

STEM TO STEAM: THE ETHICAL IMPACT OF CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES AT A TIME OF CRISIS

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Inter-Artistic Plague Narratives and the Cultural Differences between China and the West

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Abstract. Artistic representation is an instrument of historical memory that, unlike history, serves to transfer the emotional imprint that historical records leave behind for the sake of objectivity. Art memorializes achievements and success, but also tragic moments of death and destruction. Cultural differences between China and the West lead to varied perspectives and patterns of expression in the Fine Arts. This paper offers several examples showing how art has dealt with epidemic and pandemic. No one is immune to such tragedies in our increasingly globalized world. By looking back at the memories recorded in artistic representation, we can learn from the past and cooperate in order to face future crises successfully. However, cooperation is only possible if we are aware of cultural differences. This paper provides a brief example on how Chinese and European art face inter-artistic plague narratives in different ways.

Keywords: Art, China, Human Sciences, Plague, East, West.

INTRODUCTION

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx criticized the capitalist economic crisis by comparing it to an ‘epidemic’ and continued this metaphor into the description of alienated labour in the *Paris Manuscript*. As a verbal representation of the human perplexity, pain, fear, sadness and yearning in the face of existential crises, epidemic narratives implicate complex interpretative possibilities. Epidemic topics leave behind recorded disasters in the arts and their exploration shows that such episodes have left a profound impact on society. Looking back at some of these masterpieces across the world gives food-for-thought; with past examples of how humanity has dealt with these crises, and showing that many of them are motivated by a disregard with the harmony and equilibrium of natural ecosystems, and the impact on people’s lives of such neglect.

The first months of the year 2020 have brought the spread of the COVID-19 virus all over the world. This pandemic, like others before it, is one of the greatest disasters of the human race. Many experts claim that our life styles were leading in the direction of natural extinction. It seems that humans only react and change when confronted with despairing situations. Scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences continue to emphasize the need for responsible action. Looking at past failures is an important way to prevent similar situations in the present and the future. Thus, the records of past plagues captured in artistic representations bring back memories of those tragic moments of death and destruction in a unique and vivid way. The reproduction of these horrors in art and literature can help later generations to shudder in the encounter of misery and death, encouraging them, perhaps, to take action to prevent these crises from happening.

EPIDEMIC RECORDS IN EUROPEAN ART

Epidemics are among the most horrible crises that have haunted world history. Virus know no borders and past artistic representations show that the earth has surrendered to epidemic and pandemic many times. Many classic literary works have left memory records of such episodes, including Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Albert Camus's *La Peste*, García Márquez's *El amor en tiempos del cólera*, Dan Brown's *Inferno*, or Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone*, to name a few. They are classified as 'plague literature', considered dark literary classics because of their harsh descriptions. All of these works suggests that when a major cataclysm or epidemic hits humanity, people begin to reflect on what really matters in life.

Before moving on to exploring the case of China, I will refer briefly to two large-scale plague episodes that have left a great memory imprint on the annals of history in the Western world: the so-called 'Plague of Justinian', which undermined the Byzantine Empire, and the 'Black Plague', which claimed at least one third of European population during the Middle-Ages.

The Roman Empire had fallen apart in the 4th century and the West Byzantine section tried to regain the lost territory in order to unify the former Empire again and restore its past glory. Emperor Justinian waged

