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SIP (Sars Induced Panic) a greater threat to tourism than SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)

Hong Kong has a population of about 6.8 million people. To date, 6,799,860 of us have not succumbed from SARS. But, between 50,000 and 100,000 jobs in the local hotel, tourism, hospitality and retail sectors could be lost to SIP (Sars Induced Panic).

What is SIP? It is the hysteria surrounding SARS that causes people to behave irrationally in the face of a new disease whose real impact is far less than the fear it provokes. It is insidious and spread by rumour and ignorance. Its infection rate is geometric. And, its social, economic and emotional impacts are devastating.

Tourism is especially hard hit by SIP. Discussions with colleagues throughout the region suggest that arrivals are down by 80% in many places, even in those destinations where only one or two infections have been reported.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Hong Kong, where tourism activity has ground to a standstill in the last month. Here is what SIP has done to the Hong Kong tourism industry:

- Hotel occupancy across the board is less than 20% with most five-star hotels reporting single digit occupancies
- At least six hotels are now for sale, with some predicting many more will go into receivership before the end of the (northern) summer
- More than 40 percent of all flights in and out of Hong Kong have been cancelled with Cathay Pacific alone cancelling 45% of its flights and issuing an unprecedented profit warning
- Outbound tourism is down by almost 80 percent
- Inbound tourism is down by a similar amount
- The loss of the Easter weekend and China May 1 Golden Week period (a total of two weeks) will cost HK tourism US\$250 million
- The restaurant association warns that up to 5000 restaurants could close
- The Travel Industry Council warns that 300 travel agents could be forced out of business
- At least 50,000 jobs are at risk, with many companies already sending their staff home on unpaid leave due to a lack of business
- Economists are predicting that Hong Kong will have 0.5% economic growth this year, down from 3% growth forecasted just a few months ago.

Is Sars Induced Panic warranted? No! This is not to trivialize SARS. It is a very real and very deadly virus. You don't want to get it. But, chances are you won't. Thanks to efforts of the global scientific community, a concerted effort by governments, and vigilance on behalf of residents, it has been contained in most places where outbreaks have occurred.

Initial fears about an epidemic affecting 80% of the HK population have proven to be wrong. After two months, this 'highly contagious' disease has affected only 0.02% of the

Hong Kong population. After initial fears of exponential growth, the number of new infections has stabilised at between 15 and 30 cases a day. It is hardly rampaging through the community. Indeed, at this rate, it would take 931 years to infect the entire HK population. Most of the cases recorded are confined to health-care workers and two neighbourhoods where tourists never travel. Almost half of those infected have recovered and been discharged from hospital.

Those of us who live in Hong Kong continue to go to work, continue to shop and continue to lead normal lives. We practice safe SARS by adopting such unusual measures as washing our hands regularly, cleaning our houses, refraining from spitting and seeing doctors if we feel unwell. And yes, we do wear face masks in public.

Is it safe to travel? Of course it is! In fact, it is probably safer now than ever before, for the hotel and food service sectors have introduced unprecedented hygiene measures to try to build consumer confidence. Should you take precautions? Yes. But you should always take precautions whenever you travel. Will you die from SARS when you come to Asia? No! But again, these aren't messages that sell newspapers.

But, this is the message that has to get out. The panic induced by SARS hysteria poses, by far, a greater threat to the well-being of Hong Kong and the rest of Asia than the virus itself. SIP has already costs thousands of people their jobs because no-one is travelling. If the situation does not rectify itself quickly, hundreds of thousands of tourism, hospitality, hotel and retail workers across Asia will be out of work. Many of these jobs will be lost forever, as otherwise viable businesses will be destroyed by panic. The social and economic costs of SIP will far outweigh the medical impacts of the virus.

We as tourism and hospitality academics and professionals must be at the forefront in confronting SIP and begin to spread the message about how little risk tourists are from SARS. If we don't do it, no one else will. Hundreds of thousands of livelihoods depend on it.