

Abstract This paper examines the temporal politics of the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that despite the emphasis on digital real-time coverage and epidemiological forecasting, the pandemic has been understood as a historical event, even as it has been unfolding. The paper considers the implications of this ambiguous temporality, suggesting that COVID-19 has made visible a new heterotemporality, wherein real time, history, and the future intermesh. The paper concludes by focusing on Hong Kong, a former British colony and Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China since 1997, showing how the pandemic has become an uncanny rendering of the city's uncertain future.

Keywords COVID-19, chronopolitics, real time, reverse-prophecy, heterotemporality

From early January 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a “pneumonia of unknown cause” (WHO 2020) in the Chinese city of Wuhan, a coronavirus outbreak has unfolded across multiple digital platforms as a real-time event. COVID-19 has been tracked via apps, live-feeds, and interactive maps, with the disease's transmissibility monitored on online dashboards. These real-time tools have promoted nowcasting—short-range prediction—as a crucial adjunct of forecasting (Wu, Leung, and Leung 2020).

As a data-processing and management strategy, the deployment of real-time technology is hardly new. The term “real time” was used in the emerging field of computer science in the 1940s (Eckert 1985: 394). A few years later, in the midst of the Korean War, Alexander Langmuir established the Communicable Disease Center's (CDC) Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS), a training program that dispatched “disease detectives” into the field and was implicitly named after the recently established Central Intelligence Agency (Pendergrast 2010: 4).

Despite the EIS's emphasis on ready response, however, epidemics continued to be viewed as objects of retroactive epidemiological study. Painstaking fact-finding work was required by Langmuir's "shoe-leather epidemiologists" (Koo and Thacker 2010) to piece together the causes and effects of an outbreak. The conceptualization of the epidemiologist as a detective reflected assumptions about the forward- and backward-looking nature of the epidemiologist's work. Detective stories exist in double-time: while investigations advance toward a resolution, this forward compulsion is driven by a reconstruction of past events (Todorov 1988). In contrast, the mysteries of contemporary outbreaks can be solved as they are happening, with time flattened to a single real-time dimension. In this respect, COVID-19 bears witness to the figure of the "AI epidemiologist" (Engelmann 2020) who embodies broader processes of acceleration characteristic of the "high-speed" present (Rosa 2013; Rosa 2009).

Instantaneity is only one dimension of the coronavirus's temporal politics. As Sarah Sharma has suggested, speed theorists have tended to over-simplify the acceleration of everyday life. In contrast to the speed-up model, Sharma invites us to consider "entangled time" through a "power-chronography" that discloses the uneven tempos of the contemporary (Sharma 2014: 1–26). In a similar fashion, this paper examines the temporal entanglements made visible by the COVID-19 pandemic in order to show how real time, history, and the future are intermeshing in a new heterotemporality. The speed of the virus's global transmission has called forth draconian slowdown measures, including the imposition of city, regional, and national lockdowns. Economic slowdown is also reversing an established post-Cold War temporal order: East Asia—with China in the lead—is now claiming to represent a high-speed world, while the West—with the United States in the lead—is reverting to slow-motion status. Analogies of COVID-19 with earlier epidemics—Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002 and 2003 and the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic—have promoted the novel coronavirus as a future that is already past. Insistent war metaphors have also framed the fight against COVID-19 as a replay of World War II. The pandemic is being remembered even before it has ended, as if there is no need for time to elapse for memory to take hold.

The temporal politics of the COVID-19 experience are especially poignant in Hong Kong, and the temporality of the coronavirus has intermeshed with that of civil protest. In June 2019, citizens took to

the streets of Hong Kong to oppose a proposed government extradition bill that was widely viewed as a sign of Beijing's growing interference in the city's judicial independence. The bill was also taken as a forewarning of a future to come. A former British colony, China resumed its sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, and under terms agreed by Britain and the People's Republic of China (PRC), the territory was guaranteed a quasi-autonomous status for a transition period of fifty years. The specter of July 1, 2047—the date when this special arrangement will cease and Hong Kong will be fully absorbed into the PRC—has loomed large in the protests. In response to disturbances over the Labor Day holiday on May 1, 2020, a spokesperson for Beijing's liaison office in Hong Kong warned that if the protests resume after the threat of COVID-19 has passed, the city would be renouncing its future (Cheung and Lau 2020). The pandemic, it seems, has become an uncanny rendering of—or, perhaps, entanglement with—the future of Hong Kong.