a war to conquer North Africa and Italy when an unprecedented plague took place. In 541, the pestilence crushed Pelusium in Egypt, spreading across Alexandria, and arriving at Constantinople (now Istanbul) via the land-sea trading network. From there, it raged across the entire Byzantine Empire. The homeless were most vulnerable to the pestilence. Thousands of people died in a single day. Empire officials hid the truth from Emperor Justinian, who was busy leading his army in the military operations in the Mediterranean. When the Emperor was finally informed things had gone out of control. One of the episodes is depicted in *Peste à Rome* (1869; Orsay Museum, Paris) by Jules Elie Delaunay. The artist chooses to situate the episode in the Italian city of Rome, stockpiling the stinking dead bodies. The behaviour of two characters is striking. A winged angel instigates a savage bully in black to attack a household, the door and windows of which are all closed. The painter was inspired by the martyrdom story of the disciple Sebastian in *Legenda Aurea* compiled by the Italian brother Dvora Gini, “then the nice angel appeared and directed an evil angel to knock on the households with a spear. The number of deaths was decided by the times of the knock.” The plague was variously interpreted as God’s punishment on the Romans for their persecution of the Christians. A man on the bottom right corner of the painting seeks help from the statue of Asclepius, Greco-Roman protector of health. The different gods ignore the cries coming from the sinning humans. Emperor Justinian missed the plague by a narrow chance. Out of feat, he ordered to build a huge tomb to bury the dead bodies to prevent the plague from further spreading. Rich or poor, old or young, they were all piled up and buried. This large-scale pestilence claimed the lives of 40% of the residents in Constantinople and continued for half a century, causing 1/4 of the Romans to die. The famine and civil strife crushed Justinian’s ambitions and led to the collapse of the Byzantine Empire.

Even more fatal and infectious was the Black Plague that took place in the mid-fourteenth century in Europe. The virus originated in Central Asia, carried by fleas in the fur of black rats. The virus went rampant across Russia, West Europe and North Africa, taking 75 million lives worldwide. There were black spots, signs of subcutaneous bleeding, on the skin of the infected; hence the name of ‘black’ plague. At the time, sanitary and health conditions were poor and death was inevitable. The Italian writer Boccaccio spent five years on writing *The Decameron*, recording the disaster

in the once prosperous city of Florence. Another Italian artist, the poet Petrarch wrote that he wished he was never born, wondering if anyone had experienced something more horrible.

The Triumph of Death (1562; Prado Museum, Spain) by the great Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder is one of the most representative paintings depicting the havoc during the plague. The horrible scene of skeletons symbolizes the Undead Legions, reproducing the despair caused by the plague. With its grand composition in panoramic view, the painting situates in the centre the figure of Death holding the sickle to claim lives. Rat cages controlled by the Lady of death are everywhere. God followers in white coats stand by the mousetraps, holding shields with crosses and looking at the cruel scene with a curious, indifferent attitude. The desolate scenes in the background are occupied by endless legions of skeletons. Although most elements are imaginary, the painting reflects social chaos in a vivid way. The dying are tortured by birds pecking their pestilent bodies, and the distinctive beak or proboscis mask that doctors wore to protect their faces became a symbol of the Black Death, much like the mask is today a sign of COVID-19.

The deadly plague swept through Europe in the 14th century, killing one-third of the lives in some regions. Burial ceremonies became a common theme during this period, depicting innumerable nameless sufferers walking to their graves, with no distinction of social status or economic standard. Many paintings depicted scenes where sufferers received blessings from priests because the plague was once more interpreted as a punishment from God. The outbreak of the Black Death in the Middle-Ages fundamentally changed the course of European history. Feudalism suffered a heavy blow, and medical and health services accelerated their modernization. The popularity of Christian beliefs declined and a rational consciousness emerged which set the stage for the Protestant Reformation and the Renaissance.

Culture includes various customary behaviour patterns and norms. Evolving in time, cultural patterns condition human activities and bring about major differences in the recording of historical memory, artistic aesthetics and representation. Such differences are greater among territories situated far apart, as in the case of the East and the West. Thus, in the predominant Christian tradition of European cultures, plague depictions are often related to doomsday or the end of times, in

connection to God's disapproval of human actions. To give a few more examples, we can mention the copperplate etching of *The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse* created by the German artist Albrecht Dürer in 1498, now at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, *The Plague of Ashdod* (1630; Louvre museum) by Nicolas Poussin, or the series of eleven paintings *Plague Hospital* (1808-1810) by Francisco Goya. Records of plague disasters in the Western world appear variously alongside other tragic experiences such as war, famine and natural disasters. In this sense, art in China seems to be 'silent' to all these calamities, and there are cultural reasons for this.

