

# *A Journal of the Plague Years*

## Cosmin Costinas

## Inti Guerrero

“A Journal of the Plague Year,” a traveling exhibition originated at Para Site, Hong Kong during the summer of 2013, shifted its center of gravity under the influence of magnetic forces in each location on its itinerary. Echoing the polyphony in the exhibition, the book, gathering the voices of scholars, novelists, artists, and journalists, navigates disparate but interconnected narratives and wishes to make a modest contribution to a critical discussion on the fear of contamination, the implications of which extend beyond the realm of medicine or the city of Hong Kong. Nevertheless, the research behind both the exhibition and publication departs from and remains strongly connected to an exploration of the events that affected the city in the spring of 2003: the most significant airborne epidemic in recent history—the SARS crisis, coupled with the tragic death of pop figure and pan-Asian icon Leslie Cheung. These overlapping occurrences marked a collective existentialist moment in a society that has drastically changed since the end of the last century. Para Site’s former location, in the Sheung Wan neighborhood, coincidentally is in the heart of the district most affected by the 1894 plague in colonial Hong Kong, which pushes our imagination further back to a different era burdened by complexes of fear. The book thus traces the various strands of stories, historical backgrounds as well as the consequences of these events in relation to the contemporary culture and politics of Hong Kong and the world.

1 The exhibition, “A Journal of the Plague Year. Fear, ghosts, rebels. SARS, Leslie and the Hong Kong story,” was shown at Para Site, Hong Kong (May 17–August 11, 2013) and at TheCube Project Space, Taipei (June 28–August 3, 2014). As “A Journal of the Plague Year. Continental Fear. Islands, ghosts, rebels,” it was shown at Arko Art Center, Seoul (August 31–November 16, 2014) and as “A Journal of the Plague Year” at Kadist Art Foundation and The Lab, San Francisco (April 1–May 10, 2015).

Fear of agents of difference is recurrent in different societies at different historical moments. Mechanisms of hatred and politics of differentiation have always been based on dehumanizing the body of the Other, and the Other is perpetually fabricated. In Hong Kong and elsewhere, fear of infectious carriers has repeatedly evoked irrational

fear of other people, quarantine has mirrored exclusion, whilst epidemiological, racial, and cultural contamination have shared the same language. In the following pages, various forms of texts, including critical essays, literary excerpts, a scene from a play, a conversation, and a fact sheet about a fictitious infectious disease accompanied by message board posts, explore the fear of contamination, both physiological and cultural, as well as the anxieties held within societies confronted by their own prejudices and projections at the face of alterity.

Hong Kong has a subjectively internalized history of epidemics and of representations in the colonial era as an infected land that needs to be conquered from nature, disease, and Oriental habits, in order to be made healthy, modern, and profitable. Narratives of this sort culminated with the identification of the bacillus causing the 1894 plague outbreak by bacteriologists Kitasato Shibasaburō and Alexandre Yersin in Hong Kong. The disappearance of the perished and the ghostly spaces on two streets in Sheung Wan are represented in the poetic storytelling of Dung Kai-cheung's *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*. Excerpts from Shih Shu-ching's literary masterpiece, *City of the Queen: A Novel of Colonial Hong Kong*, vividly portrays the interwoven social relations and colonial structures during the time of plague.

That fateful visitation of the plague led to the first urbanization of the informal Chinese districts of colonial Hong Kong. As a hygienic measure, the British government demolished entire blocks in the plague's epicenter, aiming to cleanse both spaces and lifestyles. The discovery of the culprit that had shaken the colonial government and its subjects and had affected European populations in recurring deadly cycles for a millennium and a half—the most pestilent being the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century that might have killed half of the population of Europe—made international headlines. That the source of the disease is found in the Far East is a stunning parallel to the likely origin of the Black Death in Europe, which have been spread by the Mongol armies besieging the Genoese city of Caffa in Crimea. The

transmission route is said to have been intentional—the Mongols catapulting the bodies of plague victims above the city walls in what might have been one of the first biological wars in history. Artist James T. Hong's contribution to this book, stemming from his research in Japanese biological warfare during the Second World War, is an exposé on disease, race, purity, and cleansing.

