

# **Suicide and Justice**

A Chinese perspective

**Wu Fei**



Routledge Contemporary China Series

# Suicide and Justice

“This book is the most serious ethnographic study of suicide to date. Its conclusions challenge but also complement psychiatric research. It is also an important contribution to the study of what is disappearing in rural China today. A real achievement.”

Arthur Kleinman,  
*Esther and Sidney Rabb Professor of Anthropology,  
Department of Anthropology, Harvard University and  
Professor of Medical Anthropology and Professor of Psychiatry,  
Harvard Medical School*

Sociological and psychiatric studies on suicide based on Western ideas about human nature see suicide as a social or individual disorder. Suicide in China, however, should be understood differently.

By analyzing 30 cases, Wu Fei studies the dynamics of suicide in terms of family politics and local psychology and finds that suicide is committed when a power balance is broken in the power games in the family. Unlike public injustice, domestic injustice is not only closely related to but also often strengthened by emotional interdependence. Suicide and depression are different responses to the same situation of domestic injustice. The book also covers suicide as perceived by rural people outside the family; how suicide is viewed in politics; suicide prevention and studies of suicide in Chinese modern intellectual history.

Showing that suicide in China is not mainly caused by too great a dependence on traditional values, but rather that it reflects a dilemma in Chinese modernity, this book should be of interest to students and scholars of Chinese studies, sociology, anthropology and suicide studies.

**Wu Fei** is Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies, Peking University.

## Routledge contemporary China series

- 1 Nationalism, Democracy and National Integration in China**  
*Leong Liew and Wang Shaoguang*
- 2 Hong Kong's Tortuous Democratization**  
A comparative analysis  
*Ming Sing*
- 3 China's Business Reforms**  
Institutional challenges in a globalised economy  
*Edited by Russell Smyth and Cherrie Zhu*
- 4 Challenges for China's Development**  
An enterprise perspective  
*Edited by David H. Brown and Alasdair MacBean*
- 5 New Crime in China**  
Public order and human rights  
*Ron Keith and Zhiqiu Lin*
- 6 Non-Governmental Organizations in Contemporary China**  
Paving the way to civil society?  
*Qiusha Ma*
- 7 Globalization and the Chinese City**  
*Fulong Wu*
- 8 The Politics of China's Accession to the World Trade Organization**  
The dragon goes global  
*Hui Feng*
- 9 Narrating China**  
Jia Pingwa and his fictional world  
*Yiyan Wang*
- 10 Sex, Science and Morality in China**  
*Joanne McMillan*
- 11 Politics in China Since 1949**  
Legitimizing authoritarian rule  
*Robert Weatherley*
- 12 International Human Resource Management in Chinese Multinationals**  
*Jie Shen and Vincent Edwards*
- 13 Unemployment in China**  
Economy, human resources and labour markets  
*Edited by Grace Lee and Malcolm Warner*

- 14 China and Africa**  
Engagement and compromise  
*Ian Taylor*
- 15 Gender and Education in China**  
Gender discourses and women's schooling in the early twentieth century  
*Paul J. Bailey*
- 16 SARS**  
Reception and interpretation in three Chinese cities  
*Edited by Deborah Davis and Helen Siu*
- 17 Human Security and the Chinese State**  
Historical transformations and the modern quest for sovereignty  
*Robert E. Bedeski*
- 18 Gender and Work in Urban China**  
Women workers of the unlucky generation  
*Liu Jieyu*
- 19 China's State Enterprise Reform**  
From Marx to the market  
*John Hassard, Jackie Sheehan, Meixiang Zhou, Jane Terpstra-Tong and Jonathan Morris*
- 20 Cultural Heritage Management in China**  
Preserving the cities of the Pearl River Delta  
*Edited by Hilary du Cros and Yok-shiu F. Lee*
- 21 Paying for Progress**  
Public finance, human welfare and inequality in China  
*Edited by Vivienne Shue and Christine Wong*
- 22 China's Foreign Trade Policy**  
The new constituencies  
*Edited by Ka Zeng*
- 23 Hong Kong, China**  
Learning to belong to a nation  
*Gordon Mathews, Tai-lok Lui, and Eric Kit-wai Ma*
- 24 China Turns to Multilateralism**  
Foreign policy and regional security  
*Edited by Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne*
- 25 Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition**  
A place called Shangrila  
*Åshild Kolås*
- 26 China's Emerging Cities**  
The making of new urbanism  
*Edited by Fulong Wu*
- 27 China-US Relations Transformed**  
Perceptions and strategic interactions  
*Edited by Suisheng Zhao*
- 28 The Chinese Party-State in the 21st Century**  
Adaptation and the reinvention of legitimacy  
*Edited by André Laliberté and Marc Lanteigne*

- 29 Political Change in Macao**  
*Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo*
- 30 China's Energy Geopolitics**  
The Shanghai cooperation organization and Central Asia  
*Thrassy N. Marketos*
- 31 Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary China**  
Institutional change and stability  
*Edited by Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert*
- 32 U.S. – China Relations**  
China policy on Capitol Hill  
*Tao Xie*
- 33 Chinese Kinship**  
Contemporary anthropological perspectives  
*Edited by Susanne Brandtstädter and Gonçalo D. Santos*
- 34 Politics and Government in Hong Kong**  
Crisis under Chinese sovereignty  
*Edited by Ming Sing*
- 35 Rethinking Chinese Popular Culture**  
Cannibalizations of the canon  
*Edited by Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-yin Chow*
- 36 Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific**  
Economic interdependence and China's rise  
*Kai He*
- 37 Rent Seeking in China**  
*Edited by Tak-Wing Ngo and Yongping Wu*
- 38 China, Xinjiang and Central Asia**  
History, transition and crossborder interaction into the 21st Century  
*Edited by Colin Mackerras and Michael Clarke*
- 39 Intellectual Property Rights in China**  
Politics of piracy, trade and protection  
*Gordon Cheung*
- 40 Developing China**  
Land, politics and social conditions  
*George C.S Lin*
- 41 State and Society Responses to Social Welfare Needs in China**  
Serving the people  
*Edited by Jonathan Schwartz and Shawn Shieh*
- 42 Gay and Lesbian Subculture in Urban China**  
*Loretta Wing Wah Ho*
- 43 The Politics of Heritage Tourism in China**  
A view from Lijiang  
*Xiaobo Su and Peggy Teo*
- 44 Suicide and Justice**  
A Chinese perspective  
*Wu Fei*

# **Suicide and Justice**

A Chinese perspective

**Wu Fei**



**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published  
2010 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Routledge  
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009.

To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's  
collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).

© 2010 Wu Fei

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or  
utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now  
known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in  
any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing  
from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Wu, Fei, 1973-

Suicide and justice: a Chinese perspective / Wu Fei.

p. cm. — (Routledge contemporary China series ; 44)

1. Suicide—China. I. Title.

HV6548.C5W77 2009

362.280951—dc22

2009014394

ISBN 0-203-86911-7 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-55171-4 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-86911-7 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-55171-7 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-86911-6 (ebk)

When the corpse was carried to me, people were all grieving. One shoe of the deceased was lost on the way. Unable to find it, we had the corpse cremated with only one shoe on. From then on, every evening we heard a voice screaming miserably and frighteningly outside the gate of the crematorium: "Where is my other shoe? Where is my other shoe?" It was so horrible that nobody dared go out. This lasted for one week until we finally decided to have a look. When we ventured out of the crematorium, we found that it was not a ghost, but a madman from a nearby village. He had picked up the lost shoe and wanted to get another in the crematorium.

A watchman of a local crematorium

A young wife found her life so difficult that she wanted to hang herself. When this idea occurred to her, she was surprised to find that some bricks were already piled up to support her. "Well," she thought, "even the spirits know that I want to die and want to help me take my life? Then I will not satisfy them." Gambling for *qi* with the spirits, she gave up the idea of committing suicide.

A traditional folktale





# Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgement</i>	xiii
<i>Personae</i>	xvi
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	1
1 Suicide as a Chinese problem	3
1.1 <i>Understanding suicide in China</i>	3
1.2 <i>Fieldwork and methodology</i>	6
1.3 <i>Theory, thesis and structure of this book</i>	10
2 Two philosophies about suicide	15
2.1 <i>Sociological and psychiatric studies of suicide</i>	15
2.2 <i>The state of suicide</i>	17
2.3 <i>Ming and family life</i>	22
2.4 <i>Qi and “behaving as a person”</i>	26
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>Domestic justice</b>	31
3 Familial love	33
3.1 <i>Conjugal love</i>	33
3.2 <i>Parental love</i>	37
3.3 <i>Filial piety</i>	40
<i>Discussion</i>	44
4 Family politics	46
4.1 <i>The margin of the family</i>	46
4.2 <i>A troubled family</i>	53

x *Contents*

*4.3 A complex family* 63

*Discussion* 69

5 Fortune 71

*5.1 Long and short lives* 71

*5.2 Ghosts and human beings* 76

*5.3 Fortune and misfortune* 82

*Discussion* 88

**PART III**

**Human dignity** 91

6 Suicide and madness 93

*6.1 Excluded suicide* 93

*6.2 The abnormal* 95

*6.3 Non-persons* 101

*Discussion* 105

7 Gambling for *qi* 107

*7.1 Impulsivity* 107

*7.2 Long-term gamble* 112

*Discussion* 118

8 Face 120

*8.1 Spiritedness* 122

*8.2 Loss of personhood* 131

*Discussion* 139

9 Thinking through 140

*9.1 Having tunnel vision* 141

*9.2 Heart and lungs* 146

*Discussion* 153

**PART IV**

**Conclusion: suicide as a public affair** 157

10 Public justice 159

*10.1 Interfamily conflicts* 159

*10.2 Clear heaven* 165

*10.3 Public injustice* 171

*Discussion* 179

11 Making good luck	181
11.1 Psychiatry and suicide intervention	182
11.2 Suicide intervention of the rural women	184
11.3 Revolution	192
11.4 Good fortune	195
 Notes	 198
Bibliography	203
Index	212



# Preface and acknowledgement

The first time I was puzzled by the meaning of “*guo ri zi*” was when I was staying with my grandmother and her mother. I was about seven years old then, my grandmother 70, and her mother 95. When I frequently heard my grandmother and my great-grandmother utter the term “*guo shang*” (the equivalent of “*guo ri zi*” in our dialect), I asked them what that meant, and my question was considered strange and unanswerable. Perhaps it was then that I became interested in this overly common term in Chinese. Later on, my mother often criticized me for not knowing how to live a family life (*guo ri zi*). I was still at a loss about the exact meaning of this term until doing my fieldwork in Mengzou. Ever since Confucius, Chinese people have believed that a man becomes established at around 30 years of age. When I passed my thirtieth birthday while doing fieldwork, I gradually found that this term made sense to me. Although I am hardly established even now, I begin to understand how to live a family life through the experiences of my grandmother and my mother. My grandmother, who was a daughter of a Neo-Confucianism scholar in the final years of the Qing dynasty, survived the Japanese invasion, the early death of my grandfather, the Communist revolution, and many other difficulties and misfortunes. In the 1960s, right after the death of my grandfather, although her life was already very difficult, she sold most of her belongings to support her five daughters so that they could go to school. Many villagers said that she did not live a family life at all; but later they all admired the filial piety of her daughters and her own longevity and happiness. The older I become, the more I realize my own clumsiness and my grandmother’s greatness. She always had her own ideas but was never stubborn; she could think everything through but insisted on her principles; she was quiet and happy, but also cared about many details in our lives. Even when she was 99, she was the only person in our family who knew all the birthdays of her nine grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. She not only followed the Neo-Confucian rules of living a family life, but also managed to maintain good fortune in the truest sense. When I talk about the misfortunes of so many people in this book, I am always thinking about my grandmother. As I write this book, it is already three years since my grandmother quietly passed away. Her life tells me that the Chinese way of living is still significant, and I myself have a lot to learn. Following the example of my grandmother, my mother also has a deep understanding of family life and behaving as a person, without which there would

not have been so many friends to help her son conduct such a difficult study. My father and my wife, as I mention in Chapter 1, have also helped me a great deal in this study. This work, as my attempt to understand “living a family life,” is a product of our own family politics.

Instead of thanking family members at the end of the acknowledgement, as most authors do, I am talking about my family at the very beginning, because they have not only provided a psychological support to me, but also are the most important resources for my understanding of key concepts in this work.

Perhaps this study does not conclude but opens up my interest in suicide and “*guo ri zi*,” but it definitely concludes my six-year life in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which has been one of the most important periods in my life. This is not only because I have earned my final academic degree there, but also because my experience there will greatly shape my life and thinking in the future.

As a stranger dwelling in this renowned American town, I had never before experienced such a quiet as well as colorful life. It was so quiet that I could not help feeling lonely; it was so colorful that I always felt short of time in front of huge libraries, wise professors, and so many interesting courses. Both features reminded me of my own limits time and time again, as I could only choose a certain number of books to read and spend time with only so many friends.

Arthur Kleinman, my advisor, not only introduced me to a field that I had never imagined and gave me a wonderful topic that would fascinate me for a long time, but also lifted the strangeness of America and brought me to the warm and fresh air of New England. Without his warm heart and candid character, my life in Cambridge would definitely have been different. James Watson, who was the first Harvard professor I got to know, never once lost his patience with my clumsiness. Steve Caton, one of the most knowledgeable and eloquent teachers in this department, has always pushed me to a higher level of thinking. As a student of medical anthropology without any medical background, I am deeply grateful to Byron Good who introduced me to the general framework of modern psychiatry. I am sure that Rubie Watson, whose research interest is so close to mine in this book, will inspire me even more in the future. Michael Herzfeld, Mary Steedly and Nur Yalman are also teachers who have inspired and helped me at different stages. In addition, I must mention Harvey Mansfield and Tu Wei-Ming. The former has deepened my thinking about the human condition, a good life, and justice; the latter has repeatedly reminded me of the difficulties and pride of being a Chinese scholar in today’s world. Marilyn Goodrich, the secretary of Arthur Kleinman, is a good friend and industrious painter. Some ideas of mine are inspired by her paintings about elegy and sorrows.

Professor Wang Shouchang, my advisor at Peking University, still shows deep interest in my study and provides very helpful information. I feel extremely fortunate to have received guidance from Professor Liu Xiaofeng and Professor Gan Yang, who are doubtlessly the most important intellectuals in recent Chinese history. Professor Liu’s visit to Cambridge in early 2000 solved many of the outstanding puzzles in my work, without which my study at Harvard would have been much less fruitful. Professor Gan has always been interested in my research.

When I was engaged in fieldwork, he shared with me many important ideas about suicide in China and the Chinese way of living.

After I had finished my study in America, I came back to teach at Peking University. Professors Zhao Dunhua, Zhang Zhigang, Sun Shangyang, Chen Lai, Jin Xiping, Wang Bo, Shang Xinjian and Han Shuifa, who were all my former teachers and current colleagues, provided me with a friendly and understanding environment, so that I could finish this book. Special thanks go to all my students, from whom I have learned much more than I could teach them.

I also thank Sing Lee, Dominic Lee, Albert Yeung, Xie Lihua, Xu Rong, Michael Phillips, Xu Dong, Li Xianyun, Zhang Xiaoli, Yang Nianqun, Wang Mingming, Jing Jun and Guo Yuhua. They all have helped me in different stages of my study.

My friend Li Meng, as always, scrutinized my manuscript while I was writing it and gave me strict and constructive suggestions. Wang Liping, who conducted fieldwork in a place very close to mine, was also a good critic of my study. Ying Xing and Li Kang gave me important advice when I tried to write down certain thoughts in Chinese. Lin Guohua, Man-Lung Cheng, Niu Ke, Li Silong, Liu Guanglin, Guo Jinhua, Tao Lin, Jaesok Kim, Zongze Hu, Everett Zhang, Adam Chau, Hyeon Jung Lee, Wu Keping, He Jiangsui and Zhu Zhenyu have all provided strong support in my studies, and my discussions with them have been very helpful.

I thank the following institutions for financially supporting my fieldwork and dissertation writing: The Freedman Foundation, Anthropology Department of Harvard University, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Harvard University.

I thank Effie Shoemaker, my host family at Cambridge, and Mr and Ms Long Shengde, who have hosted several generations of Chinese students in the Boston area, for their great help and generous accommodation.

As for those people who so kindly accepted to take part in my interviews, I am obliged to omit their names here. But my deepest gratitude goes to them, because this is a work for them.

Some parts of Chapters 1, 3, 5 and 7 appear in my article "Gambling for *Qi*," published in *The China Journal*, No. 54, 2005. I thank the journal for allowing me to reprint this material in this new book.

The longer I stay in America, the more Chinese I become. The more Western books I read, the more attractive the Chinese way of life seems to me. My stay in this great country has not only opened a door for me to understanding the magnificence of Western civilization, but also introduced me to the future greatness of my motherland. If readers find my English, especially my renditions of some Chinese terms, occasionally difficult to understand, I beg your forgiveness. The only way to really understand Chinese culture is to learn the language, just as the only way to understand America is to learn English.



# Personae

<i>Location</i>	<i>Person</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Brief reason</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Other people in the case</i>
County seat	Ge Man	4.1	Female, late 20s	2001	As a prostitute, she could not marry her lover.	Pesticide	Died	Shi Lei (Ge Man's lover)
County seat	Zhou Liu	8.1-2	Male, 60 or 64	2002	Formerly one of the richest men in Mengzhou, he became poor and his young wife left him.	Pesticide	Died	Ruyi (Zhou Liu's daughter), Jixiang (Zhou Liu's son), Yu Chengyan (Zhou Liu's friend, a former leader of the Bureau of Public Security), Huidong (Zhou Liu's former colleague in Jiashu), Qi Xinfang (Zhou Liu's friend, a business woman)
Feng village	Haopeng	1.2, 10.1	Male, 14	1998	He lost at gambling.	Hanging	Died	
Feng village	Lu Li	5.1	Male, 24	1978	His father blamed him for not carrying water.	Pesticide	Died	Lu Man (Lu Li's sister)

<i>Location</i>	<i>Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)</i>			<i>Time</i>	<i>Brief reason</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Other people in the case</i>
	<i>Person</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Gender</i>					
Feng village	Wangshu	2.3	Female, 63	1983	Her husband blamed her for her mistreatment of her granddaughter.	Pesticide	Survived	
Gaoyangfu	Yunrong	10.1	Female, 28	1993	Her husband scolded her when she was arguing with her mother-in-law.	Pesticide	Died	
Gouyi	Chouyu	6.2	Female, 30	1995	Her husband was put in jail, and she suffered from a mental illness.	Pesticide	Died	
Gouyi	Hefang	3.1	Female, 27	1997	Her husband beat her.	Sleeping pills	Survived	Kang Hui (Hefang's husband, Kang Yu's kinsman), Wang Qumeng (a wealthy businessman with a big company in Beijing)
Gouyi	Mugen	4.2	Male, about 40	1992	His wife had an affair.	Hanging	Died	Luorui (Mugen's wife), Kang Yu (Luorui's lover)

(continued)

Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)								
Location	Person	Section		Time	Brief reason	Method	Result	Other people in the case
Gouyi	Mulan	5.3	Female, 25	1976	She overheard her sister-in-law's bad words about her.	Pesticide	Survived	He Xi (a young man)
Gouyi	Muzhi	4.2	Male, 40	1998	“Words following words”	Pesticide	Survived	
Gouyi	Surong	4.2	Female, about 40	1994 and 1995	Her husband blamed her for borrowing money for her brother.	Sleeping pills	Survived	Kang Yu (Surong's husband), Jiang Zhong (Kang Yu's friend, male), Youmei (a woman from the northeast, Jiang Zhong's second wife), Chongwei (Kang Yu's friend, male), Xiaoi (Kang Yu's friend, male), Kexi (a young man), Luorui (Mugen's wife, Kang Yu's lover)
Gouyi	Xinmei	4.2	Female, 30	1993	She quarreled with her husband and there were scandals in her natal family.	Pesticide	Died	
Gouyi	Xuanyuan	7.2	Male, 80	1990	There was no egg in his soup while everyone else had it.	Hanging	Died	

<i>Location</i>	<i>Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)</i>				<i>Time</i>	<i>Brief reason</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Other people in the case</i>
	<i>Person</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>					
Han village	Han Anju (husband) and Qiuju (wife)	8.1	Male	33, female 27	2000	The wife had an affair and her husband beat her.	Pesticide (both)	Died (both)	
Han village	Mizhang	7.1	Male	64	1999	His sons mistreated him.	Burning	Died	
Jiang village	Hu Suzhi	10.2	Female	42	2002	She protested at the compensation for her deceased husband.	Pesticide	Survived	Fang Jiuzhe (one of my guides, a defendant in Hu's case.)
Jianli	Fangxin	10.1	Female	30	1998	She quarreled with her husband.	Pesticide	Died	
Jianli	Gao Yan	10.3	Male	35	2002	He was suspected of committing suicide in jail.	Hanging	Died	Gao Qiuuzhi (the leader of a taxation protest)
Jianli	Guofu	7.2	Male	70	1980	His daughter-in-law hid steamed buns from him.	Hanging	Died	

(continued)

<i>Location</i>	<i>Person</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Brief reason</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Other people in the case</i>
Jianli	Qingyun	6.2	Female, 32	1998	Her mother-in-law refused to repair her house, and she suffered from depression.	Pesticide	Survived	
Jianli	Qiongzhi	1.3	Female, 20	1998	Her husband blamed her for losing a recorder.	Pesticide	Died	
Langao	Chaoyuan	6.3	Male, more than 20	2001	His cousin blamed and slapped him.	Pesticide	Died	
Langao	Luosheng	1.3	Male, 21	2002	His father suspected that he had stolen money.	Run over by a train	Died	
Langao	Mucheng	6.2	Male, 30	2000	Suffering from a headache, he thought he had neoplasm.	Hanging	Died	
Langao	Qiumei	6.1	Female, 19	2001	She was seduced by a man and then blamed by her mother.	Pesticide	Died	

<i>Location</i>	<i>Person</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)</i>		<i>Time</i>	<i>Brief reason</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Other people in the case</i>
Langao	Zhuilu	1.2, 10.1	Female, 30		1999	Her husband treated her badly.	Unknown pills	Died	
Li village	Biri	5.1	Female, 20		1991	She quarreled with her father.	Hanging	Died	
Li village	Guizhi	10.1	Female, in her late 20s		1999	She quarreled with her neighbors, and her husband blamed her.	Pesticide	Died	Ergou (Guizhi's husband), Wubo (Guizhi's neighbor), Lingbao (Guizhi's neighbor)
Li village	Lanzhi	3.2	Female, 30		2001	Her son always played electronic games.	Pesticide	Died	Muhu (Lanzhi's son)
Li village	Lingyu	10.1	Female, 30		2002	She gambled for <i>qi</i> with her husband.	Pesticide	Died	
Li village	Ruomu	5.1	Male, 30		2000	No reason except passing Biri's tomb	Pesticide	Died	Biri (Ruomu's former girlfriend)
Longtang	Qiulan	6.2	Female, 30		2000	Nephritis	Hanging	Died	
Shouzhen	Mufang	5.1	Female, 18		1980	She failed to get into high school.	Pesticide	Died	

*(continued)*

<i>Location</i>	<i>Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)</i>					<i>Time</i>	<i>Brief reason</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Other people in the case</i>
	<i>Person</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Attempted</i>					
Shuizhou	Eryao	7.2	Female	70		2002	Her daughter-in-law did not cook lunch for her.	Pesticide	Died	
Wudu	Bingde	9	Male	70		2002	He was laughed at by his son.	Hanging	Died	
Wudu	Yuying	6.2	Female	46		1998	She suffered from depression.	Sleeping Pills	Died	
Xianjialou	Bu Ju	2.4	Male	21		1969	He was shamed during the Cultural Revolution.	Hanging	Survived	
Xianjialou	Laifu	3.3	Male	20		2000	His father blamed him for being impolite to his lover.	Pesticide	Died	
Xianjialou	Sanxiu	5.1	Female	20		2002	She was depressed when working as a waitress in a hotel.	Sleeping pills	Died	
Xianjialou	Tong Rouyu	8.1	Male	60		1999	He became poorer.	Hanging	Died	

<i>Location</i>	<i>Person</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Brief reason</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Other people in the case</i>
Xiaoguantun	Chen Yuse	5.2	Male, 30	1999	He could not mediate between his mother and his wife.	Pesticide	Died	Furong (Yuse's wife)
Xiaoguantun	Ruhui	6.2	Female, in her 40s	1999	She was depressed.	Hanging	Died	
Xiaoguantun	Suohou	3.3	Male, 70	2001	He had conflicts with his sons.	Hanging	Died	
Xiaoguantun	Youlan	5.2	Female, 20	2001	Her parents did not allow her to marry her boyfriend.	Pesticide	Survived	Ning Zhengyan (Youlan's father, a fortuneteller)
Xitang	Jiaolan	7.1–2	Female, 46 and 64	1983 and 2000	She took care of her aunt-in-law but was blamed by the old woman's son-in-law in the funeral. Years later, her son blamed her for eating too much.	Pesticide and later, sleeping pills	Survived	
Xitang	Zilan	4.3	Female, 32	2000	Her husband beat her.	Pesticide	Survived	

(continued)



<i>Location</i>	<i>Person</i>	<i>Section</i>	<i>Gender and Age (at the time of suicide or attempted suicide)</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Brief reason</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Other people in the case</i>
Yu village	Shilan (wife) and Weizhen (husband)	9.1–2	Female, 36 and male, 28	2002 and 1994	She was blamed by her husband and mother-in-law. He was blamed by his mother.	Pesticide (wife) Hanging (husband)	Survived (both)	
Yu village	Sihuang	6.3	Male, 43	1990	He suffered from schizophrenia and his wife blamed him.	Pesticide	Died	

1 This list shows most of the named suicides in Mengzou that are found in this book.

## **Part I**

# **Introduction**



# 1 Suicide as a Chinese problem

## 1.1 Understanding suicide in China

In 2002, Michael Phillips and his colleagues disclosed in *Lancet* that the suicide rate in China is between 23 and 30 cases in every 100,000 people (Phillips *et al.* 1999; He and Lester 1999; Phillips, Li *et al.* 2002; Phillips 2003; Wang Lijun *et al.* 2003; Zhao and Ji 2002), which is one of the highest suicide rates in the world. This attracted attention from all over the world and marked a new stage in the study of suicide in China (Da Dan 2001: 15–17).

After Phillips published his data, scholars who study suicide, both inside and outside China, focused on several key issues: 1) Why are there more women who commit suicide? 2) Why is suicide more frequent in rural areas? 3) What does pesticide, the major suicide instrument, mean to Chinese people? and most importantly 4) What is the relationship between mental illnesses and suicide? All these features are somehow different than those found in other places of the world (Institute of Medicine 2002; Qin and Mortensen 2001).

The fact that women are more prone to commit suicide is not particular to the contemporary period (He and Lester 2002; Dominio *et al.* 2001–02; Pearson and Liu 2002). Some scholars notice that female suicide was already an important issue in traditional China (Ropp 2001; Carlitz 2001; Theiss 2001). Margery Wolf argues that the patriarchal family system is the major factor that leads to female suicide, in both traditional and modern China (Wolf 1975). The magazine *Rural Women Knowing All* (later changed to *Rural Women*) initiated a program on female suicide in rural areas in 1996, and published *The Report of Female Suicide in Chinese Countryside* in 1999. This influential book offers a comprehensive picture of female suicide in today's China. In an article "Factor Analysis of Rural Female with Attempted Suicide," the authors argue that personality characteristics, family environment and mental disorders all contribute to female suicide (Xie 1999; Lu Yingzhi *et al.* 2001). In her article "On the Problem of Village Women's Suicide in Our Country," Kang Qiong argues that female suicide results from multiple factors, including education problems, lack of social support, medical conditions and family environment (Kang 2002). These authors show that the reality might be more complex than Wolf argues. In an ethnographic description of the suicide of Ling, a young woman, Pearson and Liu show that this woman's suicide resulted from complex power struggles (Pearson and Liu 2002).

#### 4 Introduction

The fact that suicide happens more often in rural areas also attracts some scholarly attention; compared with other aspects of suicide, however, this is one of the most understudied issues. Li Xianyun *et al.* studied 326 cases of attempted suicide in rural areas (Li *et al.* 2002). Zhang Yanping *et al.* analyzed the same sample (Zhang *et al.* 2003). Both articles focus on mental disorders but neither addresses the characteristics of attempted suicide in rural areas.

One interpretation of the high suicide rate in rural areas is that pesticide is more available in the countryside. The ingestion of pesticide is the most prevalent means of committing suicide in today's China (Eddleston and Phillips 2004; Jiang Yonghua *et al.* 2003). It is said that pesticide is less concentrated now than in the past, but it is still very dangerous if one drinks several mouthfuls. Although some scholars have noticed this issue, it still needs more systematic study.

All of above issues are somewhat related to the central debate in the study of suicide in China: is the phenomenon caused by depression or other mental illnesses? (Shen *et al.* 1992; Phillips *et al.* 1999). Michael Phillips and his colleagues show that at most 63% (Phillips, Yang *et al.* 2002: 104) of completed suicides in China involve mental problems, while more than 90% of such suicides do in most Western countries (Institute of Medicine 2002: 69). Several other studies also show that mental illness is not the major factor that leads to suicide in China (Li *et al.* 2003; Zhang *et al.* 2002; Pearson and Liu 2002).

Although most Western-trained psychiatrists might wonder why so many fewer suicidal people in China have mental illnesses, we have to inquire into a no less important aspect in this number, i.e., that there are still more than half of all suicides who do have mental problems. Apparently suicide in China is not entirely unrelated to mental illness, but it must be related to mental illness in a different way than in the West, where suicide is more or less regarded as being caused by mental illnesses. Therefore, at stake is not only why mental illness is not found so often in Chinese suicides, but also what mental illness means to those people who suffer from it.

According to Phillips and his colleagues, suicide risk increases substantially when people are exposed to multiple risk factors. In order of importance, the major risk factors are:

High depression symptom score, previous suicide attempt, acute stress at time of death, low quality of life, high chronic stress, severe interpersonal conflict in the 2 days before death, a blood relative with previous suicidal behavior, and a friend or associate with previous suicidal behavior. (Phillips, Yang *et al.* 2002)

Among the 265 deceased people they study, none of those exposed to only one of the risk factors committed suicide, 30% committed suicide with two or three of them, 85% with four or five, and 96% with six or more (*ibid*). This finding is very important to the study of suicide in China. It tells us that depression still contributes to suicide, but it often operates severely when compounded. In some cases, people who do not suffer from depression also commit suicide when they

have other problems. What is the relationship between depression and other problems that happen simultaneously? Is suicide in which depression is a factor significantly different from that in which it is not a factor?

In modern psychiatry focusing on suicide, impulsivity is seen as important in suicidal psychodynamics (Institute of Medicine 2002: 81, 91, 95). This is also found in China (Li *et al.* 2003). According Li and her colleagues, however, impulsive suicide attempters in China usually have no depression symptoms and enjoy a higher quality of life.

Although most scholars agree that suicide in China is not mainly caused by mental illnesses, still many scholars believe that psychological method should be applied in both the study and prevention of suicide. Jie Zhang *et al.* argue that the Western-developed psychological autopsy is still a feasible method in suicide study in China (Zhang *et al.* 2002). The method that Michael Phillips used to study suicide risk is essentially that of psychological autopsy (Phillips, Yang *et al.* 2002).

In the literature on Chinese suicide, psychological method is still the dominant method used. Some scholars study suicides among patients with mental illnesses (Lin and Xu 2002; Zhao Baolong *et al.* 2002; Chen *et al.* 2003). There are many studies about the relationship between depression and suicide. Niu Jingui and his colleagues have published at least two articles dealing with the general relationship between depression and suicide (Niu 2003; Niu *et al.* 2003). They merely emphasize the correlation between depression and suicide in general psychiatry, but do not have sufficient empirical data to test the correlation in the Chinese context. Liu Zongfeng *et al.* and Du Yongsheng focus on delusive depression and argue that this type of depression more frequently leads to suicide (Liu Zongfeng *et al.* 2003; Du Yongsheng 2002). Zou Shaohong *et al.* argue that depression is often caused by domestic violence (Zou *et al.* 2003). Zou's conclusion shows that it is not sufficient to study depression only, and we might have a better understanding of depression after examining domestic violence.

The relationship between schizophrenia and suicide is also widely discussed. Tang Yong studied family history factors in schizophrenic suicide (Tang 2001); Zhang Huishi *et al.* studied attempted suicides among schizophrenics (Zhang Huishi *et al.* 2002); Xue Dewang *et al.* studied the characteristics of schizophrenic suicides (Xue *et al.* 2003); Jiang Huimin focuses on the suicides of schizophrenic patients (Jiang Huimin 2003). These scholars all show that suicide is frequent among schizophrenic patients, but they neither tell us the rate of schizophrenia among suicidal people nor examine the cultural meaning of schizophrenia in Chinese society. The fact that schizophrenic patients often commit suicide reveals the characteristics of schizophrenia, but does not tell us very much about suicide.

Other mental illnesses are not very often mentioned in suicide studies in China. The article of He Chuan and Niu Xiuying is one of quite few that argue that alcoholism leads to suicide in China (He and Niu 2004).

In addition to these psychological studies, some psychiatrists also notice that social factors contribute to suicide in China. Ji *et al.* show that suicide is usually seen as a social problem but not a medical one in China (Ji *et al.* 2001). Although Zhai Shutao wrote extensively about the psychiatric aspects of suicide, he did not

overlook the social factors that contribute to suicide (Zhai 2001, 2002). Some scholars specialize in the suicides of “normal people” (Yang 2002).

Lee and Kleinman began to view suicide in China from the perspective of social science. These authors argue that “suicide can be seen as a means of resisting social power and thereby as a strategy in the inter-subjective struggles of everyday social experience” (Lee and Kleinman 2003: 295).

The ethnographic study done by Pearson and Liu is another attempt to understand suicide in China from a social and cultural point of view (Pearson and Liu 2002). Instead of seeing suicide as being caused by mental illnesses, they argue that Ling’s suicide was the result of complex power struggles in the family.

Both studies indicate that we should have a more cultural as well as political understanding of suicide in China. In these stories of suicide, some psychological factors certainly play important roles, but we would be greatly oversimplifying them if we were to define them with current psychiatric terminologies. By this I do not imply that psychiatry cannot play some role in the control of suicide in China. Indeed psychiatry is becoming a powerful force to safeguard the mental health of Chinese people. Because people who suffer domestic injustice are likely to become depressed and commit suicide, of course psychiatry will play an important role in the control of suicide; but people do not merely want to be mentally healthy. They also want to be happy and lucky, and this is already beyond the reach of psychiatry. After a long period of fieldwork on suicide, I have come to understand suicide from the perspective of justice.

## 1.2 Fieldwork and methodology

In order to understand this puzzling and sensitive phenomenon, I conducted 17 months of fieldwork (July–August 2000, June–August 2001, September 2002–August, 2003) in Mengzou<sup>1</sup> County.

Mengzou is a small county in north China, with a population of about 320,000 in 2002. The county is divided into nine townships, and Gouyi is one of them.

The county was established in the Warring States period (475–221 BC), and the city wall from in the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) is still visible. Mengzou was one of the first counties in north China to be occupied by the Communist troops during World War II, and the Party never relinquished control over the area. It is not far from the east coast and is also close to Beijing and Tianjin. Although Mengzou is not the richest county in north China, its per capita income is above average for Chinese rural areas. Recently two railways were built across Mengzou, and this was very beneficial to its development.

Most people in Mengzou are of Han ethnicity. There are a few Muslims and a small mosque in the county seat. Catholicism was introduced to Mengzou in the nineteenth century, and there are several churches in Mengzou. In the village Shouzhen, there is a temple in honor of Liu Shouzhen, a famous doctor in the Jin dynasty (1115–1234). Since its re-establishment in the 1990s, it has attracted many pilgrims. There are various small temples in the county.

Gouyi is one of the biggest villages in Mengzou and the seat of Gouyi Township.

Gouyi got its name from a temple built there in honor of Empress Gouyi of the Han dynasty. This temple was very popular before 1949, and there was an important temple festival each year. The temple was destroyed in the 1950s, but during my fieldwork, I witnessed local people celebrating this festival.

Abu-Lughod said that she was the first anthropologist who conducted fieldwork accompanied by her father (1986: 11); perhaps I am the first student of anthropology whose fieldwork has heavily relied on the help of his mother.

I first went to the Bureau of Public Security<sup>2</sup> and the county hospital when I undertook this study in the summer of 2000. When I came to the Bureau of Public Security, the police were dealing with two suicide cases. The first case was that of Haopeng, a middle school student who had hanged himself on the campus. Haopeng's parents launched a suit against the school. Although there was no evidence that the school had caused the student to commit suicide, it was forced to pay a good deal of money to the student's family. The second case was that of Zhuilu, a young wife who apparently committed suicide after being maltreated by her husband. Her grandfather alleged that it was her husband who had killed Zhuilu. Although it was evident that Zhuilu's husband had indeed mistreated her, the police could not charge him since he had had no opportunity to kill Zhuilu.

In both cases, suicide was related to justice in a certain sense, but there is some interesting contrast. While Haopeng's parents had no concrete proof that Haopeng had suffered injustice in the school, the police had to consider their protest seriously. Although Zhuilu's grandfather was sure that Zhuilu's husband had mistreated her, there was no way for the police to avenge Zhuilu. In Haopeng's case, no matter whether Haopeng was murdered or had committed suicide, the school would be punished; but in Zhuilu's case, her husband would not be punished if she had committed suicide.

A forensic medicine expert showed me the records of unnatural deaths in Mengzou between 1995 and 2001. He said that the police would intervene only if people could not decide whether someone had died because of homicide or suicide, or if there was a dispute after the suicide. If it was clear that someone had committed suicide, it would not be the police's business.

When I learned that the police did not have direct responsibility for suicide, I went to a local hospital. The records of the emergency room are more systematic than that the police files. In the records from 2000, there are 499 cases of hospitalization, including 114 cases of suicides and attempted suicides. In other words, in that year over 25% of all hospitalizations were suicide cases. In the records from the first six months of 2001, 357 people were hospitalized, and among them were 65 attempted suicide and only four cases of completed suicide. A doctor said: "If a person does not seriously injure himself or herself, or if that person is too seriously injured to be healed, he or she is not sent to the hospital. When a hopeless suicide case comes to the hospital and the doctors cannot do anything for him or her, the hospital does not record it. The hospital records only suicide patients who have stayed for a period in the hospital. When a patient who has attempted suicide is admitted to the hospital, he or she is unlikely to die. Our medicine is not that bad, and most patients do not die in our hospital." I could not find any data



concerning the causes for suicide in their records. “We don’t care about that. Our responsibility is to cure and save them. It is not our business to investigate why people commit suicide.” “So you never ask about the cause when a patient comes?” “Sometimes we also chat with them, but in most cases, we only care about their physical conditions.”

Both the police and the hospital have some relationship with suicide cases, but neither is directly responsible for them. The police are responsible for suicide cases only insofar as suicide is sometimes an issue of public security; the hospital is responsible for suicide only insofar as suicide cases often become a health problem. But essentially, suicide is neither a police issue nor a health one. Most suicide cases are of Zhuilu’s type, in which injustice is involved, but not the kind of injustice to be dealt with by the police. It is a kind of injustice in the family, which I term as “domestic injustice,” in contrast to public injustice.

Since I could not study suicide without further inquiring into domestic injustice, I decided to conduct more interviews in family settings. Because my mother used to live for a long time in Gouyi, she accompanied me to that village in the summer of 2000. My fieldwork in Gouyi was very successful, and I managed to form a preliminary impression about suicide in this county. In the summer of 2001, my fieldwork in the county seat also went smoothly.

When I planned to do more fieldwork between September 2002 and August 2003, however, I worried about whether I would get enough data. It was a difficult thing to ask people about the suicide of their relatives or their own attempted suicide, and I was rebuffed by angry villagers more than once. When I finally found some people who were willing to tell me the truth, they often remarked: “I want to tell you this story because of the relationship between us, and I would never tell it to a stranger.” Apparently, it was impossible to succeed without seeking help from a go-between who was a friend both of mine and of the interviewees. Because almost everyone in Gouyi is my mother’s friend, my study in this village was highly successful. My mother also has many close friends throughout the whole county, and we decided to ask her friends to help us in their villages, and hence I was able to learn of suicidal events in almost every village in this county.

When I returned to Mengzou in 2002 to conduct fieldwork for a whole year, my mother accompanied me most of the time. Sometimes we stayed in a friend’s house in the county seat, and sometimes we stayed in another friend’s house in Gouyi; from these two places we could reach most villages in the county. Occasionally my father and my wife also joined us in the fieldwork, and my study became an important part of our “family politics.”

Although we had established connections in most villages, our guides were still embarrassed to ask their neighbors about suicide. We were very careful about choosing go-betweens in each village. They had to be outgoing as well as respectable people in the villages, so that they had enough face<sup>3</sup> to ask the villagers to tell me their stories. These go-betweens included schoolteachers, village leaders, members of important lineages, or other people who belonged to the elite in the villages. When we decided on the go-betweens, we asked each of them to provide at least two good cases of suicide or attempted suicide for me. Because of my

mother's high standing in the community, they were willing to go to considerable lengths for us. Thanks to their help, I examined 33 cases in the summer of 2000, 21 in the summer of 2001, and 150 in 2002 and 2003.

In addition to my fieldwork and some archival studies in the police and hospital records, I also performed a cursory tally of the suicide rate in this county in recent years. I visited every village in Gouyi Township and got the number of completed suicides in 2001 and 2002.<sup>4</sup> Unable to visit each village in the other eight townships, I asked some people to help me.<sup>5</sup> There were 61 cases of completed suicide in 2002. Among these 61 persons, of whom 33 were women and 28 were men. There are slightly more women than men. The average age for the women is 33.9 (11 in their twenties, 15 in their thirties, 2 in their fifties, 1 in her sixties, 3 in their seventies, and 1 in her eighties), and for men the average age is 31.5 (2 teenagers, 10 in their twenties, 3 in their thirties, 1 in his forties, 4 in their fifties, 6 in their sixties, and 2 in their seventies). Since the population of Mengzhou was 320,000 in 2002, the suicide rate in this year was at least 19 persons for every 100,000 people. I am sure that the numbers in some townships are not precise; we might have missed some cases. Hence the actual suicide rate is likely to be a little higher. Therefore, I estimate the actual suicide rate to be around 20 persons in every 100,000 people, slightly lower than the one calculated by Hui Long Guan Hospital, namely, 23 per 100,000 people (Phillips, Li *et al.* 2002).

Concrete causes for these suicide cases were various, including domestic conflicts, sexual affairs, social injustice, education problems, serious physical disease, and others. Most of them resulted from domestic conflicts, including those between in-laws, husbands and wives, siblings, parents and children. Some that were not outwardly caused by domestic conflicts could also be related to domestic politics.

A study of suicide such as this involves two interweaved yet distinct issues. The first is the social and cultural discourse about suicide in a given society. The second is the actual cause that pushes someone to commit suicide. For many cases of completed suicide, it is impossible for anyone to know the exact causes. However, by placing each case in a social and cultural context, I have tried to get as close to the truth as possible. I believe that people's personal choices are largely shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which they live. Society's views about suicide should impact on a person's reason for committing suicide. In this respect, I owe much to Jack Douglas's methodology for understanding suicide: namely, to unpack the cultural meanings of suicide as understood both in society and by different people involved (Douglas 1967). Nevertheless, it is quite possible that the actual reasons for individual suicides elude the conclusions that both local people and researchers draw from the everyday social experiences. For instance, Haopeng's parents did not know why he committed suicide, and their reactions were based on their general ideas about suicide in the local society. It is quite likely that Haopeng committed suicide for some reason that only he himself knew. I cannot claim that I have gotten at the truth in all the cases I have examined, but through my examinations, I am confident that I have obtained a sense of the important views of suicide and the general reasons for most suicides in the local society.

### 1.3 Theory, thesis and structure of this book

Suicide in today's China displays significant difference than that treated by Western sociology and psychiatry. Traditional suicidological theories all seem inappropriate to explain the Chinese phenomena. This has provided a good opportunity for us to view suicide from a new perspective.

Traditional suicidological theories, both sociological and psychiatric, are based on Western ideas about life and human nature, which I will examine in more details in Chapter 2, but both are understood very differently in Chinese culture. In China, life is essentially understood as family life, and personality is cultivated in everyday interactions with other people. Hence death is not understood as the extinction of a being, but as the termination of a process. Suicide is a voluntary termination of this life process.

The process of family life consists of birth, coming-of-age, getting married, parenting, taking care of one's parents, educating one's children, and death followed by a decent funeral. If one could finish all these in a good way, then one would die a good death, but if anyone dies before finishing all these, then that person is seen as miserable. I will explain this in more detail in the next chapter.

Each stage in this process depends on domestic justice. Although family members are supposed to love each other, they are different persons after all, and there is always an issue of justice in family politics.

Domestic justice and public justice are not two versions of the same thing. A practice that is not considered injustice in the public sphere might incite so deep a sense of domestic injustice as to cause suicide. The problem of injustice occurs in the family because family members hold expectations for each other, which, depending on different cultural notions, can be described as affection, love, interdependence, or duty. A power balance in the family is maintained through the consent and fulfillment of these expectations. People suffer injustice when the expectations are not fulfilled or when the power balance is broken. Domestic injustice is crucial to Chinese people because these expectations are fundamental to their happiness and dignity. I argue that family politics consists of a series of power games, and domestic injustice occurs when the power balance is broken in these games (Pettit *et al.* 2002).

In his famous article "Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game," Hwang Kwang-Kuo argues that the power game is the general means for Chinese people to interact with each other and maintain justice in dynamic social networks. In these games, face and favor are at stake (Hwang 1987). I further argue that underlying games of power are the ideas of family life and behaving as a person. Consequently, suicide often results from losses in such games. I will also develop the concept of 'face' into a more general concept of moral capital.

Luosheng, a 21-year-old man, was at his grandfather's house when the old man lost 800 *yuan*. His grandfather thought that it was Luosheng who had stolen the money. Without further investigation, Luosheng's father vehemently laid the blame on him. Unable to bear the undeserved ignominy, Luosheng placed himself in the track of a train and was killed immediately. Qiongzhi, a young woman, had

a happy family and got along very well with her husband. She was at home when her recorder was stolen. Her husband blamed Qiongzhi for not watching over the recorder, but she thought she was not responsible for that and committed suicide.

Both Luosheng and Qiongzhi suffered injustice because they were blamed undeservedly. People involved in the two cases, father and son, and husband and wife, are supposed to love each other in family life. When one is treated by a family member in a way that is not expected, however, one might consider oneself wronged and commit suicide as an act of resistance.

Domestic injustice can occur either as a result of long-term disharmony or of an impulsive conflict. Suicide caused by domestic injustice does not always happen in disharmonious families. Here domestic injustice and suicide should be understood via the dynamics of family politics, but not injustice in general. In Aristotle's terminology, domestic injustice is a special type of corrective injustice.<sup>6</sup> In other settings, these frustrations might not be considered as injustice or as injustice answerable by suicide. People often commit suicide as a response to domestic injustice in an attempt to regain their dignity.

A sociologist argues that the Chinese family is now a "cooperative – conflict" unit, "where family members care about each other and cooperate to improve the quality of life but also may exhibit aspects of conflict" (Chen Feinian 2001: 63). This perspective is very similar to mine. Family members care about each other not only because of love, attachment, or common interest, but also because they cannot live family life without each other. But conflicts in a family are inevitable (Pettit *et al.* 2002). In a certain sense, the process of cooperation and attachment is often accompanied by conflicts. Harmony in the family is a kind of unstable homeostasis. One can be happy only through continuous conflicts and negotiations with family members. This is especially so in today's Chinese families.

