Introduction: “The Germ of Life”†

Carlos Rojas

Look at this! Look at this!

It’s as if this tiny dark bead is alive, moving, and taking form. It expands, appears to breathe, and then relaxes again. Is it material? Is it an object? Does it even exist at all? Am I being deceived by an optical illusion? Are my eyes going bad? Is my mind becoming confused?

—Lu Xun, “The Art of Creating Humanity”

In 1905, Lu Xun (1881–1936) published a short fictional piece entitled “Zaoren shu” (The art of creating humanity), in which a scientist succeeds in creating a protean life form he calls a “sprout of humanity” (*renya*). The work concludes with the protagonist triumphantly proclaiming himself to be a quasi-divine “creator” (*zaowuzhu*):

> At that point, Mr. Yinita begins exultantly leaping about the room in a frenzy of excitement, shouting, *Hooray! Have I not succeeded in unlocking the world’s secrets? Have I not succeeded in explaining humanity’s mysteries? If the world has a primal creator, then I am in no way His inferior! I can create life! I can create worlds! If I am not the creator of everything under the sun, then who is? I beget all, peopling the peopled people. I rule over all, as the king of the king of kings. What a wondrous thing it is for a mortal to become a creator!*

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Tears of gratitude rolled down the cheeks of this new creator. (Suzi 2009: 128)

Thirteen years before Zhou Shuren would start using his now-famous nom de plume, Lu Xun, he published this short sketch in the journal *Nüzi shijie* (Women's world), writing under the feminine pseudonym Suzi. The work was accompanied by two epilogues, one of which was penned by Lu Xun's brother, Zhou Zuoren, under the feminine pseudonym Pingyun.[1] Pingyun's epilogue asks rhetorically whether there is such a thing as a "new creator," to which "she" answers in the affirmative, claiming that it is in fact "the world's women . . . [who] are the true masters of creation. . . . Our nation's two hundred million women, are two hundred million new creators."

This peculiar dialogue between two brothers both using feminine pseudonyms juxtaposes several distinct understandings of "creation." The story, at first glance, appears to be a celebration of scientific *production*, whereas the epilogue rereads the work as a celebration of maternal *conception*. The texts themselves, meanwhile, implicitly underscore a process of artistic *creativity*. Indeed, Lu Xun's story is a product of a complicated process of literary production and reappropriation. The work is identified, in *Women's World*, as a translation of a 1903 short story by American author Louise Jackson Strong, though what is not acknowledged is that Lu Xun was actually *not* working from this English text, but rather from a Japanese translation by Hara Hôitsu-an (1866–1904). Published in Japan only months after Strong's story appeared in the United States, the Japanese text was a loose and truncated rendering of the original—covering only approximately the first seventh of the earlier work, and taking considerable liberties with the portion of the text that it *did* translate. Lu Xun's "The Art of Creating Humanity," therefore, was a product of a complex series of literary productions, appropriations, translations, and erasures, and as such it exemplifies a complicated interplay between cultural production and iterative *re*production.

"The Art of Creating Humanity" was one of several science fiction works that Lu Xun translated into Chinese while studying in Japan in his early

[1] Zhou Zuoren published several translations and other texts under this pseudonym in *Women's World* both before and after Lu Xun's 1905 publication of "The Art of Creating Humanity," sometimes even signing himself *Pingyun nüshi*, or "Miss Pingyun."

twenties.[2] More than the other works, however, this story's focus on the power of science over life must have struck a chord for the young foreign student, who would later describe how his decision to study medicine in Japan was motivated by his frustration at having been unable to cure his terminally ill father.[3] More generally, the story must have also resonated deeply for many contemporary readers, given that it was during Lu Xun's lifetime that a series of scientific discoveries helped lay the foundations for modern germ theory, thereby granting medical science unprecedented power over infectious disease and, by implication, over life and death.[4] Germ theory not only provided a glimpse into a rich microbial life-world located beyond the limits of the naked eye, it also offered a provocative new perspective on the structure of both the human body and human society. To the extent that the story's focus on the creation of a microscopic "sprout of humanity" can be seen as an allegory of the germ revolution's attempts to identify the microbes responsible for humanity's sickness and health, the narrator's hyperbolic enthusiasm comes to function as a displaced enthusiasm for the power of modern medicine.

