

How SARS Is Strangling Hong Kong

This usually vibrant city that's so dependent on its service sector and hundreds of thousands of small businesses is turning into a ghost town

The toll of the killer SARS pneumonia on Hong Kong continues to mount. For most of the past week, about 40 new cases a day have cropped up, double the rate of a week earlier. But the fear gripping Hong Kong as a result of SARS may be far more damaging than the disease itself.

For a city that thrives on trade, being quarantined from the rest of the world feels like being strangled. About one-third of the more than 500 flights that usually take off or land in Hong Kong on a typical day are being canceled. Those that are still running are largely empty. For a time, outbound flights were filled with expatriate families fleeing a city whose schools are shuttered. But even that traffic has dried up. Those who wanted to go have mostly left.

The impact of the virus hit me with a thud when I returned to Hong Kong from Beijing on Apr. 4. It was a Friday evening, normally a peak period for flight arrivals. But not a single person was waiting in the cavernous south wing of the immigration hall, manned by only a handful of forlorn immigration officers.

STAYING IN. Travel agents report that outbound bookings for the Easter holiday period are down an incredible 80%. But even those of us who might still dare to get on a plane find that many countries don't want us. Thailand is checking incoming arrivals. If one person on a plane is infected by SARS, everyone on the plane is subject to quarantine, according to travel agents here. Malaysia has suspended automatic visas. Singapore has told foreign workers visiting SARS-infected areas like Hong Kong that they face quarantine on their return.

Hong Kong's streets are eerily empty. The jostling, noisy crowds that characterize this fast-paced city have retreated in fear. For a city that depends on the service sector to generate 86% of its gross domestic product and is powered with hundreds of thousands of small businesses, this disease could be a real economic killer.

After all, restaurants and other shops that depend on cash flow to pay the rent aren't going to be able to keep going indefinitely. My son and I went to a restaurant for dinner on Apr. 10. It had seating for more than 50 people. We were the only diners.

PSYCH-OUT. I was here during the Asian currency crisis of 1997-98. People called it the Asia flu, but what's happening now is so different. During the currency crisis, events unfolded in slow motion. Sure, there were moments of panic. But they were limited to the financial markets.

This fear is in the streets. And never, at least in Hong Kong, has economic activity just stopped this quickly. Some commentators are saying it's the worst crisis since 1967, when a wave of bombings and deadly riots inspired by Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution swept the city.

The damage done by the SARS pneumonia is now above all psychological. Most infected people are health-care workers or others who have been in contact with another sick person. The disease

is not increasing exponentially, like a typical influenza outbreak. And though the mortality rate is uncomfortably high for this sort of disease, it's mostly older people and those with a history of health problems who are dying.

CUNNING AND DANGEROUS. It would be wrong to say, as Franklin D. Roosevelt declared during the Great Depression, we have nothing to fear but fear itself. SARS really kills. Researchers still don't fully understand how it spreads, nor do they know how to cure it. They don't even know how long the incubation period is. No test can detect its presence. It isn't the plague, or even a killer pandemic of the sort that swept the world in 1918. But it is a cunning and dangerous microbe.

I'm afraid that Hong Kong, China, and perhaps much of the rest of the world are going to have to learn to live as best as possible can with this disease. How everyone adapts will go a long way toward determining what sort of future Hong Kong has as an economic hub.

However, here at the nexus of a mysterious disease outbreak and an urban jewel of world commerce in the 21st century, a frightening scene unfolds: As we Hong Kong residents try to take preventive measures against the disease, we're watching the slow strangulation of our city.