

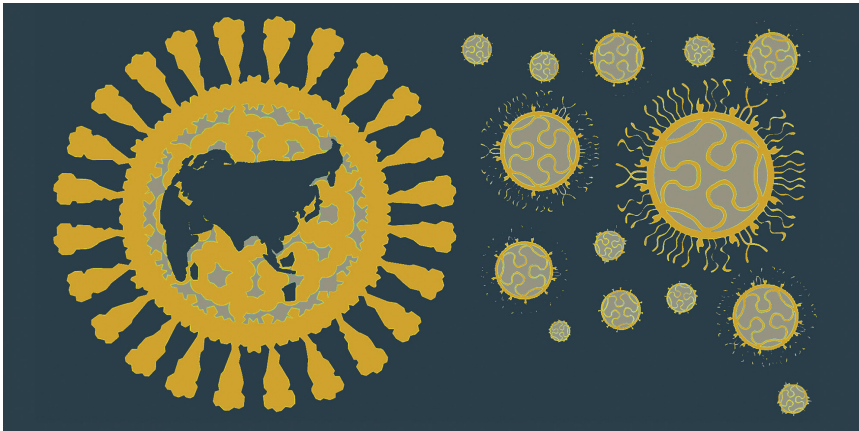
The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa

Societal Implications, Narratives
on Media, Political Issues

edited by

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

VOLUME I – CULTURE, ART, MEDIA



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Introduction

Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

Forgetting is a tendency that not only appears to be inherent to human behaviour, but also, especially in distressing circumstances, can turn out to be particularly healthy: “Suppression of unwanted memories appears to be a critical ability to avoid their unintended influence, thus preserving mental health” (Costanzi et al. 2011). Well before modern studies of psychology and neurosciences, literature and philosophy have taken care of reminding us of the importance of forgetting, from the *Odyssey*’s sailors who, fleeing from the tragedy of the Trojan war, sought oblivion in the land of the lotus-eaters (Book IX, vv. 92-117), to Nietzsche’s active forgetfulness, “which is a very sentinel and nurse of psychic order, repose, etiquette” (Nietzsche 1921, p. 41).

Yet the opposite tendency appears to be just as healthy. At the personal level, memory is a device that “involves complex *constructive* processes [...]: when we remember, we piece together fragments of stored information under the influence of our current knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs” (Schacter 2012, p. 8, italics in the original), thus contributing to forge out, and give sense to, our identity. Within the societal domain, memory is a powerful tool to create or strengthen values, boundaries and, again, identities: remembering – also in ritual contexts such as celebrations, anniversaries, Days of Remembrance etc. – events as the Holocaust, the tragedies of migration, the victims of terrorism, contribute to shape our communities and to guide our daily life. For all these reasons, a balance between these two opposite tendencies must be negotiated, both in the private and in the societal dimension: on the one hand the psychological shelter of forgetting; on the other, the societal duty of memory; the personal right to forget, and the institutional value of memory. In the case of epidemics and

pandemics, the dynamics at work of remembering or of forgetting are the same, albeit – perhaps – exacerbated by the (private and collective) level of tragedy.

In the sphere of academia, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has brought about sudden and dramatic changes. In this case as well, scholars and researchers are called to the same choice between two antithetical directions: get back to work, as if nothing had happened. Or make room for a critical – we would even say, radical – reflection. Indeed, things to reflect upon are many. The pandemic has dramatically altered methods and practices of researching and teaching.

The pandemic has exposed multiple levels of inequalities that in higher education include differential treatment of students based on their background, closed access to knowledge and research results, unevenness in global patterns of research collaboration, and lack of access to the basic requirements of digitalized higher education such as devices, internet access, and electricity.

The urgency of addressing these inequities must be kept at the forefront as higher education begins to think ahead to create a more equitable post-pandemic world (UNESCO 2022).