The family revolution in modern China has considerably weakened the hierarchical family system of traditional China, and this gives people more freedom to pursue their happiness, but also makes family life less stable. As Chen Feinian argues, mothers-in-law do not have absolute authority any more, and they have to negotiate with their daughters-in-law and strike a balance "between an adaptive strategy and a power bargaining process" (2001: 63). Women are more vulnerable to suicide, not only because of their continued inferior status but also because of moral ambiguity and family politics in modern China. Regarding why more women commit suicide than men, some local people said, "women are likely to be angry, and hence they are likely to commit suicide." An old man whose daughter committed suicide said, "Now women's status is too high, and they can be angry with trivial things. You should always flatter them, or they will be provoked and do silly things."<sup>7</sup> His wife, who was sitting beside him, obviously agreed with him and even offered some examples to prove this opinion. It seems true that women commit suicide due to anger more frequently than men. This is the case not because they are more likely to be angry by nature, but because they have more causes to be angry in their positions. In today's China, daughters-in-law are vulnerable to both mothers-in-law and husbands, and mothers-in-law are vulnerable to both

daughters-in-law and husbands. Because of their complex positions in the family, women more often face conflicts and have greater opportunities to become angry with family members.

The old man's statement that women's status is "too high" is provocative. An informant said, "In the old days, women's status was very low. Their parents-in-law and husbands did not treat them as persons (*ren*) and beat them whenever they wanted, but they did not commit suicide so often. Now women have higher status, and few husbands beat them, but they now commit suicide more frequently to resist. Because of this, both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are more likely to commit suicide."

Family order was maintained through patriarchal power in the past, and mothers-in-law had the absolute authority over their daughters-in-law. What is more, daughters-in-law knew they would themselves become mothers-in-law sooner or later, and so they expected to also have absolute authority one day (Wolf 1972: 158–70). In contemporary China, however, since mothers-in-law no longer have absolute authority, daughters-in-law dare to resist. Mothers-in-law hold little power if their daughters-in-law do not respect them.

The old man did not mean that women now have higher status than men, but that they are more independent than they were decades ago. They are no less reliant on their husbands for support. This has not changed the basic family order or women's status in the families, but it has changed family dynamics. People have to adjust their familial relationships carefully instead of relying on the hierarchical order. Because women today have independence, they are more likely to be aware of domestic injustices, to more personally experience the effects, and therefore to resist by committing suicide, fighting back, or walking away from the man.

All of these changes in modern Chinese families have produced both benefits and problems. On the one hand, they have brought freedom and dignity to people, especially to women; on the other hand, they have made domestic harmony more difficult to maintain. The family revolution in modern China has destabilized family politics and resulted in an unstable homeostasis that can easily fall out of balance.

Some classic feminist studies (Wolf 1972, 1985; Stacey 1983; Johnson 1983; Judd 1994) have found that the family in today's China remains patriarchal, and that the family revolution has reinforced rather than removed the traditional hierarchy. Recent studies, however, show that this argument is wrong, not only with regard to today's China but also for the period immediately following the foundation of the People's Republic in the 1950s. Yan Yunxiang convincingly tells us how a sense of individualism is increasing in the rural community (2003). Neil Diamant shows that the 1953 Marriage Law is far more effective in rural areas than the feminist authors have argued (2000). According to Yan and Diamant, modern Chinese women often take initiative in protecting their own rights, and the family revolution has especially improved their status. It is true that most Chinese families are still patrilineal, but we cannot conclude that domestic injustice is due to the patriarchal hierarchy. Li Xianyun, a female doctor of the Beijing Hui Long Guan

Hospital, once remarked to me, “it is too naïve to conclude that Chinese society is patriarchal simply because more women commit suicide.”<sup>8</sup>

Susan Okin talks a good deal about family justice (Okin 1989), but I cannot agree with her that family justice is of the same type as public justice. My argument about family injustice will be discussed in the three chapters that form Part II. In Chapter 3, I will examine three major kinds of familial love and how they are involved in suicide; in Chapter 4, I will examine family justice through three more complex stories. In Chapter 5, I will show how family life is related to the idea of fortune and the existential situation of Chinese people.

In Part III of this book, I will consider the idea of personhood and see how suicide is related to human dignity. For an individual, domestic justice means being treated with dignity. Hence suicide is often used as a way to pursue human dignity by resisting injustice. With this idea, we can understand domestic justice more deeply as well as having a better idea about mental illness in China.

In Chapter 6, I will examine how local people consider the suicides really caused by mental illnesses. Very differently than in the West, people do not “count” them as suicides, because in their eyes, suicide is a privilege of normal people who are able to resist. In the following three chapters, I will discuss three local psychological terms about suicide: “gambling for *qi*,” “loss of face,” and “thinking through.” Because both *qi* and face are important concepts of human dignity, suicide as gambling for *qi* and regaining face are seen as a way to attain dignity. But it is often an imperfect way to do that, and hence is understood as a result of “being unable to think through.”

Although suicide often happens to someone with mental illness, it is not understood as a negative result of mental illness. Both mental illness and suicide might be results of domestic injustice. Suicide, as a positive, though imperfect, way to resist the depressing situation, is not seen as resulting from mental illnesses. Underlying this is a culture very different than that of the West.

In the concluding chapters of Part IV, I will come back to public issues. Although I argue that suicide in China is a family problem in most cases, we cannot ignore its public significance. On the one hand, some suicides are caused by public injustice; on the other hand, domestic injustice in a larger scale is already a public issue.

In Chapter 10, I will discuss how domestic injustice becomes a public issue and the nature of the relationship between public justice and domestic justice. In Chapter 11, I will examine the available suicide prevention programs and some modern discourses about suicide in China.

An entire century has elapsed since the publication of Durkheim’s *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, and a great country is again witnessing a high suicide rate in her huge transformation and rapid development. Although both anomie and depression are of course to be found among these suicidal people, neither is able to provide a comprehensive explanation of suicide in this society. Because of fundamental differences in ideas about human nature as well as in those everyday practices that create these ideas, the phenomenon of suicide in China helps us to understand this extreme form of social suffering from an alternative perspective. Suicide in China is no less complex than it is in the West, and I am not so ambitious as to try

## 14 *Introduction*

to isolate a single idea to explain all cases of suicide. I only hope that by looking into the basic ideas of suicide in China, I can inquire into the condition of human existence in the modern era from a new perspective.

## 2 Two philosophies about suicide

As I remarked in Chapter 1, by studying suicide in today's China, I want to provide a new theory of suicide from a Chinese perspective. As a fundamental issue about the meaning of life, suicide is closely related to some basic philosophical ideas of human existence. Western suicidology is not appropriate to explain the Chinese phenomenon because the understanding of these ideas is different in China. Before digging deeper into the reality of Chinese society, I will examine the philosophies of suicide, both Western and Chinese.

### 2.1 Sociological and psychiatric studies of suicide

The most famous sociological study of suicide is doubtless Durkheim's *Suicide: A Study of Sociology*, in which the author argues that suicide is a social fact. The lack of social integration leads to egoistic suicide; too much social integration leads to altruistic suicide; and social crisis leads to anomic suicide, which is pervasive in modern society (Durkheim 1951). Although Durkheim sees suicide as a social phenomenon, it seems to him that suicide happens when society is not integrated to a proper degree. In other words, suicide is understood as a social fact because it happens when society does not work well. This has become the basic theory for most subsequent sociological studies on suicide.

Durkheim's method and theory were further developed by Halbwachs; this approach remains the mainstream one of the sociological study of suicide (Halbwachs 1978). Although many sociologists have tried to go beyond Durkheim's study, they "added virtually nothing of significance to Durkheim's theory" (Giddens 1971b: 55). People criticize its disregard for individual experience and immediate social context (Douglas 1967), its overly abstract concepts of social morality and classification (Gibbs and Martin 1964) and its oversimplification of cultural meaning (Douglas 1967; Atkinson 1978). Many works claiming to be more concrete than Durkheim's, however, are merely a kind of simplification or modification of Durkheim's theory (see Taylor 1982, 1990; Pickering and Walford 2000). The study done by Gibbs and Martin (1964), which attributes suicide to the lack of social integration, along with that by Henry and Short (1964), which attributes both suicide and homicide to external restraint, are among the most admirable attempts to go beyond Durkheim, but they have merely confirmed Durkheim's major ideas (Douglas 1967: 91; Giddens 1971b: 55).



Jack Douglas (1967) remarks that the ignorance of cultural meanings of suicide is a major shortcoming of almost all social studies on this topic since Durkheim. Some anthropological studies that emerged after Durkheim take cultural meaning into account while applying Durkheim's theory. For instance, the Durkheimian concept of "altruistic suicide" is widely used to explain suicides in non-Western societies. Leighton and Hughes's study of suicides among the Eskimos falls into this category (1971). Jeffreys' study of revenge suicides in Africa is another example (1971). Some studies (Firth 1971; Iga and Okara 1971; Bohannon 1967) show frameworks very different from the Durkheimian one. These studies, however, are quite locally oriented and can neither give us a historical picture nor explain the changes in suicide in a transforming society.

Another major trend, the psychiatric one, in a certain sense is now dominant in the study of suicide. The central idea in psychiatric theories on suicide is that suicide happens when an individual is considered to be mental ill. Long before the publication of Durkheim's book, suicide was considered to be a result of melancholy. The relationship between suicide and mental illness was confirmed by Esquirol, a great nineteenth-century French psychiatrist (Minois 1998: 320; Sprott 1961: 158). Today, most psychiatrists still believe that suicide is caused by depression and other mental illnesses. This is because suicide occurs in the cases of major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and some other mental disorders. The epidemiological correlation of suicide and mental illnesses is real; the debate is one about how mental illness should be considered, i.e., as a distal influence, an immediate cause, or even an outcome of some other health problems (Institute of Medicine 2002).

Psychoanalysis, although now not as influential as decades ago, has offered important perspectives in the study of suicide (Menninger 1938; Litman 1996; Hillman 1976). Although Freud did not write extensively on suicide, his idea of the death instinct, according to Litman (1996), was stimulated by his thought about the problem of suicide (Litman 1996). The best known psychoanalytic work on suicide is Karl Menninger's *Man Against Himself*. Menninger depicts suicide as the triumph of a death instinct (including the wish to kill, the wish to be killed, and the wish to die) over a life instinct (1938).

Nobody who studies suicide can be unaware of Edwin Shneidman, who has devoted decades to suicidology. In the 1950s, he argued that suicide is related to "post-self" (or post-ego), one's view of things after death (Shneidman and Farberow 1957; see also Shneidman 1964, 1974, 1994). Although nobody can really experience his or her own death, people sometimes have false thought about their afterlife. In an article co-authored by Shneidman and Farberow, it is argued that people who commit suicide have a kind of logic error. When someone thinks: "If anybody kills himself then he will get attention; I<sup>(s)</sup> [I as a subject] will kill myself; therefore I<sup>(o)</sup> [I as an object] will get attention," he confuses "I<sup>(s)</sup>" with "I<sup>(o)</sup>," that is, he has forgotten that he cannot enjoy the attention as a subject (Shneidman and Farberow 1957: 32). Later Shneidman uses "psychache" to interpret suicide, by which he means the pain of emotions (Shneidman 1993, 1996). "Post-self" and "psychache" are two important concepts in modern suicidology.

The psychopharmacology of suicide flourishes together with the revival of Kraepelin's biologically oriented psychiatry. In the 1950s, a neurotransmitter called serotonin was found and believed to be related to suicidal behaviors (Perlin 1975: 113–29; Kushner 1989: 82–3). This finding was confirmed by Marie Asberg in Stockholm and Herman van Praag in the Netherlands in the 1970s when they announced separately but simultaneously that a low concentration of serotonin was linked with clinical depression, the condition seen as the main cause of suicide (Institute of Medicine 2002: 123–7; Kushner 1989: 83–4). These scholars seemed to take for granted that suicide was linked with depression, and their explanation of suicide was merely a logical extension of the relationship between serotonin and depression. In fact, no substantial biological cause has been found to really correlate with suicide. Yet because suicide can at times cluster in families, there is at present an active search for a genitive basis of suicide, even one that is independent of depressive disorder.

In *Reducing Suicide*, a comprehensive report composed by a committee of experts in the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, about suicide and its studies, the authors list more than ten types of psychiatric/substance use disorders related to suicide (Institute of Medicine 2002: 70–100). They argue that “almost all psychiatric disorders, including alcohol and substance disorders, are associated with an increased risk of suicide” (*ibid* 70). In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition (*DSM-IV*), suicidal ideation is even used as a criterion to diagnose major depressive disorder (*DSM-IV* 1994: 327). In a certain sense, this is greatly related to the idea of “disorder” in psychiatry, which in turn is an example of the general idea of “disorder” in modern Western culture.

Though seemingly different, the sociology of suicide and the psychiatry of it share one important assumption: suicide happens in a situation in which either society or the person in question is in “disorder.”

## 2.2 The state of suicide

Maurice Halbwachs, Durkheim's student, realizes that the social and psychopathological studies of suicide do not conflict with each other. They are, rather, complementary (Halbwachs 1978: 263). In his study of suicide typology, Anthony Giddens links different types of suicide to different psychological disorders (Giddens 1971c). Even Durkheim himself never denies the mental disorders of suicidal people, although he does not agree that these are definite causes for suicide.<sup>1</sup> This idea helps us to further explore the cultural assumptions shared by the two approaches.

A basic idea in the psychological understanding of suicide is that one is likely to commit suicide under certain conditions that are identified as being psychiatrically disordered: the death instinct, depression, the lack of serotonin, the logical fallacy, psychache, or other “disorders.” According to Durkheim's approach, which emphasizes the social dimension, the suicide rate also increases under certain disordered conditions: when social solidarity or collective consciousness does not work well. Therefore, one commits suicide either when the individual or the

society is in disorder. Both psychiatrists and sociologists presume that suicide is an abnormal behavior, and underpinning their opinions is an assumption that can be summarized as: self-preservation is a basic instinct, therefore if someone does not want to survive, there must be something wrong with that person or their society. Even in the West, this seemingly self-evident idea was not established as a major explanatory principle until several centuries ago.

Psychiatric ideas about suicide did not come to be central in the West until the Enlightenment. In the late medieval and early modern eras, suicide (*fel de se*) was punished in many countries as being both an impious and an illegal act. It was claimed that suicide did harm not only to God, but also to the king and to the state (Blackstone 1899: Book IV, Chapter 14; quoted from Dublin 1963: 141–2). In the Tudor dynasty of England, the corpse of a suicide was ritually punished and buried in a shameful way, but suicides with mental illness were exceptional (Minois 1998; MacDonald and Murphy 1990; Dublin 1963; Fedden 1938; Institute of Medicine 2002: 23–5). Hence suicide was politically illegal and religiously impious, but was not viewed as being medically abnormal.

In *A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*, Thomas Hobbes argues that although suicide is a crime similar to homicide in theory, nobody with a sane mind would kill himself or herself. Hence suicide must be caused by madness and should be exempted from legal punishment (Hobbes 1997). This argument offers the philosophical ground for suicide to be linked to mental illness. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton sees suicide as being caused by melancholy and urges the government to stop punishing the deceased so cruelly (Burton 1927: 368–74 [Partition I, Sect 4]). This philosophical understanding and medical discussion transformed people's ideas about suicide. In England of the sixteenth century, only relatively few cases of suicide were believed to have been caused by mental illness; these were immune from posthumous punishment (Minois 1998: 85). With the work of Burton and some others, “the idea that suicidal tendencies might have a medical and somatic explanation slowly began to appear” in the seventeenth century (*ibid* 139). “In 1735 all suicides were declared mad” (*ibid* 297). The legal punishment of suicide gradually disappeared, and “by the end of the Enlightenment it had largely given way to a secularized view that suicide was a problem that lay somewhere between society and individual psychology” (*ibid* 301). Therefore, suicide was not seen as being social or mentally disordered in the West until the modern era, although it was seen as illegal and immoral a long time before that.

The debate between doctors and jurists in the seventeenth century seems to have been the predecessor of the debate between modern psychiatrists and sociologists. Although Hobbes and Burton do not agree that suicidal people should be punished, their basic ideas about suicide are not radically different from those of the jurists. Hobbes admits that suicide is of course a crime if intentionally committed, but he argues that nobody sane could do that intentionally. When Burton argues that suicide should not be punished, he does not deny the legality of the punishment. The fact that suicide is caused by melancholy does not make it legal. He argues that melancholy itself is a temptation of the devil. Suicides should be immune

from punishment because these people would suffer enough in hell (Burton 1927: 373–4). The various attitudes toward suicide can be summarized in Thomas Aquinas's famous statements: suicide is against nature, society, and God.<sup>2</sup> These three aspects established the basic thrust of modern suicidology.

Hobbes, Burton, Freud and Durkheim all agree that there is a certain abnormal condition under which one is prone to commit suicide. Agamben's ideas of *homo sacer* and bare life are very helpful in understanding this condition (Agamben 1998). According to Agamben, *homo sacer*, originally a legal term in ancient Rome, refers to a kind of human being who can be killed legally but cannot be sacrificed. The life of *homo sacer* is bare life, deprived of all kinds of social impacts. Agamben regards these ideas as the basic assumption about human beings and life in the modern West, expressed in the Hobbesian "state of nature," in which everyone can be killed by others. Because everyone can be legally killed in the state of nature, a Leviathan has to be established for the people's preservation (Hobbes 1996: 117). In the social state, although citizens cannot be killed legally, they are still *homo sacer* and cannot survive without the protection of the state. According to Agamben, some medical ideas such as brain death are closely related to the notions of *homo sacer* and bare life (Agamben 1998: 136–65). Agamben is very insightful in laying out the basic ideas of life and personhood in the modern West. The condition under which one is likely to commit suicide is very similar to "bare life" or "the state of nature," in which one can be killed by oneself.<sup>3</sup> Freud and Menninger identify such a condition as the state of "instincts," which should be overcome by social norms. Durkheim sees it as the state of anomie, which should be conquered by collective consciousness. For some modern psychiatrists, this is the state of serotonin imbalance, depression, bipolar disease, alcoholism, or other disorders, which can be controlled by medication. In sum, the state of suicide is a state deprived of social norms, rationality, or political control, and a normal person is someone who is able to control this state by working with social norms or through the use of rationality. The logic behind these theories is similar to that in the Hobbesian Leviathan, and we will see this more clearly by examining Durkheim's ideas about human nature and suicide.

Bare life, or life in the state of nature, is supposed to be a life without any social meaning. Greatly influenced by Rousseau, whose theory about the social contract is based on the idea of the state of nature, Durkheim's emphasis on society is also based on his understanding of human nature, or the nature of man without any social meaning: "It is therefore from the individual nature that we must start and to it that we must return ... But in order to arrive at this natural man, we must put aside everything within us that is a product of social existence" (Durkheim 1960: 68). Durkheim, however, does not totally accept Rousseau's idea that natural men are noble savages. His own ideas about the state of nature stand in between those of Hobbes and Rousseau: "perhaps if Rousseau had granted a Hobbesian state of war we might understand why, with a view to ending it, men should organize into a body and go so far as to recast their original nature" (*ibid* 137). The Durkheimian state of nature is both a state of nobility and a state of war. Society, therefore, should help people both to "recast their original state" of war and to return to the

nobility in such a state. The dual significances again remind us of the two features of *homo sacer*.

The Durkheimian social theory is the theoretical origin for anthropologists and sociologists to understand some seemingly natural phenomena as social facts, and it is his great contribution to attribute suicide to social facts rather than psychological ones. Ironically, underlying his sociological understanding of suicide is an assumption about the asocial nature of human beings.<sup>4</sup> Despite his emphasis on social and collective facts, he never interrogates the idea of universal human nature.

In an article entitled “The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions,” Durkheim gives us his basic ideas about human nature. First, he accepts the universal duality of human nature: “He has, in fact, everywhere conceived himself as being formed of two radically heterogeneous beings: the body and the soul” (Durkheim 1960: 326). He further explains the duality by way of the sacred – profane dichotomy: “The duality of our nature is thus only a particular case of that division of things into the sacred and the profane that is the foundation of all religions, and it must be explained on the basis of the same principles” (*ibid* 335). He concludes: “In brief, this duality corresponds to the double existence that we lead concurrently: the one purely individual and rooted in our organisms, the other social and nothing but an extension of society” (*ibid* 337). For Durkheim, human nature consists not only of biological instincts, but also of internalized social facts. The latter constitute the sacred part in human nature. The complication arises from the fact that, although this sacred part originates from society, it is already seen as a part of human nature. As a part of human nature, it exists in every culture in the world, although its particular form might vary. Every person in every culture has a biological part and a social part to his or her nature. Durkheim admits that people in different cultures might regard different things as sacred, but he does not imagine there might be a culture in which human nature does not consist of these two parts. Although he introduces the idea of social fact to explain human nature, what Durkheim does is replace the soul with the internalized social fact. The biological and social parts become dual features of the Durkheimian state of nature.

He applies this understanding of human nature to the study of suicide:

To be sure in so far as we are solidary with the group and share its life, we are exposed to their influence; but so far as we have a distinct personality of our own we rebel against and try to escape them. Since everyone leads this sort of double existence simultaneously, each of us has a double impulse ... Two antagonistic forces confront each other. One, the collective force, tries to take possession of the individual; the other, the individual force, repulses it. (Durkheim 1951: 318–19)

He further argues,

No moral idea exists which does not combine in proportions varying with the society involved, egoism, altruism, and a certain anomy. For social life

assumes both that the individual has a certain personality, that he is ready to surrender it if the community requires, and finally, that he is to a certain degree sensitive to ideas of progress. This is why there is no people among whom these three currents of opinion do not co-exist, bending men's inclinations in three different and even opposing directions. Where they offset one another, the moral agent is in a state of equilibrium which shelters him against any thought of suicide. But let one of them exceed a certain strength to the detriment of the others, and as it becomes individualized, it also becomes suicidogenetic, for the reasons assigned. (*ibid* 321)

Although Durkheim's *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* is famous for its emphasis on social fact, he actually sees sociality as a part of human nature, which still exists when society is not well integrated. Therefore, society works well only when the different parts offset each other. When one of them stands out, individuals in a given society are likely to commit suicide. Too great an emphasis on sociality might also lead to suicide, as a society that over-stresses sociality is not truly a well-integrated society, but one in which the social part of human nature stands out.

Durkheim's understanding of human nature shows that the state of nature is not "natural" or "bare" at all. Even sociality can be a part of human nature. Although "bare life" is supposed to be devoid of social meanings, vulnerability and sacredness are two salient features of natural state or bare life. Hobbes' idea of the state of war explores the former, Rousseau's idea of the noble savage explores the latter, and Durkheim's idea is a mixture of the two. These two central concepts are by no means asocial, but rather are Western ideas about human beings. Because of these two concepts' importance to the understanding of human nature, suicide also carries dual significances.

Although suicide is seen as a sin in Christianity and a disease in modern psychiatry, it is never dismissed as purely negative. According to Augustine, suicidal people are sinful not because they are evil people, but because they have lost the hope of being forgiven by God (Augustine 1998: 40 [1, 27]). On the one hand, people are supposed to negate themselves for the sins they have committed, especially the original sin; on the other hand, they should not be so self-negative as to destroy their lives. Although suicide is a sin, it is also the extreme form of self-negation and sometimes even a way to purge one's sins, to seek love, glory, even faith. This paradox is especially sharp in modern debates about suicide. Almost at the same time that John Sym published *Life's Preservative Against Self-Killing*, the first book to argue systematically against suicide, John Donne's *Biathanotos*, the first theoretical defense of suicide, was published posthumously. Although Locke argues that suicide is dangerous to liberty (Glenn 1984), Hume defends the idea that one has the freedom to commit suicide (Hume 1964: 406). While Lady Macbeth is seen as an evil figure, Romeo and Juliet are glorified for their love and death. The debates about suicide are very intense, even now. "To be or not to be?" is still a relevant question.

Given Durkheim's idea of the duality of human nature, this is of course also a question for him. Durkheim remarks toward the end of his book that it is both

impossible and unnecessary to have a society without any suicide. He offers two different reasons. The first is that suicide is a safety valve for any given society:

It is a safety-valve which is useful to leave open. In short, suicide would have the very great advantage of ridding us of a number of useless or harmful persons without social intervention, and hence in the most simple and economical way. (Durkheim 1951: 341)

Then he remarks that suicide can also be noble and praiseworthy:

Indeed, it is wrong to believe that unmixed joy is the normal state of sensibility. Man could not live if he were entirely impervious to sadness ... Too cheerful a morality is a loose morality; it is appropriate only to decadent peoples and is found only among them. Life is often harsh, treacherous or empty. Collective sensibility must reflect this side of existence, too ... There must be groups of individuals who more especially represent this aspect of the collective mood. But the part of the population which plays this role is necessarily that where ideas of suicide easily take root. (ibid 365–6)

According to Agamben, though at the margin of modern society, *homo sacer* defines human nature in society. Without the notions of *homo sacer* and bare life, modern society could not exist at all. For Durkheim, both useless or harmful people and noble ones are prone to commit suicide. The “useless” people are those whose biological instinct stands out, and the “noble” people are those whose sociality or sacred human nature stands out. These two features correspond to the two features in his understanding of human nature, a profound mixture of Hobbes and Rousseau.

Therefore, both the sociology and psychiatry of suicide in the West are based on Western ideas about human nature. This does not mean, however, that all suicide in the West falls neatly into these frameworks. Regarding such a complex phenomenon as suicide, social reality is always more subtle than theories. We can only say that these are ideal-types about suicide in the West.

### 2.3 *Ming* and family life

Similar to its Western counterpart, suicide in China is also about a profound paradox between good and bad in human existence. This paradox, however, does not lie in their bare life, but in their family life and personhood. It is a paradox between family politics and familial interdependence, namely between conflict and love.

There is no equivalent for “bare life” in Chinese culture. The basic Chinese term for life is “*ming*.” Yet another meaning of this term is fortune. Hence “*ming*” combines the ideas of life and fortune. While death signifies the end of one’s life (*ming*), to live is not merely to preserve one’s biological being, but to maintain good fortune. Death is the extreme form of bad fortune. To preserve life is to maintain the basic level of good fortune, but nobody can live merely by preserving his

or her life. Though interdependent, the two meanings of “*ming*” are sometimes at odds. Staying alive does not necessarily imply a good fortune, and sometimes one might risk one’s life to pursue a better fortune. From the Chinese perspective, “to live” means to maintain a good “*ming*” in both senses.

The most idiomatic expression of “to live”<sup>5</sup> is *guo ri zi*, which literally means “to consume days,” that is, to maintain a fortune in one’s life-span. However, just as “bare life” does not merely mean life as a bare being, we cannot understand *guo ri zi* simply as the consuming of a life day by day. There is a more profound cultural significance of this term.

Shiga Shuzo, a famous Japanese scholar on Chinese law, tells a story: When a Japanese researcher interviewed a Chinese peasant, he asked a question, “If I am the head of a family and Mr Ren is my first son, after my death Mr Ren would become the next family head, what do you call such a thing?” “To manage the family.” Apparently unsatisfied with such an answer, the researcher wanted a more formal term and further inquired, “What do you usually term ‘to manage the family’?” The peasant said, “To live (*guo ri zi*).” The researcher was disappointed and did not ask more about this term (Shiga 1967: 121). But it seems to me that the interviewee could not give a better answer. For a Chinese person, to live is nothing but to manage a family, that is, to maintain a fortune in family life, because the family is the existential condition of one’s life.

Everyone’s life-span is supposed to pass from birth, through coming-of-age, marriage, parenting, getting old, and finally to death. All of these happen in the family. A fortunate person is one who passes all these stages and fulfills all the duties well. One who fails in any stage – for instance, fails to take care of his or her parents, does not marry, or dies early – is unfortunate. A happy person is one who has taken good care of his or her parents until their death, marries well, has promising children who have established their families. When all these are accomplished, one has satisfied all the duties and could die. A decent funeral would consummate such a person’s life.

It is well documented in some classical works of sinological anthropology that the family is very central to the social life in China (e.g., Fei Xiaotong 1975; Freedman 1971; Margery Wolf 1972). The family is of primary importance not only because interpersonal relationship begins in the family, but also because it is in the family that people maintain a fortune.

Although Professor Shiga does not catch the term *guo ri zi*, he incisively points out that a Chinese family is an extension of the personality of the deceased. If there are always sons in every generation, and sacrifices for ancestors continue, and the property is inherited from generation to generation, the family is preserved and the life of the deceased is seen as continuing (Shiga 1967: 119–20). Hence we often hear expressions like “husband and wife are one person,” “father and son are one person,” “brothers are one person” (*ibid* 128–36).

Chinese families of today have changed significantly from the traditional families that Shiga studies, but the basic idea is still similar. In a nuclear family of today’s China, people do not care how many generations the lineage might extend, but the members of one family still see each other as a part of their lives. Without



a harmonious family, nobody can be really happy. Everyone is dependent upon everyone else in the family. In order to live a good life, one is obliged to manage a family well and to please all family members.

Before getting married, a child is dependent on his or her parents. The child's education and marriage are important issues in every family. When he or she is married, and has his or her own family, he or she becomes the head of a nuclear family. Marriage is the sign for one's coming-of-age, since many duties cannot be fulfilled without a marriage. Only a married person can live his or her own family life and shape his or her own fortune. He or she can live a good life only if his or her family is harmonious and wealthy enough. When an unmarried person is staying in his or her parents' family home, he or she has not begun to live in the true sense, because he or she is not yet responsible for a family. In the rural area, if a person never marries, people might see him or her as being less than a full person.

Most Chinese people live in nuclear families today, but married children still hold close relationships with their parents. All children are responsible for taking care of their parents, especially sons. Sometimes parents-in-law live in the same house with one son's family; sometimes, although they live in two houses, they interact with each other very frequently. In either case, there is still a certain kind of familial relationship among members of these different nuclear families.

Although family members depend on each other, they are not one person after all. On the one hand, family members are supposed to be attached to each other; on the other hand, everyone wants to be more powerful in a family. Familial interdependence can never dissolve family conflicts. In certain sense, it even strengthens and intensifies conflicts. People do not forgive the mistake of a family member only because they love him or her. Sometimes it is because they love their relatives that they have greater expectations for them, and there will be more conflicts when such expectations are not fulfilled. Family love is always entangled with family conflicts. In other words, in family life, the good is always entangled with the bad. This is a significant paradox in the human condition as understood by Chinese people. Suicide is often a result of this type of paradox.

Family life would be impossible without love. Familial interdependence, however, is maintained not merely by psychological affection. It is fulfilled and developed in a complex process of family politics. People should show and even learn how to love their beloved in family life. On the one hand, familial love is the beginning of family life, since a family could not exist if family members were not attached to each other; on the other hand, a more reasonable love is also the end of family politics. By striking a power balance, family members not only expect love from each other, but also know what they should give to each other. When there is such a reasonable love, the family is harmonious and domestic justice is maintained.

Although most people are living a life of fortune in the family, not everyone can have a happy life, since to live is not an easy thing. People often say something like: "I am only living aimlessly," or "Whatever you do, you will spend some decades." This implies that one has no other aim except consuming days, as if one

is ambitious to the least degree and aims at nothing beyond making the basic living. It can also mean that one has no clear idea about how to live a good life, but only about how to stay in whatever condition one happens to be. This is supposed to be the humblest way to stay alive. It does not mean, however, that the person in question does not care about his or her well-being. He or she is still trying to make life as enjoyable and dignified as possible. One cannot stay alive merely by preserving a biological life. It is by maintaining a certain degree of fortune that one can consume days as a human being does. For instance, Wangshu, an old woman who had a really poor family, uttered the sentence "I am only living aimlessly." Although she seemed not to be ambitious, she cared very much about how her husband and sons treated her. When her husband once disobeyed her words, she attempted suicide.

The same Wangshu also uttered the sentence "Whatever you do, you will spend some decades." This means that nothing is more important than to stay alive for some decades, and hence one should not desire too much. Whatever one enjoys in life, the only important thing is the fact that one enjoys life itself, i.e., the several decades. Hence what distinguishes a happy person's life is either the length or quality of life. Wangshu, who was already 80 when I interviewed her, denied that she had enjoyed a good life though she was still healthy. It is not that the more days one consumes, the happier one is. One can be happy only by making one's life worthy and dignified.

One has some control in shaping one's family, but its harmony is subject to fate. Although people can control their own behavior in most cases, nobody can control that of others. Wangshu said she was unfortunate mainly because she could not get along with her three sons and three daughters-in-law. Whether one has good family members is subject to fate. One can neither choose a good child nor predict whether a child will act with filial piety in the future. A child cannot choose his or her parents either. Similarly, when people first get married, they can never be sure what their spouses are really like. Even if a woman knows that her husband is good, she cannot know whether her mother-in-law is good. If one happens to be in a harmonious family, then one is lucky; if one happens to have difficult relatives, then one can only blame fate. Even a harmonious family is not free from conflicts, and such conflicts can induce people to commit suicide.

Although fate plays an important role in family life, nobody can passively wait for good fortune. It is crucial for people to make their own good luck out of a given situation and changing fortune. Although Wangshu seemed hopeless about a better fortune, she actually was making great efforts to flatter her children and harmonize their families. She could not control her fortune, but she could actively strive for a better fortune. In other words, she was very serious about coping with her sons and daughters-in-law and making the family as harmonious as possible, though not very successful.

In sum, for a Chinese person, to live means to take initiative to seek good fortune and personal happiness by acting well in interpersonal relationships, especially those in the family. One cannot avoid unexpected calamities, and the government is responsible for preventing misfortunes such as war and crime. In order to

maintain good fortune, Chinese people are expected to establish good relations in their families.

## 2.4 *Qi* and “behaving as a person”

When maintaining good fortune, people also have to *make* themselves worthy persons. The idea of “behaving as a person” can be best understood in relation to “*qi*.”

Given the rich meanings of “*qi*,” it is hard to be translated into a single English word. Philosophically, it means the origin and essence of the universe. Psychologically related to dignity and anger, it is similar to “spiritedness (*thymos*)” in the *Republic* of Plato.<sup>6</sup> Medically, *qi* is a vital fluid in the human body, encompassing air, breath and vigor.

Many scholars who study Chinese medicine have inquired into the ontological and social implications of “*qi*” (e.g., Hsu 1999: 235; Furth 1999: 21; Lemire 2000). For instance, Diane Lemire describes “*qi*”:

The source of this generative power lies in the ‘heavenly *qi*’ which is transferred and ‘embodied as human primordial *qi*’; it is the source of life and its absence means death ... The *qi* must flow unhindered within the human body to ensure the natural process of its normal generative functions throughout the life cycle, including death; if ignored, stagnations and blockages of *qi* and blood could lead to serious and often fatal conditions. (Lemire 2000: 91)

“A person lives only for *qi*” (*ren huo yi kou qi*) is a popular Chinese saying. “*Qi*” is a central element in the Chinese understanding of personhood. Medically, to breathe one’s last breath (*yan qi*) implies death. One can survive only by having “*qi*” flow smoothly inside. Psychologically, *qi*, or spiritedness, is the essence of one’s dignity. One is supposed to be respected and have vigorous *qi*, and a spineless person (who does not have vigorous *qi*) is seen as an incomplete person. Generally speaking, nobody can survive without *qi*.

I define “behaving as a person (*zuo ren*),” the central idea about personhood in China, as “making oneself a respectable person by cultivating, taming and defending one’s *qi*.” It implies that one is not born a full person, and that everyone has to make themselves into a worthy human being. Here are two examples about how people talk about “behaving as a person.”

Shilan, a woman who had a very bad relationship with her mother-in-law, complained about the old woman: “You see, she does not consider herself as a person, and how can her children consider her as a person?” (9.2). Shilan’s mother-in-law was already very old, but according to some villagers, she was often unreasonable. This was why her children did not consider her as a respectable person.

Bu Ju, a man who was greatly shamed in the Cultural Revolution, was thinking about suicide. While hesitant about whether he should commit suicide, he decided to see how other people treated him: “If people still take me as a person, I should not die. If they despise me, I could die later.” When he found that his relatives

did not despise him, he decided to live. He lost face for being blamed in public, but so long as people considered him a decent person, he would have the courage to keep going. Face, a signifier of one's dignity in society, is seen as an essential part of personhood.

In the idea of "*homo sacer*," human beings are understood as being both sacred and vulnerable by nature. Hence Durkheim argues that the universal duality in human nature is responsible for suicide. In the Chinese idea about personhood or humanity, "*qi*" does not have an inherent significance of good or evil. *Qi*, as the fundamental element of humanity, is necessary for one's life, but it cannot make anyone good or bad itself. Yet there is no *qi* unless it flows in a certain way; it is a certain mode of the flowing of *qi* that makes a person good or bad.<sup>7</sup> "To behave as a person" is simply to make *qi* flow smoothly, which is seen as the natural and best state of *qi*. The "natural state" of a person is not a state devoid of all social colors, but a state of perfect harmony and spiritedness. Because of this idea of a "natural person," nobody is born in a "natural" state, but rather each has to make himself or herself into a natural or full person. Hence everyone must try to behave as a person.

Spiritedness and harmony are both important for full personhood. One is supposed to be angry when one's dignity or face is challenged, otherwise one would be despised for lack of *qi*. Some heroes in Chinese history are praised for their spiritedness (*qi jie*) because they prefer suicide to a shameless life. However, if someone is always angry whenever hurt by something, especially in the family, he or she will be seen as a bad-tempered person without a proper cultivation of *qi*. One is supposed to be tolerant in family affairs, but too much tolerance will be debasing. Hence a full person is supposed to be dignified and tolerant at the same time, i.e., he or she should have both strong and harmonious *qi*.

The cultivation of *qi* is not only a spiritual process of self-exercising, but also a political process of interacting with other people. Without interacting with other people in proper ways, one cannot be worthy, respected and generous. Hence "behaving as a person" is also about interacting with other people. An unmarried person is not supposed to be a full person, because he or she has not experienced that interpersonal relationship that is necessary for full personhood. In local society, marriage is a sociological sign for one's personhood, because only a married person will have his or her own family and live his or her own family life.

People often take for granted that a child is not a full person. Children are still in the process of becoming persons. As incomplete persons, children are allowed to do things that adults are not allowed to do, and some words that are offensive for describing an adult are not when describing a child.

Similarly, people at the margin of society – such as the mentally ill, criminals, prostitutes, and bachelors – are not seen as full persons, because they have trouble marrying and establishing families. When talking about the suicide of Chaoyuan, a retarded man in Langao, his cousin said that the villagers did not consider him as a full person (Section 6.3). Chaoyuan was not a child, but he was cognitively and affectively limited and did not marry, and hence people did not regard him as a person. Bachelors (*guang gun*) often fall into the same category and are also

seen as non-persons. According to Bernard Gallin, in Taiwan, husbands in uxoriolocal marriages are also seen as “incomplete persons” (Gallin 1966: 156). Jonathan Spence remarks that a castrated man was not seen as a “whole person” in Shandong in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) (Spence 1978: 107). In Section 4.1, we will see that prostitutes are also seen as non-persons. All these people are at the margin of family order and cannot live their own family life. Hence they are not seen as full persons.

Therefore, the most important sociological mark for becoming a full person is family life. A husband is seen as the head of the family, and his wife, its manager. The families of their parents are not seen as their own; the newlyweds cannot live their own lives of fortune unless they establish their own families. They are masters of their own families and should take care of themselves and their dependents, including children and aged parents. They are responsible for the well-being of their own families (*dang jia*). In most cases, one can become a full person only in one’s own family.

Because some strategies of “behaving as a person” are seen as necessary to one’s becoming respected, they are regarded as “ways,” “principles,” or “reasons” for behaving as a person. Nevertheless, if some people make themselves respected via an unconventional way, although they are immoral, they might still enjoy being respected as full persons and have vigorous *qi*. Just as Wolf remarks, a successful woman “must learn not to stay within” the rules, “but to appear to stay within them; to manipulate them, but not to appear to be manipulating them; to teach them to her children, but not to depend on her children for her protection” (1972: 40–1). Whether one can behave well as a person is a matter of moral experience, but whether one follows certain rules is a matter of ethical discourse.<sup>8</sup> Although people use ethical terms to describe their situations, what they really care about is personal dignity and happiness, which is not about good and evil. Ethical discourse is used as moral capital to win a better status. Generally speaking, people who follow these regularities<sup>9</sup> and principles behave well as persons, and society respects them for following them; but the “regularities” of behaving as a person are not embodied in the notion of personhood, although they often accompany it. Therefore, people who follow the ways of behaving as a person might not enjoy others’ respect or have vigorous *qi*. The tension between one’s efforts to behave as a person and the personhood one really enjoys is often a cause for domestic conflicts. People who had attempted suicide often complained to me: “Whatever I do, I cannot become a person. Why do I survive without being treated as a person?” Behaving as a person is not only about ethics within and outside the family, but also about politics in everyday life.

One becomes a full person only after establishing a family, but behaving as a person is by no means confined to family life. Especially in modern China, behaving as a person is aimed at making one both respectable in society and happy in the family. To establish a family is only a necessary stage for becoming a full person. Although the essential part of behaving as a person is to play one’s roles well in the family, one is not a full person without being respected by the community and society.

Psychologically, people regard themselves as persons and also want other people to respect them as persons. Sociologically, only a married and normal person is qualified to be a person. Such a person, however, does not naturally enjoy vigorous *qi* and must make himself or herself a respectable person, and this is the ethical significance of “behaving as a person.” Although a morally good person is seen as a full person, one must fully make use of one’s moral capital to make oneself a person: namely, one must not only be a good person, but also appear to be good. This is the political significance of “behaving as a person.” The multiple dimensions of personhood intersect and constitute the essential meaning of happiness, good luck and dignity for an individual in Chinese culture. Meanwhile, these multiple meanings of personhood sometimes also conflict with each other. Someone who psychologically regards himself or herself as a full person might not be regarded as a full person sociologically. Such conflicts often lead to suicide.

Family life and personhood are interdependent. The former describes the existential condition of a Chinese person, and the latter represents the basic dignity in one’s life. Establishing and managing the family is crucial for both. There are some profound paradoxes in both ideas. Love and hatred (or complaint) are often entangled in family politics, and harmony and spiritedness are also often at odds. Chinese people are sometimes trapped in a paradox between good and bad and commit suicide. The paradoxes involved, however, are very different from the Western ones based on the duality in human nature.



## **Part II**

# **Domestic justice**





## 3 Familial love

From a Chinese perspective, family is the existential situation of life, and it consists of several basic relationships. Love between husband and wife is the primary relationship; parents' love of their children, and children's filial piety are two other basic relationships. Further family relationships, such as that between siblings, that between parents-in-law and a daughter-in-law, and that between grandparents and grandchildren, are all derived from these three relationships.

The three basic family relationships, however, are not only three attachments, but also three political relationships. One should not only love one's family members, but also treat them fairly. When these relationships do not involve fair treatment, suicide might occur.

### 3.1 Conjugal love

Yan Yunxiang observes incisively: "the horizontal conjugal tie has replaced the vertical parent-son relationship as the central axis of family relations in most households – nuclear and stem households alike" (2003:109). The emphasis of young people's autonomy and romantic love is a central part in the family revolution of modern China. Now sometimes the term *guo ri zi* refers to nothing but the life between a couple.

The notion of romantic love is also becoming more popular in rural areas, but older people often warn young people: "Be careful and follow your parents' advice when looking for your partners. Romantic love cannot bring good fortune to you." In spite of these warnings, more and more young people are falling in love with each other, getting married, and facing uncertain fortunes in their family lives. Now even the most stubborn parents seldom openly oppose their children's romantic love, although they worry about their future.

The marriage between Hefang and Kang Hui is a famous case of romantic love in Gouyi. When complaining to me about her husband, Hefang told me how she had attempted suicide:

"I attempted suicide when my husband was beating me. Now I regret having married him. We got to know each other when I was an actress and Kang Hui was an electrician in a theatrical troupe. Once I was seriously ill, and all the

other actors were on an outing. Kang Hui did not join them, but stayed with me and even washed my quilt. I was really touched by his kindness. Some people saw that we were often together and guessed we were in love. Since he was more than 10 years older than I was, those people were curious about our relationship. I said, 'Why can't I marry him?' If I was not provoked by them, I would never have married a man like him.

"Later when our troupe disbanded, we planned to get married. My parents were against our marriage. My mother said, 'Don't come back any more if you marry him.' Well, I would not come back. I finally married him despite their objections. I did not return to my natal family until several years later. Perhaps I would not have married so early if my mother had not objected to the marriage. I wanted to show my mother that he could be a good match for me.

"Ten days after I had a big quarrel with my mother, I held a wedding ceremony with Kang Hui. Nobody in my natal family came. He was kind to me at first and treated me like a little girl. As a good-tempered man, he always soothed me tenderly when I was unhappy. Sometimes he said, 'Just beat me when you are angry.' At first I only tapped him gently, but after I gave birth to my son, I sometimes really wanted to beat him. After we had been married for a long time, neither of us cared about each other any more.

"My husband is not a capable person and could not earn much money. I am often angry with that. He never makes a good plan and often wastes money on useless things. He is fond of smoking and always buys expensive cigarettes. I feel disgusted when he smokes in the room, and we often quarrel over that. Actually the first time that I really beat him was due to his smoking.

"Since he has some bad hobbies and is not good at earning money, our relationship has become worse. Now he is working in Wang Qumeng's company<sup>1</sup> in Beijing and earns 20 *yuan* per day. My son and my daughter are attending school, and how can his money be enough for them? If I had two daughters instead of one son and one daughter, of course I would have divorced him.

"He often goes out to drink and does not care about me. Once he drank a lot and fell asleep. When I returned home after playing mahjong, I found there were a lot of chicken droppings in the room. I was very angry and beat him. He jumped up and was also enraged. Holding my hair, he beat me violently. I grasped a bottle of sleeping pills and swallowed them. He was scared and sent me to the hospital. He promised that he would never fight back even if I beat him.

"After that we still quarrel with each other, and I often think about suicide. When I wanted to buy sleeping pills, however, the sellers refuse to sell me too many, since they know I once attempted suicide. Hence I can buy only ten pills each time. I have bought several times and now have accumulated 120 pills. I have threatened that I would take them again if he were bad to me. I will not drink pesticide, because I hate its smell."

I asked her whether she really wanted to divorce, and Hefang said, "No. Although sometimes I also think about that, I cannot really divorce him. We will consume a

whole life anyway (*yi hun jiu shi yi bei zi*), and I don't want to leave him."

I interviewed Hefang in the summer of 2000. When I talked about her with other villagers, they said that Hefang was not a good wife and always bullied her husband, and that Kang Hui was an honest and kind man. He seldom fought back when Hefang beat him, but nobody could be always tolerant. He could not remain silent when Hefang pushed him too hard.

The conflict between Kang Hui and Hefang seemed not as serious as in other cases. Nevertheless, their relationship was not that simple. When I came to Gouyi again in 2003, I heard that Hefang was behaving even more unreasonably. Kang Hui dared not fight back, but it was rumored that he sometimes went whoring in the county seat. Whenever I met Kang Hui, he was always busy working. I could not imagine how such a silent and honest person could do that.

