Prevailing Pandemic:

Vulnerability and Solidarity in Contemporary English and Chinese Fiction

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**I**n *Timaeus*, one of the most important documents in the history of European thought, Plato set out some key philosophical principles for the growth of human society and the development of human wellbeing. The Greek philosopher based these principles upon a distinction between two orders of reality: Being and Becoming. The world of Being, or “the real world,” contains “the objects of rational understanding and of the operations of mathematics and logic,” while the world of Becoming contains “all the things perceived by our senses” (Plato 9-10). Plato draws two deductions from this premise. First, “God fashioned the universe” in an orderly state so that it works in a mathematical and logical manner (42). Second, humans can only retain health and avoid diseases by moving their bodies in “the pattern of the universe” (119) and by perceiving “the harmonious circuits of the universe” which nourish their minds (122). These philosophical principles help to sharpen our understanding of the human world and beyond.

However, the ideal of a universe in harmony has never been achieved in reality. Not only can nature be vicious but also, historically, human beings have seldom avoided disasters of many different scales and varieties. The Black Death of 1347-1352 emerged as the largest natural catastrophe, causing severe depopulation in Europe and the Middle East (Bavel 2020: 23). Much later, in 1931, the China floods took at least one to four million lives (Bavel 2020: 28). If natural disasters are unforeseen and unavoidable, human conflict is intentional and should be avoided. Besides a natural processes of dissolution, the harmony of the universe has also been regularly broken by human misdeeds. Ultimately, human conflict climaxed in the twentieth century with two World Wars, completely human-made, the combined death roll of which reached 70,000,000 (Foster 245). Moreover, the development of human industrialization and the expansion of global capitalism caused environmental degradation which has been intensified by anthropogenic climate change and increasingly frequent attendant weather events, reinforced by disasters like Chernobyl and 9/11 as well as the War on Terror. It has been suggested that “the gap between Anthropocene disasters and disasters in the more distant past is often surprisingly small,” and this holds particularly true “when discussing vulnerability” (Bavel 168). These examples serve to stress the persistent vulnerability of the planet, highlighting the urgent need to address the human factors that exacerbate the Earth’s fragility.

Wars have never ceased, order is broken again and again, our environment is deteriorating, and the human race is suffering one calamity after another—manmade or induced by nature. Universal disorder erupts, and diseases and epidemics ensue. So much so that Susan Sontag opens her influential book *Illness as Metaphor* (1977) with the realization that “illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick” (3). The recurrent breakdown of order highlights humanity’s struggle to maintain political stability and public health. Each individual grapples with the dual citizenship of wellbeing and sickness, negotiating between the jurisdictions of health and affliction, natural or manmade.

Amid the current climate emergency, many had predicted a new strain of coronavirus emerging, but few could have imagined the recent spread of the global pandemic and the concomitant mortality, with no country left untouched by Covid-19. Four years on, the virus continues unabated with its indifferent mutations. This has happened despite vain hopes of Covid’s remission, although vaccines have improved the situation immeasurably as compared with the early stages in 2020 and 2021. In addition, we are confronted with the interminable Russia−Ukraine War, turmoil in Afghanistan, and an unprecedentedly vicious and dystopic Israel-Palestinian conflict. Resistance has escalated in response, which includes but is not limited to a resurgence of feminist activism, which in China emerged recently in the form of internet mobilization against “Class to Enhance Women’s Morality,” and, globally to counter to racism and the climate crisis, encompasses the Black Lives Matter movement, Extinction Rebellion, and Just Stop Oil.

Judith Butler, in her penetrating collection of essays *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), underlines the *vulnerability* of human beings as they endure their precarious lives. In contrast, she proposes a more appropriate reconceptualization of *solidarity*, intented to be magnanimously achieved for international justice instead of being “violently” exerted by “national sovereignty” (xii). Addressing the issue of national security after the attacks of 9/11, she provides a scenario of meditation for multiple situations of precarity. Hereupon, precarity has become a key term for researchers examining various forms of human torture (Wilson et al. 2020; Roy 2020). However, there has been something of a lacuna when it comes to solidarity, leaving space for further exploration—including by Aleks Wansbrough, and Li Zou & Christopher Rosenmeier in this special issue.