EPIDEMICS IN CHINA AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

According to Israeli historian Yuval Harari in his recent book *Homo Deus*, humankind has faced three fundamental threats over the course its history: plague, war and famine. They correspond to the horsemen depicted in the six book of *Apocalypses*, collected in the books that make up the Bible; the forth rider being death itself. As one of the most deadly human killers, plague brought down entire civilizations, such as the Aztecs, the Incas and the Mayans, in America, ancient civilizations in Egypt, Babylon, and India, as well as of the great Roman Empire.

China is no exception. Chinese history has been accompanied by plagues of all kinds and sizes. As early as in the Warring States period (475 BCE to 221 BCE), the Chinese have already sought ways to avoid epidemic in order to achieve immortality as the common aspiration of mankind. This is evidenced by a large number of myths and traditions, and in the records, for example, of the first Emperor, Qin Shi Huang, and his visits to the East China Sea and the Western Regions in search of immortal medicines (such as mercury), or in the scenes of fairy rabbits making medicine in Han Dynasty portraits. Another example are the New Year pictures to ward off evil spirits and fight infection, or the scenes depicted on the wormwood hangings during the Dragon Boat Festival.

As recorded in historical data, after the Han Dynasty, the number of plague outbreaks increased dramatically. Despite the endless struggle during the period known as the Three Kingdoms, war casualties were far less than those caused by infections were. There is a Chinese saying that states that while "three out of ten died of war, seven out of them died of

plague.” China's population witnessed a sharp decline in the period. In the second year of Yongshou, during Emperor Heng's reign in the Han Dynasty (corresponding to 156 CE), the population of the whole country was 50.06 million.

By the end of the Three Kingdoms (280 CE), the population of Wei, Shu and Wu had dropped to only 5.6 million. The plague in the transitional period of late Ming and early Qing Dynasty brought unprecedented sufferings, especially in the Chongzhen period. There are also shocking records in local chronicles of the Ming Dynasty, stating that the plague came suddenly (Qinyuan, Shanxi Province), and that those infected in the morning would not live through the evening, so entire families died overnight. People fled in panic, leaving the cities empty (Xing County, Shanxi Province). The ravaging plague killed more than half the population (Daming Prefecture, Hebei Province). There are also records stating that people were so scared that they didn't visit each other anymore. (Xiong County, Hebei Province) and there were almost no pedestrians on the roads in March (Xingyang, Henan province).

By the 16th year of Chongzhen (1643 CE), a year before the fall of the Ming Dynasty, a plague rose in Beijing. Historical records stated that from February to September people were tortured like ‘humble dogs’. Out of desperation, they had no choice but to flock to temples to worship the gods, hoping for blessings from Heaven. The year of transition from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty was also marked by war and epidemic.

Despite all these catastrophes, Chinese civilization survived. It has been well acknowledged that writing is the distinction between barbarism and civilization. There seems to be no way to trace the inventor of Chinese characters. The ancients believed it was Cang Jie 仓颉, a mythical inventor of Chinese characters during the period of the Yellow Emperor (2712-2599 BCE) in ancient China. According to *Huai Nan Tzu* “The day when ancestor Cang Jie succeeded in forming characters, the sky began to rain corn and ghosts howled in the night,” (Liu An 2010:89) suggesting that human mastery of characters brought their knowledge of the secrets of the world. A reference to the Chinese character *Gu* 蠱 meaning poison and referring to a venomous insect in legends was found in oracle bone scripts, and subsequent studies confirmed that schistosomiasis, a disease caused by parasitic worms, was discovered as early as the Yin and Shang Dynasties (Bronze Period 1600 to 1046 BCE). Oracle writing seems to be the only

surviving vestige, usually found on bones. Jin character and Zhou writing were adopted by Emperor Qin Shihuang in seals; in a transition from official to regular script, with the assistance of paper making and printing. Along with these changes came the means to fight epidemics.