Although modern germ theory was the product of a wide array of late nineteenth-century experimental and conceptual advances, some of the most exciting of these discoveries, particularly Robert Koch's pioneering work in the late 1870s and early 1880s with the bacteria causing anthrax and tuberculosis, involved the isolation and cultivation of specific microbes. Viruses, however, initially presented more of a challenge, given that they were too small to be observed with conventional light microscopes or trapped with existing filtering technologies. In a series of experiments in the late 1890s, however, the Dutch microbiologist M. W. Beijerink managed to partially isolate a tobacco plant virus, which he famously described as a *contagium vivum fluidum* (fluid living germ). Beijerink lists several of the ways this virus differed from bacteria (he notes, for instance, that the virus was unable to reproduce without the aid of the "living protoplasm of the host plant," and that it appeared to be aqueous rather than particulate in nature); his basic characterization of the virus as a "*contagium vivum*" (living germ) was one that could have been applied equally well to bacteria

[2] Between 1903 and 1907, Lu Xun translated seven works of science fiction, including Jules Verne's *Voyage to the Center of the Earth* (1863) and *From the Earth to the Moon* (1864).

[3] Lu Xun's best known description of this personal history can be found in a preface he wrote in 1923 (Lu Xun 1981*a*).

[4] Waller (2003) dates this "germ revolution" to the period between 1879 and 1900. Lu Xun was born in 1881.

or other "germs."

This excitement and wonder that scientists such as Koch and Beijerink felt when they identified and isolated specific strains of microbes are mirrored in the jubilation the protagonist expresses at the beginning of Strong's and Lu Xun's versions of the "Creation of Humanity" story. In Strong's original version, even the term she uses to describe the object of her protagonist's investigations, a "life-germ," closely mirrors Beijerink's "*contagium vivum*" formulation, except that whereas Beijerink's term emphasizes the virus's status of being *alive*, Strong's "life-germ" functions more specifically as an *origin* of life. By the time this concept of the "life-germ" reached Lu Xun, meanwhile, it had undergone yet another semantic turn. Following Hara Hôitsu-an's lead, Lu Xun translates "life-germ" as *renya*, or "sprout of humanity," suggesting that the protagonist's objective is to create a "sprout" that would generate not merely *life*, but more specifically *human life*, or even *humanity*.[5] The emphasis in Lu Xun's text, moreover, is not so much on the ability of the "sprout" to germinate into a living organism, but rather on the protagonist's own ability to create this sprout: *zao renya* (to create a sprout of humanity). The implication of this series of translations and revisions, meanwhile, is that the title of Lu Xun's story captures a gesture of doubled creation, alluding to the protagonist's determination to create a "sprout of humanity" while underscoring the role of this "sprout" in producing a (new) humanity in its own right. Read against the contemporary discourse of germ theory, the phrase implies that the creation/discovery of microscopic germs represents a powerful affirmation of life over death (to the extent that it facilitates the ability of modern biomedicine to come up with effective treatments for diseases), even as the diseases associated with those germs generate a rich body of cultural production that contributes to the foundation of "humanity" itself.

[5] Hara Hôitsu-an, in his earlier version of the story, translated Strong's term "life-germ" as "*ningen no me*" (人间の芽), or "sprout of humanity," which Lu Xun, in turn, shortens to "*renya*" (人芽), literally "sprout of (hu)man."