Temporal Differentiations

The politics of time—chronopolitics—has long been recognized as a key dimension of imperial geopolitics (Fabian 2002). The global expansion of capital in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not only involved the colonization of space but also hinged on temporal differentiations. The “now” and the “here” were pitted against the “then” and the “there.” Others were kept in their place by relegating them to another time that denied them claims to contemporaneity. Progress, development, and modernity were promoted by the colonial state in part by conjuring the dangers of their opposites: “stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition” (Fabian 2002: 144).

A reconfigured post-colonial version of this chronopolitics is becoming apparent in the coronavirus outbreak that has coincided with intensifying geopolitical tensions between the United States and the PRC. In July 2018, the Trump administration inaugurated a trade war with the PRC, imposing tariffs on Chinese goods and services in retaliation for what it considered “unfair trade practices” (Swanson 2018). Claims and counter-claims about the buying and squandering of “precious time” have been central to this US-PRC standoff. President Trump has accused the PRC of a cover-up—in effect, of wasting time before alerting the world to the scale of the threat posed from the “Chinese virus.” Conversely, Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist

Party leadership have argued that they bought the world time with their radical containment of the coronavirus in Hubei province, the epicenter of the outbreak (Johnson 2020).

Coincidentally, efforts to halt the speed of the virus's global diffusion have resulted in a dramatic global slowdown. Lockdowns of the world's busiest financial hubs—New York and London—have caused the de-acceleration of market activity and the cessation of many of the services that have been taken to typify “high-speed societies” from “fast food” to “speed dating” (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009). As President Emmanuel Macron (2020) declared in a TV address in March 2020 that repeatedly stressed the French government's determination to “slow down” the virus, lockdown is “life in slow motion.”

The Already Past

Mathematical epidemiologists have taken center stage during the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast to many former outbreaks, such as those of avian influenza H5N1, SARS, or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), where microbiologists and basic scientists played a more prominent role. Despite this emphasis on real-time surveillance and digital epidemiology, however, the repertoire of images that has defined the COVID-19 pandemic might have been lifted from a history textbook. We have seen it all before, albeit captioned with different dates and place-names: a military convoy rumbling through the streets of a town at night; a priest blessing rows of numbered coffins in a church; bodies in a parking lot that doubles as a morgue. Re-rendered in sepia or black-and-white, these could be scenes from Hong Kong or Bombay (Mumbai) in the 1890s during the third plague pandemic (the first pandemic to be systematically photographed) or San Francisco in 1918 during the influenza pandemic. We are everywhere and nowhere. But wherever we are, we are in the past. The people inhabiting these images—even those who are living—appear as ghosts, as if the present has been sucked back to some exemplary pandemic past. The name of the disease, COVID-19, reinforces this temporality. In contrast to the place associations of many other diseases—Nipah, Ebola, and Zika—COVID-19 is a chronological marker, dividing what has come before with what will come after. The disease points to the present of its emergence that is now history: 2019 already belongs to a former decade.

Analogy has been crucial in shaping COVID-19's heterotemporality. The coronavirus has been so persistently analogized with former

outbreaks it has become quasi-historical even while it is unfolding. More than a *déjà vu*, COVID-19 has always already been over. From the outset, the new coronavirus was equated with SARS. In February 2020, the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses confirmed the genetic link between both viruses, officially naming the new virus SARS-CoV-2 (Gorbalenya et al. 2020). Beyond their genetic resemblances, both originated in China, and commentators noted similarities in the way PRC authorities responded to both outbreaks. After the first cases of SARS were identified, Chinese officials attempted to cover up the scale of the outbreak, provoking international condemnation when they clamped down on alleged “whistleblowers.” Similar accusations have been leveled during the COVID-19 pandemic, with allegations that the virus’s human-to-human transmission was initially concealed, along with the true number of deaths. Doctors who warned their colleagues about the new virus—including Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at the Central Hospital of Wuhan who later died of the disease—were harassed by the police (Cai 2020).

