lockdown measures and provided financial support to struggling businesses, including the hospitality sector. According to the State Council Information Office, PRC (2020), the Chinese government introduced a series of policies, such as subsidies and tax breaks, to help hotels manage the financial fallout from the pandemic. In addition, the government played an active role in communicating public health measures and coordinating with the hotel industry to implement safety protocols, ensuring both employee and customer safety (National Health Commission PRC, 2021). Thakur and Hale (2022) emphasized the importance of the partnership between the hotel industry and local governments in overcoming external crises. This government-industry collaboration in enforcing safety standards is also evident in other situations, as revealed by research studies in Thailand, where hotels collaborated with the government by shifting to the use of electronic payments and improving their service standards as required, thus demonstrating how an effective public - private collaboration in crisis management could go beyond providing financial assistance (Chuaysatit et al., 2023). Government efforts to stimulate domestic tourism, such as promotional campaigns and easing travel restrictions, were also key strategies to aid the recovery of the hotel sector post-pandemic (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020b). The collaboration between the public and private sectors was essential for stabilizing the hotel industry and facilitating its recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.

## Conclusion

This study reviews the losses experienced by the Chinese hotel sector under the global crisis—COVID-19, then focuses on crisis management, particularly in the hotel industry, and analyzes crisis responses from the perspectives of stakeholders, specifically at the individual employee level, organizational level, and government level. The study organizes the crisis management approaches used in the hotel industry. In terms of theoretical literature, this study traces relevant concepts from the past to the present based on a temporal dimension; in terms of crisis management methods, the study summarizes literature published after 2020. This study is part of my doctoral dissertation titled *Creating an Integrated Crisis Management Mechanism for Chinese Home-grown Hotel Chains: the Case of COVID-19*. Through this literature review, the aim is to provide a solid literature foundation for the dissertation and offer a summary statement for the hotel industry's measures to this past crisis, to provide potential solutions and ideas for future crises.

The framework presented below offers a visual representation of the crisis management framework within the Chinese hotel industry, as explored in the study. It organizes crisis management into four distinct stages, showing how these stages interact with key stakeholders—employees, organizations, and the government—and the corresponding crisis management practices.



**Figure 2** Research Framework  
Source: (Author,2025)

## Limitations and Future Research

As a component of my doctoral dissertation, this review article reflects an exploratory study undertaken during the early stages of the pandemic. Consequently, its scope is intentionally limited to foundational frameworks and immediate post-pandemic adjustments, leading to deficits in bibliometric scope and time coverage. Overall, the present study focuses on strategic-level synthesis over sector-specific granularity. Future studies should broaden sampling with systematic reviews (e.g., PRISMA protocol) to access recent academic and industry reports on China's hotel sector. It is also interesting to conduct a targeted review to stratify crisis types (e.g., public health versus economic supply-chain crises) and explore their interactions with local governance strategies. More taxonomical classifications of response measures (e.g., converting flexible HR strategies into redundancy planning, digital skill-upgrading, and mental health support) would produce actionable findings. Ultimately, this methodological rigor would facilitate geographically differentiated theories of sustainable crisis resilience in emerging-market hospitality industries.



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