Lu Xun borrows a version of this same phrase for the title of his story: "Zaoren shu" (the art of creating humanity). Here, Lu Xun strategically elides the character for *ya* (sprout) and refers simply to the process of *zaoren*, or "creating humanity." The title characterizes this process of

"creating humanity" as a *shu*—using a term that carries connotations of both "technique" (*jishu*) and art (*yishu*). By positioning his narrative at the interstices of technological creation and artistic expression, Lu Xun suggests that the work bridges scientific and literary concerns, mobilizing scientific topics for literary purposes while using literature to reflect on some of the implications of those same scientific aspirations.

It is precisely in this space between art and science that this special issue of *MCLC* is located. The issue takes its starting point from the late nineteenth-century development of modern biomedicine, but its focus is the ways medical concepts and assumptions have been appropriated within *cultural* texts. These cultural texts provide insight into the popular understanding and imagination of health and disease, even as they play an important role in shaping and transforming those same understandings.

The seven essays in this special issue can be grouped into three sections, focusing on issues of contagion and immune response, psychology and politics, and language and community. Themes running through them include the relationship between infection and translation, recognition and abjection, and consumption and destruction. We emphasize the intersection of modern biomedical theories with traditional medical paradigms, the use of corporeal models to articulate sociopolitical concerns, together with the mobilization of medical metaphors to explain the workings of language and culture. The essays, in short, share a critical interest in "viral knowledge," understood in the double sense of knowledge about viruses and other forms of illness, and the ways in which knowledge and culture themselves behave in a viral manner.

Andrew Schonebaum's opening essay considers some of the overlapping understandings of infection and contagion that existed around the turn of the twentieth century. He notes that when, at the end of the nineteenth century, the traditional Chinese medical term *chuanran* was adopted to translate the Western biomedical notion of "contagion," the term had previously been used to refer to three vectors of infection: direct or indirect contact with the sick, hereditary transmission, and sexual intercourse. Even under its modern biomedical refashioning, the term retains distinct traces

of its earlier meaning. Some of the implications of this sort of conceptual hybridity can be found in literature, and Schonebaum presents detailed analyses of two works about tubercular patients—Lin Shu's 1899 Chinese translation of Dumas *fils'* 1854 novel *La Dame aux Camélias*, and Ding Ling's 1928 short story, "Miss Sophie's Diary"—both of which are informed by a comparatively modern understanding of the disease, even as they continue to draw on more traditional understandings of *chuanran*. By unpacking the disparate connotations of disease and contagion in each of these works, Schonebaum demonstrates that the biomedical reinvention of the concept of *chuanran* as contagion did not displace these traditional understandings, but rather the modern term itself became figuratively infected by its sociocultural environment and by the etymological heritage of the term. The ultimate irony, therefore, is that the vectors along which this modern concept of *chuanran* becomes "infected" by traditional notions of infection (i.e., "hereditary" and "environmental" transmission) are the very vectors associated with the traditional notion of *chuanran*.

In the following essay, Carlos Rojas considers an overlapping set of microbiological metaphors in texts from the early years of *New Youth*, the flagship journal of China's New Culture movement. Beginning with founding editor Chen Duxiu's 1915 manifesto, "Call to Youth," in the inaugural issue of the journal, Rojas examines several additional fictional and nonfictional pieces that each apply microbiological models to issues of political reform. The texts allude to notions of bodily regeneration and immune response, with two including discussions of Élie Metchnikoff's discovery of the phagocytotic function of the immune system's white blood cells, even as they immediately translate these scientific models into sociopolitical ones, using the body's attempts to defend against external pathogens and its own diseased cells as a metaphor for reformers' attempts to strengthen the Chinese nation by isolating and eliminating its old and counterproductive elements.

Chien-hsin Tsai draws on a similar set of immunological concerns to examine the biopolitical logic underlying several recent novels by Yan Lianke. Tsai reads Yan's works as examples of what he calls "writings of

autoimmunity," looking at how the texts figuratively turn a consumptive logic at the heart of both socialism and capitalism on itself. The revisionist and revolutionary tendencies of Maoism, for instance, are strategically redirected toward symbols of Mao himself, just as the consumptive impulse of capitalism is redirected toward subjects' own bodies. The result is a cannibalistic carnival that dramatizes the destructiveness both of these ideological systems are predicated on.

