

Cliff, Andrew; Peter Haggett; Matthew Smallman-Raynor.  
*Deciphering Global Epidemics: Analytical Approaches to the Disease Records of World Cities, 1888–1912*. Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography 26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pages xxiii, 469. 11 halftone illustrations, figures, tables, appendices, bibliography, index. US\$74.95 (cloth), US\$29.95 (paper)

Jan McTavish

Volume 28, numéro 1, octobre 1999

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016564ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016564ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

McTavish, J. (1999). Compte rendu de [Cliff, Andrew; Peter Haggett; Matthew Smallman-Raynor. *Deciphering Global Epidemics: Analytical Approaches to the Disease Records of World Cities, 1888–1912*. Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography 26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pages xxiii, 469. 11 halftone illustrations, figures, tables, appendices, bibliography, index. US\$74.95 (cloth), US\$29.95 (paper)]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 28(1), 67–69. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016564ar>

*Shanghai Modern* proceeds in three parts: part one outlines cultural production; part two discusses selected literary texts; and part three suggests linkages between Shanghai and Hong Kong as emblems of modernity at different stages in twentieth century history. The tripartite structure of the book replicates the cinematic montage interspersed with narration prevalent in films of the era and favoured by prominent literary figures such as Mu Shiyong (chapter six). *Shanghai Modern* thereby invites the reader to experience through the daily lives of literary urbanites of the 1930s and 1940s the new urban reality of modern consumption and conveniences. Lee moves seamlessly between description and analysis of the urban consciousness (re)produced in various public spaces such as dance halls, movie theatres, racetracks, and coffeeshops, as well as through different media including popular literary magazines (Chinese and Western), pictorial magazines, films, and jazz music. When analysis of literary texts takes centre stage in part two, the depth of knowledge Lee brings to his study of urban culture in Shanghai shines particularly brightly.

The significant contributions of this book to the fields of cultural and urban history are many. One of the most salient, to my mind, is the connection by Lee of the phenomena of nationhood and the public sphere. Lee's attention to the intimate links between imagining a new community of the nation and defining a new (urban) reading public allows commercial ventures in publishing and advertisements to sit alongside literary texts as components of the cityscape. Lee asserts, "Since a cultural imaginary may itself be defined as a contour of collective sensibilities and significations resulting from cultural production, we must also wrestle with both ends of this interpretive strategy — namely, both the social and the institutional context of this cultural production and the forms in which such an imaginary is constructed and communicated. ... In my view, 'modernity' is both idea and imaginary, both essence and surface (63)." I question, however, Lee's formulation of this approach as contrary to "the elitist approach of conventional intellectual history, which tends to discuss only the essential ideas of individual thinkers." While scholars of Chinese intellectual and literary history (Lee included) focus on ideas, most do so in relation to the larger cultural contexts within which the thinkers existed and with which they were engaged. For future directions of intellectual and cultural history, we would benefit by taking *Shanghai Modern* as an example of the productive potential of moving outside conventional categorizations of historical inquiry rather than pitting cultural against intellectual history. The cultural imaginary of contemporary intellectuals may invoke different spatio-temporal coordinates than popular writers but consideration of this imaginary can, and should, be part of both intellectual and cultural histories.

Lee's real challenge to conventional modern Chinese history lies, I believe, in the remapping of the modern nation-scape through delineation of a Chinese identity predicated upon, rather than in opposition to, urban spaces. Contrary to scholarship on China that takes leftist writers and rural spaces to be the essence of modern China, Lee argues convincingly that Shanghai was not only, or even primarily, a city of national humiliation and capitalist vice. For