Someone commented on Hefang's dilemma, "People in love are often blind, but family life is something very different from romantic love. They cannot see clearly the lover's faults and will be disappointed when they really live a family life. In marriage, they have to face many trivial things and complex interpersonal relationships in everyday life. In the case of matchmaking, however, one is more reasonable and thinks carefully about the background, personalities, and defects of the spouse, so it is easier for one to find a good match. What is more, love is flexible and always changing, and everything is different when life is not so romantic. When Hefang fell in love with Kang Hui, everyone else knew that they were extremely different from each other and could not live a life of fortune; but Hefang was in love and totally blind. She could not think about it at all." Many people agree that romantic love blinded Hefang and contributed to the problems in their family. It seems their analysis makes much sense, because Hefang's attitude toward Kang Hui changed considerably after they got married. In order to understand this issue further, however, we should see how romantic love affected their power games.

In the power structure in this family, both the husband and the wife had certain moral capital, and neither was in an obviously disadvantageous position. In the eyes of Hefang's parents, Kang Hui could not be a good husband for their daughter, because she was much younger than he. Hefang married Kang Hui at the price of losing contact with her natal family. Expecting that Kang Hui would be a good husband, Hefang disregarded all their objections. Unfortunately, although Kang Hui was kind to her and worked very hard, he was not good at earning money and had some habits that Hefang disliked. What happened in their family confirmed her parents' objections. Since she lost much by marrying Kang Hui, Hefang believed that by marrying she was doing him a big favor. Kang Hui let her down because he did not live up to her expectations for earning a good living. Kang Hui's inability granted Hefang the right to blame him. Hefang held enough dignity in the family, but she was not content. She also wanted her family to be rich and outstanding so that she could win the respect of other people, especially those who had objected to her marriage.

Kang Hui also had some moral capital. He treated Hefang very tenderly and even granted her the right to beat him when she was angry. When Hefang really beat him,

Kang Hui usually tolerated it and seldom fought back. He tolerated it in the hope that Hefang would be kind to him, too. Kang Hui wanted to make the family more harmonious at the price of his dignity. Since Hefang always trampled his dignity, the more Hefang beat him, the more right he had to fight back. Kang Hui was also accumulating moral capital when he let Hefang beat and blame him.

Both were concerned with their dignity and family life. Hefang could gain face only if they had a lot of money. Her major criterion for good fortune was wealth. For Kang Hui, harmony in the family, as his criterion for good fortune, was more important than his dignity. His tolerance, however, could neither make the family harmonious nor earn him respect from Hefang. This especially frustrated him. Therefore, when Hefang was beating him, both felt wronged and accumulated moral capital, and a power balance was maintained in this way.

When Kang Hui finally burst out that day, he could not maintain that balance any more. He had accumulated enough moral capital by tolerating her, and this time he felt that he was justified in fighting back. Hefang did not expect that her husband would fight back, because she had good reason to criticize him. Then neither of the two would accumulate moral capital by keeping silent any more. Instead, they were engaged in an intense competition for dignity or *qi*. Attempting suicide was Hefang's strategy to win this power game.

The conflicts in this family stemmed from the couple's different understandings of family life. Because of love, Hefang wanted her family to be rich, without which she would not be able to disprove her parents' reasons for objection. Also because of love, Kang Hui tolerated her beatings many times. It was their love for each other that won moral capital for both. Nevertheless, love did not decrease their conflicts, but intensified them. It was love that made the otherwise trivial conflict so harsh as to cause suicide.

Critics of romantic love worry about young lovers' blindness to the negative characteristics of each other, because that blindness could shed doubt on the harmony of the future family. These worries are based on the critics' understanding of the power games in the family. Villagers usually evaluate several factors of the spouse-to-be in matchmaking: family background, ability, personality and appearance. The major principle is that the basic characteristics of the individuals should match. A man should marry a woman from a family of similar socio-economic means, and vice versa. Too much difference in family background is likely to set an imbalance in the couple's power structure. For instance, if a wealthy woman marries a poor man, he will enter the marriage holding less power. For a similar reason, one is supposed to find a spouse neither much worse off nor much better off than oneself. Nothing can guarantee that the future couple will maintain a power balance and have a harmonious family, but prudent people try to match these objective qualities and reduce the probabilities of power imbalance. Those who hold these principles in high esteem are not ignorant of the role of love in family life. They know that a couple should not only strike a good power balance but also should get along well and care about each other. Their logic is that those objective qualities will be the basis for both a power balance and long-lasting affection. A couple cannot live together unless the two strike a power balance. Love can be long

lasting only if there is a power balance and the couple lives a happy life. "What is love?" an old woman said. "If you live together, you will finally love each other. You can never establish a family based on love."

Those who believe in romantic love, however, usually follow a different logic. For them, the family begins with affection and is aimed at maintaining and expanding that affection. Love is not seen as the basis of family life, but something important by itself. With the family revolution in modern China, the freedom of love is integrated into the idea of personhood. To love is now a critical requirement for maintaining one's dignity and behaving as a full person. Suicide stemming from the misalignment of an arranged marriage or failure of love is seen as a powerful attack against the traditional family system. In my fieldwork, I also know two young women who committed suicide when their parents denied them the freedom to pursue romantic love. Despite the objections of Hefang's parents, she managed to marry Kang Hui. Choosing this independence is seen by many young people as a way to maintain dignity and freedom (Croll 1981: 80–106).

Hefang's parents, however, were not against romantic love as such, but had more practical concerns. They knew that Kang Hui and Hefang were very different from each other and were unlikely to have a happy family. In order to gain people's respect, Hefang believed that she had to prove that her parents were wrong. It appears that only if they had a happy family could she prove that her choice was right. Love should be maintained through family life.

Family life, however, is different from being in love. To get along in the family is to maintain a power balance via a series of power games. Two persons who love each other do not always get along in family life. The traditional saying that "love is never the basis for living" holds much truth. Practically, the idea does make sense because it prompts those considering marriage to assess the characteristics of the spouse before getting married. Romantic lovers, however, usually do not see love as the basis of family life. Instead, for them, love as an aspect of personhood is important and should be maintained and cherished for itself. Given that the freedom to love is such an important aspect of personhood, the objection of Hefang's parents harmed Hefang not because their opinion was wrong, but because they challenged Hefang's dignity by denying her the freedom to love.

Hefang's dilemma was based neither on her mistake in choosing a wrong husband nor on her unreasonableness, but on the conflict between love and family life. The Chinese family revolution has provided more freedom and dignity to people, but it has not guaranteed their happiness in family life. Chinese people in the modern era are subject to the influences of both tradition and modernity. On the one hand, young people still commit suicide due to arranged marriages; on the other hand, many people suffer after gaining the freedom to love.

### **3.2 Parental love**

It was a day for the Gouyi bazaar. Lanzhi, a 30-year-old woman from Li village, got up very early. As a motor-tricycle driver, her husband was supposed to be working in another village for two days and had left home the day before.

Although this was fated to be her last day in this world, Lanzhi likely did not know that yet. She shopped around in Gouyi and bought some clothes. Already tired after shopping for an hour or so, she returned home.

When she got home, however, she did not see her 13-year-old son. "Where is that boy?" She searched around but could not see him. She found the son of her brother-in-law and asked him, "Did you see my Muhu?" The boy said, "Yes. He is playing computer games at Gouyi. I just returned from there."

There was an internet café at Gouyi, and many children often played computer games there. Lanzhi had warned Muhu several times that she would beat him if he went there again, but the boy could not resist the temptation. The week before, Muhu promised her that he would never again play computer games, but this time he had returned there again. Lanzhi searched the cabinet and found that a 10-yuan bill was missing. Each time when Muhu went to play computer games, he always sneaked some money, and this made Lanzhi especially angry. "I must beat this bastard to death if I catch him in the internet café."

While Muhu was playing computer games in high spirits, a friend whispered to him, "Your mom is coming. Be careful." Muhu looked at the door and found his mother was about to enter. He rushed to the back door, but before he could reach it, his mother caught him by the collar.

Crestfallen, Muhu returned to Li village with his mother. Although Lanzhi had already sharply scolded him on the way home, she did not feel that that was enough. She asked her son to swear that he would never go to the internet café, and Muhu repeated that as he had already done many times before. Lanzhi knew that Muhu would not keep his promise. In order to teach him a real lesson, she picked up a broom and beat him. Perhaps because she beat him too hard, the broom soon broke. Lanzhi then picked up a short whip and lashed Muhu, shouting, "I will see whether you dare do that again. I will see whether you obey my words. If you are always like that, how can you go to middle school, and how can you go to college? You have disappointed me so much. I will beat you to death this time." She began to cry and threw away the whip. Muhu stood there dumbly, unaware of what he should do or say. Lanzhi went to the outhouse and came out after a while, holding a bottle of pesticide. She screamed to Muhu, "You will provoke me to death!"

Lanzhi's brother-in-law was passing by and heard her screaming. He came in and saw that Lanzhi was holding the bottle. "What have you done? Did you drink this pesticide?" Lanzhi said, "My son played computer games again, and I will be provoked to death." Her brother-in-law smelled pesticide and knew what had happened. He immediately called several men and carried Lanzhi to the hospital. Because it was very crowded in the bazaar, they had difficulty in making their way to the hospital at Gouyi. Lanzhi breathed her last on the way.

This is one of the most astonishing cases of suicide that I have come across. Because such a suicide was really unthinkable, Lanzhi's story was spread widely. People

often talked with real surprise: "Do you believe it? A woman of Li village drank pesticide because her son played computer games. How could this happen?"

When I first heard this story, I suspected that Lanzhi might have had some other reasons to commit suicide. Filled with surprise, puzzlement and all kinds of superstitious interpretations, I interviewed Lanzhi's brother-in-law in Li village and her sister in Xianjialou. I asked them whether Lanzhi was nasty, but they both denied it: "No. She was not a nasty person. She was overly concerned with Muhu's studies. Her relationship with her husband was good; they seldom quarreled." Her sister said, "Lanzhi had been a mild-tempered woman since childhood. Who could expect that she would commit suicide? Perhaps everything was fated. Several days before that, they had found a long snake in the outhouse. That was an omen."

A friend of Lanzhi who worked in Muhu's school said, "Lanzhi's temper was good, and she was not easily angered. But she always regretted that she had not been to college. So she badly hoped that Muhu would go to college and was very concerned about his study."

From that point on, I had no doubt that her conflict with Muhu was the only reason for Lanzhi's suicide. Everything she did to Muhu was out of parental love, but how could love lead to suicide?

Muhu was Lanzhi's only son, and Lanzhi loved him very much. It was only because Lanzhi loved him overly much that she was so concerned about his study and became so angry when he did not study diligently. Familial love, however, is not only emotional attachment but also a political one. Lanzhi could not educate Muhu well merely by loving him. She had to make him understand how to study and correct him when he did not obey her. Lanzhi did not ask Muhu to do any chore in the house, but Muhu still could not study well.

I had a long talk with Muhu. That was two years after Lanzhi's death, and Muhu already had a stepmother. Muhu had never played a computer game after his mother's death and became silent whenever anyone talked about computer games. When talking about his mother's death, he confessed that his mother was always angry with him, but he said that he did not know that Lanzhi had wanted him to go to college, although everyone else I interviewed knew this. He said that he did not go to the internet café frequently and he brought only two *yuan* with him. This was very different from what I heard from other boys who had played computer games together with him. Obviously he wanted to shift off his responsibility. It seemed to him that his mother only wanted to prevent him from playing computer games, but he had no idea what she really wanted.

Although Lanzhi's final goal was to push Muhu to study better, she did not successfully convey this to Muhu in the power game. The game between the mother and son is not very difficult to understand. Muhu always played computer games and did not obey his mother's wishes. In order to make her son really concentrate on his studies, Lanzhi forbade him to play computer games at Gouyi. Although Muhu promised that he would never do that, he did not really want to quit. The promise seemed to be Muhu's stalling tactic. He dared not openly defy his mother's words, but he would go to play when Lanzhi was absent. Lanzhi and her son had played such power games several times, which always ended with Muhu's



promise to desist. After he failed to keep his promise, the same coping strategy provoked Lanzhi rather than calming her. When Muhu again promised that he would not play, Lanzhi knew that he was just placating her. Beating him was her new strategy to teach him a lesson. Although as she beat him he was crying and swearing that he would be good, Lanzhi still could not trust him. Suicide was her trump card. She wished that Muhu could really learn something and would never disobey her words again. She might have only wanted to teach Muhu an important lesson, but unfortunately, she did not calculate the likely outcome very well and took her own life. I do not think that she had a genuine intention to die at that time. There can be no question of her impulsivity. It is the extremity of her action that astonishes us.

What Lanzhi cared about was Muhu's study and future, but at stake in the power game was who might win in the game. Although she was unhappy because Muhu could not do well academically if he always played computer games, what provoked her was Muhu's willful disobedience that rendered his promise meaningless. When she became very angry, she apparently thought that a radical behavior would win more authority for her, but forgot to consider whether it would really push Muhu to study harder.

Lanzhi gambled that her suicide could win her more dignity and authority. In the final power game with her son, in a certain sense she won. She not only made her son never play computer games again, but also entirely undermined the business of the internet café. Its manager moved out of Gouyi not only because many children dared not play any more, but also because many parents urged him to do so. Lanzhi's story spread to nearby villages, and many parents used it to teach their children lessons. Although Lanzhi won the game, it was meaningless because Muhu did not concentrate on his studies afterwards. Even her suicide could not really improve Muhu's situation. The fact that Muhu quit playing computer games does not mean that he fully learned the lessons his mother intended. His teachers commented, "Such a motherless child is really pitiful, but his study has not improved after his mother's death. Instead, since nobody is concerned with his study, Muhu is much lazier now."

### 3.3 Filial piety

Lanzhi's sister in Xianjialou showed great sympathy to Lanzhi. After she described this story, she told me about another suicide case in her own village: "Since his mother's death, Muhu is not welcome in my family. I am sure he will not become a good man as my husband's cousin was. Laifu, his cousin in Xianjialou, also committed suicide when he was provoked by his father. I wonder why good people are always so unfortunate.

"Laifu was only 20 years old when he died in 2000. His mother suffered from paralysis and could not work. He and his father had borrowed a lot of money because they were poor. His father did not live a decent life. Once he borrowed some money, he would soon waste it. Laifu did all the chores in the family and took care of everything.

“Laifu’s father openly had sexual affairs. Once Laifu followed his father on a walk and saw he was meeting with a widow. After his father entered the woman’s room, Laifu set some wisteria on fire outside the wall. When the lovers came out to quench the fire, Laifu had already left. They knew that it was a warning from Laifu.

“Although the father knew his son wanted him to change, he never ended his relationship with that widow. Two days after Laifu warned his father by setting the fire, his father’s lover visited him at their home, but Laifu was reluctant to talk with her. His father berated him and asked him to be friendly to her. Laifu was enraged and said, ‘I will see whether you can live after my death.’ He ran out of the house and drank the pesticide. The quarrel between the father and son happened in the early morning, and Laifu died at about 10 am.”

In this simple but no less astonishing story, Laifu committed suicide to resist his father. Laifu was quite concerned about the whole family. He wanted his father to be more serious with the family. Because his father wasted a good deal of money and hurt his mother, the whole family could not be happy. He tried to stop his father from having the affair but failed. When his father even led the woman to their home, of course he could not be happy.

In the power games in this family, Laifu had much more moral capital than his father. Although Laifu was supposed to respect and obey his father, because his father did not live in a decent way, Laifu had the legitimacy to blame his father. In the first power game, Laifu did not openly blame him but set a fire as a warning. This implied two things. On the one hand, Laifu showed that he was dissatisfied with his father’s immoral behavior; on the other hand, Laifu did not want to challenge his father’s dignity by openly confronting and blaming him. He wished his father would end the affair after seeing his warning. Failing that, Laifu thought that his father should at least realize he was wrong. Laifu, in this sense, won this power game, because he had won moral capital for subsequent contests.

Unfortunately, Laifu’s father did not learn the lesson that Laifu intended. While Laifu understood the game as being about who was more serious with family life, his father saw it as a competition for authority. His authority in family politics was challenged by his son; now he needed to win it back. Thinking this way, Laifu’s father believed that he should not yield to his son by ending the affair. He would rather win back his authority by bringing his lover back home. Laifu’s effort to dissuade his father proved futile, so he decided to resist his father’s unreasonableness by showing hostility to his mistress. Laifu’s father had already won the power game when he brought the woman home, but he wanted Laifu to yield more and asked him to be friendly. Were Laifu polite to the woman, it would imply that his father was still the powerful head of the family, and also that Laifu had acquiesced to his father’s immoral behavior, which he sought to change.

Suicide was Laifu’s act of resistance in this last game of power. He was not disposed to yield to his father because he had greater moral capital. When his father totally ignored Laifu’s moral status and instead strove to confirm his own authority in the family, Laifu was enraged. “I will see whether you can live after

my death.” Laifu knew that the peaceful life in the family was entirely dependent on him. Instead of being grateful and learning his lesson, his father blamed him and even shamed him in front of his lover. Since his father did not realize how important Laifu was for the family, Laifu wanted to show his father that without him, his father would be unable to live at all. He would resist his father and win his dignity by taking his own life.

“What a pitiful story!” Lanzhi’s sister commented, “Similar to my sister, Laifu was provoked to death. Both of them were reasonable people and concerned with the whole family, but fate dealt them a cruel hand, and they could not live in a harmonious family.”

But both Laifu and Lanzhi are uncommon suicides. While conflict between parents and children occurs quite often, the most common type is that of aged parents who commit suicide because of conflicts with children or daughters-in-law. One of Muhu’s teachers told me the story of Suohou:

“Suohou was 70 years old when he hung himself. He had three sons and two daughters. This old man was bad-tempered. He often lost his temper for a trivial matter, and hence could not get along with his children. He did not live together with his wife either. The direct reason for his suicide was that neither his children nor his wife took care of him when he was ill.

“This old man was a little strange. When he was 50 years old, he had quit working in the field. In the twenty years since then, he had made a living by selling ice-creams. He began to sell ice-creams early in the spring and stopped late in the autumn every year. During the winter, he used to gamble every day. He used to lose everything by the time the new year came. His children never gave him any money, and his wife did not cook for him. So he lived by himself and cooked for himself. His wife was also strange. She never took care of her sons’ children, but did help her two daughters.

“In the last years of his life, Suohou moved into a small shack in the yard of his second son. Once I was coming back from the market by bike and passed by the house of his second son. It was a little past midday, and the old man came to me. He said, ‘I have something to tell you.’ I stopped and waited for his words. He said, ‘Please get down from your bike.’ I thought it was fine for him to talk with me on bike, but he insisted and I had to get down. When I got down from the bike, he said, ‘Please come into our yard.’ I was more confused and asked him why. He led me into the yard without saying anything else. When we were in the yard, he said, ‘Please put your bike here and come into my room.’ I put my bike in his yard and followed him into his shack. ‘Come into the bedroom.’ I followed the old man into the bedroom and immediately knew what he wanted to show me. The ceiling in his bedroom was supported by five beams, two of which were broken. I said, ‘Why are they broken?’ he said, ‘Yes, they are broken. I asked the head of the village committee, but nobody took care of it; then I went to the local government of the township, and again nobody could repair it for me.’ At that time the village committee of my village was disbanded and nobody was in charge of anything. As for the

township, they had more important things to do. I thought that his sons should be responsible for such a matter, and said, 'Why don't you ask your son to repair it?' He answered, 'This is why I show it to you. Can you tell my second son and ask him to repair it for me?' Without asking why he could not repair it himself, I agreed. I thought his three sons could repair it together and nobody would spend too much money. Several days later, I came across his second son and stopped him, 'Xiaohai, this is his name, 'the beams in your father's house are broken. Why don't you and your brothers repair them for your father?' He answered, 'I know that.' I said, 'You can ask your elder brother to buy some wood, and you and your younger brother will soon finish the work.' He said, 'No. We will not do that.' 'Why? He is your father, and why don't you take care of his house? What if his house collapses?' He said, 'No, I will not. If his house collapses, he deserves that.' 'You are wrong. Whatever he has done to you, he is still your father, and you, his son.' 'I don't even want to give him food, let alone wood. He never concerned himself with us when we needed him. When our children were born and we were poor, he did not take care of us and wasted all his money on gambling. If he does not care about us, why should we take care about him?'

"His sons declared openly that they would not take care of him. When he asked them for grain, they also refused to give him that.

"About two years after this, Suohou fell ill with tuberculosis. His nephew suggested that his sons pay some money to help treat his disease. It is said that his sons finally gave him some money, but without spending it, the old man hanged himself in his own room. According to the policy of the local hospital, peasants who suffer from tuberculosis could get medication for free, and one of the old man's relatives is an official in the hospital. Hence it was not difficult for him to get treatment, and he actually did not need too much money. When he was ill, his wife seldom spent time with him and did not take care of the old man."

In the eyes of the villagers, Suohou and his wife were not good parents. As bad-tempered people, they did not even take care of their grandchildren. When a baby is born, his or her young parents are usually in a very busy period and badly need the help of their own parents. Because Souhou and his wife did not help their sons at such critical moments, their sons complained a good deal.

Were his sons justified in maltreating him on the basis that Suohou had not helped them? This is not merely an ethical issue. We should seek to better understand their logic.

The episode my interviewee described is a very good example of the relationship between Suohou and his sons. When Suohou's shack needed repair, his son was of course supposed to help him. Suohou badly needed his son's help, but he was reluctant to ask him directly. Instead, he asked a third party to mediate. Here Suohou and his son were playing a power game. Because father and son were in a kind of cold war, neither wanted to speak first, as if the one who spoke first would yield. On the one hand, although Suohou's son knew very well about Suohou's

problem, he would never offer to help him; on the other hand, Souhuo would not ask his son for help.

When Suohou wanted my interviewee to help him, he was reluctant to come straight to the point, instead leading him into his room. When my interviewee saw what had happened, Suohou hoped that he might have a better idea about the unfilial conduct of his son. Then he would win more support among the villagers and get more moral capital in the power game.

When filial piety was used only as moral capital in the power game, its function was quite limited. His son knew his trick and would not buy it. Instead, he had his own moral capital, too. He told my interviewee that Suohou himself was the reason of all his sufferings. Although my interviewee was not convinced by him, Suohou did not win the power game.

My interviewee commented on this: "If Souhuo could have had a good talk with his son, his son might not have refused to repair the shack. His trick to ask me to mediate made things more complicated." According to him, if Suohou had spoken directly with his son, they would then have been in another kind of power game. Since Suohou showed respect to his son by humiliating himself, his son might really have helped him. Then their relationship would have greatly improved.

Others in this village told me what had happened after Suohou's death. The sons were also reluctant to take care of their mother. The eldest brother, however, decided that it was improper for them not to take care of her. In order to save face on behalf of the family, he finally let his mother live with them. One of my guides in Xiaoguantun said, "She did not take care of her sons. Once I talked with her and said, 'They are too tired after coming back from the field. Why don't you cook something for them? If you are unable to make breakfast for them, at least you could make supper. Why don't you help them a little while you live together with them?' The old woman answered, 'I don't want to serve them.' Her relationship with the villagers was not good either. She did not know how to connect with people."

Here the eldest son yielded considerable ground, but this could also have been another move in the power game. If his mother could respond to him positively and be milder to them, then he and his wife could also respond better to her. In subsequent power games, they might then all have competed to be good to each other. The old woman, however, did not interpret it this way. She thought that once she cooked, she would always cook. This attitude would finally make the relationship worse. The power game between mother and son is very similar to that between father and son. Because the parents did not want to yield, although they might have won in one power game, their life would become more difficult.

## Discussion

In this chapter, we have examined three familial relationships through four cases of suicide. None of the four stories is complicated, but each one is quite astonishing. Although the four are very different from each other, they all have something in common.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the family is not only an important unit of social organization in China but it also has a very profound existential significance, because one lives a life of fortune in the family. Hence in Chinese traditional culture, parents and children, siblings, and husband and wife, often think of each other as being part of a single body (Shiga 1967: 128–36). Although there have been great changes in modern Chinese families, this basic idea is still the same. Kanghui and Hefang were very different from each other, but the family joined them together; Lanzhi was so concerned about Muhu that she wanted him to fulfill her own dream of going to college; Laifu was a capable young man, but his life could not be good so long as his father was not serious about family life; Suohou did not care about his sons, but he was very miserable without any help from his children.

Family members are dependent on each other, but they are not a single person after all. Hence there are always differences and conflicts between them. Conjugal love, parental love and filial piety should not only express the attachment between family members, but also help to harmonize the family, that is, make the familial love more reasonable, reliable and just. In traditional China, the hierarchy in a family helped family members to live a stable family life. When a father acts like a father, a son acts like a son, a husband acts like a husband, and a wife acts like a wife, everyone gets the authority and respect that he or she is supposed to get, so the family is in harmony and justice is maintained.

While there is no such hierarchy in the modern Chinese family, familial love is as important as ever. Without the protection of the traditional hierarchy, justice in the family is maintained through subtle games of power. In such games, familial love is not only the beginning and end of domestic justice, but it is also often used as moral capital. Although Hefang loved Kang Hui, she would not blindly obey him as in a traditional family. Muhu would not do everything Lanzhi told him simply because she was his mother. Laifu would not yield to his father when the latter was wrong. Suohou did not have the authority to command his sons to help him. In these power games, people's understanding of domestic justice became very flexible. Whenever someone could not do what he or she wanted to do, and another family member did not treat him or her as expected, that is, when he or she lost a power game, then he or she would feel wronged. In such a case, the person in question might commit or attempt suicide to win back respect, authority and justice. The family revolution in modern China was meant to make people seek a good life with greater freedom, but since familial harmony has become more difficult to maintain, happiness is more difficult to attain, too.

Mostly, however, rural families are very complex, and suicide is caused by a more complicated situation than existed in these four cases. Yet the dynamic of the power game remains remarkably similar. We will consider cases of more complex family politics in the next chapter.

## 4 Family politics

Now we shall examine domestic justice through three more complex cases. First, by studying the suicide of a prostitute who had tried to become part of a normal family but failed, we will see what makes a normal family; second, by studying the power games between a couple, we will dig deeper into the conjugal relationship, the central axis of the modern family; third, by studying the conflicts in an aggregate family, we will have a better understanding of family politics.

### 4.1 The margin of the family

During the first week of May 2001, the suicide of Ge Man, a prostitute, attracted the attention of many people in the county seat.<sup>1</sup>

Ge Man's corpse was buried only one day before I arrived in Mengzou, almost a month after her death. Ever since Ge Man's death, her corpse had been kept in a freezer in the hospital. The freezing of corpses is a service commercially available in this area. Usually the family of the deceased pays 300 *yuan* per day for freezing. About five or six days after the prostitute's death, her parents came to this county from the northeast. Before they could investigate her death, the man who ran the freezer asked for 500 *yuan* per day, a price her parents could not afford. In addition, the hospital charged 150 *yuan* per day for keeping the corpse. So Ge Man's parents were supposed to pay more than 3,000 *yuan* in total. Scared by this amount, they went away without inquiring further into their daughter's death. The corpse was kept in the hospital for another 20 days. The man in charge of the freezer regretted that he had asked too much. He turned to the local government and police, but they also refused to pay. It seemed that her parents would not come back to investigate the case or ask anything else, so the local police decided to bury the corpse. They wondered where and how they should do that. Nobody wanted to pay, so they buried her even without a coffin. In case an autopsy might later be necessary, they found a place that was easy to identify. It was in a dry ditch in a field usually used as a place of execution for capital punishment offenders. When I first saw the man who ran the freezer, he told me that Ge Man's corpse had been buried the previous day and regretted that he had not got a single *yuan*. "Do you know why she committed suicide?," I asked. "Everyone

knows something. Her lover beat her that morning. At noon, a prostitute living next to her kept hearing the ringing of Ge Man's cell phone, and she suspected that something had happened. She opened the door and found Ge Man had been dead for a while." "Do you know who her lover is?" "Yes. We call him Xiaolei." "He has not involved himself since her death?" I asked. "No, as if it has nothing to do with him."

Several days later, I booked a room in a small inn near the "trading city" (*shang mao cheng*),<sup>2</sup> where the prostitute lived and died, and spent more than a week contacting the local police, the sellers in the trading city, and other prostitutes who knew Ge Man.

The chief of police told me what he knew about the prostitute: "Her name was Ge Man, but who knows whether that was her real name? Ge Man, who was from the northeast, came to Mengzou four or five years ago. At first she worked from a hairdressers' house as a prostitute and became Xiaolei's lover there. Xiaolei is a married taxi driver. Because of his relationship with this prostitute, his parents and wife became angry and often quarreled with him. The relationship in his family worsened. Xiaolei's surname is Shi, and his formal name is Shi Lei. One day, Shi Lei's brother came to the hairdresser's with a group of people. They destroyed the shop and smashed a big mirror in it. We fined them some money and had them repair the big mirror. After the shop was reopened, the prostitute was not allowed to stay there any more, so she moved into the trading city. That happened only three or four months before her death. Ge Man rented a room in the trading city and sold shoes. At first, her mother came to help her sell shoes. It is said that Ge Man attempted suicide in April. She took some sleeping pills but was rescued in this clinic." While we were walking in the trading city, he pointed at a small clinic. "Do you know why she attempted suicide at that time?" I asked him. "She quarreled with Xiaolei. They always quarreled. She wanted to marry him, but Xiaolei was hesitant to divorce his wife. When Ge Man felt hopeless, she wanted to die. She took some sleeping pills, and her mother helped to rescue her. Later her mother went back, and when Ge Man quarreled again with Xiaolei, she finally took her own life."

The policeman accompanied me to a clothing seller and told me that Ge Man's room was upstairs. The seller had the same landlord as the prostitute, but she knew little about her. "The only thing I know about her is that she fought with her lover every day. We could hear it. She died not too long after moving into the trading city."

We stopped at another shop. A seller came to us. "Do you know the prostitute who just committed suicide?" the policeman asked him. "Yes." "Do you know why she did that?" The seller sighed and answered, "She was consumed with love and could not think through it." It seemed he knew the policeman very well, and we started chatting. This seller was familiar with many people, and he told me much about the prostitute. Later, I visited him several times without the policeman. He also helped me to interview several other prostitutes to find out more about Ge Man's affairs.



The seller had known Ge Man for more than five years. At that time he was doing some illegal trade and was very rich. According to the seller, Ge Man came to this county around 1994, a long time before she worked in the hairdresser's. "At first, she ran a restaurant with her sister." "Was she a prostitute in the restaurant?" "Most prostitutes do not want to be prostitutes voluntarily, and they are all victims. I was not familiar with Ge Man when she was in the restaurant, so I am not sure whether she was a prostitute when she first came here. I guess it was her sister who forced or enticed her into prostitution. Who knows whether that was really her sister? It is said that that woman now is a prostitute in Beijing. Two daughters of Ge Man's uncle are also prostitutes."

Ge Man got to know Shi Lei in 1996. She was working in the hairdresser's at that time. Shi Lei was relatively rich and had money to visit prostitutes. At that time, he frequently visited Ge Man and spent a lot of money on her. Ge Man gradually became very attached to him. It is said that she spent a lot of money on him before her death. "I guess it is like this," the seller said, "at first Shi Lei spent money on her, and there was likely a period that they both spent some money on each other. Finally she began to spend money on him." "So she was rich?" I asked. "Well. She was one of the richest prostitutes in this county. She was pretty and had been here for a long time." Ge Man had earned a good deal of money through prostitution. Sometimes they took vacations together, and Ge Man paid for everything.

A relationship far beyond prostitution between Ge Man and Shi Lei developed quickly. The seller said, "Usually prostitutes move to bigger cities if they have earned a lot of money. You know, most of them are from poor families, and they admire the lifestyle in big cities. Some of them also get married (*cong liang*) and become normal housewives. Ge Man did not want to leave here; she really loved Shi Lei and intended to marry him. This had caused trouble in Shi Lei's family ... He also loved her, but I do not think he seriously thought about marrying her. He might have encouraged her for a long time by promising to marry her."

She quit prostitution for a period and began to sell shoes, according to the seller. Many people said that the real reason for Ge Man to sell shoes was that she wanted to marry. Nevertheless, people in the trading city said that they could hear them fighting almost every day. "Once they even broke the bed pan. One of them knocked the other one with it and smashed it," one man said.

Not too long before her death, Ge Man took some sleeping pills, but she failed in that suicide attempt. "She told me that she attempted suicide because Shi Lei insisted upon not divorcing," the seller said. "She did not have a resolute plan to die yet and took too few pills. She still had some hope."

At the end of April, Ge Man and Shi Lei went to Beijing for a week. Ge Man claimed that she would stock her shop with new shoes, but she came back with nothing. They only played in Beijing, and she used up all her money.

"She prostituted herself immediately after coming back from Beijing," the seller said, "and the price was cheap. She once came to me with a bill of 50 *yuan* to ask for change. Perhaps she had only asked the man for 20 or

30 *yuan*. Since that time, she prostituted herself quite frequently. I guess she had two reasons to do that. The first was that she wanted to punish Shi Lei in this way. The second was that she really needed money at that time.”

Gossip says that Ge Man committed suicide because Shi Lei did not want to divorce his wife, but the seller told me another story. “Actually Shi Lei divorced. Ge Man told me that his wife had divorced him because she could not tolerate his relationship with the prostitute. When Ge Man told me about that, I persuaded her to marry him soon. Shi Lei’s ex-wife had borne him two daughters. Ge Man’s only hope was that she could give birth to a son. Otherwise she could not have any position in the family. When I told her about this, she said nothing. I think she could have been a good wife. Ge Man was industrious and vigorous, but she was not good at playing tricks. Shi Lei would have bullied her if they had married.” “Therefore, she committed suicide not because Shi Lei could not divorce, but because he would not marry her even after he divorced?” I asked. “Yes. On the morning that she died, they quarreled vehemently again. I guess she became quite sure that morning that she would never marry Shi Lei. I think she had the idea of suicide some time ago. Ever since Ge Man had come back from Beijing, her behavior was weird. A couple of days before her death, one of my friends took a bus trip, and Ge Man sat behind him. My friend heard Ge Man make a call and say on her cell phone, ‘You will regret your whole life, and you will never see me again.’ Then she hung up.

“Her decision to die was quite firm. Ge Man not only took a whole bottle of sleeping pills, but also some pesticide. In order to make the latter work more effectively, she drank a lot of cold water, which made it almost impossible for her to recover.”

The seller had helped to sort out Ge Man’s belongings after her death. He said that there was only 207 *yuan* in her room. After her death, the landlord appropriated all her possessions, including her cell phone and all her shoes, which were worth more than 10,000 *yuan*. “What happened to Shi Lei? What did he do after her death?” I asked. “He did nothing. Perhaps he even felt released,” the seller said.

Different from most other cases I studied, strictly speaking, Ge Man’s suicide was not caused by family conflicts. Her conflicts with Shi Lei, however, were all about family. As a prostitute, Ge Man committed suicide not only for romantic love, but for her dream of starting a normal family life. For Shi Lei, the affair with Ge Man brought great troubles in the family, which prevented him from marrying her. By studying this prostitute as an individual outside a normal family, we can understand family politics from another perspective.

When I was spending day after day with the seller, my other friends in Mengzou could not understand why I was so interested in a prostitute – someone who, to them, had very little value. When I told them that Ge Man had died for love, my friends smiled and responded, as if tolerantly, “Then there is a good person among those people?” Although Ge Man’s suicide was big news in the county seat, people

talked about it only out of curiosity, saying such things as: “A prostitute committed suicide? Why? Such a person deserved death! Those people have done too many bad things. So many families have been ruined by them, and they make our society much worse.” Nobody wanted to inquire into the injustice behind this story, and people always suggested that I study some more valuable or “instructive” cases. When I visited Mengzou again in 2002, I asked some residents in the trading city (some new apartments had been built there) whether they knew about Ge Man. They said, “We know that a prostitute is buried in the dried pitch. Was she from the trading city?” Although almost everyone had talked about her one year before, nobody still remembered her except her friends and acquaintances in the trading city. I am sure that I would never have heard about her story if I had not found myself in Mengzou right after her death.

Ge Man’s identity as a prostitute distinguished her from all other cases I have examined. People do not consider her a normal person like them, nor do they think that prostitutes have the same feelings as they do. They do not even think that this case of suicide deserves my interest. Sociologically, Ge Man was a “non-person” in the local society. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, a defining mark for these “non-persons” is that they have great difficulty in establishing their own families.

Ge Man wanted not only family life, but also full personhood and dignity. Only when she became a “normal” wife, by marrying Shi Lei (*cong liang*), could she become a full person and enjoy people’s respect. In Chinese, the special term “*cong liang*” literally means “to join the good,” referring to the marriage of a prostitute. Marriage would mark a turning point in Ge Man’s life. She could maintain romantic love and attain full personhood only by establishing a family.

Ge Man must have been aware of her position, and that was why she was so concerned about marrying Shi Lei. Also because of her identity as a prostitute, Ge Man very likely knew how difficult it would be for her to be accepted by Shi Lei’s parents. Especially after Shi Lei’s brother smashed the hairdresser’s house, Ge Man realized the difficulties that she faced. She quit prostitution and made herself a less dispised shoe seller. This strategy, however, was not successful, because she could not change her past, and people still considered her as a prostitute.

She could move Shi Lei only with her love, but love was not reliable. Two lovers might yield under each other’s threat because there is certain interdependence between them. They are engaged in such power games even before marriage because it is assumed that they will marry sooner or later. Although there was some attachment between Ge Man and Shi Lei, since they had almost no hope for marriage, there was no conjugal interdependence between them, and Ge Man must have realized that her tactics could not really work.

My informants reported that Ge Man and Shi Lei fought almost every day. We know that Ge Man was trying to persuade Shi Lei to marry her, but Shi Lei was hesitant to make a promise. When she realized that her marriage plan was almost hopeless, Ge Man attempted suicide the first time. According to the policeman and the seller, Ge Man did not take a lethal dose of pills that time, and she was not serious about suicide. The attempt was just another tactic to force Shi Lei to consider her request more seriously. Such a tactic would work only if there were

conjugal interdependence between them. Although Hefang's attempted suicide worked well on Kang Hui (3.1), Ge Man could not succeed with a similar tactic because they were not married.

After they returned from Beijing, Ge Man immediately resumed prostitution and charged a lower price than before. This was, according to the seller, meant to punish Shi Lei. She intentionally debased herself and flirted with other men. If Shi Lei had cared about her, he should have taken action and prevented her from doing that, and the best way to achieve this would have been to marry her. This tactic also failed.

Not long before her death, Ge Man threatened Shi Lei by saying that he would never see her again. In family politics, when a wife claims that she will commit suicide, her husband usually yields, fearing that she might really do so. Ge Man assumed that Shi Lei would regret it for his whole life if she died, and the warning was her last straw. Shi Lei visited Ge Man a couple of times after that phone call, and they were still together several hours before Ge Man's death. Perhaps Shi Lei did try to prevent Ge Man from taking her life, but he could not promise anything. Again, Ge Man's tactic had not worked.

Although all these tactics failed, Ge Man still believed that Shi Lei would be regretful for all his remaining life. The words she had uttered over the phone were not merely a gesture. Although she could not become a normal wife, she would resist Shi Lei and gain her dignity by committing suicide. As the seller implied, Ge Man was too infatuated with Shi Lei to survive. Nevertheless, even this last tactic, as spirited as it was, was not successful. Shi Lei did not show much grief at all; he even felt released, since he would not have to worry about the affair any more, and his family would be much more peaceful. Ge Man, we can only assume, did not gain more dignity by her suicide. Her story simply vanished into thin air. All her belongings were appropriated, neither her lover nor her parents took care of her body, nobody remembered her name, and what she left was only a naked and anonymous corpse lying in the dry ditch.

Ge Man's tactics failed because Shi Lei was not responsible for her. Although he loved her, they were neither bound by marriage nor were they conjugally interdependent. While they were in pre-domestic power games, Ge Man tried to follow the logic of family politics. If they had been married, when Shi Lei mistreated her or failed to show care for her, Ge Man would have had some moral capital. Ge Man mistook romantic love for conjugal interdependence. Although they loved each other, Ge Man was not behaving ethically because she was destroying Shi Lei's family, and Shi Lei was also guilty because he, too, was harming his family. Hence although Ge Man had reason to blame her lover and demand that he do something for her, she did not have much moral capital.

As Ge Man's friend, the seller really hated Shi Lei's heartlessness. Shi Lei's situation, however, was not as simple as the seller imagined. Because of Shi Lei's affair, his parents blamed him, his brother vandalized the hairdresser's, and his wife divorced him. Later I learned that his wife's divorce was her strategy to fight for her status in the family. She did not admit defeat by divorcing Shi Lei. Instead, she was taking advantage of her moral capital in the power games, as we will see

in Surong's story (4.2). Since Shi Lei's parents and siblings were against his affair, Shi Lei was less likely to marry Ge Man when his wife divorced him. He was expected to apologize to his wife and resume the marriage; otherwise he would be unable to "behave as a person" in the family and even in the village. Perhaps he did not love his wife as much as he loved Ge Man, but he was bound to his wife not only socially, but also psychologically. Shi Lei's wife enjoyed some moral capital in the family, but she did not really have a happy and harmonious family. She was also a victim of domestic injustice.

Thus understood, Ge Man's tragedy was not merely due to Shi Lei's heartlessness. In a dilemma between romantic love and conjugal interdependence, Shi Lei had a really hard time. The power games between Ge Man and Shi Lei were only one side of the coin. The power games in his family should also be weighed.

The seller helped Ge Man to analyze her situation in case she could eventually marry Shi Lei. According to him, Ge Man had the virtues of a good wife, but she was not smart enough to win in family politics. Because she was a prostitute, she would be in a disadvantageous position if she were to marry Shi Lei. Since usually a man does not marry a prostitute, Shi Lei would do Ge Man a big favor by marrying her, and he would have much more moral capital in their own family politics. Ge Man would also have had difficulties in coping with her in-laws, who disliked her even before the marriage. Therefore, even if she had a chance to become a decent person by marrying Shi Lei, Ge Man would have been unlikely to enjoy a harmonious family. The only chance she had to improve her status in the family – by giving birth to a son – was entirely subject to fortune. Hence even if Ge Man had finally married Shi Lei, she would have had little chance of attaining a really good life. Given that Ge Man had almost no way out of this miserable situation, her misfortune was almost inevitable.

Ge Man was at the margin of society and not granted full personhood. Nevertheless, the tactics that she applied to resist and gain dignity were very similar to those used in family politics. She was at the crux between a non-social position and a social one. Her tactics failed because she was not yet a wife, i.e., she was not in the right social position to apply these tactics. Although she considered her suicide as a form of resistance to Shi Lei's heartlessness, its significance was totally lost after her death. That is why many people did not consider her case as one that deserved my attention. In their eyes, suicide is a social action, and it is not meaningful unless applied in certain social settings, such as a regular domestic sphere.

This basic idea about suicide in the local society is very different from the Durkheimian one, in which one commits suicide especially when one is under-socialized or over-socialized. In the Chinese context, the suicide of such a marginal person is not even considered as a typical suicide. Rather than being a stigma, suicide is even seen as the privilege of full persons who hold certain social positions. Society believes that stigmatized people such as prostitutes, psychotics, the retarded, and beggars have no right to commit suicide, just as they have no right to love or marry.

Ge Man's story helps us to understand that power balance and moral capital are both conditions for power games in family politics. Because she was not on an

equal footing with Shi Lei from the beginning, she had no moral capital to strike a power balance with him. It is not unreasonable that people saw her case as an atypical suicide. A typical suicide usually happens to a woman like Shi Lei's wife. Such a woman enjoys a certain moral capital in family politics and hence is eligible to commit suicide as an act of resistance when wronged.

## **4.2 A troubled family**

I first heard Kang Yu's story when I interviewed Mulan both about her own attempted suicide (5.3) and the suicide of Mugen, her brother. I will briefly introduce Mugen's suicide before moving to Kang Yu's story.

During the Cultural Revolution, while working as actor and actress in a propaganda team, Mugen and Luorui fell in love and got married. In the early 1980s, Chongwei, Xiaoi and Jiang Zhong, three young men in Gouyi, joined together to form a business making and selling wine from Jiang Zhong's house. They all had a sexual relationship with Youwei, a woman from the northeast who was good at making wine. This irritated Jiang Zhong's wife, who finally divorced Jiang Zhong after a long fight. Luorui was Jiang Zhong's cousin and lived nearby. When the promiscuity was causing trouble in Jiang Zhong's house, the business partners were unable to make wine there any more, so they moved to the house of Mugen and Luorui. Kang Yu, who had also been making wine, joined them and had an affair with Luorui. Mugen hanged himself on a chilly winter day, but his sister Mulan insisted that Kang Yu had killed him. The wine group was disbanded. Jiang Zhong married Youmei, and they opened a restaurant, which is now one of the best restaurants in Gouyi. Chongwei, Xiaoi, and Kang Yu are still poor.

Although Mulan denied that her brother had committed suicide, she told me that Surong, Kang Yu's wife, attempted suicide when Kang Yu and Luorui were having an affair. When I asked Surong about this, she frankly admitted that it was true. She told me the following story.

"I would not have married him if I were from a better family. My mother died very early. My elder brother only wanted to drive me out as soon as possible. A matchmaker came and talked about Kang Yu, one of her cousins. I refused, claiming that I had to take care of my father and my younger brother. The matchmaker, however, kept praising Kang Yu and his family. Although I didn't like his family, under my brother's pressure, I gave in and married Kang Yu after New Year's Day.

"At that time, my father-in-law was working in Shanxi province. We visited him after the wedding. My father-in-law gave us a quilt and 5 *yuan*. We stayed in Shanxi for about one week, and I didn't feel very well. I was not content with this family from the beginning. When I realized that his father was so mean as to give us only 5 *yuan*, I was bitterly disappointed. After returning home, Kang Yu did not show me the key to our house. Instead, he headed in another direction. It was not until I asked him where he was going that he said

we should visit his mother first. Well, how could I visit his mother without bringing any gift? I was quite embarrassed in her house. That was just after New Year's Day, so I apologized for bringing no gift and kowtowed to wish her a happy New Year. She gave me 10 *yuan* and a set of clothes. We ate several dumplings and returned to our own house. Then I went back to my natal family, but I was ashamed to tell my father all those things. I stayed there for several days and afterwards came back to Gouyi.

"One year later, I gave birth to a girl. Towards New Year's Day, someone came to visit my husband. Kang Yu was not at home, but I could see that this man was coming for a debt. When my husband returned, I asked him what the man had come for. 'Was he coming to collect a debt?' He said no and went out to gamble. It was only a few days before New Year's Day, but he cared very little about our family. We didn't even have any food for New Year's Day. 'Well, if you don't care, I won't either.' I was angry and decided to return to my natal family. I met Kang Hui on the way. He asked me where I was going. I said I was heading for my home. Perhaps Kang Hui told this to my mother-in-law, and she sent someone to visit me. I said that I would return to Gouyi in several days. Three days later, Kang Hui came to persuade me to return. It was only four days before New Year's Day, and I came back. I didn't tell my father why I had returned to my natal family, but who spends New Year's Day like that?

"Soon we had another baby, and he still often gambled. He never took care of me, so I thought, 'Why should I live any more?' He was 12 years older than I was, and I had not liked him from the beginning. He was extremely poor. When my daughter was about four years old, we were much poorer. Seeing that we could not live in such a situation, he went to work for the village committee. He promised: 'Well, I will never gamble. We cannot live now.' He quit gambling for a period. We got by a little better and planted some watermelons. But as soon as we got better, he resumed gambling, and we became poor again. One day, my children and I had nothing to eat. When he came back quite late with some noodles, I told him that we had not eaten anything for a whole day. He asked us to take the noodles, but he had nothing himself. It was raining hard that day, and he went back again to gamble. When he returned home the next morning, I scolded him angrily, 'I don't want to live with you any more. Never come back again and only gamble!' He said, 'Money is a thing that the more you spend it, the more of it you get.'

