

Epidemics in Modern Asia

Epidemics have played a critical role in shaping modern Asia. Encompassing two centuries of Asian history, Robert Peckham explores the profound impact that infectious disease has had on societies across the region: from India to China and the Russian Far East. The book tracks the links between biology, history, and geopolitics, highlighting the interdependencies of infectious disease with empire, modernization, revolution, nationalism, migration, and transnational patterns of trade. By examining the history of Asia through the lens of epidemics, Peckham vividly illustrates how society's material conditions are entangled with social and political processes, offering an entirely fresh perspective on Asia's transformation.

ROBERT PECKHAM is Associate Professor in the Department of History and co-Director of the Centre for the Humanities and Medicine at the University of Hong Kong.

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Robert Peckham

University of Hong Kong



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For Michael and Catherine

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Preface

There is, perhaps, no better place to begin a history of the global than with the hyper-local: the view over Victoria Harbour towards Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's highest summit, from my office at the University of Hong Kong. Across the water to the north, Stonecutters Island juts out of the Kowloon peninsula. Acquired by the British from the Qing dynasty in 1860, along with Kowloon, Stonecutters Island has served over the years as a quarry, a military depot, the site of a prison, a smallpox hospital, and a quarantine station. As a result of land reclamation in the 1990s, it was joined to the mainland and today houses a large sewage treatment facility with a naval base operated by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Many Hongkongers are likely to be unaware of the history of Stonecutters Island, just as they may be unfamiliar with the history of Taipingshan, in Hong Kong's Central and Western District, where an epidemic of bubonic plague broke out in 1894, often taken to mark the onset of the third plague pandemic. From southern China and Hong Kong, plague diffused along shipping routes to India, Australia, South Africa, North America, and Europe. Perhaps as many as 15 million people died worldwide. Today, hard-surface ball courts and a small public garden mark the spot where, following the Taipingshan Resumption Ordinance in September 1894, the British demolished the crowded Chinese tenements at the epicenter of the outbreak.

The contemporary landscape of Hong Kong, like many other Asian cities, has been shaped by disease episodes of the past. Yet most accounts of the transformations that have taken place across the region over the last few centuries focus exclusively on political, social, economic, and cultural upheavals. For the most part, disease is mentioned only as a backdrop to more momentous events, relegated to a footnote, or overlooked altogether. The aim of this book is to write epidemics back into history, examining the transformative role that disease has played in making modern Asia, and suggesting how the threat of infection continues to influence societies across the region today.

Epidemics in Modern Asia proposes a new transnational approach to modern Asian history and global modernity; one that places emphasis on connections and continuities over space and across time – as well as on discontinuities – and, in so doing, resituates the experience of epidemics at the heart of Asian history. The book challenges previous histories that have tracked the diffusion of epidemics westwards from their origins in the East and emphasized the counter-migration of knowledge and technological know-how eastwards from the West. It argues that examining the causes and consequences of epidemics in history can transform our understanding of the past and the emergence of the modern world. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in cross-cultural contacts and transmissions across Asia. With a few notable exceptions, disease has been largely and inexplicably absent from this literature. Although there is now a substantive scholarship on the history of medicine, health, and disease in Asia – particularly in South Asia, but increasingly in East Asia – the study of epidemics has not, on the whole, been sufficiently integrated into a broader, interregional framework. Research on the history of disease in India, for example, has remained typically disconnected from histories of Southeast Asia, just as artificial boundaries are apt to be drawn between Southeast Asia, China, and Japan. As a result, regions that for centuries have been characterized by cultural, political, and economic exchange, vanish from view. The purpose of this book is to offer a much-needed corrective to this sequestration, furnishing a fresh comparative vantage of analysis, while providing suggestions for future directions of research.

In her ethnographic exploration of the conflicts over the future of the rainforests in South Kalimantan, on Indonesian Borneo, the anthropologist Anna Tsing enquires: ‘How does one do an ethnography of global connections?’¹ In this book, I recast the question to ask: How does one write a history of disease that explores continuities but simultaneously takes cultural differences seriously? The view across Victoria Harbour – one of the busiest ports in the world – onto a former quarantine station that now serves as a base for the PLA is a poignant reminder of the complex and sometimes violent interactions that have shaped this post-colonial port city. To borrow Tsing’s phrase, Hong Kong is ‘a zone of awkward engagement,’ a global hub that is also a place of ‘friction.’ This is a book, then, about disease, cultural interactions, and global networks of power and trade. It investigates epidemics as unstable phenomena that

¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p.xi.

are produced when global processes become entangled with highly local circumstances.

There are, of course, many challenges in writing a history of epidemic disease in Asia. First, and most obviously, are the impediments presented by the sheer geographical and chronological scale of such a project. In focusing on the macro-level there is a danger that the particularities of specific places at specific times may be overlooked, with the consequence that epidemic histories are inadvertently abstracted and de-territorialized. Second, is the linguistic challenge that the task poses, since a trans-Asian history requires proficiency in many languages – too numerous, certainly, for any individual scholar to acquire. Third, and relatedly, is the sheer quantity and variety of sources. And fourth, are the gaps in existing knowledge and the patchiness of the archives. Given the lack of systematic and reliable statistical data, estimating morbidity and mortality is often no more than guesswork. While the book draws on my own archival research, it is also necessarily a work of synthesis informed by the research of many other scholars. I am profoundly beholden to colleagues whose writing has stimulated me to think in fresh ways about modern Asia. Wherever possible, I have sought to acknowledge this debt clearly in the main text. At the end of the book, a brief guide to further reading identifies work that I have found particularly helpful. Although this is an English bibliography, the books and articles that are referenced contain abundant additional material in Asian languages.