When Covid-19 was first identified in Wuhan, one of the largest cities in China, doctors and officials there were left at a loss. An initial inertia and the subsequent strict lockdown in this city, followed by those of other metropolises in China, were met with fierce criticism from the Western world, resulting in the increased alienation of many Chinese citizens. This was compounded by President Donald Trump’s political and economic agenda intended to isolate China. Simultaneously, many Western countries began grappling with the extended pandemic, in their turn receiving opprobrium for the large death toll of their citizens. As international economic and political disputes escalated, increasing human vulnerability in the face of the pandemic, there was a concomitantly desperate state in the mental health and financial prospects of many populations.

But we also witnessed solidarity. This was evident when doctors and civic workers across the world reached out to help people in need. It was present when people donated to those nearby or in distant places regardless of color, ethnicity, nationality, or political stance. Individuals’ deepest feelings of love were intensified when their family members lived in peril far away, or lay dying close at hand but impossible to visit. Nonetheless, the collective readiness for more effective communication and dialogue in the face of a pressing calamity threatening the human race clearly has ample room for improvement.

Humanities scholars, including several esteemed contributors to this special issue, have delivered reflections on emergent and far-reaching issues in and around the pandemic. Book collections and journals feature articles that cover insights and proposals from most parts of the globe. Up to 2023, the existing scholarship has approached pandemic writing mainly from local, cultural, or global precarious perspectives, including overviews of Covid-19 fiction from countries like Spain (Hidalgo-Marí and Palomares-Sánchez) and South Africa (Warren), narrative strategies of Covid-19 fiction (Däwes), and genres of pandemic writing such as that of posthuman fiction (Donn) or of apocalyptic fiction (Hughes). In particular, four special issues have been organized, with the one in *Neohelicon* addressing the intertwining of pandemics and literature through the ages and examining how this is represented in selected works of fiction from various countries (Estok). An issue published in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* concentrated on precarity (Wilson et al.). Meanwhile, the *European Review* special issue concerned itself with reports from China (Wang), whereas *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*’s issue set the pandemic against the backdrop of the history of capitalist injustice (Treasa and Brittany).

While including many thought-provoking topics and discussions, these special issues incline not towards impartiality, but instead often espouse one side of debate and opinions. This encourages the question: “What would it be like to engage in mutual discussion with greater dialogism?” This is a mission which a journal for interdisciplinary cultural studies such as *Mosaic* aims to fulfill. In this special issue, we thus intend to provide views and discussions that are multiperspectival. We have commissioned ten articles from sixteen cross-continental scholars: Janet M. Wilson, Claire Chambers, and Christopher Rosenmeier from the UK, Pallavi Rastogi from the US, Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández from Spain, and Aleks Wansbrough from Australia, as well as ten scholars from China: Ning Wang, Xiaohui Liang, Min Zhou and Yunchun Lan, Haiyan Xie and Weihua He, Lingling Yao, Li Zhou, Jianxin Dong, and Mingdong Gu. In so doing, we will foster comparison and contrast between their stances and approaches based upon the researchers’ different educational contexts and living conditions. These are either comparative between texts of different periods, countries, or thematic concerns, or a close textual analysis on a single text from a comparative perspective. The contributors use approaches such as ecocriticism, its newer version cultural ecology, and its key concept ecoprecarity, as well as ideas drawn from cultural studies such as social justice and the cultural unconscious. Moreover, the writers address the concepts of vulnerability and solidarity with a subtlety that accommodates a range of cultural specificities. Without shying away from potential friction, we offer up this special issue as a space for authors and readers to explore difficult subjects with an ethos of reciprocal communication.

