
Hong Kong Junk: Plague and the Economy of Chinese Things

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SUMMARY: Histories of the Third Plague Pandemic, which diffused globally from China in the 1890s, have tended to focus on colonial efforts to regulate the movement of infected populations, on the state's draconian public health measures, and on the development of novel bacteriological theories of disease causation. In contrast, this article focuses on the plague epidemic in Hong Kong and examines colonial preoccupations with Chinese "things" as sources of likely contagion. In the 1890s, laboratory science invested plague with a new identity as an object to be collected, cultivated, and depicted in journals. At the same time, in the increasingly vociferous anti-opium discourse, opium was conceived as a contagious Chinese commodity: a plague. The article argues that rethinking responses to the plague through the history of material culture can further our understanding of the political consequences of disease's entanglement with economic and racial categories, while demonstrating the extent to which colonial agents "thought through things."

KEYWORDS: plague, bacteriology, things, material culture, opium, ruins, photography, China

In his compendious *History of the Laws and Courts of Hongkong* (1898), James Norton-Kyshe, registrar of the colony's Supreme Court, provides a striking description of the Hong Kong magistracy:

I am grateful to the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong for supporting the research for this article with a grant from the General Research Fund: project title "Infective Economies: Plague and the Crisis of Empire" (HKU752011H). In thinking about China, things, ruins, and infectious disease, I have benefitted from conversations with a number of colleagues and, in particular, I should like to thank Frank Dikötter, Angela Ki Che Leung, Christos Lynteris, and Christopher Munn. Finally, my thanks to the editors of the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* and to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

The Court yard, too, offers an extraordinary conglomeration of queer things. Here is a bunch of branches unlawfully cut on Crown land, there are bags of flour, sugar, or coal seized on a junk; again, there is a pile of rusty rifles, a tray of dried oysters, a bag of medicinal roots, ship's gear, and all sorts of goods and stuffs that are to figure as exhibits. In fact the Court often presents the appearance of a junk shop in a large line of business.¹

Rifles, flour, sugar, coal, oysters, roots, ship's gear: what does this miscelany of "goods and stuffs" signify? What can an accumulation of such "queer things" tell us about Hong Kong in the 1890s? In evoking this cabinet of organic and manufactured exhibits, Norton-Kyshe suggests that the crown colony itself—described by the missionary and colonial official Ernest Eitel in precisely the same terms as "an odd conglomeration"²—can perhaps best be known through the interrelationship of everyday objects. Hong Kong is a "junk shop" wherein "things"—as Asa Briggs would have it—are "emissaries."³

Things, of course, played a critical role in the British Empire, which was underpinned by the production, exportation, and importation of commodities across the globe. Hong Kong was a hub in this imperial network, and its establishment by the British following the First Opium War (1839–42) was predicated on the lucrative opium trade. Burgeoning imperial pathways of trade also provided routes for the diffusion of infection. As Mark Harrison has recently demonstrated, disease and commerce were—and remain—entangled global processes.⁴ The "plague-germ," which reached Hong Kong from Canton and the Pearl River Delta in early 1894, was, according to one conjecture, conveyed among bales of opium shipped along Chinese waterways.⁵

1. James William Norton-Kyshe, *The History of the Laws and Courts of Hongkong*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), 2:548. As Christopher Munn notes, Norton-Kyshe's "history" is an amalgam of unacknowledged newspaper reports and readers' letters interspersed with his own commentary; see *Anglo-China: Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong, 1841–1880* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 5–6.

2. E. J. Eitel, *Europe in China: The History of Hongkong from the Beginning to the Year 1882* (London: Luzac & Company, 1895), i.

3. "Things as emissaries" derives from T. S. Eliot's 1948 essay "Notes Towards a Definition of Culture," which Briggs quotes as an epigraph in his book: "Even the humblest material artefact, which is the product and symbol of a particular civilization, is an emissary of the culture out of which it comes"; see *Victorian Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 11–51, quotation on 11.

4. Mark Harrison, *Contagion: How Commerce Has Spread Disease* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012).

5. Myron J. Echenberg, *Plague Ports: The Global Urban Impact of Bubonic Plague, 1894–1901* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 16; Carol Benedict, *Bubonic Plague in Nineteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 131–49.

This article examines British responses to the plague epidemic in Hong Kong through the lens of imperial concerns about the infective propensity of Chinese things. It demonstrates how an epidemiological crisis brought to the fore latent colonial anxieties about the acquisition, use, exchange, and transportation of Chinese things—anxieties that induced specific forms of colonial violence directed at Chinese property. In responding to the plague, colonial commentators and agents focused obsessively on Chinese effects, disinfecting or destroying bedding, clothing, furniture, and razing structures thought to be infected with plague. These draconian “cleansing” policies were rooted in enduring assumptions about the potential of material objects to transmit disease.

Concurrently, new scientific knowledge generated in the laboratory gave rise to the novel idea that plague itself was a “thing” that could be collected and cultivated. In the 1870s and 1880s, Robert Koch was to develop photomicrography as a key bacteriological tool that allowed the scientist “not only to obtain proper illustrations of the [microscopic] objects under study,” but also to demonstrate his technical expertise.⁶ Photomicrographs of bacteria were displayed in public exhibitions and reproduced as illustrations in magazines, journals, and atlases.⁷ “We observe, by means of the micro-camera, objects unseen by the eye,” noted the author of an article on Koch’s photomicrographs in 1880.⁸ The plague bacterium isolated in Hong Kong in June 1894 by Alexandre Yersin and Shibasaburō Kitasato gave the bubonic plague a new identity as a thing, which could be collected, cultivated in laboratories, and depicted in journals.⁹ In July 1894, a reporter from the *Hongkong Daily Press* observed the bacillus at firsthand in Yersin’s extemporized makeshift laboratory set up by the Alice Memorial Hospital in Kennedy Town. The germ, he reported, had been cultured in an agar plate “like a little plant”: “It is of a cloudy amber colour and spreads in numerous small blotchy looking branches.” Observed through

6. Olaf Breidbach, “Representation of the Microcosm: The Claim for Objectivity in 19th Century Scientific Microphotography,” *J. H. Biol.* 35, no. 2 (2002): 221–50, quotation on 242. Although it was introduced in the 1830s and became the subject of practical manuals in the 1860s, Breidbach argues that “[microphotography] did not really become an accepted tool of the profession until well in the 1880s” (222). “Microphotograph” strictly refers to a miniaturized photograph that requires magnification to see, however the term is often used interchangeably with “photomicrograph.”

7. Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 159–93 (184–85).

8. Quoted in *ibid.*, 186.

9. Andrew Cunningham, “Transforming Plague: The Laboratory and the Identity of Infectious Disease,” in *The Laboratory Revolution in Medicine*, ed. Andrew Cunningham and Perry Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 209–44.

the microscope, “‘colonies’ of bacillus [*sic*] are differentiated into tiny dots of uniform size and appearance.”¹⁰

The plague existed in relation to a “sliding scale” of interrelated objects¹¹—an economy of things in motion ranging from trade commodities to the plague-germ and the incriminating “conglomeration” of Chinese “junk,” which so troubled colonial administrators as a source of likely infection. Different objects became entangled and—despite the emphasis on scientific objectivity—the ontological status of “plague” and Chinese “things” became ambivalent, the meaning of one invariably displaced onto the other. In discussing the plague, commentators spoke of Chinese things; and in the increasingly vociferous anti-opium discourse, opium was conceived as a pernicious Chinese commodity: a plague.

This colonial ambivalence to Chinese things raises a number of critical questions about the place of material culture in history—questions that are often sidelined in studies that focus exclusively on the indigenous body as an object of scientific knowledge and state regulation. How do objects become freighted with particular significance?¹² What role do objects play in producing subjects? And how is knowledge about objects—the objects of science and the things that constitute a material culture and a means of disease transmission—produced in relation to specific social and historical conditions? As David Arnold notes of the colonial state in India, the native body functioned “as a site for the construction of its own authority, legitimacy, and control.”¹³ Similar arguments have been made in relation to the Chinese body. There is a substantive literature, for example, focusing on the pathologization of the Chinese “coolie” from the 1850s,¹⁴ as well as the interpolative processes through which Western medical discourses,

10. “The Plague,” *Hongkong Daily Press*, July 6, 1894, 2; on the history of Yersin’s matshed, see Robert Peckham, “Matshed Laboratory: Colonies, Cultures, and Bacteriology,” in *Imperial Contagions: Medicine, Hygiene, and Cultures of Planning in Asia*, ed. Robert Peckham and David M. Pomfret (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), 123–47.

11. Marina Benjamin, “Sliding Scales: Microphotography and the Victorian Obsession with the Miniscule,” in *Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention*, ed. Francis Spufford and Jenny Uglow (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 99–122.