The name of the new virus was intended to break the stigmatizing associations of the pathogen with Wuhan and China, but Chinese authorities have been disinclined to use the term SARS-CoV-2 because of its connotations with the PRC’s bungled response to the 2003 outbreak. The WHO has also been cautious about using SARS-CoV-2, since “the name SARS can have unintended consequences in terms of creating unnecessary fear for some populations, especially in Asia which was worst affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003” (WHO n.d.).

As the radius of COVID-19 infections widened and the number of cases increased beyond SARS, comparisons were drawn with other pandemics: the 1918–19 influenza pandemic in which upward of fifty million people died worldwide (Rumore and Mather 2020) or even the fourteenth-century Black Death (Marcus 2020). These analogic views promoted by articles, commentaries, and opinion pieces in medical journals and the popular media have presented COVID-19 as a recurrence, as the retelling of a familiar story with lessons to be learned for the future, or lessons not learned (Peckham 2020).

Pandemic War and Remembrance

Another recurrent metaphor used in relation to the coronavirus pandemic has been that of war and World War II in particular. In a nationwide TV address in mid-March 2020, German Chancellor Angela Merkel set the tone when she asserted that the challenge posed by the

virus was “the greatest since WWII” (Morris, Beck, and Noack 2020). Donald Trump has called himself a “wartime president” (Smith 2020). President Macron has repeatedly proclaimed France to be “at war.” In his first address to the nation in March 2020, he used the phrase numerous times, declaring: “The enemy is there—invisible, elusive—and advancing” (Macron 2020). Queen Elizabeth II celebrated British World War II resolve in a special broadcast where she quoted from the morale-boosting wartime song “We’ll Meet Again,” popularized by the singer Vera Lynn in 1939. Prime Minister Boris Johnson—the author of a book on Winston Churchill—has repeatedly summoned the Churchillian spirit of the Blitz, calling the country’s lockdown measures “unprecedented since WWII” (Rawlinson 2020). Even Bill Gates (2020) has referred to the pandemic as a “world war,” noting on his blog, “During WWII, an amazing amount of innovation, including radar, reliable torpedoes, and code-breaking, helped end the war faster. This will be the same with the pandemic.” Finally, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has declared COVID-19 to be the most serious challenge for the world since World War II (Plett-Usher 2020).

Disease-as-war metaphors have a long history. As Susan Sontag has shown, a military lexicon is deeply lodged in Western conceptualizations of disease with frequent reference to campaigns, battles, and fights (Sontag 1990). Even on the microbiological level, mechanisms of infection are understood in combative terms as an attack on host cells by invading viruses. These domains collide in the spectacular, logistic-speak of “theaters” and “operations.” Idioms of combat and biomedicine are anchored in a shared commitment to strategic violence.

Like the promotion of mass containment as a tool of prevention, much of the resurgent jingoism during the coronavirus pandemic has come from the PRC. Xi Jinping has been the role model for the new war on disease, taking command of “the people’s war” against the viral epidemic. The language of war has been so thoroughly promoted by the central government in Beijing since December 2019 it has made the fight against SARS look like a minor skirmish. The war against COVID-19 has been conjured as the war to end all wars: a “total war” (Xinhuanet 2020b) in the parlance of the official Chinese media. And it is a war framed in explicitly moral terms. “The epidemic is a devil,” Xi has said, “we will not let it hide” (Xinhuanet 2020a).

Conspiracy theories abound claiming the coronavirus may be some dark instrument in a bio-armory. President Trump (2020) has spoken in antagonistic terms of the “Chinese Virus,” asserting, in an Oval

Office address, “This is the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history.” On the other side, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian has accused the US military of bringing the coronavirus to Wuhan (Zheng 2020). This accusation—long since debunked—recalls Chinese allegations of US biological warfare during the Korean War, merging the fight against infectious diseases with the war against capitalist imperialism. As Mao Zedong declared in 1953: “Let us get mobilized, attend to hygiene, reduce the incidence of disease, raise the standard of health, and crush the enemy’s germ warfare” (Endicott 1979: 80).

