

# Summoning Hsi Wang Mu: Foresight, Global Risk and the SARS Outbreak

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A Critical Friends of Foresight Presentation

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“The global mesh of humans  
and that of microbes are in a  
deadly race.”

Howard Bloom, author of *The  
Lucifer Principle* (1996) and *Global  
Brain* (2000).

# Key Points

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- Media ecologies and the 'Killer Virus' meme
- The 'World Risk Society' & SARS
- Strategic Foresight™ & Causal Layered Analysis
- Capacity-building for Global Institutions

# SARS: Socio-economic Effects

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- Impact on 2003-04 Treasury forecasts
- Wild Card for 2003-04 Queensland Budget
- \$US10 billion losses in airline industry (IATA)
- Challenges China Century geopolitical scenario
- Multibillion dollar impact on Hong Kong's financial district
- "Rethinking Tourism" (Sohail Inayatullah)

# The 'Killer Virus' Meme

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- Popular film imagery: *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *Outbreak* (1995), *12 Monkeys* (1996).
- AIDS scare (early 1980s)
- Ebola and Creutzfeld-Jacob Disease
- Pre-millennium tension (mid-1990s)
- Template for media coverage (Susan D. Moeller) and 'hysterical epidemics' (Elaine Showalter)

# Media Ecologies I

- CNN Effect: 'to provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to both global and national events' (Piers Robinson)
- Policy-Interaction model (Piers Robinson) whereby 'Killer Virus' meme and other factors form constraints for policy-makers to implement pre-existing plans
- Example: US national strategic policy, neo-conservatives and post-September 11

# Media Ecologies II

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- SARS evolved from emerging issue . . . to geopolitical flashpoint
- 'Killer meme' as leading idea; SARS as leading event
- Challenged experts, institutions and political jurisdictions
- Exposed how Chinese Communist Party officials in Beijing tried to cover up early cases in Gaungdong province

# 'World Risk Society' I

- German sociologist Ulrich Beck
- Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens and Sohail Inayatullah ("Mapping FS and Risk")
- *World Risk Society* (Polity Press, 1999)
- Post-Cold War social contract theory
- Risk: "The modern approach to foresee and control the future consequences of human action." (Ulrich Beck)

# 'World Risk Society' II

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- Reflexive modernity
- Risk Calculus (intention, capability, threat, level of harm, risk)
- Manufactured uncertainties (group response)
- Globalization + Individualization + Gender Revolution + Underemployment + Global Risks (ecological crisis, financial crash, new resource wars, geopolitical flashpoints)

# 'World Risk Society' [II]

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- 'Systemic events' (Exxon Valdez, Challenger, BSE, SARS) define risk in public consciousness
- Society generates uncontrollable hazards
- "Result of unintended consequences" (Beck)
- "Politics of everyday fear" as social control

# Risk: Five Common Errors

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According to Aaron Wildavsky:

- Selective reception and transmission of the knowledge of risk
- Uncertainty of knowledge
- Mistakes and errors
- Inability to know
- Unwillingness to know

# Causal Layered Analysis

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- Developed by Sohail Inayatullah
- Post-structuralist 'layered method'
- Gives vertical depth to issues analysis
- Multiple perspectives and timeframes
- Opens up conceptual space for new options
- Litany / Social Causes / Worldview / Myth

# CLA I: Litany

- The 'killer virus' meme
- 'Virus hunter' chic
- The *Hot Zone* metaphor (*Time Magazine*)
- Media imagery and sound-bites

# CLA II: Social Causes

- Institutional responses: CDC & WHO
- International emergency management
- Reuters, AP and Google News coverage
- National policies and Travel warnings
- Center & Periphery (Johan Galtung)
- “Institutionalized disaster areas” (J.G. Ballard)

# CLA III: Worldviews / Epistemes

- Conflicting scientific hypotheses of American, Canadian and German researchers
- Astrobiological hypothesis as example of post-normal science (Jerry Ravetz)
- Challenges to normative policies and institutional structures (Laurie Garrett)
- Non-Western critiques of Western media imagery (Time Magazine)

# CLA IV: Myth/Metaphor

- Chosen-ness, Myth, Trauma (Johan Galtung)
- Gaia hypothesis (James Lovelock)
- Spaceship Earth (Buckminster Fuller)

# Macrohistorical Perspectives

- Macrohistory: histories & evolutionary patterns of social systems
- Human and microbe co-evolution
- *Man & Technics* (Oswald Spengler)
- Dominator & Partnership society (Riane Eisler)
- Rise of the Bedouins (Ibn Khaldun)

# Capacity-building

- Capability gaps in the global architecture
- Anticipatory management vs. unfolding crises
- Constructive pessimism ([Robert Kaplan](#))
- Individual to social capacity
- Catalyst for inter-civilization understandings