12. See the essays collected in Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004).

13. David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 8.

14. For accounts of the Chinese as carriers of disease, see Marilyn Chase, *The Barbary Plague: The Black Death in Victorian San Francisco* (New York: Random House, 2003); Susan Craddock, *City of Plagues: Disease, Poverty, and Deviance in San Francisco* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans* (New York: Random House, 2007); Guenter B. Risse, *Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

which linked the Chinese to disfiguring disease, helped to construct an image of China itself as a pathological body.¹⁵

However, recent research on materiality within cultural studies and, in particular, the concerns of an “artifact-oriented” anthropology have suggested the importance of “thinking through things” in order to grasp the dynamic role of material contexts in shaping the social.¹⁶ The emphasis in this literature has been on reconsidering the interrelationship between human subjects and material objects, using “things” as a strategy for challenging conventional classifying categories within which materiality is routinely read.¹⁷ Adopting a “radical essentialist” approach, for example, Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell question the presupposition within ethnography that “artefacts are analytically separable from the significance informants seem to ‘attach’ to them.” Instead, they propose, “that *things might be treated as sui generis meanings*.”¹⁸

This scholarship represents an important shift of focus away from theories of fetishism and commodity culture. Given that the impetus for this reappraisal has come predominately from cultural studies and anthropology, however, there is now a need to reconnect the more speculative currents of “thing theory” with a grounded analytics of the historical processes involved in the production and consumption of imperial “goods and stuffs,”¹⁹ recognizing that things cannot be untethered from the market system in which they circulated.²⁰

15. Larissa Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body between China and the West* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

16. See, for example, Bill Brown, ed., *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) (originally published as a special issue of *Crit. Inquiry* 28, no. 1 [2001]) and Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, eds., *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically* (London: Routledge, 2007). For an argument about the importance of “things” in history and the relationship of objects to texts, see Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *Amer. Hist. Rev.* 110, no. 4 (2005): 1015–45.

17. J. Plotz, “Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory,” *Criticism* 47, no. 1 (2005): 109–18.

18. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, “Introduction: Thinking Through Things,” in Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking Through Things* (n. 16), 1–31, quotations on 1, 3, emphasis in the original. This literature draws explicitly on Bruno Latour’s interrogation of the distinctions within modernity between subject and object, human and nonhuman, cultural and natural. Latour’s aim is to recuperate hybrid identities (“quasi-objects”) in order to demonstrate the coproduction of society and nature; see *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

19. “Thing theory” is the term applied by Bill Brown to the interdisciplinary literature that studies materiality; see “Thing Theory,” in Brown, *Things* (n. 16), 1–21. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, on the other hand, reject the notion of a “thing theory,” and argue that things may offer a new methodology, rather than a theoretical framework; see “Introduction: Thinking Through Things” (n. 18), 2.

20. See Jennifer Sattaur, “Thinking Objectively: An Overview of ‘Thing Theory’ in Victorian Studies,” *Victorian Lit. Cult.* 40, no. 1 (2012): 347–57.

Hong Kong and the Ambivalence of Chinese Things

House-to-house visitations and the clearance of suspected plague dwellings were not, of course, unique to Hong Kong. Draconian measures were subsequently implemented to control epidemics in other port cities where there were Chinese communities, including Honolulu, San Francisco, and Sydney.²¹ Hong Kong stands out from these other sites, however, in a number of ways. First, Hong Kong was an entrepôt established explicitly for trade in opium. The free port's development from the early 1840s was closely connected to the drug's global traffic.²² Second, the Chinese made up the overwhelming majority of Hong Kong's residents. Out of 221,441 individuals recorded in the census for 1891, there were just 8,545 Europeans and Americans, including military and naval personnel, and the crew members of merchant ships.²³ Moreover, in 1894 the crown colony consisted of Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula, an area of less than forty square miles appended to a vast hinterland, populated by an estimated 400 million Chinese. This asymmetry of scales between an expansive Qing Empire and a circumscribed crown colony, between a "mass" of Chinese and a diminutive society of colonials, created a distinctive dynamic that shaped responses to the epidemic.

To be sure, Indian objects were also pathologized during the plague, which reached Bombay in 1896. In the subcontinent, British anxieties about infective objects drew on earlier experiences of "Asiatic" cholera "whose progress westward [had] exposed the weak spots of an expanding industrial culture."²⁴ Particularly from the 1830s, concerns about the global flow of disease had become interwoven with anxieties about the transnational conveyance of Asian commodities— anxieties that centered on the disruptive potential of this intensifying circulation.²⁵ Cholera was understood to be transmitted by infected goods and closely linked to material culture. As Erin O'Connor has noted, "Cholera was, of course, not the only source of infectious objects. England was rife with contagious

21. For an account of the global diffusion of the plague and the responses of local authorities in affected cities around the world, see Echenberg, *Plague Ports* (n. 5).

22. On the fundamental importance of opium to the establishment and development of Hong Kong, see Christopher Munn, "The Hong Kong Opium Revenue, 1845–1885," in *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952*, ed. Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 105–26 (107).

23. "Census Report 1891," *Hongkong Sessional Papers* (1891), 373–95 (377).

24. Erin O'Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 22.

25. Robert Peckham, "Infective Economies: Empire, Panic and the Business of Disease," *J. Imperial Commonwealth Hist.* 41, no. 2 (2013): 211–37.

commodities, and horror stories of how things could carry sickness from the hovels of the poor into the homes of the rich abounded.”²⁶

Responses to the plague in Hong Kong thus need to be viewed within a broader history of metropolitan and imperial concerns about infected “Asiatic” things. Indeed, opium itself was part of the Indo-Chinese trade and distinctions between India and China often dissolved in generalized denunciations of “Asiatics” and “Orientals.” At the same time, however, there was a particular ambivalence to Chinese things from the second half of the nineteenth century, and a growing antagonism to China during the 1890s. Although Chinese luxury items, such as tea, porcelain, chinoiserie furnishings, and silk, had been highly prized since the eighteenth century,²⁷ in the course of the nineteenth century Chinese objects were progressively excoriated for their lack of sophistication and poor manufacture.²⁸

Ambivalence was particularly noticeably in attitudes to China during and after the Opium Wars.²⁹ Even as the Chinese were reviled in the British press, Chinese items were imported to the West as art objects for decorating the home.³⁰ The “opening up” of China provided an opportunity for renewed interest in Chinese objects. In the 1840s, an exhibition titled the “Chinese Collection” in Hyde Park Corner, London, gave visitors “an idea of the Chinese almost as complete and vivid as could be formed by a voyage to China.” The “multifarious contents” of the exhibition comprised

26. O'Connor, *Raw Material* (n. 24), 33.

27. See, however, the argument made by Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins about the role of the “thing Chinese” in the formation of an English “selfhood” during the long eighteenth century. Zuroski Jenkins argues for the “simultaneous emergence of enthusiasm for chinoiserie and suspicion of Chinese influence,” suggesting that Chinese objects functioned as “a site of epistemological foment, where various ways of knowing and perceiving the world were tested and reflected”; see *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 159. For analyses of knowledge about China during this period, see Peter J. Kitson, *Forging Romantic China: Sino-British Cultural Exchange, 1760–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); David Porter, *The Chinese Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Caroline Frank, *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

28. On shifting Western attitudes to China, generally, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: Norton, 1998).

29. See, for example, Henry Morley, “Our Phantom Ship: China,” *Household Words* 66 (June 28, 1851): 325–31.

30. See Catherine Pagani, “Chinese Material Culture and British Perceptions of China in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” in *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum*, ed. T. Flynn and T. J. Barringer (London: Routledge, 1998), 28–40.

rare vases of porcelain; a great variety of articles of furniture, dress, and bijouterie; sumptuous saddle-housings, and warlike equipment; heaps of caps and shoes, fans and pipes, pouches and boxes; books and musical instruments; workmen's tools and implements of all sorts; models of houses, bridges, pagodas, junks, and other craft; irrigating and other machinery; stuffed birds of superb plumage, painted butterflies, shells, and a large collection of fish preserved in spirits.³¹

Other enthusiasts traveled to China in person to acquire objects for their collections, including the writer and entertainer Albert Smith who noted all the "wonderful things" available in Hong Kong and Canton.³² Smith incorporated a "Chinese Collection" in his entertainment at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, featuring numerous "Chinese *curios*" and "many things which cannot be replaced": everything, in fact, from a Chinese garden pavilion to a traveling barber's shop and a peripatetic eating house, Chinese books, compasses, models of ships, gambling implements, weapons, medicines, kites, shoes, toys, bills and proclamations.³³ Technological innovations and notably the popularization of photography from the 1850s were spurs to this interest in Chinese things.

Yet conflict with China also gave expression to and fueled anti-Chinese sentiments. Newspapers censured the Celestial Empire as decrepit, corrupt, and inferior. Such views were exemplified in the articles by Thomas De Quincey collected in the pamphlet *China*, published during the Second Opium War (1856–60). There, the Chinese are described as "horrid savages," while China is portrayed as Britain's "vilest oriental enemy" and represented in terms of backwardness and barbarity.³⁴ If the war was justified as an act of "retribution" for Chinese "treachery," China was located "in a moral discourse and an economy that [defined] it as an immature civilization, one lacking anything of superior and enduring quality."³⁵

31. "The Chinese Collection or Museum," *Spectator*, June 25, 1842, 16. The title of the catalogue printed by the collection's curator and coproprietor, William B. Langdon, was *Ten Thousand Chinese Things*. The show had opened in Philadelphia in 1838 before touring England. See Catherine Pagani, "Objects and the Press: Images of China in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Imperial Co-Histories: National Identities and the British and Colonial Press*, ed. J. F. Codell (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 147–66, esp. 150–51.