As Tsai notes, an important precedent for Yan Lianke's fascination with autoimmune self-destruction can be found in Lu Xun's work, most famously in his trope of cannibalism in "Diary of a Madman." A similar specter of cannibalism also haunts Lu Xun's earlier "The Art of Creating Humanity"—a specter, though, that is located not in the text itself, but rather in its paratextual margins. That is to say, although the final paragraph of Lu Xun's story (previously cited) corresponds to one in Strong's text celebrating the quasi-divine nature of the protagonist's accomplishment,[6] Strong's story immediately transitions to a more sober reflection on the potential implications of the protagonist's achievement: "He dropped, panting, into his chair, and strove to collect and quiet his mind. Not yet the time to make known the incredible fact. He must wait until full development proved that it was indeed a living creation—with animal nature and desires" (Strong 1903: 413). This paragraph, positioned precisely at the point in Strong's text where Lu Xun's translation leaves off, marks a key transitional point in the work, in that it signals a shift from the narrative's initial focus on the "life-germ" as a organic entity, to its subsequent attention to the "nature and desires" of the resulting creature—a shift, in other words, from biology to psychology.

The remainder of Strong's story, accordingly, describes how the tiny "life-germ" does in fact develop into "a living creation . . . with animal nature and desires"—and specifically the organism develops into a four-foot-tall creature that the protagonist describes as "a strange caricature of humanity." Noticing that the creature appears to possess a certain "crude intelligence," the protagonist tries to teach it to talk, but then is flabbergasted when it responds with the abject query: "What am I?"

[6] "At that the learned professor leaped to his feet in a transport of exultation. The impossible had been achieved! Life! Life, so long the mystery and despair of man, had come at his bidding. He alone of all humanity held the secret in the hollow of his hand. He plunged about the room in a blind ecstasy of triumph. Tears ran unknown and unheeded down his cheeks. He tossed his arms aloft wildly, as if challenging Omnipotence itself. At that moment, he felt a very god! He could create worlds, and people them! A burning desire seized him to rush out, and proclaim the deed from the housetops, to the utter confounding of brother scientists and their theologians." (Strong 1903: 412)

Following this existentialist exchange, the creature develops a swelling on its chest, which flakes and proceeds to grow into a separate humanoid creature. This process is repeated numerous times, until eventually the entire laboratory is filled with a hoard of rapacious creatures whom the horrified protagonist describes as "monsters, who would prey on human flesh!" One day the protagonist finds the creatures huddled around a window gazing ravenously at his children playing outside, whereupon he immediately resolves that they must be destroyed. Before he has a chance to detonate the explosive device, however, the creatures manage to do so on their own—thereby exterminating themselves, destroying the laboratory, and almost killing their creator in the process.

To the extent that Strong's initial description of the discovery of a protean "life-germ" is set against the historical backdrop of the recent development of germ theory, the work's subsequent emphasis on the creatures' expressions of violence, hunger, and existentialist angst appears to channel contemporary developments in psychology, and specifically psychoanalysis.[7] Indeed, the creatures function as uncanny doubles of the protagonist himself, and their urges and desires can be seen as manifestations of the libidinal forces that lie hidden beneath properly socialized subjects. Meanwhile, to the extent that Lu Xun (unwittingly) omits this psychological turn that is arguably already anticipated in the portion of the work that he *does* translate, the psychological dimension of Strong's work comes to occupy something akin to the textual unconscious of Lu Xun's—discernible only by virtue of the traces it has left behind.

Like germ theory, psychoanalysis presents a vision of the organism at war with itself, with rival forces continually at odds with each other, to the point that the notion of a unified and self-contained "self" becomes a mere abstraction. The two essays in the second section of this special issue focus not on physical disease, but rather on mental illness. Each piece considers a prominent May Fourth author whose oeuvre engages closely with issues of insanity, and who either explicitly or implicitly uses psychoanalytic tropes to comment on contemporary sociopolitical concerns.

