Introduction

In August 2004, I first visited the only surviving courtyard house in Baoma, a village in southwestern China where I had settled three months previously. Locals told me the house was three hundred years old. Over a dozen families had lived there during the Cultural Revolution, but in 2004 it accommodated only three families, and most of the former residents had since moved, either to a nearby house, to the township, or to the small county capital of Langzhong. Most of the building had fallen into a condition of irreversible disrepair. Some parts still retained wooden walls with reliefs defaced during the Cultural Revolution and others were made of bamboo strips covered with mud or supported by brick-built walls, with bamboo walls dividing the interior space into rooms.

As I made my way into the courtyard, Aunt Zhang, a woman in her early sixties, emerged from one of the brick-built units. It had taken me half an hour to walk to her house from my home on the other side of the village, and Aunt Zhang invited me to have some hot water and fruit. It was the first time I had met her, but Aunt Zhang was very friendly and had predictably heard much about me already. She laughed at my dressing style—thick blue trousers and a dark blue top—which she joked was as modest as the local villagers, and she admired my cheap boots, which came in so useful when the rain poured down as it had done for several days. Sipping some hot water, Aunt Zhang volunteered some information on her family. She had a daughter who lived over two hours’ bus ride from Langzhong city; a son working with his wife in Guangdong Province (one of southern China’s prosperous regions) and sending money home whenever needed; and a doting ten-year-old granddaughter, Youhui, who would become one of my gan haizi in December 2004.2

Aunt Zhang was very embarrassed and apologetic about the state of their house, which other villagers considered a clear sign of poverty.
Although the building itself was derelict, the living room/bedroom featured a DVD player and a karaoke system. Until a couple of years earlier, Aunt Zhang explained, they were not doing badly financially. Since then, however, her son had undergone surgery and taken medication for nasal cancer, which had exhausted all of their savings. “This family is in great difficulty,” she sighed. Her husband sat in the corner in silence. I smiled and, guessing he may have been roughly my father’s age, acknowledged him as “Uncle,” adding the typical greeting, “Have you eaten?” As it turned out, this was a highly topical question. Aunt Zhang replied for him: “He is an ill man” (ta shi ge bing ren). Uncle Wang had recently been diagnosed with stomach cancer, and his appetite had already begun to decrease. Four months later, in November 2004, thin, weak, and unable to eat, he ended his life in the most common and speedy way available to villagers: drinking pesticide.

Making Sense of Cancer

Researching cancer was not my original intention. In May 2004, I formally enrolled as a visiting researcher at Sichuan University, hoping to carry out fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural part of the province. My Chinese supervisor selected the area of Langzhong (northeast Sichuan) as a location where, with the help of his connections, I would be allowed to reside in a village as I had requested. The following month I settled with a rural family and registered as a resident of Baoma, a village of five hundred residents six kilometers from Langzhong city, where I lived until September 2005. I returned for follow-up visits each year since, for a total of eighteen months of research and residence in the area. Unless otherwise stated, the period 2004–2005 should be taken as the ethnographic “present” of this volume.

I planned to conduct an anthropological study of how villagers understand health and illness, how they make decisions about treatment within the family, and what home-based knowledge and practices are widespread for common illnesses. As my research unfolded, however, cancer occupied an increasing amount of my time and attention. Doctors and local residents alike highlighted cancer—of the stomach and esophagus in particular—as a major local killer in the Langzhong area. In 2004, two of my neighbors had recently lost their husbands to cancer—one prostate and the other esophagus. Uncle Wang, as noted
above, had just been diagnosed in June 2004 with stomach cancer and died in November. In October 2004, my host Erjie’s father, Gandie, who would posthumously become my “dry father,” was diagnosed with esophagus cancer and died the following February.3 Baoma’s former barefoot doctor turned village doctor could list over thirty people, including his own parents, who had died of cancer in the past twenty years. I counted eleven from 2003 to 2007 among Baoma’s five hundred or so residents. In a neighboring village unit (dui or zu) of eighty residents I call Meishan, nine died of cancer during the same time span.