All the essays in this collection seek to investigate different cultural responses to epidemics in history or to the Covid-19 pandemic from interdisciplinary and comparative perspectives. The first essay, Janet M. Wilson’s “Vulnerable Subjects: Ling Ma’s *Severance* and Karen Thompson Walker’s *The Dreamers*,” highlights precisely the focuses of the five clusters of essays in this special issue, namely, the definition of the subgenre of pre-Covid fiction, ecological concern, social critique, feminist vision, and cross-cultural confrontation. After a short discussion about the pandemic fiction as a type of speculative dystopian fiction, Wilson explores two pre-Covid speculative novels, *Severance* ([2019] 2021) and *The Dreamers* ([2018] 2019). She discusses how these novels address themes of reproductive futurism, environmental degradation, xenophobia, female resilience and agency in the face of crises. *Severance* depicts a dystopian world in which a fungal infection overtakes New York City, highlighting the protagonist’s journey from compliance with capitalist forces to principled resistance. *The Dreamers* explores a sleeping sickness outbreak in California and its effects on a small community, emphasizing the struggles and resilience of various characters in the face of uncertainty. The essay examines the novels’ thematic significance in relation to contemporary issues such as neoliberalism, climate change, patriarchal oppression, and social inequality.

The second article “Forms of Covid: Fiction After March 2020” by Pallavi Rastogi starts with analysis of Covid fiction as a subgenre of disaster writing. Under that umbrella term, Rastogi’s article discusses the surge of pandemic-related works in 2020-2021 and subsequently. The author identifies two types of writing: works directly addressing Covid and those using pandemic-related concerns to address broader social problems, emphasizing the specific thematic concerns and formal aesthetics. Rastogi firstly refers to two short pieces, Shamsie’s “The Walk” and Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Letter to Italy.” Produced in March 2020, Shamsie’s short story and Lahiri’s work of nonfiction directly address the pandemic’s effects on daily life, underscoring the importance of empathy and community building. Next Rastogi turns to longer fiction about the pandemic, most notably Mohsin Hamid’s *The Last White Man*, which began to appear only recently. In doing so, Rastogi expands the thematic focus of early Covid fiction outward, addressing the intersectionality of crisis in particular. The essay also explores how Covid fiction has created its own literary vocabulary and adapted to the changing dynamics of the pandemic. Finally, the author poses questions for future scholars and anticipates the “Great Corona Novel” that will help to reframe some pressing issues, make sense of the twenty-first century’s chaotic currents, and portray a post-crisis forging of new worlds.

Pallavi Rastogi’s reference to climate change depicted in Covid fiction amid her intersectionality argument leads on to the ecological discussion in the next two articles: Xiaohui Liang and Claire Chambers’s “Pandemic Writing as an Ecological Force” and Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández’s “Ecoprecarious (Inter)dependencies in Dystopian Narratives of Pandemics.” Liang and Chambers’s article introduces the concept of cultural ecology, a branch of ecocriticism, to analyze the relationship between humans and nonhumans, individuals, nations, and the world in pandemic literature. The focus is on three functions of literature as an ecological force: meta-discourse which exposes dominant cultural structures, counter-discourse which challenges existing confinement, and integrative discourse which harmonizes different forces into ecocultural realization. The article explores how the Chinese and Anglophone authors Fang Fang, Shumin Bi, and Oana Aristide address the pandemic. In exploring the controversy aroused by Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary*,we find its counter-discourse obtained from other sources inadequate. Instead, we analyze Oana Aristide’s *Under the Blue* (and, to a lesser extent, Zadie Smith’s *Intimations*) in order to adumbrate a more enriched, broadly based counter-discourse. In particular, we highlight the integrated discourse of Shumin Bi’s *CoronaVirus*, which aims to combine both nature and culture harmoniously to create solidarity between human and nonhuman and for the universal order suggested by Plato.

Gámez-Fernández’s article in its turn draws on the rhetoric of ecoprecarity to analyze transhumanist biotechnological enhancements in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, focusing on two novels, *The Nephilim Virus* by John T. Prather and *The Companions* by Katie M. Flynn, both of which are set in California and use pandemics to explore divergent ideological positions on (non)human vulnerability. Gámez-Fernández’s analysis contrasts the two novels by emphasizing their divergent ideological positions on (non)human vulnerability. While the former reinforces human ontological superiority and distrust in advanced technologies, the latter reflects critically on the ecological interdependence and ethical considerations in a techno-mediated reality. In her conclusion, Gámez-Fernández evaluates Prather’s and Flynn’s representations of ecoprecarity and their contrasting ideologies about vulnerability, human supremacy, and the impact of pandemics on (non)human entities. Here Gámez-Fernández affirms the more challenging and resistant stance of *The Companions*, a novel which questions corporate ethics in a capitalist society. The analysis illuminates some of the ways in which literature engages with ecological disasters, biotechnological advancements, and the ethical dimensions of human actions.