In his essay on Yu Dafu's short story "Sinking," Feng Lan examines the

[7] In 1886, Freud established the private medical practice where he developed the conceptual foundations of psychoanalysis, and in 1899 he published his magnum opus, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

abject condition of a young Chinese man studying in Japan at the turn of the century. The young man is described in the story as suffering from *youyuzheng*, which, as Lan points out, can refer to either melancholia or hypochondria. Actually, these two conditions are closely related in psychoanalytic theory, and Lan argues that Yu Dafu's protagonist suffers from a set of imagined bodily ailments (hypochrondria) resulting from a loss he is unable to come to terms with (melancholia). He posits that the protagonist's *youyuzheng* must be understood in the context of his status as a Chinese student in Japan, in that the character's debased (or "de-based") condition is a consequence of an acute sense of loss of a Chinese "ethno-ethical" tradition. He notes that the author, Yu Dafu, who once described himself as "a superfluous man emasculated by higher education," appears to share with his fictional protagonist a conflicted attitude toward the Chinese tradition—though the story pivots on the irony that Yu Dafu uses a *foreign* psychoanalytic concept of "hypochondriac melancholia" to illustrate the sense of abjection the protagonist experiences after he turns his back on Chinese tradition to acquire foreign knowledge from abroad.

In the following essay, Xiaojue Wang focuses on Shen Congwen, noting the irony that for many years after 1949, one of the most influential authors of the May Fourth period disappeared almost completely from the literary scene in both Mainland China and Taiwan. She discusses Shen's brief hospitalization in 1949 following a mental breakdown and subsequent suicide attempt and notes that not only did his crisis coincide with the founding of the People's Republic, it also marked a pivotal moment in his own career: it was in 1949 that Shen effectively stopped writing literature and took a new position in China's National Museum of History. After a consideration of Shen's mental breakdown, Wang suggests that he may have suffered a schizophrenic attack. She then considers some of the ways schizophrenia has been theorized in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, together with more metaphorical appropriations within cultural and political theory. From the latter cultural-political emphasis on schizophrenia's paradigmatic "resistance to decoding," Wang returns to the question of the significance

of Shen's 1949 move away from literature to curatorial work in the history museum, arguing that schizophrenia provides a useful model for understanding Shen's attempts to sidestep the post-1949 totalizing socialist master narrative.

Although Lu Xun's literary legacy fared significantly better in post-1949 China than did Shen Congwen's, a similar moment of textual erasure has long been buried at the beginning of his career: it turns out that "The Art of Creating Humanity" had been effectively "lost" for many decades, and was not rediscovered as one of Lu Xun's texts until 1963, nearly thirty years after the author's death. Another gesture of elision and erasure, furthermore, is embedded in the text; Lu Xun silently (and, most likely, unwittingly) omits the entire latter portion of Strong's original story. To the extent that this elided narrative focuses on the creatures' maturation and infectious reproduction, Lu Xun's own text instantiates a similar process of self-cloning in its own right. His text, in other words, is not only a translation of Strong's story, it simultaneously illustrates the latter text's underlying reproductive and translational logic.

Lu Xun's 1905 story coincided with a wave of translations from Japanese and European languages into Chinese that peaked during the first decades of the twentieth century. Convinced that one key to addressing China's weakness lay in what the late-Qing reformer Zhang Zhidong famously advocated as a strategy of taking "Chinese learning as the basis, and Western learning as the instrument" (*zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong*), late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinese reformers participated in a vast translation project intended to introduce into China not only new scientific and medical knowledge, but also a wide array of political, philosophical, and literary works. Conventionally abbreviated simply as "Chinese basis/Western use" (*zhongti xiyong*), Zhang's formula captures the desire that the Western knowledge being introduced into China during this period be used merely for strategic purposes, precisely to shore up an underlying core of Chinese national identity centered on traditional ethics. The term that Zhang uses to articulate this notion of a Chinese "basis," meanwhile, is *ti*, which literally means "body." The irony, though, is that

the widespread introduction of Western knowledge into the Chinese body politic simultaneously resulted in a systematic reconsideration of the very notion of the body itself.