the writers featured in this book, Shanghai embodied modernity and China's future. Through analysis of Chinese writers such as Eileen Chang, Shi Zhecun, and Mu Shiyong, this study also moves beyond the parameters of Chinese urban culture to engage comparatively the relationship between citizens, cities, and modernity in Europe, America, and China. Lee's introduction into English-language scholarship of the schools of Chinese modernism, neo-sensationalism, and de-cadence surfaces alternative imaginings of the relationships between China and the West, city and modernism. For example, the occidentalism of Fu Yanchang and his associates, for Lee, reveals that "exoticism as a phenomenon of urban culture is closely related to a search for Chinese modernity and provides a partial solution to the paradox that arises between nationalism (a new cultural identity) and imperialism (203)." In summary, Leo Ou-fan Lee demonstrates in a richly textured account how the city, as centre of modern civilization, captured the imagination of many urbanites as essential backdrop to modernity and Chinese-ness. *Shanghai Modern* provides for a diverse audience a nuanced account of how the light, heat, and power of the city's venues and its images fueled a dynamic urban culture distinct from rural China and urban Europe but nonetheless driven by similar concerns of modernity, identity, and space.

Tina Chen  
Department of History  
University of Manitoba

---

**Cliff, Andrew; Peter Haggett; Matthew Smallman-Raynor. *Deciphering Global Epidemics: Analytical Approaches to the Disease Records of World Cities, 1888-1912. Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography 26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pages xxiii, 469. 11 halftone illustrations, figures, tables, appendices, bibliography, index. US\$74.95 (cloth), US\$29.95 (paper).***

In 1887 the United States Marine Hospital Service (forerunner of the United States Public Health Service) began publishing a weekly bulletin of disease data gathered not only from American locations, but from cities all around the world. American officials were concerned that immigration and travel to the United States would bring a host of deadly ailments into the country, resulting in widespread epidemics. There was good reason to be fearful. Past experience had demonstrated that infectious diseases could cause large numbers of fatalities. A process of excluding or quarantining people arriving from parts of the world where epidemics were occurring was seen as one way to control the incidence of disease in the United States. But to know whom to exclude, one needed to know where epidemics were occurring. Hence, American consular officials all over the globe were instructed to find out how many people had died of infectious diseases in their jurisdictions each week and cable the figures to Washington. With varying degrees of enthusiasm they complied, and for twenty-five years mortality statistics from over 200 foreign cities, augmented by data from about 150 American cities, were published in the *Weekly Abstract of Sanitary Reports*. Historians have nibbled around the

edges of this mass of information for many years, but it was never thoroughly analyzed — until now.

Convinced that useful knowledge about the behaviour of epidemic diseases could be gleaned from data collected in the past, three British geographers set out on a project that eventually resulted in this book. Their intention, however, was not to shed light on the historical experience of disease but to “see if firm baselines can be established against which modern shifts in disease prevalence can be measured.” (2) The observation that new diseases such as Ebola and AIDS and old ones such as tuberculosis have the potential to be far more widespread and devastating than they are at present is one of the concerns that underlie this book. Understanding how diseases behaved in the past, what factors exacerbated or attenuated them, how they spread in different environments, should, the authors hope, be of practical use to public health officials and others in their efforts to control or even eradicate these infections. Therefore, to make the historical data useful in a modern context, it was necessary to subject them to modern statistical analysis. In many respects, then, *Deciphering Global Epidemics* is a text book about how to apply the methodologies of late twentieth-century statistics to material originating in earlier eras. It is a carefully organized presentation, with each step of the process justified and explained in painstaking detail, but it does not make for easy reading. Unless you are familiar with terms like “spatial autocorrelation coefficient” and “truncated Fourier series,” much of this book will be incomprehensible. Nevertheless it should not be ignored by urban historians.

From the material in the *Abstract*, the authors selected six diseases (diphtheria, enteric fevers [typhoid and paratyphoid], scarlet fever, measles, tuberculosis, and whooping cough) and 100 cities on which to focus. These diseases were chosen because they were the best documented, and the least subject to mis-diagnosis (84). The city selections, on the other hand, were arbitrary (102). A manageable number of cities had to be chosen and the authors wanted those with as much data as possible. But for the analysis to be truly global, cities outside Europe and North America (which were over-represented in the *Abstract*) had to be included, even though the information collected from them was not always complete. Thus, no Canadian cities made the cut, but Melbourne, Durban, and Smyrna did. Outside the United States itself, the choices were limited to cities with an American consulate, and were therefore usually cities governed by a European colonial power or ones that were of strategic importance to the United States. So Calcutta, Bombay, Cartagena, Rangoon, Montevideo, and Singapore join Paris, New York, Sheffield, Detroit and San Francisco, but no city in China or Persia nor any in Africa between Cairo and Cape Town could be included. The authors did want the data to be as wide-ranging as possible, however, so even if information was incomplete, places such as Moscow and Rangoon were included, if only to represent very different climates. Similarly, the authors deliberately chose as many different sizes of cities as they could, from Colon, Columbia with less than 50,000 people to London with 5.5 million in 1888, and 7.3 million in 1912). They also selected cities with hugely different growth rates: Liège, Belgium,

