

## BACKGROUND AND ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

This project—*A Documentary History of Public Health in Hong Kong*—aims at chronicling and presenting the history of public health in Hong Kong from 1841 to 1993. It was initiated in 2004, immediately after the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong. It has taken us more than a decade to complete this project, which is primarily based on archival materials. We collected key documents in nine areas pertaining to public health and provide a systematic study of these documents in order to show the main issues and characteristics of each identified sector during the process of development in the century and a half following Hong Kong's opening.

Three of our teammates are experienced scholars in the field of medical history. For Professor Lee Shiu-hung, former Director of Health of the Hong Kong government and Founder of the School of Public Health and Community Medicine at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, public health has been a life-long concern and engagement; for Professor Yip Ka-che, a distinguished historian from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, medical history has been a long-standing academic interest. The other member of our team, Professor Timothy Wong Man-kong of Hong Kong Baptist University, whose major academic interests are Hong Kong history and the history of Christian missions in China, began to pursue Hong Kong medical history a few years ago and now sees it as an integral part of Hong Kong history and missionary history.

Among the team members I am the only exception, a newcomer to the field. For me, the issue of public health, before SARS, had never been my immediate concern and medical history never a priority on my research agenda. In short, this project is, for me, really a recent development in the post-SARS period.

There are two main reasons for this newfound interest. First, it came out as a direct impact of SARS on my life and the growing need I felt toward understanding the trauma during my own post-SARS reflections. In the immediate

aftermath of SARS, in early 2004, an academic forum was organised by the RGC to discuss the implications of SARS on teaching and research. The forum speakers consisted of mainly health workers and medical scientists. For reasons unknown I was also invited to give a presentation on behalf of the humanities faculty. When I was asked, my immediate reaction was: what has the humanities to do, if any, with SARS or post-SARS research? Or, what can humanities scholars—the artist, the writer, the classicist, the philosopher, the religionist, and the historian, etc.—contribute to the post-SARS research agenda?

Unlike the medical and health care colleagues who were at the forefront during the war against SARS and since have been actively engaged in virus research and other infection-control projects in the post-SARS period, or the social workers, psychologists, economists, building designers, and architects whose contribution to a post-SARS agenda was clearly evident and much called for, the role of the humanities scholars seems secondary and ambiguous at best if not totally irrelevant. My feeling at that time was: maybe we could just be satisfied being bystanders, clapping our hands, encouraging and cheering on our “heroes” from the sideline, just like any other concerned citizens.

However, with the vivid memory of the SARS scare, we felt the urge to do more, not only in the form of cheer leaders, volunteers, and monetary contributors, but by making some 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, especially in philosophy and religion: suffering and anxiety, despair and hope, death and afterlife, crisis and destiny—what these experiences are and how to deal with them. The problem of SARS in Hong Kong had certainly brought more urgency and relevancy to the humanities 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 curriculum.

Since 2004 many university members of our Humanities Faculty had already contributed to the public discussion and reflective discourse on SARS and its impact on the sociocultural order. During the SARS period, CUHK Professor Lau Kwok-ying and Professor Leo Ou-fan Lee, for example, drew public attention to a rereading of Nobel Laureate Albert Camus’s book *The Plague*, with fresh insights. Professor Chung Po-yin, a historian at HKBU, writing for *Ming Pao* right after SARS, rekindled our interest in local history by revisiting the plague of 1894 in Hong Kong, to remind us that infectious disease and plague had caused much suffering to the people in Hong Kong in similar ways like SARS had, more than a century ago, but nevertheless a reenergised and even more vibrant society emerged soon after. Fear struck when we encountered SARS as an unknown and

unprecedented disease with no vaccine and immediate cure, but we might get a sense of solace, and even perhaps optimism and hope from our collective memory. We learn from our past that without panic our society could withstand and endure the challenge and return to normalcy, civic order, and prosperity.

Colleagues in the humanities who participated in public forums and cultural seminars related to SARS contributed generally to the deepening reflections on the meaning of life and human existence and on the articulation of feelings and emotions. During the three months before our 2004 forum much emotional energy, in the form of anguish and anxiety or in the form of anger and despair, was unleashed. We believe the proper channelling of our collective anxieties and emotions into regulated expressions would have soothing and therapeutic effects upon the public and help alleviate the community from chaotic fear and emotional disorder. Professor Victor Chan Wai-kwong's beautiful song, written as a requiem to SARS, is an example of the humanist's dosage for a society stricken by sadness and sorrow. Professor Cheung Tak-sing's refined poetry, even though in classical Chinese language, had similar effects upon the tormented souls. Moreover, during the SARS days we also witnessed the courageous, noble actions of Hong Kong doctors and nurses, and many angelic deeds of other health care workers, all moving stories that lifted our hearts and touched our souls. I believe that these are truly great qualities that define human existence and are part of the most valuable social and cultural assets of a civilised society. Yet our memories are short and angelic thoughts would soon be overcome and replaced by mundane and practical interests. It is the duty of humanities scholars to help to preserve and sustain the nobility and humanity that have emerged in crisis by integrating the values of compassion and heroism into our collective memory and into the history of mentalities and human development.

I declared in 2004 that we humanities scholars had to face two challenges: (1) how to help regulate the unleashed energies and emotions and put them into constructive and creative application and (2) how to help preserve, sustain, and integrate the valuable lessons into our collective memory.

It is in this regard that I proposed at the 2004 forum the following research projects:

- 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 organisations, experiences of Hong Kong people under the siege of plagues and other epidemics would be the main themes and topics for investigation.

