

## From Bat Soup to Bean Sprouts: Coronavirus Food Fears in Historical Perspective

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By

On a trip to Shandong, China, at the end of January 2020, a few days after the lockdown of Wuhan, I watched a video of a stewed bat on Douyin – the Chinese video-sharing app. The bat sat in a bowl of soup, its boiled skin drawn back across its face to reveal its teeth, almost as if maliciously grinning. Horror-movie style music soundtracked the clip. Later in the spring, back in Hong Kong, the same video – or one like it – appeared again on my Twitter feed. The bat circulated through different social worlds, but in each catalysed horror, disgust, and blame.

The bat video is only one of a profusion of images, clips, and memes that have entangled the COVID-19 pandemic with fear and contempt of putative Chinese dietary practices. In the UK, the [Mail on Sunday](#) published photographs of bedraggled and abused cats and dogs, caged for sale in a Chinese food market, with the headline ‘Will They Ever Learn?’ In the United States, [Michael Caputo](#), who was later appointed government spokesman for the US Department of Health and Human Services, tweeted that ‘millions of Chinese suck the blood out of rabid bats as an appetizer and eat the ass out of anteaters’. Republican senator John Cornyn has described China as a place where ‘people eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that.’ [Paul McCartney](#) meanwhile – from a more liberal, but also militantly vegetarian standpoint – stated that Chinese wet markets were ‘medieval,’ compared them to slavery, and suggested the threat they posed to humankind was comparable to the atomic bomb.

Much of this misinformation is easily dismissed. The growing industry of online fact checkers and social shamers have had rich pickings. It later emerged that the video of stewed bat was from [Palau](#), not Hubei. The photographs of cats and dogs in the *Mail* were from a highly specific situation: the meat markets of one city, Guilin, which is infamous, even in China. A conservative commentator shared a video that purported to show a Chinese woman sucking embryos from bird eggs. It was quickly pointed out that the woman was not speaking Chinese. Fact checking and Twitter dunking has largely focused on the personal ignorance and prejudice that often motivate such claims, but these also grow out of deep-rooted and longstanding histories.

Consider, for instance, the history of bubonic plague in Hong Kong at the turn of the twentieth century. After breaking out in Hong Kong – then a British Crown Colony – in 1894, bubonic plague persisted there until 1929. Hong Kong is well known as having been the site of the plague bacterium's initial identification in June 1894, but research into the disease continued long afterwards. As a British colony in China from which the plague began its global diffusion, Hong Kong was an extraordinary place for scientific research. While the first decade or so of the twentieth century saw the gradual elucidation of plague's epidemiology – with the identification of its rat hosts and flea vectors – food and culinary behaviour became objects of deep suspicion and blame in Hong Kong.

Experiments on monkeys and other animals in 1896 seemingly established that it was possible to contract plague through consuming infected food. This became an *idée fixe* at the turn of the century, later described as an obsession.[\[1\]](#) Cockroaches, ants, beetles, and other insects were suspected of contaminating food with plague bacteria.[\[2\]](#) Flies were shown to deposit plague on sugar.[\[3\]](#) Pigs, providing the pork which then, as now, is the most commonly eaten meat in China, were feared to spread plague after entering the human food chain.[\[4\]](#) Cheap rice was thought to foster the plague bacterium.[\[5\]](#) Epizootics of rinderpest among cattle were suspected of having some connection to human plague.[\[6\]](#) An experiment with hydrochloric acid to simulate the conditions of the stomach was undertaken to assess the survival of the plague bacterium after consumption.[\[7\]](#)

Chinese markets became places of suspicion. Foods commonly eaten in Hong Kong were subjected to bacteriological tests: salted fish, boiled pork, apples, and turnips in 1896; in 1902, everything from dried mussels to bean sprouts to the scrapings from a baking board at a market stall on Hong Kong Island.[\[8\]](#) In June 1903, the discovery of apparently plague-infected poultry at Hong Kong's Western Market sparked a warning to be 'extremely careful,' with recent Chinese deaths ascribed to eating these chickens half-cooked.[\[9\]](#)

This commentary was often racialised. It was entangled with a wider sense of Chinese people as unsanitary, living in filth, and with wrong practices of food preparation. These complaints were common, from the experimenter of 1896 denouncing the 'excessively filthy habits of the Chinese' to the Government Bacteriologist speculating that Chinese 'carelessness or filthy habits' explained food contamination.[\[10\]](#) For instance, the Chinese pickling of meat, he explained, was likely not done in a European 'scientific' manner, but by an insanitary, dirty method instead.[\[11\]](#)