32. "Mr. Albert Smith at Hong-Kong," *Illustrated London News*, October 23, 1858, 389.

33. "Mr. Albert Smith's Chinese Museum," *Illustrated London News*, December 24, 1859, 625. See Smith's account of his trip to Hong Kong and Canton, *To China and Back: Being a Diary Kept, Out and Home* (London: Egyptian Hall [Published for the Author], 1859).

34. Thomas De Quincey, *China: A Revised Reprint of Articles from "Titan"* (Edinburgh: James Hogg, 1857), 10, 104.

35. James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 102.

In October 1860, members of the Anglo-French force destroyed and looted Chinese objects from the Summer Palace (Yuanming Yuan): vases, enamels, lapis lazuli carvings, paintings, and furs were auctioned on site or brought to the European market. Lord Elgin, who visited the Palace shortly after it had been ransacked, observed, “There was not a room that I saw in which half the things had not been taken away or broken to pieces.”³⁶

Over the next two decades, perceptions of China hardened into a more consistently disparaging attitude. Descriptions of the nefarious opium den, which had begun in the 1860s, became increasingly alarmist.³⁷ It was a shift that corresponded to growing anxieties about Britain’s imperial future and more vehement opposition to the expansionist drive of the new imperialism. Although guidebooks to China, such as William Legge’s *Guide to Hongkong* (1893), noted an array of “admirable and handsome” Chinese things available for the globe-trotting tourist to buy, worries about economical performance, foreign competition, and subsequent setbacks during the Boer War (1899–1902) fed into latent concerns about the vulnerability and sustainability of Britain’s position in the East, particularly in the face of other imperial ambitions in the region.³⁸ British commentators reflected on the ramifications of China’s future industrialization and the flooding of the markets with cheap Chinese goods. In *National Life and Character* (1893), the British-born historian and politician Charles H. Pearson envisioned that “the great inert force of China” would one day “be organised, and rendered mobile and capable of military aggression,” heralding a new dark age.³⁹ Defeat by Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) may have underscored China’s weakness, but it also precipitated a scramble for further concessions and an escalation of Great Power rivalry. Particularly around the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, popular novels raised the specter of a Chinese invasion, wherein China overwhelms the West “like a flood—a ghastly, organized, calculating flood.”⁴⁰

36. Theodore Walrond, ed. *Letters and Journals of James, Eighth Earl of Elgin* (London: John Murray, 1872), 361. See also Hevia, *English Lessons* (n. 35), 79.

37. Virginia Berridge, “The Myth of the Opium Den in Late Victorian England,” in *Opium and the People: Opiate Use and Drug Control Policy in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century England* (1981; repr., London: Free Association Books, 1999), 195–205 (196).

38. William Legge, *A Guide to Hongkong with Some Remarks on Macao and Canton* (Hong Kong: Walter W. Brewer, 1893), 20–21.

39. Charles H. Pearson, *National Life and Character: A Forecast* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 111.

40. S. N. Sedgwick, *The Last Persecution* (1909), quoted in Ross G. Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 130.

Implicit in James Dyer Ball's turn-of-the-century anthology, *Things Chinese*, is the notion that things—from the abacus to the plague and zoological collections—could reveal China as it was. For Dyer Ball, “things” disclose China's “vast mass of old-world traditions and modes of thought,” and extend from Chinese material artifacts to cultural practices and institutions.⁴¹ Plague is a Chinese “thing” in that China has become the “nidus” and “natural culture of the germ,” just as it produces piracy, specific forms of poetry, a distinct population, and pottery.⁴² In other words, things are phenomena that enable China to be known, and through the acquisition of this knowledge, the British may help to lay the ground for China's progressive transformation. As Dyer Ball expresses it, “The little white stone of Western progress” has been cast and sunk deep in China's “well-nigh stagnant pool”: although unseen, “its influence is making itself visible on the surface in ever-increasing ripples, which are extending far and wide, and have not yet reached their limit.”⁴³ The reformation of old things and the importation of new things were ways of extending and intensifying the process of China's modernization: not only permeating the realm of material culture with new “modern” values but also seeping through into the very ground from which that culture emerged.⁴⁴

Objects, of course, had other singular meanings and values attached to them within the British colonial service. In 1895, Francis Henry May, Hong Kong's captain superintendent of police (and later the colony's governor), was awarded the Companionship of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George (CMG) by the queen, in recognition of his services during the plague epidemic the previous year. The chairman of the Sanitary Board, John J. Francis, was given “a handsome silver inkstand” as a token of the government's appreciation for his “valuable labours.” For Francis, however, the inscribed inkstand was “so ludicrously inadequate to the services rendered” that he promptly returned it, enclosing a lengthy and irate letter to the governor. In Francis's eyes, the value of the gift, as an object, was clearly incommensurate with the dedication he had demonstrated in fighting the plague-germ.⁴⁵ It was with the purpose

41. James Dyer Ball, *Things Chinese; or, Notes Connected with China*, 4th ed. (Hong Kong: Kelly and Walsh, 1903), xi.

42. *Ibid.*, 513.

43. *Ibid.*, xi.

44. On the adoption of modern, Western “things” in China, see Frank Dikötter, *Exotic Commodities: Modern Objects and Everyday Life in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

45. “More Comment on the Inkstand Incident,” *Hongkong Weekly Press*, June 26, 1895, 9–10; see also Norton-Kyshe, *History of the Laws and Courts of Hongkong* (n. 1), 2:462–66.

of removing a “whole [Chinese] area” with its “conglomeration of blocks” that the Taipingshan Resumption Ordinance was passed in September 1894, authorizing the demolition of unsanitary Chinese dwellings in the Western District.⁴⁶ The bestowal of an inkstand was deemed an insufficient reward for the labor of dealing with the clearing of contaminated Chinese “junk.”

Indescribable Rubbish

Hong Kong was declared an infected port on May 10, 1894, with sections 32 and 33 of the Public Health Ordinance No. 24 (1887) invoked, vesting authorities with powers to conduct house-to-house visitations “for the purpose of inspecting the sanitary condition of the premises.” Affected dwellings were to be disinfected, while “all articles of clothing or bedding and all other articles whatsoever” were to be removed from the premises. In cases where “clothing, furniture or other articles” could not be effectively disinfected, they were to be destroyed.⁴⁷

In his own words, Francis had been the Sanitary Board’s “brain and motive power” during the epidemic, while Superintendent May had overseen the visitations of Chinese plague dwellings and supervised the operations on the ground. On May 13, “search parties,” consisting of “Chinese Constables and Detectives,” began house-to-house visits. On May 14, J. Rowland Crook, an engineer and the colony’s sanitary surveyor, assumed responsibility for cleansing houses with “organized gangs of coolies.” Given the scope of the work, however, requests were made for volunteers to assist.⁴⁸ According to the governor, Sir William Robinson, “naval and military doctors were furnished, and at least 300 men from the Shropshire Regiment and officers and men from the R.E. and R.A. detachments were, among others, detailed for the duty of house-to-house

46. See the speech by Acting Attorney General J. H. Stewart in the Legislative Council, *Hong Kong Hansard*, September 3, 1894, 57.

47. “Bye-laws Made by the Sanitary Board,” Government Notification No. 175, *Hongkong Government Gazette Extraordinary*, May 11, 1894, 375–76 (376). Additional bylaws were approved at the end of May. Houses deemed by the Permanent Committee of the Sanitary Board to be “in such a dirty or insanitary condition as to constitute a danger to health” could be forcefully disinfected, with the householders removed; Government Notification No. 208, *Hongkong Government Gazette Extraordinary*, May 31, 1894, 493–94.