Already a decade ago, researchers stated that cancer deaths “have doubled since the 1970s, and are now the leading causes of mortality in rural China” (Wu et al. 1999, 252). More recently, a World Bank report assessing the cost of pollution in China again identified cancer as the main cause of death in China, showing also that mortality rates for cancers associated with water pollution, such as liver and stomach cancer, are well above the world average (2007, 45). Reports about “cancer villages” in China have appeared with increasing frequency in Chinese and Western media. All these accounts outline a strong connection between economic growth, pollution, and cancer.4 Cancer villages are the result of economic progress, leading to the proliferation of chemical factories, causing death in villages such as Xiditou and Liukuaizhuang, near Tianjin in northern China. In an article for the Telegraph (UK), Richard Spencer wrote, “As the effects of economic reforms rippled through the 1980s, local governments eagerly built new factories but had little experience of environmental controls” (2006).5 In most cases, the continuing misery is attributed to official corruption, which poses an obstacle to implementing environmental regulations. For instance, an article examining three cancer villages (in Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang) published in Nanfang Wang (2007) as part of a report on water pollution documents how villagers’ attempts at seeking redress failed due to insufficient evidence or through uncooperative officials bribed by polluting industries.6 But how do people experience and understand cancer in areas where there is no agreement on its cause? Who or what do they blame? How do they cope with its onset?

The aim of this book is not to debate the existence of cancer villages or to identify my research location as one. Insofar as Langzhong has been recognized since the 1980s as an area with a high rate of cancer and that industry then and now has been minimal, local settlements
are extremely unlikely to be classified as “cancer villages” according to
the conventional industrial pollution paradigm. Collecting any quanti-
tative data on cancer in the area proved extremely difficult. Although
the Baoma village doctor, doctors in the city hospital, and Public Health
Bureau staff were aware of research on cancer in Langzhong in the
1980s, they claimed to have no records of such research. They further
explained that even if they located such records, they would probably
be classified as “internal” (neibu) and would therefore be inaccessible
to me. All they could tell me was that such research had attributed the
high cancer rates to consumption of salt-preserved meat and vegetables,
but that this finding was later dismissed. I was confronted with a similar
response when I requested access to hospital records on cancer patients.
I was told that they were not comprehensive and that providing me with
this information would be very troublesome (hen mafan). At any rate,
given that most cancer sufferers do not opt for hospitalization and avoid
surgery, hospital records would have been severe underestimates.

Readers eager to be told in no uncertain terms what causes high
cancer rates in Langzhong will not find an answer here. This is not
only because hard data is inaccessible or unreliable, but also because of
a choice of focus. None of the etiologies explored—from the relatively
more scientific water pollution or consumption of preserved vegetables
to the relatively less scientific emphasis on hard physical work—could be
isolated as typical of this geographic area alone. What I offer, rather, is an
account of how the different etiologies employed locally clash and what
implications they have for inaction. Villagers are shown not as backward
and ignorant of sanitation and nutritional principles but as engaging
with new circumstances of market expansion in complex ways.

Fighting for Breath

This book offers a bottom-up account of how villagers in Langzhong
understand the development of cancer, how they cope with it, and how
it affects and is affected by family relations. Faced with the tragedy of
what is often a fatal ailment, families articulate disparate views to tackle
the question, “Why him/her?” and assemble various and conflicting
strategies to deal with illness. The elements villagers typically identify
as causes of cancer are farm chemicals, smoking, drinking, preserved
vegetables, and repressed anger or enduring hardship in general (most
significantly, strenuous physical work, food shortage, and humiliation during the Cultural Revolution). A biomedically based account of cancer would start with testing villagers’ knowledge that smoking and drinking are potential causes of cancer. By contrast, this monograph gives primacy to locals’ own explanations of why cancer was common. For some, cancer is mostly to be blamed on the sufferer—either because of their bad temper or their predilection for strong alcohol and cigarettes. For others it is caused by factors beyond the sufferer’s control—rapid social change leading to tensions amongst family members or consumerism requiring the use of farm chemicals. Adherence to one or another of these etiologies embodies a particular engagement with the sociopolitical past and present and provides diverse answers to the question of who is accountable for illness and who is responsible for healing.