Most ancient doctors believed that the ‘spirit of the five elements’, that is metal, wood, water, fire, and earth (金、木、水、火、土), was the cause of epidemic. It was believed that small deviations in the cyclic seasonal order of the year and in nature could lead to dislocations that resulted in disease. Wu Youxing, a famous doctor in the late Ming Dynasty, wrote a *Treatise on Plague*, in which he put forward the theory of an internal host as the source of infectious diseases. He argued that plagues were caused by hostile invasions rather than an external cause, and that it spread from air emerging from the mouth and nose. Interestingly, this theory is very close to the tenets of contemporary medicine and microbiology. Wu also elaborated a mechanism for epidemic control.

The third global pestilence in China began in Yunnan in 1894 and lasted until the mid-20th century. Over 60 countries in Asia, Europe, Oceania, America and Africa were also affected, most being port cities and nearby inland localities. According to reliable records, 15 million people died from that epidemic. Almost simultaneously, the Japanese scholar Kitasato Shibasabur and the French Swiss Alexandre Yersin discovered the plague bacillus in Hong Kong in 1894. Some years later in 1897, Masanori Ogata found that fleas transmitted the disease, thus identifying the infection source and the transmission routes and providing the scientific basis for the fight against the disease. Episodes surrounding this plague are mentioned in *The Painted Veil* by the British novelist W. Somerset Maugham. In the book, as a sort of punishment after finding out that his wife had cheated on him, Doctor Walter Fane travels with her to a remote village in China. Their mission is to fight a rampant plague. This beautiful but dangerous foreign land leads them to experiences beyond anything they had imagined in their comfortable lives in Britain. Struggling with betrayal, love and death, their journey is one of spiritual growth and realization of the things that really matter in life.

In November 1910, another epidemic broke out again in China under Emperor Xuantong’s reign. That summer, a plague of marmots emerged in Siberia, where there were large numbers of Chinese workers. Those who were infected were expelled by Russia and introduced the disease into

China. After the outbreak in the three North-eastern provinces, it spread at an alarming rate along the Middle East and the Southern Manchuria Railways, as well as Hebei, Shandong and other places. Those fighting the spread, doctors, officers and policemen involved in the response to the crisis infected all their families. Urban centres and rural areas were overwhelmed by the threat of death. The Qing government came to a standstill. Wu Liande, a Malaysian Chinese who was then deputy superintendent of the Tianjin Army Military Medical School, volunteered. He was the first Chinese to receive a doctor's degree from Cambridge University. Wu made field visits to the epidemic area and developed a theory for pneumonic pathology while working with other experts to put forth prevention measures to restore order. These included mobility control, patient isolation, strict disinfection of the infected areas, and incineration rather than traditional burial. Thanks to these effective measures, this epidemic disappeared within four months.

Unlike Western art, Chinese cultural traditions present disaster narratives from a very different perspective. For instance, in the face of disasters, Chinese paintings often emphasizes the close social ties in communities, and the relationship between leaders and common people. In 2008 *Song to the Fight against Earthquake*, created by Hou Yimin, focuses on the grand scenes of disasters. By depicting the soldiers, the medical staff and the suffering, the work highlights the speed, passion and capacity of a nation to protect its citizens. It embodies the Confucian ethos of unity and courage of community, highlighting Chinese collectivism. *We are By Your Side* by Xu Hongfei in 2020 depicts a group of medical workers in protective clothing, holding a covid-19 patient and looking both sad and determined. Rescue is not a person in battle, but a group of people fighting together. They are in a race against death. Heroes who have the courage to shoulder their responsibilities are integrated into one. With such a spirit, all difficulties can be overcome.

More recently, the painting *For the Country I Would Lay Down My Life* by Huang Huasan reflects 84-year old Doctor Zhong Nanshan's devotion to work in the front line during the fight against COVID-19. The medical staff represented by Doctor Zhong Nanshan left their families and risked infection in order to fight the epidemic, serving the country with their hearts and treating patients with compassion.

