After going through this nightmare summer together,
Will you and I face each other with greater humaneness?

Leung Ping-kwan (Ye Si),
"Love Poem in the Time of SARS"

Introduction

Prosociality in the Time of Pandemics

To not just survive the nightmare of disease but to feel greater humaneness toward each other as people—that is what matters in our experience of pandemics, so reflects the Hong Kong poet Leung Ping-kwan soon after the end of the 2003 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak.[1] Yet reading the news during COVID-19 can wear down anyone's desire to feel embedded in a common world. To scrutinize constantly changing disease data and public health guidelines while wading through layers of partisan spin and georacial bias is often an exercise in selective attention, emotional calculation rather than social connectivity. Amid the protracted banalities of crisis, one has to turn to more

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mundane sources for comfort and strength, for meanings that arise from and abide within everyday life, and for an affirmative sense of peopleness to offset "affects of disaffection."[2] This book tells precisely these stories by looking back at the SARS pandemic, arguing for this archive's crucial significance especially in light of COVID-19. But we can also find a more recent example, a complex and revealing one, in the unexpected figure of a seventy-five-year-old Chinese grandmother reputedly turned onetime woman warrior.

On March 17, 2021—the morning after the Atlanta spa shootings that left eight people dead, six of them Asian women—Xie Xiao Zhen was punched in the face by a white male assailant while standing by a light pole at a San Francisco street intersection. In the ensuing days, her story went viral across both anglophone and sinophone media worldwide, not as yet another tragic example of anti-Asian violence and victimhood during COVID but as a tale of unexpected liveliness in dark times. Early news footage showed Xie at the scene afterward, left hand holding an ice pack to her swollen face and right hand brandishing a wooden board as she animatedly cursed her assailant in Taishanese, while he lay dazed and bloody-mouthed on a stretcher surrounded by police officers.[3] "Elderly Asian Woman Attacked in San Francisco Fights Back, Sends Alleged Attacker to Hospital," headlined multiple American news outlets appreciatively that week, citing eyewitness accounts of Xie "pummeling" her attacker.[4] Mainland Chinese news soon followed with features on "Overseas Chinese Grandma Suffers Attack but Forcefully Strikes Back" and "Granny Attacked in US Counterstrikes with All Her Might!"[5] Xie's grandson launched a GoFundMe campaign to help raise money for her medical expenses, and, within a week, the fund accrued almost one million dollars. Xie then decided to donate the money back toward fighting anti-Asian racism, insisting that the "issue is bigger than her," thereby prompting another round of international coverage. "Asian Grandmother Who Smacked Her Attacker with a Board Donates Nearly $1 Million," reported NPR.[6] "Valiantly Fighting Back against Hoodlum, Overseas Chinese Grandma in San Francisco to Donate Crowdfunding Proceeds," proclaimed the North American Chinese-language newspaper *World Journal*.[7] Xie's family finally set up a nonprofit, diverting over 80 percent of the proceeds toward "protecting the AAPI community, promoting safety, and preventing any further increase in Asian hate crimes."[8] When the family offered to refund those who do not support this charity, numerous donors left messages that they were donating again to offset any refund requests.

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Within three months, the YouTube video of Xie's post-attack tirade, uploaded by the local KPIX television station, had garnered over a million views.[9] In the comments section, thousands of netizens across different racial and ethnic groups and from various countries applauded Xie's courage and spirit while expressing their heartache for her suffering. "[She] deserves a medal," remarked more than one poster, while others enthusiastically proclaimed "Good job, Grandma!" and "Respect to grandma!" Racial care as well as racial anger and racial grief emerged as prominent themes among self-identifying Asians, even as other netizens of color conveyed solidarity with their "Asian brothers and sisters."[10] The incident also incited much fury and pride among Xie's fellow Taishanese in her hometown and in the diaspora. The Guangdong-based cartoon journalist Chen Chunming, himself from Taishan, was inspired to sketch Xie in the pose of a fierce martial artist wielding her wooden board like a sword and barking out "daa nei puk gaai"—a colloquial Cantonese vulgarism that can be doubly translated, Chen explained, as either "beat you bastard" or "beat you till you go to hell," as Xie had been filmed swearing at her assailant as a "sei puk gaai" ("goddamn bastard"). This droll cartoon, along with a short video Chen created of it with the theme song from the Wong Fei Hong movie franchise as background music, also went viral in the sinophone media, further elevating Xie to the status of transnational ethnic folk hero. When this meme reached back to Xie's San Francisco family and they conveyed their gratitude to Chen, the latter responded that he wished not only to pay tribute to the granny but also to communicate a spirit of ethnic solidarity, for "the overseas Chinese to unite together and not be afraid of bullying."[11]

From one perspective, Xie's story epitomizes a generative hub of pandemic prosociality. As different components of her story spread globally, prosocial words and deeds, sentiments and connections proliferated, at first revolving around Xie as an individual but rapidly fanning out to encompass a much wider socius. Admiration for her transformed into positive group identifications within and across identity lines, cohering around common feelings of concern and care. At a time when the coronavirus has resurrected vehement orientalist and sinophobic attitudes across the Western world—a topic I will address more fully in chapter 4—the many instances of altruistic rallying around Xie testify to a strong countercurrent of social affects and attachments that are not reducible to disease fear and xenophobia. Indeed, against the backdrop of the pandemic's negative social effects, her

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story stands out as all the more extraordinary, with her fire and generosity moving others to speak and behave in kind. It is as if the global socius has been hungry precisely for an affirmative model to replicate and reciprocate amid its sense of collective crisis—especially given that this attack occurred during not only a spike in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States since the start of the pandemic but also an ancillary wave of violence targeting specifically Asian seniors since the start of 2021. In the Bay Area alone, the eighty-four-year-old Thai immigrant Vicha Ratanapakdee was fatally shoved to the ground while taking his daily constitutional around his San Francisco neighborhood in January, and just a week before Xie's assault, the seventy-five-year-old Hong Kong immigrant Pak Ho was punched in the face while taking his usual morning walk around Oakland's Chinatown; both men died of their brain injuries.[12] According to the nonprofit organization Stop AAPI Hate, the 3,795 anti-Asian hate incidents reported to their center during the pandemic period from March 2020 to February 2021 "represent only a fraction of the number of hate incidents that actually occur," but this fraction already showcases "how vulnerable Asian Americans are to discrimination." Physical assault constitutes over 11 percent of the total reports, with Chinese Americans making up over 42 percent of targeted subjects, the largest reporting ethnic group.[13] Within this distressing context, Xie's story readily takes on an aura of myth.

As it happens, though, two key elements of this myth—Xie's ferocious thrashing of her attacker and the attacker's racial motivation—have been destabilized by new evidence. Steven Jenkins, Xie's assailant, turns out to be a homeless man with a history of mental illness who himself was the target of an unprovoked group assault just five minutes before encountering Xie. A seven-minute surveillance video released by the San Francisco Public Defender's Office shows Jenkins being punched and kicked forty times by four different people a few blocks away, and, when he walked off, he was followed by one of his attackers, who struck him five more times in the head before he escaped again. The second beating took place about ten yards from where Xie stood by her light pole, apparently hawking goods on the sidewalk like many street vendors in the city. Even as Jenkins ran from his attacker, the latter continued to tail him threateningly, prompting Jenkins to punch into the empty air in self-defense. As he reeled and flailed, in the seconds before he hit nearby Xie, his attacker was mere feet away on the other side of the pole. Security cameras also captured how, contrary to prevailing versions of the incident, Xie did not "pummel" Jenkins until he was down and immobi-

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lized. Instead, a security guard tackled Jenkins to the ground seconds after he struck Xie, at which point she picked up a wooden stick and slapped Jenkins's feet with it several times, as a crowd gathered and the police arrived.[14] According to Jenkins's lawyer, even before Jenkins approached Xie, he was already "bloodied . . . disoriented and possibly concussed."[15]