This socially critical stance is continued in the next three essays, which take a cultural-political approach. Both Min Zhou and Yunchun Lan’s and Haiyan Xie and Weihua He’s essays explore the social problems in a plague-stricken China, either in the Qing Dynasty when China was still a feudal society, or towards the end of the twentieth century when China was promoting its modernity project. In “Plague as the Prism to the Structure of Feelings,” Min Zhou and Yunchun Lan begin by discussing the recent Covid-19 pandemic and its parallels with historical plagues. Their essay critically analyzes *Snow and Raven*, a Chinese novel by Zijian Chi depicting the Manchurian Plague of 1910-1911, as exemplified by a small plague-stricken Chinese town and the lives of its inhabitants. Zhou and Lan explore how literature reflects cultural and symbolic meanings associated with plagues. The narrative structure, coupled with the symbolic imagery of snow and ravens, effectively conveys the structure of feelings during pandemics, in that societies’ responses reflect their own values and the cultural unconscious. The article examines both the state of disorder and human weaknesses during a plague, and the warmth and solidarity of ordinary people in the face of calamity. It also discusses cultural and ideological divides, including the clash between Chinese and Western medicine. In its conclusion, the article asserts the significance of plague-related fiction as a spiritual remedy during crises, as a healing and encouraging instrument that maintains the strength of individuals and universal humanity.

Such notes of optimism are more muted in Haiyan Xie and Weihua He’s “In Search of Reality: Disease and the Overshadowed Countryside in Yan Lianke’s *Dream of Ding Village*.” The article scrutinizes *Dream of Ding Village* (2006) by the well-known Chinese author Yan Lianke, a novel set in a desolate village in Henan Province. Targeting money-oriented Chinese society at the end of the twentieth century, the story revolves around the government’s initiative to boost the local economy and the villagers’ proposal to sell blood for money, leading to the spread of HIV within the community. The novel is controversial in China, with many scholars emphasizing Yan’s critique of the “plasma economy” and political corruption rather than the novelist’s central focus on the countryside’s dilemma at being left behind in the development of the city. Partly challenging Susan Sontag’s view on disease as metaphor, the authors argue that in the novel AIDS serves both as a biological reality and a metaphor for societal issues. They clarify that the alleged foreignness of AIDS to Ding village underscores the exploitation of rural resources by urban centers, a symbol of the negative consequences of China’s rapid modernization. The indifference displayed by the villagers towards each other’s suffering mirrors Lu Xun’s critique of the Chinese “bystander culture,” a collective form of numbness and apathy. Nevertheless, the article concludes that Yan sees love as a metaphorical salvation in the wasteland, expressing humanity in the face of those challenges presented by modernity.

In “The Political Unconscious of P. D. James’s *The Children of Men*,” Aleks Wansbrough examines P. D. James’s novel *The Children of Men* (1992) and Alfonso Cuarón’s film adaptation *Children of Men* (2006) in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Critics have lauded the film while disparaging the book, partly due to Cuarón’s left-wing political stance contrasting with James’s conservative background. The author argues instead that the novel deserves praise and scrutiny as much as the film. Wansbrough evaluates critical comparisons between the two and applies Fredric Jameson’s concept of the political unconscious to discuss how both works address themes of identity crisis, atomization, and a pandemic mindset. The essay reconsiders how *The Children of Men* examines the role of Christianity and British nationalism, highlighting James’s ambivalent views toward capitalism, neoliberalism, and consumerism. The essay also explores the intersection of biopolitics and necropolitics, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, drawing parallels between the novel’s dystopian world and real-world responses to the recent crisis. Finally, the essay concludes by discussing the relevance of the novel’s themes in contemporary society and the importance of understanding historical forces and class struggle in interpreting literature in a post-Covid era.