Having become very close to the families of two cancer sufferers, Uncle Wang and Gandie, and paid them frequent visits, I gained a sense of the ways in which families perceive these types of cancer and their etiologies and of strategies they employ to tackle them. Much of this volume focuses on these two families as in-depth case studies of the moral economy of cancer. Given my familiarity with some of the medical staff in the county hospital, villagers often resorted to me as a bridge between themselves and that most feared of places, the city hospital. Acting as ganma\(^7\) to six children in Baoma also allowed me to develop a close relationship with some local families and become involved in their caring practices. This type of involvement with the local community has enabled an anthropological description of the idiosyncrasies of health and illness as part of villagers’ everyday practices. Their quests for healing include trips to the city hospital, Chinese herbs and biomedical pills from township clinics, and resort to spirit mediums. They often require selling all of the family’s livestock, asking students to abandon school to earn money for their parents’ care, and mobilizing connections and neighborly advice to identify reliable treatment.

I was struck by the stoic attitude with which locals faced illness. None of those who fell ill and died with stomach or esophagus cancer during my stay resorted to surgery, and this came as no surprise to me. One of the reasons why I had chosen to do research in rural China was that, as in many other developing countries, especially in the countryside, people face major problems of access to health care. I wanted to know more about how sufferers and their families attempted
to overcome these barriers. What I found is that in at least some cases, financial barriers alone were not what prevented sufferers from resorting to expensive forms of treatment such as surgery. Family relations and sufferers’ sense of responsibility and entitlement proved just as important. Villagers’ attitudes and strategies of care offer a prism for understanding the wider dimensions of social and cultural life in contemporary rural China—what I refer to as “fighting for breath.”

“Fighting for breath” is not the translation of a local idiom. The phrase is intended as a semiotic framework to encompass everyday efforts to make sense of cancer and treat it. Since esophagus cancer was also referred to as the “choking illness,” the expression is particularly pertinent. It is intended to encapsulate the physical, emotional, and economic hardship presented by this most often fatal disease. This book illustrates villagers’ fight for breath as both a physical and a social struggle to maintain integrity and to ensure family and neighborly support. It is not only about fighting for survival but also about the search for a moral existence. Thus this book engages with the question of how morality is contested in contemporary China. Is it moral for a son not to visit his father throughout his illness to ensure that he can send money home for treatment? What kinds of moral claims are implied by attributing cancer to water, diet, or anger? How does a woman’s fear of her father-in-law’s ancestral image configure her relationship with the rest of the family?

This ethnography approaches critically various characterizations of the post-Mao period as a fall “from heaven to earth” (Croll 1994), as uncivic, individualistic, and immoral (Liu 2000; Yan 2003). By contrast, it examines how contending forms of morality are constantly produced through negotiations about cancer etiology, cancer treatment, and mourning practices. The fight against cancer, then, is deeply bound to efforts not only to maintain health but also to debate one’s position within the family and the local community (see Crandon-Malamud 1991) and to make claims to entitlement to care and to a cleaner environment.

**Structure of the Volume**

The volume is divided into three parts. In part 1, chapter 1 situates the study vis-à-vis relevant areas in the anthropology of suffering and the anthropology of rural China, with particular reference to social suffering, subjectivity, family management of illness, etiologies of cancer,
and moral economy and morality in China. Chapter 2 presents the ethnographic setting and provides a historical contextualization of village life to outline what is at stake for villagers in the contemporary period as compared to their past experiences and to those of their neighbors.

Part 2 includes three chapters on how villagers make sense of cancer. Chapter 3 begins to explore the relationship between cancer etiology and morality. It examines why water pollution, while it was regarded as a cause of cancer by some, did not appeal to locals more broadly. I argue that the emphasis instead on hard work, farm chemicals, and contaminated food made more sense to locals, offering the grounds for a shared moral subjectivity based on past experiences but also engaging with and commenting critically on the present. Chapter 4 continues the inquiry into cancer and morality by focusing on how an alternative etiology—anger and anxiety—accrues efficacy. Such negative emotions, while providing an explanation of why particular individuals develop cancer, allow ambiguity over who is ultimately blamed for it, thereby articulating contrasting values and practices. Chapter 5 examines how various etiologies are adopted in the case of Gandie. Focusing on one case from its inception to well after the sufferer’s death allows a better understanding of how cancer may be attributed to different causes throughout its development and why it may be so. Past experiences coalesce with the new experiences created by illness to form new parameters of health. As in the previous chapters, this chapter shows that resort to any etiology is made when it is morally feasible.