This amounts to saying that, as far as universities are concerned, the choice between remembering and forgetting – between the burden of responsibility and the refusal to see – cannot be left to personal, or not-strategic decisions. Considering also that academic institutions and their activities fall within the societal sphere, any discussions end soon: there is no room for individual disengagement, no unease can be lifted as justification for silencing memories. A radical reflection which must be based precisely on the memories – and on the teachings – of the pandemic is needed.

Yet, what is under the eyes of those who are involved in this domain, is more or less the opposite. During the long months of the pandemic as well as nowadays, the “urgencies” that have been and are made present to researchers, students, and administrative staff – apart from health precautions – have been and are quite others: the improvement of productivity parameters, the completion of the course of study within the prescribed deadlines, the increase in the number of “research products” and the measurement of their scientific and social impact. In fact, while “[t]he neo-liberal university has pushed us relentlessly, [...] [t]he metrification of academic work, which continued uninterrupted during the pandemic, ‘placed new demands on academ-

ics to perform productively and reinvent the self' (Lipton 2020, p. 3). [...] As De Gruyter's (2020, p. 18) report on the impact of the pandemic on academics and academic publishing concluded, 'the pandemic has [been], and continues to be, a time of great stress, insecurity and pressure. These are pressures that will cause career-defining damage that impacts the individual but will also have significant repercussions for scholarship, equality, diversity and research innovation'" (Shin et al. 2022, pp. 296-298).

At the same time, new opportunities have also emerged for a change in habits and practices in both research and teaching: "[t]he 'new normal' brought on by COVID-19 has shown the potential for positive developments in the academic community" (Ibid, p. 294). The exhortation not to waste a good crisis – attributed to Churchill and now in common use – should also be applied to the post-pandemic period. Among the most important shifts that have occurred during the pandemic period, the largely increased use of virtual communications (Neuwirth et al. 2021; Pregowska et al. 2021); the transfer of research results to open databases, not only in medical sciences (Willinsky 2020; Lane, Lifshitz-Assaf 2022); and the major role played by local scholars and key informants of the global South within international teams (see for instance the survey in IOM 2021), must be considered of particular importance.

We had a direct experience of these changes during the various phases of our project on "Health emergency in Asia and Africa", funded by Sapienza University, Rome, and supported also by the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Geneva Graduate Institute, of which the present two volumes represent an output¹. Conceived in the most critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic, this project was intended not only as an interdisciplinary survey on the social, institutional, and cultural impact of the plague, but also as a tool to keep alive the connections between researchers and institutions from different areas of the world, when various waves of the virus were forcing people from one country after another into lockdown and isolation. In retrospect, now that more than two years have elapsed since our first virtual meetings, we can affirm that this experience has been highly formative for all of us. In fact, it has highlighted not only how humans can effectively adapt to the occurrence of critical circumstances, but also how science itself evolves like a

¹ *The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa: Societal Implications, Narratives on Media, Political Issues*. Vol. 1: *Culture, Art, Media*; Vol. 2: *Society and Institutions*.

living being, in that it is able to activate different operational circuits and systems once the usual ones are damaged or put out of use.

All the three mentioned major changes in research practices have characterized the development of our project, since its early stages. Initially, we activated a dedicated area within the platform Common Spaces, or CommonS, “an Erasmus+ project funded by the EU, aimed at experimenting new forms of co-learning, e-tutoring and e-mentoring”², of which Sapienza University, Rome, is a partner. We found it particularly suitable for our project, both for its free availability and for its educational dimension. We started uploading our materials (documents, drafts, data, presentations) and holding regular meetings with scholars, researchers, key informants from various countries of Asia and (albeit to a lesser extent) Africa, progressively expanding our research group. Interestingly enough, the virtual nature of these gatherings did not impact significantly on the quality of our discussions. On the contrary, the possibility of joining remotely has made the organization of our meetings more agile and flexible and the group of participants richer and more diverse.

