

A Comparative Study on the Bathing Cultures and the Spread of Plague Between China and the West—Taking the Spread of the Black Death in China and Europe in the 14th Century as an Example

YU Meng-qing

School of Translation Studies, Shandong University, Weihai 264209, China

An unprecedented catastrophe shrouded over the Chinese Empire ruled by the Yuan Dynasty and Medieval Europe—the Black Death during the 14th century with rapid spread, widespread impact, serious damage to property, and substantial deaths and injuries. In the aftermath of the Black Death, lifestyle changes were made and more sensible bathing habits evolved. In feudal China, Bathing Culture had variously adapted to each dynasty; while its existence in the West was heavily influenced by religion and other factors. In the post-pandemic era, this paper is dedicated to exploring the possible relevance of Bathing Cultures to the Black Death, and to conducting a comparative study of the plague spread in Yuan and Europe and its impact on ethnic Bathing Cultures, reckoning to present informative information to regular prevention and control of the following pandemics.

Keywords: bathing culture, the Black Death, pandemic transmission, prevention, control

Introduction

The Black Death¹ (or plague) was once an indispensable benchmark of the health level and periodical social civilization. Also, Bathing Cultures and their horizontal evolution, historically, in the latitudinal direction clearly presented globalization progress. China's Yuan and Ming changing hands and the budding Renaissance in Europe together elect the 14th century as a representative of timing to explore the spread and prevention of the Black Death and its impact on Bathing Cultures.

Although the existing interpretations of the Black Death in the 14th century are marked by proliferation and diversity, each with its own theoretical basis, interest and emphasis, many scholars are concerned with a major theme, namely, the impact of the Black Death on economic and social development. These academics tend to focus on the role of the Black Death in the formation of an integrated society from the disadvantage point of

YU Mengqing, M.A. Student, School of Translation Studies, Shandong University, Weihai 264209, China.

¹ Plague is caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pastis*, a zoonotic bacterium usually found in small mammals and their fleas. Historically, plague was responsible for widespread pandemics with high mortality. It was known as the “Black Death” during the fourteenth century, causing more than 50 million deaths in Europe.
WHO. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/plague>. 2022.7.7.

development (see, for instance, William, 1980; Ketch, 2011; Hugh, 2020; Zhang, 1992; He, 2006; Li, 2011, 2020).

By contrast, this study aims to demonstrate that the socio-cultural discussion, especially on the details of Bathing Cultures and the comparative evidence of the changes in Chinese and European Bathing Cultures in response to outbreaks of the Black Death and other pandemics. Its vantages on all aspects of society and culture throughout history have been significant, but the limitation of space does not permit this study to go into other part.

Bathing Cultures Before the Outbreak of the Black Death

Undoubtedly, distinctions between Bathing Cultures of China and Europe are consequences of a combination of numerous factors, such as geography, technology, as well as values. This chapter deals with the typical Bathing Culture of Yuan and medieval Europe before the Black Death ravaged Asia and Europe.

Bathing Culture in the Yuan Dynasty

During Yuan, which was under Mongol rule, the openness of the Mongols to constant conquest and the closedness of the Chinese traditional thought created a contradictory Bathing Culture that was “open on the outside and closed on the inside”: the expansionist policies of Yuan facilitated the exchange of Chinese Bathing Culture with exotic ones in other parts; however, hygiene concepts inherent under feudal rule limited the pace of its development.

An extensive collection of bathing equipment has been emerging along with time-honored Chinese Bathing Culture, samples are not excluded in the case of royal warm spring facilities (e.g., Huaqing Pond²), “bath beans³”, medicinal herb bath (Run, 2004), etc. Apart from those, due to the development of urbanization and the prosperity of the commercial economy at that time, public bathhouses gradually appeared in cities, especially in the northern regions, where bathing was inexpensive with comfortable service facilities (Qiu, 2010). In this regard, clean and spacious environment attracted most hygienic bathers, and Bathing Culture, thus, was popular for a while.

With inherent farming culture of central plains intertwining with the nomadic culture from grasslands, Bathing Culture also presented relatively diverse and innovative characteristics. Still, the role of bathing exists as ritual fasting, religious ceremony (Jiang, 2020) and aristocratic status. Furthermore, the wealthy merchants pursued elegance and bathing was synonymous with their admiration for the literati way of life and upper-class health. For the common people, nevertheless, it was a necessity of daily life. As a result, it had not shaped unified understanding of bathing among the various social classes, and even less concept of social health.

Consequently, Bathing Culture materially advanced in good shape if ignoring the lack of major event that would have led to a genuine Bathing Culture as a concept of hygiene and health.

