

## Review - Epidemics in Modern Asia

Written by Michael Shiyung Liu

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MICHAEL SHIYUNG LIU, DEC 14 2016

### *Epidemics in Modern Asia*

by Robert Peckham

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016

Although several fine histories of epidemics in Asia recently have been written, none of them integrated diseases and societies as a narrative thread, much less a central theme. Reading Robert Peckham's *Epidemics in Modern Asia* reaffirms to me that epidemics should be one of the vital themes of modern Asia. The author explores the crucial yet under-explored role that epidemics have played in both colonial and postcolonial Asia. As Peckham's work probes a series of world-changing disease outbreaks across from the eighteenth century through the present, the definition of *modern* to the book is obviously the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the victorious period of scientific medicine and bacteriology in many medical books. The neglect of epidemics and social dynamics in past medical books of the period is arguably more because of their authors' professional training in other dimensions of history than the actual significance of such epidemic impacts in modern Asian history. This absence is gradually being remedied with the new historical scholarship of the past decade like Peckham's that integrates analyses of medical sociology and cultural studies into knowing Asian history.

The book's five core chapters are preceded by an introduction that situate mobility, cities, environment, war, and globalization around the book's central theme on epidemic impacts to Asian societies. The author looks at the interrelationship between disease and human society at both the particular and hemispheric level. The author searches 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 infectious disease's interdependencies with empire, modernization, revolution, nationalism, migration, and transnational patterns of trade. In doing so, the author argues how disease, infection, and epidemics are translated across divides of Asian cultures and powers in both the colonial and postcolonial periods. The author therefore concludes "disease is interlinked with these social and environmental transformations... (via) a complex interplay of variables" (315). To Peckham, diseases mattered not just epidemiologically and demographically but also socially, politically, and culturally.

Each chapter examines this theme by different actors and therefore differing consequences. Chapter 1 elaborates on epidemics and quarantine actions of cholera in colonial Manila and Japan, and bubonic plague in China and colonial Hong Kong during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Peckham abandons the old "impact-response" model, claims that the epidemic crises in fact shifted regional economic and political power, pushed the rise of the nation-state, nationalism, and empire. The meaning of "mobility" in this chapter is multiple, covering new pathways of trade and movements of people and increasing efforts to manage the border controls such as telegraphy and law enforcement measures (90). The author's assertion sets a foundation for following chapters: chapter 2 on the relationship and risk of urbanization and modern public health infrastructure and chapter 3 "Environment" on the exploitation and colonization to utilize environmental resources for economic and political goals. The author treats colonial cities such as Calcutta, Bombay, Singapore, and Hong Kong as nodes in a global pattern of disease transmission. He further verdicts "the geographical location of port cities, as well as their social constitutions, created an environment for infectious disease to spread (139)." An observation is also suitable for explaining the SARS panic in 2003. Aside of the cities' role as transmission centers to global danger of infection, the author views the human-environment relations in Asia as a

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by-product of colonialism and modernization as deeply disruptive and coercive processes (187). To support his analysis, Peckham brings the concept of Anthropocene to the reader's attention. Chapter 4 addresses that war and infectious diseases are intertwined and usually cause conflicts which further spreads diseases, also increases the demand for strong political power. The request to stronger border controls commonly led to state-making in many Asian locations. Chapter 5 considers how globalization would further devastate the disease impacts in the region. This chapter explores a number of interconnections between infectious disease emergence and globalization across Asia. Peckham's warning to globalization of epidemics is very similar to the reason why the World Health Organization launches the Global Burden of Disease Study (GBD) during the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Peckham is also the author of a rich body of articles on Asian history and the history of medicine. He had edited two previous volumes, *Empires of Panic: Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties* (Hong Kong: University Press, 2014) and *Disease and Crime: A History of Social Pathologies and the New Politics of Health* (New York: Routledge: 2014) as well as co-edited with David M. Pomfret, *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene, and Cultures of Planning in Asia* (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Press, 2014). The long list of his publications in the past along with this latest achievement all reveal his insights and approaches are influenced by cultural studies of medicine. Peckham profoundly raises many personal opinions and interpretations in the book without consistently integrating several important works in non-English languages that demonstrate similar concern to modern Asian history, including studies of environmental history and history of international health. He does not either engage with traditional concept of disease, sickness, and modernity in each local society. But these are minor shortcomings in a book that provides by far the richest empirical observations and inspiring arguments to date about why epidemics mattered to shape modern Asia. Generally speaking, *Epidemics in Modern Asia* presents a powerful revisionist interpretation, bringing the history of epidemics to the center of the frame for us to rethink Asian past, present, and future.

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### About the author:

Michael Shiyung Liu is professor at the Institute of Taiwan History, Academia Sinica. His research focuses on environmental history and the history of medicine, in 2009 he published *Prescribing Colonization: The Role of Medical Practices and Policies in Japan-ruled Taiwan 1895-1945*.