Epidemics in Modern Asia is organized into five cross-cutting chapters that pivot on specific themes: mobility, cities, the environment, war, and globalization. These are not watertight categories, but rather provisional frames for interrogating specific epidemic events, with frequent cross-overs and switchbacks. In this sense, the themes are approached as questions rather than fixed conceptual anchors. One aim of the book is to introduce readers to larger historiographical issues and in so doing to contribute, on a more theoretical level, to discussions about the methods and scope of history. Each chapter is structured around three or four case studies. A conclusion summarizes the main arguments and the critical questions that the chapters have raised. The book also includes a select timeline, maps, and a glossary, where essential terms are defined. Plates and maps provide a visual narrative that emphasizes the spatial and visual dimension of the epidemics under discussion. Throughout, text boxes introduce key concepts, topics, and illustrative readings from a range of primary and secondary sources.

I am grateful to the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong for generously supporting research for sections of this book with a grant from the

General Research Fund ('Infective Economies: Plague and the Crisis of Empire' HKU752011H). A work such as this, which reaches across terrains, is inevitably a collaborative process. The arguments developed in the book have been tested in a large cross-faculty undergraduate course at the University of Hong Kong entitled 'Contagions: Global Histories of Disease' (CCGL9003). *Epidemics in Modern Asia* was written first and foremost with my students in mind. While there is an expansive literature on the history of disease in the West, it is relatively recently that academic work has begun to appear in English on disease in East Asia. Much of this specialist literature is dispersed across journals and difficult to access. A practical aim in writing this book has been to make existing scholarship more accessible, bringing together area-specific research to highlight broader themes. I should like to thank my students for encouraging me to write this book, for helping me to draw connections between the past and the present, for challenging many of my assumptions about Hong Kong and modern Asia, and for reminding me how important history can be for understanding the contemporary world. I am grateful to Amy Tsui, Ian Holliday, Gwyn Edwards, Gray Kochhar-Lindgren, and the members of the Common Core Committee for espousing transdisciplinary, research-based teaching in the new curriculum, and to my colleague Carol Tsang who helped with the course materials and provided much useful feedback. A special thank you to Nancy Yang and to all the students involved in Beyond the Pivot (BTP), a student-led NGO that I am privileged to have mentored: their humanitarian work in rural China has shaped my own understanding of the health challenges facing the region, and their commitment and enthusiasm have given me hope. Thanks to my postgraduate students Mark Clifford, Angharad Fletcher, Maurits Meerwijk, and Georges Papavasiliou, who have kept me on my toes.

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At the University of Hong Kong, I thank all of my colleagues in the Department of History. I have benefitted greatly from conversations with Frank Dikötter, whose insights have informed my thinking, and from the encouragement of John Carroll and David Pomfret. Over the last few years, Helen Siu and Angela Ki Che Leung at the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences have been generous interlocutors and my warm thanks to them. I am grateful to Daniel Chua who was instrumental in establishing the Centre for the Humanities and Medicine, which I have been fortunate to co-direct since 2009. In the Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine, Gabriel Leung has been a champion of the ‘big picture’ view of disease and medicine and a passionate advocate for history. I owe a unique debt to Maria Sin for her encouragement, ingenuity, and indispensable support during the writing of this book. Her acumen and energy have also ensured the success of the Global Histories of Disease and Medicine project, which has provided a vibrant forum for exploring many of the ideas and issues examined in this book.

For help with sourcing the images, thanks to Anita Austin, Iris Chan, Jack Eckert, Stephen Greenberg, Akiko Kasiwara, Mattias Klum, Ako Matsuo, Michael Sappol, Joanna Skeels, Charlotte Todd, and Michael Wolf. My thanks to Dick Yeung for the maps. I gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the copyright material in this book. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their prior permission for the use of copyright material. I apologize in advance for any errors or omissions and if notified of any corrections will ensure that they are incorporated in future editions of this book.

Finally, *Epidemics in Modern Asia* could not have been written without the support of my wife, Rebecca, with whom I have shared many adventures in Asia, including six special months in Tokyo. Our children Lily

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Mei and James – Hongkongers both – were wonderful antidotes to contagious preoccupations. Exchanges with Oriana were always a joy. This book is dedicated with appreciation and love to my parents, Michael and Catherine, truly doctors without borders.

ROBERT PECKHAM
Hong Kong, October 2015

Abbreviations

ARC	American Red Cross
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CDC	US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CER	Chinese Eastern Railway
CIA	US Central Intelligence Agency
DDT	Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane
EIC	East India Company
EID	Emerging infectious disease
ENSO	El Niño Southern Oscillation
EVD	Ebola virus disease
FAO	UN Food and Agriculture Organization
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FCR	Frontier Crimes Regulation
GHSI	Global Health Security Initiative
GPEI	Global Polio Eradication Initiative
GPHIN	Global Public Health Intelligence Network
HIV/AIDS	Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome
IMCS	Imperial Maritime Customs Service
INSEP	Intensified Smallpox Eradication Program
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
JE	Japanese encephalitis
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MERS	Middle East respiratory syndrome
NiV	Nipah virus
NTD	Neglected tropical disease
OIE	<i>Office International des Epizooties</i> (World Organisation for Animal Health)
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ProMED	Program for Monitoring Emerging Diseases
SARS	Severe acute respiratory syndrome

xx List of abbreviations

STI	Sexually transmitted infection
TCM	Traditional Chinese medicine
UAV	Unmanned aerial vehicle
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VOC	<i>Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie</i> (United East India Company)
WCS	Wildlife Conservation Society
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization



Map 0.1. Contemporary Asia