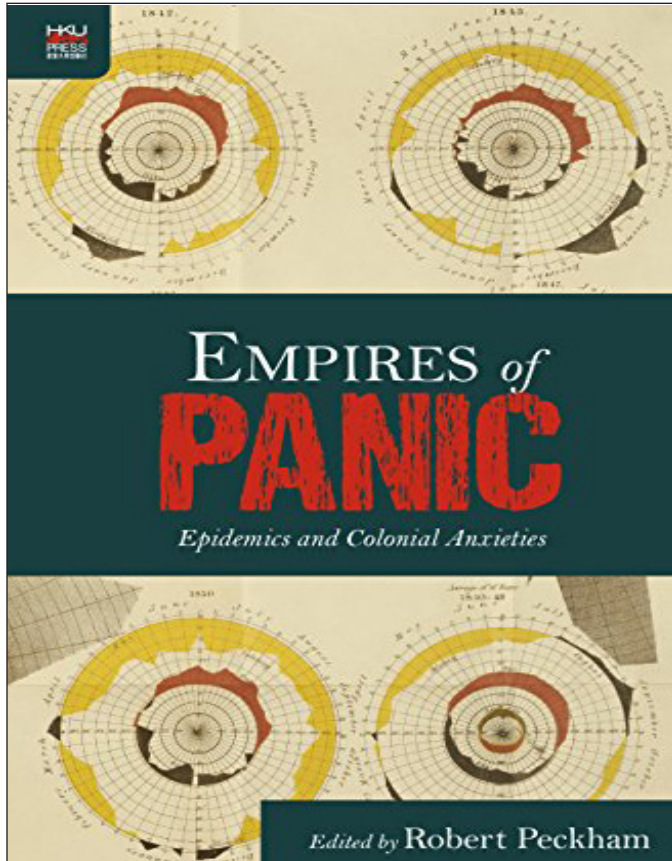


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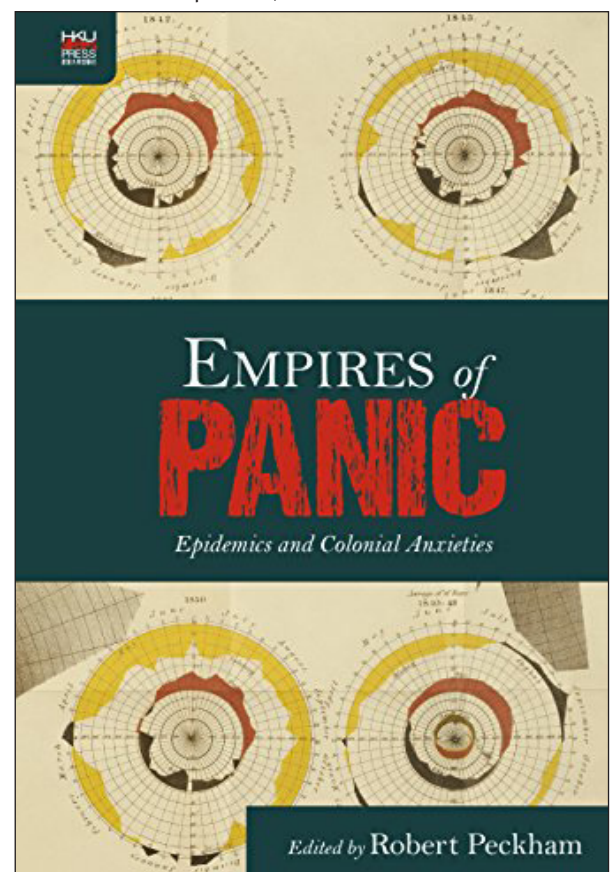
Book Review: *Empires of Panic: Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties*, Robert Peckham, editor.

by Eric Tagliacozzo, Ph.D., Cornell University

Empires of Panic: Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties (Hong Kong University Press), edited by Robert Peckham, is an intriguing volume. There are not many books on a topic as diffuse as this one – the idea itself is unusual, and worthy of a volume. And the book once in hand does not disappoint – though slim, the study punches above its weight in sketching out some of the parameters of this notion across a wide ambit of time and space. This is not history for the faint of heart. It is, however, history that shows how epidemics have spread and caused havoc in various places, and how this phenomenon in turn has been processed and explained by states, and by the human actors that make up the “public,” as well as the sinew of these same states. Most of the action in the volume takes place in Asia, broadly construed; parts of it also jump later on to other geographies, beyond the world’s largest continent.