The perceived Asian origin of the plague at the end of the nineteenth century ignited its dubious associations with Asians, heightening the “yellow peril” scares in the West at the time. Prejudices against Chinese immigration in the Western world in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century arose alongside the wariness triggered by the growing Japanese military power, especially after the crushing defeat of Russia in the 1905 war—the first time in the modern era that a non-Western power had won a war against a European country. “Yellow peril” also shares a history with anti-Chinese sentiments found in other Asian nations (currently resurfacing with the growing clout of China in the twenty-first century). Nevertheless, the pre-First-World-War Western world, infatuated with its own sense of progress and civilization, convinced that war and destruction could not erupt anymore from within its brotherly and interconnected countries, needed a horizon of fear on the outside. The inscrutable, rising, and spreading Asians were the perfect agents of fear.

The unknown Others—but also one's own higher order of the social, like one's nation and its place in history—are frequently represented by animals, real or mythological, fearsome or scatological; they are no longer human. In popular imagination, immigrants were and are still portrayed as pests, or a disease that could infect the essentialist and mono-cultural social body defined by populist nationalist rhetoric in varying contexts. San Francisco-based writer and curator Xiaoyu Weng brings the stereotypical iconography for Chinese immigrants appearing in the print media of the 1910s in California, home to one of the largest Chinese communities outside of China (originating primarily from Hong Kong and

Canton) and the site of a major manifestation of the plague from Hong Kong in that decade. Weng further relates the recurrent archetypes of differentiation to the inquiry on Chinese and Asian identities in Hollywood films developed in recent works by artist Ming Wong.

But the nineteenth century medical diagnosis of Hong Kong was more complex. The century saw in the West a highly politicized dispute between the proponents of two competing scientific theories trying to explain the spread of diseases. One side believed that diseases spread between individuals (the exact form in which this could happen saw some imaginative sub-theories); the other believed they were fixed in a given place, from which conditions sprang from the so-called miasmas, which were also explained through a range of phantasmagoric hypothesis, connecting soil, water, angle of sun rays, and so on. Not unlike the current disputes on the human role in climate change in which deep economic and political motivations are involved, the group that denied the human transmission factor in the spreading of diseases (making procedures like quarantines unnecessary) was the one profiting from international free trade, seen by their opponents as a health hazard. For the British Empire, the foremost proponent and beneficiary of global free trade in the nineteenth century, Hong Kong functioned as an excellent example for the miasmatic theory, a place that was intrinsically infected, pestilent and dangerous. The smell of free-flowing goods and money was the only fragrance that could cover the smell of death in Hong Kong. The miasmatic theory was fully demised only after the 1892 cholera epidemic in another bastion of free trade, the German city of Hamburg, where the city's health official, politically appointed by the old patrician Hanseatic trading families, based on his endorsement of miasmatic theory, denied basic measures against epidemics, common by then in most of Europe. Cholera was yet another disease originating in the East, its every cycle of epidemic spreading through the same route, across Russia, westward toward Europe. It had its own metaphorical appeal as the demons of the time,

with Dostoevsky associating “The Possessed” “Asiatic cholera” to nihilist terrorist threat and Hermann Ahlwardt calling the Jews, who needed to be “exterminated,” “cholera bacilli” in an infamous speech in the history of anti-Semitism in Germany before the Reichstag in 1895. The death toll in Hamburg was over 8,000 people, an enormous number for a cholera epidemic at the end of the nineteenth century in a “civilized” Northern European city.

When Hong Kong became the epicenter of the SARS crisis of 2003, the unprecedented shutdown of a “first world” city and the atomization of society in quarantined segments led to an unexpected shift in the political awareness of the Hong Kong citizenry. Just after the end of the epidemic, record numbers of people turned out to protest against a new internal security law imposed by Beijing, causing its shelving and, more importantly, the emergence of an active political community. After that moment, the image of a de-politicized and soullessly pragmatic commercial hub could not anymore tell the whole story about Hong Kong. The Umbrella Movement in the autumn of 2014 was in many ways a culmination of the disobedience that started that year. In this book, two contributions address the political shift that began in 2003. The conversation between artist Pak Sheung Chuen and writer Lawrence Pun follows personal memories of how such protests, linked to the aftermath of SARS, transformed their ways of being in the world. Journalist Fionnuala McHugh, Hong Kong resident of twenty years, undertakes a deep analysis on the rhetoric of fear caused by the handling of the epidemic, including a comparison to the other global fear, the “weapons of mass destruction” during the early stages of the Iraq War, which began at the same time as the SARS crisis. The parallel between a distant war and an epidemic hitting home is the background of the beginning of Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, from which this book and exhibition take their name. Zuni Icosahedron’s play The Phantom Mask refers to the political cover-up at the beginning of the epidemic

and alludes to the public distrust toward the Hong Kong political class in the decade between the 2003 protests and the 2014 Umbrella Movement.