- 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. We'll first start with intellectual discussions (newspaper columns and public forums) and expressed opinions in the forms of literary essays and poetry (fiction and other forms of creative writing will also be included later).
- Colleagues in the departments of 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.

This RGC-funded project is a result of the three suggestions. I have to thank my three colleagues for their positive response to my invitation and the cooperation and input they offered me following the initial contact. Their expertise and contributions have made the proposal successful in the subsequent RGC selection process. And now we have the project beginning January 1, 2006.

Secondly, I have to add that this project, as I conceive it, and other members may look at it differently, is an outgrowth of my own and also the public's increasing interest in public history. I have been involved since 2001 in developing a new Master Programme at the History Department of the CUHK, the focus of which is comparative history and public history. I have since been reading and thinking about the themes and significant trends in the two subfields and thinking through the three definitions of public history, first as heritage studies, second as popular or people's history, and third as historians as public intellectuals. I was specially fascinated by the third. How could a historian contribute to social betterment and public policy through our research and writing? In the context of post-SARS Hong Kong, a project on infectious diseases and medical services seemed so relevant to me that I took my initial steps to become a public historian.

## Historiography and State of the Field

In the post-SARS period there has been growing interest among academics as well as in the community in the history of public health in Hong Kong, an area that was long overlooked prior to the outbreak of SARS. In the past a few medical practitioners such as Dr. Gerald Choa and social historians like Elizabeth Sinn

contributed to our understanding of a field that is now still inchoate. This project therefore is a first systematic and comprehensive attempt in documenting the history of public health in Hong Kong based on archival materials and government documents. The team of investigators collected and analysed primary sources and key documents in a number of significant areas relating to the history of public health in the British colony from the 1840s to the early 1990s, except the founding of the Hospital Authority.

Previous scholarship in the history of public health in Hong Kong is not systematic and far from comprehensive, even though there are essays and books in some of the areas identified by this project team. The preeminent scholar in the field was the late Dr. Gerald Choa, who wrote several useful accounts of the history of medical services in early Hong Kong and a variety of relevant issues. The history of several medical institutions such as the Tung Wah Hospital (E. Sinn), Queen Mary Hospital (C. M. Fung), Alice Memorial (E. H. Paterson), and United Christian Hospital (E. H. Paterson) has been documented and analysed. In regard to the leading medical professionals, Ho Kai, James Cantile, Patrick Manson, Sun Yat-sen, Kwan King-leung, James A. Lowson, and Li Shu-fan have received some attention, but there are more biographies to be collected and written, though the investigators do not envisage a biographical project in the magnitude of C. Goodrich's Ming biographies. The most overlooked area is on the outbreak of epidemics and contagious diseases such as plague, tuberculosis, and venereal diseases and their impact on government and society. Studies on the changing notions of public health are entirely lacking. In the area of medical education, Evans and Starling have provided accounts of the founding and development of two medical faculties at HKU and CUHK. A great deal of effort is still needed to capture the changing paradigms in medical education-cum-research and in nurse training in Hong Kong.

The most recent book project in this field of emergent interest is *From Plague to SARS: A History of Medicine in Hong Kong*, by the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences. It is meant for public interest and provides photos, maps, charts, and a chronological history of medical services. The editorial committee, consisting of medical professionals such as Professor Lee Shiu-hung, published the book a few years ago. Our project, on the other hand, includes more primary sources and analysis of documents.

## Scope and Emphases of Our Project

In both the academic field and among the public there has been an overall lack of understanding of the medical history of Hong Kong, especially in public health. This project therefore aims at providing a systematic and comprehensive

documentary history on this important topic by presenting and analysing important documents in nine areas in the history of public health in Hong Kong between the 1840s and the early 1990s. The nine areas identified for documentation and analysis are as follows:

- 1) changes and continuities in government policies towards public health
- 2) histories of major medical institutions, both public and private
- 3) shifting paradigms of medical education and of medical research in Hong Kong
- 4) history of nursing and the role of nursing in the public health sector
- 5) history of dental health including hospital, training school, the introduction of fluoridation to the water supply and related practices
- 6) emergence of “allied health” (physiotherapists, occupational therapists, medical laboratory technicians, and radiographers)
- 7) biographies of leading medical practitioners throughout the period from the 1840s to the early 1990s
- 8) changing notions of health, as defined by both medical professionals and the general public
- 9) major epidemics and diseases, including the government and public responses

This project involves extensive archival research and oral history in Hong Kong and abroad. The archives that house medical documents include the public record offices in Hong Kong and London and the archives of missionary societies (e.g., the London Missionary Society), philanthropic organisations (e.g., Rockefeller Foundation), and professional and educational bodies (e.g., archives of the medical faculty of Edinburgh University).

## A Concluding Note

The project and its output will be a useful reference for policy makers and health administrators, especially those involved in the planning and further development of medical and health services in Hong Kong. It will provide good background knowledge on the history of health and health care in Hong Kong to undergraduate and postgraduate medical students. Furthermore, it is anticipated that this project will stimulate research interests in many related areas both in medicine and in history, and the public programmes such as lectures and exhibits would be useful in the promotion of public awareness of a “health” city. Presenting Hong

Kong to the world community as a “health city” had been the dream of Professor Lee Shiu-hung before he passed away in 2014 after a full life of eighty years as a medical student, government official, and university professor, committed to improving public health in Hong Kong, and to him this book is dedicated.

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