While part 2 already indexes some of the ways in which beliefs on etiology influence paths of healing, part 3 moves more clearly into the realm of healing practices. Taking on a fuller discussion of family relations, chapter 6 remains focused on Gandie and his family and compares it to Uncle Wang’s case to provide a detailed account of the mutually productive connection between family relations and practices of care. It offers a sense of the costs—financial and emotional—precipitated by cancer. Chapter 7 unpacks Gandie’s rejection of surgery by reflecting on how perceptions of surgery for cancer as inefficacious are socially, culturally, and historically produced. I argue that his rejection of surgery embodies a moral response to the commodification of healthcare and as such constitutes an active engagement not only with the healing process but also with values of the Maoist past and the reformist present. Finally, chapter 8 concludes my account of Gandie and Uncle Wang by
turning to the interplay between the spirit world and perceptions of illness, healing, and mourning. It shows that different religious allegiances produce different attitudes to healing and mourning, and these present occasions for disagreements. Conflicts ongoing after Gandie’s death highlight the role of ritual practices in producing family and social relations and in turn in producing contending modes of morality.

Entering the Field

Serendipity brought me to Langzhong, and the process of settling in and becoming accepted by the local community was by no means straightforward or painless. Dr. Pam Leonard, a friend and colleague of my doctoral supervisor, was in Sichuan for a year in 2004 and put me in touch with one of her contacts at Sichuan University, where I was able to be affiliated as a visiting researcher under the supervision of sociologist professor Chen. Professor Chen had reliable contacts in Langzhong and was planning a research visit with some students in June 2004. This would serve as my entry point into the field. When Professor Chen first made his case for Langzhong, I was suspicious to say the least. He urged me to carry out research in the area because “it has not become modern yet” and “tradition is disappearing in China” (May 2004). This baffled me and went against much of what I had learned to critique in my anthropological training, to do with ready-made oppositions between tradition and modernity, ignorance of social change in so-called traditional societies, and the salvage paradigm, by which the use of anthropology is to study cultures on the verge of oblivion. My list of reservations went on. I was nonetheless intrigued to see what he meant, and I requested to visit Langzhong before making a final decision.

Upon my first visit to Langzhong in June 2004, I understood what Professor Chen meant by declaring the area “not yet modern.” Langzhong is one of a few cities in China to have preserved an “old city”—an area of low-rise commercial and domestic buildings built largely of wood and based on a plan dating from the Song dynasty (960–1279) (Song 2003, 19), earning it the qualifier “traditional” in Professor Chen’s mind. Most crucially, Professor Chen’s solid connections in the area meant that I could obtain all necessary official permissions to settle with a village family. Fearing that local officials might (as indeed they tried to) change their minds about these arrangements or
choose a family on my behalf, I set out on my first morning in Langzhong to identify a suitable research location.

With a graduate student from Sichuan University assigned to assist me for the initial period in the field, I was driven as far as was deemed suitable by a prefecture-level Public Security Bureau (PSB) official and one of her contacts in Langzhong. We were then asked which side of the hill we would like to choose. The area on the left seemed to have less concrete-built new houses and, we were told, despite its relative proximity to Langzhong city and the township center, this village was still rather poor. We slowly descended to the irrigation pool. The rhythmic sound of three women gathered at the pool vigorously beating clothes with a wooden stick reverberated through the valley. As we approached, the official’s local contact explained that I was a research student looking for a family who could accommodate me for fifteen months as I carried out a social investigation (shehui diaocha) into rural life. Villagers were incredulous. None of them had ever seen a foreigner before. They also doubted that local officials would really agree to this. As the village party secretary was summoned by the prefectural PSB official, they were gradually persuaded that perhaps this was not a con after all.

My assistant and I requested to live in a “common” (putong) house of the brick-built type dating to the early 1980s and, if possible, having a family with three generations, which I hoped would allow me to observe any generational divergences in practices of care. This latter demand considerably narrowed the available pool: most young adults had left the village in search of waged labor. We were led down narrow paths amongst large bamboo groves to a house farther away from the pool. The family proposed was one of the few in which the young wife had remained in the village to farm and her husband worked in Langzhong city (as a carpenter), returning home every night. They had a twelve-year-old daughter and lived next to the husband’s parents and his grandfather. It seemed ideal to both me and my assistant.