When the materials uploaded on the platform – a part of which has been reworked within the contributions collected here – reached a fairly good level of precision, we held a first conference in June 2022. It proved particularly useful for the inputs and the inspiration it provided to the participants through in-depths discussion sessions, open also to students and colleagues from other disciplines – which strengthened both the inter-disciplinary dimension of the research and its comparative nature. A larger, widely attended conference was finally held in October 2022 at Sapienza University, Rome, on the basis of both the contributions presented in June and further research activities. The articles collected in the present two volumes represent a further elaboration of the materials that have been collectively tested and discussed on that occasion, during round tables and Q&A sessions that saw also a significant participation (in presence and remotely) of international students – whom we want to thank for their active contribution. We also want to express our sincere gratitude to the reviewers from universities around the world who accurately examined the articles and suggested decisive integrations to their contents. Now, those articles are here, offered to the readers both as Open Access digital content and

² The platform can be reached at: <<https://health.commonspaces.eu/it/info/platform/>>

in two printed volumes: they represent a critical reflection, in different disciplinary fields, on the experiences lived during the pandemic. They are our contribution to remember those times of great difficulty and to make sense of the damages and the losses thereby suffered.

The two volumes in this collection are focused on two main directions pursued in the research: on the one hand, we concentrated on the variegated forms of narrative and narration that a traumatic event like the COVID-19 pandemic can originate having an impact on various cultural phenomena, fields of interest, artistic expressions and social media communication, in different lands. On the other hand, an overall scenario politically imprinted was presented to show how the historical event of the pandemic and its societal implications took shape in the targeted countries. In both cases, the results have been highly rewarding in terms of individual originality and joint forms of scientific collaboration, as previously pointed out.

Earlier in these pages we mentioned the possibility of the agency of oblivion triggered as a self-defence reaction in case of distress produced by highly traumatic circumstances; vice versa, when grappling with overwhelming events, we also invoked – and actually put into practice in the various steps of our research – the expedient of externalization through a varied range of expressive forms and means of inquiry. Sublimated memories, experiences filtered and elaborated anew in the positive side of their essence – shared in a scientific community – appeared more fruitful than just simple erasure and suppression of traumatic occurrences. In a way, that was the hidden agenda of the whole research, validated in both academic and pedagogical terms: to turn forgetfulness or repression of feelings into their diametrically opposite force, that is a deepened investigation of the facts actually occurred, leading to the transformation of negative realities turned into a springboard towards renewed and regenerated meanings.

Within the amplitude of scope of this research on the health emergency caused by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, we could realize not only how an extended span of geographical areas were joined in the common thread of inquiry, but also how diversified disciplinary fields of study intersected, ingraining in one another, creating a sense of harmony, reciprocity and projective circularity.

Revolving around the three main inspiring tenets of the research which included: – memory vs oblivion, highlighting the constructive power of writing and tangible documentation; – changes in the re-

search forms of scientific inquiry, with the enhancement of the virtual potentialities brought about by the new social media resources applied in the academic fields; – the interdisciplinary quality of the scientific investigation, spanning through extended geographical spaces, but also involving expanded areas of knowledge, intertwining with one another, the traditionally assumed disciplinary boundaries were trespassed by the variety and richness of the materials collected. These were most of the times gained first-hand, through tailor-made questionnaires, surveys, one-to-one interviews, and the precious added value of local informants; and, in all this, despite the originality of each single contribution, we could identify crosscutting lines of convergence.

For instance, in the nineteen contributions of the two volumes, the emergence of feelings – in all their gamut, from fear to hope, from hate to love, from depression to exaltation – is coming to surface in full evidence. Irony and humour, at times even satire, have their space in the narratives collected. And the narrative themselves are diversified, being conveyed through various artistic forms – from storytelling to theatrical or verbal forms, from social media messaging to religious rituals, from the cathartic effect of narration in the lower social strata to the more sophisticated and elitist intellectuals' reappropriation of the themes at stake.