Xin Yang's essay in this issue compares two contemporary novels that use tropes of illness to examine the shifting social structures of postsocialist urban China. Published a decade apart, Chen Ran's *A Private Life* (1996) and Anni Baobei's *Padma* (2006) both focus on sick women, and Yang notes that unlike many of the sick women in 1980s fiction, who typically become ill as a result of assuming too many institutional responsibilities, the female protagonists of these two works are comparatively removed from those sorts of urban institutions, and they respond to their illnesses by attempting to retreat even further from their urban environments. After the protagonist of *A Private Life* is diagnosed with schizophrenia, for instance, her doctor recommends that she return to the structured environment of the hospital, but she instead chooses to withdraw to the personal and private space of her home. Anni Baobei's protagonist, meanwhile, addresses her own illness by leaving the city and embarking on a sort of spiritual pilgrimage. Both of these authors are regarded as representatives of the contemporary "individualized writings" movement, and their attempts to separate themselves from dominant, collectivized narrative traditions can be seen as a literary equivalent to their protagonists' attempts to withdraw from social institutions associated with the modern metropolis.

In the final essay, Andrea Bachner examines the viral quality of language. She frames her piece with a discussion of William Burroughs's well-known dictum that language is like a virus, together with his contention that Chinese is at once the most infectious language and the one most impervious to outside contamination. Bachner explores the implications of these twin postulates through a detailed reading of texts by three very different authors: the early twentieth-century Esperanticist Hu Yuzhi, the Mexican novelist Salvador Elizondo, and the contemporary Taiwanese author Wuhe. She notes that in each of these sets of texts, the viral character of the Chinese language emerges precisely by virtue of the

texts' position at the interstices of disparate semiotic regimes. Hu Yuzhi, for instance, approaches Chinese against the backdrop of the potential (or desired) demise of the language itself; Elizondo views Chinese through a lens of reductive Orientalist stereotypes; and Wuhe uses a variety of typographical experimentations to push written Chinese up against its limits as a meaningful linguistic system. Bachner emphasizes that despite their differences, each of these texts is written under a shadow of death, and is located in an indeterminate zone at the boundary of life and death.

Although Bachner is interested not so much in actual viruses as in a set of viral metaphors, her point about the fundamentally viral quality of language is also relevant to our understanding of the peculiar nature of viruses themselves. Viruses have frequently been viewed as chimerical entities positioned at the very "edge of life" (Rybicki 1990: 182–186). Unable to produce their own proteins or reproduce on their own, they are arguably more akin to disembodied fragments of genetic material than to autonomous organisms. For this reason, viruses enjoy what has been described as a "borrowed life," in that they "become living constituents only when part of infected living cells" (Villarreal 2005: ix–xi). Viruses, in other words, are paradigmatic parasites, dependent on their hosts for the ability to mimic behaviors and functions conventionally associated with living organisms. In Derridean terms, however, it is precisely viruses' parasitic position at the margins of life that permits them to articulate the underlying, iterative logic on which "life" itself is necessarily predicated.

Even as they appear to be somehow less than alive, viruses nevertheless possess remarkable power *over* life. In some instances, they are able to strategically repair the cells of hosts (such as bacteria) that have been killed by ultraviolet radiation, thereby enabling the organism to regain enough biochemical capacity to allow the virus to continue to thrive and reproduce. Even more remarkable, there are situations in which "dead" viruses can reanimate themselves—as when a cell contains multiple "dead" viruses, and their fragmented genomes are able to reassemble themselves to produce a new, "live" virus (Villarreal 2005: x–xi). Viruses are the only organisms known to be able to reanimate themselves in this fashion (using

a technique known as *multiplicity reactivation*), yet it is precisely their vampiric position at the boundary between life and death that provides crucial clues into the viral logic that may very well underlie life itself. An influential theory of the origins of life popularized by Carl Woese (2002), for instance, contends that before the development of proteinacous cellular life there existed "an era of nucleic acid life" in which genetic information circulated "virally" between proto-organisms. More recently, Luis Villarreal (2004; 2005) has argued that viruses appear to have helped catalyze many of the major evolutionary jumps that have yielded the diversity of life we see today.