"When we were extremely poor, he once thought about selling the house, but I wouldn't agree. I insisted that I should have my share of two rooms even if we divorced. I would not go to stay under the shelter with him. No. I could not sell the house.

"He decided to earn some money and went to work in Beijing. He stayed there for about 50 days and earned 600 *yuan*. He went to Beijing again the next year and then quit, because I needed his help to take care of our children.

"When my second child was five years old, we talked about divorce. At that time, there was a popular TV drama called *Frog Girl (Wa Nu)*. We had no TV

set in our house, and he always went to Kang Hui's house with our children to watch TV. This caused some trouble in Kang Hui's family. The children always fought, and Kang Hui didn't want them to go there any more. So Kang Yu quit watching TV and often stayed at Xiaoi's house. When he came back, he went to sleep directly without making the bed. I criticized him for all these things. He was angry and said, 'Stay here if you want. If you don't want to live with me, go away.' We quarreled for a whole night. I really didn't want to live with him any more, so I decided to divorce. Although he always gambled, I had managed to save about 20,000 *yuan* for the family. I sought to have neither the children nor all the money. I only asked for 1,000 *yuan* and a quilt. 'If you can accept this, let us go tomorrow to get a divorce. It will be good for both of us.' We divorced the next morning. I had made my decision, and we had to divorce. There was no way to live together any longer. When we had finished the divorce procedure, I went back to my father's house immediately. My relatives asked me why I had come back at that time. I said, 'This time I will not go back to Gouyi, I will stay longer with my own family.'

'I told people in my natal family, 'No one from Gouyi is welcome. I will see none of them.' Many of Kang Yu's relatives came to beg me to return to Gouyi. My relatives told them that I was not at home.

'A man came for a debt, because I owed him 100 *jin* of oil. I had almost forgotten the debt. Since I owed him for the oil, I let him in. I told him that I could not return the oil at that time, but I would get some oil the next morning and give it to him as soon as possible. When we were talking, some other people also came in, including my mother-in-law. She said, 'I would kneel down if it made you go back.' I said, 'Please don't do that. We have already divorced. Although he was not good to me, I addressed you as "mother" for many years. Let me be your nominal daughter, but I will not go back.' My two children also came. So many people came to the house, and I was afraid that this would make both his family and mine lose face. In such a situation, I could not protest too much or my neighbors would have laughed at us. I finally returned to Gouyi.

'After I came back, I lived together with Kang Yu, but we did not resume the marriage. I said, 'I will leave again if you treat me badly.' He apologized and said that I could leave him whenever I wanted, but he still gambled. Anyway, he never scolded or beat me any more.

'We resumed our marriage six years later. That was in 1992, after Kang Yu and Luorui had eloped six months previously. Although he was together with that woman, I took care of his parents very well. I sold our cow for 230 *yuan* and gave 30 to my mother-in-law. I toiled in the fields and cultivated some chickens. His elder brother never helped me, and I did everything myself. Once his father, who had retired and stayed back in Gouyi, asked, 'Who went away with that woman?' I replied, 'The lousy beast from your family.' The old man was enraged, because I said his son was a beast. 'Well,' I said, 'then he is not from your family. That is the beast in the street. Isn't he a beast?' He became angrier and attempted to beat me. I did not fear him at all: 'This



is your tradition. Perhaps the men from your family are all like that.’ He was quite angry but there was nothing he could do.<sup>3</sup>

“Six months later my husband came back with that woman. They even stayed together in our house. Well, if she was going to stay here any longer, I was going to go back to my natal family again. The Party secretary came to help solve the problem. Luorui left, and I told my husband, ‘If you think our children can address her as “mother,” please marry that bitch as Jiang Zhong did, and I can go back to my natal family again.’ He said, ‘Well, if you think our children are miserable, please let’s resume our marriage. If I marry her, you can prosecute me for bigamy.’ Under his begging, I resumed the marriage with him, but he did not improve. Why should I live like this? We had fought many times, and I had no pleasure in living at all.

“I attempted suicide two years later. The direct reason was this: my brother helped someone to sell a child. The parents of that child were too poor to bring him up. My brother and one relative helped them to sell the child for 5,000 *yuan*. The other guy got 2,000 *yuan*. Who knows how the police got to know this? They came to investigate. The parents lied and said that the child was dead and even showed them a tomb, but the truth was finally discovered, and my brother was put in jail. The police could release him only if we paid 5,000 *yuan*. I discussed this with my sister. We agreed that both of us would offer half of the amount. I dared not tell the truth to my husband. I lied to him that we did not have to offer money. At that time we had no money, and I asked some friends to help me. When it was almost done, I visited my sister to take her money. Kexi, a young man in Gouyi, drove me to her house. To my surprise, my sister said that she could not offer the money. I was disappointed and wept freely on the way back. Kexi asked me what had happened, and I told him everything. He was quite generous and said that he could lend me 2,000 *yuan*. Then I borrowed some money from my relatives and neighbors. My brother was finally set free. I still thought that my sister should pay a part of my debt, so I went to argue with her: ‘Perhaps you are short of money now. You can pay me back later.’ But she said, ‘We have no money. We have spent all our money.’ I was very sad and told my brother, ‘Please never do such a thing again. We have no money to help you any more.’ My husband learnt about the money and said, ‘You always say I do not “live family life” seriously, but do you “live family life” seriously?’ He scolded me several times, and I assumed he might scold me for the rest of my life. When I had nothing to give my children, they often said, ‘You had money to give my uncle, but have nothing for us.’ No one was supporting me, so I decided to commit suicide. At that time Xinmei had just committed suicide after a quarrel with her husband, and I watched her funeral. Soon a relative and I saw another funeral for a woman who had committed suicide. She said, ‘I would never die this way.’ But while I was watching these two funerals, I thought I might die that way.

“Before I did that, I told my husband how much money I had borrowed and asked him to pay it back as soon as possible. I bought a bottle of sleeping pills after breakfast. I also bought a set of new clothes, shoes, and socks, but I

was hesitant to dress up, fearing that they might discover my intention. Then I began to wash my underclothes. At least I should wear clean underclothes. When I was washing, someone came to borrow my basin. I said, 'Don't you see, I am washing clothes? Please wait a while or go borrow from someone else.' She didn't find out that I was preparing for death, since I was almost smiling. When I finished preparing and got dressed, I took out the bottle of sleeping pills. I was rethinking my situation and became angrier, so I again confirmed my decision. My bed was in the south part of the room. The bed of the next room was in the north part. If someone sat in that bed, he could see the foot of the bed in my room. So I decided not to put on the new shoes. I took the pills and got in bed. I thought about lying in the quilt, but that might also have helped people to discover what was going on, so I just lay there. It so happened that my husband came to my room 10 minutes later. 'Hi, go toil in the fields.' 'No,' I said. He thought I was gambling for *qi* and said, 'Don't always think about going back. This time it is not my fault. It happened in your own family.' He carried me out and put me on the bike, claiming that he would send me back to my natal family. I fell down and said, 'I don't want to go anywhere.' I went back to my room and lay in bed again. Then I had difficulty speaking. The pills were working, and I was trembling. 'You are sick?' 'No. I am OK.' Kang Yu carried me out and put me on the bike again. I lost consciousness, and he sent me to the hospital. Later I found I had bumped into the door of the hospital and was seriously hurt in the head. I wasn't even aware of that. We arrived at the hospital at about 10 am and came back that evening. I completely recovered the next morning. This was my first attempt.

"The second attempt happened one year later. At that time, he always gambled late into the night and did not listen to my words. He even gave up having dinner and going to work, and I badly wanted to die. That was in June, and we had a mosquito net over our bed. He was still sleeping in the morning, and I took a bottle of sleeping pills again. Kexi suddenly came to our room and asked, 'Aunt, would you please lend us the tricycle?'<sup>4</sup> I said, 'Someone else is using it. I will ask for it back and lend it to you, but now it is too early. Can you come a little later?' He left. Perhaps he sensed something strange and came back again. 'Why are you still sleeping? It is not early now.' If he were a little older, I would have died this time. How could an adult man come to see a sleeping couple? Kexi was still too young and came to uncover our mosquito net. Kexi and my husband carried me to the hospital, and I survived again. Even now I still want to commit suicide. Is it meaningful to stay alive like this?"

A paradox in Surong's story is that when her husband was having an affair with Luorui, she did not commit suicide but resumed the marriage. It seemed that her attempted suicide had nothing to do with Kang Yu's affair. How do we understand the power dynamics between this couple and the domestic injustice that Surong suffered?

Surong disliked Kang Yu from the beginning. Kang Yu did not live decently and

did not treat her well. At that time, however, there was no apparent domestic injustice that pushed her to commit suicide. Although they did not have a harmonious family life, Surong was not in a disadvantageous position. Instead, she had some moral capital and could criticize Kang Yu for all his defects. When there was any conflict between the couple, Surong was never merely a passive victim.

One year after they got married, Surong returned to her natal family because her husband did not prepare for New Year's Day: "If you don't care, I won't either." Women are not supposed to spend New Year's Day in their natal families unless there is some serious problem (Judd 1989). Surong's return showed that she was not content with Kang Yu and was intentionally breaking the convention. Although Kang Yu did not care too much about it, his mother and his kinsmen like Kang Hui fully understood what that meant. Even if Kang Yu was not moved by Surong's resistance, other people knew that he must have done something wrong. In order to mediate between them and save the whole family's face, Kang Hui made efforts to apologize on Kang Yu's behalf and called Surong back.

Surong was good at both managing the family and fighting her husband. Although Kang Yu wasted much money gambling, Surong managed to save 20,000 *yuan*, which was really a large amount in the 1980s. When she first came to her mother-in-law's house without any preparation, she ingratiated herself with the old woman by apologizing properly. When she had any conflict with her husband, she grasped every chance to take advantage of her moral capital and urged Kang Yu to work. She understood when she should shout angrily, when she should argue, and when she should threaten to return to her natal family. Kang Yu was a playboy and would not give up his bad habits, but he never attained an upper hand in family politics. When he had only some noodles for himself, he had to give them up under Surong's urging; when Surong insisted upon not selling the house, Kang Yu had nothing to say; when Surong needed him to take care of the children, he quit his job and returned to Gouyi. According to many villagers, Surong took control of the whole family, and Kang Yu had almost no say in family affairs.

The climax of Surong's resistance was doubtless the divorce. When we look at the situation in retrospect, it is hard to discern how genuine Surong's desire was to divorce. Mulan even suspected that it was a strategic divorce. If Surong really did not want to stay with Kang Yu any more, I do not think that she could have been persuaded to return. It seems more like Surong's strategy to resist.

Although Surong was not content with Kang Yu from the beginning of their marriage, the event that led to the divorce was so trivial that common people like Mulan did not believe that this was really why they divorced. I am sure that Surong did not have divorce in mind when she first scolded Kang Yu that evening. It was after a whole night of quarreling that she decided to divorce him; Chinese people often describe such a process as "words following words (*hua gan hua*)."<sup>1</sup> This saying implies that when people are arguing with each other, an unexpected but important decision is made as a response to certain words.

For instance, a man named Muzhi who attempted suicide described why he did that: "My wife and I were engaged in a big quarrel, in which neither of us wanted to yield. Perhaps I threatened her with some words that I cannot recollect now,

and she responded, ‘There is some pesticide over there, why don’t you drink it?’ Unwilling to give in, I grasped the bottle and drank some pesticide.” “Words following words” can be a mini power game. The result of such a game can be harsh words or unexpectedly rash actions.

When Surong criticized Kang Yu for staying in others’ houses, they focused on who was the more reasonable. It would cause trouble in both families if Kang Yu insisted on staying there late. Surong had “sound reason and strong *qi*” (*li zhi qi zhuang*). Kang Yu was aware that he was not being reasonable, but he did not want to give in under Surong’s harsh words. Unable to respond with a better reason, he turned a debate about what is reasonable into a bare competition for *qi* and said, “Stay here if you want. If you don’t want to live with me, go away.” Without responding to Surong’s reasoning, he asked her to choose whether she would stay with him or go. Both Kang Yu and Surong knew that the quarrel was about a trivial thing that could not be so serious as to make them divorce. Kang Yu offered the two options because he knew that it was unlikely Surong would divorce him, and if she chose to stay with him, she would yield, and then he would win the power game. Although Surong also knew that she should not divorce over such a trivial quarrel, she was provoked, and this reminded her of how she had disliked Kang Yu from the beginning. Unwilling to yield, she made an unexpected choice by agreeing to divorce. Therefore, the decision to divorce, like Muzhi’s unexpected suicidal attempt, was a result of “words following words,” an unexpected consequence of the power game.

The power game did not end with their divorce. Although Surong defended her *qi* with divorce, this was nonetheless an unfortunate move for both. Even Surong herself did not intend to separate from Kang Yu forever. Her winning became meaningful only if Kang Yu yielded and apologized. Kang Yu did not do that when Surong first talked about divorce, which was perhaps also beyond her expectation. What happened later suggests that Kang Yu did not want to divorce either, but like Surong, he did not want to give in and thus also made a difficult decision by divorcing Surong. Although Surong did not win Kang Yu’s immediate apology, her “prize” was much more significant – her mother-in-law and children begged her to stay.

Aware that they had divorced over a trivial quarrel, Kang Yu’s mother could not be indifferent to them. She knew that her son was unreasonable and that the whole family would lose face if her daughter-in-law left the family. She was also aware that the divorce was only the result of “words following words,” and that Surong would finally be moved by her and come back.

It seemed that Surong was also aware of that. When she returned to her natal family, she uttered some contradictory words: “This time I will not go back to Gouyi, I will stay longer in my own home.” At first she said she would not return to Gouyi, but then she implied that she would finally go back, although she would do so much later. She also knew that the game could not end like that, and she was quite likely to go back to Gouyi, but she would not do so unless someone came to apologize. This was why she asked her relatives not to let in anyone from Gouyi before they had visited her.

The visit of Kang Yu's mother continued the power game between the couple. His mother attempted to mediate by humbly apologizing to her daughter-in-law. Because of the hasty divorce, both Surong's natal family and Kang Yu's mother were involved in the power game. Although Surong did not mention any specific person in her natal family, her relatives were crucial in supporting her in the power game. Kang Yu's mother, however, was in a tricky situation. On the one hand, she was concerned with the well-being of her son and his family; on the other hand, given the unexpected result of the power game, she could not side with Kang Yu but had to apologize to Surong. She knew that she could help her son to win back Surong only by blaming him.

The old woman's visit transformed the competition of *qi* back into a debate about reason. Although Kang Yu defended his *qi* by arguing with Surong, this harmed both the harmony of the family and his happiness. Kang Yu's mother knew that her son could not really have any dignity without having a harmonious family and living family life in a proper way. She did a great favor to Surong by visiting her and even promising to get down on her knees. His mother's humility compensated the harm that Kang Yu had done to Surong, and Surong gained much face. Then the focus shifted back to life and harmony in the family, which were exactly what Surong had been worrying about when she had criticized Kang Yu that night.

When the power game ended with Surong's returning to Gouyi, Kang Yu totally lost his battle, but he managed to preserve the family's harmony. In order to maintain harmony, he had to admit his fault and give in. An indicator of his yielding was their decision not to resume the marriage immediately. Without resuming the marriage, Surong was in a more advantageous position in subsequent power games, because she could return to her natal family any time. Kang Yu could not mistreat her any more, and any harsh words might lead to a permanent separation. Why then did Surong resume the marriage when Kang Yu was having an affair with Luorui?

When Kang Yu went away with Luorui, Surong did not return to her natal family. Instead, she stayed in her conjugal family and continued doing chores. This does not mean, however, that she did not mind Kang Yu's affair. What she said to Kang Yu's father indicated that Surong was so provoked by her husband that she even dared to scold her father-in-law. There seemed to be a paradox between her hard work at home and the angry words to her father-in-law.

We can understand this paradox by putting the conflict in the framework of family politics. Surong did not really want a divorce, although her life was hard. She was concerned about her children, the property that she shared with Kang Yu, and the nuclear family as a whole. A divorce would put an end of their family life, and then her winning of the power game would be meaningless. Surong fully understood this and would not divorce at an inopportune moment. By emphasizing to me that she did not quit working when Kang Yu was together with Luorui, she wanted to show me how reasonable she was. With all the moral capital that she had accumulated, she had gained more power in family affairs and could openly curse her father-in-law.

This does not imply, however, that Surong enjoyed staying with Kang Yu at the expense of allowing him to have affairs. This was simply her strategy for dealing

with Kang Yu's affairs, and it showed that she was quite clever. For instance, Jiang Zhong's wife finally divorced him when Jiang Zhong was having an affair with Youmei. After Jiang Zhong married Youmei, Youmei helped him to become one of the richest men in Gouyi, and their family seemed pretty harmonious. Jiang Zhong's ex-wife, however, is not happy with her second husband. Perhaps having this example in mind, Surong was aware that she would not be more fortunate after leaving Kang Yu, but could instead have a higher status in the family by building more moral capital.

When Kang Yu's affair had become so notorious that the Party secretary intervened, Surong urged Kang Yu to marry Luorui: "If you think our children can address her as "mother," please go to register with that bitch as Jiang Zhong did, and I can go back to my natal family again." At that moment she was sure that her husband dared not marry Luorui. By saying that, she not only exposed her husband's fault, but also took advantage of her moral capital. As Surong expected, her husband could not marry Luorui, but wanted to resume their marriage.

Although Surong implied that she was concerned about the happiness of their children, she was really using them as another weapon in the power game: the children's likely opposition to accepting Luorui as their "mother." With this proposal, Kang Yu caved in under her pressure. A family is not merely the union of a man and a woman, but a greater entity. When talking about the children, the couple is also talking about the larger family as a whole as well as the good fortune of its members. Perhaps Luorui could provide some pleasure for Kang Yu, but she could offer nothing to Kang Yu in terms of being the children's mother, of family happiness and good fortune. If she could not make Kang Yu's children happy, then she could never make him really happy either.

Mulan told me something else about the affair. "I heard that Surong was outrageous and claimed that she would kill Luorui if Kang Yu dared to continue the affair. I was worried about the fate of my nephews. One day I met one of them in the street. I found a piece of paper and wrote down several words on it: 'If you go to Kang Yu's house again, we will kill you.' I asked the boy to show it to his mother. I wrote this because I knew Kang Yu's wife was hostile to Luorui. I didn't want Luorui to be murdered and then make my nephews lose both of their parents. Luorui remarried two years later."

Although Luorui was responsible for her husband Mugen's death, Mulan did not want her to be killed by Surong, because as the mother, Luorui was the only person who could take care of Mugen's children. Similarly, Surong was also the only woman who could take care of Kang Yu's children as well as the family as a whole.

Both Kang Yu and Surong were fully aware of this. In the power game following Kang Yu's affair, Surong again won a great deal. Kang Yu resumed the marriage with Surong shortly after running away with Luorui, and he lost much face in the village; Surong not only triumphed over Luorui, but also fortified her status in the family. In spite of Kang Yu's affair and her harsh words to her father-in-law, she was doubtless the head of the family, and Kang Yu had to obey her in almost everything in the family.

The power balance in Surong's conjugal family was maintained through her moral capital. This does not mean, however, that Surong enjoyed her power in the family structure very much. Although Surong could defend her dignity and had sound reason to argue with Kang Yu, their family was far from harmonious, and she was not happy at all. She could protect her dignity with all kinds of strategies, but that was not sufficient for a happy life. Because the power balance was maintained solely through her clever strategies, it was vulnerable to any small mistake that she might make. When the power balance was broken, she thought about suicide.

Aware of the disharmony in her family, Surong concealed from Kang Yu the fact that she should offer money for her brother. When Kang Yu found out about it, he had an excuse to blame her, and all her moral capital was gone. Since she also harmed the family life, how could she reasonably blame her husband again? Kang Yu fully made use of this opportunity. He blamed Surong, claiming that she was not better than he. What made things worse was that even Surong's children blamed her. This showed that Kang Yu's manipulation of this opportunity worked, and she lost moral capital even in front of her own children.

A villager said, "It would have been better if Surong had told Kang Yu everything from the very beginning. She would not have lost so much if she had not concealed what she had done." Others said, "Perhaps she would have had more difficulty getting the money if she had told her husband. Who knows why her sister broke her promise? Perhaps that was because of the objection of her husband."

Whatever reason she had, Surong made a mistake, and her loss in the power game altered the power balance. Kang Yu would not fear her accusations any more, and she would not have the upper hand in any quarrel afterwards. Her dignity was challenged, and she thought about suicide when watching Xinmei's funeral.

When Kang Yu went into her room unexpectedly, he again used his moral capital in the power game and demanded that Surong work. After she refused, he said, "Don't always think about going back. This time it is not my fault. It happened in your own family." He not only blamed her in speech, but also shamed her in deed by carrying her on the bicycle.

This is another mini power game. When she saw Kang Yu, Surong already knew that she would survive, but she did not want to yield either by going home or by telling him what she had done. She would rather resist him by lying there to die. She could not win the power game by arguing with Kang Yu because she had lost the game this time; but she did not want to yield either, for she was still self-righteous. Because of the small mistake she had committed, however, she could not express her suffering or blame her husband. Suicide was her strategy to resist and respond to this moral dilemma.

Given that Surong and Kang Yu had such a bad relationship, why did they not divorce? Many of my Western friends asked me this question. The same question could also be asked about Hefang and Kang Hui (3.1). I do not mean that Chinese women never divorce in such a situation. Shi Lei's wife (4.1) and Jiang Zhong's wife divorced their husbands. But the fact that Surong resumed the marriage when Kang Yu was flirting with Luorui told us that, in such a situation, divorce is not the best choice. For such a woman, divorce would mean the end of the power games.

Although it could finish a bitter family life, it could not bring better fortune to her. Instead, if she did not divorce but continued to play the power game, she would have more moral capital with which to fight her husband. Suicide might be a good strategy to win back dignity and punish her husband, even if a suicide were completed. Family life is an existential condition, in which there are both times of happiness and conflicts. People fight in power games in a family, but do not want to destroy that family and rebuild another one. Hence, in most cases, a person who feels wronged in family politics would commit suicide to resist rather than seek divorce.

### **4.3 A complex family**

When I first interviewed Zilan, an attractive woman of 32 from Xitang, she told me a brief story:

“I drank pesticide for a really trivial thing. My husband works in a building team in Shimen. As the driver for the manager, he seldom comes home. That day he returned home and was unhappy. Don’t laugh at me. It was quite a small quarrel. It was only three days before New Year’s Day. When I was cooking that evening, I heard someone knocking at the door and asked my husband to see who it was. [They have a big yard. The door is far from their room – Author.] But he refused and commanded me to open it. I said, ‘I am cooking for you.’ We both became angry. He knocked the chopsticks against the table, which jumped so high that I was almost hit in the eyes. ‘Do you want to make me blind?’ I was outraged, ‘You had better not come back any more. Whenever you are back, you always beat and scold me.’ Without responding to my words, he grabbed my hair and slapped my face. With nose bleeding, I cursed him, ‘Your family is so unreasonable. You are no better than your father!’ Well, it would have been all right if he had only beat me a little, but it seemed he would never stop. He pushed me down, sat on my belly, and constantly beat me until he was tired. Without uttering a word, he went out and did not come back for the whole night. Later I learned that he was gambling with his manager that night. I was still angry the next morning. Seeing my children weeping, I lost my senses and drank the pesticide. Some neighbors sent me to the hospital. It was very simple.”

“Does he often beat you?” I asked her. “Often? Well, sometimes. My temper is not good. Neither is his. He seldom comes home, but we quarrel and fight whenever he is back.” It seemed that she did not have too much to say, and the first interview ended here. I noticed how she scolded her husband: “You are no better than your father!” There seemed to be another story about her father-in-law. The next morning, I went to her house again with a man who had been more familiar with their family. When we got into her big yard, her two sons were about to have breakfast.

“How is your relationship with your father-in-law?” I came straight to the point. She smiled and replied, “Our family is too complicated, and you cannot



understand.” My guide explained to me, “They have too many people. She has not only parents-in-law, but also grandparents-in-law.”

He said to the woman, “Sometimes your in-laws are a little difficult. Your aunt told me that she came to the house of your grandfather-in-law after you drank the pesticide. They quarreled over you.” “Did he say something bad?” Zilan asked in a serious tone. “Well,” my guide found that he had made a mistake and denied it, “perhaps not. The old man was not good at words. Your aunt tried to justify your actions, and your grandmother-in-law said some good words for you.”

Zilan sighed and said, “The old man always does stupid things. All the old people in my family are stubborn and confused. Don’t you know the news about my brother-in-law? He has been released, but my father-in-law lodged an appeal again. Isn’t he confused? My father-in-law wanted the police to compensate him for his loss. He knows no high-ranking official, so how can he succeed with such an unreasonable request? He might see himself as very capable. Who knows what he is thinking?”

My guide explained: “Her brother-in-law had just been released from jail after three years of imprisonment. Her father-in-law wanted to get back the money he had spent on this case, so he lodged an appeal. They often quarreled over that case. Actually, her suicide attempt was also related to it.” Zilan smiled and said, “My father-in-law made a lot of mistakes in this case, and many conflicts in my family happened because of it. Since our family is so big and complicated, it is hard to cope with all these people.”

Zilan’s two sons finished their breakfast. Zilan washed dishes and then said, “I bore my second son in Fuyang. My experience in Fuyang was really good. The workers there were very friendly. The most important thing was that the relationship among the workers was easy going. We never quarreled at Fuyang. I didn’t have to worry about anything there, and there was no pressure. At home I have to be careful with everything, for there is too much pressure. When I am here, I have to think about all the relationships both within and outside our family. Everyone is in need of everyone else. If there is some unexpected event in the family, we need the help of others. You see, people in the west yard [she pointed to the yard of her parents-in-law, which was west of the house we were in – Author] care about nothing like this. Anyway, we still belong to one family. Hence I have to relate to other villagers for them. I am tired and unhappy. Back from Fuyang, my temper immediately flared up, and our quarrels increased.

“Now I am much better and can think through my situation. I have learned a lot after my attempted suicide. I should not have worried so much. Rather, I should let it be. Everyone can live for only a certain number of years. Why should we treat ourselves so hard?”

My guide said, “Don’t think too much. Every couple quarrels with each other. I think you are successful in dealing with everything. Everyone is friendly to you. You are also quite sweet to the villagers.” Zilan said: “Sometimes I am sweet, but when I am not happy, I am not. The main problem

between my in-laws and me is that we are not the same kind of people. Both my grandfather-in-law and my father-in-law are not good at making friends. You cannot say that they are bad people. No. They are good. Nobody thinks they are bad, but they have no close friends. They never eat or drink with friends. I don't like such a situation. This is the difference between us. I am quite fond of making friends. If someone comes to borrow something from me, I am never hesitant. Only by this can I succeed when I also want to borrow something from other people."

After the interview, my guide supplemented with further information. Because Zilan's brother-in-law was put in jail, Zilan's parents-in-law were especially kind to his children. He had one boy and one girl. The life of his wife became hard after his arrest, so his children often stayed at their grandparents' house. Zilan was unhappy, because she also had two children, and her husband was not at home either as he was working as a driver. She often quarreled with her in-laws about that.

My guide said, "Once when I was passing their door, I heard some noise in their yard. I opened the door and saw the old man holding her hair and slapping her violently. I went to stop him. Even if she had behaved badly, her father-in-law was not supposed to beat her. 'This is not a person you can beat.' He gasped and said, 'Well, I know that, but ... but you don't know how much she has enraged her mother-in-law.' This happened several days before her husband came back. I guess her husband was angry when his parents told him of this. The real reason for her quarrel with her husband and her suicide attempt was her quarrel with her father-in-law."

"What did her grandfather-in-law say to her aunt?," I asked. He said, "I could not tell the truth just now. Her aunt also married into this village. Zilan met her husband through an introduction from her aunt, so her aunt has always felt responsible for her. After her attempted suicide, Zilan's aunt went to her grandfather-in-law's house to ask about it. Do you know what the old man said? He said, 'You are still talking about this? If I were her husband, I would have beaten her to death.' Her aunt burst out immediately: 'How could you beat her? How can you say such stupid words?' Ever since that, the old woman has never talked to the old man. Even Zilan's mother-in-law has not spoken with Zilan since her attempted suicide. Their relationship has become a little better only recently."

Although Zilan's attempted suicide was prompted by a quarrel with her husband, the domestic injustice she had suffered was different from that of Hefang (3.1) and Surong (4.2). Zilan's complaints about her husband were far less serious than her complaints about her in-laws. Her husband occasionally gambled and did not concern himself enough about the work in their field, but he did not have extremely bad habits that compromised the family life. Without her complex and troubled relationships with her aggregate family, Zilan would not have quarreled so much with her husband nor would she have attempted suicide. In order to understand the relationship between the couple and the cause of her attempted suicide, we need to

examine more closely her relationship with the wider family, especially its impact on the nuclear family.

An aggregate family, as Elizabeth Croll (1987) and Ellen Judd (1994) define it, is “a family that has divided into more than one household but retains close economic cooperation and sociopolitical relations” (Judd 1994: xiv). Although they did not live in the same house, the several nuclear families involved in Zilan’s story had very close relations with each other.

The experience in Fuyang provided Zilan and her husband with a chance to live away from the wider family, and further provided me with a different perspective of the relationship between the nuclear family and the aggregate family. The couple enjoyed life in Fuyang, but Zilan’s comparison between the experience in Fuyang and life in Mengzou was not as straightforward as it first appeared. On the one hand, she seemed to admire the simple interpersonal relationships in Fuyang; on the other hand, she boasted of her skills in relating to other people in the village. Zilan enjoyed her days in Fuyang not only because the relationships there were easier and simpler, but also because they did not have an aggregate family there. A city dweller like me might find relationships in the countryside simpler and more enjoyable because I never have to worry about building a relationship with the local people. In Fuyang, Zilan only had to worry about her relationship with her husband and two sons. Since they did not have many conflicts, they all got along fairly well.

When they returned to Mengzou, their quarrels immediately increased. Although Zilan complained about the complexity of the relationships in the countryside, what she really worried about was her in-laws’ inability to deal with people. “Everyone is in need of everyone else. If there is some unexpected event in the family, we need the help of others. You see, people in the west yard care about nothing like this. Anyway, we still belong to one family. Hence I have to relate to other villagers for them. I am tired and unhappy.” She actually appreciated the basic requirement of behaving as a person in the village. What made her life in the village less enjoyable was not the requirement, but her relationship with her in-laws. These problems not only saddened her, but also worsened Zilan’s relationship with her husband.

Zilan claimed that she had to win more face for her in-laws, since they all belong to one family. What annoyed Zilan most, however, was not her in-laws’ inability to deal with the villagers, but their clumsiness in managing the family. Although she also lost face when her in-laws could not behave well in the village, what harmed her most were their improper words or deeds to her.

When Zilan was quarreling with her parents-in-law, even if she had been unreasonable, her father-in-law should not have beaten her. As my guide said, “this is not a person you can beat.” A father-in-law is not supposed to beat his daughter-in-law, for two reasons. First, parents-in-law in the family of today’s China do not have absolute authority over daughters-in-law, although daughters-in-law are supposed to be obedient to them. Second, even if mothers-in-law are often in direct conflict with their daughters-in-law, fathers-in-law are not supposed to get involved. As men, they should neither be too intimate with nor too harsh to their daughters-in-law.

In the contemporary Chinese countryside, it is very difficult to maintain a good relationship between parents-in-law and daughters-in-law. As Chen Feinian points out, in families where husbands work outside the village, as does Zilan's husband, a mother-in-law is often in a more disadvantageous position than her daughter-in-law (Chen Feinian 2001: 52). Both parents-in-law and daughters-in-law are likely to commit suicide due to domestic conflicts. The size of her aggregate family might have been why Zilan was in a disadvantageous position. However, it is hard to assess whether she was really in a disadvantageous position. Although she was not treated well in the family, her sociability won her more sympathy from other villagers, and her in-laws' lack of social skills also prompted the villagers to pity Zilan. Whatever Zilan said or did, her father-in-law's aggressive beating violated some basic code for in-laws, and this prompted the villagers to lose respect for him.

Another instance of her in-laws' social ineptness is in Zilan's grandfather-in-law's words to her aunt: "If I were her husband, I should have beaten her to death." Even if Zilan had done many bad things, the old man as a senior in the family was not supposed to utter such harsh words, especially to Zilan's aunt. The old woman's visit to the old man was a friendly gesture. As a senior from Zilan's natal family and the matchmaker, she felt responsible for Zilan's life in the village and was of course concerned about her attempted suicide. Perhaps she sided with Zilan, but her visit at least showed her intention to negotiate and mediate. The old man's harsh words, however, dissolved all her good intention before they could have a serious talk. He offended Zilan's aunt, the best placed person in the village to mediate between Zilan and her in-laws, and made it more difficult for Zilan to repair her discord with her in-laws.

When my guide and some other villagers talked about the apparent shortfalls of Zilan's in-laws, their usual comment was: "They are unable to deal with things," or "They do not know how to manage the family." In the case of Zilan's brother-in-law, the family was also unable to solve the problem. Since their son was finally put in jail, the life of his wife and her children was more difficult. It was understandable that Zilan's parents-in-law showed more concern to them. "Zilan's argument that they did not take care of her children was not reasonable," some villagers commented, "but the old couple did not know how to refute her and finally changed the quarrel into a big debate." By beating Zilan, they totally lost their moral capital and their advantageous position.

Zilan's in-laws' improper behavior hurt Zilan, but this did not really break the power balance. When Zilan was arguing with her parents-in-law, she did not expect to be treated very well by them. She knew that they would be constantly engaged in sharp conflicts. Therefore, Zilan did not think about suicide when her father-in-law was beating her. It was only when her husband quarreled with her that she took the pesticide. The power balance in the nuclear family is the key to understanding her attempted suicide.

When Zilan was arguing with her parents-in-law, from her point of view, she was struggling not only for herself and her children, but also for the nuclear family and her husband. Her husband was supposed to support her and argue with his sister-in-law and his parents. When her husband did not seek to soothe her over his parents'

mistreatment of her, but instead beat her vehemently, she became extremely sad and was more stimulated to resist. In contrast to her parents-in-law, her husband shared with her the same interests of protecting the nuclear family as well as his own children. His attitude toward her was more important to her than was that of her parents-in-law, because her fortune was bound to his.

Regarding one's personal happiness, the nuclear family weighs more than the aggregate family, and the power balance between husband and wife is more important than that between the couple and the husband's parents. A woman is more frustrated when her dignity is challenged in the nuclear family. The conflict between in-laws is especially dangerous when it is transformed into a conflict within the nuclear family. When Zilan and her husband stayed in Fuyang, they maintained a power balance and did not have many conflicts; when Zilan was in conflict with her father-in-law, although she was suffering the latter's violent beating, she was enjoying certain moral capital, and the power balance was not really broken. When this quarrel changed her husband's attitude to her, however, the power balance that she cared most about was broken.

Zilan's husband was in a more difficult dilemma. On the one hand, he had more responsibilities to his parents than Zilan did; on the other hand, he knew that Zilan was suffering for the good of the nuclear family. It is not appropriate for him to side with either party. In such a case, a smart husband might criticize his wife in public and soothe her in private. Such a strategy demands much skill and patience. If he sided too much with his wife, he would get a reputation of impiety – a risk that most men dare not take. Therefore, to punish Zilan was a more acceptable solution, though not ideal. Hence his wife became the victim of his strategy to harmonize the aggregate family.

Zilan understood her husband's dilemma, and she was also aware that he cared about their children. He had the same interests as her but could not support her in the fight she had had with his father. When he returned home, he said nothing to Zilan, but was waiting for an excuse to punish her. There was no need to argue, since he had already decided upon the punishment. It was not because Zilan was unreasonable, but because this was necessary for him to appease his parents and harmonize the aggregate family. Even if he had totally agreed with Zilan, he still had to beat her. This was unfair to Zilan, and she had no chance of defending herself. She attempted suicide to resist his beating which was against his own will and interest, to force him to regard her more highly in similar conflicts in the future.

Many people comment, "The key figure in mediating between the parents-in-law and the daughter-in-law is the husband." The husband, as the son of his mother, is also seen as a member of the nuclear family of his parents. As a member of both nuclear families, he is responsible for the harmony of both. A mother commented about the husband's position: "When his mother is not satisfied with his wife, she is likely to complain to him, and his wife also complains to him about his mother. If he is smart enough, he should know how to satisfy both women and make the whole family harmonious. A silly husband, however, might make things worse by intensifying the conflicts between the two women."

An example will illustrate how a husband can worsen the situation. A young

woman once complained to her husband about her mother-in-law: "I will divorce you if she always does that." She was not serious, but when her husband tried persuading his mother to treat his wife better, he told her that his wife threatened to divorce him if she did not stop. Also enraged, his mother said, "Let her divorce, if she wants." She said this lightly also, but the man again delivered it to his wife. A trivial argument eventually became a big conflict, and the young couple had to move to the house of the wife's parents. This husband wanted to make both women treat each other more tenderly, but his efforts not only proved futile but also made things just the opposite of what he had wished. In a certain sense, the silence of Zilan's husband is better than the loquacity of this husband.

The daughters-in-law and the parents-in-law do not live in the same nuclear family, and they are not very dependent upon each other, but the daughter-in-law relies on her husband, and the parents-in-law on their son. It is through the man that the personal happiness of the two parties is linked. It is also through the man that they maintain a power balance. When a daughter-in-law is mistreated by her parents-in-law, the domestic injustice usually is not so serious as to lead to her suicide unless her husband also treats her badly. When a mother-in-law is mistreated by her daughter-in-law, she is also unlikely to commit suicide unless her son favors his wife or she thinks he does. Although the conflict between in-laws is often a thorny issue in contemporary Chinese families, and it is sometimes a cause for suicide, it worsens especially after being transformed into a conflict in the nuclear family.

Margery Wolf appears to be correct in her assessment that the patrilineal family contributes to the suffering and suicide of many women (1972, 1975, 1985), but her argument fails to explain the complex power games in the contemporary Chinese family. Zilan's case shows how domestic injustices occur in a series of power games. While many factors inside and outside the family add to the sufferings of these people, the successive power games between couples are the key in family politics.

## **Discussion**

The modern transformation of the family's structure and values is an important reason leading to many suicide cases in China. In a certain sense, suicide due to such a social change is similar to the anomic suicide described by Durkheim. I agree with Durkheim that social progress often brings moral ambiguity and more cases of suicide, but there is still some difference between suicide due to domestic injustice and that due to anomie. In contemporary China, it is not anomie that makes common people commit suicide following social change, but the intensified domestic conflicts that result from social change. These people are suffering not because they are alienated from the transformed social norms, but rather because they are more devoted to the social norms. Hefang, Surong and Zilan all recognized the social norms in contemporary rural China, and they even followed those rules better than their husbands or in-laws did. They were facing a paradox of modernity that is very different from anomie. What they need is not a normal order, but a

better and more acceptable way to maintain domestic justice.

We can thus understand domestic justice. First, although familial love is both the beginning and end of family life, power structure and moral capital are very important in the family. Hence there is always an issue of “justice” in the family, even in a very harmonious one. Although Ge Man and Shi Lei loved each other, because they were not in a family, Ge Man could not get fair treatment. She had no moral capital and could not win a single power game. Even in the family, as we see in Hefang’s case, mere love is far from enough. Only when family members respect and bind each other can a power balance be reached.

Second, power conflicts in the family are not bare struggles, but power games. If morality were only used as moral capital, and people were only concerned with how to win in power games, family life would be poor. We can see this in the stories of Lanzhi (3.2), Laifu (3.3), Suohou (3.3) and Surong (4.2). One who loses in family politics suffers from domestic injustice, but one who wins in a power game might not be happy either. When family members become enemies to each other, and there is no concern for good and bad, but only for wins and losses, then domestic justice is no more. Only when everyone in a family leads a good life harmoniously is domestic justice possible. That is why Surong could not be happy when she won the power game.

Third, unlike public justice, the aim of domestic justice is not to commend the righteous and to punish the wrongdoers, but to harmonize the whole family and maintain a more reasonable love. Domestic justice, therefore, could not be maintained merely by punishing the unjust. When Zilan did not have good reason to treat her sister-in-law poorly, her parents-in-law punished her violently. This did not solve the problem, but instead brought more troubles.

From these three points, we can see that domestic justice is very different from public justice. Beginning from familial love, aiming at familial harmony, domestic justice is maintained through power games in the family. When every family member is respected as he or she should be, and a power balance is preserved, domestic justice prevails. When domestic justice breaks down, one might feel wronged and commit or attempt to commit suicide. Hefang attempted suicide because she relied too much on romantic love but could not strike a power balance in the family; Surong attempted suicide because her family life became a bare power struggle; Zilan attempted suicide because the power games in her family were not aimed at harmony.

## 5 Fortune

In Chapter 2 we noted that to live is to maintain a fortune in family life. Having examined familial love and domestic justice, now we come to the idea of fortune.

In the context of fortune, local people understand suicide in three ways: first, as being caused by supernatural powers, as if it were an accident beyond human control; second, as the result not of fate but of power games between gods or ghosts and human beings; third, as a manifestation, along with misfortune, of the paradox of family life.

Suicide is a positive resistance against domestic injustice, but it brings a great misfortune to the deceased and his or her family. Hence suicide indicates an existential paradox in family life. Any explanations of the fate of suicides are efforts to understand this paradox.

### 5.1 Long and short lives

If one has passed a life peacefully, that is, if one has experienced birth, growth, getting married, the birth of one's children, educating them, taking care of one's parents, getting old, and death, then although one might not necessarily be happy, one has experienced what a human being should experience and fulfilled all the duties that should be fulfilled. If one not only passes through these stages peacefully, but is very successful in each of them – e.g., if one is treated well by parents, siblings, spouse and children, lives in a harmonious family and always enjoys a good spirits – then one is a happy and fortunate person. But if in one's life a family member dies early or suffers from an unexpected injustice or accident, or, worse, if one is treated badly by certain family members or experiences great family conflicts, then one would be very unfortunate. If someone commits suicide due to domestic injustice, that is a greater misfortune yet.

The funerals for suicides are arranged according to the above principle. Many suicides are unable to be buried decently in the cemetery of their ancestors, but for a reason very different from that in medieval Christian Europe. If an old person who has children commits suicide, people would blame the children for impiety, but the old person would enjoy a good funeral and be buried in the cemetery of their ancestors. If a young married person commits suicide, he or she could still be buried in the cemetery of their ancestors, although the funeral might not be



magnificent. But if a single person commits suicide, he or she could only be buried at the margins of the cemetery. When his or her parents find a ghost spouse for the deceased son or daughter, the latter could then be reburied in the cemetery. The funeral of a suicide depends on whether he or she is married, i.e., on whether he or she has his or her own family. In fact, everyone who dies unmarried is buried at the margins of the cemetery. Because such a person has not passed through many important stages of family life, he or she is unable to be treated as a full person. A young person who commits suicide is treated exactly like a young person who dies from an accident, disease or violence. The ghosts of such people are supposed to be very dangerous.

Ruomu, a man of Li village, committed suicide for no obvious reason, except that he passed the tomb of his ex-girlfriend who had died nine years before. Biri, his ex-girlfriend, had committed suicide due to a quarrel with her father, which allegedly had nothing to do with Ruomu. She was buried outside the cemetery. Although the man was very sad upon hearing that, he finally recovered and married another woman. He did not have any conflict with his wife before committing suicide. People attributed his mysterious suicide to the haunting of the girl's ghost.

Such an explanation of suicide could shift the responsibility away from family members and belie any real conflicts in a family. Whatever the reason for a suicide, other family members should continue their life.

Sanxiu, a girl who worked in Chonghua Hotel, committed suicide right before the Mid-Autumn Festival of 2002. Unlike most other suicides, she suffered from depression. She could not work efficiently and was very depressed after becoming a waitress in the hotel. A woman in a nearby village, whose son had died several years earlier, had a dream one week before Sanxiu's death: "My son happily came to me and said, 'Mom, I will soon get married. My bride, who often wears a yellow skirt, is very pretty.'" It so happened that her sister had exactly the same dream. After the death of Sanxiu, who often wore a yellow skirt, she was betrothed to the dead young man. As happens in a "ghost marriage" in this area, her funeral resembled a wedding, and she was directly buried together with the man in the cemetery of his ancestors.

Although the whole village knew how Sanxiu had committed suicide, Sanxiu's parents denied it. Unable to find a better explanation, they simply said that Sanxiu had died very mysteriously. When I talked about the supernatural explanation with them, they said that they did not believe it, although they had held a "wedding-funeral" for Sanxiu. Nevertheless, because this explanation helped them to deny Sanxiu's suicide, they seldom refuted it as an explanation among the villagers. Sanxiu's uncle thus explained the ambiguity in their attitudes: "If they admit that Sanxiu committed suicide, people might assume that they treated their daughter badly. Because they do not want people to see any problem in their family, they deny it. They do not believe the superstitious story, but because that story helps them to save face, they do not insist that it is false."

Sometimes a supernatural story is accepted only because it saves face for the survivors. This does not mean, however, that the relatives of suicide victims never believe such a story. After all, the supernatural story helps them to cope better with

the unresolved questions involved in suicide. The story of Lu Li offers another example for us to understand this issue.

In the spring of 2003, I came to the house of my guide from Xiaoguantun to investigate Suohou's story (3.3). While we were chatting, Lu Man, my guide's daughter-in-law, and her mother came in. Lu Man's mother was ill, but Lu Man's brother's wife did not take care of her. Hence Lu Man took her mother to the hospital. When I asked Lu Man if she knew about any suicide case, she at first said "no," but then she said that Mufang, her ghost sister-in-law (*si sao zi*), died by committing suicide.<sup>1</sup> After she talked about this case, I asked why she called the girl "ghost sister-in-law." She explained that her brother, Lu Li, had committed suicide two years before Mufang did, and Mufang married him after death. Although they did not know each other when alive, their bodies were buried in the same tomb. It seemed that Lu Man only exposed her brother's suicide by mistake, but she could not hold it back any more. She briefly told me how Lu Li had committed suicide: "My brother worked very hard for the family. That night he was exhausted after coming home. When my father asked him to carry some water, he was reluctant to do so. My father became angry, and my brother went to my grandmother's house. When he came back the next morning, my father was still angry. He said, 'I don't want you to be my son any more. Now go to any place you want.' My brother ran out and drank pesticide."

Lu Man's mother continued, "It started raining that morning. Lu Li came back from his grandmother's house and went out again. I thought he was cold and asked his sister to take a shirt to him. She hurried to her brother and came back soon, shouting, 'My brother has drunk pesticide.' Then people carried him to the hospital at Gouyi, and it rained much harder. On their way to the hospital, his uncle asked him why he had drunk the pesticide, and he said, 'My father did not want me to be his son, so why should I live?' It was raining hard that day, and they had difficulty making their way. Upon getting to Gouyi, Lu Li collapsed and said, 'I cannot survive.' He could not walk any more, and his uncle carried him on his back. Lu Li died soon after arriving at the hospital. When he died, the rain immediately stopped. I don't know whether he had told his grandmother about the quarrel or not. Even if he had, was it a big mistake for his father to ask him to carry water? Why was he unable to cope with his father's words?"

Lu Man continued with the story, "It seemed that my brother had foreseen his own death. Some of his friends said that he had been a little upset several days before, which was different from his usual state. I think he predicted that something would happen. My brother was not very outgoing, but he was not silent either. When he behaved in an unusual way, people noticed. He was strong and industrious. He began to work at the age of 15."