The proposed host, whom I would learn to call Erjie, was less than enthusiastic, however. She found the idea that I would eat their food or understand their local dialect simply laughable. She suspected I was sick with something contagious—not of the likes of head lice, which I did catch some months later, but of a more serious variety such as AIDS, which, she argued, is widespread amongst “foreigners.” She also, understandably, did not relish the official attention this would attract to
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her home. While officials insisted this would be a unique opportunity for her daughter Lida to learn English and live with an educated foreigner from a “famous university,” Erjie felt Lida—nicknamed “iron mouth” for her fierce and nondeferential comments—would be too undisciplined to make much of this opportunity. Still, the offer was attractive: we promised we would set up a phone line and pay 500 yuan per person per month for rent and food. This allowed Erjie to remain home instead of looking for menial work in Langzhong and was a very good deal in local terms. Still unsure that my presence really was legal, Erjie requested a copy of the photograph my assistant took of myself with a host of village, township, and city officials as a guarantee in what she predicted as the likely event that my presence would raise suspicion.

Over the course of the coming months, Erjie later explained, she concluded that I was not ill or contagious after all: I was energetic, had a good appetite, and did eat what she cooked. My relaxed attitude toward Erjie’s food, however, attracted much gossip and a great deal of envy amongst her neighbors. At first, and in some cases throughout, Erjie was heavily critiqued by locals for being “stingy” (xiaqi), money-grabbing (xiang qian), and feeding me simple (jianpu) food. Villagers also often used a Sichuanese expression to describe her attitude: jigu. In standard Mandarin, jigu means to whisper, but in Sichuanese its meaning is closer to bao yuan—that is, to grumble or complain; it can also mean stingy, the correspondent of linse in standard Chinese. They accused Erjie of not caring for me properly, of charging me too much, and a few suggested that I should move to their family, who would feed me better and charge less. Also, as her mother predicted, Erjie’s daughter was routinely rude to me. Endowed with resilient sarcasm, she often suggested that if I was unhappy about anything I should just leave. Having been my first gan haizi, Lida despised me for having accepted more gan haizi and having to share my attention with other children. It took me longer than perhaps it should have to analytically metabolize these exchanges not only as evidence that I was not wanted but as one way in which locals positioned themselves vis-à-vis their neighbors and articulated parameters of moral behavior. Caught at the very center of the process, I was confused and hurt.

Criticisms of Erjie also came from more official channels. Township and city cadres routinely visited me and accused her of not keeping her kitchen suitably clean, adding degrading comments about how one
could possibly bear to relieve him/herself in the pigsty. (The pigsty is, of course, where every local family’s toilet, without exception, is located.) If criticisms by fellow villagers were sometimes hard to objectify as local power and status games, those waged by cadres were transparent efforts to undermine Erjie and present their own lives as cleaner and more cultured, typical of an urban and official superiority complex. As we shared jokes about cadres’ inappropriate probing into her family home and their air of snobbery, Erjie realized I did not share their derogatory view of her and her home. This slowly reinforced our relationship. The most definitive step toward consolidating it came as I regularly joined her in visiting her father after he was diagnosed with esophagus cancer in October 2004. By fostering the sense that I was loyal to Erjie, this dissipated villagers’ attempts to persuade me to move out of her family home and into theirs.

