

After Sars: Reflections and Research Possibilities

---- A Perspective from the Humanities

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“After SARS: Education and Research Agenda for the Future”

Joint HKU/CUHK/CPU Academic Seminar on July 2, 2003

First I would like to thank the organizers for their generous inclusion of a presentation from the perspective of the humanities in this panel about post-Sars development in Hong Kong. When I was first asked to give a presentation, my immediate reaction was: what has the humanities to do with Sars research or what can we humanities scholars—the artists, literary writers, classicists, philosophers, historians, contribute to the post-Sars research agenda? Unlike the medical and health-care colleagues at our university who were on the forefront during the war against Sars and are still actively engaged in virus and infection control projects and other medical research in this post-Sars period, or the social worker, the economist, and building designer and architect whose contribution to a post-Sars agenda is so clear and much called for, the role of the humanities scholars seems ambiguous at best if not totally irrelevant.

Maybe we could just feel comfortable with the role of a by-stander, clapping our hands, supporting and cheering on our “heroes” on the sideline, or mourning the deaths of our friends and family members who fell victim to the infectious disease, just like any other concerned citizens.

But we know we can do more, not only in the form of cheer leaders, volunteers and monetary contributors, but making tangible contributions to the healing process of our post-Sars society, individually or collectively, as scholars in the field of humanities. In fact, some important issues arising from Sars have always been major concerns of the scholars in the humanities in general and in philosophy and religion in particular: suffering and anxiety, despair and hope, death and afterlife, crisis and destiny—what the experiences are and how to deal with them. The problem of Sars in Hong Kong has certainly brought more urgency and relevancy to the courses dealing with these issues, and certainly the syllabi and course contents of these courses and General Education could be practically adjusted and strengthened in the post-Sars era.

Individually many members of our Faculty have already contributed to the ongoing reflective discourse on Sars and its impact on the socio-cultural order. Professor Lau Kwok Ying and Professor Leo Ou-fan Lee have drawn public attention to a re-reading of the Nobel laureate Albert Camus’ book *The Plague*, with fresh new insights. Professor Chung Po Yin has rekindled our interest in local history by revisiting the plague of 1894 in Hong Kong, reminding us that disease and plague had caused much suffering to the people in Hong Kong more than a century ago, but there was a reenergized and even more vibrant society emerged soon after. Fear strikes when we encounter Sars as an unknown and unprecedented disease with no vaccine and immediate cure, but we might get a sense of optimism and hope from our collective memory that without panic our society could withstand and endure the challenge and return to normalcy and prosperity.

Colleagues in the humanities who participated in public forums and cultural seminars related to Sars contributed generally to the deepening reflection on the meaning of life and human existence and on the articulation of feelings and emotions. We believe the proper channeling of our collective anxieties and fear into regulated expressions would have soothing and therapeutic effect upon the public and help elevate the community from chaotic fear and widespread panic. Professor Victor Chan Wai Kwong’s beautiful song, is an example of the humanist’ dosage for a society stricken by the sadness and sorrow caused by Sars.

Now let us turn to the question: what collectively and institutionally the Faculty of Arts and the scholars in the humanities can do in post-Sars research?

The following are some of the Sars-related projects under planning and development:

- First, a team of social historians and public health specialists are interested in developing a project to investigate the history of public health in Hong Kong from the early colonial period to the present time. Prevention and control of infectious diseases by government and community organizations, experiences of Hong Kong people under the siege of plagues and other epidemic would be the main themes and topics for investigation in their study.
- Secondly, the Centre for Comparative City Cultures at the Research Institute for the Humanities at CUHK would develop a joint project (perhaps with Taipei and Beijing) to compare the responses of government and community to the outbreak of Sars in the Sars affected cities: Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei, Guangzhou and Beijing.
- Colleagues in Philosophy and General Education are also thinking of introducing a course on “Human Life and Death” to the primary and secondary school curriculum, while a similar but more advanced course offered to university students will be further strengthened with reference to the Sars experience in Hong Kong.