This narrative approximates what Xie herself recounted to her local Chinese television station the day after. In this phone interview, Xie protested: "I'm seventy-some years old and he's only thirty-something, how on earth could I fight him? Some people are saying I bullied him, but when did I do that? The police pushed him and he fell into the concrete. Only then did I pick up a wooden stick from the street and hit the bottom of his feet a few times. That's all! I didn't beat him up!"[16] Even by Xie's own account, her fighting back was belated and negligible, not the phenomenal smackdown of viral lore. As Jenkins's defense attorney, Eric McBurney, writes in a press statement: "This situation is a tragedy on many fronts," with Jenkins as much a "victim" as Xie. Recognizing the larger context of escalated racial violence against Asian Americans during COVID but rejecting racism as a motivation for Xie's assault, McBurney highlights instead social apathy toward those experiencing homelessness and mental illness as contributing factors to this multilateral tragedy.[17] As he points out, the attacks on Jenkins happened "in broad daylight while pedestrians went about their business near the Farmers' Market" and "in the busy UN Plaza," with "not one person com[ing] to his aid."[18] McBurney himself is Asian American, born in Taiwan and adopted by a white family; having grown up "in small towns across the South" where he, as he puts it, was "the entire Asian population," he too understands unbelonging, he says, only too well.[19]

Additional details may continue to emerge around this case to complicate easy narratives and conclusions, but, for now, we can draw out a few themes. Most prominently, Xie's story has catalyzed a wave of surprising prosociality amid the tensions and divisions wrought by COVID. This pandemic prosociality takes forms both big and minute—as headline news and microaffirmations, crowdsourcing campaigns and small donations, social media activism and digital humor, cross-racial empathy and diasporic camaraderie. Many of these elements will reappear throughout this book in my examination of the 2003 SARS outbreak and its cultures of epidemic life. Furthermore, the prosociality precipitated by Xie's incident is transnational and translingual, and, while neither revolutionary nor permanent, it has been serially generative, activating innumerable instances of dispositions and emotions geared

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toward the well-being of others, including remote strangers and overseas communities. Recently, a group of evolutionary biologists and social scientists has theorized this concept of prosociality as not just a loose set of ideal principles but a "broad evolutionary worldview." In their book *Prosocial*, Paul Atkins, David Sloan Wilson, and Steven Hayes advance prosociality as an alternative framework to neoliberal paradigms of competition and self-interest, one that has the potential, they argue, to transform the lived human world by fostering multilevel relations of cooperation and care and creating "prosocial ecosystems" on a global scale.[20] Their book's opening example also involves an infectious disease outbreak: they describe how volunteer aid workers in Sierra Leone during the 2014–16 West African Ebola epidemic collaborated with local villagers rather than "imposing solutions from the outside" and how the two groups worked in concert to find strategies for viral containment while "respecting local customs and values."[21] So, for theorists of the concept, epidemic epicenters can be prime sites for engendering global prosocial practices. Likewise, my giving pride of place to Xie's tale constitutes one small attempt at reshaping pandemic discourse away from reflexive tropes of planetary calamity toward underrated modes of micro prosociality, retextualizing the psychic and affective environment in which we think and feel global disease across lines of difference. That is the guiding spirit of this book.

At the same time, people's eagerness to latch onto Xie as an icon of heroism amid pandemic racism—a paragon of what we might call crisis extraordinariness—risks reproducing empirical falsehoods and social erasures. First and foremost, Xie's own voice and narration of events, already multiply subalternized within a global hierarchy of languages and their respective power in epidemic knowledge production, have been mostly overridden, even by her champions and admirers. (This thematic nexus of language, power, and pandemic knowledge will reappear in chapters 3 and 4.) Moreover, the pervasive attention to high-profile pandemic-related issues has worked to sideline other endemic problems that turn out to be directly relevant to Xie's case, such as housing and mental health insecurity among precarious populations. Indeed, the prosociality radiating out from Xie has very pointedly excluded both Jenkins, who is swiftly branded the racist villain by a transnational public with little regard for his circumstances, and McBurney, who has received not only hate mail from other Asian Americans but also disapproval from his Taiwanese family for defending Jenkins.[22] In an ironic manner, this overshadowing of entrenched conditions through a

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selective spotlighting of top headlines of the moment parallels what many Asian Americanist scholars have underscored about anti-Asian racism, that it is not new with COVID but a persistent problem dating back to nineteenth-century yellow peril ideologies. Exclusively highlighting Xie's singular resilience may obscure the resilience of systemic racism itself. From a more minor perspective, though, we can see McBurney's commitment to affording Jenkins legal justice and a fair trial, despite the opposing tide of public and familial opinion, as a secondary order of prosocial ethics, as he foregrounds the long-standing plight of those who are homeless and pleads for greater compassion toward them. What McBurney advocates is not a dismissal of the assault charges against Jenkins but the weighing of these charges alongside a sympathetic and justice-based recognition of the latter's everyday reality and experiential world. Jenkins deserves a fair hearing, he insists, especially in the face of collective outrage born from a crisis milieu.

Against Pandemic Crisis Epistemologies

In "Against Crisis Epistemology," Kyle Whyte makes a key distinction between crisis and what he calls epistemologies of crisis. While real crises such as climate change do exist, crisis epistemologies, he argues, are those "practices of knowing the world that . . . use crisis to mask colonial power." Focusing on the history of settler colonialism and the oppression of Indigenous populations in North America, Whyte writes: "Colonisation is typically pitched as being about crisis. People who perpetrate colonialism often imagine that their wrongful actions are defensible because they are responding to some crisis. They assume that to respond to a crisis, it is possible to suspend certain concerns about justice and morality."[23] Moreover, crisis rhetoric often entails a "presentist unfolding of time," whereby "a certain present is experienced as new" rather than as a repetition of historically sedimented modes of power, and this "structure of newness . . . permits the validation of oppression." Whyte isolates in particular two tenets within this crisis temporality: unprecedentedness and urgency. Crisis epistemologies, he notes, tend to construct each current crisis as unprecedented, with "few usable lessons from the past" and "the novelty of being complex beyond anything previously encountered." Furthermore, every crisis is cast as urgent and imminent, in need of rapid response and possibly severe sacrifices, regardless of "harmful consequences" that may be "unfortunate, but acceptable."[24]

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This presentist mindset then operates to "mask numerous forms of power, including colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and industrialization."[25] In effect, crisis epistemologies perpetuate historical violences in the name of new crises.

Whyte's framework is all too resonant in the time of COVID. Across almost all arenas, this pandemic has been labeled an unprecedented global crisis necessitating urgent action, whether in terms of its health, economic, political, or social impact. This language is adopted by the World Health Organization, United Nations, World Bank, US Department of Homeland Security, and countless governments and media outlets worldwide.[26] One Dictionary.com poll finds *unprecedented* to be one of the most overused words during COVID, but even the website's editorial team feels obliged to concede that, while the word is "on everyone's lips . . . they aren't wrong; this is an unprecedented situation."[27] The presumed truth of this cliché seems irrefutable even to its satirists. Although many of these authorities also espouse coordination and cooperation, hence departing from an explicit script of colonial rationality, their crisis rhetoric reflects the presentist temporality Whyte outlines—as if this coronavirus outbreak has no pertinent history and no comparable precursors, not even the widely cited 1918 influenza pandemic, thus paving the way to validate extraordinary emergency measures that are then used to retroactively normalize an oppressive status quo. In this context, even though Giorgio Agamben has been criticized for pushing his biopolitical thesis about the "invention of an epidemic" in COVID's early months, a position that eerily aligned with right-wing science denialism at the time, he was not wrong to worry about state deployments of power during a public health emergency, as a disease outbreak can serve as an "ideal pretext for scaling . . . up beyond any limitation" "exceptional measures" that suspend basic rights and freedoms, thereby normalizing an "authentic state of exception."[28] Indeed, these apprehensions are especially warranted if we excavate the history of power behind pre-COVID pandemic discourse.