48. “Report of Messrs. F. H. May and J. R. Crook on the Works Carried Out by Them in Connection with the Plague,” September 28, 1894. Enclosed with miscellaneous material in “Plague Services 1894,” June 19, 1894, Great Britain, Colonial Office, Original Correspondence: Hong Kong, 1841–1951, Series 129/270 (hereafter CO 129), 395–409, Public Record Office, London.

visitation and for cleansing and disinfecting the houses in which cases of plague had occurred.”⁴⁹

In July 1894, the *Illustrated London News* carried a feature on the plague in Hong Kong, accompanied by a photograph of troops from the First Battalion Shropshire Light Infantry Regiment conducting searches of poor tenements in the Western District of the island and burning wooden partitions torn down from within the buildings: “The woodwork and the wretched furniture had become so saturated with the noisome and noxious atmosphere that it was necessary without delay to consume it by fire.”⁵⁰ A similar image appeared in the British weekly newspaper the *Graphic*, showing troops “making bonfires of the furniture which littered the roadways and of every rag and stick which had been removed from the houses.”⁵¹ As a reporter for the *Hongkong Telegraph* observed, this was “highly unpleasant work,” which entailed entering the Chinese neighborhoods of Taipingshan and Kennedy Town, at the epicenter of the outbreak, “to thoroughly strip, cleanse and disinfect every building found to be infected.”⁵² Those undertaking visitation duties were directed to apply a handkerchief saturated with eucalyptus oil to their nose. As soon as they came off duty, they were requested to change their clothes (hanging up their working garments in the air and sun when not in use), douse themselves in water and Jeyes Fluid, and rinse their mouth with a solution of Condy’s Fluid.⁵³

49. Dispatch from Governor Robinson to Lord Ripon, June 20, 1894, CO 129/263, 457–78. Robinson reports that “upwards of 350 have already been condemned as unfit for human habitation” with 7,000 Chinese dislodged from “infected houses” into provisional shelter.

50. “The Plague at Hong-Kong,” *Illustrated London News*, July 28, 1894, 100. The article contained a photograph by D. K. (David Knox) Griffith from a series depicting “a few scenes and incidents which present themselves to notice in the afflicted city.” Griffith was born in Dublin in 1841 and died in Hong Kong in January 1897, having spent twenty-five years in China: principally in Shanghai from 1872 and in Hong Kong from 1878. On the “Whitewash Brigade,” see J. J. Platt, M. E. Jones, and A. K. Platt, *The Whitewash Brigade: The Hong Kong Plague of 1894* (London: Dix Noonan Webb, 1998).

51. “The Plague in Hong Kong,” *Graphic*, August 4, 1894, 119. This illustration was also based on a photograph by Griffith. Other images showing the incineration of Chinese “rubbish” and “refuse” appeared in the newspaper on July 21, 1894 (64) and December 29, 1894 (12).

52. L. C. Arlington, who had arrived in China in 1879, claimed that the soldiers “used to enter a house and demand a ‘squeeze’—otherwise the furniture and other things, such as clothing, trunks, etc., were thrown out into the streets and destroyed by fire.” He alleged that it was the “native helpers and interpreters” who “did all the ‘squeezing,’ the foreigners being totally ignorant of the matter.” See *Through the Dragon’s Eyes: Fifty Years’ Experiences of a Foreigner in the Chinese Government Service* (London: Constable, 1931), 168.

53. “Report of Messrs. F. H. May and J. R. Crook” (n. 48), 407.

Subdivided into numerous makeshift cubicles or “cocklofts,” the dwellings were “pitch-dark, and as close as the grave.”⁵⁴ The boxed interiors were constructed with “narrow apertures more like rat-holes than anything else” and had “less room than there is in a rabbit-burrow.”⁵⁵ In such brutish accommodation, “men, women and children herd together.” Zoomorphic images—rats, rabbits, cattle, sheep—merged in this reportage with the primitive indigenous: the dimensions of these Chinese hovels are “pigmy,” while the inhabitants have been “toughened” and “blackened” into aboriginals by the dense smoke within.⁵⁶

A recurrent emphasis in the official reports is on “the state of things” and “the enormous amount of filth collected in the houses.”⁵⁷ A language of “things” and unsavory “collection” is employed to describe Chinese habits and living arrangements. The focus of the sanitary campaign was on the removal of offending articles and furnishings from the buildings “to prevent contagion from the deposit of foul exhalations on their surface.”⁵⁸ The protagonist of a short story by the writer and sometime Hong Kong resident James Dalziel, which is set during the epidemic (“black ninety-four”), is a sanitary inspector who is dispatched to gut “the filth-clad woodwork out of the awful rookeries, heaving up the floors and down the ceilings” to leave “a shell of bare granite walls and gaping windows, and the miserable tenants wailing the destruction of their frowsy household gods.”⁵⁹

Chinese dwellings were described by commentators as filled with “a miscellaneous assortment of indescribable rubbish.” As the *Hongkong Telegraph* reported, “Endless quantities of evil-smelling stuff, possibly valuable property from the Chinese point of view fill[ed] the place.” The “indescribable” nature of this “rubbish” was a persistent refrain in local and metropolitan newspapers.⁶⁰ The disinfection process involved the seizure of personal belongings, deemed to be contaminating, and the

54. “The Plague: House to House Visitations,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, May 26, 1894, 2. For an account of these “cocklofts,” see *Mr. Chadwick’s Reports on the Sanitary Condition of Hong Kong: with Appendices and Plans* (London: Colonial Office, November 1882), 11.

55. “The Plague: House to House Visitations,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, May 26, 1894, 2.

56. *Ibid.*

57. See, for example, the use of the phrase by Colonial Surgeon Philip B. C. Ayres in his letter of March 2, 1895, prefixed to a report on the plague; *Hongkong Government Gazette*, April 13, 1895, 367–68, quotation on 367.

58. “The Plague at Hong-Kong,” *Illustrated London News*, July 28, 1894, 100.

59. James Dalziel, “The Case of John Dyer: Hero,” in *Chronicles of a Crown Colony* (Hong Kong: South China Morning Post, 1907), 1–15, quotation on 11.

60. See, for example, “The Plague in Hongkong,” *Times* (London), which reported on the “tons of indescribable rubbish” removed from Chinese homes (August 28, 1894), 6.

ejection of “every stick and rag of movable property” into the street, while the “black holes” were whitewashed and drenched with carbolic acid.⁶¹ Furniture, bedding, and a jumble of “filthy” household objects amassed outside, giving rise to misgivings about the consequences of “the huge piles of rubbish thrown out of infected dwellings,” since it was alleged by some that the expulsion of junk was helping to fuel the epidemic.⁶² “Not unnaturally,” observed the *Graphic*, attempts at the removal and destruction of personal belongings were opposed by the “natives,” since “the heaps of rubbish that Tommy Atkins burns in the streets represents the entire property of many destitute families.”⁶³

All in all, “over 7,000 tons of rubbish and dirt were removed from the city.”⁶⁴ Numerous bonfires blazed in the streets of Taipingshan, reported the *Hongkong Daily Press* (including a fire in the lane behind the offices of the *China Mail*), stoked by “lots of stuff” comprising all “the rubbish from the condemned coolie quarters.”⁶⁵ In the colonial lexicon “rubbish” and “stuff” became catchall terms to describe an unwholesome and undifferentiated mass of Chinese objects. Material culture was intelligible and describable only in relation to a threatening “conglomeration,” a quotidian and perishable jumble, which stood in antithesis to the formal “collection.” As the critic and travel writer Clement Scott noted in an article on “The Black Plague in China” published in June 1894 in the *Illustrated London News*, disease was fomented among the filth and “foul conglomeration of stenches” in Canton and Hong Kong. Scott explicitly links Chinese “dissipation” to a sanitary breakdown wherein everyday objects become vehicles of death. In one hallucinogenic image, infected Chinese bodies and objects are disturbingly conflated, with the rotting heads of dead Chinamen “potted in huge jars for burial.”⁶⁶

Goods and Stuffs

Although the plague-germ was linked to the contaminated Chinese body—“the great breeding ground for the germ is in the human body”⁶⁷—

61. “The Plague: House to House Visitations,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, May 26, 1894, 2.

62. “The Plague in Hongkong,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, June 4, 1894, 2.

63. “The Plague in Hong Kong,” *Graphic*, August 4, 1894, 119.

64. J. G. Kerr, “The Bubonic Plague,” *China Med. Missionary J.* 13, no. 4 (1894): 178–80, quotation on 179.

65. “The Plague,” *Hongkong Daily Press*, July 6, 1894, 2.

66. Clement Scott, “The Black Plague in China,” *Illustrated London News*, June 30, 1894, 823.

67. James Lowson, “The Epidemic of Bubonic Plague in Hongkong, 1894,” Government Notification No. 146, *Hongkong Government Gazette*, April 13, 1895, 369–420, quotation on 375.

it was also understood to adhere, or possibly *inhere*, to things. “Their baggage in particular should be most carefully disinfected,” noted James Lowson, acting superintendent of the Government Civil Hospital, “as the ways of the ‘heathen Chinese’ are just as peculiar in the matter of clothing as they are in some other things.”⁶⁸

From the 1870s, bacteriology had demonstrated the role of particular pathogens in the etiology of disease. In an article on leprosy published in 1891 in the *China Mail*, Louis Pasteur was reported as declaring that “with the progress of science and by following the lines already laid down, I have not the slightest doubt that in time the microbes of all diseases which attack the human body will be discovered and cultivated.”⁶⁹ Three years later, during the plague outbreak in Hong Kong, Yersin and Kitasato had isolated the causative organism of plague,⁷⁰ while in 1898 research by Paul-Louis Simond suggested that plague was transmitted from rodents to humans via fleas.⁷¹

These scientific developments impacted upon quarantine policy and, in particular, the danger understood to reside in infected merchandise. Although quarantine practices continued to be determined by economic interests and priorities,⁷² by the 1890s Koch’s bacteriological research had established that cholera was rarely conveyed by imported merchandise, “other than those few in which the cholera bacillus was transmissible (mainly used and soiled clothing and foodstuffs like milk, butter and cheese).”⁷³ Following the International Sanitary Conference convened in Venice in 1897 to agree preventative measures against the spread of plague, there was an easing on shipping restrictions. In the case of India, this meant lifting bans on such articles as hides and skins, which were now considered to be innocuous.⁷⁴

In 1897, in an article on the plague pandemic in Asia, the *Lancet* had disparaged old-fashioned prejudices about “infected goods,” citing the authority of Luigi Pagliani, professor of hygiene at the University of Turin,

68. *Ibid.*, 392–93. Although Lowson concluded, “Introduction by merchandise from an infected port though possible is very improbable indeed” (393).