The mobilization of troops to combat COVID-19 has reinforced the pandemic-as-war motif. Media stories have emphasized the vulnerability and sacrifice of World War II veterans, making discussions of a wartime ethos central to debates about the coronavirus. In Britain, Captain Tom Moore, a veteran who served in India and Burma during World War II, has been lauded for his courage and has raised millions of pounds for the National Health Service (NHS) in its fight against COVID-19. Moore’s hundredth birthday was celebrated with a Royal Air Force fly-past of Spitfire and Hurricane warplanes and birthday greetings from the Queen and prime minister (BBC 2020). In the United States, a one-hundred-four-year-old World War II veteran, Bill Lapschies, who survived the 1918 influenza pandemic and was drafted into the US Army in 1943, has similarly been feted as the oldest known COVID-19 survivor (Shepherd 2020).

These COVID-19–World War II analogies emphasize the magnitude of what’s at stake (a way of life) and the need to forget differences in the face of a common enemy. The fight against the coronavirus is conceived as a heroic struggle with an uncertain outcome, as if World War II history is yet to be made. In fact, this war is fought in reverse, since the outcome of COVID-19 imagined as World War II is already known before it has ended. COVID-19, it turns out, isn’t a new war, but an old one—a war that doesn’t need to be fought to be remembered since it has already happened.

Geoff Dyer notes a similar temporal contraction in his history of World War I, *The Missing of the Somme*, where he argues that the memorialization of World War I preceded the war itself. Dyer (2012: 8) cites the celebrated medievalist Johan Huizinga who enjoined the historian to “maintain towards his subject an indeterminist point of view” and to “constantly put himself at a point in the past at which the known factors still seem to permit different outcomes.” But as Dyer reflects, “history does not lie uniformly over events.” The words from

Laurence Binyon's poem "For the Fallen" (1914), intoned each November on Remembrance Day, were written, Dyer (2012: 9) reminds us, "*before* the fallen actually fell": "'For the Fallen,' in other words, is a work not of remembrance but of anticipation, or more accurately, the anticipation of remembrance: a foreseeing that is also a determining." Much the same could be said of COVID-19 imagined as World War II: the memory of the pandemic-war has preceded the pandemic-war, and history is told backwards as "the story of effects generating their cause" (Dyer 2012: 9).

Reflecting on the meaning of history during and in the aftermath of World War II, the German philosopher Karl Löwith (1949: 6) wrote, "the past is a promise to the future; consequently, the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse, demonstrating the past as a meaningful 'preparation' for the future." The coronavirus functions in a similar way as "a prophecy in reverse." The past becomes preparation for a future that has already happened.

Conclusion: Hong Kong Time

It is not surprising that this sense of entangled time—of real time, history, forecasting, and reverse prophecy—is perhaps nowhere so pronounced as in Hong Kong. As Ackbar Abbas (1997: 4) observed in 1997, the year that China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong: "A port city that used to be located at the intersections of different spaces, Hong Kong will increasingly be at the intersections of different times or speeds."

From the end of the twentieth century, with the emergence of highly pathogenic avian influenza, Hong Kong became a strategic site for anticipating emerging infections—"a sentinel post on the edge of the epicenter for pandemic flu" (Keck 2019: S251). SARS, which was first identified as "atypical pneumonia" in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong in late 2002, reached Hong Kong in February 2003 and from there went on to infect over 8,000 people in 29 countries with nearly 800 confirmed deaths. SARS was so closely associated with Hong Kong that the acronym for the territory's status as a Special Administrative Region of the PRC, or SAR, became confused with the acronym for the disease (SARS): SAR was SARS (Peckham 2016).