Ancient Western fine art seems to view disasters from a tragic perspective, in a grand narrative of afterlife salvation that uses dramatic forms of metaphor and allegory in order to trigger emotional responses from the audiences. Chinese artistic creations, including contemporary art, tend to emphasize national awareness and perhaps adopt romanticized techniques of expression, highlighting the positive impact of art and the social responsibility of artists. Chinese aesthetics take it as a fundamental task to shape heroic characters, tell touching stories and enhance the national image.

HUMANISTIC RESPONSES TO PANDEMICS

Differences in philosophy, institution and culture between China and the West lead to varied perspectives and patterns of expression in fine arts. Nonetheless, such differences serve similar purposes in capturing the cultural ethos of the time; in this case, the historical memory of epidemic and pandemic disasters.

After the 1918 so-called Spanish flu, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers pondered on one of the most crucial concepts in his existential philosophy, that of ‘critical circumstances’, such as accident and death, and the unreliability of the world. Jaspers believed that only these critical situations make humans surpass themselves and change. Similarly, today's epidemic has prompted people to reflect on the development of civilization.

In the face of such vulnerability, during the COVID-19 spread in 2020, the world of culture and the arts has offered many testimonies of solidarity and courage and what has been termed a ‘fight’ against the virus. Responsibility has also been a key word at this time. The multiplicity of artistic expressions developed during the lockdown bears witness to human struggles to overcome fear and social breakdown, inspiring people to responsible action.

Pandemics are like the myth of Sisyphus; and test of endurance. They can also help set priorities on life values, establishing mechanism to safeguard what matters most. A more recent record, that of French existentialist Albert Camus, narrates how the residents in Oran worked together to fight an unexpected plague and the threat of death. The detailed descriptions reproduce the lively life of the city before the

outbreak and people's struggle afterwards, visualizing the extreme anguish, the total darkness and the complete destruction. The work highlights the absurdity of social systems and emphasizes an attitude of resistance as well as the pursuit for truth and justice, concluding in a positive light.

CONCLUSION

Plague is a major disaster on a par with famine and war. From the fight against past epidemics recorded in art history, humans can acquire painful lessons and valuable experience about what pushes human civilization to these crises and how to confront them. Most infectious diseases were effectively controlled by virtue of improvements in public health systems, modern microbiology and medical technology since the 19th century, proclaiming a temporary triumph for mankind in the fight against plague through civilization and science. However, new plagues are inevitable, given the rapid evolution of viruses, increasing urbanization and population density, and widespread global mobility. Scientists have also warn about the impact of climate change and ecological crises in the development of epidemics and pandemics. These problems continue to challenge governments' capability to respond quickly to unexpected events as well as international cooperation mechanisms.

The arts keep track of these crises and disasters and can serve as warning to avoid the repetition of tragedies. Unlike other disciplines, the arts carry an emotional imprint that has greater impact on people's reactions and actions. Advance in the so-called Hard Sciences needs to move hand in hand with the opportunities offered by the Human Sciences. In the course of human history, millions of people have lost their lives to plague. The COVID-19 pandemic has already taken the lives of over a million people all over the world, and the numbers continue to grow. The Humanities stress that these numbers should never be taken as mere figures because they are a record of the grief of innumerable nameless families. During the lockdowns, the destruction of people's productivity, trade stagnation, and the decline of the tourist industry are having a very negative impact on global economy. The arts have the capacity to capture these individual stories and build them into memories.

Acknowledgements: This research was supported by the Think Tank Construction project of Hangzhou Normal University and the Humanities and Social Sciences Revitalization Plan (2020); the Research Centre for International Communication and Discourse Strategy of Hangzhou Culture, the Key Research Base of Social Sciences in Hangzhou; Art Program of National Social Science Foundation of China (19BA009), the Program for Young Talents of Science and Technology in Universities of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (NJYT-18-A16), as well as the Important Research Bases of Philosophy and Social Sciences in Zhejiang Province (WYPP2020001).

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Bioprofile

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