69. “Leprosy Microbes,” *China Mail*, November 17, 1891, 3.

70. S. Kitasato, “The Bacillus of Bubonic Plague,” *Lancet* 144, no. 3704 (1894): 428–30; A. Yersin, “La peste bubonique à Hong-Kong,” *Annales de l’Institut Pasteur* 8 (1894): 662–67.

71. P. L. Simond, “La propagation de la peste,” *Annales de l’Institut Pasteur* 12 (1898): 625–87.

72. Mark Harrison, *Public Health in British India: Anglo-Indian Preventive Medicine, 1859–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117–38.

73. Peter Baldwin, *Contagion and the State in Europe, 1830–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 210.

74. Harrison, *Public Health in British India* (n. 72), 135; Harrison, *Contagion* (n. 4), 184.

who declared that “no proof exists of an epidemic of ‘pestitis bubonica’ having been propagated by merchandise or by articles of private or domestic use.” As Pagliani noted, “Neither epidemiological reasons nor such as the laboratory can bring to the test can justify the prevailing dread of goods proceeding from plague-stricken localities—a dread fraught with damage to our commerce.”⁷⁵ William Simpson, professor of hygiene at King’s College London from 1898, who was commissioned to write reports on the plague pandemic in Asia, likewise noted the exaggerated fears about merchandise as a vehicle of transmission. Although he observed that the disease could “be transported on articles that have been contaminated with infected secretions,” these were limited to clothes and specific kinds of cargo, principally foodstuffs.⁷⁶ Reflecting on the lessons learned from the outbreaks of plague in Hong Kong and Bombay, the U.S. surgeon-general, Walter Wyman, declared in 1897, “This disease furnishes a striking illustration of the scientific advance of modern medicine. It was not until 1894 that positive knowledge of its true nature became known. Now, its cause, method of propagation, and the means necessary to prevent its spread are matters of scientific certainty.”⁷⁷

Yet, despite scientific and medical progress, and the optimism of physicians such as Wyman, bacteriological insights were often rejected or modified on the ground as they interacted with sanitarian assumptions. Simond’s suggestion that the rat flea was important in the transmission of plague, for example, met with some antagonism.⁷⁸ Many remained convinced that the plague was “self-generated,”⁷⁹ while others claimed it was a soil-bred “miasmatic” disease similar to malaria, and produced “in some particular form of fermenting or decomposing material in which the germ finds a nidus.”⁸⁰ The physician Frank Clemow, who represented Britain at the International Sanitary Conference in Paris in 1903, thought it probable that “the infection can remain for considerable periods in inanimate objects without losing its activity.” In his view, it remained “almost

75. “Editorial,” *Lancet* 149, no. 3838 (1897): 817–19, quotations on 819.

76. William J. R. Simpson, *A Treatise on Plague: Dealing with the Historical, Epidemiological, Clinical, Therapeutic and Preventive Aspects of the Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 194–209.

77. Walter Wyman, “The Black Plague,” *North Amer. Rev.* 164, no. 485 (1897): 441–52, quotation on 444.

78. L. Fabian Hirst, *The Conquest of Plague: A Study of the Evolution of Epidemiology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), 159.

79. “News of the Week,” *Spectator*, June 16, 1894, 1.

80. James Cantlie, “A Lecture on the Spread of Plague,” *Lancet* 149, no. 3828 (1897): 85–91, quotation on 85.

certain that the disease can be spread over the earth's surface by means of infected goods or fomites."⁸¹ The ambiguous category of "things" was appended to the term "merchandise" at the Paris meeting, reflecting an uncertainty about what precise objects the plague was able to cling to.⁸² Summarizing the available literature, Wyman himself concluded that the plague was spread by clothing, bedding, and "other infected materials," as well as by dust.⁸³ Pre-bacteriological, sanitarian notions coexisted with a new understanding of pathogenic agency in ways that problematize any notion of a laboratory "revolution."⁸⁴ As Carol Benedict has remarked, "The reluctance of many policymakers and physicians to accept the rat flea theory of plague transmission and their continued insistence that plague was caused by the bodies and belongings of the Chinese themselves remind us of the ways in which scientific knowledge is always embedded in a particular cultural and political context."⁸⁵

In Hong Kong, Chinese objects, in particular, were viewed as contaminating. The U.S. consul in Hong Kong (1897), William E. Hunt, declared that Chinese household items and personal effects were certain culprits in the dispersal of disease.⁸⁶ Chinese clothes were viewed as particular targets for incineration. Superintendent May reported to the Sanitary Board how dwellings were "subjected to chlorine" with the removal "of all

81. Frank Clemow, *The Geography of Disease* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 348.

82. Simpson, *Treatise on the Plague* (n. 76), 419–20.

83. Wyman, "The Black Plague" (n. 77), 447.

84. See the arguments made in David S. Barnes, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle against Filth and Germs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). On the obsession with the hygiene of household objects and the incorporation of germ theories into "the fabric of everyday life" in the United States, see Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). For a critique of germ theory as "an all-purpose explanation, its meaning and authority evident to all," see Nancy J. Tomes and J. H. Warner, "Introduction to Special Issue on Rethinking the Reception of the Germ Theory of Disease: Comparative Perspectives," *J. Hist. Med. & Allied Sci.* 52, no. 1 (1997): 7–16. As Michael Worboys has shown, there was no one germ theory but rather multiple theories: "The distinct interests and resources of different groups enabled them to produce distinct theories and meanings, and to fashion diverse germ practices"; see *Spreading Germs: Disease Theories and Medical Practice in Britain, 1865–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8. On germ theory in Hong Kong and Calcutta, see Mary P. Sutphen, "Not What, but Where: Bubonic Plague and the Reception of Germ Theories in Hong Kong and Calcutta, 1894–1897," *J. Hist. Med. & Allied Sci.* 52, no. 1 (1997): 81–113.

85. Carol Benedict, "Framing Plague in China's Past," in *Remapping China: Fissures in Historical Terrain*, ed. Gail Hershatter et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 27–41, quotation on 40.

86. Benedict, *Bubonic Plague* (n. 5), 141.

clothing and such portions as are of any value are disinfected and the rest burnt.”⁸⁷ “Great piles of refuse and garbage were cleared out from some houses, that must have taken years to collect, where the germs of disease were cultivated,” noted Charles Halcombe in 1896 on the government’s sanitary campaign. The troops, “acting the part of scavengers and heroes, routed out and burned tons and tons of filth and rubbish which had been accumulating for years.”⁸⁸ Lawson, too, commented on how “the amount of what is generally termed rubbish accumulates in a Chinese house in a crowded city beyond the imagination of most civilized people.” Penetration of this “domestic privacy” was justified on the grounds of its infectivity, and Lawson provided an inventory of household junk, “a mixture of dust, old rags, ashes, broken crockery, moist surface soil” and other material artifacts coated with “a fetid patina of human and animal excrement.”⁸⁹ Organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate forms become indistinct in the inchoate Chinese dwelling. If Chinese inhabitants have a propensity to herd like beasts, human artifacts are indistinct from a degenerating biology. Rotting animal flesh—“decomposing and putrid meat, fat and bones”⁹⁰—is identified as incriminating evidence among the impoverished furnishings and filthy rags. The “decomposition” of the house is understood to necessitate its erasure.⁹¹

“Whoever has looked into a Chinese dwelling,” observed Kitasato, “is at once persuaded that here is a suitable hunting-ground for the plague bacillus.” In his report on the plague in the *Lancet*, the Japanese bacteriologist underlined the importance of treating Chinese “household things” as potential vehicles of infection.

The infected dwellings, before the household things are removed, have to be disinfected by a 2 per cent. carbolic acid solution or by a solution of quicklime in a correct way. Afterwards, wearing apparel, linen, bedding, &c. should be specially disinfected by a steam disinfecter for one hour at a temperature

87. “Hongkong Sanitary Board,” *Hongkong Daily Press*, July 6, 1894, 2.