Directions are laid down in the Introduction, “Panic: Reading the Signs.” Here, Peckham as editor usefully tells us that the vastness of Asia has episodically caused feelings of great anxiety in the West. It’s not just the vast extent of the territory that is “Asia,” but also the immense number of people living there that is potentially hazardous, if things should go wrong. And epidemics are about as wrong as “wrong” gets in this scale of danger. How could pathogens and the people carrying them be controlled, if the distances covered across Asia were so large? How could the immense flow of humans be staunched, when the numbers of people being talked about in imperial terms dwarfed the Western administrators and colonial officials charged with such a daunting task? Peckham shows us some of the calculus at work here, in different climes and in various places, and looks for themes in common among the examples. Despair and a sense that Western science had better move quickly were a near-constant in this equation. This was true in India, for example, vis-à-vis the millions ruled in the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire. But it was also true in Dutch Indonesia, and in a nineteenth-century China that was being carved to pieces by many avaricious powers, all of them taking territory for themselves as putative spheres of influence.

Five of the chapters fit very well together in showing some of the breadth and scope of the ideas on offer in this book. Chapter 2 (by John Carroll) takes Canton as its “site”: here, in factories across a crowded, hemmed-in anchorage, Western merchants confronted the multitudes of China from a solitary base for several hundred years. The notion of the crowd here was seen as dangerous from



the beginning, because of disease (assuredly) but also because of the dangers of fires inherent in such a small space. Chapter 3 (by Joao Rangel de Almeida) examines the Sanitary Convention of 1851, when initial ideas about a pan-European response to epidemic disease spreading on the wings of colonial trade and migration began to circulate in administrative circles. Chapter 4 (by James Beattie) then looks at the scene just a few years after this, but in India, where the 1857 Mutiny changed the landscape of dissent in the sub-continent to one presaging outright rebellion, partially as a result of disease and over-crowding. The tendrils of migration in the wake of the disturbances then stretched all the way to the Antipodes, showing the repercussions of instability as they moved along colonial British pathways. Chapter 5 (by David Arnold), who has written widely elsewhere on disease and public health vectors, then deepens this story further by looking at the plague and influenza as a pan-Indian and supra-Indian phenomena just a few decades later, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, in Chapter 6 (by Robert Peckham himself), these patterns are linked to the astonishing stretch of telegraph wires around the colonial world, both inside and between colonies, and also back to the metropolises in distant Europe. How pandemic was “seen” by the West was of course conditioned by the speed of such reporting, and this vector changed rapidly after telegraph wires started to increasingly connect the globe, especially after the Suez Canal was dug in 1869.

Chapters 7 and 8 (by Amy Fairchild and David Johns for the former, and Nicholas King for the latter), are good essays, and both present interesting material. They do not, however, connect quite as well as the former essays, partially because they move further away temporally from the “Age of Empire” proper, and also because they begin to move further away from Asia itself in their overall scope as well. Chapter 7 does this through a broad-based analysis of public perception of panic and epidemics, mostly over the long twentieth century, and Chapter 8 looks at visual culture and spreading disease from the 1930s, all the way up until our own time. Again, both are useful and well-supported essays, but they do not jibe as well with the overarching theme of the book as earlier chapters do, which fit together more naturally as a set. In an Epilogue chapter, Alison Bashford ties together the eight treatments before her own, and does a nice job of explaining the arc of this research as a coherent “project,” looking back into the past, but also forward into the future as well. It should become clear to anyone reading this volume that the subject-matter at hand is important: we’ll likely live or terminate ourselves as a species based on how we handle such pandemics in the future, given the terrifying speed with which the planet has now knitted itself together. In this respect, *Empires of Panic* is a real service to the field, both in showing that the past is prologue, as the saying goes, and also in warning us that not to take such lessons seriously would be foolhardy indeed.