When I began this book around 2014, I, too, was centrally preoccupied with the subject of pandemic biopower and its potential for global expansion and entrenchment. For it was precisely during and after the 2003 SARS outbreak that these same tropes of pandemic crisis came to be articulated and cemented and the same assertions of urgency and unprecedentedness were used to justify exceptional governance procedures. Back then too, SARS was cast as an unprecedented crisis via an idiom of "firsts," billed by health authorities and infectious disease experts as much as international news

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media as the twenty-first century's "first new virus," "first emerging disease," "first new disease threat," "first dangerous pathogen," "first new global epidemic," and "first pandemic."[29] The international law scholar David Fidler in his 2004 book on SARS dubbed it "an epidemic of firsts" and argued that SARS was "the world's first post-Westphalian pathogen," rendering obsolete the older global health paradigm of state sovereignty and nonintervention and inaugurating a new model whereby nonstate entities become "legitimate governance actors in their own right."[30] In fact, it was apropos of SARS that the World Health Organization (WHO), for the first time in its then fifty-five-year history, issued a region-specific infectious disease–related travel advisory, warning against all nonessential travel to Guangdong and Hong Kong.[31] The various travel restrictions during COVID are therefore not new but have a direct precedent in SARS and its effects on global health response strategies. It was also on the heels of SARS that the World Health Assembly, WHO's decision-making body, revised the International Health Regulations in 2005 to hold member states directly accountable to WHO oversight, thereby formalizing powers that WHO had exercised only extrajuridically during the outbreak period, such as collecting and disseminating disease information derived from nonstate sources and without state consent.[32]

Across international news outlets back then too, SARS was ubiquitously portrayed as the global health crisis that demanded urgent and drastic action. According to one front-page *New York Times* article that May, it was only through "aggressive steps" and "sheer luck" that the United States "escaped the full fury" of the virus.[33] This emphasis on toughness to avert worse luck was echoed, after the pandemic's end, by an international group of scientists who concluded that "the world community was very lucky this time round" partly because "fairly draconian public health measures could be put in place with great efficiency in Asian regions where the epidemic originated." Had SARS broken out in North America or Western Europe, they speculated, containment would have been much more challenging "given the litigious nature" of people in Western democracies.[34] Exceptional biopolitics in the interest of global health was thus outsourced to Asia, which was posited as less concerned with human and civil rights to begin with and hence less prone to be hurt by their infringement and suspension. If Sara Ahmed sheds light on the white supremacist and jingoist rationales behind the rhetoric of Britain as a "soft touch nation" vis-à-vis asylum seekers, the idiom of biopolitical toughness around SARS trod a finer line, allotting just enough "softness" to the West to validate its liberal humanist superiority

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and just enough "hardness" to Asia to justify its fortunate otherness but ultimate moral inferiority.[35] I will unravel this colonialist projection vis-à-vis China in chapter 1.

This neocolonial orientalist facet of contemporary pandemic crisis discourse formed my other core concern at the book's inception. When I first delved into the cultural archive on SARS representations in Western popular media, I was shocked by how frequently the doomsday imagery and lexicon about an impending disease apocalypse recycled age-old sinophobic associations of Chinese bodies with pollution, filth, and pestilence. Numerous magazines at the time resorted to orientalist tactics without hesitation or embarrassment—as if to flaunt, in accord with the logic Whyte pinpoints, how the present crisis of pandemic disease obviates the immorality and harm of parading old racist stereotypes. If anything, a current of nationalist bravado ran through exaggerated performances of sinophobia that deliberately conflated anti-Chinese racism with anticommunist geopolitics. An April 2003 issue of the *Economist*, for example, featured on its cover a manipulated image of Mao Zedong in a face mask and the caption "The SARS virus: Could it become China's Chernobyl?" Similarly, the cover of a May 2003 issue of *Time* displayed a red chest x-ray and the caption "SARS Nation" with China's national flag superimposed. These images played a double signifying game. On the one hand, they functioned to metaphorically contain the pandemic as a strictly national—China's—problem rather than a truly planetary or human one. On the other, they yoked biological and racial signifiers to a specifically Chinese geopolitical iconography, anachronistically revitalizing potent symbols from the past (Mao, the red flag) and resituating them within contemporary crisis contexts (face masks, respiratory viruses, global pandemics) to intimate an ever-present communist threat now newly biologized and globalized.

Elsewhere, I have analyzed this discourse as pandemic bio-orientalism.[36] The component strands of this discourse are long-standing, but they coalesced uniquely around China and pandemic outbreaks during SARS. Media coverage at the time frequently insinuated that China's entry into a modern capitalist world system brings with it new types of danger to global life, as the country's and its people's entrenched cultural, social, and political practices prove to be a fertile breeding ground for deadly emergent pathogens. As Mei Zhan has argued, international debates surrounding the "zoonotic origin" of SARS at the time ultimately blamed the virus not on environmental factors but on "Chinese people's uncanny affinity with the nonhuman and the

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wild . . . and the deadly filthiness of such entanglements." These "accusatory ambivalences," she notes, reflected not just familiar schemata of orientalist othering but also contemporary neoliberal anxieties about China's rising middle class and its "visceral practices of consumption."[37] In multiple ways, post-SARS pandemic discourse came to exceptionalize China as the planet's disease "ground zero"—a presumption that has become all too commonplace again during COVID, especially with the initial branding of the coronavirus as a "China virus" or "Wuhan virus." I will return to these perilizing motifs in the anglophone SARS archive in chapter 4.

Pandemic discourse, then, exemplifies an epistemology of crisis. By framing each epidemic as new while erasing the trail of prior outbreaks—and, by extension, the history of previous power deployments as well as the fact of our repeated mass survival—pandemic discourse mediates a way of knowing the world that uses disease crises to mask and perpetuate racial and geopolitical power. This discourse aligns with what Lauren Berlant calls a "genre of crisis," insofar as our long-standing and ongoing human reality of living with microorganisms and experiencing periodic epidemics now gets narrativized as a novel crisis condition of our unprecedentedly globalized world, "rhetorically turning an ongoing condition into an intensified situation in which extensive threats to survival are said to dominate the reproduction of life."[38] Even a dozen years after SARS, the trope of imminent species doom persisted without the need for an actual successor pandemic, though international media fanned trepidation by putting the West African Ebola epidemic at the forefront of global health news in the mid-2010s. As a May 2015 *New Scientist* issue captioned on its cover—above a colorful image of a giant viral particle that, upon closer inspection, turns out be ringed at its outer edge with skulls and crossbones: "THE NEW PLAGUE, we're one mutation away from the end of the world as we know it."[39] Then as now, the language of newness underscores that our current era is not just a repetition of the old, that we are in unknown territory with alien and constantly mutating microbial menaces. The visual aestheticization of disease terror and suspicion further suggests that what appears at first to be an innocent and pleasing art image can have death lurking at the periphery, almost invisible and blended into the background, hence all the more in need of constant vigilance.

This representation of illegible surfaces and hidden dangers also reverberates back to SARS iconography. In international media coverage at the time, prevalent images of masked Asian faces and crowds likewise summoned a sense of potentially fatal inscrutability and urban density. As Priscilla Wald

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observes, Western cultural narratives of disease outbreaks typically follow formulaic conventions, one of which is a "geography of disease" where "timeless, brooding Africa or Asia" is imagined as "the birthplace of humanity, civilization, and deadly microbes." Infectious diseases are constructed as third-world problems "leaking" into the Global North, in a one-way traffic of emergence and contagion.[40] Exactly so, post-SARS pandemic discourse frequently envisages planetary destruction and human extinction via Asia and Asian-originating germs and carriers. A prime example is a February 2004 issue of *Time*, the cover of which showed a giant egg about to be hatched and a baby bird beak poking through a crack in its shell, with the headline posing the ominous question: "Bird Flu: Is Asia hatching the next human pandemic?" The article then turned to avian flu as the "latest scourge to emerge from Asia," "spreading with alarming speed through Asia's poultry farms." According to the article, "the great fear of health officials around the world is that the virus could, like SARS, jump the species barrier, mutate into a deadly and highly contagious form and set off a worldwide pandemic"; this "next deadly global epidemic" would be "a slate wiper," but what endangers the world is not just the virus itself but "dissembling and stalling by local governments [that] have already allowed the pathogen to spread in Asia—not only in birds but also among the men and women who raise them for a living and the kids who gather eggs or simply kick up infected dust in their villages."[41] Given the combination of Asia's corrupt governments, the poor hygiene and general level of medical ignorance of its rural residents, and the rapidity of international travel enabled by globalization, Asia, the article warned, stands to jeopardize not just public health the world over but our very species survival, so that even the experts are afraid. The underlying message was that, while we may ethically lament the loss of Asian lives to lethal microbes, we should not slacken our vigilance toward Asian bodies because they host those microbes—if not every single body in actuality, then the collective Asian body in potentiality.

