Shallow Graves and Empty Tombs:
The Architecture of Death under the Chinese Concept of *Tianxia*

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The disruptive situation caused by the Corona virus we are currently experiencing reveals various narratives of self-isolation, levels of catastrophe and an acute sense of our vulnerability. The ubiquitous masks, surreal outfits, health care gowns as well as the many graveyard scenes pose questions regarding our representations of death. An elegiac pathos of distance has developed, unbelievable fights over stocks of masks on European airports tarmacs have occurred: from savagery to humanitarianism, this pandemic has revealed the burning scars of our modern societies. As a reminder of mortality, the ongoing disaster becomes the occasion for a philosophical reflection, challenging the founding assumptions of secular democracy with an urgent need to rethink the relationship between nature and culture.

Just as many science fiction stories have explored the mythical significance of the encounter between new forms of living in dystopian universes, the events surrounding us today are placed in suspension of the usual narratives of economic cycles, by counterposing various ways of isolating new sequences, unforeseeable periods and a longue-durée epoch with its terrifying agonistic nature. The pathos if not tragedy of the Corona virus outbreak we are now observing with dismay gives a historical resonance to past episodes of human vulnerability. Such events are also vulnerable to misrepresentation, ideologies and the rewriting of history.

The Chinese government has constantly monitored the media coverage and the treatment of the Corona crisis since its early stages when priority was given to tame and conceal the virus behind the untouched image of an ultra-modern state, an emblem of empowerment. When the Chinese Communist party finally admitted, though with a deadly delay, its spread across China, figures were systematically underestimated. The ridiculously low number of alleged deaths in China (at the time of writing, the official publicized count amounts to circa 4000) strikingly contrasts with the much higher number of funeral urns given to Wuhan families mourning their deceased. Imperceptible and shapeless, Covid 19 death is not acknowledged neither at the individual nor at the societal level. Mourners were left with nothing to visualize, but an obvious discrepancy, where lost individuals have died in a no-go zone, in an indistinct space of anonymous gravediggers, skulls without lower jaws, unable to testify. If the concept of testament is (as the Bishop Isidore of Seville punned once) *testa - mentis*, these dead bodies are left without testaments, they cannot prompt the living to speak for the dead. There is no horizon, no community for the dead, no time allowed for the sorrow of bereavement.

The Faustian pact made with Wuhan mourners by Chinese officials seems to equate the following: keep silent about your dead and we will instead give you a material object (a funerary

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urn) binding together individuals who stand both inside and outside the enclosure. Akin to the curse of death without gravestone, mourners are left with unofficial deaths without burial rites. Not only is their bereavement contained inside the private sphere, but the rites of the community of bonds between the living and the dead are not even performed. Instead of acknowledging the necessary remembrance of death within life, official media focus on the vain glory of human's industrious fight to build gigantic hospitals, out of prefabricated cubes.

Philippe Ariès once taught us that mourning apparatuses appeared between the thirteenth and the fourteenth century in Europe and this was an important shift in our mentalities as the symbolical apparatus of the catafalque led to the concealment of the corpse[1]. This monument is meant to be an extreme representation offered by those who remain alive to the memory of the deceased, it becomes *muta eloquentia* as it gives voices to the corpses. Throughout the early modern period in Europe, the *castrum doloris* ("castle of sorrow") was a common iconography, applied in Baroque exequies to catafalques in order to accompany the prestigious rites offered to the famous deceased (emperors, kings, queens, cardinals and bishops)[2]. European emblems of death would draw on biblical roots to offer mourners Christian solace.

While the death toll has now reached more than one hundred and sixty thousand victims across the world, the situation in China is now presented as if normality had come back. In one of a series of propagandist translations of the Chinese dominant order, the pompous reopening of Wuhan's key spots has dramatized the fable of the omnipotent Chinese apparatus chasing the devilish virus as the Virtuous Republic bringing light to the world.

A recent article by Anne Cheng[3] has highlighted the misrepresentations of Chinese official discourses about the so called "Chinese model" playing off the virtues of auto-discipline and the spirit of sacrifice, an inheritance from the revolutionary military warfare "made in China" which would have overcome, thanks to its civic heroism, the overwhelming outbreak in the record time of two months. Anne Cheng adds in conclusion that she had planned to bring her contrastive thoughts to a conference held in Beijing about a much-debated concept, called in Chinese "tianxia" meaning literally "all that exists under heaven". The conventional translation of *tianxia* simply means "the Chinese world", or perhaps, more precisely, "China as the world".