The next article takes us to analysis of pandemics from a feminist perspective. Lingling Yao’s “Her Stories as Textual Envisioning” turns to three Chinese women writers post-2020 and observes how they conceptualize environmental crises in the form of three disease-themed novels. Bi’s novel *Corona Virus* (also examined by Liang and Chambers in our article for this issue) and Chi Zijian’s *White Snow and Crow* (or *Snow and Raven*; alsoexamined by Zhou and Lan in their article), are compared with Xu Yigua’s *White Face Mask* (2013). Yao highlights the texts’ common theme of the SARS-related crises and characterizations of a brave and indomitable female protagonist. The article also explores the unexplained deaths, rumors, official denial, media involvement, enforced quarantines, quest for solutions, and a tentative return to normalcy in the three novels. In discussing the novels’ historical and contemporary contexts, Yao emphasizes the government’s response to crises and the integration of Western scientific methods into Chinese medical practices. Although she questions the writers’ internalization of sexist interpretations of idealized women characters and the overemphasis on female rivalry, she posits that such progressive women’s writing plays a crucial role in shaping a posthumanist future. In sum, Yao advocates for narratives that promote female solidarity and environmental ethics in the face of global crises.

To bring the collection to a close, the final cluster of essays concentrates on the force of intercultural communication and the influence of cultural translation. Li Zou and Christopher Rosenmeier’s “Anglophone Narratives of China’s Second World War and Historical Lessons for Building International Solidarity” discusses the importance of fostering global solidarity during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. Zou and Rosenmeier draw parallels with artistic and literary works about China’s Second World War, namely H. S. Wong’s photograph “Bloody Saturday,” Lin Yutang’s wartime novel *A Leaf in the Storm* (1943), and Lin Taiyi’s *The Golden Coin* (1945). The article emphasizes two key lessons: the significance of mourning the suffering of individuals beyond national borders and of promoting unbiased cross-national cooperation. Zou and Rosenmeier first turn to the notion of intersubjective connections to explore how narratives in the context of the Second World War challenge Japanese politicians’ attempt to widen divisions between China and the West and help establish attachment between peoples from different cultural backgrounds. They then examine *The Golden Coin* as an example of unbiased cooperation between America and China during wartime, which served to strengthen cross-national bonds, rather than perpetuate divisive racial assumptions and hinder international cooperation. The latter negative impulse was what Trump conformed to in his labeling of the Covid-19 virus as the “China virus.” The essay concludes by emphasizing the relevance of these historical lessons for addressing current global crises like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Jianxin Dong and Mingdong Gu move from physical disease to mental torture in “‘Melancholia,’ Youyuzheng, and Yu: Mental Illness as a Call for National Salvation in Yu Dafu’s *Sinking*.” Stating that the term “yiyuzheng” (melancholia or depression) has been exacerbated in Chinese society because of the pandemic, the essay traces the introduction of melancholia into modern Chinese literature through Yu Dafu’s novella *Sinking* (1921), which depicts the protagonist’s melancholia as a reflection of the anxieties of Chinese intellectuals. The authors clarify that the protagonist’s emotion aligns more closely with the traditional Chinese concept of “yu,” a condition of stagnation and obstruction in traditional Chinese medicine, rather than with Western melancholia. But Yu Dafu’s use of the term “youyuzheng” (melancholia) originates from a Japanese translation which in its turn influenced by German psychiatry and psychoanalysis. This cultural translation of melancholia reflects broader themes of cultural adaptation and the intersection between medical and literary traditions. Furthermore, the essay examines how “youyuzheng” symbolizes national degeneracy in *Sinking*, reflecting concerns about China’s future and destiny. The essay concludes by discussing the broader implications of cultural translation and the political motivations behind it. Dong and Gu suggest that the translation of medical terms, such as “Covid-19,” can also reflect cultural politics and solidarity in the face of global challenges like pandemics.

Ning Wang concludes the collection with an “Afterword,” elaborating on new theoretical developments of eco-criticism and medical humanities, and appealing for more intercultural and interdisciplinary research into global issues like this prevailing pandemic.

Exploring Covid and other health crises, this special issue illuminates their transformative impact on global literature and culture. We would like to thank Shep Steiner for his receptivity about publishing this collection as a special issue of *Mosaic* and his great efforts in editing the drafts, and Karalyn Dokurno for all her encouragement and pragmatic support along the way. The issue is dedicated to those who died in the pandemic and the loved ones who mourn them.

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