This bio-orientalist crisis epistemology underpinning pandemic discourse did not originate with SARS. As Ari Heinrich points out, the "intensity of [the] eruption of popular anti-Asian racism in the US, Europe and Australia [during COVID-19] draws on deeply entrenched stereotypes that date back more than 200 years."[42] Heinrich traces how eighteenth-century European travelers to China distorted the Qing court's relatively advanced system of smallpox management and inoculation into a more politically advantageous narrative of a special Chinese vulnerability to the disease. This misrepresen-

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tation later evolved into a "broader and more insidious stereotype linking Chinese identity to pathology: the notion that China was the 'sick man of Asia' . . . uniquely susceptible to ailments," from the plague to cholera, and this "pathological racism" went hand in hand with ideologies of empire as a civilizing mission, stretching into modernity with Chinese communism "portrayed as a contagious and potentially fatal disease of the spirit" requiring Western salvation.[43] As several Asian Americanist scholars have further shown, in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, Chinese immigrants and ethnic spaces were often demonized by health officials and the white public as sources of pestilence, with Chinese bodies represented and treated as a crisis of pollution within the national body.[44] The rise of public health as an institution and of public hygiene as a discourse of modernity served to reify preexisting yellow peril ideologies, providing a biomedical basis to white economic disgruntlement about labor competition and political anxieties about foreign infiltration. California emerged as the hub of this matrix. In San Francisco, successive outbreaks of tuberculosis, smallpox, syphilis, leprosy, and plague were blamed by local officials on Chinatown as the "plague spot," "cesspool," and "laboratory of infection" that poisoned the rest of the city, while in Los Angeles, health officials and citizens targeted Chinatown as "that rotten spot" of "filth and stench," with Chinese launderers and vegetable peddlers singled out as disease carriers and germ spreaders.[45]

It was in discerning the repetition of these historical patterns in the SARS archive that I realized how germane this scholarship on bio-orientalist histories of public health remains. It was also through this realization that I began to investigate the process by which the racialization and Asianization of infectious disease became increasingly tied to the geopolitics of US biosecurity after World War II. This research culminated in my article "Pandemic as Method," which, in the retrospective light of COVID, may seem prescient.[46] There I argue that, if we probe the concept of pandemic not as a neutral description of a natural phenomenon but as a set of discursive relations, we can see how our contemporary mode of thinking about pandemics is a product of layered histories of power, an assemblage of US geopower and biopower that can be traced from the post-9/11 War on Terror back to the Cold War period. Within this genealogy, Asia both near and far has been repeatedly targeted by American paradigms of biosecurity and infection control as the frontiers of bioterrorism and the diseased other, and, hence, as the rationale for establishing, consolidating, and augmenting biosecurity and biodefense programs. What a critical geopolitical archaeology further discloses about

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this history, which is not merely discursive but stretches over multiple fields of policymaking and finance in the name of human health, is its persistent ideological construction of Asia as the site of malicious biopolitical agents requiring special vigilance and response. This infectious disease paradigm's entrenchment by the new millennium illuminates why, even though SARS caused no fatalities in the United States, it prompted the National Intelligence Council to issue a report in August 2003 entitled *SARS: Down but Still a Threat*. This report's lexicon of national security was supplemented with maps prepared by the Central Intelligence Agency spotlighting China and Hong Kong as global pandemic hot spots.[47] If Kuan-Hsing Chen exhorts "critical intellectuals in countries that were or are imperialist to undertake a deimperialization movement by reexamining their own imperialist histories and the harmful impacts those histories have had on the world," my archaeology of pandemic discourse is one attempt at deimperializing US-centric infectious disease thinking.[48]

COVID Reappraisals

As noted above, this book began around 2014, about a decade after SARS's global end but still half a decade before COVID's onset. Back then, I believed that enough time had lapsed for pertinent materials around SARS to emerge, establishing a sufficiently stable empirical foundation from which I could then investigate pandemic discourses and fictions. No doubt, this assumption reflected a methodological bias on my part, one that clung to a version of Whyte's crisis temporality. On some level that remained tacit even to myself, I imagined pandemic time as decisively past and the SARS archive as comprising relatively inert objects awaiting retrieval and appraisal in a postcrisis scholarly time. This book, moreover, was originally conceived as half biopolitical critique and half literary and cultural analysis. Along the way, however, the proportion shifted. The former half came to recede in importance, condensed into a few paragraphs in this introduction, while the latter swelled into the bulk of the book. Chief in compelling this restructuring was COVID-19.

Throughout the early months of 2020, as the new coronavirus prompted Wuhan's lockdown and then spread from Italy to the United States as the pandemic's new epicenter, two sets of observations and questions progressively troubled me. The first was the utter predictive failure of biopolitical

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and biosecurity critiques regarding epidemic disease surveillance. By that point, I had already researched and written about these critical models and their chronic worry about the contemporary expansions of biosovereignty regimes. Because the primary focus of these macro critiques is on power and its unceasingly adaptive techniques, their vocabularies tend to be shaped by corresponding themes of permanent warfare and preemptive strikes, total surveillance and distributive control, with the specter of Agamben's planetary state of exception seeming ever more fully realized in the amplification and normalization of disease emergency politics.[49] Yet when Wuhan's COVID case counts rapidly mounted and the coronavirus swept across Western countries into the United States—the supposed center of global biopower and biosurveillance—a slow disillusionment sank in for me, as the limits of these critiques became ever more evident. For all the robust theorizing and ominous warnings about global consolidation of biosecurity strategies and surveillance networks around emerging pathogens, why did these same power structures fail so spectacularly to register, much less predict or prevent, what in retrospect seems to be the entirely foreseeable transmission of a respiratory virus across well-known routes of international travel? Then, when Agamben's first public reaction to Italy's outbreak was to proclaim the epidemic a hoax "invented" by the Italian government, effectively using the occasion to bolster his erstwhile thesis on states of exception rather than revising his own tenets in light of an unfolding global event, it was difficult not to detect a note of philosophical panic in his theoretical foreclosure and determined refusal to grapple with empirical counterevidence. Even more perturbing was how quickly he broadcasted his assessment—despite the by then confirmed death toll of over 2,700 in China—as though the imperative to fret about loss of Western freedoms rendered extraneous for contemplation reports of Chinese deaths.[50]

Later, as the US outbreak took on clearly racial contours and disproportionately impacted low-income minority communities, these same biopower critiques accrued additional gaps. Why are considerations of social inequality not central to any biopolitical articulation? In all the big-picture evaluations of global biosecurity, where is the concern with common people's lack of access to health security, even domestically here in America? Indeed, where are all the people in these biopolitical visions—not just people as abstracted subjects of governance, interchangeable bodies and data points within panoptic surveillance grids, or figures of bare life stripped of meaning except as evidentiary exhibits exposing a totalizing biopower but people as social citizens

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seeking basic access to healthcare and health resources, equitable treatment within medical systems, and safety from disease-driven racial stigma and violence? In retrospect, it struck me that biopolitical and biosecurity critics projected the wrong nightmares. They were not mistaken about the operations and augmentations of biosovereign regimes on a macro scale, but their accounts felt, in the face of an actual pandemic, ethically truncated and socially impoverished. In lieu of their absencing and flattening of people as persons, I began in those early months of COVID to seek out cultural platforms such as Chinese social media, where actual people materialized as actors and sources of agency in their own lives as they coped with an epidemic. If the category of agency presents a classic conundrum for biopolitical theory, this blind spot now appeared particularly glaring. How do we reconceive people as social agents and reorient our attention to their cultures of epidemic agency? How do we rethink epidemic agency beyond the top-down binary of compliance versus noncompliance, measured as these usually are by the yardstick of fluctuating guidelines and policies set by the very institutions that are supposed to have safeguarded public health and monitored epidemic emergence in the first place? In short, how do we move beyond critique-for-itself, beyond crisis biopolitics, beyond even critical deimperializing archaeologies?

While COVID shook the biosecurity footing of my project, its bio-orientalist pillars, by contrast, were repeatedly reinforced. In the pandemic's early months, aside from the upsurge in anti-Asian hate incidents, Asian Americans were reportedly dying of the coronavirus at higher rates than any other racial group in urban areas such as San Francisco, due to systemic racial inequities that directly impacted their healthcare access, but this trend was underreported given the entrenched perception of Asian Americans as a successful and assimilated model minority.[51] Moreover, subtler modes of georacial chauvinism saturated both expert and lay attitudes, possibly exacerbating the pandemic's global toll. One index of this chauvinism was the early debate around face mask usage. Before Western authorities normalized the stance that face masks are an essential lifesaving public health measure, the WHO and US CDC as well as numerous Western governments vehemently advised against their use by the general public. Up until April 3, 2020, five weeks into the coronavirus's community spread in the United States, multiple top health officials at national and international levels issued unequivocal statements about the ineffectiveness of masks as a mitigation strategy.[52] Then-US Surgeon General Jerome Adams tweeted in impatient admonish-

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ment in late February: “Seriously people—STOP BUYING MASKS! They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus, but if health care providers can’t get them to care for sick patients, it puts them and our communities at risk!”[53] While officials may have crafted their messages to combat panicked hoarding of supplies by the public and to conserve personal protective equipment for frontline healthcare workers, they simultaneously created a contradictory and unreliable information environment, especially when they later reversed their own policies and guidelines and then erased the trail of these reversals on their websites.[54] Ironically, as I will discuss in chapter 2, these health governance mistakes around public communication also characterized China’s initial handling of SARS in 2003, but Western critics attributed them not to honest fumbles but authoritarian power.