Contrary to other civilizations, China hasn't only represented itself as the center of the world, but simply as *the world* i.e. the whole known geographic space. The Chinese Emperor, appointed by heaven (*tian*), held his mandate from heaven. This concept of political legitimation (a Chinese concept comparable to the European notion of *imperium*) was combined with a moral ideal as the Emperor would represent the highest level of virtue. Anne Cheng has

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[1] Philippe Ariès, *L'homme et la mort,* Paris, Seuil, 1977. Ariès has extended his survey into contemporary practices and he analyses the ways in which death has now sunken into total oblivion and has now become more savage than before. See especially, Philippe Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort. Le temps des gisants*, Paris, Seuil, 1985.
[2] See the collective volume *Emblems of Death in the Early Modern Period*, eds Monica Calabritto and Peter Daly, Geneva, Droz, Cahiers d'Humanisme et de Renaissance, vol. 120, 2014 and especially, Eva Knapp and Gàbor Tüskés, "The Motif of Death in Literary Emblematics", at 149-198 and Richard Dimler's essay on "Jesuit Emblems of Death" at 269-286.
[3] https://www.fondation-cdf.fr/2020/04/06/de-la-chine-monde-a-la-mondialisation-du-virus-chinois/

shown persuasively how this authority, which is not constrained by territorial boundaries, is the exact embodiment of the archetypal totalitarian state.

The cosmological worldview located in the "center" of the Communist party has now turned global and aims at preserving a powerful control through cyber sovereignty at home. Over the past decades, the meaning of the geopolitical term *tianxia* has led to highly controversial debates. The variegated meanings of *tianxia*, a highly flexible and nomadic concept, may serve to question the effects of the dramatic rise of Chinese power over the world. Since its recent reemergence in the writings of Chinese mainland scholars, the ultimately utopian concept of *tianxia* seems to presents a new hegemony where the idea of Chinese empire has simply been adapted and revamped for the twenty-first century. Many Chinese thinkers have used this notion to fight the Eurocentric concept of international order and Western norms which have prevailed for several centuries.

What is left to Wuhan mourners is only shallow graves and empty tombs, the disconnected marbles hinting at the absence of the disappeared. The celebratory kind of fable crafted by the Chinese government reasserts the totalitarian violence of its domination. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this escalation of technological warfare is the image of the construction of virus hospitals in record time (8 to 10 days). These temporary and seemingly substandard hospitals were given names reflecting the power to cure: "Huoshenshan" meaning the "Moutain of the God of Fire" and "Leishenshan" meaning "Mountain of the God of Thunder". Their aesthetic form is akin to a construction kit but with an attempt to reaffirm some kind of Colossian aptitude to build immense purpose-built spaces rearming the government capacity to tackle evil. These prompt constructions were hailed as a political triumph and they were carefully staged as a victory over time by many state newspapers. In order to hide the evident failures of a belated response to the outbreak, state newspapers published day-by-day accounts of crews assembling prefabricated rooms overnight. The website *Economy Net* reported that the Leishenshan building had been equipped with infrared scanners able to detect signs of the disease's distinctive fever. The pictures showing units of these prefabricated containment structure never show any sign of empathy or humanity.

Patterns of fluxes, rules for segregated corridors and ultra-modern scanning technology are put before the public eye, in such a mechanical way that these bricks echo the iced words of militant ideologies. During his travel to China in April and May 1974, Roland Barthes had depicted in his notebooks his disgust towards the cemented doxa of all the ideological stereotypes he had collected from Chinese official discourse: "faire une liste des X Stéréotypes (briques) que j'ai recueillis"[4]. He used the metaphor "brick" to describe how clichés would consolidate, until their nauseous replication would have brought insomnia and physical distress.

The media coverage of these building designs has brought to the fore another type of "brick", the visual stereotypes of productivism and efficiency, associated with an oppressive state surveillance regime. The Chinese idiom of emergency construction reflects images conveying a zeal for feverish constructivism, rewriting the ongoing disaster by claiming themselves

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[4] Roland Barthes, *Carnets du voyage en Chine*, éd. Christian Bourgois/Imec, 2009.

successful at controlling the virus. The architectural idiom of Chinese government is central to its hegemonical power: it offers visual proofs of its mechanisms for isolation and, at the same time, it transfers a voyeuristic control to all confined viewers watching from a distance.

The extension of the Covid-19 outbreak has profoundly disrupted our ways of understanding what is the world. The ways in which an unknown transitory micro-organism, in need of a living body to multiply, has imposed itself as a geopolitical global operator[5] beyond knowingness in such a short time span continues to challenge us. The unintended consequences of confinement measures have inspired movement toward a utopian future, not a return to an imagined Eurocentric past. This pandemic revolution has also triggered new ways of figuring, spatializing and apprehending such cardinal notions as space, time, life and death.

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[5] Michel Lussault, « Le monde du virus- une performance géographique », AOC, 14.04.2020 see https://aoc.media/analyse/2020/04/13/le-monde-du-virus-une-performance-geographique/