grew by less than ten percent in the period being considered, compared to New York, which tripled in size. Most of this book is in fact an argument justifying why these particular cities were chosen, and explaining how statistically meaningful conclusions can be drawn from imperfect data derived from such different locales. A vast number of variables had to be taken into account, and it is a measure of the ingenuity of statisticians that we can be sure all necessary factors have been adjusted for. A simple example is the adjustment for the inevitable sloppiness of data collection in those horse-and-buggy days: deaths may have accumulated for several weeks before being reported, and therefore in some cases figures may appear to signal an epidemic when in fact none occurred (72).

The raw material in the mortality tables was itself starkly simple: the name of a city, its estimated population, and the number of deaths due to various diseases, plus the number of deaths from all causes. For this study, the information was easily converted into deaths per 100,000 population — the standard measure of mortality — and we can quickly determine the percentage of all deaths attributed to infectious diseases in each locale. But the number of deaths is the only information the *Abstract* supplies. How many people had measles but recovered, for example, is not known. Thus the authors are restricted to doing what they can with raw death rates, but manage nonetheless to relate the rates to many factors: city size, climate, latitude, altitude, and proximity to seaports and trade routes, among other things. They compare city to city, and also compare ten world regions; British Isles, Eastern Europe, Middle (i.e. central) America, North America, Northern Europe, Rest of the World, South and East Asia, South America, Southern Europe and Mediterranean, Western Europe, to see if mortality rates reflect large geographic differences. All their analyses are accompanied by excellent graphs and diagrams.

The authors were especially interested in what the data can tell us about the apparent decline in deaths from epidemic diseases that is usually associated with the period under consideration (Chapter 4). They have tested several hypotheses that have been presented to account for the decrease in mortality, including the concept that it is a statistical illusion (not borne out), and the widely-accepted notion that mortality is higher in larger urban populations (“the big-city” hypothesis). Larger cities (more densely populated and therefore more conducive to the spread of epidemics) should have a slower decline in death rates than smaller cities. The study came to a surprising conclusion. Smaller cities in fact had a “greater death rate intensity” than larger ones, all other things being equal (p. 161). As for the overall decline in death rates, however, the authors found that while in European and North American cities this was generally the case, the results were “much more ambiguous” when examined globally (p. 184). Only diphtheria deaths really did diminish; tuberculosis deaths, on the other hand, really did increase (148). TB is something of an anomaly in this study, a measure of its current epidemiological importance, and its former prominence as a deadly disease. The *Abstract* only collected TB mortality statistics for about half of the period under consideration. Nevertheless on raw scores alone it accounted for 48.2 per cent of all deaths from the six diseases, and when the figures were ad-

justed for the late start in data collection, its share jumped to 61.3 per cent (121).

Perhaps of the greatest interest to urban historians is Chapter 6, which looks at the individual records for the ten largest cities in the study, and then examines in some detail the cities in the North American region, and in the British Isles. At this point, the statistical analysis was augmented by contemporary epidemiological and other literature providing descriptions of conditions in these cities, that to some extent can put a human face on the numbers. Each one of the mortality figures, after all, represents a man, woman, or child who died of a nasty disease. It is important to keep in mind, however, that this information was examined for what it can contribute to an understanding of modern epidemic diseases, and in the last chapter, the authors discuss twentieth-century experiences and speculate on possible applications of their analyses.