Let's consider, for instance, the vantage point suggested by Giorgio Milanetti's contribution³, where the agency of narration itself becomes a balmy remedy and effective antidote to counterbalance the deeply negative consequences of the deadly illness; or, alternatively, think of the point of view presented by Fabio Mangraviti's essay⁴, where humour and satire become the crucial resources to express and fight against the virus. Another intriguing form of narrative is tackled by Sanjukta Das Gupta⁵, who investigates the highly inventive and renovated ways of expression taken by the production of *pañacitras* during the pandemic in West Bengal. In the same line of inquiry, we can appreciate Mara Matta's investigation⁶, referring to the photographic and

³ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *Tell a Story to End the Pandemic. COVID-19 and the Remedy of Narration: Instances from India and Italy*, by G. Milanetti.

⁴ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *Hanso hamsão, Coronavirus ko dūr bhagāo: Hindi Satire and Humour as Psychological and Ideological Resources During the COVID-19 Crisis*, by F. Mangraviti.

⁵ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *Narrating the Pandemic: Pañacitras of West Bengal, India*, by S. Das Gupta.

⁶ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *Shooting Back: Photography and Videomaking to Confront the Silencing*

filmic artifacts produced by the Rohingya camps refugees in Bangladesh to counteract – via creativity through visual media – against the forced segregation of lockdown. Similarly, Zakir Hussain Raju, in his article⁷ highlights the power of alternative forms of narration, showing once again how in this research the tools of investigation ranged from the traditional ones to the most innovative resources.

Furthermore, also the discursive forms through which the scientific data are presented in the two volumes are quite variegated: for instance, in volume 2, we witness primarily the adoption of the essayistic form or the presence of field reports, as in the case of Laura Guazzone analysis⁸, which argues that the pandemic increased authoritarianism in the Arab Region; or as in Marina Miranda's contribution⁹, which clearly shows how the handling of the pandemic has been strictly entangled with urgent political issues of the Chinese leadership, who went from successfully managing the outbreak in 2020 to provoking social unrest in 2022. Tonio Savina in his study¹⁰ invokes a bottom-up approach to substitute the top-down one so far documented in the Chinese digital world; whereas Christine Lutringer¹¹ in her article explores the intersection of governance and welfare in order to understand the shifts that have been induced or revealed by the COVID-19 crisis in India, mapping the institutional responses driven by the central government's reaction to the health emergency. Jean-Luc Maurer¹², on his turn, illustrates the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia – severely hit by the infection – and the nature of its impact on democracy to draw lessons that can be useful for

of Being Locked Up During the COVID-19 Lockdown in the Rohingya Refugee Camps of Bangladesh, by M. Matta.

⁷ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *Representation of COVID-19 in Bangladesh: from Mainstream Media to Alternative Visual Narratives*, by Z. H. Raju.

⁸ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *Authoritarianism Goes Pandemic? Symptoms from the Arab Region in the COVID-19 Era*, by L. Guazzone.

⁹ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *The Handling of the COVID-19 Crisis in the PRC: An Analysis of Its Political and Social Implications (2020-2022)*, by M. Miranda.

¹⁰ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *Pandemic Surveillance in China: An Interpretation Beyond the Top-Down Approach*, by T. Savina.

¹¹ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *Recasting Welfare Politics in India at the Time of COVID-19*, by C. Lutringer.

¹² See, *infra*, vol. 2: *The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Indonesian Democracy*, by J. L. Maurer.

comparison. Astrid Zei¹³ adds to the perspective describing the relationship between Singapore's juridical system and the outbreak of the pandemic, highlighting the legal framework into which the restrictive measures against the infection were incorporated.

In this collection of essays, it is evident how the handling of the pandemic is strictly connected to the political scenarios of the countries where it impacted. See for instance also Rossana Tufaro's article¹⁴, whose focus is to provide a first insight into the dynamics through which the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon influenced the trajectories of the process of reconfiguration of the country's socio-political order. The political issues, raised by the impact of the pandemic in so many different countries, often intersect also with societal or religious aspects as reported by Gianfranco Bria in his analysis¹⁵, dealing with the joint fight of religious authorities, recognised by the government, against COVID-19, sharing the restrictive measures and promoting the WHO's anti-pandemic policy, or in Sudarshana Bhau-mik's contribution¹⁶, where health issues, societal implications and religious credos all mingle in one only container, that is, the single countries' reaction to an emergency.