Hong Kong and SARS were taken as reflections of a new high-velocity globalization. As "a disease of speed" that hitched onto proliferating high-speed transportation networks (Zhou and Coleman 2016), SARS mirrored the frenetic pace of the global city. The epidemic drew

attention to advances in information and communication technology that enabled real-time responses to the crisis. However, SARS also revealed globalization as a desynchronizing force that produces differential speeds of information flow and unequal capacities to respond to coincidental health emergencies (Zhou and Coleman 2016; see also Rosa 2009). And it exposed the persistence of old habits embedded in the hyper-modern city: a tenacious “backwardness” exemplified by the “wet markets,” which were widely viewed in the Western media as sites of interspecies spillover and incubators of viral infections (Lyn-teris 2016).

If Hong Kong is imagined within global health as a place with a long history of infectious diseases—from Hong Kong fever to the bubonic plague in the 1890s and the Hong Kong influenza in 1968—it is also conceived as a frontier-zone for preempting risky futures. Politically speaking, as the writer Han Suyin put it in 1959, the city works “on borrowed time in a borrowed place” (quoted in Hughes 1976). While Hong Kong Island was held in perpetuity, the New Territories—by far the largest part of Hong Kong—had been leased from the Qing dynasty for a term of ninety-nine years. In 1997, when China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong after more than 150 years of colonial rule, the territory continued to live on borrowed time as the countdown began to 2047. A legacy of the colonial period is the fact that most land is leasehold, with leases generally granted by the government for fixed terms of seventy-five years or ninety-nine years—raising public concerns about what will happen after Hong Kong’s special status ends. As Hughes (1976: 129) expressed it, Hong Kong “is the only human habitation in the world that knows when it will die.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken place nearly halfway through this fifty-year term. Many Hong Kong residents feel the future to be increasingly uncertain. The 2015 dystopian movie *Ten Years*, set in the future, imagines Hong Kong as a Chinese colony with Cantonese relegated to a second language and freedoms curtailed. In 2016, Artists Sampson Wong and Jason Lam created the installation project “Countdown Machine” as a giant digital clock projected onto the International Commercial Centre building in West Kowloon, Hong Kong’s tallest skyscraper.¹ Such protest art projects are symbolic slowdowns that seek to counter Hong Kong’s accelerating assimilation into China—a process exemplified by the new high-speed rail service now linking Hong Kong to Guangzhou in under an hour.

News of the outbreak in Hubei province in December 2019 occurred against the backdrop of political protests that had brought

Hong Kong to near standstill since June 2019 with mass demonstrations, sit-ins, and street barricades. The “speed-space” of the city was compelled to slowness (Virilio 2001: 69). Masked crowds took to the streets and the police retaliated by deploying antiriot units, water cannons, and tear gas. In October 2019, the government made use of an emergency colonial ordinance to impose a universal face-mask ban on those attending public gatherings. Clashes between police and protesters led to all eleven lines of Hong Kong’s Mass Transit Railway (MTR) system shutting down, bringing the city to a halt.

Government antiprotest measures have since converged with anti-COVID-19 social-distancing measures. In January 2020, Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, refused to close the borders with mainland China, despite an influx of COVID-19 cases into Hong Kong—a position that was viewed by many as politically motivated. Thousands of medical workers took strike action in protest. Meanwhile, the government’s banning of face masks was challenged by health experts who called for the mandatory wearing of masks to contain COVID-19.

Time has been crucial to the COVID-19 experience in Hong Kong. The rush to slow the disease has converged with the countdown to 2047 and protesters’ efforts to slow down Beijing’s influence. Hong Kong’s future, embedded in its status as a Special Administrative Region, has intersected with its past: SARS in 2003, Hong Kong’s “hand-over” in 1997, and the resurrection by the government of a 1922 emergency colonial law to quell antigovernment protest. As the receding threat of COVID-19 is gradually replaced by the resumption of civil unrest, the specter of Beijing is positioned to turn Hong Kong’s future into Hong Kong’s past.

Robert Peckham is MB Lee Professor in the Humanities and Medicine at the University of Hong Kong, where he is concurrently chair of the department of history and founding director of the Centre for the Humanities and Medicine. He is the author of *Epidemics in Modern Asia* (2016).

Note

- 1 “Counting down to 0:00, 1st July 2047.” <http://addoilteam.hk/countdown/>.

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