URBAN ILLNESS, FEAR, AND UN/HAPPINESS IN HONG KONG AND JAPAN

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As the clichés goes, Hong Kong is now sick. Not that Hong Kong itself as a city is sickening, but things taking place in the society and political realm are so unprecedented that city dwellers find it difficult to come to terms with the hardships they are facing, let alone the rapid urban developments and both the tangible and intangible changes and transformations within the cityscape. It is not coincidental that it is twenty years after the handover, and Hong Kong is once again under the spotlight of scrutiny and anticipation. At the same time, Hong Kong is not the only place that is once again being scrutinized in the East Asian region. Japan/Tokyo, which is going to host the 2020 Olympic Games, is another place facing a similar scenario, let alone its extremely important and significant role in the new global order. Tokyo, for instance, is another city that has the notorious reputation of having suppressed city dwellers under great pressure because of the relatively weak economy. Fear, uncertainty, and the sense of vulnerability continue to fuel negative energy to both Hong Kong and Japanese city dwellers, and this project seeks to explore the possibilities and potentials behind these apparently gloomy cityscapes. We want to ask: is happiness feasible under people's pressure in the city? What kinds of identity crisis are urban dwellers facing in this small city called Hong Kong vs. this "repressed" nation called Japan? How are pressing issues like urban illnesses, wellbeing, and un/happiness related to each other, especially when both Japan and Hong Kong are infamous for having a low happiness index as compared to many developing cities in its neighborhood? With the continuous impact of globalization, one has to rethink and negotiate various identities and new forms of citizenships, particularly in crammed urban spaces like Hong Kong and Tokyo. People may at times feel detached and indifferent, and the by-product of this sense of unbelonging is precisely the emergence and many manifestations of urban illnesses.

This project uses various methods to conduct researches and ask these questions: To articulate "sickening" citizenship, what data and figures should one be looking at? How can we measure the changes in question and analyze fear and urban illnesses beyond mere demographics? Is fear a barrier to happiness? When one is uncertain about something, stigmatization comes into place and further dichotomizes the self-other binary. Many illness narratives precisely deal with marginalization, and this project thus explores three levels of representations: the theoretical, the textual, and reality. Theories and methodologies that will be used and consulted will cover a wide range of disciplines: media and cultural studies,sociological accounts of mental health, historical frameworks of urban illnesses, social and critical theory, cultural studies approaches to illnesses, wellbeing, and un/happiness etc. Texts, in this way, serve as a bridge filling in the gap between theoretical interrogations and reality. In recent years, there are many Hong Kong and Japanese films that narrate the suffering and actuality of urban dwellers suffering from various urban illnesses: schizophrenia, eating disorders, bipolar – and the list goes on. One of the latest Hong Kong examples would be Wong Chun's Mad World (2016), which depicts the relationship between a recovering bipolar patient and his father being crammed in a small living space. A Japanese counterpart would be Lee Sang-il'sRage (2016), in which characters are forced to deal with the aftermaths stirred up by a suspicious runaway psychopath in their tiny households. Both films obviously play with claustrophobic spaces, and claustrophobia portrayed in films can often be seen as a metaphor, such as allegorical entrapments and deadlocks, private-public dynamics, and psychological fragmentation, and we would like to ponder what real fear is behind catastrophic Hong Kong and Japan: housing problem; poverty gap; social stratification; political turmoil etc.As prominent cultural critic Susan Sontag argues, "It is hard not to be afraid. Be less afraid." Urban illnesses therefore serve as a symptom to talk about larger cultural and sociopolitical issues, and that is why this project also looks into the actual world and examines how subject matters like madness, in/sanity, and wellbeing are mediated, twisted, and distorted by the mass mediaso that the findings will not be onlyrelying on the representation and textual mediation level. Hopefully this project will shed light to ongoing researches in the realm of urban illnesses in small but crowded cities like Tokyo and Hong Kong, which will definitely correspond to other Asian cities in the region like Seoul and Taipei which are covered in my research area. Ideally one more nation/city outside East/Asia will also be supplemented so thatthe interrelationship between local, regional, and globalsocieties and cities in striking forhappiness can also be addressed.