By the time the graduate student who had lived with me for the first two months left in mid-August 2004, my relationships with my most immediate neighbors had become fairly solid. Villagers in units further afield were a different matter entirely, however, still baffled by my suggestion that I wanted to learn about their daily lives. What, they mused, could I possibly learn from uneducated villagers? It did not help that Jinghua, the young laid-off worker assigned by the township Public Security Bureau to “accompany me” after the student’s departure, made no mystery of her disdain for villagers. She spent much of her time lecturing them and the rest absorbed in her mobile phone, unwilling to answer their questions and rarely acknowledging them with a greeting or even a glance. A little over a month later, having ostracized most villagers she talked to, I explained to Jinghua and to the PSB that my university required I carry out research alone. As I had spent over three months in the village by this stage, the PSB accepted that villagers were familiar enough with me to ensure I was “safe.” Catastrophic as I feared Jinghua’s presence to have been, it paradoxically strengthened my relationship with villagers. I earned their respect for refusing the company of someone who ignored them at best and offended them at worst. In return, villagers confronted visiting officials investigating my work with a unanimous “she is a good person.” Eventually, they stopped coming. This meant that apart from the initial period when I was accompanied by the graduate student (mid-June to mid-August 2004) and by Jinghua (mid-August to mid-September 2004), I was able to work on my own.
Becoming accepted did not, of course, mean becoming one of them. Occasionally, rumors would circulate that the township officials had visited to hand over large amounts of money to me as welcoming gifts (and possibly to ensure I would not report negatively on them). Conversely, stories (in this case, sometimes true) would have me donating large sums to villagers in difficulty. This made me wonder, at times, whether some families overemphasized their financial difficulties to get help. Largely, however, these gossips were quite beneficial. In one case I was compared to Norman Bethune, the famous Canadian physician praised by Mao as a martyr and selfless friend of the revolution, for my willingness to visit and help all families with farm work, regardless of how poor they might be. In another I was credited with having cured a young woman’s debilitating rheumatism, which had for years made her thin and unable to walk, by buying medications for her. It was never specified where these were from, and any attempts I made to deny it were simply taken as displays of modesty.

Learning how to present myself to the local community was instrumental in slowly undoing suspicion and allowing me to talk about locals’ lives and their challenges in more open and informal ways. I made a concerted effort to dress modestly, eat whatever I was offered, and help locals in their activities such as selling noodles, harvesting rape-seed, transplanting and harvesting rice, and cooking. This earned me the qualifier _jianku pusu_, an expression popular during the Mao period (1949–1976), literally translated as “hard working and plain living.” To dispel locals’ sense that they knew or did little of interest to my scholarly pursuits, I took the advice of one of my key informants and learned to describe my presence not in terms of “research” (yanjiu) or “investigation” (diaocha) but rather as an attempt to “experience life” (tiyan shenghuo). This proved a turning point in establishing productive relationships with locals and enlisting their trust and support. To be eventually described as lively (huopo), easygoing (suibian), and accustomed to everything (sha dou xiguan) was a great achievement, even though some remained suspicious of my ultimate goals and continued to think they had nothing of any substance to talk to me about. Toward the end of my long-term fieldwork, I carried out over thirty semistructured interviews based on a questionnaire that I showed to interviewees during our discussion (see appendix 1). I conducted this work with the assistance of a research student from Sichuan University, who visited the village for
three weeks. This, however, mainly elicited standard answers and confirmed the efficacy of long-term participant observation or “experiencing life” for gaining insights into local knowledge and practices.

Throughout the volume, I have employed kinship terms—such as Uncle Xu or Grandma Yang—to refer to villagers. I use first names for those of the same generation as myself and to whom I was close and surnames followed by kinship terms according to generation in relation to me (for instance, “Aunt” for women of my mother’s generation) for those older than me and to whom I was less close. Most notably, I refer to my host as Erjie (second elder sister) and to her parents as Gandie and Ganma (literally “dry” father and “dry” mother), as I did during fieldwork. This is not intended to naively present myself as a part of one local family and of the village community more widely. Rather, I have done so to make my positionality in the village clear and to highlight the relational nature not only of the data collected but also of locals’ identities. More crucially, turning those I have learned to address as older sister, uncle, or grandmother into “Mr.” and “Mrs.” would feel rather odd and disrespectful. Learning to address locals appropriately was a vital part of the long process of being accepted by the local community. Using these terms of address offered an important means to express and foster respect and familiarity. Retaining kinship terms in the monograph may be a cultural mistranslation. Yet the process of defamiliarization and objectification entailed by referring to informants as Mr. and Mrs. would, I fear, have the much worse effect of denying or masking relationships that are central not only to this study but also to my relationships and sense of commitment since fieldwork. If, as this book argues, relationships are produced through daily practices, among which addressing villagers through kinship terms is essential, then continuing with this practice is not only academically sound because it conveys a sense of the relationships fostered during fieldwork but is also respectful to those who have shared their lives with me.