I was puzzled by Lu Man's explanation. What did she mean by "foreseen" or "predicted"? If Lu Li had been out of sorts for several days, was that not a sign

that he might have thought about suicide? Why did Lu Li's sister regard that as his prediction? Although she fully understood that it was a quarrel between her brother and her father that led to Lu Li's suicide, she used the words "foreseen" and "predicted," as if Lu Li's suicide was an accident beyond human power, so that he could not "will" it, but could "predict" it. It was not a result of an individual's suffering preceded by unhappiness, but an unexpected event that could be foreseen only by some mystical capability.

Her mother's words explained why Lu Man did not regard the family quarrel as the cause for Lu Li's suicide: "I don't know whether he had told his grandmother about the quarrel or not. Even if he had, was it a big mistake for his father to ask him to carry water? Why was he unable to cope with his father's words?" What puzzled his mother was not how Lu Li was provoked by his father's words, but how such a trivial quarrel could be so consequential as to lead to his suicide. Lu Li's mother knew that her husband should not have asked Lu Li to carry water after a day of hard work, and she also knew that Lu Li committed suicide to resist his father's rudeness, but she could not understand why he resisted so strongly as to take his own life. The logic behind Lu Li's anger was understandable, but the serious result of suicide did not match the degree of his father's rudeness.

Enquiry into the trivial triggers of suicide reflects the deep sadness and regret of the survivors, even those who had in some way prompted the suicide. Although Lu Li's parents treated him harshly, they were not his enemies. They loved this son and never meant to kill him, yet the power games in family politics led accidentally to Lu Li's death. How could they have pushed such a beloved son to commit suicide? The paradox between love and the power games of family politics prompts people to understand suicide as a supernatural matter.

In previous chapters, I showed that the family revolution in modern China has increased people's desire for personal dignity and love. A happy person is one who is both loved and respected in the family. Because family members are supposed to love each other, domestic conflicts are supposed to be milder than public conflicts between strangers. This is why people always think of domestic injustice a trivial matter, as opposed to public injustice. People often say, "What problem cannot be solved between a husband and a wife?" The logic is that a husband and wife love each other, so their conflicts should not be as devastating as public conflicts. This is also the case between parents and children.

In many cases, however, familial interdependence does not ameliorate but rather intensifies family conflicts. In a certain sense, because family politics is so related to people's personal happiness, people are more likely to perceive a trivial event or argument as unjust and resist it. To be hurt by a loved one is often more devastating than being hurt by a stranger. Love between family members makes some otherwise trivial conflicts seem so hurtful that one cannot survive them. As we have seen, Zilan attempted suicide because she wanted her husband to support her (4.3), and Hefang and Kang Hui had serious conflicts because they loved each other (3.1). It was also because Lu Li's parents were supposed to love him that Lu Li could not stand their harsh words. Just as he confessed to his uncle, he drank pesticide because his father did not want him to be his son.

On the one hand, love pushes people to commit suicide as a result of family conflicts; on the other hand, love is supposed to help solve family conflicts. This paradox is the focus of the concept of misfortune in family politics. When Chinese people say that domestic affairs are always trivial, they mean that there is never real enmity in family life. Given that there is so much love or interdependence in the family, suicide still puzzles them even when people fully understand how the suicide has occurred.

Unable to find a satisfactory answer to this puzzle, Lu Li's mother described the rain all the time. At first I thought she was only describing the weather of that day, but when she emphasized that the rain immediately stopped when Lu Li died, I realized what she meant. My guide thus explained the meaning of the rain: "Lu Li must be an attendant boy (*tong zi*) of the Dragon King. It was time for him to return, and the dragon came to take him back." This reminded me of the words of Ning Zhengyan, a fortuneteller of Xiaoguantun: "The attendant boy and girl of the Dragon King have fled to this world, and sooner or later they should go back." After Sanxiu had committed suicide, a villager reflected on her story, "She must be the attendant girl of Avalokitesvara (*guan yin pu sa*), and now she is called back. Otherwise why was she so beautiful?" The untimely deaths of many young people are interpreted in this way. A shaman said, "I can see whether a child is an attendant or not. A child can donate a wooden figure of an attendant. If the god accepts the figure, the child does not have to return and will live longer."

Thus understood, it was a supernatural force that killed Lu Li. When his family understands Lu Li's suicide in this way, there is an important change in the significance of misfortune. As Lu Man implied when she said that Lu Li "predicted" his suicide, the tragic event was seen as being similar to an accident or an unexpected disease, as if it were not a voluntary act but rather one enforced externally. By ignoring the will of Lu Li, such an explanation somehow concealed the guilt of his father.

Although Lu Li's mother ascribed his suicide to the Dragon King, Lu Li's suicide was still very different from an accidental death. Before I met Lu Man that day, I had already learned about Lu Li from their neighbors. Lu Li, his parents' first child, had six younger sisters and one younger brother, the latter being 20 years younger than him. When Lu Li was 24 years old, his mother bore another daughter, which made Lu Li unhappy. Some friends joked with him: "You have another younger sister now, and you will be a bachelor forever. Your parents will never save enough money for your marriage." This was why Lu Li had been unhappy several days before. The wife of his uncle said, "No other parents are so cruel to their children." When preparing for his funeral, his mother found a pair of trousers with patches and a small shirt for Lu Li. On the day of his funeral, Lu Li's parents did not shed tears at all.

Although his parents were still angry with him at the funeral, they later often wept when talking about their first son. After the death of Lu Li, they very much spoiled his younger brother, whose situation was quite different. Apparently, they realized that they had treated Lu Li badly and wanted to

correct their mistakes by spoiling the little boy. After that boy grew up and got married, however, he did not behave as a filial son. His father died several years after his marriage, and his mother was not in a good health. Lu Man told me that her little brother was working in Beijing. Instead of taking care of her mother-in-law, his wife also went to Beijing. Hence Lu Man took her mother to his conjugal family. When talking about this, Lu Man's mother was very sad. Lu Li's suicide was a misfortune not only for himself, but also for his parents.

## 5.2 Ghosts and human beings

When people explain suicide as being the result of the mediation of supernatural power, such power is not understood as the transcendental force it is in Christianity. Gods and ghosts are also subject to all kinds of contingencies, and hence they are uncertain themselves. These external forces are not inevitable, and are not even evil. Their influence on human society works also through a series of power games. This is especially so when the supernatural power is not a god, but the ghost of a deceased family member. After I interviewed Lu Man's mother-in-law, I learned about another case in Xiaoguantun, in which we further see how misfortune in the family is seen as accidental.

Chen Yuse, a 30-year-old man from Xiaoguantun, committed suicide in the spring of 1999. Ning Zhengyan, a famous fortune-teller, told me his story.

"Yuse had no reason to commit suicide, and we had no idea why he had ingested the pesticide. But he was not alone. Yuse's death was one of several strange things that happened to his family. He was called away by his grandfather.

"His grandfather had a brother. Both had died many years ago, and their tombs are very close to each other. They both had big families in the nether world, and the two families lived in the same house. In the end, they had some trouble coexisting with each other and decided to divide the household. In order to divide it well, they needed a clever person to help them. That was why they called Yuse to be their mediator.

"Several days before Yuse's death, one of Yuse's sisters-in-law was possessed. The woman became so strange that she often woke up suddenly at midnight and got dressed. Holding a kitchen knife, she would dance and utter meaningless words. People could see that it was not she who was speaking, but her grandfather-in-law, because her voice was identical to his. Her grandfather-in-law had died long before she got married. She had never even met that old man, so how could she imitate his voice? She must have been possessed by the old man. Several days later, out of the blue, she said, 'Why am I going to die?' Her husband shouted at her violently, 'Who said you are going to die? I will hit you if you continue to act like this.' Shocked by his words, the woman became dumb. When she spoke again, she had completely forgotten her previous strange behavior. She recovered fully and never again

experienced such episodes. Not long after that, Yuse committed suicide.

"This is not the entire story. Several days after Yuse's death, Yuse's great uncle's granddaughter-in-law also died. She and her husband had a very harmonious family. One day as she was passing a woodpile on a construction site, it suddenly collapsed. Unfortunately, there was a tricycle behind her. She was not hurt by the woodpile, but when the collapsing wood knocked her down, she bumped her head on an iron corner of the tricycle. Her skull was broken, and she was killed instantly. I had never heard of anyone being killed that way. There was only a little piece of hard iron in the tricycle; how could her head hit right on that spot? Like Yuse, this woman had been called upon to mediate between the old men, and like Yuse, she too had suffered an untimely death."

According to Ning Zhengyan, Yuse was one of three candidates to mediate between his grandfather and his great uncle. Hence Yuse's suicide was seen as a case of possession by spirits, followed by accidental death. In this explanation, Yuse and his female relative could not save their lives because they both failed to fight the ghost of Yuse's grandfather as his brother had done. Here self-preservation was won in a power game with supernatural beings. If Yuse could have overcome the ghost, he would have survived, too.

The invading supernatural force is not necessarily evil. As we saw in Lu Li's case, children might be called back by the gods. Sometimes young parents intentionally give ugly names to their new born babies, such as Choufen (Foul Dung), Erchou (Second Clown) or Goudan (Dog's Baby), so that they will not be loved by gods and will not be called away. In Yuse's case, it was his beloved and respected grandfather who killed him.<sup>2</sup> These forces can bring misfortune not because they are evil, but because they are foreign to human society. In a Chinese funeral, many rituals are aimed at preventing the ghosts of the deceased from returning home (Watson 1982). People believe that the separation between the two worlds is a basic precondition for peace in both. People need special techniques to play power games with ghosts and gods, to prevent them from bringing misfortune to themselves and their families, either through hatred or love. The ugly names, Yuse's brother's shouting, and children's donation of wooden figures in the temples, are all such techniques.

Power games are played not only between human beings and ghosts or gods, but also between ghosts themselves. Yuse's grandfather not only had a large family in the nether world, but also quarreled with his brother there and divided the household. As sinological anthropologists have realized, the underworld is a replica of this world. Arthur Wolf argues that the supernatural beings that serve as objects of worship reflect different people in this world (1974), and Feuchtwang argues that popular religion is a metaphor for the secular empire (1992). Though they differ on some points, these anthropologists agree that the supernatural world is fashioned after the real world in specific ways.

On the one hand, there is a basic separation between the two worlds; on the other hand, the two worlds are very similar in structure. Although some Chinese

people believe that there is another world, it is not more important than the real world. Love from the gods might represent an ominous danger to one's happiness in this world. One can obey, fool or even fight supernatural beings when necessary. Although supernatural beings can bring misfortune, one's fortune is not determined by these forces alone, but rather by one's ability to play power games with them, or by power games between supernatural beings themselves. Hence these supernatural beings cannot determine people's fortune as did the fatal sisters in Greek mythology or the Christian God. In fact, there is seldom a determining force of one's fortune in Chinese culture.

Yet to understand misfortune as being induced by power games within the family is still quite different from seeing it as being caused by power games with ghosts. I believed that there must have been another viable explanation for Yuse's story, and so further asked Ning Zhengyan: "Are you sure that Yuse didn't commit suicide for some other reason?"

Ning Zhengyan told me, "Well, it is said that Yuse quarreled with his mother. Perhaps his mother blamed him for some trivial thing, and then he went to the cellar pantry where they stored vegetables and drank the pesticide there. If you want some reason, I can only offer you this. How could his mother's blame be so serious as to push him to commit suicide? Everyone said that his grandfather called him back. Otherwise it was inexplicable." Therefore, this supernatural explanation was also aimed at answering the question: "How can family conflicts be so severe as to lead to suicide?" When people attributed Yuse's suicide to his grandfather, Yuse's conflict with his mother seemed completely unimportant. When I further explored the domestic problems in Yuse's family, however, I found that Yuse was in a very serious dilemma in terms of family politics. By comparing his power games with family members to those with his dead grandfather, we will see what was concealed in the supernatural explanation.

Although the story about Yuse's grandfather was very popular in Xiaoguantun, not everyone accepted it. When I talked with Yuse's relatives, none of them ever mentioned that story. I asked them about it, and some of them said, "It is nonsense. How can you believe such an absurd explanation?" Others said, "Well, it is just one explanation, and we cannot say it is wrong. It somehow relieves people of their guilt." They have a more realistic explanation for Yuse's suicide. One of his sisters-in-law (not the one who was allegedly possessed) told me the following story.

Yuse was the youngest of three brothers, and he and his wife lived in the house of his parents. His wife Furong treated Yuse's mother badly. Furong managed the family very well, but she was a spendthrift and could not save money. Furong often complained that her mother-in-law did not treat her and her husband as well as she treated her brothers-in-law. Because Furong always nagged her husband, the couple often quarreled. They even quarreled on New Year's Day.

The three brothers were supposed to give their mother some money each

month, but Furong did not allow Yuse to do so for several months. At that time, Yuse's father was sick and his mother asked Furong for some money. Furong, however, claimed that they had nothing to offer. She said, "If you need money so badly, I can go borrow some. At least I can borrow 10 *yuan* or so for you. Or I can ask Yuse to do that when he gets back."

When Yuse returned home, he learned what had happened and came to his mother's room. He put some money on the table and asked her to keep it. Instead of taking the money, his mother asked him, "How did you get the money? Your wife said that you had no money. How come you have this much?" At that time Furong was not around, and Yuse did not want to make more trouble between the two women. He only wished his mother could keep the money, and believed that then everything would be fine. But his mother became very serious and said, "It is true that your father and I need money, but we don't want to force you to give it to us. We would like to take some from you if you have enough; but if not, we understand." Instead of admitting that his wife had lied, Yuse said, "I borrowed the money specially to give to you and father." His mother responded, "Then I will not keep the money. Take it away." Yuse did not want to argue with his mother, so he begged her, "Please keep it, Mom." He knew that his wife would soon come back, and it would be more troublesome if she were involved in the quarrel. His mother said, "Since you have borrowed it, return it now. I do not want you to go into debt for us." Yuse was annoyed by his mother and said, "If you don't want it, then just forget it." Hearing this, his mother was angrier and said, "Then you and your wife stay in this house, and I will move out. I know I cannot rely on you." Yuse could not bear her words. He threw a bell and smashed a big mirror, shouting: "We will not stay here, you will not stay here, and nobody will stay here."

The situation was unmanageable, and his mother sent for Yuse's two brothers. In such a situation, Yuse's brothers were bound to scold him, even if their mother were in the wrong. When his wife came back, she would also make things more complicated. Holding a bottle of gasoline in the left hand and a bottle of pesticide in his right, Yuse stepped out of the house. He claimed that he would burn down the house and then commit suicide.

At that moment, Furong returned and saw that he was holding two bottles. She wept and screamed, "How can I survive if you drink the pesticide?" Yuse said, "I did not really drink the pesticide. I am only threatening my mother by pretending to do so. I am going to leave, because my brothers will beat me up when they come." Soon after, his two brothers came. Aware of what had happened, they blamed their mother for pushing Yuse too hard. Then they found that Yuse was missing. His mother was afraid that he really would drink the pesticide, but Furong assured her he would not. They searched everywhere and finally found him in the cellar pantry. They asked him, "Did you drink the pesticide? We will carry you up." He responded, "No. I did not drink it. I can come up myself." When he came up, people could smell not only pesticide but also wine on his breath. "You drank both pesticide and wine?" asked his



brothers. Unable to deny it any more, Yuse admitted that he had. Several people came to help his brothers take him to the hospital. Yuse got on the tricycle by himself. He greeted those people and even offered them cigarettes. When they got to the county hospital, Yuse offered another cigarette to the doctor and lit it for him. Although he seemed very sober, the doctor said his condition was serious: "I am afraid that even pumping his stomach will not help." His brothers got a bucket of water, saying, "Why don't we try it anyway?" When the doctors began to pump his stomach, Yuse was still sane. He asked a boy at his bed, "Where is my wife?" "At home." "My son?" "At home, too." Then he breathed his last breath.

After Yuse's sister-in-law told me this story, I asked her if she believed that Yuse had been called back by his grandfather. She said, "Everyone said that. How should I know whether it was true? From what I have seen, I know that it was the conflict between his mother and his wife that led him to commit suicide. It is really strange that he was so sober after drinking the pesticide. Yuse feared his brothers' reaction, but actually they did not blame him, since they knew their mother was wrong. Perhaps the gossip about my grandfather-in-law makes some sense, although I don't totally believe it. My grandfather-in-law and his brother were kind to each other, and even now the two branches of our lineage are still very close. The grandsons of the two old men are like brothers." When I asked about Yuse's other sister-in-law becoming possessed, she admitted that it had happened. But she did not think that it was related to Yuse's suicide.

In the eyes of Yuse's sister-in-law, Yuse's suicide was not especially difficult to understand. She said that both Furong and Yuse's mother were irascible. Given that Yuse was still quarrelling with Furong on New Year's Day, of course he did not enjoy family life. Yuse had quite a few personal reasons for committing suicide.

As I remarked in relation to Zilan's story (4.3), the husband is often a key figure in conflicts between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law. Yuse's story is especially helpful in understanding the complex power structure in the aggregate or extended family. Different from Zilan's, Yuse's family was an extended family, in which the old couple and the young couple lived in the same house. Hence the face-to-face conflict between the in-laws was more intense. As a son and husband under the same roof, Yuse was in a very difficult position. Willing to hurt neither his mother nor his wife, he gave some money to his mother without his wife's knowing it. Usually, this is a smart tactic to mediate between two such women. Unfortunately, his mother did not buy his tactic but forced him to admit that his wife had been wrong. She wanted her son to side with her and blame his wife, so that she could be victorious in the power game with her daughter-in-law.

In the power game between these two women, Furong won skillfully. She did not want to give her mother-in-law any money, but she did not say that. Instead, she pretended to be eager to help her parents-in-law, even saying that she wanted to borrow money for them. Both sides knew that she was lying, but the only way

Furong's mother-in-law could refute her was to win the power game. Just as Furong could not explicitly refuse to give her money, so her mother-in-law could not directly expose Furong's lie either. This is the rule in family politics: family members should play power games only under the guise of respecting each other.

When Yuse came home, he was playing a power game with his mother following the same rule. Both Yuse and his mother knew that Furong had lied, but both pretended otherwise. Although both knew that Yuse had some money, due to Furong's lie they pretended that Yuse had none. Yuse knew that his mother knew the truth, but he did not want her to expose Furong's lie and hoped that she would accept the money. By doing that, his mother would be silently forgiving Furong. He could not expose Furong's lie when giving money to his mother. If he admitted that Furong had not told the truth, his mother would have won much more moral capital and blamed Furong in the future. This would have destabilized the power balance in the family and brought about even more trouble.

Yuse's mother, however, was angry with Furong for not offering money and did not want to lose this opportunity to earn moral capital. She pretended that she did not know the truth and was persistent with this pretension. If Furong had told the truth, Yuse could not have had money and must have borrowed some. Hence the old woman would not accept the money, because ostensibly that would cause Yuse more trouble. By refusing the money, she showed how absurd the pretension was. Yuse had only two choices: either to withdraw the money and so hurt his mother or to tell the truth and so hurt his wife. Under these conditions, it was very difficult for Yuse to withdraw the money and hurt his mother. Hence the old woman's real aim was to force Yuse to expose Furong's lie. Nevertheless, Yuse did not give up but instead attempted to withdraw the money. He essentially "called his mother's bluff," but his mother was by this point provoked.

In the power game between Yuse and his mother, his mother had moral capital because Yuse's wife had wronged her. Yuse wanted to compensate for Furong's mistake without exposing her lie. His tactic could work only if his mother cooperated with him. Because his mother did not want to cooperate and insisted on making full use of her moral capital, Yuse was trapped in a dilemma.

Yuse's mother was provoked and threw out harsher words. This pushed Yuse to a violent response. Seeing that the situation was unmanageable, the old woman sent for Yuse's brothers. According to Yuse's sister-in-law, Yuse's brothers often blamed him when his wife quarreled with his mother, and Yuse feared them very much. Hence he thought he would be more violently blamed if his brothers came. Given that Furong would not support him either if he gave his mother the money, Yuse lost greatly in the power game with his mother. So disturbed was Yuse by what would happen to him, that he drank the pesticide.

Yuse's suicide somehow transformed the power game in this family. Yuse's sister-in-law said that his brothers did not blame him but instead criticized their mother. This seemed contrary to what they usually did in such a situation, and also to what Yuse had expected. Yet I do not think that this was only because their mother was so unreasonable in this case. Rather, it was Yuse's extraordinary behavior (his suicide) that convinced them that they could not side with their

mother. Yuse's attempt to burn down the house and his suicide were aimed at exposing his mother's unreasonableness. Yuse could not win in the power game in any normal fashion because he had been forced into a corner. This did not mean, however, that he had no moral capital. As an accommodating son and husband, his intention was to create harmony in the family without hurting either side. This good intention was his moral capital, but he could not put it into practice when pushed so hard by his mother. He felt wronged because his good intention could win nothing, and his passionate responses were his resistance to his mother. By this he showed his moral capital to his brothers and to other people. On the way to the hospital, though, so close to death, Yuse was not passionate any more, but greeted and chatted with other people. One reason for this might be that he realized that he had finally won the power game, though at the price of his life.

As in many other suicides, Yuse had some moral capital, but for certain reasons, he could not use it and lost in the power games at play. A feeling of injustice pushed such individuals to resist by committing or attempting suicide.

When one understands Yuse's death as the result of a power game with ghosts, however, its significance is entirely changed. The focus is no longer on who was more reasonable or who had more moral capital, but whether one could remain safe under the menace of supernatural invasion. Yet the dynamics of power games between human beings and ghosts is not different from that between human beings. Yuse's grandfather did not mean to hurt his grandchildren, but a power game between ghosts and human beings brought tragedies to the latter.

This shows that even when a supernatural being mediates, one's fortune is still uncertain, and is shaped and changed in all kinds of power games. People are always creating their fortune through power games. Where one might not have good luck by worshipping gods, a violent attitude towards ghosts and gods might work better. After all, one can get better fortune only by living family life seriously. Although Ning Zhengyan adhered to the supernatural explanation of Yuse's death, he was aware of what to do when something happened to himself.

Two years after Yuse's death, the fortune-teller Ning Zhengyan's daughter Youlan also attempted suicide because her parents were opposing her marriage. It is said that whenever she passed Yuse's house, she saw Yuse's ghost smiling at her and this was the reason she attempted suicide. Ning Zhengyan did not refute this explanation; he was smart and knew what he should do. After Youlan was finally allowed to marry her boyfriend, she became very happy and never attempted suicide again.

### **5.3 Fortune and misfortune**

Although fortune is not entirely within human control, it is not a divine or magic affair but essentially a human one. In order to understand how Chinese people obtain good luck, we should inquire deeper into the everyday life of common people.

Mugen's sister (4.2), Mulan, who had attempted suicide in 1976, was 50 years old when I interviewed her. The following is her frank narrative:

"I attempted suicide when I was pregnant with my second daughter. She is 24 years old now, so it was 24 years ago, around 1976, right? And I guess I was the first woman who drank pesticide in Gouyi.

"If you want to know the whole story, I should tell it from the very beginning. I have always been an unfortunate woman. Do you know that I was married twice? My first husband was from Gaoyangfu, a village quite close to Gouyi. He was the nephew of one of my teachers in elementary school, and we had a child. My first daughter was three years old when we divorced.

"I was cheated in my first marriage. My fortune has always been bad. When I graduated from middle school, the cadres in my village recommended me to the medical school at Fuyang. It was a good opportunity, but my parents did not want to pay the tuition. Although they did not say that, I understood their concern and gave up that opportunity.

"I didn't want to be a peasant any more, but I lost many opportunities. One of my teachers said that he could help me. If I married his nephew, I could have a job in the city. This was an exchange of a job for a marriage, and I disliked the idea. Many people helped him to persuade me, and I finally married the teacher's nephew, but I soon learned that it had been a trap.

"The guy that I married was almost illiterate, though rich and powerful. He even had an affair with his cousin. I felt completely cheated. I quarreled with my husband, and it seemed that he finally stopped the affair with that girl. Then he went to work in the railway station of Wuyuan county, which was far away from Mengzou. We already had a daughter at that time. When I got his letters, I always felt that he was not warm to me. I suspected that he had another woman there, and so I went to Wuyuan with my daughter. All the closets and boxes in his room were locked, and he kept the keys. One day he left his keys in the room. I unlocked one box and found pictures of several women.

"This time I made the decision to file for divorce. His family soon found me a job and asked me to go to work, but I refused. They asked me to stay with him for the sake of our daughter, but I insisted on divorcing him. I didn't want to live with him, even though I could then have worked in the city.

"After I divorced, my parents asked some relatives to look for a new match for me. In order to be close to my first daughter, I married in my natal village. The matchmaker was a close friend of my parents, and she introduced a man to me. My second husband was a short guy and more than 10 years older than me. His family was reluctant for him to marry a divorcee, but because he was old and quite short, they finally agreed. I was not accepted as a good wife from the beginning. My mother-in-law lived in the same house with us, and my husband had six siblings. I found that I had joined a large and complex family. His elder brother regarded him as a major laborer in the family, but he could no longer remain as such after I came. At least he could not work as much as before. This made them dislike me all the more.

"His mother, his brother, his brother's wife and his sister all despised me. Even his brother's daughter, who was only a few years younger than me, often blamed me. Not long after our wedding, the elder sister of my husband came

to our house. While making lunch in the kitchen, I heard her whisper to my mother-in-law, 'Well, that creature can only be like this. We should be content so long as she does not steal or sleep with any men (*yang han*).' They despised me to that extent, so how could I be happy? I ran back to my parents and wept so vehemently that I almost fainted. My mother went to argue with them and asked them to take me back, but nobody came. It wasn't until several days later that my husband finally came. Nobody else cared about me. This was the direct reason that I wanted to commit suicide. I went back to my husband's house and decided to die.

"When I was home with my parents, I mentioned his sister's words about 'sleeping with any men' to my friends. They all became angry, which made me feel especially wronged. They said, 'If you do not sleep with a man, how can you have children? Ask her about that.' My friends agreed with me that his family was a strange one. His mother, his sister, and his sister-in-law all had strange personalities.

"I used to think about suicide before that. When people were bad to me, I would become depressed and think about death. I kept a bottle of pesticide by my bed. Nevertheless, I had not thought about death that time until I arrived back at my husband's house.

"When I returned to my husband's house, his sister was still there. During the evening's chat, nobody mentioned our fight, as if nothing had happened. We talked about other things for several hours. Nobody could see that I was ready to die, because I pretended to be happy. Then we all went to bed. My husband soon fell asleep. My mother-in-law came to our room and sat down. She said she was not feeling well. I knew that was not true. She often came to our room when we were sleeping. You see, she often came when a couple was in bed! Her son never criticized her for anything. I felt so lonely. No one was supporting me in this family, and I didn't want to live any more.

"When my mother-in-law left, I drank the pesticide. Perhaps my husband heard the sound when I put down the bottle or else he smelled the pesticide. He immediately woke up and ran into the street to look for help. Fortunately, he found He Xi. They carried me to the hospital. By that time, I had already lost consciousness. They later said that I was almost dead when we got to the hospital. I had drunk the whole bottle.

"I have no serious diseases. Although I was pregnant at the time of the suicide attempt, my child was born healthy. Nothing changed after my attempted suicide. I was just telling my children about this incident today, and then you also asked me about it. I often said to my husband, 'If we had no children, I might have left you a long time ago.' At that time, we had to struggle to earn work points (*gong fen*)<sup>3</sup> for a large family. Life was difficult."

I asked Mulan whether her husband beat her, and she said, "Yes, he did. Once there were too many things to do in the field, so I was late making lunch for the family. My mother-in-law became angry and cried to my husband, 'I have been starving. She doesn't want to make lunch.' Then my husband

went to the field, and I met him on the way. Holding my hair, he slapped me vehemently.

“Nothing became better after I survived my attempted suicide, and they still treated me that way. My husband is a good man, except he was too obedient to his mother. He did everything his mother wanted him to do and had no ideas of his own. He knew nothing about how to please a woman. We lived with my mother-in-law for seven years until she died. I had done nothing bad to her. After that, everything turned better.

“I missed my first daughter very much. She finally came to join us at the age of 11.” I asked whether her daughter had married, and she said, “Oh, this is another unfortunate event in my life. It always saddens me to talk of this. When she was 16 years old, out of curiosity or something, while watching a funeral in our village, she, along with my brother’s daughter and my sister’s daughter, went away, leading a dog with them. These three girls went to Tianjin and spent all the money they had. When they decided to return home, they were trapped by someone and were sold! We had no news about them for three whole years. Fearing that she might come back, her husband’s family had not informed us until the girl gave birth to a child. They were sure that the young mother would not try to escape and told me everything. I visited her and found they treated her very badly. My sister and my brother also learned where their daughters had been taken.

“Well, now I am 50. My whole life is full of unfortunate events, but it seems everything should be better now. My husband sometimes regrets that he was so rude when he was young. He says, ‘If I had known more about family life, there would not have been so many quarrels.’ All my hope now falls onto my children. My second daughter is working in Beijing, and my son is a college student in Beijing. Today they have just returned to Beijing. I don’t like seeing them leave. I am unfortunate, but my family is also lucky. Years ago, I fortunately survived an accident. The car I was in almost fell into a river. A tree stopped it, and this was the only tree along the bank. All the other trees had just been cut down, and no one knew why only this one was left. People all said that I was lucky and should go thank the gods.”

Although Mulan had been talking about her misfortune for a whole night, she concluded that she was lucky and should thank the gods. How did her fortune change, and what was the significance of attempted suicide in her life history?

According to Mulan, there were several things that especially contributed to her misfortune: her failure to leave the countryside, her two marriages, and being separated from her daughter. However, it was not at her moment of greatest misfortune that Mulan was pushed to attempt suicide.

The first marriage was far worse than the second. Because she was so eager to leave the countryside, her teacher was able to trick her into marrying his nephew. When Mulan found she had been fooled and her husband was a playboy, she was very resolute about divorce even though they had a daughter. As we argued in Section 4.2, a woman does not usually divorce unless she totally fails in family

politics. When one suffers domestic injustice but is still serious about playing power games in the family, suicide is considered a viable option, but divorce is seldom a solution. What makes one decide to divorce is often the discovery of a problem so severe that it makes the spouse less than a full person. For instance, Shi Lei's parents could not allow him to marry a prostitute (4.1). In Sections 9.1 and 9.2, we will see that Shilan divorced her first husband upon the discovery of his terrible disease. These problems deprived the people in question of full personhood. People who marry a non-person are despised by the community; essentially they too become "non-persons."

Mulan's first husband did not have problems so serious that they made him a non-person, but in the eyes of Mulan, however, his affair made a happy family life impossible. The deceitful behavior of her teacher also made Mulan feel wronged. If she had stayed with her first husband, she would have remained in a humiliated position, even if she could work in the city. The problem in this family was that she could not live a normal life at all. Because she felt hopeless about that marriage, she did not attempt suicide to resist, but decided instead to leave the playboy.

Her second marriage was also difficult, but it was different from the first in an important aspect: her second husband, as well as most of his family members, were serious about family life. Mulan's own words summarize her suffering in this family: "My husband is a good man, except he was too obedient to his mother. He did everything his mother wanted him to do but had no mind of his own. He knew nothing about how to please a woman." The problem she had in this family was how to achieve a power balance. Mulan suffered domestic injustice because her husband could not appease his mother and his wife at the same time. When there was a conflict between the two women, he was usually biased toward his mother. Although Mulan complained bitterly that she was unfortunate, her misfortune in this marriage was very different from that in her first marriage.

The contrast between divorce and suicide shows that people choose suicide when they desire to remain a part of the family, but they choose divorce when they do not want to stay in the family. In other words, one commits suicide when there are both domestic injustice and familial love, but one chooses divorce when there is no familial love.

Mulan's attempted suicide can be seen as her resistance in family politics. Although she was not content with her complex and large family, Mulan still wanted to have a good life in it. When she overheard that her sister-in-law and her mother-in-law talked about her in a harsh way, she burst out crying and returned to her natal family. Her returning to her natal family was obviously a strategy of resistance. Although Mulan claimed that she had been wronged, she was not essentially an obedient woman. As we have seen from her actions in the first marriage, she was often ready to resist. Surong also returned to her natal family several times, but she never returned there merely upon overhearing critical words (4.2). Mulan's spirited reaction shows a very active resistance. By returning home, she wished to force an apology from people in her husband's family.

Her husband finally came to take her back, but after she returned to his house, nobody apologized to her, and they did not even mention the quarrel. This made

Mulan especially frustrated, because her resistance seemed fruitless.

Mulan's attempted suicide was another strategy of resistance. Because she did not win the apology of her husband and his family members, she decided to resist more violently. Although Mulan said that she did want to die, she also revealed her underlying wish to survive: "Fortunately, he found He Xi." This showed that she still wanted to survive and was happy when her husband found He Xi to take her to the hospital. Mulan did not despair with family life, although she felt greatly wronged. Otherwise she would have divorced as she had done before. She attempted suicide because she recognized the rules in family politics. Death was not her aim, but her means to attain honor and true happiness. Because she initially hoped to resist without dying, of course she was pleased with her survival. This was the first time that Mulan said fortune had favored her.

Family life became better after the death of her mother-in-law. Her husband did not have to mediate between the two women, and there were fewer reasons to quarrel. Because her husband was a good-tempered man, it was much easier to maintain a power balance between the couple. I visited her house several times, and could see that her husband seldom resisted when Mulan criticized him. Her husband was a very tolerant man and would not wrong her unless pushed by his mother. Another factor that contributed to Mulan's fortune was the promising future of her children. Although the abduction of her eldest daughter saddened Mulan, the prospects of the other two children filled her with hope. Now Mulan and her husband live in the village without their children. In addition to working hard in the field, they often sell shoes in the market. Though not very rich, the two lead a happy family life.

Strictly speaking, there was no turning point in Mulan's life. The change of fortune in Mulan's family is neither because of her attempted suicide nor the death of her mother-in-law. In the past 20 years, neither Mulan nor her husband has changed much, but they have experienced many things together. They established a family, made a living, educated children, and took care of the elders together. Although there have been conflicts in this process, they have finally fulfilled many important duties. Now, although they still occasionally quarrel with each other, they do not have to worry about anything in the family. Unlike those who failed to get married or died early, they have lived a life of fortune and can be counted as happy persons.

Mulan and her husband attributed their better luck to the geomancy (*feng shui*) of their house, claiming that it was built on the site of the temple of Empress Gouyi. Mulan's husband said to me, "I was still a child when the government destroyed the temple. The empress blessed everyone who prayed to her. It was because she prayed to Empress Gouyi that my mother had so many children. Before 1949, our house was next to the temple, and the outhouse in our yard was almost joined with it. About five days before the temple was destroyed, I was playing in the middle room of the house. Sitting on a bench, I could see everything that happened in the yard. I suddenly saw a lady in black coming from the direction of the outhouse. Her face was exactly the face of Empress



Gouyi as on her statue. She seemed so beautiful and benevolent. Though reluctant to leave, she finally went away and never came back. She did not bless this village any more after that. Later we built this house on the site of the temple. Although the empress has left, we are still blessed by her.”<sup>4</sup>

In Chinese folklore, Empress Gouyi, known as a pretty woman from Jianli,<sup>5</sup> was unable to open her fist until she met Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty on a trip to Mengzhou. When she opened her fist in front of the emperor, people found that she had been holding a pretty jade hook (*gou*). She became “Empress Gouyi,” meaning “the empress who holds a hook.” According to *The Records of History (Shi Ji)* and *The History of the Early Han Dynasty (Han Shu)*, Empress Gouyi was involved in one of the most complex cases of family politics in Chinese history. After the death of Emperor Wu’s eldest son, the emperor wanted to make Empress Gouyi’s son the crown prince, who was later known as Emperor Zhao. The crown prince was a baby when his father made this decision. Following the decision, Emperor Wu killed Empress Gouyi. When someone asked why he had killed the mother of the new crown prince, the emperor said that he was afraid that Empress Gouyi and her relatives would dominate the empire when the boy became an emperor. The potential power of the empress’s relatives was a great fear of the central government during the Han dynasty (Sima Qian [Chu Shaosun] 1959: Book 49; Ban Gu 1962: Book 97).

Empress Gouyi was lucky that her son would become the next emperor, but she was also unfortunate to be killed for that. The regime, however, felt secure and stable because of the death of the innocent empress. Thus, incomprehensible events or changes of fortune in this story imply that people who are blessed by Empress Gouyi are also subject to similar events and changes.

Like Empress Gouyi, all the suicides I examined were subject to changing fortune. Although there are some conflicts, both Lu Li’s family and Yuse’s family were not in bad condition. If no suicide had happened, their lives would have been much better after several decades. But suicide has ruined these families. The only way to maintain a better fortune is to be serious about family life.

## Discussion

This chapter on fortune concludes Part II and helps us to understand the existential meaning of family life. As we repeatedly emphasize, the family is not only a social organization but also the existential condition of life and fortune in Chinese culture.

One is born into a family and will establish one’s own family in the future. One’s fortune is nothing but the process of a life. One is fortunate if that life passes smoothly and happily; one is unfortunate if there is a serious problem in the process, or if the process is interrupted by sudden death. Suicide is ominous because it interrupts this process.

Suicide is essentially different from accident, disease or natural calamities, because it is chosen voluntarily. The local people, however, would put these into

one category, because nobody who commits suicide really pursues death. Suicide, after all, brings unexpected misfortune to both the deceased and the family.

The real paradox in suicide lies in the uncertainty of family politics. Happiness is never one person's business, but depends on the whole family. Although everyone wants to be dignified and happy, not everyone can live a good life. One's fortune is determined by whether one can play well in family power games. Anyone who wants a good life commits suicide not because he or she is insane, but because the result of a power game is always the opposite to what he or she expects. The more dignity the person wants, the more he or she feels wronged.

Familial love is both the starting point and the end of family life, but there are always quarrels and conflicts in the family. Hence there is a very subtle family politics at play. The efforts of some suicides, including committing suicide itself, are aimed at justice and happiness, but they make the perpetrator sink deeply into misfortune.

The interpretations of the fortune of a suicide are all meant to understand why people who love a good life are involved in bad fortune. When people employ supernatural force to explain suicide, they do not provide a reason beyond power games. When Mulan's husband uses Empress Gouyi to understand his fortune, he brings us back to the family. Given that Empress Gouyi was killed in family politics herself, how could she protect the villagers against domestic injustice? Mulan seems to be much luckier than Empress Gouyi.

There is nothing special in Mulan's family, but among all those I have examined, this is the only family that claims itself to be truly happy. This family could become happy only because they lived seriously. When they had experienced all life's stages and fulfilled all their duties, they found that they were already in a state of happiness.

Mulan's family is representative of many happy families among the common Chinese people. This does not mean, however, that one can be happy by waiting for good luck passively. One's dignity must be realized in everyday life, but this does not mean that only one who has a good family is dignified. Now we must turn to another important issue: personhood.



## **Part III**

# **Human dignity**



## 6 Suicide and madness

As we have seen in Part II, justice is not only about domestic order but also about human dignity. Hence we should further see what domestic justice means to an individual. In Confucianism, justice is defined as “doing what is appropriate” (Moran 1993: 224). One attains justice not only when one is treated fairly, but also when one does what one should do in such a position. For instance, if a father is both treated as a father and behaves as a father, he is respected as a father. When one has a proper position in the family, one is a full person and lives a family life in a good way. When one is either not treated properly or does not behave properly, then one’s dignity is injured and domestic justice is endangered.

In this part, we will see not only what is just for a Chinese person, but also what it means to be mentally ill and abnormal. In Chapter 6, we will examine the suicide of mentally ill people; in the following three chapters, we will examine three local terms about suicide and see how suicide is linked to human dignity.

### 6.1 Excluded suicide

According to some researchers, mental disorders are found in a significant number of suicidal people in China, though the percentage (63%) is not as high as in the West (more than 90%) (Phillips, Li *et al.* 2002). In order to understand the link between mental disorders and suicide, however, we cannot only consider numbers. At stake are the cultural concepts of mental illnesses.

In my fieldwork, I encountered several cases with obvious mental illnesses, but had difficulty getting very detailed information about them. When some people mention such a case, they often say, “That does not count, because he or she was a mad.” For instance, after a man in Langao told me the story of Qiumei, a young woman who had committed suicide after being seduced by a man and then blamed by her parents for it, I asked him whether there were any other cases of suicide in his village. He smiled and said, “There are some, but they are not as instructive as that of Qiumei. For instance, my cousin, who was a fool, also drank pesticide and died. That does not count” (see 6.3). Likewise, a man from Yu village told me about several cases of suicide, but he almost forgot that his own brother also had committed suicide. When I asked him about that, he said, “That was not a suicide, because he was mad” (see 6.3). A young man from Gouyi suffered from

apparent symptoms of depression, and people could not find any other reason for his attempted suicide. When talking about him, a friend of his said, "It was depression that caused his attempted suicide." He implied that there was nothing he could tell me, because it was depression, not any social reason, that had led him to his attempted suicide, and hence I could dismiss this case.

Although these people understand that mental illnesses sometimes lead to suicide, they seem to exclude such cases from typical suicides. When I told them that I wanted to study suicide, they supposed that I wanted to study only cases related to social reasons.

Sometimes when people talked about a case of typical suicide, they might also remark: "She suffered so much that she went almost mad," or "She became a lunatic before committing suicide." In such a case, although the person in question may have suffered from mental illness before committing suicide, people did not regard the illness as the cause for suicide, but as a result of domestic injustice. They believed that it was the domestic injustice that led to both the illness and the suicide.

This understanding of suicide is very different from that of modern Western psychiatry. Although people in the local society know that both mental illnesses and domestic injustice can lead to suicide, most of them assume that suicides caused by mental disorders are not "typical" suicides. When they helped me to find suicide cases, they excluded such cases.

In Part II, I showed that suicide is understood as a social matter, and a "non-person," one who is at the margins of society and is not seen as a full person, is not seen as eligible to commit suicide. As some scholars have pointed out, suicide is often viewed positively in Chinese culture (Lin 1990). It is often seen as spirited resistance, and people who commit suicide are considered to have strong personalities. Psychotics, the retarded, and other "non-persons" are not seen as full persons. Although they do commit suicide, because they are stigmatized, their suicides are not seen as resulting from strong personalities or spirited resistance. Hence even if there is no phenomenological difference between non-persons' suicides and typical suicides, the cultural and social significances of the two types are very different. When the rural people say that such people's suicides "do not count," they mean that although these people have committed suicide, their suicides lack positive significances.

In some cases, although certain mentally ill people commit suicide due to reasons other than their illnesses, people still think their suicides insignificant. Their suicides also result from family politics, but because they are stigmatized as non-persons, their deaths are not seen as typical suicides.

There are three local terms for mental illnesses: "*mo zheng* (abnormal)," "*sha* (fool)" and "*feng* (mad)." "*Mo zheng*" is the least serious of the three. The character "*mo*" means "magic" or "demonic," and the character "*zheng*" means "distracted." Linguistically, perhaps this term was related to possession in a certain way. Now if people say someone is "*mo zheng*," they usually mean that the person is strange but not so much as to be insane. People who suffer from depression are often seen as "*mo zheng*." "Abnormal" is a good translation for "*mo zheng*."

“Fool (*sha zi*)” and “madman (*feng zi*)” are the most common terms for people who have mental illnesses. “Fools” are those who are mentally retarded. A “madman” or “mad woman” often says something meaningless and behaves strangely, and these traits distinguish him or her from a retarded person. In some villages, I occasionally saw some distracted persons wandering in the street, and it was hard to tell whether they were retarded or psychotic. Sometimes people even use the two terms interchangeably. I will examine the suicides of “abnormal” people in Section 6.2, those of the retarded and psychotic in Section 6.3.

## 6.2 The abnormal

If a wife had committed suicide, it was usually difficult for me to interview the relatives of her husband, because they did not want to acknowledge that their relatives were responsible for domestic injustice. But this was not so in the case of Yuying, a woman who committed suicide. When I asked Yuying’s brother-in-law about Yuying’s suicide, he was very happy to talk about her. Because Yuying had committed suicide due to depression, her husband was not considered responsible for her death.

“At first, my second sister-in-law often felt sad and said that she did not want to live. When I chatted with her, she always said that her life was not worth living. She sometimes said, ‘I would rather go to the field and have a good cry.’ I held a mistaken view, namely, I believed that it was her bad relationship with my brother that had led her to think that way. My brother’s temper was not good, and they often quarreled. Later a doctor examined her and said that she was suffering from the symptoms associated with menopause. I realized that it was her illness, not the bad relationship, that accounted for her abnormal state.

“Before she got the disease, she often quarreled with my brother. She was from a wealthy family, and her father was a famous calligrapher. My sister-in-law was smart and sociable. She was also a face-lover [concerned with her social reputation; a social climber] and wanted to surpass other people in many ways. My family, however, is not outstanding. Although my brother had attended school, his knowledge was poor. My sister-in-law did not like him because he was not a capable person. He was not very industrious either, and my sister-in-law often complained that he did not work hard. When provoked, my brother would smash things. He broke at least two pots and several tables. A number of times I saw with my own eyes that he had overturned the dinner table.

“After the doctor had made the diagnosis of menopause, my brother did not quarrel with her any more. The doctor warned my brother that quarrels were not good for her health. Aware that her abnormal behavior resulted from the disease, he tried to prevent her from getting worse, but she was not getting any better and always felt anxious. Although my brother tried to be tolerant of her symptoms, her situation became worse. She could neither fall asleep nor eat well. Sometimes I asked her why she was sad, and she said, ‘Life is



no better than death. Don't you think death is much better?' That must have been the effect of a disease.

"My sister-in-law died half a year after getting that strange disease. That night my brother was not at home, and I was also working in the field. It was already the season of the wheat harvest. Because my sister-in-law had often talked about death, my brother did not dare to leave her alone at home, although he was supposed to take care of the wheat. My sister-in-law fell asleep very late. Thinking that there was no danger, my brother went to work in the field. When he returned home at dawn, he found his wife had already taken sleeping pills and died."

I asked him, "What kind of person was your sister-in-law? Could she think through most things?" He answered, "My sister-in-law was well educated, and she was not a stubborn person. She could think through everything." I asked further, "Then why was she unable to think through this time?" He said, "That was because of her illness. A smart person can also be ill. Although she was a capable woman, she could not overcome the disease. At first I thought her situation resulted from her quarrels with my brother, but later I found that I was wrong."

He repeated several times that he had been wrong to think the family quarrel was responsible for Yuying's abnormal behavior. I wanted him to explain this idea and asked, "Why do you think your previous opinion was wrong?" He said, "When we found out that she was suffering from the disease, I realized that her abnormal behaviors were not caused by the quarrels, but by her disease. She was 46 years old that year."

I asked, "Do you think that her disease was irrelevant to the quarrels?" He said, "Sometimes I think that disease is also related to psychological conditions. For instance, when I was ill some days ago, if I talked with friends, I felt quite released and almost forgot my pains. I could talk for several hours without being tired. Otherwise I could not stand for more than a few minutes. Her disease was of course related to the quarrels, and hence my brother did not quarrel with her after he knew that my sister-in-law was ill."

Although he acknowledged the relationship between their quarrels and Yuying's illness, my interviewee never said that the effects of menopause might be a result of the quarrels. He implied that her illness was a physical one with some psychological symptoms, and her condition could be improved if she lived in a better psychological atmosphere.

Many Chinese people believe that women are prone to anger and depression as well as other psychotic disorders due to menopause, and this is similar to Japanese beliefs about menopause (Lock 1993). Some people even believe that men also experience an abnormal period around the age of 50. The doctors in the county hospital told me that Yuying suffered from depression, and they believed that her depression resulted from menopause.