What additionally stood out to me, as a second set of disturbing observations in COVID’s early months, was the casual disregard and even implicit ridicule of Asian health practices among most Western authorities. By March 2020, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore had all widely adopted the use of cloth masks and other face coverings.[55] Indeed, several scientific studies in the wake of SARS had established the effectiveness of face masks as a public health measure against coronaviruses and other respiratory illnesses.[56] These studies validated Asian “societal and cultural paradigms of mask usage” as a “rational” hygienic practice rather than simply a cultural quirk.[57] That Western agencies for months ignored this science-based practice and its track record of efficacy highlights how an unspoken georacial hierarchy of biomedical authority runs deep within global health epistemologies. Nonwestern societies, even those with greater experience in containing coronavirus outbreaks, are not viewed as sources of usable pandemic knowledge, much less purveyors of global pandemic education. This missed opportunity reveals another effect of imperialist pandemic knowledge formations. Yunpeng Zhang and Fang Xu have analyzed this dynamic in terms of what they call a “transpacific and transatlantic production of ignorance” surrounding COVID. In the pandemic’s early months, even as Western countries eagerly sought out knowledge about the coronavirus, they simultaneously reproduced their own ignorance because “knowledge accumulated by experts from China as well as other Asian countries about the virus and mitigation strategies are [*sic*] marginalized, discredited, distrusted, if not dismissed altogether.”[58] Zhang and Xu ultimately see these ignorance practices as rooted in “a conflation of orientalism, sinophobia and statephobia in the West,” based on “cultural prejudice and racist bigotry” as

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well as "struggles for and the fear of losing power and authority" to China and other Asian countries.[59]

Writing in Germany in March 2020 and similarly pondering the delay in Western responses to COVID during the European outbreak, Marius Meinhof asked: "After seeing what the virus did in China, how could Europeans have underestimated it? Why did Chinese experiences not matter to them? Why did they not respond fiercely the moment when the first cases without known infection routes emerged?" This failure, he underscores, was not due to lack of information, as "terrifying news from China was available since late January: High death rates, permanent damage from the disease, people dying in their homes or in the street in front of overloaded hospitals, entire families dying." Meinhof's questions parallel my own regarding the failure of timely intervention by global surveillance networks and health institutions, but he probes a later moment in the timeline and raises the additional question of why "western observers did not see an urgent need to act." The problem, as he casts it, was not so much the triggering of a crisis epistemology as the astonishing deactivation of a crisis consciousness. He goes on to identify three types of orientalism at work: (1) an age-old "sinophobic racism" that faulted the Chinese for their dirty cultural habits, such as drinking "bat soup"; (2) a "colonial temporality" that partitioned the world into "backward" regions of disease calamities and "modern" nations that would remain largely untouched; and (3) a "new orientalism" that further otherized China as "the authoritarian 'other'" whose failure to contain the virus was taken as a sign of its political effeteness and, by extension, of Western liberalism's superiority. As Meinhof concludes, "what failed in Europe is not liberal democracy but postcolonial arrogance," which failed in "relating Chinese disasters to 'us.'"[60] Undoubtedly, this postcolonial arrogance also characterized America's initial passivity toward COVID.

Framed in terms of affect theory, these early dynamics bred a pandemic nonchalance in the West that led to a failure in what Ahmed calls the "sociality of pain" as well as a perpetuation of an unequal "politics of pain."[61] Under Western eyes, Chinese subjects with disease and sickness continue to channel historically sedimented emotions of dread and disgust, scorn and mockery, overriding empathetic identification with them as human subjects in pain and appropriate objects of grief. As Ahmed suggests, the cultural politics of emotion works to "differentiate between others precisely by identifying those that *can be* loved, those that *can be* grieved," and thereby "to secure a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate lives."[62] There exists "an intimate

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relation between lives that are imagined as 'grievable' . . . and those that are imagined as loveable and liveable in the first place."[63] Vis-à-vis COVID, entwined with the georacial politics of Western hubris toward Chinese knowledge was this cultural politics of emotional indifference toward Chinese lives and Chinese suffering and a sundered racial politics of grief. This matrix is the complementary inverse of Eric Hayot's argument that the imagination of Chinese pain has historically paired with tropes of Chinese cruelty to secure Western self-definitions of the sympathetic modern subject. It would seem the "ecliptic" relation Hayot theorizes, whereby China functions as a "horizon of horizons" for Western thought and "the exceptional object" guaranteeing the West's projections of its own universal virtuous norms, breaks down now precisely because this originary othering of sympathy toward Chinese pain lies at the core of Western philosophical humanism.[64] So, while the gloomy prophecies of biopolitical and biosecurity critics have failed to materialize, bio-orientalist formations have by contrast exploded. Indeed, in light of the current pandemic, I have come to wonder whether global biosovereignty can ever be a truly viable threat so long as huge swaths of the planet's human populations and their pain matter so little to those inhabiting Western centers of power and privilege. The more fundamental task, it now seems to me, is not to keep hammering home the same self-assured critiques of power but to lay down, multiply, and deepen aesthetic tactics and emotional pathways for affirming and deexceptionalizing Chinese humanity—if by human we mean simply people deserving of care, with their own practices of love, without the reflexive need to measure their lives' legitimacy against white Western standards of worth.

Toward Epistemologies of Pandemic Microagency, Sociality, and Care

As I meditated on these dilemmas and started to turn away from frameworks of crisis biopolitics, two alternative intellectual traditions surfaced as inspiration and resource: affect theory from queer feminist, critical race, and postcolonial perspectives; and various schools of social justice thought for which critique does not constitute an end-in-itself but serves to launch collective action and coalition. Amid COVID, these have been the hope-oriented and sociality-affirming intellectual practices I drew on to reenvision my project and finish the manuscript.

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One of my early and most significant readerly epiphanies was Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, particularly its fusing of affect and politics with sustained attention to and respect for the quotidian aspects of life at the social margins. Grappling with the deep-seated social precarity underlying the neoliberal West, Berlant zeroes in on structures of "crisis ordinariness"—where crisis is understood as "not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming." Similar to Whyte, they emphasize "systemic crisis" and "unfolding change" as commonplace realities confronting vulnerable subjects in late capitalism.[65] For many in the West today, they argue, the democratic promise of "the good life"—circumscribed for generations by fantasies of "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy"—has dissolved as an actually achievable outcome. Instead, "the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building," but because people remain attached to "the good-life fantasy," they persevere in living, caught in an affective structure of "cruel optimism" where the very things they desire and work toward become obstacles to their well-being and sources of continual suffering.[66] This condition is not some extraordinary event arising from a radical rupture from the past; it does not single out "the historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going on and with respect to which people felt solid and confident."[67] In terms kindred to Whyte's, Berlant notes: "Crisis rhetoric itself can assume a . . . kind of inflation. Often when scholars and activists apprehend the phenomenon of slow death in long-term conditions of privation, they choose to misrepresent the duration and scale of the situation by calling a *crisis* that which is a fact of life and has been a defining fact of life for a given population that lives that crisis in ordinary time."[68] Crisis ordinariness is lived in unexceptional ordinary time; it marks something constant, to be endured and lived with rather than overcome or lived past. On their conception, "being treads water; mainly, it does not drown."[69]

What moves me above all in Berlant's work is their insistence on recognizing the value of people's everyday practices of living, what they term "lateral agency" or "lateral politics" and what I call microagency. While crisis ordinariness produces an "impasse," this is not an existential paralysis à la Herman Melville's Bartleby, that favorite tableau of stunned and curled-up life so frequently conjured by political theorists. Instead, "people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures

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to scramble for modes of living on."[70] Refusing to fall back on established political categories such as revolution and protest, transformation or some other exalted type of "heroic agency" as the de facto benchmark for what counts as agency at all—ideas of wholesale and colossal change that often privilege elite actors already endowed with an inordinate amount of social power and centrality, that naturalize a sovereign autonomous subject as the universal pregiven—Berlant urges us instead "to reinvent, from the scene of survival, new idioms of the political, and of belonging itself."[71] In particular: "We need better ways to talk about a more capacious range of activity oriented toward the reproduction of ordinary life," and "we need to think about agency and personhood not only in inflated terms but also as an activity exercised within spaces of ordinariness that does not always or even usually follow the literalizing logic of visible effectuality, bourgeois dramatics, and lifelong accumulation or self-fashioning," activities that engage in "self-continuity," "life maintenance," "ongoingness, getting by, and living on."[72] In effect, Berlant displaces exterior legibility and macro results as criteria for politics and prioritizes instead the lived meaning of micro actions. This model of lateral agency as the "life-affirming" creative energy of "subordinated peoples" amid crisis ordinariness will be pivotal for all the chapters in this book.[73] Throughout, I follow the spirit of Berlant's example by highlighting and recovering the stories and microagencies of those at the textual and contextual fringes of SARS, reconstructing worlds of pandemic meaning and value where the experiences and perspectives of globally marginalized epidemic subjects can take center stage.

In fact, a focus on small stories has been widely taken up during COVID. In their March 2020 "Theses for Theory in a Time of Crisis," for instance, Benjamin Davis and Jonathan Catlin urge readers to "share small stories, and tell your own," noting that "there is more to a crisis than the headlines. Possibilities for alternative futures are hidden in the granularities of day-to-day life."[74] Around the world, many pandemic archiving projects sprang up in COVID's early months, including at many colleges and universities. Collecting materials that chronicle people's daily experiences such as journal entries, photographs, artworks, emails, tweets, and blog posts, these humanistic projects put renewed emphasis on microstorytelling as comprising the core meanings of our communal present. These meanings do not have to await the recovery efforts of future archivists, however. As Shiqi Lin suggests, the "documentary impulse" that has flourished during COVID needs to be understood as collective attempts at building a "participatory digital archive" about

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pandemic life, not just by scholars and professionals but by common people. Lin ties these digital practices to a politics of everyday meaning-making and justice: "When our current language is still inadequate to capture the fears and uncertainties of living in this form of political injustice, to jot down traces of the present is not only a makeshift to process the gap between everyday experience, official discourse and media representation, but also an effort to reconstruct a lexicon from the everyday and of the everyday."[75] As global pandemic epicenters multiply, people have naturally intuited their capacity for lateral agency amid crisis injustice. Each small story told and shared testifies to this resourceful energy, whereby individuals create not just personal records for elite future memorialists but active and living communal meanings now, from the ground up and out of the minutiae of their own lives, bringing into being the contours of an actually shared global socius.

This critical spotlighting of pandemic sociality and microagency is particularly important for global knowledge production about China. As Xiaobing Tang argues, Cold War epistemologies continue to dominate Western perceptions of China today. He identifies a "dissidence hypothesis" that "presupposes any expression of criticism voiced in China to amount to an act of political dissidence subversive, and therefore intolerable, to the repressive regime," and this attitude "determines the relevance and value of a Chinese cultural product solely from a political calculation" and ultimately "draws on the demonization, with . . . unmistakable racial undertones, of a menacing 'Red China' during the Cold War."[76] Similarly, Jenny Lau points to a narrow handover paradigm underpinning global discourses of Hong Kong, whereby every cultural product from the city is interpreted as obsessed with the politics of 1997 and the specter of communist rule. Such an "elitist historiography," she notes, "erases the concrete details of cultural experiences and . . . complex social and psychological realities of life in Hong Kong," so that the city takes on significance for global commentators only if it fits into Western constructions of anticommunist resistance.[77] Lau made this argument in 2000, and it is perhaps even more pertinent today, on the heels of the globally high-profile 2014 Umbrella Movement and 2019 prodemocracy protests. In these at once aggrandizing but reductive hermeneutical frameworks, common people's micro practices of everyday living are often seen as irrelevant, mere dross in the grand dramas of power, rather than agentive acts in their own right. Tang's and Lau's critiques will play a key role in framing my analyses of SARS works in chapters 1 and 3, respectively.

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For some time now, I have been seeking out scholars whose work helps decolonize elitist and persistently imperialist critical habits, who formulate ground-up epistemologies of contemporary Chinese agency and provide conceptual alternatives to the gridlock generated by the valorized categories of rebellion and dissent. These categories not only carry a tremendous amount of cachet in intellectual history and political discourse but often imply a moral cowardice surrounding their absence. Even vis-à-vis post-revolutionary China, these paradigms retain an implicit dominance. As Charles Laughlin observes in the controversy over Mo Yan's 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, Western expectations for "Nobel laureates, especially those who were born in repressive societies, to be heroes," notwithstanding the patent "horrors of revolution" in modern Chinese history, ironically erase the "creative agency" of cultural producers who continue to live and labor within conditions of state repression.[78] A similar plea for acknowledging non-Western styles of agency and sociality motivates Erika Evasdottir's concept of "obedient autonomy." Writing on the discipline of archaeology in China, Evasdottir contends that Western templates of "uncompromising autonomy," whereby the world is "divided a priori into oppressors and oppressed," are inadequate for understanding identity and agency as a set of self-governing strategies within postsocialist China. She proposes obedient autonomy as an alternative framework that prioritizes "cooperative behaviors of mutual benefit rather than acts of 'dog eat dog' competition": in this system of "mutual interdependence," a person "becomes more involved in society, not less; becomes more connected, not separated; becomes someone who acts and effects change by participation, not destruction."[79]

Consonant arguments appear in several recent studies of Chinese visual culture. For instance, Margaret Hillenbrand argues against amnesia and censorship as normative explanations for how politically sensitive episodes in modern Chinese history get disavowed, noting that these frameworks "favor . . . top-to-bottom relations that locate agency in the state and treat the people as coercible herds." Analyzing a disparate archive of what she calls "photo-forms," she proposes public secrecy as a better model for grasping how collective silence under repressive governance is often "shared work," as people exercise "lateral sociality" in producing a complex culture of national public secrecy.[80] The "hushing of history," she writes, "is a densely collective endeavor in China . . . a highly agential process whose actors choose to obey the law of *omertà* for shifting, mindful reasons."[81] Myriad actors can choose to

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maintain, skirt, play with, subvert, or satirize public secrets, and these acts mediate social agency without the flashiness of overt dissidence. In the global art field, Hentyle Yapp similarly contests "major narratives around resistance and romanticized notions of liberal free speech," whereby Chinese artists hailed as heroic dissidents garner value in the international art market when they "reify" Western images of "China as authoritarian." Yapp calls this dominant discourse "major and proper China," against which he poses "minor China" as a method to "rethink the terms, conditions, and operations that define not only whom or what we value but also *how we value*."[82] Likewise, in her study of the Chinese internet, Shaohua Guo challenges the narrow terms steering much Western commentary on digital developments in China, split as these are between "narratives of revolution" and "narratives of closure": the former pin high hopes on the potential of digital technologies to democratize authoritarian regimes, while the latter "foreground the omnipotence of the Chinese state in its power to enforce strict control over media and society, thereby closing the space for free expression." Both narratives, she points out, erect a "binary opposition between the state and its citizens [that] not only ignores the reality of a more sophisticated interplay between the two, but also results in a narrowly defined, politicized study of the Chinese Internet that neglects the daily experiences of netizens."[83] For Guo, the Chinese internet is at heart a manifestation of people's quotidian agency, "a product of the ways in which Chinese-language users navigate digital spaces and make sense of their everyday lives."[84] I will return to this conception of Chinese digital media as a space of social agency, already evident in the folk humor cultures during SARS, in chapter 2.