88. Charles Halcombe, *The Mystic Flowery Land: A Personal Narrative* (London: Luzac, 1896), 211, 217.

89. Lawson, “Epidemic of Bubonic Plague in Hongkong” (n. 67), 376.

90. Philip B. C. Ayres, “Colonial Surgeon’s Report for 1894,” Government Notification No. 354, *Hongkong Government Gazette*, August 17, 1895, 906–52, quotation on 913.

91. For an account of the ways in which slum dwellings were linked with infectious disease pathologies and crime in late 1880s and 1890s London, see Robert Peckham, “Pathological Properties: Scenes of Crime, Sites of Infection,” in *Disease and Crime: A History of Social Pathologies and the New Politics of Health*, ed. Robert Peckham (New York: Routledge, 2014), 56–78. The language of forced entry and demolition employed in Hong Kong’s slum clearance echoes the vocabulary of imperial expansion, which emphasized the “opening up” and penetration of China.

of 100°C.; should a steam disinfector not be available the things ought to be exposed directly to the sun's rays for several hours. Articles unfit for use ought to be burned.⁹²

The removal of "rubbish and refuse from infected houses," noted one commentator, caused a dangerous "stirring-up of filth" and resulted in a change of policy: "thenceforth the houses were simply soaked with powerful disinfectants and left closed for several days, after which the contents were entirely cleared out and the bare walls white-washed."⁹³

Imperial Debris

The plague was frequently evoked in colonial commentaries in relation to the senses: to Chinese noise and nauseating Chinese odors. Pestilence was aggravated by the "noisome" environment of the poor Chinese quarters,⁹⁴ which were characterized by the "yelling and ululating" of coolies and the insensitive blasting of firecrackers.⁹⁵ Cacophonous noise and stink were transgressive and antisocial, seeping across borders and threatening to undermine the colonial order.

Yet the plague was above all understood in terms of the visual, even though there was debate in the Legislative Council in September 1894 about the reliance on "seeing" to determine whether or not Chinese dwellings were fit for habitation. In the Council's deliberations on the Taipingshan Resumption Ordinance, the Hon. Andrew J. Leach, QC, acting colonial-attorney, expressed his disapproval of "amateur experts who go round and look at the houses" as opposed to the architects, engineers, and sanitarians who possessed "really practical knowledge": "I do not wish for a moment to throw any blame or cast any slur on those gentlemen who have gone through this area and tried to see for themselves what the condition of those buildings is, but I venture to say that their sight from want of experience may have misled them."⁹⁶

Notwithstanding such concerns about the authority of "seeing," the plague was understood in relation to a visual economy of "Chineseness." Disease was visualized in relation to place. The photographs by D. K. Griffith of the house-to-house visitations provide one contemporary depiction of the epidemic that is frequently recycled in historical accounts:

92. Kitasato, "Bacillus of Bubonic Plague" (n. 70), 429–30.

93. "The Plague in Hongkong," *Times* (London), August 28, 1894, 6.

94. "The Plague at Hong-Kong," *Illustrated London News*, July 28, 1894, 100.

95. Scott, "Black Plague in China" (n. 66).

96. "Reports of the Meetings of the Legislative Council," *Hong Kong Hansard*, September 17, 1894, 60–68, quotation on 65.

the image of wasted Chinese plague victims lying in the makeshift “Glassworks” hospital or images of the “Whitewash Brigade” undertaking sanitary inspections in the Chinese districts.⁹⁷ Based in Shanghai and Hong Kong, where he opened a studio in the 1880s, Griffith had exhibited “a choice selection of Hongkong views and characteristic scenes for display in the India and Colonial Exhibition” held in South Kensington, London, in 1886. As the *Hongkong Daily Press* noted in July 1894, “Mr. D. K. Griffith has forwarded to us from his studio several photographs of an excellent series he has taken of the plagues scenes.” Noteworthy, according to the newspaper, was the realistic, “life-like” quality of the photographs, including one showing “a party of Shropshire ‘lads’ burning *débris* from condemned houses on a narrow filthy looking street.”⁹⁸

Griffith’s plague scenes depict a medley of barely discernible junk in the street heaped outside the “condemned” Chinese tenements. Household objects lack specificity, although on close inspection there appear to be planks, receptacles of various kinds, and bamboo poles. The dwellings and their contents spill out into a broader environment of “dirt,” which is set off starkly against the military who resemble white-uniformed medical personnel. Photography is here imagined as a “cure.”⁹⁹ Indeed, popular accounts in the Hong Kong newspapers celebrated photography’s role in medical research, in picturing the body’s insides, and in enabling the surgical targeting of specific disease “spots.”¹⁰⁰

While Chinese objects in Griffith’s photographs are aggregated into indiscriminate “stuff,” the agents of their removal are clearly and individually delineated. The “mass” of pedestrian things serves, like the teeming Chinese crowd, to underscore colonial difference and singularity, “an individuality produced and sharpened by the teeming numbers around

97. Griffith’s photographs might be compared with those taken of the plague in Bombay by Captain C. Moss of the Gloucester Regiment and F. B. Stewart, a photographer based in Poona. The latter are contained in the album *Plague Visitation, Bombay, 1896–97* prefaced by Brigadier-General W. F. Gatacre, who furnishes background information on the plague and efforts to control it. Griffith’s photograph of the men’s ward of the “Glassworks” hospital appeared in the *Graphic*, August 4, 1894, 120.

98. “The Plague,” *Hongkong Daily Press*, July 6, 1894, 2.

99. See Christopher Pinney, “Photography as Cure,” in *The Coming of Photography in India* (London: British Library, 2008), 1–49. On the uses of the camera in slum clearance and sanitation projects, see John Tagg, “God’s Sanitary Law: Slum Clearance and Photography in Late Nineteenth-Century Leeds,” in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 117–52.

100. See “Photographing the Invisible,” *Hongkong Daily Press*, February 29, 1896, 2. On the enthusiasm for photography in Hong Kong, see “The Photographic Exhibition,” *Hongkong Telegraph*, March 11, 1895, 2; and “The Photographic Exhibition,” *Hongkong Weekly Press*, March 14, 1895, 9.

them.”¹⁰¹ The composition holds in frame the *decomposition* of the household interior: the photograph fixes the plague as an object, even as the plague is viewed in relation to a contagious conglomeration of barely discernible things.

As Helen Grace has noted in relation to the photographs of the clear-up of the 1900 plague outbreak in Sydney, “the images represent horror and abjection *by implication only*. The photographs do not *show* us the horror of plague but function more as a rhetorical device which evokes abjection by withholding the description of it.”¹⁰² The Hong Kong “Whitewash Brigade” photographs register the imprint of a draconian colonial governance. They document an act of assault and the public exposure of “personal effects.” Yet in suggesting the indeterminacy of Chinese things—the relegation of Chinese objects to the status of discarded junk—the photographs “whitewash” the perpetration of another violence. In this sense, the dead matter in the street and the demolition of Chinese plague-houses might be understood in terms of Ann Laura Stoler’s “ruination.” The emptied homes and junked belongings remind us, in other words, that imperial formations were “relations of force” entailing “processes of decimation, displacement, and reclamation.”¹⁰³ Ironically, Griffith himself was to remark on Chinese “hostility to photographic manipulations” on the grounds that for the Chinese, “the photographic image is the soul of the original,” presaging the subject’s death. “In my own case,” he observed, “I have had my chair torn to pieces on the road, my coolies beaten, and my camera broken.”¹⁰⁴

The Hong Kong plague photographs create, as Timothy Mitchell has noted of colonial streetscenes in late nineteenth-century world exhibitions, a distance between the viewer and the native world, while that world is reconstituted “as something picturelike,” resembling an object on exhibit.¹⁰⁵ The exhibition itself reflected a conviction that the world

101. Douglas Kerr, *Eastern Figures: Orient and Empire in British Writing* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 53.

102. The Sydney photographs were produced under the direction of George McCredie, a Public Works Department consultant engineer; see Helen Grace, “A New Journal of the Plague Year,” *Cult. Stud.* 1, no. 1 (1987): 75–91, quotation on 76 (emphasis in original).

103. Ann Laura Stoler, “Introduction: ‘The Rot Remains’: From Ruins to Ruination,” in *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 1–35, quotations on 4–8.

104. D. K. Griffith, “A Celestial Studio,” in *The Photographic News: A Weekly Record of the Progress of Photography*, vol. 19, ed. G. Wharton Simpson (London: Piper & Carter, 1875), 259–61, quotations on 260.