From what my interviewee told me, it was very likely that the bad relationship between the couple caused Yuying's abnormal behaviors. This was also my

interviewee's opinion before he knew that she was suffering from symptoms of menopause. After the doctor had made the diagnosis, however, my interviewee totally changed his opinion. When I asked him why such a smart person did not think things through, he said that even a smart person could be ill. Although Yuying's brother-in-law was talking about her abnormal behavior, he seemed to be talking about a kind of physical disease that cannot be "cured" by simply thinking through one's actions or a situation.

This reminds me of Kleinman's argument that Chinese medicine is inclined to describe mental illness with physical terminologies (Kleinman 1986). This was exactly what Yuying's brother-in-law implied. Because of the doctor's diagnosis, he thought it was not the quarrels, but some unknown changes in Yuying's body that made her "abnormal" and discontent.

Yuying's disease was understood as a physical ailment that affected her thought process. Yuying's husband did not quarrel as much after the discovery of her condition. This was not because he wanted to improve her condition in a more harmonious family, but because he feared that her disease might be worsened if he was angry with her. In other words, by defining Yuying as a patient, her husband actually distanced himself from her and excluded Yuying from normal life in the family.

I do not know whether my interviewee really believed that his brother's quarrels with Yuying were not responsible for Yuying's suicide, or if he simply wanted to conceal his brother's guilt. In either case, Yuying's condition seemed like an excuse for his brother. The disease totally changed the way that people understood her abnormal behaviors as well as her suicide. On the one hand, because of her menopause, she was seen as an abnormal person and excluded from normal family life, so that in the final analysis, her suicide did not seem like a spirited resistance against her husband. On the other hand, because of her condition, her suicide seemed to be caused not by domestic conflicts, but by an unexpected and uncontrollable accident. This is very similar to the supernatural interpretations that Chinese people apply when they do not want to attribute suicide to domestic injustice, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Kleinman argues that somatization is a way for Chinese people to be politically safe. In front of harsh political situations, somatization can keep people safe from political repercussions (Kleinman 1986). In family politics, somatization also enables the family to avoid domestic conflicts. Although both Yuying's depression and suicide seemed to be caused by domestic injustice, the diagnosis of depression made her suicide seem insignificant and unlike a typical suicide that is viewed as a form of resistance.

This leads us to another issue: what is the difference between mental illnesses with social origins and those with biological origins? In my fieldwork, I encountered several people who became mentally ill due to clear social reasons. For instance, Qingyun, a woman from Jianli who had serious quarrels with her mother-in-law, became "crazed" and attempted suicide. Chouyu, a woman from Gouyi, developed a serious mental illness and committed suicide after her husband was put in jail. When talking about these cases, although the suicide or attempted

suicide was obviously related to a mental illness, people thought that the family troubles which had caused the illnesses were more responsible for the suicide or attempted suicide than were the mental illnesses themselves. The illnesses were seen as one result of the domestic trouble, and the suicide or attempted suicide was seen as another result of it. In such cases, people think that the suicide cases are normal ones, which reflect a spirited resistance of the victim to their domestic problems. In Yuying's case, although the relatives of her husband said that her suicide resulted from a physiologically based depression, people from her natal family told me that she would not have been abnormal if her husband had treated her better. Therefore, whether a person's depression results from social or biological reasons largely depends on the interpreter's perspective. Yuying's brother-in-law emphasised her disease, because such an interpretation was better for her husband and his family.

When one who has a mental illness with a physical or genetic origin commits or attempts suicide, people are likely to say that the disease is responsible for the suicide. Even in such a case, however, the suicide is viewed as stemming not merely from a medical problem. We can further examine this issue in considering Ruhui's story.

Ruhui, a woman in her forties with two daughters and one son, from Xiaoguantun, hanged herself in 1999. Some doctors in the county hospital told me that she had suffered from hypochondria.

According to one of Ruhui's relatives, her mother and two brothers all have mental illnesses. Ruhui herself was not abnormal at first. She had no serious psychopathology after she got married. It is said that she was not a quiet person and often talked happily with other villagers. After she gave birth to her first child, however, Ruhui became abnormal. Unlike her mother and brother, she did not run about aimlessly, but was occasionally paranoid. When faced with a trivial matter, she would think about it for a long time. For instance, once when she was working in the field, her cow fell into a pond and died. This was not an unusual event in the countryside, and other people would not take it to heart, but Ruhui thought about it endlessly, as if she could not bear the loss, and was sad for several weeks. Her parents-in-law said, "Whatever she wants, we must satisfy her." Thanks to their concern, she became much better after several months.

Later still their household was divided. Ruhui and her husband moved to another house. People did not say that she had any special conflict with her in-laws. Because she was extremely serious about many things, she often had conflicts with people generally. These conflicts, according to the villagers of Xiaoguantun, were not very vehement.

When Ruhui's illness occasionally worsened, she quarreled with her husband over trivial affairs. When they disagreed over techniques of working in the field, she usually demanded that her husband follow her technique. Her husband was not a good-tempered man and could not easily bear her domineering attitudes. But he made great efforts to yield to her.

About two months before her suicide, Ruhui suffered from cholecystitis. When she visited the county hospital, the doctors said that it was not a serious disease and wrote a prescription for her. However, believing that she had a more serious disease, Ruhui insisted on going to a better hospital. She and her family members visited several hospitals, but each time received the same diagnosis. Ruhui thought that her husband and son were lying to her. Her sister-in-law said, "Once I accompanied her to a hospital. On the way back, I invited her to my house to have lunch. She said, 'Now my son is already 15, and I have nothing to worry about. Why don't you tell me the truth? If it is not curable, we do not have to go everywhere to look for good doctors. Please tell me what the doctors told you – I can cope with whatever the diagnosis is.'"

Whatever she desired, her husband and her son tried to satisfy her; but this time nobody could tell her anything more since there was nothing more that they knew.

According to the villagers in Xiaoguantun, two days before she died, Ruhui suddenly said that their black-and-white TV set was not good. Her husband and son immediately went into the county seat and bought a color TV. When they were watching the new TV that night, Ruhui said, "This one is too small." The next day her husband and son again went to the county seat and bought a bigger one.

One of my interviewees said, "When they carried the TV set back, Ruhui seemed content and did not say anything else. Two evenings after they bought that TV set, the old couple was watching TV, their daughter was in another room, and their son had gone out. Ruhui's husband took a nap, and when he woke up, he found that his wife was missing. He looked everywhere and finally found her hanging in the doorway, already dead."

I first heard about Ruhui's story from a villager from Xiaoguantun, and then I visited her sister-in-law and a relative of Ruhui's mother. It was the relative of her mother who told me about the background in her family. She said, "Ruhui's condition was not as serious as that of her mother and brother, but she also occasionally acted strangely." As one of my major guides, this woman had explained to me many nuances of the suicide stories I was investigating, but she had never mentioned Ruhui until I asked directly about her. She said, "You cannot learn too much in her case, and that was not a suicide. Many people in her family are abnormal."

This was not the only case of hypochondria that I encountered in my fieldwork. In a village named Longtang, Qiluan, a woman suffering from nephritis, committed suicide out of fear that her disease might worsen and would cost her family too much money. She seldom quarreled with her husband, and her husband was even a little henpecked. Since she had no history of mental illness, nobody considered her to be a hypochondriac. Her relatives said that she died simply because she was unable to think things through. Some other people believed that she had been possessed by a ghost. In Langao, Mucheng, a man who suffered from headaches, suspected that he had a neoplasm. After the funeral of his uncle, he hanged himself

in his mourning clothes. People said that there were no grounds for thinking that he had any mental illness. This man wrote a suicide note, in which he talked only about who should get his possessions. My interviewees said that no insane person could write such a suicide note. Although there was no serious conflict between the man and his wife, people thought that his wife's bad temper was accountable for his suicide. There is no medical diagnosis for these two cases, but judging from what the villagers described, they likely suffered from hypochondria, or a related condition in which the sufferer became preoccupied with serious illnesses.

Compared with these two, Ruhui's disease was hardly more serious. Not many people in the village knew the doctor's diagnosis of hypochondria. Their main evidence to define her as abnormal was that others in her family suffered from mental illnesses.

According to most of my interviewees in Xiaoguantun, there was no serious conflict in Ruhui's family, and most of their quarrels were seen as common everyday misunderstandings. Hence there was no other obvious reason for her suicide. When I had a more searching conversation with her sister-in-law, however, I found that the case was more complex than it appeared.

Although Ruhui seemed to have had no special conflicts with her parents-in-law, their relationship was not good. Her sister-in-law said, "My sister-in-law was too sensitive, and my mother could not tolerate her. Although they knew she was ill and tried to meet all her desires, it was very inconvenient for them to stay together, and hence they divided the household. After the division, my brother lived very far from my parents, and they did not often communicate with my parents." Although they did not quarrel much, Ruhui's abnormal behavior annoyed her parents-in-law greatly. Because of her illness, on the one hand, other people did not quarrel with her, as she was too sensitive; on the other hand, her parents-in-law could not live with such an abnormally sensitive daughter-in-law. Some trivial conflicts that seemed common in other families would threaten Ruhui. Her parents-in-law showed unusual kindness to her not because their relationship was good, but because she could not put up with the normal attitude toward a daughter-in-law. In other words, she was not seen as a normal member of the family, but as someone vulnerable who needed constant attention, and hence her parents-in-law wanted to divide the household.

This was also what happened between Ruhui and her husband. Her husband was not a good-tempered man, yet he always tried to fulfill her needs and follow her orders. Although her husband tried to tolerate Ruhui's whims and moods, it was unlikely they would have a good relationship. Several people mentioned her unhappiness with the TV sets. This was really an unusual set of requests, but as with her parents-in-law, her husband and son exchanged the TV sets only because they were afraid that she might become mad, not because they were especially kind to her. When Ruhui's sister-in-law told me this story another time, I found that the truth was not as dramatic as the outsiders had described:

"There was a black-and-white TV set in their house, and they had been planning to buy a color one for a long time. That day my brother and his son bought a new one. My sister-in-law again complained that the new one was not good, and they replaced it with a bigger one, which worked very well. They watched TV for

one night and went to bed. My brother found her missing the next morning and wondered why she had awoken so early. When he came to the door, however, he found my sister-in-law was hanging there, dead.”

Ruhui's sister-in-law also mentioned another episode preceding her suicide: “Several days before she committed suicide, her daughter went to the Catholic church of Duan village. When my sister-in-law knew this, she quarreled with her daughter, and they had not made up yet when she committed suicide. Perhaps this was also a reason for her suicide.” In the eyes of most peasants, the Catholics are corrupt and strange people, and it is a taboo for a non-Catholic person to visit a church (see Wu 2001). It was understandable that Ruhui was angry with her daughter for that.

Ruhui's family had many troubles, and Ruhui might have had several personal reasons to commit suicide. I do not mean that she did not have mental illness or that her suicide was not caused by her illness. The events mentioned, including her daughter's visit to the Catholics, did not appear strong enough to directly lead to her suicide. The most likely reason was still the mental illness. What I am concerned with is why people attributed Ruhui's suicide to mental illness, but did not do so in the other two cases of hypochondria. Psychologically, the other two people had similar reasons for suicide. What distinguished Ruhui from them was that she was already defined as an abnormal person. The mental illnesses of other members in her family especially contributed to the villagers' opinion about her mental illness. The other two persons were seen as normal people and had a normal life, and hence people did not define them as being mentally ill.

People who are abnormal (*mo zheng*) are at the border between normal and crazy people. On the one hand, they usually have normal family lives; on the other hand, sometimes they are not seen as normal family members. The reasons for their suicides can be either family conflicts or mental illnesses. If villagers define them as “normal” people, then they are unlikely to attribute their suicide to mental illnesses; but if they are seen as abnormal people, then they are driven to the margin of family order, and mental illnesses are considered the major cause of their suicides. The villagers mainly saw both Yuying and Ruhui as abnormal people, but overlooked the domestic reasons that might have been related to their suicides. Hence their suicides are seen as atypical, resulting from their mental illnesses, but not from the more noble reason: resistance.

### 6.3 Non-persons

A man from Langao told me about Qiumei's suicide (6.1), but was a little reluctant to tell me about the suicide of his cousin, a retarded man. I begged him to describe the case, and he briefly told me the following story:

“My cousin Chaoyuan was a fool. He could say hello and other greetings when meeting someone, but would be lost if you talked any more with him. He was over 20 years old, but unable to work, and every day he did nothing but eat. Chaoyuan played everywhere in the day, and people in nearby villages all knew there was such a fool in this village. Nobody considered him as a

person. Sometimes he rode a bike on the road. Whenever he saw a pretty girl along the street, he shouted to her and even followed her. One day he again said some meaningless words. Because he appeared so foolish, I slapped him in front of several people. He returned home and drank pesticide and died. His mother and brother were also fools.”

Although the narrative of Chaoyuan’s cousin was brief, it was enough to show that Chaoyuan was not killed by his mental condition. Although he was retarded and often did strange things, he committed suicide as many other people do when wronged. I was astonished to see my interviewee smiling when he talked about his violence toward Chaoyuan and Chaoyuan’s death. He “confirmed” that Chaoyuan was really a “fool” by telling me that both his mother and brother were also “fools.” When emphasizing that Chaoyuan was a “fool,” he implied that this case was worthless and could be dismissed. Although I had begged him several times to describe it, he was not really telling me a story of suicide, but was showing me how worthless this case was.

Someone else told me more about Chaoyuan: “Although Chaoyuan was retarded, he could toil in the fields and work well. During the harvest seasons, he did not store his grain as other people do, but put it throughout his house. Soon his grain would be eaten by rats. Because he would have nothing to eat, he usually did some work to earn money. When he had money, he did not use it properly, but drank and played.”

The fact that Chaoyuan did not keep his grain and always drank did not indicate that he was cognitively disabled, but they did show that Chaoyuan could not have a normal life. One of my interviewees from Langao said, “Chaoyuan’s father was a smart man, but when he married a foolish wife, he did not live seriously any more. Hence Chaoyuan was not well educated and became a fool. His father died early, and his mother remarried. Chaoyuan had to support himself.” Chaoyuan’s mother was from Xitang, and I asked Zilan about her. She said, “I know her very well. Her mother (Chaoyuan’s grandmother) was a fool and married into a family from Xitang. Disappointed with such a foolish wife, Chaoyuan’s grandfather had an affair. Chaoyuan’s grandmother was angry and went back to her natal family. Chaoyuan’s mother had a sister and a brother. The three children all grew up in Xitang, but neither their mother nor their father took care of them. The two girls were both fools, but the boy was not.”

According to my interviewees, Chaoyuan’s grandmother was the first retarded person in their family, and her two daughters and one grandson were all retarded. Therefore, Chaoyuan’s mental condition was genetic, and his poor education did nothing to help it. Because he was unable to live as other people do, he was not only medically retarded, but also socially “foolish.”

Although Chaoyuan’s mother was cognitively disabled, she got married and gave birth to several children. Chaoyuan did not get married. Although he could work, and could be happy and angry, people “did not consider him as a person.” Therefore his cousin could slap him in front of many people because Chaoyuan

could not lose face, since he was already considered a non-person who lacked any dignity. After Chaoyuan committed suicide following the slap, nobody held his cousin responsible. The latter even smiled when telling me the story.

This was not because Chaoyuan's cousin was especially cruel, but because Chaoyuan was not supposed to be respected as a person. He was seen as a non-person, and thus nobody could be held responsible for his death. "Non-persons" can be teased, made fun of, shouted at or shamed, without any bad consequence for the aggressors. All these acts are seen as ways of playing with them. If the non-person becomes angry, people will laugh as if they enjoy their anger. Some people said, "People treat them as if they are just kids." "Non-persons" share a main feature with children – they do not have their own families and are not considered as full persons. Children, however, will eventually become full persons, but non-persons are sociologically excluded from ever becoming full persons. Some villagers implied that Chaoyuan would not have been considered a "fool" if he had been well educated. Because he was not raised to the level of an adult through education, he could not grow up and thus behaved like a child.

Chaoyuan was not totally excluded from family life. A villager described his suicide in more detail: "Once Chaoyuan and some other young men did some labor for the village committee, and they were supposed to be paid by a cadre, who was Chaoyuan's cousin. His cousin knew that Chaoyuan would soon waste the money and said, 'I will keep the money for you. When it is time to irrigate or buy some fertilizer, I will give it to you. Otherwise I am afraid you will waste it.' His cousin was concerned about Chaoyuan's life. Seeing that everyone else was paid but he was not, Chaoyuan did not consent and debated with him. His cousin became angry. Chaoyuan could not understand him and even quarreled with him. He slapped Chaoyuan, and Chaoyuan drank pesticide after returning home."

On the one hand, Chaoyuan's cousin thought that Chaoyuan was a "fool" and would waste his money; on the other hand, he was concerned about Chaoyuan's well-being and wanted to help him to have a better life. He was angry when Chaoyuan could not understand his concern.

As we saw with Ge Man's story (4.1), non-persons may well be sociologically stigmatized and excluded from the normal social order, but they still have the same feelings as other people. Ge Man was a prostitute, and many people did not consider her a full person, but she was hurt when she failed to marry Shi Lei. When commenting on Qiumei, the girl who was seduced but still angry when being blamed by her parents (6.1), Chaoyuan's cousin said, "Even bad people have dignity." These people committed suicide because they still wanted to be respected as full persons. In a word, it is a paradox that their desire for full personhood led to their suicide. To be a person is a basic need, and one feels the unfairness of being treated as a non-person; but in the viewpoint of local society, full personhood requires some qualifications, such as marriage, family, and a normal life. It is this paradox that stigmatizes these people.



Let us further examine this paradox in the story of Sihuang. At the beginning of this chapter, I noted that a man from Yu village forgot to mention that his brother had committed suicide, despite talking freely about other cases. This man's brother, Sihuang, suffered from schizophrenia and committed suicide in 1990.

Sihuang's eldest brother also suffered from a mental illness and went missing several years before Sihuang died. One of Sihuang's nephews had manic depressive disorder and was locked up by his father in the family house. His father was my interviewee who forgot to mention Sihuang's suicide.

When Sihuang was young, he did not suffer from any mental illness and got married. At the age of 18, he joined the army. He began to suffer from schizophrenia in the army and returned to Yu village. His brother thus described his situation: "Usually people could not see that he was insane. He could work in the field, although not very skillfully. When his illness was occasionally serious, he walked in the street, muttering nonsense. He often wandered along the street with his arms crossed and his head lowered. His disease was especially serious in the spring."

Sihuang's wife often complained about him. One villager said, "If he were mad before joining the army, nobody would have married him. Sihuang had two daughters and one son. The son was born after he came back, and now he is 18 years old. Sihuang was clumsy when working in the field, and his wife often complained about that. One day when they were working together in the field, his wife again complained about his clumsiness. Unable to stand her harsh words, Sihuang drank pesticide and died."

The apparent reason for Sihuang to commit suicide was his quarrel with his wife, and this was not different from many other cases I have examined. Sihuang's suicide seems to represent his resistance against his wife's criticism, but his wife had complained because she also felt that she was suffering unfairly. Some people said, "She did not expect that her husband would become like that, and how could she live with such a madman?" In the story of Chaoyuan, we saw that Chaoyuan's grandfather had an affair ostensibly because his wife was retarded, and that Chaoyuan's father was not living in a serious way because his wife was retarded. Sihuang's wife might well have held the same feelings of frustration and unfairness. The mentally ill people did nothing unjust to their spouses, but their spouses complained as if they themselves were suffering from a domestic injustice.

"After his death," a villager said, "Sihuang's second eldest brother often helped his wife with work in the field. He is 60 years old now and still single. The woman did not marry Sihuang's brother, but they worked together like a couple. Sihuang's son often complained about his mother's affair."

Regarding the relationship between Sihuang's wife and his brother, another villager said, "Sihuang suspected that his wife was having an affair with his brother before he died. Once he went to his brother's house and cut him with a knife. His brother was wounded seriously and shed a lot of blood." Some

villagers regarded Sihuang's violence as a symptom of his mental illness. One of Sihuang's female neighbors said, "He was too suspicious. Once he said to me, 'Do you know who she married?' Aware that he was talking about his wife, I said, 'She married you.' 'No,' Sihuang said to me seriously, 'She married you.' Perhaps mad people are all like that. A relative of mine often says similar things."

The villagers could not know with certainty whether Sihuang's wife had an affair with his brother when Sihuang was alive, but they said that Sihuang's elder brother began to help them work before Sihuang died: "As a madman, Sihuang could not work well, and his wife could not do all the work. Of course his brother helped them." Even if Sihuang's wife did not have an affair when he was alive, Sihuang's suspicion could have accounted for their bad relationship and his suicide.

Unlike Chaoyuan, Sihuang became ill after getting married and having several children. He and his wife were in a more paradoxical situation than Chaoyuan was. When talking about his case, villagers sometimes showed sympathy to Sihuang and sometimes thought that his wife was unfortunate. On the one hand, it was unfair for his wife to have to live with a mentally ill husband forever; on the other hand, it was also unfair to treat Sihuang as a non-person and give his wife the freedom to abandon him. Both were suffering domestic injustice in a way that gave them moral capital.

People understood that Sihuang's suicide represented his resistance to his wife, but because he was a psychotic, they did not think him equipped with the skills necessary to lead a normal family life and thus to commit suicide in order to show resistance. Although some people pitied him, even his own brother did not consider his suicide as a typical case.

## **Discussion**

When the statistics about Chinese suicide first came out, many people suspected that the percentage of mental illnesses was low because psychiatry was not popular in China. As we have shown in this chapter, however, even common peasants are fully aware that mental illnesses can lead to suicide. We should dig into the cultural meaning behind this. For Chinese people, only a full person can suffer domestic injustice, commit a normal suicide and so resist this injustice. If a person commits suicide only because of mental illness, or if a non-person commits suicide because of an injustice, neither is counted as a typical case of suicide.

A modern psychiatrist might think this idea strange, but it was not particular to China. In many European countries during the early modern era, people who committed suicide due to mental illness were not punished posthumously as other suicidal people were, because only deliberate suicides were considered sinful.<sup>1</sup> They were also considered atypical suicides, although for different reasons than in today's China.

The mentally ill, prostitutes and people who do not marry are seen as lacking full

personhood and are excluded from the privilege of normal people who are eligible to commit suicide. A normal person is one who lives a normal family life, and typical suicide is understood positively as a privilege of normal people. Although suicide is bad, not everyone is held to be equal to playing this tragedy. By committing suicide, one is showing dignity and claiming the right to be treated justly. A person unable to behave as a normal family member is also unable to be treated justly, and hence unable to resist domestic injustice by committing suicide.

## 7 Gambling for *qi*

“Gambling for *qi*” is the most frequently used local term for the psychodynamics of suicide. By pursuing *qi*, one is also pursuing justice; but a rash gamble for *qi* often results in tragedy.

I remarked in Chapter 2 that *qi* could be understood as spiritedness, anger and dignity. In *Matthews' Chinese-English Dictionary* (1972), “*du qi*” is translated as “to get in a rage and insist on doing something regardless of the consequences (945).” Although this is very close to what it means, we should further examine its literal meaning and psychological implications. In order to understand the metaphor of gambling, we can look at gambling with playing cards. In such a gamble, money is the stake, and different parties are betting on their cards. What people really care about is how much money they can win. Similarly, in a gamble for *qi* (spiritedness or dignity), *qi* is at stake, and people engaged in the game all have stifled *qi*. They are willing to take all kinds of risks to win *qi*. When wronged too much, one is likely to set life as a trump card to win one’s *qi*. This is the rough dynamics of committing suicide by gambling for *qi*.

Thus understood, gambling for *qi* is not a result of domestic injustice, but a resistance against it. Not everyone gambles for *qi* when wronged. One might accept, ignore, or yield to injustice. Only one who cares about justice and dignity gambles for *qi*. A non-person such as Chaoyuan (6.3) does not have the right to gamble for *qi*.

### 7.1 Impulsivity

Hefang (3.1), Lanzhi (3.2), Laifu (3.3), Zilan (4.3), Lu Li (5.1) and Yuse (5.2) all committed or attempted suicide by gambling for *qi*. Their suicides are characterized by impulsivity. In modern psychiatry, impulsivity is seen as an important characteristic that can lead to suicide, both inside and outside of China (Institute of Medicine 2002: 81; Li *et al.* 2003). In the story of Mizhang, we will see how impulsive suicide is understood as gambling for *qi*.

Because his three sons had treated him badly, Mizhang, an old man who was famous for martial arts, burnt himself to death. “After setting some grain on fire in his house, he sat on a chair and held several bankbooks and all the

cash that he had. When we saw that there was fire in his house, we hurried to extinguish it. As soon as the final spark died out, we heard a great crash from his dead body, and then it fell down to the ground. That was his *qi*. With its support, he was absolutely still when dying. We could see how much *qi* was stifled inside when he decided to die, and how he braced himself to bear the fire. He was really an old hero.”

This brief description reveals the multiple meanings of *qi* in relation to suicide. First of all, *qi* represented Mizhang’s anger at his sons for not treating him well. Second, it was the vigor with which he managed to resist; it was so great that he managed not to move when burning to death. Third, *qi* was the breath that was not released until after his death. Without the support of his *qi*, his dead body finally collapsed.

Jiaolan’s case will help us to understand the psychological mechanism of gambling for *qi*.

Jiaolan, a 66-year-old woman from Xitang, said half-jokingly and half-seriously, “Hearing that you wanted to know my story, I said to myself, ‘Perhaps he could help me out of my dilemma? If they could really dismiss my worries, I would tell him what I have never told anybody.’” I was dumbfounded on hearing that, and unsure whether I should assure her that I could solve her problem. I knew that I was unlikely to be able to solve it, but feared that I would lose a good case by revealing my limitations. However, she continued, “That is only a joke, but I would like you young people to hear my stories. I attempted suicide because I felt the pressure was too great. I still have too much pressure now. My whole life is complex and difficult. That must be my fate.

“It was in 1982. My father-in-law had an elder brother who had only two daughters. His wife had been ill for several years, and my husband and I took care of her day and night. Her own daughters never stayed with her for a single day. I tried my best to serve her and almost treated her as my mother. On her last days, we took her to the hospital and stayed there for six days. It was not an easy job. She was unable to defecate or urinate without assistance, and I helped her with everything. The doctors and nurses asked me whether she was my mother, and I said no; then they asked whether she was my mother-in-law, and I denied it as well. ‘Who on earth is she?’ they asked, and I said, ‘She is my aunt-in-law.’ They all laughed at me. How could any other woman serve her aunt-in-law so well? Her own daughters only stayed with her for a short while. Why did I do that? I am too eager to have a good reputation. I served her so well only in order to have people respect me and say some good words.

“My aunt-in-law died six days later. The eldest son is supposed to carry the paper flag in the funeral. If a daughter carried it, the family would be scorned by the villagers. Since we took care of her, my husband should have carried the paper flag. My husband was the eldest male child of his generation in their lineage, and hence he was expected to carry the flag. The cadres in the

village also asked my husband to do so. One of the daughters of my aunt-in-law had married in the same village, and we had to discuss that matter with her. Whatever we said, she and her husband refused to allow my husband to carry the flag. Perhaps they thought that we wanted some inheritance from the deceased.

“When my husband discussed the matter with the woman, he said, ‘Xiaozhi, I want to carry the paper flag not because I want any money from you. All we have done was for the face of my aunt. It is not good for a woman to carry it, and I am afraid people will despise our family.’ He swore that he had nothing else in mind and was even willing to write a note to that effect. But the woman refused. Her husband stood in the street and shouted, ‘I am standing here, and who dares come into the yard?’ I was walking down the street to give out the mourning clothes to people who would attend the funeral. When someone told me what he had said, I could not bear his words. I had done so much to serve my aunt-in-law, but was this the outcome of my efforts? I put aside the mourning clothes and went to the man in charge of the funeral, and said, ‘Brother Sang, I cannot pass out the clothes any more and must leave. Please take care of the funeral.’

“One usually commits suicide when the mind suddenly goes blank and becomes painful. I am an outgoing person, talkative and always happy. Being provoked at that time, however, I could not control my mind and did a rash thing. When I got home, I pulled out a bottle of pesticide from under the closet in my bedroom. Without thinking further, I drank a bottle of pesticide. Brother Sang and other people came to my house and saw what I had done. They were astonished, and Brother Sang said, ‘Well, let us suspend the funeral and take care of Jiaolan. We should immediately take her to the hospital.’ When we got to the county hospital, they could not find water. A friend of mine heard about that and came to the hospital. When he found there was no water, he hurried to a nearby restaurant and asked them for a basin of water. Being unconscious, I closed my teeth tightly, and they could not open my mouth. Someone suggested that the doctors open it with an iron stick, but my friend said that that would harm my teeth. Then they infused the water to my belly through the nostrils, and I survived. Later my friend said, ‘It was I who gave you another life.’ I answered, ‘Yes, I know. I will treasure this life very much and never do such silly things again.’

“I am not a stubborn person and I easily recovered. People always say that I am a frank and happy woman. I attempted suicide that time only because I was really angry and gambled for *qi*. When that moment passed, I would not be so sad any more.”

Jiaolan vividly described the “suicidal mind” (Shneidman 1996) of a Chinese woman: “One usually commits suicide when the mind suddenly goes blank and becomes painful. I am an outgoing person, talkative and always happy. Being provoked at that time, however, I could not control my mind and did such a rash thing ... Without thinking further, I drank a bottle of pesticide.”

“Blank,” “painful,” “provoked,” the “control [of] my mind,” “rash” and “without thinking further” are key terms in her description. We see something similar in Zilan’s words: “So I lost my senses and drank the pesticide” (4.3). This type of suicidal mind is different from that of Surong (4.2) and Ge Man (4.1), who had been thinking about suicide for a while or made deliberate plans for death.

“Out of control” or “losing one’s senses” is the phenomenological description of gambling for *qi*, denoting a mental state that goes beyond common sense. Such a psychological state, however, does not imply that the person in question suffers from depression or some other mental disorder. For instance, Jiaolan described herself as “outgoing,” “happy” and “talkative.” She had been playing an active role both in taking care of her aunt-in-law and in preparing for the funeral. She also said that usually she was not depressed. Although what happened later made her depressed in a certain sense (7.2), depression was unrelated to Jiaolan’s first attempted suicide.

The word “provoked” refers to the causes for the phenomena of suicide and suicide attempts discussed above. Jiaolan lost her senses not because she was a senseless person, but because the man’s words pushed her to behave senselessly. His words made Jiaolan sad because all her efforts seemed to have been in vain. She had been taking care of her aunt-in-law for a long time, and she was supposed to have more say in the funeral. Although Jiaolan had greater moral capital than her aunt-in-law’s daughters because she had taken care of the deceased, the daughter of the deceased and her husband did not show respect to her at all. Hurt by the man’s words, Jiaolan felt “pain” – not due to mental disorder, but from her frustration in the power game with him. She felt a sense of injustice, not illness.

“Blank,” “rash” and “without thinking further” describe how she was out of control. She was not really irrational, but because she was struck by a certain idea and since she had rushed to resist, she could not think further, and her mind went blank. In other words, Jiaolan was out of her senses because so strong an idea had occupied her mind that she could not think about anything else. The attempted suicide was her rash resistance against the man’s harsh words.

As we have shown, gambling for *qi* in family politics is similar to gambling with cards. When totally devoted to gambling, one is prone to be occupied by the idea of winning back dignity. In such a case, everything else is forgotten or suspended, and the gambler rushes to do something at any price. Jiaolan was out of her senses not because she deviated from common sense, but because she was fixated on the power game. This happens to almost everyone who gambles for *qi*.

Li *et al.* find that depression symptoms are less often found among impulsive suicide attempters than non-impulsive attempters, and the higher one’s quality of life is, the more likely one will commit suicide impulsively (Li *et al.* 2003). Impulsive suicide attempters or completers have no or few symptoms of depression, and they are well integrated into society. They commit suicide not because of any disorder, but because they are impulsively provoked. It is not a mental disorder that causes their suicides or attempted suicides, but their concern with *qi*.

When gambling for *qi*, one does not want to die, but rather to win more dignity. Nevertheless, gambling for *qi* often leads to death. Therefore, is suicide by

gambling for *qi* a kind of attempted suicide, where people die only accidentally because they are not saved at the last minute?

Scholars have realized that attempted suicide “cannot simply be regarded as ‘failed’ suicide, but as an act which has different characteristics” (Giddens 1971c: 114). Weiss categorizes attempted suicide into three types: abortive completed suicide, true attempted suicide in which one thinks “that he might die as a result of his action but was not certain,” and suicidal gestures, in which one is sure that one will “not die as a result of his action.” A “true suicidal attempt” is a cry for help and usually brings a change of the bad situation (Weiss 1971: 384–97).

If we understand suicide in China in Weiss’s framework, it appears that many people who gamble for *qi* do not have a genuine intent to die, although suicidal gestures are not common either. It is interesting that Weiss titles his article “The Gamble with Death in Attempted Suicide,” which seems close to gambling for *qi* in China. Similarly to those described by Weiss, people who gamble for *qi* also think that they might die although they are not certain, and this is why both are called “gamblers.” From the perspective of Giddens (1971c), Weiss (1971), Stengel (1971) and others, completed suicides are significantly different from suicide attempts based on such a gamble.

According to Giddens, suicidal acts of the egoistic type are more likely to be suicidal attempts, but anomie more often leads to completed suicides. He argues that an egoistic suicide “has the expiatory objective of direct appeal to others,” and hence the individual tends to dramatize the action to “provide some opportunity for others to respond” (Giddens 1971c: 115). Contrary to this, anomie more often leads to completed suicide because of the gap between one’s ego ideal and actual identity (*ibid* 111). Unlike a completed suicide, an attempted suicide prompts others to feel sympathy and concern, and a suicidal attempter not only wants help from others but also forgiveness. The interference of others in the suicide attempts is the wager in this gamble, and only when interference occurs can one win the gamble. The attempters take on the role of the weak or the guilty, and they will die if there is neither help nor forgiveness.

The gamble of Chinese peasants is different. In such a gamble, the wager is *qi* or others’ yielding, not others’ help or forgiveness. It is not a cry for help or forgiveness, and the people in question do not want to prove themselves weak or guilty; instead, they want to prove that they are not as weak as they seem to be. They can prove themselves strong and spirited even if they really die. For instance, although Mizhang’s sons did not save their father, Mizhang did not lose the gamble. After his death, his sons had a bad reputation in the village, and Mizhang was respected by many people as a great hero. Most suicides or attempted suicides in China are aimed at gaining something from others, such as respect, yielding or fear, but others’ interference is not crucial to the meaning of a suicidal act. In other words, the significance of suicide is clearly expressed even if nobody interferes and the attempter dies.

Although suicide is often seen as a positive action in terms of dignity and spirit-*edness*, it is also often seen as an unreasonable one. The popular saying “To scream, make a scene, and then hang herself (*yi ku er nao san shang diao*)” shows how an



unreasonable wife can force her husband to obey her absurd requests. Parents often warn their children: “Don’t provoke unreasonable people. You can never argue with them. When they are unable to beat you, they might knock their head against the wall, and what can you do?” When two persons engage in a debate, people are supposed to judge who is the more reasonable, but sometimes a debater does not play power games in a reasonable way, instead forcing others to obey because of their anger, threats or even suicide attempt. In such a case, the person in question puts himself or herself in an undeservedly advantageous position. The significance of the suicide attempt is also different from that described by Weiss.

In Jiaolan’s case, although her suicide attempt shows her anger, the villagers do not see her action as unproblematic. Although she tried her best to serve the old woman, when she insisted on having her husband carry the paper flag, she was forcing the daughter of the deceased to acknowledge her impiety. It was natural that she and her husband would be angry.

Therefore, although a suicide that is aimed at winning *qi* is similar to an attempted suicide from a Western psychiatric perspective in some aspects, the two have different psychodynamics and different meanings. Most suicides in China are similar to attempted suicide in the Western view and are aimed at appealing to others, but they are mainly about winning back one’s dignity, spiritedness and respect. We cannot understand them simply as “failed” attempted suicides.

## 7.2 Long-term gamble

I interviewed Jiaolan because I had heard about her attempted suicide of 1982. After she told me the story about her aunt-in-law, however, I could not see what Jiaolan’s “pressure” was. Before I pried further, she told me about another suicide attempt:

“Last year I felt quite unhappy and did not want to live any longer. I bought some sleeping pills and wanted to take them. People in my husband’s family are too difficult to cope with, including my own son.

“I am 66 years old. I was trapped in my marriage. People in his family all had bad tempers and often beat or blamed me. I have one son and one daughter, who are the same as other people in this family. When my children were young, I was working in the county seat. I also had to take care of the fields when I was not working.

“My husband had some money, but I never used a single *yuan* of his. He earned quite a lot, but he spent everything on drinking. Although sometimes he gave me money, I could not use it as I wanted. He always asked me how I spent it, as if he did not trust me. I would never spend his money. I love my face [care about my social reputation] and only use my own money. Even now, I sometimes work in the county seat and earn some money. My children do not give me money either. I have a sister in Beijing. She and her four sons are kind to me and often help me. My relationship with my children is not good because they do not treat me as their mother. I never tell this to the villagers.

“My son was repairing cars in Beijing. That was a good job, and he could

earn a lot, but my son's temper was not good, and he often quarreled with others. Then he returned home and repaired cars here. Like me, my son is a face-lover. Although his business was not bad, he was too generous. Even when strangers talked amiably with him, he would reduce the price. Because of this, he did not earn much money. Later he quit and went to drive a truck for a factory. Now he earns 1,000 *yuan* every month, and I believe that he has some money.

"Unlike his father, my son does not drink alcohol. In several ways he is similar to me, but his temper is as bad as that of anyone else in his father's family. I have spoiled him, and he does not concern himself with me at all. He never gives me any money at all. I am unlike other old people who ask for money from their children. I only want them to give me money voluntarily. You know, the money that I ask from them is different from the money they offer to me. I wish that my work and concern could finally move them, but all my efforts are futile. My son is over 30 years old now, and I always spend money on him and his wife. Now I do not talk about anything of theirs. My son bought a small truck, but I have not talked about that. I do not ask how much it is or whether he needs money.

"I am always kind to my children. When they are bad to me, I often blame myself and ask whether I might have done something wrong. I often spend the whole day thinking about that, but cannot find an answer. Someone said, 'Your son does not want you to work too hard.' Perhaps that is right, but who will take care of the field if I do not? I tried to quit work, yet the situation became even worse. My son never steps into the field. Once he drove along the field and asked someone, 'Where is the field of my family?' The person showed him, 'The peanuts are yours. You don't even know where your field is? You can see how well your mother has toiled in the field.' He said, 'Well, is that our field? How wonderful the peanuts seem!'

"My son got married several years ago. Because he is not good to me, his wife is not good to me either. I do not blame my daughter-in-law, because she would treat me better if my son did. My daughter has two children, and I brought up both of them. I contributed so much to her family, but she does not take care of me.

"I cannot sleep well. Every night I think about my situation and try to find a way out. I think about my bitter past, my difficult present, and each way that I have tried to move my children. Every night I become sadder and more sleepless. I think this must be my fate, and life is so meaningless.

"Sometimes I really feel that I cannot live like that any more, that there is no hope in this life. I have already died once and do not consider life good. I am working for the sake of my son and my daughter day and night, but I never please them. They do not understand what I think and what I am aiming at. Once I worked in the field for a whole day and came home. They had already had dinner. I could not find any food in the house and wanted to cook something. Seeing that I was about to cook, my son asked rudely, 'Haven't you eaten enough already?' My tears immediately came down. I had worked for a

day and returned home without eating anything. They did not wait for me to have dinner; that is fine. I could also forgive them that they did not cook for me, but why did they forbid me to cook my own food? I really could not bear what he had said and wept for a whole night. 'Let us see whether your life will be better after my death,' I said. I decided to commit suicide.

"The next morning I went to the county seat and bought three bottles of sleeping pills. Suicide is like this: when one has made a decision and commits suicide without hesitation, it is completed; if one hesitates for a while, perhaps one throws away the pills when the moment has passed and it will never return. I was really angry when buying the sleeping pills, but when I got back to the village and met the villagers, we talked happily, and I forgot all my sadness. I put aside the three bottles and did not attempt suicide this time.

"This must be my fate. When I was feeling life was unfair, I wished that my situation would change after my children grew up. Now my children have grown up, but my fate is still the same. When they asked me whether I would talk with you about my attempted suicide, I asked, 'Can they change my fate? If they can, then certainly I will talk with them and even be grateful to them.' That is just a joke.

"Although I suffer so much, I do not want to lose face by telling people what I had experienced. I wept to myself and did not dare to tell other people. When I felt bad, I could only comfort myself. What benefit could I gain by always weeping and telling my story of suffering? I had to make myself happy and survive. When I was young, I began to work in the county seat. Although I had not attended much schooling, I was seen as an educated person at that time and could find part-time jobs in the town. I did not realize that I would have to remain in such a terrible situation even when my children grew up. Now I also often go out to find part-time jobs and earn some money for myself. I know that I can rely on nobody. Life is really difficult for me; nobody understands me.

"My father-in-law, who is more than 80 years old, now is very nice to me and regrets that they were so bad to me before. He is even willing to kneel down to beg my forgiveness. I have finally moved my parents-in-law, but my husband and children cannot be moved. They are heartless, and I am hopeless with them.

"Other people in the village all like me, but my children and my husband do not. Actually I do not want them to serve me; I would be quite content if they understood how I was thinking. That is not too much, but they are unable to do it.

"When I am sad again indoors, I come out to the street. Once I joked to people, 'When I am dead, you should all be the ones wearing the most somber mourning clothes (*da xiao*, clothes for sons in their parents' funeral).' They all laughed. They thought that I was only joking, but I was serious. I always think about death these days. I am living aimlessly. Do I have another 66 years?

"The doctor in my village once said, 'You are in danger of becoming

mentally ill (*mo zheng*). You should take care of yourself.' I smiled and said, 'No, I will never be mad. I know how to control myself.'"

We had lunch together and spent the whole day chatting. Her son came for her during lunch time. She went out with him and came back several minutes later. She said, "My son said he wanted to ask me about how to sell the apples, but before I said anything, he stopped me and let me come back."

Compared with the angst that she faced regarding the funeral of her aunt-in-law, the trouble in Jiaolan's nuclear family was much more serious, though she did not take action to attempt suicide the second time. In her first attempted suicide, Jiaolan was enraged upon hearing the man's words of blame, but she would soon forget the matter. The trouble in her own family, however, was continually worrying her, and she had some symptoms of depression. Gambling for *qi* is not always an impulsive game. It can also result from long-term problems. In such a case, we should further examine its relationship with depression.

Jiaolan had suffered from insomnia and complained about the difficulties in her family life. These are symptoms of depression, though neither very pervasive nor continuous. Her doctor's words also confirm this observation: "You are in danger of becoming mentally ill." Nevertheless, I do not think that it was her depression, if she really had depression, that drove her to attempt suicide. For that, we need to analyze the power game in her family more closely.

Jiaolan did not tell me many details about her relationship with her husband, but we can see there were several aspects that especially upset her. First, her husband occasionally beat and blamed her; second, he drank too much and did not live seriously; third, he did not trust Jiaolan, and the couple did not get along.

Her husband often beat her when they were young, and he was still irascible in old age. This was of course a serious problem for her and for the family. Jiaolan's husband drank a great deal and wasted a lot of money. Jiaolan was unhappy with that, but it did not do much harm to life in the family.

The so-called distrust of her husband, however, was a more serious problem and deserves more analysis. When we were chatting after lunch, Jiaolan again complained to all in her presence that her husband always asked her to account for how she spent money. Apparently she was very unhappy with that.

Nevertheless, when she mentioned this issue, Jiaolan said, "He always asked me how I spent it *as if* [author's italics] he could not trust me." She actually knew that her husband did trust her, but the fact that he asked gave her the impression that he seemed not to trust her. His willingness to give her money was indeed out of good intention. Jiaolan was annoyed and decided not to spend his money simply because her husband did not know how to respect and please her by uttering suitable words. This was also a gamble for *qi*.

The trivial issue about her not spending his money constitutes a mini power game. By giving Jiaolan some money, her husband showed his good intention and won moral capital. When he asked Jiaolan how she had used the money, he did not suspect that Jiaolan had actually spent it in an inappropriate way, but was making use of his moral capital and showing that he had authority over her. Jiaolan was

unhappy because she felt his control and wanted to become more independent. In order to have more autonomy, she decided not to use her husband's money but to earn her own. Then she would not have to report to her husband how she used the money.

Jiaolan was quite concerned about her position in her family. She played a very active role in most affairs in the family. She worked hard in the fields, took care of her in-laws, and communicated with the villagers on behalf of the whole family. She ought to have had more moral capital than her husband. She would be highly frustrated if her husband gained a higher moral position simply by giving her some money.

Jiaolan's own words told us why she was so depressed: "Nevertheless, my husband and my children cannot be moved. They are heartless, and I am hopeless with them." She worked hard in order to have her husband and children respect her. Her hard work was aimed at winning more moral capital in family politics. The fact that she could not win more respect through hard work made her sad and disappointed.

In family politics, one's relative moral position in power games is more important than the actual benefit one gets in material terms. Jiaolan did not concern herself with how much money her husband gave her, but she was very angry that he tried to manipulate her through such a strategy. We should also understand her relationship with her son from the same perspective.

Jiaolan said, "I am unlike other old people who ask for money from their children. I only want them to give me money voluntarily. You know, the money that I ask from them is different from the money they offer to me." If she asked for money from her son, she would put herself in a humble position, as if she were begging from him. If her son voluntarily offered her money, the situation would be different, and he would show his filial piety and respect to his mother. Although the material benefit would be the same, its significance in family politics is quite different. The villagers often teach young people that their parents do not really lack money, but that they should please them by giving them some money and showing their filial piety. As a way to behave as a person, giving money has more symbolic meaning than economic importance.

Jiaolan repeatedly said that she wanted to win over her children but could not. She complained that they did not treat her as their mother. The host of the house where I interviewed her once commented on her son: "That young man is sometimes confused." The man did not really mistreat his mother as Jiaolan seemed to imply, but he was confused about how to please her. What Jiaolan really meant was that her son did not treat her as a good son is supposed to. He did not respect her by showing his filial piety. She could not enjoy her moral capital in power game with her son. This disappointed her greatly.

When Jiaolan talked about her son, she complained about his coldness on the one hand, but emphasized his difference from his father on the other. Even when she said that he was not good at earning money, she conveyed that he was a generous young man. When she remarked that her son was similar to herself in some ways, she showed her emotional attachment to him.

We can see the subtle relationship between the mother and son in the episode of selling apples. Her son called Jiaolan out when we were having lunch, and Jiaolan soon came back. He came to discuss how to sell apples, but let her come back before she brought forth her opinion. The fact that he wanted to discuss business with his mother showed that he valued her opinion, but the way he did it showed that he did not know how to respect her opinion. At stake here was not whether he was filial or not, but whether he could express his filial piety in a proper way. In fact, Jiaolan never complained that he was an unfilial son.

Jiaolan's son was unable to maintain a balance of power with his mother, and this worsened the situation in the whole family. Although Jiaolan and her son lived in the same house, she did not often talk with him. When he bought a small truck, she even did not bother to ask him about it.

Therefore, Jiaolan was depressed mainly because she could not make use of her moral capital and enjoy the respect of her husband and son in family politics. All her efforts to manage the family did not give her an advantageous position in their power games. Jiaolan frequently said that she was happy outdoors but sad indoors. Compared with her status among the villagers and in front of the cadres, she was especially depressed in the family. Jiaolan said that her happiness outdoors could temporarily release her from the worries indoors, but the comparison also highlighted her suffering in family life.