In various ways, these scholars all model the location of politics and culture, articulating what Eve Sedgwick calls "local theories and nonce taxonomies"—the tactical, localized, and contingent categories that subordinated subjects are continually "making and unmaking and *re*making" to navigate their social worlds within power relations of the moment.[85] Indeed, the dissidence hypothesis and handover paradigm mirror Sedgwick's conception of "paranoid reading"—whereby every act coming out of China or Hong Kong, regardless of temporal or local circumstance, is read suspiciously, as freighted with either tyranny or oppression, resistance or compromise.[86] In their excessive emphasis on macropolitical struggle, these critical habits effectively freeze China and Hong Kong as totalizing spaces of exception, as if to project onto them in reality what biopolitical theorists such as Agamben fear as only potentiality for the West, replicating anew the logic Edward Said

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identified long ago as orientalism's geopsychic partitioning of the world into self and other. But beyond the political register, these models are woefully incomplete, as they render insignificant and altogether invisible people's everyday survival practices, even when these have enduring meaning for the actors themselves. A pandemic event such as COVID or SARS can bring this insight home with sharpness and intensity, but the validity of people's self-organizing of life and life-meaning does not apply only in global emergencies. It is in this context, too, that a focus on affect gains magnified import, as it allows us to imagine the opposite of dissent not as acquiescence, capitulation, or complicity but as simply living and enduring, even creating and finding pleasure, with a whole range of ordinary emotions that saturate everyday life. Given the persistence of Western colonialist hermeneutics, tracing mundane feelings and attachments of, by, and toward Chinese subjects can itself constitute a praxis for recognizing non-Western forms of agency and sociality and for decolonizing hegemonic habits of interpreting non-Western others.

At its core, this book is concerned with not the polis but the socius—with redeeming and centering social practices and prosocial affects without burdening them with an obligatory politics. Hence, the artists and works I choose for analysis will not subscribe to a common political stance, such as pro- or anti-China or pro- or antidemocracy movement. Instead, I select for attention minor styles and minor genres, or minor moments within major texts, as key sites for understanding Chinese people's diverse microagencies and reparative desires, during and beyond SARS.[87] Domestic routines and ephemeral romances, female friendships and sentimental bonds, defunct small presses' untranslated novellas and digital bad jokes, televised award ceremonies and Cantopop songs, low-budget flicks and raunchy sex comedies, hospital records and epidemiological documents, spiritual documentaries and crowdsourced ghost tales—these are the archival materials out of which I curate noncrisis epistemologies of SARS. If Yoon Sun Lee looks to the "day-to-day routine" and "little things" as a means for uncovering the unsettled status of Asian Americans within racialized capitalist modernity, whereby "the everyday" is lived in terms of "muted recognition and constrained action" as well as "a minimal sociality," my study looks more optimistically to the ordinary and the minor for *maximal* sociality and care, of both self and others, beyond the organized exigencies of whatever polis.[88]

In this regard, beyond Berlant, several affect theorists are also influential here. Sianne Ngai's theory of "ugly feelings" productively gives critical

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due to those "minor and generally unprestigious feelings," such as irritation and envy, that have historically been relegated to the interpretive sidelines through congealed racial, gender, and class biases. For Ngai, these feelings are "explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic" and "have a remarkable capacity for duration," especially for marginal subjects in late capitalism.[89] I will extend her concept of ugly feelings to argue for Chinese women's affective sovereignty and to lay the groundwork for Chinese epidemic subjects' experiential sovereignty more generally in chapter 1. Carrying affect studies into the realm of justice, Ahmed's proposal of "just emotions" further teaches me that the "emotional struggles against injustice are not about finding good or bad feelings, and then expressing them" but "how we are moved by feelings into a different relation to the norms that we wish to contest, or the wounds we wish to heal . . . which opens up different kinds of attachments to others, in part through the recognition of this work *as* work."[90] If, as Ahmed remarks, "emotions are the very 'flesh' of time" and "show us how histories stay alive" while also "open[ing] up the possibility of restoration, repair, healing and recovery," my hope is that this book's recuperations and rescriptings of Chinese epidemic subjectivities, beyond the distortions and antipathies wrought by racist and imperialist histories, will help reshape my readers' affective relations to them and perform some restorative justice work.[91] Finally, against the "paranoid hermeneutics" of the dissidence hypothesis and handover paradigm, I assiduously follow Sedgwick's turn toward "reparative reading" for my SARS archive.[92] My desire, too, is to "assemble and confer plenitude" on my subjects—by showcasing Chinese practices of self- and prosocial care as "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance" that we can learn from, even derive hope and nourishment from, despite all prevailing prejudices.[93]

Concurrent with this affective turn has been my growing engagement with intellectual traditions around social justice work in North American contexts that couple political criticism with the theorizing of praxis. Whyte, for one, does not halt at the critique of crisis epistemologies but outlines what he calls "epistemologies of coordination," which "emphasize coming to know the world through kin relationships . . . moral bonds that are often expressed as mutual responsibilities" such as "care, consent, and reciprocity."[94] Epistemologies of coordination "do not tradeoff kinship relationships to satisfy desires for imminent action," operating instead in slower time to repair and rebuild frayed kinships, with a clear eye on "ethics and justice."[95] For Whyte, this knowledge paradigm has long shaped and sustained Indig-

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enous peoples' responses to colonial violence and damaged ecologies, and its wider adoption "would go a long way to transform unjust and immoral responses to real or perceived crisis."[96] This coupling of justice with reparation has become more visible in recent health humanities scholarship, such as Karen Thornber's *Global Healing*, which leverages global narratives of illness to destigmatize disease and "create communities of care that promote healing and enable wellbeing."[97] Less recognized, perhaps, is the work of disability activists of color who have long given voice to the interlocking nexus of social justice, group survival, communal storytelling, and what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls "care work." As Piepzna-Samarasinha narrates of her own journey, "Disability justice allowed me to understand that me writing from my sickbed wasn't me being weak or uncool or not a real writer but a time-honored crip creative practice. And that understanding allowed me to finally write from a disabled space, for and about sick and disabled people, including myself, without feeling like I was writing about boring, private things that no one would understand."[98] As she points out, lateral politics in the disability justice movement has long taken seemingly trivial forms, from zines, blogs, and social media to routine acts of "getting together at a kitchen table or a group Skype call to hesitantly talk about our lives, organize a meal train, share pills and tips, or post the thoughts about activism and survival we have at two in the morning." All this is "undocumented, private work—work often seen as not 'real activism.' But it is the realest activism there is," a kind of "care work in the apocalypse," "a story of collective struggle, community building, love and luck and skills."[99]

These paradigms of care and reciprocity, community and justice shape my approach to SARS's archives and affects in this book. If one consequence of pandemic crisis discourse has been an intensification of fear and animosity—of and toward otherness and difference, hardening around race hostility and xenophobia and spiraling into ever-greater disintegration of social kinship feelings, on both domestic and global scales—to reconstruct sentimental attachments, however small or trifling, between minor epidemic subjects is not just a retrieval of subaltern experience for its own sake but one critical path toward collective healing. It is within this cross-temporal pandemic zone that the SARS archive can yield profoundly reparative affects during COVID. Again and again in the ensuing pages, we will encounter pandemic reparations: even in the face of panoptic state power, the protagonist of China's first major SARS novel ends with an affirmation of her ordinary home life and its simple joys, such as walking the dog; even amid a fluctuating disease

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information environment, a robust culture of digital SARS humor, including a plethora of nonpolitical bad jokes, flourished on the Chinese internet; even for a city as experienced in extinction threats as ex-colonial Hong Kong, a resilient happy-go-lucky sex worker would become the iconic figure of its SARS films; and even amid serial disease tragedies in Singapore, what may appear to be the trappings of techno-orientalism emerged as survival technologies of connectivity for the nation's index patient. These are only a few examples of the stories tracked here. By book's end, rather than doom and debility, the affects that linger, hopefully, will be hope and love.

An Array of SARS Scenes

The following chapters lay out an array of rhetorical styles and affective scenarios at some of SARS's epicenters. The materials span literary fiction (chapter 1), digital and social media (chapter 2), visual and sonic cultures (chapter 3), and science journalism and medical reports and records (chapter 4). My focus is on the sinophone broadly understood, inclusive of mainland Chinese literature, diasporic Chinese-language fiction, the Chinese digital mediascape, as well as Cantonese film, television, and music. In the last chapter, I probe the anglophone archive as a dominant linguistic switchboard for global pandemic meanings. My aim is not to present a comprehensive record of SARS articulations within any specific region, culture, or language; rather, I have selected for attention an assortment of epidemic scenes, mostly emerging from the outbreak's epicenters in 2003 China and Hong Kong, that can help undo pandemic crisis epistemologies. These scenes orchestrate alternative knowledges about how people lived with, and sometimes through, SARS without their epidemic experience being consumed by the tyrannical terms of disease catastrophe, mass death, and human extinction. Dystopian and apocalyptic narratives of biohorror or biothriller—such as Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011) or Max Brooks's *World War Z* (2006)—are thus not included here.[100] To summon Berlant again: this book tracks not so much conventional epidemic genres via "foreclosures of form" as "the ways the activity of being historical *finds* its genre." Rather than the usual suite of crisis tropes propagated by pandemic emergency discourse and what Priscilla Wald calls the outbreak narrative, SARS materializes here as a constellation of stories about people's "active habits, styles, and modes of responsivity"—with surprising turns into romance, comedy, farce, and spirituality.[101] As in

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the case of Xie Xiao Zhen, the genres we expect or crave may not tell the whole story, and it is in their cracks that we discover other microepistemes.

