

Selfless Dedication in the Time of Plague

The recent coronavirus outbreak has gravely affected our daily lives. To learn from history, many people compare this diseases to the SARS outbreak in 2003 and even the bubonic plaque as long ago as 1894, which will be covered in detail in our revamped permanent exhibition, currently in the planning stage. We will illustrate life during the epidemic through the artefacts of a nurse, Elizabeth Frances Higgin, and a volunteer, Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Chapman.

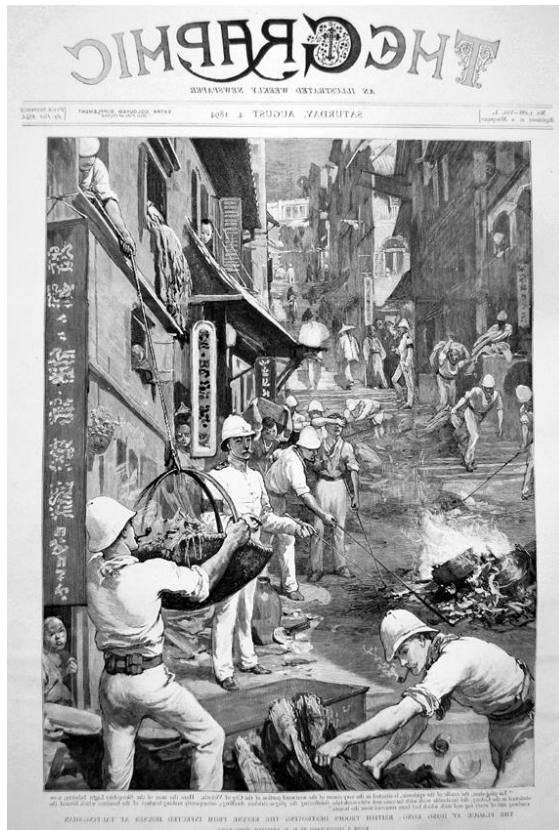
In March 1894, the bubonic plague first erupted in Guangzhou, and given its proximity to Hong Kong and the frequent interaction between the residents of the two cities, the Hong Kong government sent Dr James A. Lawson, of the Government Civil Hospital, on an inspection trip to Guangzhou in early April. However, the first case of plague was recorded in Hong Kong on 5 May before Lawson's return. In the following six days, Tung Wah Hospital alone registered 55 cases, 38 of whom died, a 70 per cent death rate. The Hong Kong government was unable to identify the source of the epidemic. All it knew was that the disease had broken out in the Tai Ping Shan district and that its spread was linked to cramped living conditions and poor hygiene. Therefore, the government carried out a mandatory quarantine of patients and the complete disinfection of Chinese communities by forcibly entering people's homes to search for plague victims, and removing corpses from homes and streets. The government subsequently ordered the demolition of the tightly packed buildings in Tai Ping Shan, where more than 2,500 people had succumbed to the plague, and a park was built in the district most savagely struck by the disaster. The park was named Blake Garden after the governor of Hong Kong at the time, Henry Arthur Blake.

Our renewed permanent exhibition will shed light on the plague via the first-hand accounts of two witnesses. Elizabeth Frances Higgin joined the Government Civil Hospital as a nurse on 21 July 1890. She took care of a few Japanese bacteriologists who came to Hong Kong to study the cause of the plague but contracted it. As two of them made a full recovery under her care, Higgin received not only a letter of appreciation from the Sanitary Bureau of Japan's Home Ministry, but also the gold version of Hong Kong Plague Medal, presented by the Hong Kong governor. Another witness, Arthur Chapman, joined the Hong Kong government as an Assessor of Rates on 12 October 1889. As a member of the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps before the plague outbreak, he was one of the first civilians to volunteer for plague duty. He subsequently received the silver version of Hong Kong Plague Medal. The stories of these two individuals prove that love and devotion in the time of plague can be more

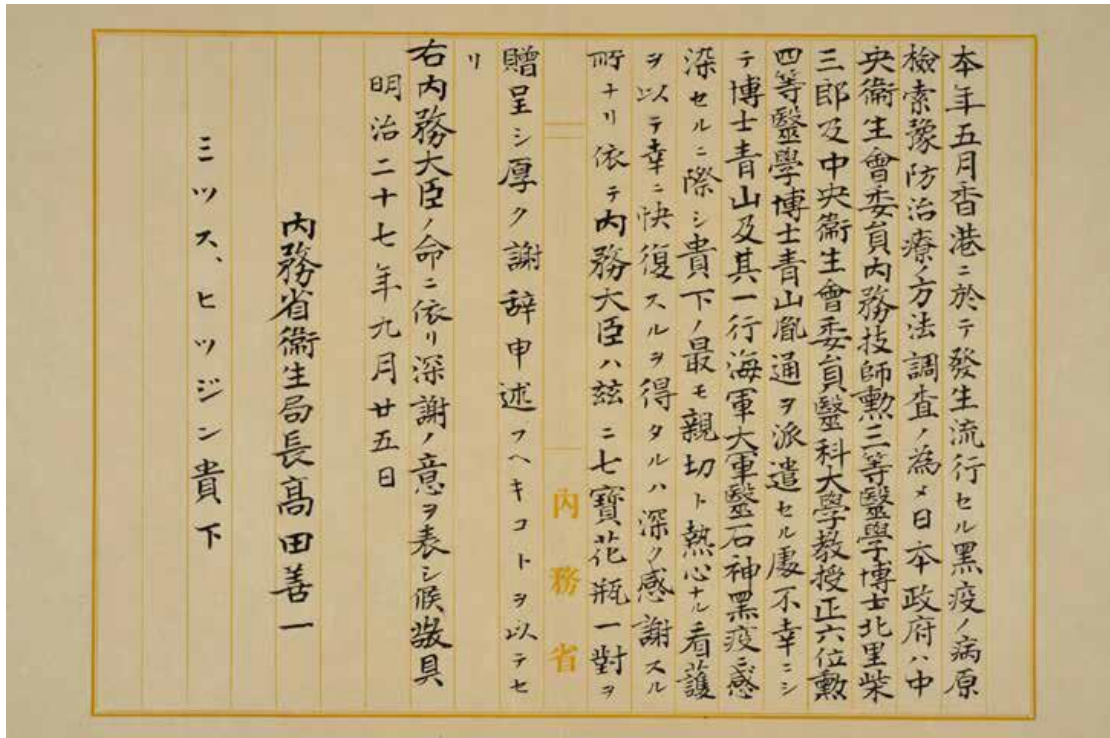
than love and care for our families, but also selfless dedication to serving the public at large.



The district of Tai Ping Shan packed with the homes of Chinese residents, 1870s.



A British pictorial from 1894 depicts British soldiers disinfecting Tai Ping Shan District.



Letter of appreciation sent by the Sanitary Bureau of Japan's Home Ministry to nursing sister Elizabeth Frances Higgin in 1894



Gold plague medal presented to Elizabeth Frances Higgin



Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Chapman of the Hong Kong Volunteer Corps



Silver plague medal presented to Arthur Chapman