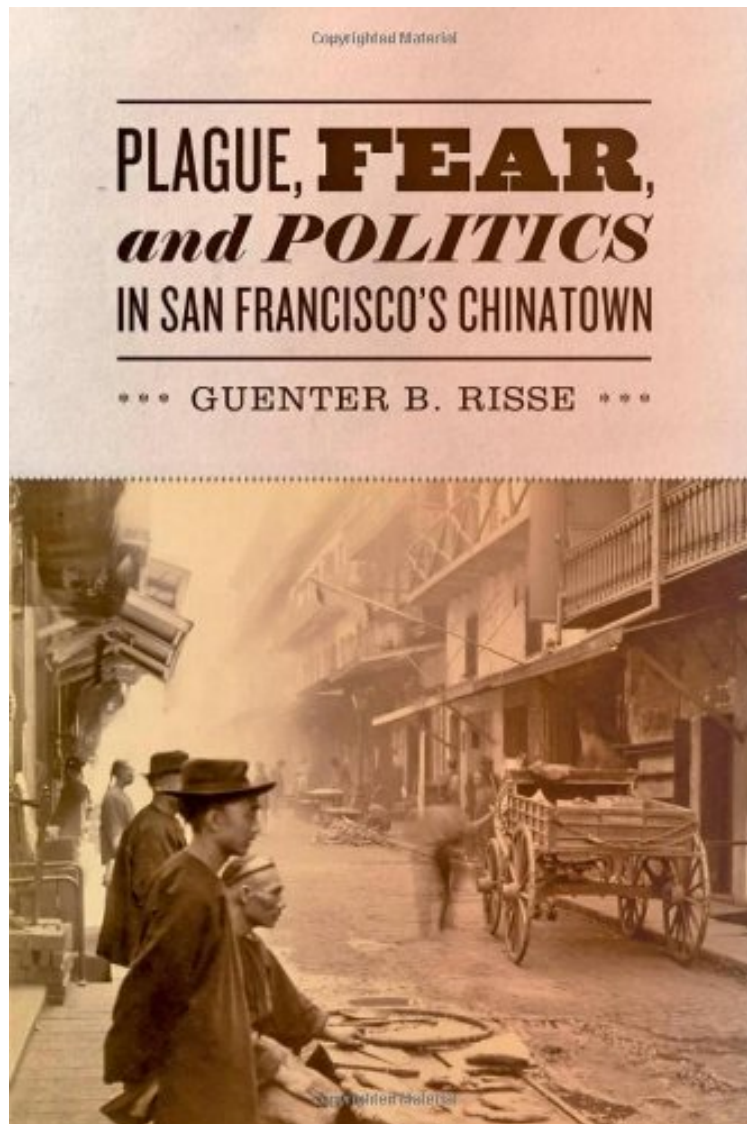


Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco's Chinatown

Guenter B. Risse

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Guenter B. Risse : Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco's Chinatown before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco's Chinatown:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Intriguing and Informative AccountBy D_shrinkThis is a compelling story about how medical science combined with luck of a sort, if you can consider the 1906 San Francisco earthquake as a form of luck, in termination the spread of Bubonic Plague from the Chinatown area of San Francisco to the broader populace of the country.The first case of plague as reported by the author occurred with the reporting of the