105. Timothy Mitchell, “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order,” in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. N. B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 289–318, quotation on 309.

could be known through its reassembly. In particular, colonized places could be understood through “objects and things themselves” with world exhibitions serving as an “object lesson” for Western spectators.¹⁰⁶ As a photographic subject, the half-ruined Chinese plague dwellings contrast with conventional scenes depicting Victoria as a city of elegant villas and shade trees, government buildings, and commanding company headquarters. There is a connection, here, to the “ruin” as a subcategory of building photography, a genre popularized in a Chinese context by photographers such as Felice Beato, Thomas Child, and John Thomson. Indeed, Griffith himself had toured Northern China in 1872, while working for the photographic studio of William Thomas Saunders in Shanghai, taking photographs of “picturesque” ruins, including views from Tientsin “chiefly associated with the sad events of June, 1870—the ruins of the Cathedral and Orphanage and the graves of the unfortunate victims of the massacre.”¹⁰⁷ Such depictions of half-demolished buildings from the 1870s were to contribute to “the emergence of a transnational visual culture of ruins in China.”¹⁰⁸ A “salvage” photography, which renders colonized worlds as fragile remnants of a premodern past, thus converges in the plague pictures with a genre of “identificatory” photography that scrutinizes indigenous peoples and places for objective evidence of degeneracy and “dissipation.”¹⁰⁹ At the same time, ruined Chinese places provide a context and rationale for the Western reappropriation of Chinese objects in the “collection”: the vases, china, and silk, which were emblems of metropolitan civility.¹¹⁰

106. *Ibid.*, 294.

107. *North China Herald*, December 19, 1872, 527.

108. Wu Hung, “Introduction: Reading Early Photographs of China,” in *Brush & Shutter: Early Photography in China*, ed. Jeffrey W. Cody and Frances Terpak (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011), 1–17 (12–15). Although there are affinities between the elegiac photographs of Chinese ruins and the rubble of plague dwellings, there are clearly distinctions. As Gastón R. Gordillo has argued, “ruins” connote a distancing and estrangement from the past, while “rubble” implies “shapeless, worthless debris.” In this sense, “ruins” abstract the past in a way that ignores “the afterlife of destruction.” Gordillo’s aim is to reframe “ruin” as “rubble,” recuperating the latter from its demotion and exploring it “as textured, affectively charged matter that is intrinsic to all living places”; see *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 10, 5.

109. On the “salvage paradigm” and “detective” or “identificatory” photography, see Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

110. For anxieties about Chinese immigration and objects, see Lenore Metrick-Chen, *Collecting Objects/Excluding People: Chinese Subjects and American Visual Culture, 1830–1900* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); for an account of redefinitions of “Chinese things” in the world of collecting, see Vimalin Rujivacharakul, ed., *Collecting China: The World, China, and a History of Collecting* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011).

As one visitor to Hong Kong remarked in the 1880s, the living quarters of colonial government employees, military officers, and commercial agents were elegantly furnished with Chinese objects: “The interiors of these houses, indeed, present an aspect of luxury—I might almost say, of splendour—peculiarly characteristic of the East, and attainable at yet comparatively small expense.” With a verandah, profusions of flowers, and a large “punkah” fan worked by a coolie, rooms featured

beautifully stained floors, high, wide windows, and folding doors, pretty coloured rattan mattings, large bamboo chairs of every ingenious form to conduce to repose and coolness, feather-weight hand-tables, which can be shifted about almost at a thought, a multiplicity of bright fans scattered conveniently about for use, plenty of handsome lacquer work, and enough revolting ugly china to satisfy the most vitiated taste of a depraved virtuoso.¹¹¹

The affluent European home is presented as a repository of quintessential Chinese objects (mats, fans, lacquer work, and “ugly” china) in contrast to the accumulations of rubbish that swamp the colony’s poor Chinese houses. Moreover, China is integrated into an Oriental setting, merging with India in a “combination of surroundings” to produce “a strange, Arabian-night sensation.”¹¹²

Things in Motion

A tension is manifest in this discourse of the insalubrious Chinese dwelling between, on the one hand, a degraded and festering Chinese space—stewing in filth and characterized by a singular lack of circulating air and light—and, on the other hand, a propensity that this unhealthy constriction promotes for the circulation of infected bodies and things. As Simpson emphasized, plague was a “transportable” disease: it was a thing in motion. The conveyance of infected Chinese bodies and things through the streets of Victoria caused consternation. One appalled colonial resident writing in to the *Hongkong Daily Press* during the plague outbreak of 1900 complained that the “removal of plague victims and clothing” by ambulance, coffin, and large basket along “the most frequented roads” of the city posed an imminent health hazard. “As they are being jogged along,” there was a danger of bacilli being discharged and floating off in the dust. “Sometimes the contents of the basket stink, and things drop along the route.”¹¹³ Plague victims are imagined as so many motile “things”

111. Sir Henry Knollys, *English Life in China* (London: Smith & Elder, 1885), 5–6.

112. *Ibid.*

113. “The Transport of Plague Victims and Infected Clothing,” *Hongkong Daily Press*, May 17, 1900, 2.

carried by pseudo-hawkers. At the height of the 1894 epidemic, Sir William Robinson noted the ingenuity with which some of the colony's Chinese residents sought to evade the quarantine, with one plague victim being exported as substitute merchandise in a wooden camphor box.¹¹⁴

A connection was repeatedly drawn between Chinese houses, disease, and trade. In his 1902 report on the plague, Simpson noted how, since the epidemic of 1894, many of the lower stories in Chinese buildings "had been changed into store-rooms to contain the goods and merchandise for which Hongkong is an entrepôt. These store-rooms as a rule are infested with rats, which at times find their way up to the room on the higher floors."¹¹⁵ In this economy of infected things, the focus moved in expanding and contracting scales from the cubicles in Chinese dwellings and the stinking baskets carried through the streets, to the merchandise in the global shipping lanes radiating out from the colony. As a regional and global transshipment hub, Hong Kong's infected status was "a source of anxiety to those who have trade relations with it."¹¹⁶ Disease transmigrated between borders, invested with a capacity to transform "human and social contexts," thereby recalling Arjun Appadurai's definition of a "commodity," which is constituted within a trajectory of exchange, or what Appadurai calls a "career."¹¹⁷

During the 1894 epidemic, trade and plague were viewed as interconnected, moving along the same pathways. As Simpson noted, Hong Kong, "besides being a great distributor of merchandise, had become also an active centre for the distribution of plague."¹¹⁸ The plague was believed to have come up China's waterways "nesting comfortably among the opium bales"¹¹⁹ and to have been dispersed by opium smugglers in Yunnan.¹²⁰ Connections between the opium trade and plague were repeatedly made. Although opium had been taken for medicinal purposes in imperial China to ward off infections, it was increasingly viewed by colonial commentators within a discourse of disease.¹²¹ Opium was understood by many to be a

114. Sir William Robinson, *Bubonic Plague in Hongkong* (London: HMSO, 1896), 4–5. On the conflated idiom of plague and trade, see Peckham, "Infective Economies" (n. 25).

115. William J. R. Simpson, *Report on the Causes and Continuance of Plague in Hongkong and Suggestions as to Remedial Measures* (London: Waterlow, 1903).

116. *Ibid.*

117. Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63, quotation on 15.

118. Simpson, *Treatise on the Plague* (n. 76), 65.

119. Echenberg, *Plague Ports* (n. 5), 16.

120. Benedict, *Bubonic Plague* (n. 5), 60.

121. Although the perceived benefits of opium were also noted. As Frank Dikötter, Zhou Xun, and Lars Laamann have argued, the "opium plague" was a mythic construction; see

dangerous contaminant and a contagious commodity. Thus, the Reverend George Piercy in 1883 warned against the effects of the importation of Chinese opium: “What could all this grow to but to the plague spreading and attacking our vitals?”¹²² And in 1897, Dr. Leslie E. Keeley wrote “from the east comes the scourge of cholera and the infinite plague of opium smoking.”¹²³ Visitors to the Western Gardens of the Earl’s Court Exhibition in 1899 could pay 6 pennies to view a Hong Kong “opium smoking parlour in full working order” replete “with living Chinamen and true to every detail.”¹²⁴ While the British had opened up the opium trade in the East, pernicious Oriental practices were coming home. Empire had precipitated a reverse penetration of the metropole by the Orient. As an Oriental commodity, opium reflected a host of anxieties that pivoted upon the vulnerability of the British body to contagion in a world increasingly characterized by interconnection.¹²⁵

Thomson noted the effects of opium and the degradation of the Hong Kong “dens” that had “a noxious atmosphere, heavy with the fumes of opium, which, added to the livid and death-like appearance of the smokers stretched upon the benches, recalls the horrors of a nightmare.”¹²⁶ The smoke-filled, blackened-walled Chinese “hovels” in Hong Kong’s Western District, lacking chimneys and with insufficient “smoke-holes,” were described in similar nightmarish terms. They bore a striking similarity to the East End opium dens and were frequently referred to as such. Colonialists censured “the disgusting and filthy dens” in Taipingshan,¹²⁷ while Scott drew a connection between the plague and “the surroundings of the dirty den where the gamblers assemble to play ‘fan-tan,’ oblivious to the dangers of insanitation.”¹²⁸ As the correspondent for the *Times* put

“China, British Imperialism, and the Myth of the ‘Opium Plague,’” in *Drugs and Empires: Essays in Modern Imperialism and Intoxication, c.1500–c.1930*, ed. James H. Mills and Patricia Barton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 19–38; see also Berridge, “Myth of the Opium Den” (n. 37).

122. Quoted in Barry Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains: Opium and the Orient in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 83.