Chapter 1 concatenates three sinophone texts that foreground sentimental plotlines of female sexuality, domesticity, or friendship amid SARS: Joan Chen's 2012 short film *Shanghai Strangers* (*Feidian qingren*); Hu Fayun's 2004 internet novel *Such Is This World@sars.come* (*Ruyan@sars.come*); and Chen Baozhen's 2003 novella *SARS Bride* (*SARS xinniang*). Set respectively in Shanghai, Wuhan, and Guangzhou, all three works center on female feelings and relationships during SARS, mobilizing conventions of sentimental fiction to give shape to everyday epidemic experiences at Chinese urban sites. While they each link the 2003 outbreak to previous episodes of national or global crisis such as World War II, the Cultural Revolution, or the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, they nonetheless maintain the primacy of ordinary life's continuance rather than the ruptures of mass contagion and death. In this respect, they not only exemplify pandemic ordinariness but compel us to read with close attention those textual moments and motifs that bespeak commonplace microagencies of globally peripheralized epidemic subjects. The three authors' positions on gender and national politics may differ, but their texts all present a challenge to bio-orientalist projections of SARS China as a homogeneous space of filthy consumption, disease calamity, and exceptional biopower. This chapter also stays the longest with questions of gender, especially regarding what kinds of affective and ethical responses to a pandemic event get recognized as proper or properly political.

Chapter 2 turns to epidemic humor as another matrix of pandemic ordinariness and microagency during SARS, produced via the then fledgling sphere of Chinese digital media. Throughout the 2003 outbreak, epidemic humor was pervasive across both personal digitized networks and public internet forums, as people used new communication technologies not only to disseminate unofficial news about the virus but also to tell and share jokes about epidemic life. This digital humor culture constructed the sense of a mass socius yoked together by a common crisis yet collectively enduring it with ingenuity and wit. The bulk of these jokes were not political or even parapolitical but nonpartisan, insofar as they did not have critiques of the communist party-state at their core. Assuming such trivial, ephemeral, and bathetic forms as holiday greetings and love confessions, silly ditties and shoddy mimic poems, pseudomedical prescriptions and hodgepodge myth parodies, these cultural tidbits were widely circulated as amateur comic texts, presenting a rich spectrum of social expressions around SARS and compelling

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an expansive understanding of what counted as humor within the epidemic milieu. In contrast to satire's critical impetus and the carnivalesque's subversive energy, these SARS pieces mediated what I call small humor—the humor of deliberately bad jokes, forced puns, ridiculous buffooneries, and mock-inflated displays of emotion that invite the laughter of chuckles and giggles, smiles and grins, groans and eye rolls, channeling a gentle and generous laughing alongside rather than a spiteful or angry laughing at. Small humor is full of heart, animated at heart by a concern with the socius rather than the polis. It is fundamentally prosocial, aimed at shoring up a quick sense of shared bonds and the shared world within and despite everyday strife. During SARS, this small humor culture maintained an affective economy of communal care by spreading and reproducing feelings of sympathy, recognition, and solidarity, materializing an epidemic mass socius via micro digital practices.

In contrast to digital culture's translocalism, chapter 3 turns to a highly localized geopolitical aesthetic I call the Hong Kong Cantophone. As mentioned earlier, pandemic crisis epistemologies are often premised on a linear and presentist temporality that constructs each disease crisis as unprecedented and necessitating exceptional measures to avert planetary annihilation. The trope of human extinction is hence inveterate to many horror-driven outbreak narratives, its aura of urgency serving to camouflage ongoing historical structures of oppression. From the perspective of 2003 Hong Kong, however—the hardest hit global epicenter of SARS—what we find instead is a host of epidemic deextinction texts. This chapter focuses on three filmic projects produced and released locally in 2003: *Project 1:99* (*1:99 din jeng haang dung*/*1:99 dianying xingdong*), a compilation of eleven shorts sponsored by the Hong Kong government and directed by fifteen top local directors; *City of SARS* (*Fei din yan sang*/*Feidian rensheng*), a low-budget movie with three interlinked story lines featuring an ensemble cast of local stars; and *Golden Chicken 2* (*Gam gai 2*/*Jin ji 2*), sequel to the award-winning comedy hit *Golden Chicken* from the year before, about a female sex worker with a zest for life who allegorizes the Hong Kong spirit of survival and resilience. Here, too, humor abounds, but the types of humor evoked are thickly tied to local history, local popular culture, and Cantonese inside references, with an enclave quality that solicits strong Hong Kong identification. In these multimedial texts, the pandemic is staged, not as a potentially terminal disaster that can end global and local life for good but as just one challenging event within Hong Kong's cyclical experience with disappearance and return, death and resurrection, extinction and deextinction. This unique aesthetic captures the local entertainment

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industry's sense of being a hitherto cultural subempire without sovereignty, one whose golden age of regional dominance has witnessed a slow collapse but that nonetheless perseveres in autoregeneration through Cantophone mnemonic stories and techniques. Alongside apocalyptic motifs of infection, illness, suicide, amnesia, bankruptcy, and so on are a host of companion deextinction tropes—the underdog comeback, the reversal of fortune, the eleventh-hour rescue, the overdue miracle. Hong Kong SARS films thus offer a key provincializing of pandemic crisis discourse by subordinating globally hegemonic agendas to the local concerns of small ex-colonial lives.

Finally, chapter 4 turns to nonfiction by delving into the anglophone archive on SARS index cases. I focus on three figures: Pang Zuoyao, the index patient of the Foshan outbreak and the world's first known case of SARS; Liu Jianlun, the index patient of the Hong Kong Metropole Hotel outbreak that internationalized the virus; and Esther Mok, the index patient of Singapore who was herself infected at the Metropole Hotel. As I will detail, the anglophone discourse around each patient, from mainstream news media to popular science journalism and even academic writing, repeatedly propagated inaccuracies and distortions that fed bio-orientalist and sinophobic perceptions of China and Chinese bodies. Even into the time of COVID, Pang has been mythicized as a village farmer with possible links to China's wildlife trade and "wet markets" who died of SARS after igniting a global pandemic—when in fact he was a local official with a desk job who transmitted the virus to only four family members, in a contained outbreak cluster with no fatalities and with himself surviving to tell his story ten years later. Similarly, Liu is often cast in a sinister light as the "patient zero" and "superspreader" who globalized SARS by carelessly or maliciously carrying the virus across the China–Hong Kong border and then killing everyone proximate to him—when in actuality he was a physician who unknowingly caught the virus while treating patients and was himself surrounded by family members throughout his illness until his death, with even his equally elderly wife surviving her infection by him. And Mok, salaciously vilified as a "modern-day Typhoid Mary" by the global press and publicly dubbed the "superinfector" who "infected the whole lot of us" by Singapore's health minister, lived through the tragic toll of SARS on her family to become an active church youth worker and spiritual role model. In all three instances, humanistic storytelling fell back on crisis-driven narrative conventions about disease and contagion that ultimately exacerbated georacial prejudices. By contrast, scientific literature, such as epidemiological studies on early outbreak clusters and medical

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documents on index cases, provides a trove of empirical tidbits from which to reconstruct each patient's disease experience and social world, allowing us to reclaim the ordinariness and goodness of their lives from a dehumanizing archive. Finally, this chapter's coda turns to the Singapore ghostwriter Russell Lee's *True Singapore Ghost Stories* series for a more heterodox account of the epidemic experience, via the crowdsourced ghost tale, as an alternative mode of indigenous folkloric transmission of interpandemic wisdom.

Despite these troubled years of COVID and the now almost certain prospect of future pandemics, I believe we can, per Leung Ping-kwan's plea in the epigraph to this introduction, grow to treat each other with greater humaneness—if we begin to tell better stories with better affects.

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