Her second attempted suicide, however, represents her resistance against such a depressing situation; it is not the result of it. She put her intention of committing suicide this way: "Let us see whether your life will be better after my death." Words like these are very typical of people gambling for *qi*. Jiaolan knew that both her husband and her son relied on her in family life, but they did not fully recognize it or openly express it. Since they did not respect such an important person, she would punish them and let them know how miserable their life would be if she were dead. This is often the psychodynamics of gambling for *qi* that leads to suicide (3.3).

When Jiaolan returned home from the field, she was angry because her son and daughter-in-law had not cooked dinner for her. A good son, as she implied, would wait for her to have dinner or cook for her. She had been working for a whole day, and was exhausted and hungry. Since she had done that for the sake of the family, she had the moral capital to ask her son to cook for her. Her son not only was reluctant to cook for her, but also shouted at her. Whatever the reason was, his rude shouting was not a proper way to speak to his mother. Jiaolan felt extremely wronged to be scolded by her son after a day of hard work. She decided to show him that he could not survive without her. Her suicide attempt was her resistance against her son's harsh attitude.

Food appears to be a trivial matter, but such a small matter can lead to tragedies. Jiaolan is not the only parent who has attempted or committed suicide because of food. Guofu, an old man from Jianli, hanged himself because his daughter-in-law had hidden some steamed bread from him and fed him rancid food. Xuanyuan, an old man in Gouyi, also hanged himself when he found that there was no egg in his soup while everyone else had it. Eryao, an old woman from Shuizhou, drank

pesticide when she found that her daughter-in-law did not cook for her. All these people felt disrespected, ignored, or “put down.”

Eryao’s story is quite similar to Jiaolan’s. She usually cooked for the whole family. One day Eryao did not make lunch. Her daughter-in-law only made enough food for her husband and herself. When Eryao found that there was no food left for her, she committed suicide. Her daughter-in-law tearfully said to me, “I am not such a silly woman. My relationship with my mother-in-law was very good, and we often joked with each other. Well, now I know that I am a woman notorious for impiety. I did not know why, but I was especially uneasy those days and did not say good words to my mother-in-law. Who knows why she could not think it through this time?” Instead of criticizing her for impiety, most villagers who knew the details said that she was very confused – similar to what people said about Jiaolan’s son. By “confusion,” they meant that she was not morally bad, but had no idea about how to please Eryao and show her filial piety.

I do not know precisely how Eryao complained about her daughter-in-law, but I guess it might be similar to how Jiaolan complained to me. For these parents or parents-in-law, filial piety is not a matter of intention but a matter of proper manner. In other words, one is not filial merely by willing it so or saying that it is so. One has to behave properly to show filial piety. Parents cannot force their children to obey or respect them. With the new emphasis on freedom, autonomy and equality in the Chinese family revolution, traditional hierarchical and patriarchal systems have broken down, but harmony in the family is still important. Chinese people do not only rely on force and obedience to maintain harmony, but also strive to strike a balance in power games. Both depression and resistance in contemporary Chinese families should be understood in this context.

## Discussion

In this chapter, we have examined gambling for *qi* through Jiaolan’s two suicide attempts. The main goal of gambling for *qi* is justice and dignity. As we have shown, in family politics, both love and respect are necessary. When one’s moral capital is not acknowledged, one might feel wronged and become angry. When a person tries to force others to respect him or her, he or she might be gambling for *qi*.

As a rash and dangerous action, gambling for *qi* is not a rational way to defend human dignity. Although Jiaolan’s two suicide attempts are significantly different from each other, they follow a similar mode. She attempted the first time because, although she had tried her best to serve the old woman, she won nothing but curses; she attempted the second time because she could not move her son despite her hard work. We saw in Section 7.1 that people in her village did not approve her thinking in the first attempt. Similarly, they assessed her later situation: “Why did she not have a good talk with her son? If they understood each other better, things might

change.” When Jiaolan was not content with her son, she never talked with him, but passively waited for his change and gambled for *qi*. Although a talk might not solve all problems, neither is gambling for *qi* a rational way forward, after all.

In the understanding of human dignity, the term “*qi*” has ambivalent meanings. On the one hand, it denotes the positive meaning of dignity. People who are not angry in front of enemies are cowards. On the other hand, *qi* accompanies conflict or rashness in family life. *Qi* brings forth human dignity only in dangerous or really hostile situations. If one is overly serious in conflicts with family members, it does not produce justice but only worsens family life.



## 8 Face

The loss of face is another concept frequently used to describe suicide in Mengzhou. The concept of “face” is perhaps one of the biggest contributions that Chinese culture has made to international social science. In her now classic article “The Chinese Concepts of ‘Face’,” Hu Hsienchin distinguishes *lian* and *mianzi* and argues that *lian* is a moral sanction and *mianzi* is about prestige and reputation in society (Hu 1944). Erving Goffman develops a more general understanding of face and argues that face is the image of the sacred self (Goffman 1955). Hwang Kwang-Kuo relates it to the general mechanism in power games in Chinese societies (Hwang 1987).

Among all these theories, Goffman’s is doubtless the most profound. His theory on face includes three points of concern to us. First, face is constructed in interpersonal interactions; second, face is important because it is the image of the sacred self; third, because the self is considered sacred despite cultural differences, face should be understood as a part of universal human nature. Hence he views face as a “sacred thing,” yet “universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities, but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without” (Goffman 1955: 231).

In the Chinese context, I agree with Goffman that face is a social construct, but I would not say that it is the image of the self. Not only is human nature understood in a different way in Chinese culture, but the relationship between face and human nature is also viewed differently.

When Hu discusses “loss of *lian*” and “loss of *mianzi*,” she also introduces a third term: “loss of man (*diu ren*).” (I translate this as “loss of personhood” in subsequent discussions.) She remarks, “Another expression for ‘losing *lian*’ is *diu ren* – ‘to lose man.’ *Ren*, here probably stands for *ren-ge*, ‘character.’ It is possible that *diu ren* is a newer expression that will eventually come to displace *diu lian*” (Hu 1944: 50). I am somewhat surprised that among the enormous number of subsequent studies on face, this third term is seldom mentioned, and almost nobody picks up on the issue that Hu raises here. Although this third term has not come to replace “*diu lian*” as Hu predicted, it is a key to understanding the Chinese concept of face. This term helps us to see that the Chinese concept of face is not based on the sacred self as Goffman argues, but rather on the idea of the cultivation of emotion and morality to make people more human.

I do not agree with Hu that loss of personhood is only another expression for “loss of *lian*.” Hu makes a distinction between “*lian*” and “*mianzi*,” which establishes the basic thrust for subsequent studies. She says, “*mianzi* stands for the kind of prestige that is emphasized in this country [USA]: a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation.” “*Lian* is both a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction” (Hu 1944: 45).

We can see how the two terms are related to the concept of “personhood” in a study done by Ge Gao. Illustrating this distinction in Chinese TV dramas, Ge Gao argues that “to ‘have *lian*’ thus is essential to being a human” (Gao 1998: 473), and that “*mian* symbolizes the *image* of a person in the Chinese culture” (*ibid* 475). Gao implies that both *lian* and *mian* are essential to being a full person. According to Gao, *lian* is the minimum requirement for being a person, and one can lose *lian* but cannot get it; in contrast, one has more freedom to get, lose and give *mian*.

In everyday Chinese parlance, however, “loss of personhood” often refers to both. Loss of personhood is sometimes equivalent to the loss of the minimum requirement for being a normal and moral person; and it can also be similar to loss of the image of one’s social role. Therefore, “loss of personhood” covers the meanings of both “loss of *mian*” and “loss of *lian*.”

The distinction between *lian* and *mian* is a central issue in most studies on face after Hu. David Ho points out that there is significant overlap between *lian* and *mian* (Ho 1976: 868). Ambrose King and John Meyers argue that the linguistic distinction between the two is only valid in north China. Instead of sticking to Hu’s distinction, they define the two as “moral face” and “social face” (King and Meyers 1977). In an empirical study, Chen Zhizhao argues that the difference between the two is one of degree (Chen 1989: 229). The focus in all these discussions is on how we understand the moral aspect and the social aspect of the Chinese concept of face.

Based on above studies and my fieldwork in Mengzou, I argue that face, in contrast to Goffman’s “image of the sacred self,” is the sign of personhood, and it is often used as moral capital in power games. The linguistic distinction between *lian* and *mianzi* is not true in many places, but it is still helpful for understanding face from different perspectives. Because the significance of personhood is complex, so face is also complex. We have seen that personhood could be understood sociologically, morally, politically and psychologically; face is also understood not only sociologically and morally, but also politically and psychologically. Family life and social status provide social face, morality provides moral face, and clever strategy provides political face. Even when all these are lacking, one who wants to be a full person has psychological face. In power games, face is used as moral capital. When one’s moral capital does not win dignity, i.e., when face is lost, one might commit suicide to resist. “Face-lovers,” people who especially value face, are more likely to commit suicide because they are seen as being more spirited.

### 8.1 Spiritedness

Because of different life conditions and personalities, people have different expectations of dignity. A face-lover especially weighs his or her status in the community and is concerned with the quality and others' view of his or her life. After I had clarified these basic ideas about face-lovers, an event puzzled me and also pushed me to reconsider this term: Zhou Liu, a famous businessman who had enriched many people in Jiashu, drank pesticide and died in August 2002.

"Zhou Liu was a highly spirited man. Unwilling to lose personhood, he committed suicide when his young wife ran off," said Yu Chengyan, one of Zhou Liu's close friends. After I learned more about Zhou Liu, however, I could hardly see how such a controversial person could be a "face-lover." "Zhou Liu always broke the law and should have been executed eight times," people said. Zhou Liu seemed to be an extremely immoral person, and if we apply Hu's dichotomy, he had lost *lian* (moral face) many times.

One week after Zhou Liu's death, I started investigating his case. According to my interviewees, he was not originally from this county, but moved to Mengzhou and started making electrical devices in the late 1970s. Zhou Liu soon became the richest person in the county and his entrepreneurial flair was praised by the officials as the forerunner of economic reform policies. Zhou Liu had several mistresses after becoming rich. The elopement of his young wife, a woman almost 40 years his junior, was seen as the main reason for his suicide.

During the last five years of his life, Zhou Liu lived in a room of the "Entertainment Palace" (*yu le gong*) in the county seat. A 40-year-old man from the northeast had rented the land facing the new railway station and built the "Entertainment Palace."<sup>1</sup> The Entertainment Palace consists of a dancing ball and a theatre, and several boarding houses, most of which are rented by railway workers. Zhou Liu was one of the tenants there. His room was close to the dancing ball, where he was found dead.

Although Zhou Liu became wealthy in the 1980s, he gradually used up all his money. But he was generous and often spent large amounts of money on his friends. Because he did not save money, Zhou Liu owed people large sums. "He also owed me 1,100 *yuan*, including several months of rent," said his landlord, "I know that I can never get the money back." According to the landlord, lenders came to visit Zhou Liu almost every day before his death.

The landlord told me that Zhou Liu would occasionally get a large amount of money even in the most difficult periods. "I know his secret," he said, "Zhou Liu was a smart person and tried many things. I don't know what he had done before. During the five years here, he tried several technologies, such as solar power, water heaters and pesticides. None of these new techniques was invented by him, but he claimed otherwise and sold patents." The landlord explained how Zhou Liu developed these new products.

"He bought many magazines and newspapers and looked for new

technologies in them. Whenever he found a suitable one, he bought the new product immediately and studied it. He also asked people who knew more about the technology to help him understand it. Then he sold the technique to others, claiming that it was his invention. He knew nothing himself and never invented a single item, but he got wealthy in this way. Last year I saw with my own eyes how he cheated a man from Henan. By the end of last year, he again earned about 5,000 *yuan*. In this year, however, he was not so fortunate. People are smarter, and he could not cheat them any more. Because he could not succeed with that, he borrowed a lot of money. Zhou Liu did not pay me his rent and electricity fees. When he had money, however, he was no miser.”

In order to learn more about Zhou Liu’s life history, I interviewed several people who were familiar with him. Huidong, a villager of Jiashu, was a colleague of Zhou Liu and now is one of the richest persons in his village.<sup>2</sup> I could see that the villagers of Jiashu were obviously richer than most peasants in the county, and many of them had built enormous houses. Some people even run enterprises in other provinces. Most of these people first became wealthy by selling electrical devices.

Huidong told me the following stories about Zhou Liu: “Zhou Liu came to this village as a black market master in the brigade-owned factory around 1976. He had been a Red Guard leader in his hometown and had many connections in Qizhou. The leaders of some units in Qizhou promised him: ‘If you have a factory, we will buy your products.’ So when he was in this village, he could always sell our products outside the area. When nobody else could manage to sell a single item, he would sell all of them with a phone call. In the factory he was paid 120 *yuan* each month, which was quite unusual at that time. Later he wanted to settle down in this village and moved the legal registration of residence for his whole family here. I helped him to do that. His wife was 15 years younger than him. When Zhou Liu was 35, she was only 20.

“My relationship with Zhou Liu was good, and we often traveled together. When we chatted in hotels, Zhou Liu told me in private, ‘In terms of what I have done, I should have been sentenced to death several times.’ He dared do whatever he wanted, and when I accompanied him, I was often scared by his deeds.

“His wife’s sister also worked with him, and they had an affair. One niece-in-law of his became pregnant when working for Zhou Liu. He was a man with unusual ability and extreme vices. He was spendthrift, and I guess he saved no more than 20 percent of what he had earned.

“In 1980, our factory was not running well, and Zhou Liu, who had earned a lot of money and made new connections in the county, went to Shiluan. At that time, bribery was not yet common and a small gift could win fruitful benefits. Zhou Liu became familiar with many local officials and made business deals via bribery. He even bought several guns, and two of them were confiscated by the police.

“After he went to Shiluan, I did not contact him very often, fearing that I

might become involved in the bad things he was doing. Later it was said that he went to Guangzhou and had affairs with many women. People said that he earned money in the south by cheating. He came back with a young wife and a child and divorced his first wife.

“His young wife left him because he could not become rich again. He wanted to sell his two kids, but his young wife returned and took them away. Someone said that he and his first wife resumed their marriage, and I said, ‘Good for him.’ But soon news came that he had drunk pesticide. I was quite surprised and did not expect that he would do that. Zhou Liu had experienced all kinds of difficulties and faced all kinds of menaces. Why would he commit suicide?”

According to his landlord and Huidong, although Zhou Liu was a capable and smart man, he ignored almost all the social norms. He stole patents, cheated merchants, openly bribed officials, possessed guns illegally, and had sexual affairs. He not only frequently broke the laws, but also deviated from some basic conventions. Even his sister-in-law and niece-in-law became his mistresses. People in Mengzou did not know much about his past, but they knew that Zhou Liu had been active and violent in the Cultural Revolution. According to gossip, he came to Mengzou because he feared that people would retaliate in his hometown. “Perhaps he even committed capital crimes,” someone said.

Zhou Liu did not feel loss of face (*lian*) for his misdeeds. Instead, he became a famous entrepreneur in Mengzou and a favorite of the officials. He gained much face (*mian*) using vices that obviously challenged “moral standards.” Since Hu defines *lian* as “both a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction,” Zhou Liu was winning social face (*mian*) by losing moral face (*lian*). This paradox calls for a deeper understanding of “face” and its relationship to personhood.

Yu Chengyan, a former Party secretary of the Bureau of Public Security and also a close friend of Zhou Liu, described Zhou Liu’s stories in detail, in which we can better understand how he gained face by acting immorally, and why he was seen as a highly spirited person.

“Zhou Liu was a highly spirited person, and I think that was the main reason why he committed suicide. A spineless person is not likely to commit suicide.

“He had been a member of the Propaganda Team of Maoist Thought (*Mao Zedong Si Xiang Xuan Chuan Dui*) in his hometown when he was young. In the mid-1970s, he began to produce and sell electrical devices. He thought that Mengzou was a poor county and wanted to develop his business here. Mengzou was very leftist-oriented during the Cultural Revolution. When he first came, nobody dared to run a private business, and he was considered an “underground seller” or “black market master.” He first settled in Zhongzhuang and secretly worked there. Thanks to Zhou Liu’s promotion, now the electronic enterprise in Zhongzhuang is good. The leaders of Zhongzhuang, however, were not friendly to him, and so he moved to Jiashu and started working there. He established an electronics enterprise in Jiashu,

which has become famous now. His work benefited both villages very much. People who grasp the technology can steal electrical devices and wires easily. There is a saying: 'Robbery and kidnapping are not as profitable as selling electrical devices.' All this happened before I knew him, and I don't know many details about his early experiences.

"How did I know Zhou Liu? I was from a poor family. Once my grandmother was ill, but we had no money to buy medication for her. I asked one of my friends whether he could lend me 20 *yuan*, but he had no money. His friend Zhou Liu passed by and was about to drink with him. Without any hesitation, Zhou Liu lent me the money. A week later I got my salary and asked someone to get the money to Zhou Liu. Later Zhou Liu said to me, 'I did not expect to get the money back. It was only a small amount.' The 20 *yuan* made us friends. That was in 1984 or 1985, and he was selling patents and his business soon began flourishing. At that time people seldom had motorcycles, but he bought one. Soon he even bought a car, and that was especially unusual at that time.

"Zhou Liu's wife has a certain kind of mental illness and seems retarded. She bore two sons and one daughter to him, who also seem 'silly.' Zhou Liu was not bad to them. When he became rich, his children also came to Mengzhou. Zhou Liu built three buildings for his children in his hometown.

"That was in the early period of the economic reform, and the central government frequently asked people to liberate their minds. As one of the first private managers, Zhou Liu became the forerunner of the economic reforms. Many high-ranking officials met him. He had very good clothes and suitable manners. Once after the magistrate had met the leaders of the prefecture, he said to me, 'Zhou Liu was with us. When the leaders saw him, they smiled and warmly shook hands with him, but said nothing to us. Zhou Liu was more important than officials like us.' That was in the middle of the 1980s, and Zhou Liu began to have mistresses, which was a new thing, too.

"In 1988, he established a factory in Shiluan and taught people the technique of making multi-colored mosaics. He earned more than 1 million *yuan* in that factory. He advertised widely and asked the tricycle drivers to carry technical students for him from the bus station. If a driver brought one student to him, he would pay the driver 300 *yuan*. He had paintings incorporated in the mosaics. The originators of the paintings were local artists, but he claimed that they were painted by famous artists.<sup>3</sup> A student who studied the technique for one week was supposed to pay 3,000 *yuan* in tuition fees to him, and he would write an invoice for 5,000 *yuan* to the student. In this way the students could not only study his technique, but would also earn money when they were reimbursed by their work-units. Hence many people came to study. The technique that he taught was not invented by him, but stolen from the newspaper. I warned him that it was illegal. He said that he had no stubs for the invoices, and his trick could not be discovered. Zhou Liu studied the laws of our country very carefully in order to manipulate those laws. When he made contracts with people, he often laid traps for them and could always win if there was a lawsuit.

“He was very smart. He could speak in many accents. When he spoke with the prostitutes, they often thought that he was from their hometowns. Zhou Liu had all kinds of IDs, including those of reporters of *The People’s Daily*, the *Law Daily*, and the *Economy Daily*. When someone came to check his identity, he would show him several IDs and tell him, ‘You can choose what kind of person I am.’

“Zhou Liu showed great pity for poor people. When he saw a beggar, he never failed to give him some money. He was not a heartless person. He supported an elementary school in Shiluan and built a bridge there. When the government was running a martial arts contest in the county in 1987, he offered a large amount of money. He told the managers of all the restaurants, ‘If any participant in the contest has dinner in your restaurant, I will pay.’ He paid for all such people, which cost him up to 30,000 *yuan*.

“In 1990 Zhou Liu went to Guilin, but I did not know that when Zhou Liu left. Once someone from Guilin said that he was a friend of Zhou Liu. I wondered how Zhou Liu could have a friend in Guilin, and the man said that Zhou Liu was living in Guilin. He told me how Zhou Liu had got there. Once Zhou Liu’s driver killed someone in an accident. Zhou Liu left the car to the relatives of the dead and fled. He also bought a ticket for his driver and asked him to go away. The relatives got the car worth 120,000 *yuan*. They could not have got so much money even if the court had asked Zhou Liu to pay. They were happy and did not seek to indict him.

“Zhou Liu stayed several years in Guilin and then went to Shanghai. In 1997, he came back to Mengzhou. Qi Xinfang [a business woman from Jiashu] knows more about that, since it was she who called him back.

“Zhou Liu came with a young woman, and I asked him, ‘Have you changed your secretary again?’ Zhou Liu always had several mistresses and pretty secretaries. One secretary was his niece [the daughter of his wife’s sister], who also became his mistress. Later the woman stole a large amount of money from Zhou Liu and ran away. This time I saw another woman and thought that she must be his new mistress, but Zhou Liu said, ‘No. This is not my secretary, but your new ‘sister-in-law.’ We got married, and we have an official marriage certificate.’ I was confused because he had not divorced his first wife. But Zhou Liu said, ‘Here is my official certificate of divorce.’ He showed me his divorce certificate. I knew that that certificate could not be legal. Perhaps the marriage certificate was also a fake? He said, ‘I have not only a young wife, but also a little son.’ Then I had a serious talk with him: ‘Brother Liu, we have been close friends for more than 10 years since you lent me the 20 *yuan*. Now let me tell you something seriously: although you had mistresses before, you did not divorce your retarded wife and people thought you were still a man of conscience. But now you are wrong. Please let her go away. She is 33 years younger than you and must be a burden for you. You should think it over.’ His sons also called on me and said that they wanted to drive away his young wife.

“I could not convince Zhou Liu, and he said, ‘Let it be, my brother. I can

handle it. Now your job is to cope with the leaders. Please invite all the major leaders in the county to a dinner.' I soon contacted the magistrate, the Party secretary, and the leaders in charge of science, technology, industry, commerce and other affairs related to his business. Everything was settled at the dinner table, and he did not have to worry about any trouble in the county. He asked me to help him with everything related to the government and said, 'I feel free in your presence.' He asked me to work in his factory, and he offered to pay me 300 *yuan* each month, but I refused. Although he was my close friend, I could not see him do those illegal things. I could help him but would not work for him.

"After returning from Shanghai, they first rented a house near the railway station and then moved to the Entertainment Palace, because they owed their former landlord rent. They put up a banner in front of their home in the Entertainment Palace: 'Ning & Liu Center of New Technology.' Ning was his young wife's name. That banner is still there.

"When communication systems were underdeveloped, Zhou Liu could sell his technologies. In the 1990s it was very easy for people to learn new technologies, and Zhou Liu's patent-stealing tricks no longer worked. After returning from Shanghai, he borrowed a lot of money, 10,000 *yuan* from Qi Xinfang, 7,000 *yuan* from me, and so on. Altogether he owed people at least 50,000 *yuan*. Nevertheless, he was still smart enough to earn 10,000 *yuan* every year, but this would soon be spent by his young wife. His health was not good. His face was getting paler and paler.

"Zhou Liu always had a car or a motorcycle. Because he was lame, he seldom walked. He wore a pair of boots even in the hottest weather. Even after he became poor, he always had a motorcycle. Sometimes he asked me to assign a car to him. I dared not let him drive my car. When necessary, I would drive him in my car. We went to Shiluan and Jiashu, where he had many acquaintances. However, seeing that he was no longer rich, they were cold to him.

"About two or three months before his death, people said that Zhou Liu divorced, and his young wife ran away with his nominal son, who had been working for him. I said, 'It is good that she finally left him. She should have left much sooner.' I comforted him, and he said that I was right, that she had finally left him. I said, 'Perhaps she will come back someday.' 'No,' he said, 'I know her character. She will never come back. She has taken away many of my antiques.' I then said that this was his fate, and he must have owed her something in a previous life. He smiled upon hearing that. I could see that he was really sad. Soon after, Zhou Liu's first wife came to Mengzou. She said, 'That bitch has destroyed our family.'

"Once when I was coming home from a marketplace, I passed the gate of the Entertainment Palace. Zhou Liu was there and said, 'You come when I am thinking about you.' He said that the guardian of the Entertainment Palace had stolen many of his antiques when he was in Shimen several days before. I told him to call the police, but he refused. I immediately knew that he must owe the man some money. Otherwise he would have sought help from the police.



Days later I met the guardian in the marketplace and asked him why he had stolen Zhou Liu's antiques. The guy said that it was Zhou Liu who asked him to do so. 'I lent him 7,000 *yuan*, and he asked me to take the stuff. Even that is not enough for the debt.'

"A week later, I met Zhou Liu again at the gate of the Entertainment Palace. I knew that he was actually waiting for me, but in order to save face, he made our meeting seem accidental. He said, 'My friend Liang, who is from the south, said that he wanted to give me money. He has a wine factory. He wants to have the TV station advertise his product. I know that your son has a friend who works in the TV station.' He said that Liang wanted to buy a building for him in Shimen and even agreed to pay the debts for him. I also know Liang. Zhou Liu wanted me to ask Liang to give him some money immediately, but he was too ashamed to ask on his own behalf. 'I want 50,000 or 60,000 *yuan* to pay my debts. When I pay those debts, I can go away.' I thought that he wanted to go to Shimen, but now I think that he meant to leave this world. I promised to talk to Liang. Zhou Liu also talked about his two children with me. His son's name was Jixiang (literally meaning "fortunate"), and his daughter's was Ruyi (literally meaning "as one wishes"). 'I want someone to adopt them,' he said.

"On the next day, however, Liang came to see me and said that Zhou Liu had attempted suicide. His driver was carrying Zhou Liu to the hospital. We called the driver, and the driver said that Zhou Liu had survived. We called his first wife and children, who soon came to Mengzou. Zhou Liu went to his hometown with them. He came back some days later, but I did not see him afterwards. When he committed suicide, I was out of town.

"Zhou Liu was a free-spirited person. He had a strong personality and did not want to lose face. Once he had become poor and his young wife had run off, he did not want to bear the shame and difficulty of life. I think this was his reason for committing suicide.

"When Zhou Liu died, people felt pity for him. His lenders no longer wanted to get back their money. 'He died when he could not pay his debts, so why would we force him to pay?'"

Although Zhou Liu flouted almost all the laws and ethical codes, he was not a man without any moral sense. He was generous to his friends, kind to beggars, supported the establishment of an elementary school, and built a bridge in Shiluan.

Yu Chengyan shows that Zhou Liu abided by some important principles and that he felt very bad when he broke them. Although he did not mind being hated or regarded as a bad man, he could not withstand the coldness of the villagers in Jiashu and Shiluan and the betrayal of his young wife. In this sense, he was also a face-lover and a highly spirited person. To put it another way, Zhou Liu had his own ideas of life and personhood, and his sense of face should be understood in terms of these ideas.

Yu Chengyan further commented on suicide: "In my opinion, most people who commit suicide are too proud and too vainglorious. As highly spirited people,

they are likely to be provoked by some sudden events and kill themselves. Zhou Liu committed suicide not because of a gamble for *qi*, but apparently because he could not endure his misery stemming from owing so many lenders who were coming to collect. He was such a famous person that he preferred death to living miserably. Spineless people do not commit suicide, even if they are penniless or hopeless. They prefer life to anything else. Zhou Liu had been very wealthy and respected in the past, but he had become very poor and very ashamed, particularly when the lenders came. As a face-lover, how could he endure the loss of personhood? Tong Rouyu from Nanmiao was similar to Zhou Liu. He was one of the first entrepreneurs in the county. In his heyday, two sisters became his mistresses, but he also became poor as Zhou Liu did. Later he attempted suicide twice and finally died by hanging himself. I knew another case of suicide when I was a policeman. A person who had returned from the army could not work well in the fields. His father blamed him, 'You are so incapable.' And people laughed at him. When he came home, he committed suicide. He wrote in his suicide note, 'I am sorry to my parents and my wife.' That person also had a strong personality and could not bear loss of face."

Although Zhou Liu was not a righteous person, what seemed to matter most to him was face, and what he feared most was the loss of personhood. Huidong remarked that Zhou Liu could stand any hardship, but this was not true regarding his loss of face.

Some details in Yu Chengyan's narrative reveal Zhou Liu's strong sense of face. Being lame was Zhou Liu's big defect. Zhou Liu tried several ways to conceal this defect. First of all, he always wore a pair of boots even in the hottest weather, so that nobody would see the defect of his foot. Then he bought a motorcycle and a car at the earliest opportunity, not only to show off but also to better conceal this problem. Even when he became poor, Zhou Liu still tried his best to keep at least a motorcycle.

Another detail is the two "unexpected" meetings with Yu Chengyan before his death. As Yu implied, the two meetings were in fact well planned. Zhou Liu wanted to seek help from him but did not want to appear to be begging. By making the meetings seem accidental, he concealed his eagerness to see Yu, and hence he did not risk losing much face.

When Zhou Liu told him about losing the antiques, he wanted Yu to help him ask for them. He wanted neither to admit that he had borrowed a lot of money from the guardian nor directly to tell Yu what he wanted, but Yu immediately realized what had happened. When Zhou Liu mentioned Liang's project, he was also hesitant to ask for money directly, but wanted Yu to help him.

As a highly spirited person, Zhou Liu not only tried to conceal his problems, but also cultivated his *qi* in his own way. His close friend Yu Chengyan knew very well that Zhou Liu would spend the money recklessly rather than pay his debts. Even when he was in a very difficult financial situation, as his landlord remarked, Zhou Liu was still generous to his friends.

Although Zhou Liu did not care about morality, he always appeared to be generous, magnanimous and proud. What he feared most was not poverty, family or legal

difficulty, or even death, but shame, humiliation and restriction. In Yu Chengyan's words, he was a "free-spirited person."

Some of Zhou Liu's tricks (or vices) are considered beyond the pale by most Chinese people, and anyone who engages in these vices risks losing "moral face" (*bu yao lian*). For Zhou Liu, however, these vices were not a source of humiliation but instead enriched his spiritedness and very likely won him moral capital. We should understand those vices as his means of cultivating spiritedness and behaving as a person.

Zhou Liu came to Mengzou as a "black market master," but such an identity never bothered him. Instead, he might even have enjoyed this special title. He became a master neither because he was knowledgeable or skillful, but because he had good connections and was audacious. Qi Xinfang thus talked about his work at that time: "Zhou Liu was not well educated and sometimes made terrible mistakes. As an audacious person, he dared to try everything. When we were making a new product, he did not know how to fill a hole in the machine. Without further consideration, he inserted a corn cob in the hole. It worked, and we put corn cobs in all our products and sold them like that. Although we sold out of all our products, they were soon returned."

It was through his scorn for the laws and ethical codes that Zhou Liu both succeeded with his enterprise and cultivated his *qi*. The trick over the multi-colored mosaics is another example. The students wanted to pay less but learn more, and Zhou Liu wanted to earn more at a low cost. By claiming that he was teaching students about his own patents and that the paintings were the works of famous artists, he raised the value of his products. The tuition fee of 3,000 *yuan* was very high in the 1980s. In order to get the students to willingly pay such a fee, he wrote a larger amount on the invoices. He knew that most of the students would be reimbursed by their work-units. By doing them such a big and unexpected (though illegal) favor, he almost succeeded in getting the students to forget the high tuition fee that their units had to pay. In such a power game, he won moral capital and made the students grateful to him and willing to pay him the high tuition fee. Similarly, since he promised to pay the tricycle drivers to deliver students to him, the drivers would be very happy serving the students, and this made his work much easier.

This was Zhou Liu's way of "behaving as a person." Because of his tricks, the tricycle drivers liked him, and the students were grateful to him. By engaging in these illegal operations, Zhou Liu could assist his friends much more than through legal means. The favors that he did for his friends were often far beyond their expectations and made them especially grateful. Although those people might neither admire nor respect such a person, they at least were grateful to him. As a practical result, those people were all willing to help him, and he could earn much more money with their support. Ironically, by acting unethically and illegally, Zhou Liu won moral capital. One does not have to follow ethical codes or laws, but very few can survive without being respected as a person. A face-lover has special difficulty in living without others' respect.

Zhou Liu did not care about common ethical codes, but he cared about his personhood very much and had his own perspective of what makes a decent person.

He played all kinds of tricks, but he was honest with his friends and generous even to strangers. By having affairs with his wife's relatives, he challenged a basic taboo in the family, but he never really abandoned his first wife. Zhou Liu knew that only when many people really respected him could he be a decent person. As a smart person, he had his particular techniques to manipulate those people. He managed to be so successful that he became a famous entrepreneur in Mengzou, and even the officials there respected him. Well dressed, good mannered, Zhou Liu made himself "somebody." He gained face through his cunning and adventurous spirit.

Face is not only the symbol of personhood, but also an essential aspect of it. Although personhood is often a psychological concept, its value is felt only in interpersonal relationships. Because personhood itself is an intersubjective notion, having face is very central to behaving as a person.

Of all the people I have seen during my fieldwork, Han Anju, a man who was kind to his wife's lover, is seen as the most spineless person. Even such a spineless person, however, could not bear it in the end and tried taking revenge by torturing his wife to death. He also committed suicide because he could not get vengeance. Yu Chengyan seems to be wrong in saying that weak people never commit suicide. As weak as he was, Han Anju committed suicide to gain face. He did care about face, dignity and personhood, but he simply had no idea how to protect them. In other words, nobody is entirely spineless, although everyone has different ideas about face and different ways of saving face.

Therefore, face is by no means the privilege of face-lovers, but a basic condition for personhood and life. A person might not observe laws or follow ethical codes, or even behave appropriately as a person, but nobody can really disregard their own face and personhood. Han Anju did not become angry until his wife died, but Zhou Liu already could not tolerate it when his young wife ran away. In Yu Chengyan's words, he was overly "vainglorious."

Zhou Liu was seen as a highly spirited person. *Qi* is the essence of personhood, and face is its symbol. Usually a face-lover is also a highly spirited person. By protecting his face, Zhou Liu also showed his vigorous *qi* or high spiritedness. If one does not care about face, like Anju, one usually does not commit suicide. Anju committed suicide because he felt ashamed and wanted to regain face. Suicide stemming from the loss of face is usually aimed at protesting a loss of face. Loss of face might lead to shame and depression, but suicide is a resistance against the injustice that causes depression. What distinguishes face-lovers is their higher standard for personhood. Everyone might lose face, but only spirited people commit suicide to rail against their loss of face. Therefore, even if the loss of face leads to both depression and suicide, the meaning of the suicide is different from that of those who take their lives due to depression.

## 8.2 Loss of personhood

With these concepts of face and personhood in mind, we can understand Zhou Liu's suicide as stemming from family politics. In order to learn more about Zhou Liu, I interviewed Qi Xinfang, the woman who had called him back from Shanghai.

Qi Xinfang, perhaps the richest woman in Mengzou, said, "Zhou Liu died because of several reasons. First, he was sad when people became cold towards him; second, his young wife, whom he believed would never leave him, ran away with another man; third, he wanted to pay off his debts but was unable to do so.

"Men always become bad after becoming rich. If he had taken care of his first wife and given her some money, he would not have been like that. When his young wife bore him a daughter, he called his first wife to Shanghai to take care of the child. The old woman became very angry and said, 'Is this the reason that you called me here? Let me tell you: you like this child, but I don't. I will not serve her.' And then she left Shanghai.

"Zhou Liu's first wife is not as silly as people imagine. She only has a kind of headache, which sometimes gives her pain and makes her act confused. Otherwise she is fine. White and plump, she is not ugly at all. She married Zhou Liu when she was only 17, she is also much younger than Zhou Liu.

"Zhou Liu stayed in Zhongzhuang at first. When he was in Jiashu, he made electrical devices. I worked together with him. When he left Jiashu, Zhou Liu helped me to make connections and I soon established my own factory.

"After Zhou Liu went to Shiluan, his first wife also lived there with him in a small house. Zhou Liu gave no money to his wife, believing that she was foolish. If he had given any money to her, she would have saved some for him. Then he would not have been so poor. When Zhou Liu was in the south, his first wife sold the small house and returned to their hometown. She ran a small shop and earned enough for her daughter's dowry. Her daughter married last year. Zhou Liu's young wife was unwilling to give her money, but finally Zhou Liu gave her some. Zhou Liu's first wife has two sisters, and their parents were dead. When Zhou Liu got rich, he had affairs with her elder sister and the daughter of her younger sister. Zhou Liu had no face to see his first wife.

"Later Zhou Liu went to the south and took with him a young woman from his hometown. This girl became his young wife. He stayed in the south for several years. In 1997, he called me several times and asked me to cooperate with him over a business matter. Finally I went to Shanghai. He was living with his young wife and a daughter, and an old woman was their babysitter. Zhou Liu said that he was making a new type of toilet. He wanted to produce such toilets in Mengzou. I suspected that it would fail. He insisted on returning to Mengzou with me. I wanted to come back the next day, and he said that he would also return that day. Finally we came back together, with his little daughter in arms.

"When they first returned to Mengzou, I let them live in my house. He borrowed 10,000 *yuan* from me, but he did not succeed with the new scheme. He could not pay back the money and moved to another house near the railway station. Unable to pay the rent, they finally moved to the Entertainment Palace where they rented a small room.

"I once said to Zhou Liu that he should not have had the baby with his young wife, who was even younger than his grandson: 'Your wife is younger than

your daughter-in-law.' He said that his young wife was a good woman, and she married him not for the sake of his money. 'She will stay with me no matter whether I am rich or poor.' I did not believe that. At that time they were poor, and the woman spent a good deal on babysitters. How could she stay with him when he became poorer? When she married him, Zhou Liu lied to her about having houses in Shiluan. After returning to Mengzou, he said that his first wife had sold them at a low price. I knew that that was true only of one small house. Later their second child was born, a boy. I thought that they should not have had the first child, let alone the second. His wife said, 'If I don't want to keep the child, I can still sell him to earn money.'

"Zhou Liu tried several new schemes but always failed. He often told me, 'I will soon get rich again. I will be able to pay the debt this year.' He said so every year, yet every year he failed to return any money. He still said that he would pay back his debt, right before his death.

"Later his young wife ran away with his nominal son. That man was an escaped criminal from the northeast. I dared not hire such people, but Zhou Liu always accepted them. He believed that they would be more obedient to him, but finally that guy eloped with his wife. Later his young wife came back, but again she eloped with another man, who was old and ugly. I don't know who he is, but I heard that he is an ugly old man."

Zhou Liu was a member of two families at the same time. On the one hand, he never totally broke up with his first wife; on the other hand, his conflict with his young wife was very likely the direct reason for his suicide. Sometimes he was engaged in power games with both his wives at the same time. For instance, when he called his first wife to Shanghai, he pleased his young wife but shamed his first wife. In order to protect her dignity, his first wife scolded them and left Shanghai. Because Zhou Liu seldom cared about his first wife and her children, his first wife became the real manager of that family. She worked hard and succeeded in paying the dowry for her daughter. Zhou Liu's first wife had more moral capital than he had. When her daughter asked for money from Zhou Liu, he again became engaged in a power game in both families. He was obliged to give her some money, otherwise he would lose yet more face, but his young wife was unwilling to agree, because she also had some say about life in their family. As a spirited person, Zhou Liu managed to win the game with his young wife, but his first wife and her daughter also won their power game with Zhou Liu.

When a player of power games gains moral capital, he or she has more face and gets an upper hand in subsequent power games. To behave as a person is to be more respectable in power games, and moral capital has a great impact on the results of such games. A person of a higher status, i.e., one who has more face, is likely to be in an advantageous position in power games. One who gains more moral capital by acting reasonably or winning in previous power games also gains more face. This provides the distinction between moral face (*lian*) and social face (*mian*). One gets moral face when acting better in a power game, but social face is gained by occupying a higher position. Both can be used as moral capital in power games.

Because Zhou Liu did not treat his first wife well, he lost moral capital to her and her children. Since his first wife did much for their children, she had more moral capital when playing power games with Zhou Liu. In Qi Xinfang's words, Zhou Liu "had no face to see his first wife." Although the elopement of his young wife was very likely the direct reason for his suicide, his loss of face with his first wife also contributed to his decision to commit suicide. We can understand his suicide better by looking at the power games in both relationships.

Qi Xinfang thought that Zhou Liu's young wife would leave him sooner or later. Her evidence was that the young wife spent a good deal of money on hiring babysitters even though they were poor. This fact did not show any infidelity on the part of the young wife to Zhou Liu, but it did indicate that she was not serious about living with him. Qi never implied that the young wife was disloyal to him, but she predicted that there would be many domestic conflicts when Zhou Liu became poorer.

Zhou Liu's landlord, the man who witnessed Zhou Liu's last days, told me more about his quarrels with his young wife.

"I don't know whether that was his first young wife. I know almost nothing about his past. That woman was from the northeast and is 28 years old now. At first, their relationship was not bad. Zhou Liu was kind to his young wife, and she bore a daughter and a son to him. The daughter is five years old, and the son is three now. Zhou Liu had a nominal son who worked for him. Early this summer, his young wife went away with his nominal son. Zhou Liu attempted suicide the first time when this happened. That was at midnight, and I was sleeping. Someone suddenly woke me up and said that Zhou Liu had taken sleeping pills. I rushed to his room and found that he had already fallen unconscious. He had taken 200 pills. I called several people and carried him to a small clinic nearby. I would be held responsible if someone died in one of my houses. I tried my best to save him. When we got to the clinic, the doctors said that they could not cope with the case, and we had to go to a bigger hospital. We went to the county hospital, and finally he survived. This time I spent about 200 *yuan*. When Zhou Liu recovered, I begged him, 'Brother Liu, please never do that again. You will bring me trouble if you die in my house.' Zhou Liu laughed and said, 'I will never do that again. Whatever happens, I will not kill myself.' Who could predict he would die only one month later? Zhou Liu cheated me.

"I was the first to find him dead. I don't know what he took this time, but I am sure it was not sleeping pills. I guess that was a pesticide, one of his new products. Soon after his young wife went away with his nominal son, Zhou Liu's first wife came, and they went to Qizhou. We thought that they would not return. I guessed they went to Qizhou in order to get out of paying me the rent. I knew that they were poor and did not insist on it. Zhou Liu also promised his first wife that he would never see his young wife again. About one month later, however, his young wife came back. She asked me to find Zhou Liu. I phoned his family in Qizhou and let his young wife speak to him.

The woman spoke with him for a long time on my cell phone. I do not know exactly what they talked about, but I overheard that his young wife had only 5 *yuan* with her, and she had sold her gold earrings. She asked him to come back immediately. Later I heard that Zhou Liu discussed with his first wife whether he should come back. At last they agreed that he could stay here for no more than five days. He still loved his young wife and could not see her helpless. Nobody knew that he would never return to his first wife.

“Zhou Liu soon came back. I don’t know what he and his young wife talked about. It seemed that they quarreled several times, and then they went away together. About one week later, Zhou Liu came back alone at 3 pm. He said nothing to me, and I did not know what had happened. I had a cold then and did not have the energy to ask him. I went to bed early that night. When I got up the next morning, I was surprised that the door of the dancing hall was open. I went to the dancing hall and found Zhou Liu lying on the ground. He had been dead for a long time. Something white and long was coming out of his mouth. At first I thought that it was plastic and wondered why he had eaten plastic. When I stepped closer, I realized that it was his dribble. I immediately called his son, and several of his relatives came.<sup>4</sup> Seeing Zhou Liu’s corpse, they knew that he had committed suicide and started crying, without holding me responsible for it. People found two pieces of jade, a cell phone, and 70 *yuan* in Zhou Liu’s room. The jade pieces seemed valuable, but nobody bothered to pay off his debts, and I did not ask them to. I had been a friend of Zhou Liu for a long time and also felt sad about his death.

“They carried his body back. I overheard that before Zhou Liu’s death he and his young wife had quarreled about their children, who were at their nominal father’s place. Many people said that Zhou Liu had sold both his children for 10,000 *yuan*. I don’t know whether that was true, but I think that one reason for his suicide might be the two children. I did not ask about these things. Who knows what happened?”

I interviewed a teacher in the kindergarten, who had been taking care of Zhou Liu’s two small children. When I asked her about Zhou Liu, she did not know that he was dead. As for the affairs in his family, she offered some details that the landlord did not know:

“Zhou Ruyi, Zhou Liu’s daughter, is five years old now. We celebrated her birthday (Jan. 10) twice in my house. His son stayed in my house for only a few months. At first, Ruyi was in my class. She was smart and pretty, and I was fond of her. Zhou Liu saw that I liked her and asked whether I wanted to take care of Ruyi. He and his wife were busy and could not spend much time with her. They paid me 400 *yuan* each month. They were busy, and I don’t know what they were doing. In the first year, they paid me every month. This year their economic situation seemed bad, and sometimes they could not pay me on time.

“At first, I did not know that Zhou Liu had another wife. Once in front of



Zhou Liu, Ruyi said that she had a mom (*ma*) and a mother (*niang*). ‘Mom’ is Zhou Liu’s young wife, and ‘Mother’ is his first wife. ‘Mother is even kinder than Mom,’ said Ruyi. Later I asked her whether that was true, and Ruyi said that it was his father who had taught her to say so, and Mom was much better than Mother. I met the first wife only once. Early this summer, when I passed the Entertainment Palace, I saw an old woman in front of Zhou Liu’s house, sitting in an armchair. I introduced myself to her, and she only nodded to me. I was unhappy because she was impolite. I did not know who she was. Later I learned that she was Zhou Liu’s first wife. I did not know that the young woman was not his legal wife.

“At first, their relationship was good. From the beginning of this year, however, they quarreled and fought frequently. His young wife went away several times, which made Zhou Liu very nervous. Once I got a phone call from Zhou Liu, saying that he was in Henan. He was nervous and said that Ruyi’s Mom had run away. ‘Don’t let her take Ruyi away if she comes,’ he told me. I was confused and did not know what had happened. How could Ruyi’s mother run away? He repeated that I should not let Ruyi go with her. I said, ‘That’s OK. I will let Ruyi stay in my house. Because of what you have told me, she will not leave unless both of you come.’ Zhou Liu was relieved. This was the first time that his young wife had run away. She came back about one month later. Afterwards they quarreled more frequently, and the woman ran away again a couple of times. Zhou Liu also several times asked me not to let Ruyi go with her. Once Ruyi was in their house, and Zhou Liu suddenly called me. He said that Ruyi’s Mom had run away again and asked me to take Ruyi to my house. I went to the Entertainment Palace. When I led Ruyi out, however, I saw her Mom in the yard. She did not run away, but they quarreled again.

“The woman ran away again in May. She came back on a Friday. Zhou Liu said that his young wife was back and wanted to see her daughter. Ruyi went home, but all three came to my house again the next Monday. Ruyi’s Mom was dressed up and looked very pretty. They left Ruyi in my house, and the woman went alone. Zhou Liu said that they had divorced. I could not believe that. She had come back on a Friday, and how could they have time to get a divorce between that Friday and the next Monday? Did the court open? ‘Are you really a legal couple?’ Zhou Liu said nothing. Zhou Liu told me that his young wife was planning to go away with his nominal son, who was eight years younger than she. ‘How could they be together, given that she was eight years older?’ I asked. Zhou Liu said that they had vowed to be together forever, but he remarked, ‘I am sure that she will come back sooner or later. He will not be together with her for long.’ Zhou Liu was right. Several weeks later, I heard that the two were caught in an inn and charged with adultery. Zhou Liu was still kind to his young wife and helped her get released.