Bathing Culture in Medieval Europe

Bathing Culture in Europe also undergone drastic changes in the Middle Ages when it was heavily grasped by Christian theology with distinct historical divisions. With the political power declining whereas the

² A spa palace for the exclusive use of the ruler.

³ A kind of “soap” for cleansing, such as washing and bathing.

ecclesiastical power expanding, the Christian church imposed an ideological clampdown on common ones and overcorrected the “excessively licentious Bathing Culture” of ancient Rome (Wang, 2015). They advocated that “abstinence from bathing” and retaining only “baptism” as a religious ritual (Zhou, 2004), resulting in the near loss of Bathing Culture.

Admittedly, rarely available bathing places, poor conditions and high costs were also unmissable reasons why medieval European were not interested in bathing. For example, after the Germanic Empire conquered the Roman Empire, the exquisite tiled baths, which were representative of Roman civilization, were destroyed, leading to the scarcity of available resources and the high cost of bathing. So much so that some doctors then discouraged warm baths, claiming that they dilated the pores, thus making it easier for disease-causing bacteria to invade bodies and reduce human immunity.

Briefly, various reasons from different perspectives of thought restrained the prevalence of Bathing Culture.

The Black Death and Its Prevention and Control

Plagues are a symptom of social backwardness at a certain time (Wang & Kang, 2022) including the Black Death, the most “famous” one. In this chapter, parallel comparison is drawn between the Black Death outbreak in the 14th century.

The Plague in the Yuan Dynasty

The Yuan Dynasty coincided with the second worldwide Black Death pandemic, when plague was rampant in northern China linked to climate, warfare and medical developments.

Against the 14th century’s dry and cold climate, the gradual decline in grassland vegetation made it impossible for wild rats to meet their food needs, so they left their natural habitat, north grassland, and migrated to the warmer regions of south Yuan for food. At this point, the wild rats began to spread the plague bacterium to domestic rats and even humans who had no antibodies (Zhao, 2020). The plague broke out then.

In addition to natural conditions, the massive outbreak of plague across the country and even the world was closely related to the policy of territorial expansion. Military expansion followed Yuan China and Central Asia and Europe, and the lack of proper disposal of corpses during wartime led to the widespread spread of plague.

Additionally, there was no specific medical discipline for the plague due to its sudden outbreak and lack of accumulation. Even with thriving medical medicine during Yuan for a well-established medical officer system and divided thirteen medical disciplines (Chen, 2006), few medical practitioners specializing in the study of plague laid hazards for the plague prevention later.

After the massive outbreak of the plague, the Yuan rulers were fully aware of the pernicious pandemics and proposed corresponding measures:

First, official emphasis was paid on medicine. The rulers of Yuan had a clear understanding that the prevention and control of plague relied heavily on medicine development. The government, hence, set up special officials responsible for the medical texts collation and publication and established medical schools with substantial medicine professor (Guo & Zhang, 2008).

Second, personal emphasis was paid on hygiene. Yuan people attached great importance to personal hygiene and cleanliness. The Travels of Marco Polo has recorded that people in the Qidan province were diligent in taking warm baths for three times a week (Polo, 1999). Also, “Disease enters through the mouth.” Yuan’s diet doctor

Kusihui (2002) clearly stated in his *Drinking and Dining* that where brushing your teeth on a clear day is better than brushing them at night, illnesses will not arise.

Third, policies on migration control were taken. That period had witnessed the frequent warfare and the common displacement and Large-scale population migration greatly accelerated plague infection wider in scope. Therefore, strict control or even prohibition of population movements was an important part of the prevention and control of pandemics during the war years.

The Black Death in Medieval Europe

In the 14th century, unlike that in Yuan Dynasty, the Black Death in Europe was not triggered by warfare, but by extremely poor personal hygiene and regional sanitation.

Personal hygiene was reflected in the near loss of the Bathing Culture of the city dwellers mentioned above. Citizens lacked scientific knowledge of hygiene and thumbed your nose at bathing, and even the wealthy urban aristocracies and princes had their clothes covered in parasites such as lice and fleas (Kiple & Ornelas, 2001). Various parasitic organisms proliferated in and around the human body, further contributing to the outbreak and spread of the Black Death (Liu, 2021).

Regional sanitation conditions were even worse, as the dense population and frequent contacts in European cities have accelerated the spread of the disease. Meanwhile, undeveloped water condition in European cities is derived from serious water pollution that industry was confused with water for residents and good quality water with polluted water. Citizens would also pile up some household waste and dung on nearby streets and rivers, creating a variety of environmental pollution such as air pollution (Nie, 2016), which exacerbated the spread of pandemics.

As the Black Death continued to wreak havoc, people gradually realized the importance of scientific knowledge related to infectious diseases, and countries have taken countermeasures, of which, several notable ones are as follows:

To begin with, decrees were issued. Britain, Italy and Spain issued temporary decrees during the Black Death to balance the needs of soldiers and civilians during pandemics.