Moving to Far East Asia, we witness Antonetta Bruno's report¹⁷ on the attitude to wearing protection devices in Korea, where the use of facemasks during the pandemic somehow coincided with the local cultural *humus* of the place, or we can consider Matilde Mastrangelo's contribution¹⁸, where she investigates the development of an ancient form of verbal art renovated with a new inspiratory impulse. Still in Japan are set the cases reported by Mika Omori and Yoko Yamazaki in their article¹⁹, which deals with the psychosocial aspects of infection prevention, and is based on an empirical investigation in the field, as

¹³ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *Singapore Constitutional Communitarianism and COVID-19*, by A. Zei.

¹⁴ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *Handling the Pandemic in Times of Crises and Revolution: COVID-19 and the Reconfiguration of Lebanon's Political Relations*, by R. Tufaro.

¹⁵ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *COVID-19, Public Narrations and Pilgrimages in Albania*, by G. Bria.

¹⁶ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *"Rituals", "Illness" and "Public Health": Social Implications of the COVID-19. A Case Study of West Bengal, India*, by S. Bhau-mik.

¹⁷ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *The Culture of Wearing and Keeping on Facemasks in Korea: Beyond Confucianism*, by A. L. Bruno.

¹⁸ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *The Impact of the Coronavirus on the Japanese Verbal Arts (wagei)*, by M. Mastrangelo.

¹⁹ See, *infra*, vol. 2: *Psychosocial Perspectives on Preventive Behaviours of Infectious Disease: An Empirical Study in Japan*, by M. Omori and Y. Yamazaki.

well as the paper²⁰ by M. Montanari et al., which resorts to statistical data collected through online surveys and interviews. In a similar line of research is Marina Morbiducci's contribution²¹, which adopted the corpus linguistics and sentiment analysis linguistic approach to investigate the affective reactions conveyed through metaphorical discourse by the ISO Dept. students at Sapienza, who constructively interacted via internet with their Oriental interlocutors during the health emergency period. So doing, they fought the virus and offered an example of re-edification, which was the whole research project's agenda.

In the last part of this Introduction, the reference to our students is not merely accidental. They represented, indeed, the propelling engine to all the international scholars involved in this wide project of research. During the pandemic, forced to teaching in remote modality with different devices, as academicians teaching our young interlocutors, but also as human beings, we still could perceive their attentive looks and ears. It was also their participatory attitude which fed our daring research, in a form of mutual nourishment, with jets of intellectual energy proceeding in virtuous circularity, spiral-wise, which made us all grow.

Finally, it is with great pleasure that we thank Fabio Mangraviti and Tonio Savina, who acted as editorial assistants and coordinated the first and the second volume respectively. We are indebted to them for their competence, patience and accuracy as editorial team. As previously mentioned, we would like to thank once again our invaluable colleagues, from national and international universities, who kindly accepted to act as peer reviewers, whose cooperation was essential for the scientific validation of the whole collection. A silent, unrewarded work which represents the axis around which the entire academic world revolves. Projects like ours, showing collaboration of different parties aiming all together to the same goal – the so-called “advancement of learning” – represent our vital lymph.

Rome, July 24, 2023

²⁰ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *Same Issues, Different Perceptions: A Pilot Study of Pandemic-Related Issues among Italian and Japanese Populations*, by M. Montanari, S. Perone, M. Omori, A. Kayo, I. Barth.

²¹ See, *infra*, vol. 1: *English as a Lingua Franca and the International Pandemic Discourse: Investigating the BA First-Year Students' Questionnaire Data Gained at Dept. of Oriental Studies, Sapienza University, Rome*, by M. Morbiducci.

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