123. Diana L. Ahmad, *The Opium Debate and Chinese Exclusion Laws in the Nineteenth-Century American West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2007), 37.

124. Cover of the brochure “Opium Smoking Parlour” issued to accompany the exhibit at the Western Gardens of the Earl’s Court Exhibition, 1899.

125. Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains* (n. 122).

126. John Thomson, “Opium-Smoking in a Restaurant,” in *Illustrations of China and Its People*, 4 vols. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle, 1873), 1:plate IX.

127. Ayres, “Colonial Surgeon’s Report for 1894,” 913.

128. Scott, “Black Plague in China” (n. 66).

it in an article on “The Plague in Hongkong,” “reeking” Chinese hovels were “dens of death.”¹²⁹

The dark, damp, smoked-filled interiors with their makeshift and festering furniture acquired a hallucinatory aspect in many accounts. The dead Chinese feigned life, while the living were often indistinguishable from the dead. Under the “Clinical” section of his report on the plague, Lowson described his visit to a plague dwelling in a delirious vocabulary that implicitly recalls the criminal “den” as a topos:

I have entered a long low cellar, without any window opening, and with the air entering only by a square open shaft from the level of the roof three or four stories high. Down one side of the shaft ran a broken earthenware drain pipe, leaking freely, the contents streaming down the wall of the air shaft to a shallow pool of filth which crossed the undrained floor of earth. Although it was broad daylight outside a lantern was necessary to see one’s way. On a miserable sodden matting soaked with abominations there were four forms stretched out. One was dead, the tongue black and protruding. The next had the muscular twitchings and semi-comatose conditions heralding dissolution.¹³⁰

This is a corrosive space of “wild delirium,” characterized by noxious seepage and dissolution, where human beings are reduced to “forms” and objects are rubbish, a place where, as Lowson notes, “delirium dissipates coherency.”¹³¹ Dissipation is conveyed through the emphasis on unhealthy liquescence: drips, leaks, outflows, and leachings that undermine fixture and pose a threat to health—and stability.

Although opium smoking in China was often differentiated from the licentiousness of European dens,¹³² depictions of Chinese slum dwellings tended to draw on stock descriptions of the “den” as it featured in metropolitan fiction and reportage. Lowson’s account in his plague report of the pathological Chinese dwellings in Hong Kong, for example, is strikingly similar to descriptions of the opium den that appeared in the *Strand Magazine* in 1891 with illustrations by John L. Wimbush: “Den’ was an appropriate name for the reeking hole to which he conducted us. It was dirty and dark, being lit only by a smoking lamp on the mantle-shelf, and was no much larger than a full-sized cupboard.”¹³³ The smokers themselves “huddled or curled up” on the sordid mattresses are of a “ghostly palour”

129. “The Plague in Hongkong,” *Times* (London), August 28, 1894, 6.

130. Lowson, “Epidemic of Bubonic Plague in Hongkong” (n. 67), 376.

131. *Ibid.*

132. See Philip B. C. Ayres, in his “Annual Report for 1891,” Government Notification No. 471, *Hongkong Government Gazette*, November 19, 1892, 909–60 (914).

133. “Night in an Opium Den,” *Strand Magazine* 1, no. 6 (1891): 624–27, quotation on 626.

and appear “dazed and stupefied.” In fact, they display all the symptoms of plague victims, the author comparing them to lepers. Metropolitan “dens” were invariably situated in backstreets that resembled “the black web of some sprawling spider.” They were cave-like, dank, and filthy: “grotesque things” lay on “ragged mattresses,” and the drugged denizens had “twisted limbs,” “gaping mouths,” and “staring lustreless eyes.”¹³⁴

By the turn of the century, the dissipating “underground” Chinese dwelling had become another trope; a picture of junk-shop thrift and decay onto which was mapped the grotesquery of the den. Sparsely furnished—perhaps with a chair or stool, and a bed consisting of a “platform covered with a coarse mat of reeds,” which could occupy half of the space—these vagabond dwellings were constructed from cast-off things: “the smallest rags and shreds of cloth are saved, carefully pasted together, and form the insole of shoes. Bits of woods are ingeniously glued and dovetailed into other bits, until a board or post is literally built up.”¹³⁵

Conclusion: Twisted Objects

This article has explored colonial responses to the plague in Hong Kong through the conflictual economy of “Chineseness” and in relation to colonial preoccupations with collecting and visualizing Chinese things.¹³⁶ Its focus has been on “twisted objects” in a colonial field, which are testimonies to violence.¹³⁷ The miscellany of “queer things” assembled like so much junk in Norton-Kyshe’s Hong Kong courtroom are exhibits that bear the indelible trace of violence: “a blood-stained piece of clothing and a knife or other weapon with ominous marks thereon.”¹³⁸ While these objects have much to tell us about colonial attitudes toward disease and the Chinese, they also suggest the extent to which colonials *thought through things*.¹³⁹ The importance of “things” was repeatedly emphasized

134. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward Lock, 1891), 208.

135. Chester Holcombe, *The Real Chinaman* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1895), 319–22.

136. Such works have mainly focused on literary production; see, for example, Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain’s Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination* (n. 40).

137. I borrow the phrase “twisted objects in a postcolonial field” from Nancy Rose Hunt, “An Acoustic Register: Rape and Repetition in Congo,” in Stoler, *Imperial Debris* (n. 103), 39–66, quotation on 44.

138. Norton-Kyshe, *History of the Laws and Courts of Hongkong* (n. 1), 2:548.

139. See, generally, Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, *Thinking through Things* (n. 16); and in relation to “how the body helped Victorians think,” see O’Connor, *Raw Material* (n. 24), 13.

by commentators who noted how the Chinese themselves misconstrued the meaning of Western things, just as Westerners were prone to misread Chinese things. A writer in the *Times*, for example, commenting on the anti-Western prejudice of Chinese newspapers, noted acerbically how Chinese “ideas of things foreign are just as correct as most of our popular ideas regarding things Chinese.”¹⁴⁰

Although there is a substantive literature concerned with Western constructions of the infective Chinese body during the second half of the nineteenth century, much less has been written on material objects as vehicles of disease: the “miscellaneous assortment of indescribable rubbish” or “decaying débris,”¹⁴¹ which was understood by many panicked Western observers to be a possible source of infection. The institution of quarantine measures in the nineteenth century has tended to be viewed in relation to developing contagionist theories of disease, as well as anxieties over immigration. However, quarantine was primarily adopted to prevent the importation of infected cargo. “Maritime health authorities in the nineteenth century,” David Barnes had recently argued, “were positively preoccupied with cargo, wherever it came from.”¹⁴²

Responses to the plague in Hong Kong suggest the persistence of pre-bacteriological ideas about the infective agency of things in the etiology of disease. This “materialization” of disease and the inherited miasmatic assumptions that it implied were not, however, unrelated to the operations of laboratory science, which ascribed diseases to specific pathogenic objects, visible under the microscope. Trade and plague had long been viewed as interconnected, while the plague itself was often construed by Western commentators as a foreign object—an “importation.” In 1894, disease, as a nonhuman and imported “thing,” became entangled with colonial anxieties about Chinese objects. This “extraordinary conglomeration” functioned as a critical actant in the epidemic, shaping how knowledge was produced and how responses were implemented.¹⁴³

The interchangeable terms used by British commentators to describe everyday Chinese objects (“rubbish,” “debris,” “junk”) erased any significance that they may have held for their owners. In this sense, alienated Chinese objects were divested of any function and intrinsic value. The plague-germ, however, acted infectively to transform these relegated

140. “The Chinese National Press,” *Times* (London), August 7, 1885, 13.

141. Mary H. Fulton, “Letter,” *China Medical Missionary Journal* 8, no. 2 (1894), 142–43.

142. See David S. Barnes, “Cargo, ‘Infection,’ and the Logic of Quarantine in the Nineteenth Century,” *Bull. Hist. Med.* 88, no. 1 (2014): 75–101, quotation on 76.

143. Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); on “things-in-themselves,” 193–94.

Chinese things into objects of sanitarian concern. Meanwhile, the material existence of the germ, discernable as an object under the microscope, was deemed inseparable from the significance attached to it by the new laboratory science: the cloudy, amber-colored blotch *was* plague. Object and significance were indissoluble.¹⁴⁴

Finally, concerns about the circulation of infective goods were interwoven with anti-opium discourse predicated on averting an imported Chinese “plague” that threatened to degenerate metropolitan society.¹⁴⁵ Plague and trade, biological organism and material object, were conceptually tethered. An examination of this interrelationship serves to shed light on how pathological identities were constituted during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in relation to biomedical and cultural processes—processes that entailed specific forms of violence: the reclamation of Chinese homes and the ruination of Chinese things.



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144. In this sense, too, the plague-germ resembles the power powder or *aché* used by Cuban diviners and understood by them not as a symbolic representation of divinatory power, but as power itself; see Martin Holbraad, *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

145. Howard Padwa, *Social Poison: The Culture and Politics of Opiate Control in Britain and France, 1821–1926* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).