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BOOK REVIEW

SARS Stories: Affect and Archive of the 2003 Pandemic

Belinda Kong. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2024. 301 pp. $28.95 (pbk). ISBN 9781478025665

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In her recent monograph on the 2003 SARS outbreak in southern China, Hong Kong and Singapore, Belinda Kong lays bare people's efforts in maintaining day-to-day ordinariness, affective relationality and social solidarity in the face of crisis – the reality behind pandemic horror narratives. Debunking the bio-orientalism that has systematically connected Chinese people's frail bodies, bad hygiene habits and moral inaptitude to their culpability of contracting and spreading contagious diseases, Kong points out that such biases, recapitulating the yellow peril metaphors since the late 19th century, outright distort Chinese humaneness while propagating misinformation about the origin of SARS and other related fictions. Her argument is supported by medical archives on index cases and the self-accounts of the patients themselves, which are as a rule neglected by global reports in both popular media and official history.

In addition to fictional writings that highlight ordinary loves and hates during the pandemic, Kong draws on a copious and various body of digital texts that generated and relayed SARS jokes, illustrating how people at the epicentres managed to sustain ordinariness during the pandemic with ingenuity and laughter, while connecting with other denizens in a time of despondency. Contrary to the usual representation of China as a totalitarian state, Kong indicates how the state media encourages people to engage in such humour and buffoonery, even at the expense of officialdom and the Communist Party, since it is believed that a few harmless laughs are good for mental health during times of despair. This rich culture of humour, as Kong writes in reference to Christopher Rea's *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (University of California Press, 2015), has existed throughout communist history since the pre-1949 decades, a time narrated as purely "of tears and sorrow" in official communist historiography.

Among the rich instances of hope and solidarity brought to light amongst Hong Kong people's - especially the entertainment industry's - timely, creative and uplifting responses to the pandemic, Kong foregrounds responses to actor-singer Leslie Cheung's suicide on 1 April 2003. The following few days, around the hotel where he jumped to his death, at his memorial service and on his final journey to the crematorium, crowds surged to commemorate him notwithstanding the virus and a steady rain, leaving not only bouquets but also masks, evidently to protect his spirit from the virus. Long suffering from a gradual decline, the cinema business decided to keep the annual film awards ceremony going as usual that week. Despite his qualms about the disease, the invited host accepted the job in order to continue the show-business tradition of braving global disasters and donating or raising money for people in need. Many celebrities in town participated in the event in camaraderie. It is moments like these that make Kong believe in Chinese people's capability of social solidarity and love. Hong Kong films made during and after SARS all mixed fear and despondency with jokes, laughter and joy. Similar benevolent practices continued in the COVID-19 era. Samuel Hui's "Riding in the Same Boat," a 1997 song replete with "Cantophone vernacular wit, little-guy sassiness

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and fighting spirit," was reperformed in a 2020 miniconcert to rally for togetherness and hope (p. 179).

Throughout the book the coherent analysis of maintaining ordinariness and normalcy in the time of pandemic stems from Kong's methodological choice: in lieu of crisis epistemologies and the concept of biopolitics, Kong opts for what she dubs as "pandemic ordinariness." Siding with critics such as Kyle Whyte, she points out that crisis discourse is used by colonialists to justify their wrongdoings towards other peoples in times of "unprecedented" crisis demanding "urgent" reactions that often entail appalling sacrifices. As she illustrates in the book, however, pandemics occur repeatedly in human history, each mirroring a previous one in magnitude and in the mistakes made in responses. As to biopolitics, she names the conspiracy theory of Giorgio Agamben, for whom the COVID-19 pandemic was a hoax, serving only as a pretext for governments to use extreme measures to control people's bodies rather than saving their lives. Finding these two methodological models resonant with "Western colonialist attitudes toward Chinese emotions" (p. 35), she turns for inspiration to the famous writer Eileen Chang's practice of enacting "micro-agency amid macro chaos" and her aesthetic of sentiments and daily "trivial things" as a contrast to "grand narratives of national salvation." Hence Kong's adoption of Lauren Berlant's concept of "crisis ordinariness," her purpose being to "decolonize and deorientalize global affective forms toward pandemic China" (pp. 34–35) by showcasing Chinese people's resilience against the threat of the pandemic while keeping ordinary everyday life going.

Still working on the book after the COVID-19 outbreak, Kong draws readers' attention to the similarities between the two pandemics, 16 years apart, instilling a deep sense of déjà vu. Discussed throughout the book and especially in a coda at the end of each chapter, the later event seems to repeat the same mistakes and Sinophobia of the earlier one, a disheartening phenomenon to note. However, she finds consolation in the resilience and love shown in people's selfless care for each other. Without theorizing the concept of affect and seeming to equate it with emotions, *SARS Stories* implies nonetheless that affect, be it positive emotions such as love or negative ones such as hate, is more than personal emotions; it is transpersonal, social and relational. Furthermore, the expression of affect is always selective: it can be fascistic or progressive, phobic or philanthropic.

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