We might even go a step further and argue that similar "viral" processes (both literal and metaphorical) are responsible for the constitution not only of life, but also of culture. As an example, we can conclude by considering how in 2003, exactly a century after the publication—in the aptly named journal *The Cosmopolitan*—of Strong's story about the creation of a virulent "life-germ," the world found itself briefly transfixed by the outbreak of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) epidemic that paralyzed Hong Kong and spread to several communities around the world. Apart from its strictly epidemiological significance, the crisis had important implications for the relationship between infection and information. One of the earliest hints of the emerging crisis, for instance, was discovered over the Internet half a world away (when Canada's Global Public Health Intelligence Network—which monitored electronic transmissions for the World Health Organization—picked up evidence of a surge in flulike symptoms in southern China); and conversely Beijing's subsequent attempts to *limit* the circulation of information about infection—particularly over the Internet—aggravated the crisis by inhibiting the ability of health organizations to understand and respond effectively to it. This dialectical interrelationship between the epidemics of infection and information (together with the concurrent attempts to control or quarantine them), in turn, illustrates in miniature how networks of information and systems of culture are themselves continually shaped and transformed by the viral circulation of knowledge and ideas.

A suggestive commentary on the position of SARS at the interstices of these networks of infection and information can be found in Samson Chiu's 2003 Hong Kong comedy film, *Golden Chicken II*. A sequel to Chiu's enormously popular *Golden Chicken* (2002), about a happy-go-lucky prostitute named Ah Kum, *Golden Chicken II* was already in production when Hong Kong became virtually paralyzed by SARS in early 2003. Rather than postpone or cancel the film, however, the producers decided to write the epidemic into the script. Structured as a series of flashbacks to different periods in Ah Kum's life, the work devotes considerable attention to the events of early 2003, as Ah Kum and her companions struggle to retain a semblance of normalcy in the face of the SARS epidemic. In this respect, the deadly epidemic was also literally *productive*—inspiring new practices, discourses, and social formations, such as the plot of Chiu's film.

The image on the cover of this issue features an encounter between Ah Kum and a Hong Kong doctor she befriends. As a physician specializing in treating SARS patients, the doctor is shunned by the public, who sees him as a symbol not only of the medical fight against SARS, but also of the lethal disease itself. The doctor's surgical mask, therefore, not only helps protect him from the virus but also symbolizes the prejudicial barriers isolating him from the same public he is attempting to protect. Ah Kum, meanwhile, is wearing a stylish black face mask with a ruby-colored mouth opening over her hospital-issue mask. By transforming a prophylactic medical device into a cultural trope, Ah Kum illustrates one way the specter of infection provides a catalyst for a rich body of cultural production. Symbolizing both medicine and culture, protection and contagion, silence and speech, life and death, Ah Kum's face mask marks the inherently productive liminal space from which this issue takes its inspiration.

Glossary

Ah Kum	阿金
Hara Hôitsu-an	原抱一庵
jishu	技術
ningen no me	人间の芽
Nüzi shijie	女子世界
Pingyun nüshi	萍雲女士
renya	人芽
Suzi	素子
ti	體
yishu	藝術
youyuzheng	憂鬱症
zao renya	造人芽
zaoren shu	造人術
zaowuzhu	造物主
Zhang Zhidong	張之洞
zhongti xiyong	中體西用
zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong	中學為體，西學為用
Zhou Shuren	周树人
Zhou Zuoren	周作人

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