Even at the time in Hong Kong, there were those who dismissed these scientific claims about the infectivity of Chinese food. For one, much of the

speculation didn't fit with what Chinese people actually ate. The idea that Hong Kong's Chinese community were liable to plague infection because of a failure to properly cook pork was nonsense: as a critic put it, '*Chinese cooking is exceptionally well done*,' and in fact was *overcooked* by European standards.[\[12\]](#) Likewise, so was the idea that infected chickens were spreading plague. Chicken, and indeed most meat, was a luxury item at the time, largely unaffordable to most Chinese residents of Hong Kong. It could not have been a cause of infection for a disease which so disproportionately hit the poor.[\[13\]](#) Similarly, the idea that foodstuffs would be contaminated through long storage in cupboards and pantries was unlikely – Hong Kong's labourers were generally too poor to store food, instead buying one meal at a time.[\[14\]](#) Besides, food had to be sold quickly to avoid deterioration in Hong Kong's subtropical climate. Ironically, the only market where meat was regularly kept overnight and therefore at higher risk of contamination was Central Market – the one used by Europeans.[\[15\]](#)

These discussions over plague and food among Hong Kong's scientists at the turn of the twentieth century are thus a salutary warning. Common ideas regarding Chinese food, diets, and markets come loaded with pre-set associations and prejudices. They decoy thinking along sterile pathways of cultural blame. They often have little or nothing to do with actual food practices within China, both then and today.

At the same time, however, this example from Hong Kong helps us to assess the limits of critique. The science of Hong Kong's plague researchers may have been directly wrong, but in their wrongness they simultaneously raised many of the right questions. If suspicions of the role of food in plague turned out to be incorrect, then they were broadly right in beriberi. Moreover, these scientists' attention to animal disease alongside that of humans is a distant predecessor of current approaches to 'One Health.' A way of simultaneously understanding cattle and human disease, for instance, is precisely the unitary vision promised by this fusion of veterinary and human medicine. Furthermore, critique often leaves difficult questions about disease patterns which are irreducible to culture. If the chickens of Hong Kong's markets were the wrong place to look, then, as SARS and – likely – Covid-19 demonstrate, markets must be sites of special attention. The panzootic of African Swine Fever, preceding and accompanying the coronavirus pandemic, illuminates the dangers of the turbocharged movement of meat inside China since 'Reform and Opening Up', while the spectre of avian influenza continues to haunt industrialised poultry production around the world.

The Hong Kong case brings home the difficult balancing act to be undertaken by historians and others in the humanities. Critique remains unfinished and essential work. Racism, orientalism, and long-standing

tropes of prejudice and othering continue to distort, in 2020 as in 1896. Yet, there must remain ways of talking about the entanglements of diet, food, markets, trade, and disease emergence. This is obviously not to justify the sorts of hoary prejudices listed above, but rather to maintain a dual perspective. There is an essential work of rigorous and unsparing critique – but, simultaneously, of not bypassing the dangers present at the interface of human and animal lives.

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### Footnotes

[1] Robert Pollitzer, *Plague* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1954), p. 298.

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[2] William Hunter, *A Research into Epidemic and Epizootic Plague* (Hong Kong: Noronha & Co., 1904), p. 41.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[4] William J. Simpson, *Report on the Causes and Continuance of Plague in Hongkong* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1903), p. 101.

[5] William Hunter, *A Research*, p. iii.

[6] John Mitford Atkinson, 'Bubonic Plague and Cattle Disease' *Lancet* 151, no. 3900, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1900: p. 1494, 1494.

[7] M. Wilm, *A Report on the Epidemic of Bubonic Plague at Hongkong in the Year 1896* (Hong Kong: Noronha & Co., 1897), p. 27; William Hunter, *A Research into Epidemic and Epizootic Plague* (Hong Kong: Noronha & Co., 1904), p. 40.

[8] M. Wilm, *A Report*, p. 27.

[9] 'Plague-Infected Poultry' *China Mail*, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1903, p. 4.

[10] M. Wilm, *A Report*, p. 23; William Hunter, *A Research*, p. 61.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[12] Wilfred W. Pearse, 'Report of the Acting Medical Officer of Health on the Epidemic of Plague in the Colony of Hong Kong During the Year 1904' *Papers Laid Before the Legislative Council of Hong Kong 1905* (Hong Kong: Noronha & Co., 1905): 359-427, p. 381.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 383, when making this point Pearse noted how Chinese labourers could generally afford chicken only a few times a month.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 381.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 383.

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