

...Hong Kong underwent a rapid transformation that left the place feeling for at least several weeks as if it was in the middle of an eerie, silent war. Long queues formed outside pharmacies as people stocked up on surgical masks; almost the entire population wore them outside the home, though they offered only a feeling of security rather than actual protection. Every morning, the government announced how many new cases had been found and how many deaths had taken place the previous day; at first the numbers rose exponentially. Nervous, well-heeled expatriates hurriedly sent their families overseas, and foreign countries withdrew many consular staff. For a while, all schools were closed. Parents were advised to keep children indoors and check their temperatures daily. Radio stations broadcast messages in Filipino and Indonesian to tell foreign maids what to do (keep washing all door handles and floors with bleach). TV commercials advised people to wave rather than shake hands. Tourism and business travel came to an almost complete halt. The airport was deserted, as were hotels, shops, cinemas, bars and restaurants; small businesses folded as cash flow dried up. The stock prices of companies exposed to the local property, travel and retail markets plunged. Cleaning staff in office blocks sterilized the floor buttons in elevators every hour. People pushed doors open with their shoes, or wrapped their fingers in tissue if they had to pull. Anyone sneezing or coughing in a public place found the crowds surrounding them instantly edging away. Thousands were quarantined in medical facilities or their homes after suspected possible contact with the virus. One housing estate, Amoy Gardens, suffered 321 cases after infection by a visitor from Shenzhen; on April 1, a whole block of residents were evacuated to a rural holiday camp in buses escorted by government workers wearing protective suits. That same day, actor and icon Leslie Cheung leapt to his death from the top of the Mandarin Hotel in Central; it was nothing to do with SARS – he had long suffered from depression – but it deprived the distraught community of another loved one. A photographer took pictures of passers-by with large-scale Polaroid paper and asked them to pen messages on the portraits; one masked, probably youngish, lady wrote, ‘The pearl of the orient is sunk.’ Malaysia and Yemen, among other countries, forbade entry to travelers on Hong Kong documents. On a relatively bright note, hygienic practices like hand-washing gained in popularity and, with far less traffic on the roads, the air became surprisingly clean.

SARS was the most traumatic experience Hong Kong had been through since the riots of 1967. But there was no panic. In Beijing and Taipei, staff in quarantined hospitals climbed over walls to escape. In Hong Kong, medical workers and orderlies said goodbye to their families and volunteered to go in, sealing themselves off to care for patients with an infectious disease with no known cure, not knowing when, or if, they would come out alive. Some did not. Some 22% of people who caught SARS in Hong Kong were frontline healthcare workers, eight of whom died. It was early May before the number of daily new cases fell to single digits. By the time Hong Kong was officially cleared of the disease in June, it had infected 1,755 in the city – some of whom were left disabled by treatments – and killed 299...