Less glorious than these moments of collective grace are the repercussions of the main measure taken to alleviate the economic meltdown caused by SARS: the permission for mainland citizens to visit the territory on individual visas. It has caused a seismic shift in the identity of the city and its relationship to mainland China. Medical vocabularies and imageries reminiscent of epidemics have been used in regards to the growing number of mainland Chinese in Hong Kong—seen as pathogens corrupting an otherwise healthy social body. Again, an epidemic becomes the backdrop of paranoia and hatred, but the fear of the Chinese—a term that has taken on a more politically pointed meaning in certain contexts since the beginning of the twenty-first century to indicate those from the mainland—and their vast numbers and uncivilized habits, is now harbored by fellow Chinese Hongkongers. The essentializing xenophobia has come to be a defining factor in the relationship between the two sides of the Shenzhen River, and paradoxically has complicated the pro-democracy (and anti-Beijing) discourse and activism, rejuvenated in the wake of the SARS crisis. In this book, the Taiwanese film and art critic Austin Ming-Han Hsu explores the anti-Chinese rhetoric in the public sphere of Hong Kong through an extensive reading of an installation by Ai Weiwei, commissioned for the Para Site exhibition, based on the social anxieties related to the commercial restrictions on the export of baby formula. Hsu's essay delves into how such a commodity emphasizes the representation of mainland Chinese as a mass of locusts sucking up the resources in Hong Kong.

In 2003, the ambivalence in the identity of the Hong Kong people was, and to a certain point still is, reflected in the figure of Leslie Cheung, the iconic actor and singer who committed suicide at the height of the SARS crisis by jumping off the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Central, Hong Kong. His shocking death at the darkest hour of the most trying times in recent memory played its part in

the mobilization of Hongkongers, who turned out in huge numbers for Leslie's funeral, ignoring the health warnings in effect at the time. Gor Gor's (Cantonese for "Big Brother," as Leslie was known) life and career have contributed to forging a strong sense of identity for Hong Kong culture, in spite of his queer and often contrarian persona. In her essay, cultural theorist Natalia S. H. Chan discusses the way in which the versatility of the roles that Leslie played reflected, and arguably enhanced, the versatility of the city's identity over the past decades, before and after the Handover. One such highly symbolic moment is Leslie's performance in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), arguably the most successful Chinese-language film of all time. This grand narrative of twentieth-century China, in Mandarin, saw the quintessential Hong Kong pop star (the symbol of a lifestyle still foreign to most mainland Chinese in 1993) cross-dressing as a traditional Peking opera performer and symbolically returning to the cultural canon of the motherland. It was perhaps an unintended, but no less effective, cultural handover avant-la-lettre.

Nevertheless, Leslie remained, in the eyes of generations of Hongkongers, a lasting symbol of this city, of a certain Hong Kong with its own Cantonese, post-colonial, and pop-vernacular idiosyncrasies that perhaps died, together with Leslie, in 2003.

It seems as if a periodization of modernity could be structured through humanity's experience with pandemic diseases and the paranoia and acts of exclusion that follow. By the time we publish this book, an Ebola crisis has expanded with vicious virulence in West Africa. The current association of the tropical disease with Africans is fostered worldwide by its portrayal in the media. Aside from journalism, recent films have also constructed our imaginaries of outbreaks and contagion. Chinese cultural studies scholar Michael Berry explores how epidemics and diseases like SARS and Ebola have been cast in Hong Kong cinema, paradoxically labeled as feel-good movies that deliver allegorical messages teasing out the brighter side of dark events. But nowadays, with the immediacy of social media, it is the possibility of "going viral" that shapes the

collective beliefs and prejudices. In May 2014, far-right French politician Jean-Marie Le Pen was quoted in social media saying that the deadly Ebola virus could solve France's immigration problems "in three months." In other words, one virus would kill another. It is common to hear that if SARS had not happened, the Mandarin-speaking locusts from the mainland would not have invaded the already overcrowded city of Hong Kong. In this case, one virus creates another. But, as Fionnuala McHugh has stated elsewhere, the more mainlanders that enter pluralistic Hong Kong, the more they come into contact with dissenting discourses. Perhaps in the near future it will be the Hong Kong SAR which will become the new dangerous virus of the twenty-first century, making disobedience and democracy pandemic within China.

Cosmin Costinăş and Inti Guerrero