The value of this study to modern public health officials, I am not qualified to comment upon. From the perspective of a historian, however, the book presents some frustrating problems — those related to the fact that the work was not intended to be a historical study, and which therefore leaves a large number of questions unaddressed or only briefly examined. The mortality tables do not tell us the race, sex, age, ethnicity, or social stratum of the dead, all of which information is crucial to understanding the social and political responses to these diseases. What percentage of white colonials died in Singapore, compared to natives? Did New York City deaths claim more immigrants than non-immigrants? What effect did local politics play? It is a pity that no Canadian cities were included. It would have been interesting, for example, to compare Detroit to Toronto, where the principal variable might have been public health measures, not climate or population size. Such information, however, did not appear in the *Abstract*, and at any rate, would not have been suitable for statistical analysis. Statistics are of course the heart of *Deciphering Global Epidemics* and are both its strength and its weakness. At its best, the work demonstrates the fallacies in long-standing assumptions (such as the “big-city” hypothesis) and alerts us to the hazards of accepting “the obvious.” In most cases, the statistics cautiously confirm expectations (death rates declined after sanitary measures became widespread, and *probably* as a result of them), but many of the conclusions are fairly banal, and in some sense do not seem to justify the effort that went into producing them. With so much effort devoted to method, results that are expressed so succinctly seem to be a rather insufficient reward. This is in my view especially apparent in the sections on mortality decline, where the authors, in fact, appear surprised by the inability of statistics to clarify historical experience. The past is far too messy and there are simply too many variables to end up with neat and tidy results. And, not being historians, they have missed a few things. In their discussion of the decline in diphtheria deaths, for instance, they do not mention the introduction of diphtheria antitoxin in the 1890s, and therefore are puzzled by the reduction in mortality in advance of immunization techniques, available after 1923 (321).

What this book needs, in my opinion, is an overview or summary chapter for the benefit of the statistically ignorant, that states the general gist of the conclusions and their implications. It would go a long way to making *Deciphering Global Epidemics* more “user-friendly” to the average historian. But this was not part of the authors’ intentions (speculation must perforce be muted in a statistical study). Further commentary on the results is left for others to attempt. For historians, therefore, this work will prove useful mostly as a thorough data resource for urban mortality in a particular twenty-five-year period. In addition, there is an excellent bibliography, and appendices that identify important sources of mortality, morbidity, and population figures for the countries whose cities appear in the book.

Jan McTavish  
Department of History  
University of Winnipeg

---

**Schneider, Eric C. *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999. Pages 408. 3 line illustrations, 5 maps, 11 half tone illustrations, index. US\$29.99 (cloth).**

In the summer of 1959 unchecked violence of New York City youth gangs catapulted these previously obscure adolescent male cliques to the status of newsmakers. Among the numerous boys and bystanders murdered that summer were two “American” boys slain one night in a Hell’s Kitchen park at the hands of an odd assortment of Puerto Rican gang members, including a knife-wielding, caped Vampire. University of Pennsylvania historian Eric Schneider uses this case to explore “the issues of ethnic and class marginalization and the problem in defining masculinity that led adolescent males to confront each other on city streets.” (5) Schneider’s well-written, absorbing treatment of postwar youth gangs, engages them as historical subjects, and helps to filter out commonly-held and enduring myths (à la *West Side Story*) and prejudice regarding these youths.

Youth gangs of the postwar period were defined by very specific characteristics: comprised entirely of adolescent males, they embraced names that glorified toughness, wore distinctive uniforms (colours), organized along ethnic lines in defense of “their” neighbourhoods, planned rumbles with other gangs, formed complex alliances when it suited them and, at times, allowed community workers to negotiate truces. They were not, for the most part, involved in the drug trade or the underground economy, and did not often use guns, relying instead on bare fists and knives. Schneider does not ignore the postwar media, public policy and social science obsession with delinquency and rebellious youth, but rejects the contemporary assumption that the rise in adolescent male gangs was a product of youth culture. Rather, he suggests that the social and economic conditions that gripped working-class New York from the 1940s were directly responsible for youth gang formation and proliferation. More than an investigation into structures at work in this history, Schneider continues his earlier work