death on 3/4/1900 of a 41yo Chinese laborer named Wong Chut King. It ended approximately four years later with the last reported death in Chinatown of a 42yo professional gambler named Fung Bo on 2/14/1904 who was its 117th victim. However, two additional people died with the last being Mrs. Frank Soto on 2/29/1904 in Concord, California; although her husband claimed she had not left their home in months prior. Yet as we learn, not nearly all the deaths were reported due to superstition and Eastern customs plus other intrigues. The author did a great job of giving the English translations and explanations for numerous Chinese expressions. He also did a most thorough job of detailing the political intrigue surrounding this epidemic and how several forces collided to exacerbate this epidemic. We learn of the Orientals who wanted their deceased sent back to China to be buried with their ancestors, but couldn't be if plague were suspected as the cause of death as the bodies were doused in lime in lead lined caskets and immediately buried. The "White" establishment had two conflicting goals at the time, one to try to get as much of the Chinese property as they could for the lowest price, as it had become greatly valued since originally settled, and the other problem was that they didn't want a lot of recognition of a plague epidemic which would scare people off and devalue the property. This is how the San Francisco earthquake comes into play. There was also a dichotomy on how illness was viewed between Eastern and Western cultures. The Chinese believed that illness merely represented the imbalance of "qi", while Westerners held the belief that germs caused illness. On top of that the Chinese who initially settled into the San Francisco Bay area were from Guandong Province and were even considered by other Chinese to be soft of flesh and more likely to become sick than people from other areas of China. We were even given a short history lesson on the Boxer [officially called the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists] Rebellion and its reasons for occurring. Another reason for the epidemic was a disproportionately high ratio of single adult males to adult females, as family members were left in China until funds could be secured to send for them, which generally didn't happen or happened very late in life. This phenomenon led to an exceedingly high use of prostitutes which led to a very high rate of venereal disease, which was often the misdiagnosis attributed to the plague in its earlier stages. Overall this was a high quality scholarly work suitable for graduate research when read in depth. It was filled with copious footnotes and cites all listed after the final chapter so easily referenced.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A DARK CHAPTER IN AMERICAN HISTORY By A reader Dr. Risse is both a physician and a historian. In PLAGUE, FEAR, AND POLITICS IN SAN FRANCISCO'S CHINATOWN, he brings a meticulous, astute and compassionate perspective to an important but little known chapter in American history. How many of us even knew that bubonic plague, of all things, existed in the United States in the 20th century? Or that the immigrant Chinese community was victimized, both by the disease itself and by appallingly racist treatment from the media, politicians and public health authorities? The tangled web of economic and political interests and how the Chinese community was abused and scapegoated throughout the ordeal is very well dissected and documented in this book. Dr. Risse is an academic writer, and this is not a trade paperback. Although the subject is fascinating and exceptionally well researched, the writing style is dry. I've read more entertainingly written history books (think Robert Caro, for instance). Still, it's hard to find fault with the depth and breadth of Dr. Risse's scholarly effort which, in its sheer quantity of connections and details, brings the time period to life. If you have an interest in public health, the treatment of minorities in the United States and of the Chinese in particular, and how power and politics make the world go 'round (or not), it's worth giving this book a shot. It took me awhile to finish it, but it was worth the effort.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Hard for me to get through By Steve This book is an exhaustive and unfortunately dry account of the political, racial, medical, and cultural factions at play during San Francisco's outbreak of bubonic plague at the start of the twentieth century. Author Guenter B. Risse has done thorough research into the epidemic, including Chinese historical and cultural practices, the political games of San Francisco and Chinatown, and the distrust that lingered before the outbreak and exploded thereafter. As the research was exhausting, so was the reading. Risse's description of backstories and details of myriad angles of influence made for a confusing and taxing labor and rendered the work as textbook rather than a casual history. It's hard to knock a book for achieving its goals, but for a person like me, relying on a simple paragraph description, my gamble on a fascinating historical tale crapped out under the weight and fact barrage of Risse's tome. My rating is only for my enjoyment of the book and is not reflective of how valuable it might be for those with a greater capacity for such writing. It's my hope that the curious browse the reviews to get an idea of what the product descriptions might fail to illuminate.

When health officials in San Francisco discovered bubonic plague in their city's Chinatown in 1900, they responded with intrusive, controlling, and arbitrary measures that touched off a sociocultural conflict still relevant today. Guenter B. Risse's history of an epidemic is the first to incorporate the voices of those living in Chinatown at the time, including the desperately ill Wong Chut King, believed to be the first person infected. Lasting until 1904, the plague in San Francisco's Chinatown reignited racial prejudices, renewed efforts to remove the Chinese from their district, and created new tensions among local, state, and federal public health officials quarreling over the presence of the deadly disease. Risse's rich, nuanced narrative of the event draws from a variety of sources, including Chinese-language reports and accounts. He addresses the ecology of Chinatown, the approaches taken by Chinese and Western medical practitioners, and the effects of quarantine plans on Chinatown and its residents. Risse explains how plague threatened

Californias agricultural economy and San Franciscos leading commercial role with Asia, discusses why it brought on a wave of fear mongering that drove perceptions and intervention efforts, and describes how Chinese residents organized and successfully opposed government quarantines and evacuation plans in federal court. By probing public health interventions in the setting of one of the most visible ethnic communities in United States history, *Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco's Chinatown* offers insight into the clash of Eastern and Western cultures in a time of medical emergency.

"Anyone interested in the history of public health... will love this book." (Elizabeth Schexnyder Watermark)"Risse's impressive book provides the most detailed examination of the political, cultural, and medical landscape in which a deadly plague appeared in San Francisco and became associated with Chinese bodies and Chinatown... Risse deserves much credit for adding a great deal of nuance and texture to our historical understanding of plague and politics in early twentieth-century San Francisco." (Alexandra Minna Stern *Journal of American History*)"The author, a well-known historian of medicine long resident in San Francisco, has impeccable credentials to tackle one of the most complex and tortured episodes in the history of American public health. He does not disappoint." (Myron Echenberg *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*)"In *Plague, Fear, and Politics in San Francisco's Chinatown*, Guenter Risse presents a thoroughly researched, nuanced analysis of events surrounding the outbreak of bubonic plague in San Francisco from 1900 to 1904. While much has been written about this epidemic... Risse's book is a significant addition to scholarship in this area. It places the epidemic in a broader context, and it adds a unique perspective that focuses on the effects on the residents of Chinatown of the plague and the public health response to it... This book is more than merely the story of one plague epidemic. It is also a good source for the history of the Chinese immigrant experience in American, early twentieth-century San Francisco politics, and California history... Scholars in variety of disciplines will find much of interest and avenues for further exploration in Risse's important book." (Lisa A. Mix *Journal of the History of Medicine*)"Risse is the first writer to be comprehensive, exploring all facets of the plague, digging into personal accounts, even using the archives of Chinese accounts and Chinese personal letters to tell their side. His treatment is successful." (Jon Sands *Federal Lawyer*)

About the Author
A physician and historian, Guenter B. Risse is professor emeritus of the history of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and an affiliate professor at the University of Washington, Seattle. His previous books include *Hospital Life in Enlightenment Scotland* and *Mending Bodies, Saving Souls: A History of Hospitals*.