In the second place, scientific knowledge was increased. Reformers cleverly used the church as a platform to change the lifestyle of the faithful. Doctors were ordered to write and print pandemic prevention manuals in appropriate quantities, which were distributed to the faithful and read out by priests before services. Further, living spaces, activity spaces and densely populated areas were fumigated with spices based on the scientific advice of doctors; fresh fruit and vegetables were encouraged, rather than meat.

Thirdly, commerce was resumed. While the Black Death lasted, traders could continue to buy and sell from each other, but they must trade across space that disinfected and fumigated in a timely manner.

Last of all, protection was taken for vulnerable people. Government agencies gave shelter to beggars, vagrants, orphans and other vulnerable groups to reduce the number of stragglers. This also set the scene for future measures such as the “welfare system” and “providing employment as a form of relief”.

The Relevance of the Black Death to Bathing Cultures

With a long and unbroken history until Yuan Dynasty, from the political world, Bathing Culture was as a necessary preparation for the induction of heavenly beings; from the religious world as a sacred ritual to cleanse

the soul; and from the common people as part of their quest to cleanse themselves to the best of their ability. Although bathing equipment, places and practices marched in a slow speed due to its smallholder economic system and the closed nature of China, Bathing Culture moved steadily forward, even after the ravages of plague. The slow pace, conversely, was the reason why, when the war-induced plague broke out on a large scale, Bathing Culture not only did not accelerate the extension of pandemics, but also slowed or even stopped its spread to a certain extent.

Although medieval Europe may be collectively referred to as the feudal era of Europe, in terms of national prestige, the Christian Church was largely in power. In order to consolidate its religious authority, the Church would not easily change its ideas on abstinence, nor would it easily abolish the idea of abstinence from bathing. The outbreak of the Black Death, therefore, made some of the European hierarchy aware of the importance of Bathing Culture, but it took a long time to re-emerge in reality because of the deep-rooted religious beliefs of the nation.

All in all, in terms of subjective thought, the attitude of Yuan Chinese towards Bathing Culture was strengthened in the aftermath of the plague, whereas the medieval European view of Bathing Culture did not break the shackles of religious thought even with the outbreak of the Black Death. In terms of objective action, whether the main purpose was ritual, status symbolism or daily purification, the practice of bathing in China continued uninterrupted and the outbreak of the plague during the Yuan Dynasty was only a catalyst for its intensification; the practice of bathing in Europe, nonetheless, was largely discontinued throughout the Middle Ages and the outbreak of the Black Death did not revive Bathing Culture, but only as an indirect trigger for the return of bathing to the public consciousness.

Implications

The above demonstrates in detail the impact of a major outbreak of the Black Death on Bathing Culture and even on health and hygiene, and the importance of post-pandemic reconstruction and health concerns. Today, in the post-pandemic era, the era of the pandemic has come to an end, but the pandemic itself has not disappeared, so this paper draws on the lessons of history and the gaps in historical pandemic prevention efforts to summarize the following key advice:

Initially, proper knowledge of pandemics should be accumulated. Despite the high level of literacy of the population, the complexity and diversity of information on the Internet currently can influence the reasonable judgement of the population if inappropriate statements are made. Therefore, the government, social organizations and individual residents should receive and disseminate scientific knowledge about pandemic prevention and correctly understand the dangers and seriousness of diseases.

Subsequently, regular hygiene should be focused on. Citizens are advised to follow the scientific advice of doctors and pay attention to personal hygiene and regular cleaning; society focus on protecting vulnerable groups such as the disadvantaged and cutting off the natural channels for spreading the epidemic.

Finally, people should be put in the first place. Whether before or after a pandemic, for disaster prevention or in disease control, always put the safety of citizens first. While ensuring safety, also fully respect individual opinions on pandemic prevention and control, and give people the appropriate freedom of choice. When

necessary, group efforts can be made to bring into play the strength and wisdom of the public to fight against the difficulties of the times together.

Conclusion

The article has provided a comparative account of the specific situation of Bathing Culture in China and Europe in the 14th century, the causes and control measures of the Black Death, and its potential relevancy on the advance of Bathing Cultures. It is hoped that this article will help promote interest in the Black Death and Socio-culturalism, so that its potential will be further exploited and its scope of investigation further extended. The paper will continue to follow the current and future track of pandemics worldwide to provide information for the promotion of scientific and individualized prevention and control in the post-pandemic era.

“Good fortune follows upon disaster; disaster lurks within good fortune.” Pandemics has taken a heavy toll on human society, but through concerted efforts, a better social reconstruction covering cultural purification, health advance, and social clarity is the best response to a catastrophe.

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