“One week after the woman ran away, Zhou Liu called me and said that someone wanted to buy his children for 30,000 *yuan*. I said, ‘How can you sell your own children?’ The next day he came to ask me whether I wanted

to have Ruyi. I asked why. Zhou Liu said, 'Yesterday I fell on the ground. It was serious, and I almost died. I know that my health is not good, and I will not live too much longer. Sooner or later Ruyi will not be able to stay with me. I have to sell her or give her to somebody. I can see that you like her very much. If you want, she can be your own child.' I tried to dissuade him. Why was he thinking about death when he was only 60? Ruyi was weeping, and I felt very sad. Days later, Zhou Liu came again. He said that Ruyi's nominal father wanted to see her. Ruyi went away with him and never came back. This was the last time that I saw Ruyi and Zhou Liu. I don't know whether he finally sold the children or not.

"Around June 15, my husband saw them again in the street. Zhou Liu and his two children were eating barbecue mutton and asked my husband to join them. My husband felt sad upon seeing such an old man sitting there with two little kids. At last my husband paid for the barbecue; it was about 20 *yuan*. At least Zhou Liu had not sold his children at that time."

These three narratives provide different yet complementary perspectives about Zhou Liu's life with his young wife and his suicide. Unlike his other affairs with women, Zhou Liu was very serious about his relationship with his young wife. According to Yu Chengyan, he even managed to get a fake divorce certificate and a fake marriage certificate. Although these documents did not really legitimize the marriage, they at least made it appear to be more formal.

Since he and his young wife had a relatively formal family, Zhou Liu appeared to be serious about living with her. But Qi Xinfang's prediction proved true: his young wife ended the relationship when Zhou Liu became poor.

Although these informants provided different versions about her elopement, it is apparent that she ran off more than once and that she had more than one lover. Perhaps she first ran off in secret, but according to Ruyi's teacher, elopement became a routine in their family politics. When they quarreled, she even threatened Zhou Liu that she would leave him. Before she ran away in May, she went with Zhou Liu to the house of Ruyi's teacher. Instead of understanding her episodes of running off with her lover as being due merely to her wantonness, we should put them in the context of family politics.

According to Qi Xinfang, Zhou Liu promised his young wife that he had money and big houses in Mengzou, but he could neither fulfill his promise nor make her rich when they were in Mengzou. This reminds me of Hefang, who beat her husband because he failed to make much money (3.1). Similarly, Zhou Liu's young wife also freely cursed him when he failed to provide her with a more comfortable life. Such a power game was also about face. One who fails to keep promises usually loses face, especially in sexual liaisons. Zhou Liu was ashamed when his young wife blamed him for not fulfilling his promise. Zhou Liu's failed promises gave her moral capital, which she could use when angry. Believing that Zhou Liu would become rich again, she hired babysitters and spent a lot of money. When she realized that it was impossible for him to become rich again, she took full advantage of her moral capital. When she showed her disappointment and prepared for her

elopement, Zhou Liu could not stop her. His failure to provide her with a better life justified her elopement.

Nevertheless, Zhou Liu could not accept such a fate. Although he had failed to keep his promise, he loved his young wife and had been supporting her for several years. On the one hand, since he did not keep his promise to provide her with a comfortable life, he could not prevent her from leaving; on the other hand, he felt wronged when she treated him so disrespectfully. In such a moral dilemma, he resisted his harsh fate by attempting suicide.

When he survived his first suicide attempt and was going to return to Qizhou, he entered a power game with his first wife. Ruyi's teacher complained that his first wife was impolite to her. By comparing the narratives of the landlord and the teacher, we see that that was after Zhou Liu's first suicide attempt. At that time, the young wife had run off, and his first wife was called to Mengzou. This trip was his first wife's triumph in family politics. Having shamed her in Shanghai and all but abandoned her afterwards, Zhou Liu threw his first wife into a miserable situation for a long time. Working hard to save money and support her children, she had accumulated much moral capital and face. When his young wife finally eloped and Zhou Liu's new family in Mengzou was ruined, Zhou Liu's future life depended on his first wife's mercy. She did not forsake him as he did her, but showed benevolence and even came to take care of him. By doing that, she showed her moral capital. Zhou Liu lost his dignity fully to his first wife. She could curse his young wife and anything related to her. The teacher had some connection with Zhou Liu only because of Ruyi, his daughter by his young wife. Of course the first wife could not be friendly to her.

By going back to Qizhou with his first wife, Zhou Liu surrendered to her and had to break up with his young wife. He even promised that he would never see her again. His first wife's triumph should have marked the end of his bigamy.

If his young wife had not returned to Mengzou one month later, Zhou Liu might not have committed suicide. We do not know what Zhou Liu and his young wife discussed in his last days, but it seemed that she was asking him to sell their two children. According to most people, Ruyi and Jixiang were finally sold. In order to help his young wife out of her dilemma, Zhou Liu had to break his promise to his first wife and see her again. He lost face once more when begging his first wife to let him return to Mengzou. His first wife finally agreed, but she did not allow him to stay with her for more than five days.

The week in Mengzou must have been a terrible experience for Zhou Liu. First, he had to sell his children.<sup>5</sup> Second, although his young wife returned to him when she needed his help, she did not really want to reunite with him. Zhou Liu still loved her and even helped her at the price of enraging his first wife. Despite all that he had done for her, his young wife was not grateful and went away again. Third, he had already stayed in Mengzou for one week. If he returned to Qizhou, Zhou Liu would have had to humbly explain to his first wife why he had not returned within five days, and he would yet again have lost face and had to bear his first wife's curses and anger.

It was in this context that Zhou Liu eventually took his life. On the one hand, like

his earlier suicide attempt, it reflected his resistance to the depressing situation he found himself in and the loss of face; on the other hand, his suicide also represented his resistance to his first wife. Instead of humbly begging her for forgiveness, he would rather protect his dignity by committing suicide.

## Discussion

To sum up, face, as the symbol of personhood, is a crucial aspect in behaving as a person and is closely related to moral capital. Loss of face brings a sense of shame (loss of social face) or guilt (loss of moral face). Giddens discusses these two psychological states in "A Typology of Suicide," arguing that shame often leads to anomic suicide, and guilt often leads to egoistic suicide, because shame is about the loss of social position, and guilt is about breaking one's moral integrity (Giddens 1971c). Zhou Liu felt ashamed when he became poor, and guilty about his treatment of his first wife. As we have seen in Yu Chengyan's comment, however, what distinguishes these people is not shame or guilt, but their spiritedness to regain face by resisting shame or guilt. Loss of face might result in depressive symptoms, yet suicide is not understood as such a result, but as resistance against it. Many people can feel ashamed or guilty, but not everyone attempts suicide because of these feelings. They commit or attempt suicide because they are "face-lovers." Therefore, they are significantly different from the suicidal people described by Giddens.

Similar to gambling for *qi*, regaining face is also a way to attain human dignity and justice. A face-lover is often inclined to gamble for *qi*. *Qi* is more about human dignity in the psychological sense, but face is more about one's social standing. One who commits suicide due to loss of face might contemplate the action for a long time. From the descriptions of Yu Chengyan and Ruyi's teacher, we learn that Zhou Liu had indeed thought about death for a long time.

Face is important not only because it is a symbol of personhood, but also because it is the essence of human dignity. Human dignity is identified in interpersonal relationships, and the winning of power games depends on moral capital. Moral face and social face are important because they constitute moral capital.

Because nobody can live in isolation, and nobody is immune from power games, face is an issue for everyone. To the extent that a person interacts with others, face is important to that person. Everyone shapes his or her face during their life. Beggars, mentally ill people, prostitutes, bachelors and others who do not live a family life are seen to lack human dignity, but they still interact with other people and psychologically care about face.

Face is usually related to moral rules, but when Zhou Liu broke some moral rules, he was still able to win moral capital and face. Social rules are made by human beings and hence are changeable. In a family setting, however, Zhou Liu could not go unpunished. In Chinese culture, family is the existential situation and determines the happiness and human dignity of everyone. When one breaks the basic principles in family life, one is unlikely to lead a good life.

## 9 Thinking through

Hopelessness, desperation or despair is often seen as the main mental state that leads to suicide (Institute of Medicine 2002). Some scholars even find this feeling more important than depression as a predictor of suicide (Beck *et al.* 1996: 338). Some suicidological studies in China also cite “hopelessness” as a cause (Yan *et al.* 2003; Xu Xiuru 2003; Jiang and Xu 2003). Both gambling for *qi* and loss of face, though understood as positive ways to protect dignity, involve hopelessness. The idea of “hopelessness” is best seen in another local term: “being unable to think through.” An episode in my fieldwork led me to consider this concept.

In the summer of 2001, aware that I was studying suicide, Bingde, an old man from Wudu, commented, “How can anyone take his own life? Suicide cannot help you solve any problem, but once you die, everything is finished. Whatever happens, I will never do that. If I commit suicide, I will never see this world again, and my children will get a reputation of impiety. It is really a bad thing. One should think it through, and everything can be solved.” As a very optimistic person, he did not save too much money and often cooked delicious food for himself. Bingde had four sons. One of them was a scientist in Beijing, and two were officials in Tianjin. His youngest son was a teacher in the middle school of Gouyi. Having such a good family, of course, he enjoyed his life very much.

When I returned to Wudu one year later, however, I was shocked to learn that Bingde had hanged himself. He had been ill and had to get more professional care at hospitals in Beijing. When he stayed in his son’s house, he behaved like a peasant and collected fallen tree branches. His son laughed at him and said, “Dad, don’t behave that way and lose personhood (*diuren*).” Bingde’s disease was not serious, but he felt uneasy about staying at his son’s place. Hearing his son’s words, he thought a lot about them and then hanged himself. His son was very regretful. Other people commented, “He could think through things so well, so why did he commit suicide over such a trivial thing?”

Although Bingde seemed not to lack a sense of perspective, he could not help being sad when his son joked with him. “Thinking through” means clearly thinking about a problem and enjoying life even if there is no hope of solving the problem.

According to the concepts of *qi* and face, suicide is seen as a positive though irrational way to gain human dignity. But no suicide is judged entirely positively. People's negative assessment is often seen in the idiom "being unable to think through." One who cannot think though can be a good, normal and spirited person, but not sufficiently prudent or responsible. One who thinks through might not be happy, but is often more prudent, hopeful and respected. In contrast to gambling for *qi* and regaining face, thinking through is a rational way to gain human dignity.

### 9.1 Having tunnel vision<sup>1</sup>

Thinking through is often understood as a cognitive process. An educated person is supposed to be more flexible and able to think through problems. People sometimes comment, "These peasants are not educated and cannot consider all aspects of a problem carefully. When they get an idea, they never think that there might be other possibilities and so they commit suicide." Although thinking through requires some intellectual ability, one cannot get through a problem only by thinking. The contrast between Shilan and her husband Weizhen shows that "thinking through" is meaningless without "living through."

Shilan is an illiterate woman from Yunnan who attempted suicide in the summer of 2002. Her husband attributed her suicide attempt to her poor education and boasted that he could think through problems much better. When I interviewed Shilan, however, I learned that Weizhen had also attempted suicide himself.

When I first tried to interview Shilan, she was not at home, and I had a talk with Weizhen. When we finished, I asked Weizhen whether I could interview his wife, and he agreed. About half an hour later, Shilan came alone, and we had a long talk until her daughter called her back for lunch. Shilan told me that Weizhen had also attempted suicide eight years before, which he had not mentioned himself. I will examine Weizhen's narrative in this section and Shilan's in the next.

"As I understand, people commit suicide usually when they stick too much to an idea. They always 'have tunnel vision (*zuan niu jiao jian*)' and cannot think about their problems from another perspective. My wife, who is from Yunnan, is this kind of person. As an illiterate woman, she always confines herself in an idea and cannot think through. That was the reason for her attempted suicide. That day when I was irrigating the wheat field, my wife brought my lunch to me. It was a hot summer day. Having worked for the morning, I wanted to take a nap after lunch. But my wife urged me to work: 'Go on and irrigate, irrigate.' I was not happy and responded, 'Why can't you irrigate? Don't you have the energy to irrigate? Damn it (*ta ma de*).' I said "Damn it" and seemed a little rude, but it was not a big deal between a husband and a wife. How could she be angry only because of my 'Damn it'? Yet she was really provoked and screamed at me. I became even more enraged: 'I can do it myself. Go away!' So she returned home. When I returned home at dusk,

everyone else had finished dinner. Shilan had prepared supper for me, and I sat down at the table. Thinking that she was no longer angry, I said, 'You are really a silly woman and have no mind at all.' I meant that I only asked her to irrigate and was not blaming her, yet why had she been so angry? Although my tone was a little rude, my meaning was not bad. Was I wrong if I asked her to irrigate? Why had she been so provoked? My wife misunderstood not only my previous words, but also these words. She started weeping: 'Well, I have no mind. If you don't want me to live any longer, I will satisfy you and take my life.' I felt something strange in her tone and looked up. She threw an empty bottle of pesticide onto the table. I jumped up and called for people to carry her to the hospital of Yingzhou, and she survived.

"My wife is not an outgoing person and does not like to speak to other villagers. Her relationship with my mother is not good, either. My mother is too talkative and often says improper things, which makes my wife unhappy. She is elderly and does not know what is appropriate and what is not. Some of her words are provocative and often fired up my wife. In these cases I tried to persuade my wife: 'Don't think the same way as she does. She is elderly, after all.' Even if my mother is unreasonable, she is still my mother and has brought me up. We cannot be too harsh with her and should tolerate her words. Sometimes I talk with my mother and ask her not to argue any more: 'My wife, after all, is from a place far away, which makes her life more difficult than ours. We should try to tolerate her. Why do we always fight and quarrel over those trivial things? Isn't it better to help everyone to be happy?' My efforts, however, are useless, and my wife is still like that. She cannot understand what I say. Sometimes she agrees with me, but when enraged, she cannot control herself and never thinks carefully. She often says, 'Why is my opinion always wrong. Why are you always right?' She is very stubborn. Perhaps this is because she is not educated. She does not know a single character.

"Shilan has too many pressures, including those of her own, those in our family, and those from the government. Our family is poor, and we have to work hard. She is far away from her natal family, and here she is not familiar with a single person. It is not easy for a woman to marry and live so far away from her home, and she misses her relatives very much.

"We are also under pressure from the government. We were fined because of our marriage and the child. Shilan and I have only one child, who is 11 years old now."

"Everything annoys my wife, and she cannot find a way out. Her illiteracy also intensifies her annoyance. Although I am not well educated either, at least I attended elementary school. Some of my opinions are good for the family, but she cannot understand. What is my aim? Isn't my wish simply to improve the life of my family? I try to persuade her to understand me instead of intensifying the conflicts. She does not understand my concern, nor does she cooperate with me. She often quarrels with me and never takes time to think things over. Hence I said that her mind was too simple.

"As for her conflict with my mother, that is too complex to explain.

They always quarrel and fight over trivial matters. For example, last winter my cousin wanted to give us some maize cobs and came to my house. She asked my wife to take the cobs. When my wife was ready to go, my mother said, 'Aren't you ashamed to take the cobs? I won't allow you to take them! Couldn't you plant some yourself?' This made both my wife and my cousin angry. They often quarreled over things like that. If my wife ignored these words, everything would be fine, and they would not always quarrel.

"In fact, I have more pressures than her, but I do not want to let them burst out. I just keep them inside. Now men and women have exchanged their statuses. Women had a lot of pressures before, but now men have more, and they must learn how to live with them. I also see that if we always quarrel and fight, it is not good for the child. I must learn how to tolerate my wife and reduce family conflicts. If my child suffers too much from this, we will never forgive ourselves. Once I wondered whether it would be better to divorce. I tried to ask my daughter, 'Would it be good for you to stay with your grandmother on your mother's side?' My daughter refused resolutely. Although she is only 11 years old, she understands everything. She knows what is going on in the family and even knows who is right and who is wrong. Sometimes she also blames her mother, though indirectly. Once we quarreled a little when preparing for dinner, and my daughter said to me, 'Don't you want to eat anything, Dad?' Although she seemed to be blaming me, actually she was criticizing my wife. She meant that if I quarreled more, her mother would not cook for us. She can think for everyone and knows how to blame her mother without hurting her. Aren't we living for our children? For the sake of her, we should not quarrel much."

Weizhen attributed his wife's attempted suicide to being unable to think through. According to his reasoning, Shilan could not think through because she was not well educated.

When the couple was quarreling about irrigation, Weizhen cursed her. Unable to see it as a common quarrel between a couple, Shilan felt provoked. When Weizhen returned home at dusk, he wanted to teach Shilan a lesson about thinking through. He again used rough words, which not only reminded her of the previous quarrel, but also provoked her to attempt suicide. Weizhen further explained his meaning: "What is my aim? Isn't my wish simply to improve the life of my family?" When uttering those words, he did not mean to insult his wife. He said "damn it" not because he looked down upon Shilan, but because he was impatient at that time. He said that Shilan was silly because she was supposed to understand that he did not really mean to insult her. According to him, Shilan could not think through because she focused on the literal meaning of his words, but did not try to understand his real concern.

Weizhen described a power game from his own perspective. It seems to me, however, that both were gambling for *qi*. In the quarrel about irrigation, Shilan also spoke rudely when she urged Weizhen to continue work. Since his wife could not see that he was overly tired, he became angry and asked her to do his work.



Neither was more reasonable than the other, and the quarrel was simply a gamble for *qi*. This power game continued in the evening. By teaching Shilan a lesson, Weizhen was emphasizing that he was morally right. Even if Shilan understood his meaning, passively receiving his blame meant yielding. Shilan also thought that she was right, so why should she be blamed? By drinking pesticide, she showed that she was not in a morally disadvantageous position. This is a typical case of gambling for *qi*.

When Weizhen viewed Shilan's attempted suicide as being unable to think through her dilemma, he offered a new perspective through which to understand the power game in family politics. He was not implying that Shilan should not protect her dignity or struggle for her *qi*, but rather that there was something more important for the family.

Although Weizhen was hesitant to criticize his mother in front of me, according to other villagers and Shilan herself, I knew that the conflict between his wife and his mother was the main reason for the trouble in the family. As we will see in Shilan's narrative, she believes that her mother-in-law was responsible for her attempted suicide.

Since his wife and his mother were often in conflict, Weizhen attempted to persuade both women to think through their conflicts. He found excuses for their mistakes and rudeness. His mother was excused because she was old and had contributed much to the family. His wife could also be excused because it was difficult enough for her to live away from her family in a faraway place. For the sake of the whole family, they were supposed to forget their conflicts and live harmoniously. If unable to think through their problems, they would spoil the ship for "a half-penny-worth of tar." In mediating between the two women, Weizhen was much better than some other husbands I have met.

Instead of asking either party to sacrifice her dignity for the sake of the family, Weizhen soothed both by promising moral capital. If his wife could yield a little, she would distinguish herself from her mother-in-law, because she did not "think the same way" as her mother-in-law did. If his mother could hold her tongue and be less critical of his wife, she should also be praised for being tolerant of Shilan. Such a strategy, though balanced and prudent, could not really overcome the women's hostility to each other, but tended rather to intensify it by temporarily suspending the conflict. Both women would think: "Alright. I will not argue any more with you, because I am not as unreasonable as you are." In such a case, to think through a problem is to ignore the groundless blames and avoid unreasonable sufferings. Because both received moral capital by suspending the conflict, when they quarreled the next time, each would feel more justified to defend herself. It seems that this was exactly what happened after Weizhen had persuaded them to think through their conflicts. They could not change their styles – not because Weizhen was unable to convince them, but because each now had more moral capital with which to argue.

From Weizhen's perspective, when there is no way to really solve a problem, one should think it through by ignoring it and soothing oneself. Because we constantly face thorny, controversial and even unsolvable problems in our lives, ignoring them

is an alternative way to maintain happiness. A power game in the family, however, is never an isolated game. The previous games always influence subsequent ones. If a problem is not solved, it will return later. The more frequently one conceals or ignores it, the more intense it will become. When it finally leads to another quarrel, the moral capital one has accumulated will be brought out, and the conflict will be even more vehement. One cannot be hopeful by ignoring a hopeless situation. This is a paradox in Weizhen's way of "thinking through by ignoring."

Regarding the quarrel about the maize cobs, Weizhen remarked that everything would have been fine if Shilan had ignored her mother-in-law's nasty words. It makes sense that Shilan could have benefited if she had ignored such trivial things, but it was almost impossible for her to ignore them over the long term. Especially at that very moment, the old woman's words not only annoyed Shilan but also hurt Weizhen's cousin. Shilan was responsible for defending his cousin, and she could not stand by and simply accept those words.

Weizhen talked about three big problems in his family: poverty, the trouble with the government, and the conflict between his wife and his mother. Although he claimed that these were Shilan's pressures, he implied that he suffered more from them. As I will show in the next section, Weizhen's attempted suicide was also related to these issues. As a face-lover, he never revealed his own suicidal attempt to any of the villagers, and of course not to me either; but those three problems should also be understood as his reasons for attempting suicide.

Weizhen not only asked his wife to think through her problems by using his method of ignoring them, but also tried to do the same himself: "In fact, I have more pressures than her, but I do not want to have them burst out. I just keep them inside." Weizhen tried his best to ignore and forget those problems, or at least to conceal them from others. And this was exactly what he wanted his wife to do when he asked her to think through them. This way of thinking through, however, did not liberate him from those dilemmas but made him more depressed. While suffering deeply, he neither argued with his mother nor exposed the issues to the villagers as Shilan did to gain sympathy and support. He also had his own moral capital, but aware that his suffering was groundless and unjust, he seldom used his moral capital to resist or struggle. When finally he could not bear things any more, he attempted suicide.

Domestic injustice is often interwoven with moral duty, emotional attachment and familial interdependence. Like Zilan's husband (4.3) and Chen Yuse (5.2), Weizhen had to consider his roles both as a son and as a husband. In order to harmonize the whole family, he had no choice but to ignore the ongoing conflicts between his mother and his wife and to prevent his anger from bursting out. Weizhen did not really ignore those problems, but just concealed them. In fact, he was not immune from them and could not easily ignore them.

When he realized that there was no way out of the dilemma, Weizhen tried to ignore his troubles and asked his wife and his mother to do the same. Not only did the two women fail to do that, even he himself could not really ignore them either. To think through one's trouble, as a prudent attitude of living a family life, is not to hide the trouble, ignore one's dignity, or pretend to be happy as Weizhen

tried to do. In order to live better, one should seriously consider domestic trouble and conflicts.

Weizhen's hope to attain a better fortune was sparked only by his daughter. Because she brought happiness to the family, he decided not to quarrel so frequently and not to divorce, but to endure it and work harder. He believed that real happiness and harmony in the family are more important than false indifference. Essentially, it was also this daughter who encouraged Shilan to overcome her difficulties.

## 9.2 Heart and lungs

Shilan's narrative is as follows:

"I came to this village 13 years ago. Because my natal family was poor, I wanted to leave Yunnan and marry in the north. I married in Jiuhe and gave birth to a boy before I realized that my husband had a terrible disease. He was a local cadre and had spent 3,000 *yuan* for our marriage. When I learned about his disease and knew that I had been cheated, I divorced him. Then I came to this village and met the cousin of my current husband. He asked me whether I wanted to marry here. The elder brother of my current husband came to talk to me, and I agreed. Weizhen's sister-in-law said that I could request anything I wanted. I only wanted the house to be furnished. They furnished it with some old furniture. On the day of our wedding, my husband's sister-in-law lent me some new clothes and asked for them back three days later. I was cheated again, but this time it was better. At least the man was healthy, and I decided to settle in this village. When I felt that their family was not very friendly to me, I said, 'If you do not treat me well, I will kill myself in the street.' Seeing I was holding a knife, they knew that I was serious and yielded to me.

"I wrote a letter to my father. He would have felt relieved after learning that I had settled, but how could he know I was still suffering in this family?

"Although my mother-in-law often annoys me, I try my best to earn money and feed her. These days I am working in a brick factory, earning 10 *yuan* a day. I also cultivate some cotton and wheat.

"My husband is a nasty man, and we often quarrel. On the day that I attempted suicide, he blamed me for not irrigating the fields, and I was sad. What am I living for? They rewarded my efforts with blame, and I thought death would be better. Why am I annoyed like this every day? I try my best to serve my husband and my mother-in-law, but they blame me all the time. What is the meaning of living any longer? The words that they used to blame me were so harsh that I could not bear them. I serve them in spite of their poverty. My child gives a better reason for me to endure the difficulties, but I could not tolerate their harsh words. I could not think through. Perhaps I am fated to have such a terrible husband and such a strange mother-in-law. I cooked noodles for them that evening. My mother-in-law and my brother-in-law had finished dinner, and we were waiting for my husband. When he came back and began to blame me, my mother-in-law said, 'You have stayed here for

many years but don't work.' Unable to endure their words, I seized a bottle of pesticide and drank seven mouthfuls in total. I thought everything would be better after death. The first mouthful tasted a little sweet, but the second was not. When I drank the seventh mouthful, I had great difficulty swallowing. I lost consciousness after throwing the bottle onto the table.

"When my sister-in-law, my husband's brother's wife, heard about my attempted suicide, she said, 'She would have been better dead, and I would feel relieved if she were dead.' This is the style of this family. My mother-in-law said, 'We are so poor because she eats too much.' Actually they had been very poor before I came, otherwise why could her son not find a wife and need to marry a woman from Yunnan? I never complain about their poverty, but she cannot tolerate me and often beats me. This kind of life is really not better than death.

"I have spent much money on my mother-in-law. Last year I earned 2,000 *yuan* in the brick factory and spent all the money on her medication and clothing. She suffered from a serious cerebral hemorrhage. If I had not taken care of her, she would have died. When she recovered, she said to me, 'You are so kind, my daughter-in-law. You have saved my life and are much better than my own daughters. I really appreciate what you have done.' But before long she became even worse and forgot what I had done and what she had said.

"She is 65 years old and suffers from several diseases. I take good care of her and do not take her words seriously. When she blames me too vehemently, I try to disregard it. She does not seem like a normal person and does not understand what other people are doing. She enjoys seeing me upset. Although she utters such bad words, she is not upset herself. No one else in the family can eat well when there is a conflict, but she can still eat a lot after uttering hurtful words. She does not take her own words seriously at all, but how can other people disregard them?

"Sometimes my mother-in-law can't fall asleep, and then she will get up and grumble. Then we all wake up. I try to ignore it, as if I never hear what she says.

"Every month my mother-in-law stays in our house and that of my brother-in-law for half month in turn. The wife of my brother-in-law, however, is a tough woman and does not fear her. She married my brother-in-law in an exchange of marriage (*zhuan qin*).<sup>2</sup> My sister-in-law is never scared when my mother-in-law blames her. She knows how to respond, and my mother-in-law can do nothing to her.

"My sister-in-law is not good to me either. Two days after I drank the pesticide, she said to me, 'We don't like you. Your mother is a bitch. Go away!' This is not the only time that she has uttered such words. I will not go away. Whatever she has said, I cannot yield. 'It was you who called me here, and now it is also you who drive me away. Is it that easy to drive me away? No, I will never go. I am not well educated and can be mistreated by you, but I will not leave here as long as I am not dead. Let you be provoked to death! My home is 5,800 miles away, and how can I go back? I am not an unreasonable

person, but if you push me too hard, I know how to respond. I am not living with you and do not rely on you. I neither spend a single *yuan* of yours nor eat anything of yours. How can you have the right to drive me away? How can you have the right to blame me this way?' When I tell this to some of the villagers, they all sympathize with me. My brother-in-law attended high school and is better educated, and hence he and his wife dare to curse me. I held my daughter tightly and said, 'You have no way to drive me out. I am reasonable, and people sympathize with me wherever we go. A reasonable person is not afraid of you.' The villagers can tell who is right and who is wrong. I earn my own money and food with my hard work, and I am not afraid of her at all.

"When I was cooking for the mid-autumn festival last year, my daughter complained that the food was not good. Hearing what she had said, my brother-in-law blamed me and even attempted to stab me with a knife. I asked my daughter to eat steamed buns or rice. I could take care of my child myself and did not need his intervention. Sometimes I quarrel with my husband, but that is our own business and has nothing to do with other people, so how come my brother-in-law intervened and cursed me?

"My relationship with my husband is not bad. Although we are both ill-tempered, we understand each other, and there is no big conflict between us. His mother and brother often stir up our quarrels. When my daughter was three years old, my brother-in-law quarreled badly with my husband three times. My husband is a face-lover. The popular saying is right: 'One who cares too much about face suffers a lot (*si yao mian zi huo shou zui*).' Unwilling to show anger to his brother and his mother, he endured everything and finally collapsed. He suffered from a chronic stomach ache, and I suffered from mastitis. The conflicts worsen his health. He cannot sleep well and often thinks about those things.

"We borrowed 2,000 *yuan* to buy medication for ourselves. I also borrowed 5,000 *yuan* when my mother-in-law was ill. We have to work very hard to pay our debts. I work every day in the field, and when I have time, I go to work in other people's orchards or in the brick factories. Sometimes I eat nothing but salty turnips. I managed to pay off the debts in this way. When every day I return home and hear my mother-in-law's angry words, I tremble. Her curse makes me feel so cold.

"My husband attempted suicide when my daughter was three years old. Once my mother-in-law said to him, 'You eat too much, and all others are starving. You might be happy to see that.' My husband suffered from a stomach ache, but his mother did not care about him. When we asked her to have dinner, she said, 'I don't need you to ask me to eat. Why do you keep calling me? Damn it!' Sometimes she also complained about her granddaughter. When my daughter became sad, I told her to disregard those words. My mother-in-law never respected us even though we took care of her. Unable to endure the coldness and all the conflicts in the family, my husband attempted to hang himself. Fortunately, my daughter saw what he was going to do and called 'Dad!' several times. When I heard her, I hurried to him and cut the

rope. My husband got down and wept. In spite of our sadness, my mother-in-law did not comfort us and even blamed us more. She does not deserve our respect at all.

“When I ask my mother-in-law to have dinner, she often refuses: ‘I don’t want you who fuck turtles (*wang ba cao de*) to call me to eat. You always call me after you are full.’ But when she goes outdoors, she complains that we do not serve her food. At first people believed her and asked us why we did not let her eat. This was also why my husband attempted suicide. But gradually they all got to know what was going on and considered her words as nonsense. Nobody takes her complaints seriously now.

“When my father-in-law was alive, my mother-in-law dared not behave that way. He was 10 years older than her and could control her. After his death, however, she became the head of the family, and everyone was expected to obey her. If people do not obey, she sometimes gets so angry as to break a pot. As I recall, she has broken at least six pots. Once I came home after sprinkling pesticide in the field, and my mother-in-law complained at me endlessly. She went to visit her eldest daughter angrily. She stayed there three days and came back tearfully. Unable to endure her mother, her daughter had driven her back. All three of her daughters and their husbands don’t like her. Once in the house of her eldest daughter, my mother-in-law did not allow them to eat the meat that her daughter had just bought, and the husband of my sister-in-law was provoked. After a big quarrel, they drove her back here.

“Once she went to the house of her eldest daughter and quarreled vehemently with her son-in-law. The other daughters also came. After a discussion, none of them wanted to take care of her. She gave everyone 300 *yuan*, yet they still refused to support her. My husband was the last to know about that big quarrel. He was kinder to his mother and said, ‘Mother, I will take care of you even if you give me nothing.’

“You see, she does not consider herself as a person, so how can her children consider her as a person? When she stays with my elder brother-in-law, my sister-in-law does not cook special food for her; but when my sister-in-law’s father comes, she cooks good food and makes dumplings (*jiaozi*) for him. Seeing that my sister-in-law serves her father so well, my mother-in-law dares say nothing. My sisters-in-law are not afraid of her, and she can only do those things to my husband and me. When I think about the trouble, my head becomes numb.”

Another villager who was present said, “Your sisters-in-law and your brothers-in-law are smart and know how to cope with her. You should learn to live with all those troubles. As the old idiom goes, you should have ‘Your own heart and lungs.’ Silly people like you have neither a heart nor lungs (*mei xin mei fei*).<sup>3</sup> You should learn to disregard her words and not be angry. Anger is bad to your health.”

“It is right to say that I have neither a heart nor lungs. I also tried to disregard her words but failed. It is really hard to have one’s own heart and lungs [chuckling]. Sometimes she curses not only me, but also my parents. When

she curses my parents and even my ancestors, how can I stand by? I am often trembling when she blames me like that. We quarrel almost every day. Seeing that I am sad, sometimes my daughter asks, 'Mom, can't you tell my uncle about these things?' My brother is a tough man and is also in Mengzou. If he knew what was going on, he would help me. I don't want anyone in my natal family to worry about me. Several years ago, I did tell my brother and he came to argue on my behalf. Afterwards I never did that again. Nobody in my natal family knows my situation. When they ask about it, I just tell them, 'Everything is fine with me.'

"Once after we went to work in the field, my mother-in-law put her urine into the drinking water. Another time she poured the water that she had used to brush her teeth into our pot. How can anyone do that? This made us really angry, and I felt like she would provoke me to death. Once I could not eat well for three days and felt suffocated. I left her and stayed seven days in the house of her eldest daughter. My sister-in-law said, 'You should consider her as a mad person. Don't take her words seriously.'"

A villager interrupted: "You should pretend to be foolish sometimes. Don't be too smart and make everything clear. You will suffer a lot if you are too smart. Sometimes when she does those things, you would do better to ignore them as if nothing had happened. Then you would be happier."

"My husband's temper often changes, and I don't know when he is going to be happy and when he is not. He has also broken two pots when we quarreled. Once we had a big fight, and he sat on my body, beating me very hard. Thinking that I might die, I took off my clothes: 'Well! Beat me to death, and I will not live any longer. I did not care whether I die or survive.' When I uttered those words, my husband stopped beating me and started weeping. After that, we did not fight for two years. Although we often quarrel and fight, our relationship is not bad so long as my mother-in-law is not acting strangely. She even asked her sons to pay her a 'bringing-up fee' because she had brought them up."

When she said this, everyone who was present laughed. A villager said, "Although her words are improper, her reasoning is valid. Hasn't she brought up your husband? Whatever she does, you must take care of her."

"I often think that life is meaningless. Sometimes I think about death. I am an outgoing person, but many people here cannot understand my accent. Hence I don't usually chat with the villagers. There are some other women from Yunnan in this village, and I can only talk easily with them."

"Two years ago, I went back to Yunnan for two months and visited my father. I told him nothing about life here. My husband accompanied me to the railway station in Beijing. On his way back, someone robbed him of 3,000 *yuan*. When he came back to Mengzou, he knocked someone down with his motorcycle. The man was not seriously hurt but asked for 500 *yuan* from him. My husband is too honest and could not bargain with them."

A villager then added, "If you had lived seriously, you would have been rich now. You work so hard but waste your money on many useless things. I guess

you have wasted more than 20,000 *yuan* because of those quarrels.”

“Sometimes my mother-in-law criticizes me, saying, ‘You are unable to bear a boy.’ I say, ‘You are free to find any woman who can bear boys to be your daughter-in-law. If you are so capable, why did you marry your eldest son by an exchange of marriage? And why was your second son still single at the age of 26 and in a hurry to marry me?’ My husband is 39, and I am 36 this year. We married 13 years ago.

“I am fated to marry into such a family and have such a mother-in-law, and what can I do? Fortunately, I have a good daughter who can always comfort me. She is 11 years old now. When my husband and I quarrel, she always criticizes the one who is wrong. We rely on her to mediate our relationship. When my husband and I are too angry to do the housework, she takes care of everything. Now she cooks very well and seems like a mature person. Sometimes we get up at 3 am to work in the field. When we come back at 6, she has already prepared breakfast for us. She is smarter than me. Sometimes I feel very sorry for my daughter. Once we made vegetable dumplings, and my daughter said, ‘I like meat dumplings.’ Hearing that, my tears immediately started falling.”

Although Shilan’s attempted suicide was directly caused by her husband, her bad relationship with her mother-in-law contributed a great deal to her troubles and her attempted suicide. If she had thought through her problems, she would not have attempted suicide. As she implied herself, she had been demoralized, thinking for a long time that life was meaningless.

Unlike Weizhen, who pretended to think through his problems by ignoring trouble, Shilan admitted that she could not think through them. Nevertheless, she too attempted to think through by ignoring the words of her mother-in-law. She made an effort to change her mother-in-law’s behavior by treating her well. A striking example is in the way she took care of her mother-in-law when she was ill. Because her mother-in-law treated her even worse after she had taken care of her so well, Shilan felt especially wronged.

Although Shilan could tolerate the foul words of her mother-in-law, she could no longer do so when the old woman became so unreasonable as to put her urine in the family’s drinking water. When finally Shilan could not stand it any more, she drew upon all the moral capital that she had accumulated and resisted very strongly.

Shilan’s sisters-in-law offered an alternative for dealing with the dilemma: to engage in harsher power games with the old woman. Instead of pretending to be indifferent to the quarrels, her sisters-in-law paid her back in her own coin. Since her mother-in-law was unreasonable, the wife of Weizhen’s brother intentionally provoked her by serving her father better food. When the old woman did not allow her daughter’s family to eat meat, she was driven out. Her daughters all refused to take care of her, even though she was willing to pay them to do so. They totally ignored emotional attachment to the family. Without considering the old woman’s feelings, they were always able to win in power games. The other villagers agreed that Shilan’s sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law were smart in playing power games



in such a sly way. Shilan could not think through the situation because she had neither 'a heart' nor 'lungs' and did not know how to live with all her troubles.

Shilan's sisters-in-law could think through their problems because they did not take the ethical codes of filial piety seriously and resolutely fought for their own dignity. Their reputations among the villagers were ambiguous. People knew that they did not respect the old woman because she did not treat them well, but nobody praised them for their rude behavior. Although the villagers told Shilan to learn from them, after Shilan left, they criticized her sisters-in-law for being bad to their mother and praised Shilan for being filial.

Weizhen tried to ignore the conflicts and wanted to preserve emotional attachment with his mother. Shilan's sisters-in-law ignored emotional attachment and filial piety, and the old woman could not beat them. Shilan's strategy was a mixture of the two. On the one hand, she tried to ignore her mother-in-law's abusive words; on the other hand, she resisted her when overly provoked. But she could not be happy.

The villagers suggested that she "have a heart and lungs." By saying this, they were suggesting that Shilan be smart enough to have her own ideas. These same villagers, however, also asked her to be foolish when her mother-in-law cursed her. How could she be both smart and foolish at the same time?

By smartness, they meant that she should be clever in living. The villagers regretted that Weizhen and Shilan had wasted so much money and energy on meaningless quarrels. "It is useless to gamble for *qi* every day," they said, "and too much *qi* hurts one's health." Although *qi* is the essence of personhood, one does not maintain good fortune simply by accumulating *qi*. Too much *qi* is harmful to one's health. *Qi* is good only when it helps to maintain a better fortune. What the villagers were suggesting is that Shilan focus on more important things than gambling for *qi*.

By foolishness, they meant that Shilan should ignore her mother-in-law's foul words and not be too serious about power games. Shilan's resistance against her mother-in-law was justified, but, as they implied, resistance is not the real aim of living. She should not care too much about each and every power game. If she could be a little foolish, ignore her mother-in-law's taunts and demands, and not engage in certain of the power games, she would not be so depressed. In fact, although her loss in power games more or less challenged her dignity, winning games would not reward her either.

Therefore, smartness and foolishness amount to the same thing: a shift of focus. On the one hand, she should be smart enough to focus on family life; on the other hand, she should be foolish enough to ignore certain of the power games. One who has a heart and lungs knows what the aim of life is, and can overcome dilemmas by living wisely.

At first glance, the villagers' suggestion seemed quite similar to Weizhen's. They also asked Shilan to ignore her mother-in-law's words. Yet this had proved to be futile. What is it then that distinguished the villagers' advice?

Although both stressed the need to ignore her mother-in-law's words and deeds, their emphasis was different. Weizhen was in favor of concealing the hopeless truth, but the villagers suggested that Shilan focus on more important things and

live more proactively. They asked Shilan to create her own hope and fortune by focusing less on what her mother-in-law wanted. Neither fighting nor passive suffering is a wise way to maintain good fortune, according to most villagers.

Both “living a family life” and “behaving as a person” require a sense of creativity and initiative. In order to live, one should not only be able to deal with changing fortune, but further *create* one’s own good luck. One must also *make* oneself into a full person. The best way to create good luck and behave as a person is to manage the family well. In order to do so, one should not only be mindful of the immediate good, but also harmonize the whole family. The most frequently mentioned way of dissuading someone from suicide is to remind that person of his or her relatives: “How could your mother survive your suicide?” “Think of your children and how could you commit suicide?” One who cares only about winning or losing each and every power game cannot manage the family well, but neither can one who ignores power games altogether. One must ignore certain trivial power games but try to improve family life by playing others. Therefore, thinking through one’s problems does not require one to ignore dignity or personhood. It is a more prudent way to create good fortune and behave as a person. Hence the villagers not only asked Shilan to ignore her troubles, but also suggested that she live in a more proactive way.

Although there are many differences between the couple’s narratives, both end with their daughter. The girl was the only happiness in their lives, and Shilan managed to put up with a good deal for her sake. When Shilan was talking about her, the girl also came to join us. She asked her mother to come home for lunch, and Shilan left happily. Although I still wondered whether Shilan could really think through her problems as the villagers suggested, her daughter gave her some hope of succeeding. I found myself wishing that her fate might change sooner or later, as in the case of Mulan (5.3).

## Discussion

Concluding Part III, we have two arguments: 1) from a psychological viewpoint, suicide in China is meant to resist against a depressing situation in a family conflict, but it is not the result of such a situation. Hence although depression might accompany suicide, it has a different cultural meaning from suicide, and 2) thinking through is understood as the most rational way to attain human dignity and domestic justice.

“Being unable to think through,” the general term for the psychological state of a suicidal mind in rural China, incorporates the meaning of “gambling for *qi*” and “loss of face.” *Qi* and face are about one’s immediate good status in family politics, and people play power games to win it, but such games are meaningful only in the general framework of family life.

In Western psychiatry, most suicides are seen as stemming from mental disorders, whether the disorders are defined as logic error (Shneidman and Faberow 1957; Shneidman 1964, 1974), psychache (Shneidman 1993, 1994, 1996), a lack of serotonin (Perlin 1975: 113–29; Institute of Medicine 2002: 123–7; Kushner

1989: 83–4), or self-negation (Hendin 1996: 614–17). Wahl remarks that suicide is a “magic” behavior, because whatever the reason for it, there is nothing so difficult in a life that should logically lead to suicide (Wahl 1957). Scholars also see impulsivity, shame, guilt (Giddens 1971c: 97–120), hopelessness (Beck *et al.* 1996: 338; Institute of Medicine 2002), rage, and other mental states that lead to suicide as mental disorders (Hendin 1996: 614–17).

Impulsivity, shame and hopelessness are typical mental states in these Chinese cases, but mostly they are not seen as mental disorders. Lanzhi (3.2) and Laifu (3.3) committed suicide in an impulsive way; Zhou Liu (8.1–2) felt both ashamed and guilty; Weizhen and Shilan felt hopeless about their lives. But it was not a mental disorder that led to their suicides or attempted suicides. What distinguished them from other people was not their difficulties, but their single-minded focus on certain power games in their lives. They were too spirited to live prudently. Gambling for *qi*, loss of face, or being unable to think through are all seen as forms of rash resistance against one’s difficulties and are not viewed as mental disorders as understood in Western psychiatry.

Some people mentioned in the cases presented here do have mental disorders, in the psychiatric sense. But I do not see them as mental disorders *per se* or even as pathological psychological problems. In my view, there is no personal “pathology” here. Rather these are affective and moral conditions where contextual meaning in rural Chinese society provides an interpersonal, social and subjective source of suicide.

The discussion of thinking through completes our consideration of domestic justice. In domestic settings, justice is not only about right and wrong, but involves familial love and power games as well. Many people want both love and justice in the family, but cannot deal with them rationally.

Justice between family members should be viewed from the perspectives of both family politics and human dignity. Domestic justice is not the practice of a transcendental theory about right and wrong, but a proper arrangement in the family. The key to this issue, therefore, is what constitutes dignity for any family member.

Sociologically, only a person who lives a normal family life is eligible to be dignified as a full person. Family life is the precondition for personhood. Only one who lives in the family could commit suicide to pursue dignity.

Gambling for *qi* and regaining face are two ways to pursue dignity. Whether a suicide dies or not, he or she can resist injustice by doing so. But this could not help him or her to obtain full personhood and real justice, because a suicide interrupts his or her family life and makes the fulfilment of some duties impossible.

One who really thinks through is not someone who evades family duties, but someone who has a profound understanding of family life and human dignity. He or she does everything properly, trying to make everyone in the family happy, moderating his or her emotions prudently, and improving family life proactively. Because a person cannot be happy without a family, human dignity is realized only when the whole family is harmonized. Since there are often unexpected elements in family life, people who think through might not always be happy, but at least

they always try their best to realize human dignity and domestic justice.

Based on above observations, we cannot see the issue of suicide in China as merely a psychiatric problem. From the perspective of family life, it is a problem of domestic justice; from the perspective of social ethos, it is a problem of human dignity. Putting it in a more general context, it is a problem of social justice. We will see it from a broader perspective yet in Part IV.



## **Part IV**

# **Conclusion**

Suicide as a public affair



## 10 Public justice

Although suicide is in most cases a domestic affair, I do not argue that it never happens in the public sphere. In fact, if we did not make sense of suicide as a public issue, this study would be incomplete. While we now understand the dynamics of family injustice in China, we must be aware of how suicide's meaning is changed when examined from a more general perspective. In this chapter, I examine how domestic matters can be transformed into public matters and how suicide relates to public injustice. In Chapter 11, I examine suicide-prevention programs in China and some suicide discourses in modern Chinese intellectual history.

Suicide is related to public politics in two ways. First, some suicide cases caused by domestic injustice are dealt with in the public sphere; second, some suicide cases are caused by public injustice. In public politics, suicide is understood as an act of protest, a fear of punishment, or a struggle for help (not as a cry for help). When people understand a single suicide case from public perspectives, its meaning undergoes important changes. In the study and prevention of suicide in China, it is crucial for researchers and policymakers to be aware of these changes.

### 10.1 Interfamily conflicts

Even after three years of research, I still could not dismiss my curiosity about the stories of Haopeng and Zhuilu (1.2). After examining so many other cases of suicide, I decided to return to these two stories to see if I could understand them better.

Haopeng, the student who hanged himself to death in Gouyi middle school, was from the same village as Lu Li (5.1). After doing some research in his village, I learned that Haopeng had often gambled, and that his parents did not care about his studies. His mother was a difficult person and often quarreled with other villagers. The most likely reason for Haopeng's suicide was that he had stolen some money from his parents to gamble and then lost it. Another young man who gambled with him the day of his suicide told me that Haopeng was depressed after gambling. Afraid that his parents might scold him for that, Haopeng committed suicide. After some investigation, I believed that this was closer to the truth. Hence the school was by no means responsible for his death, and perhaps his own parents were even more responsible than



the school. As in the story of Lanzhi and her son (3.2), it was the power game between Haopeng and his parents that apparently led to his suicide.

I also investigated Zhuilu's suicide in both her natal village and conjugal village. I learned that even as a young child in school, her husband had been a problem student. He started stealing petroleum at a very young age and was put in jail for two years after marrying Zhuilu.<sup>1</sup> Because he did not live a decent life, Zhuilu's relationship with her husband was troubled. They often quarreled, but her parents-in-law were good to Zhuilu and often blamed their son. Zhuilu attempted to divorce him, but her husband did not consent. She suffered very much although she had some moral capital in family politics. This evidence suggests that she had personal reasons to commit suicide.

Both cases are apparently about family politics. Haopeng's suicide became a legal issue, but Zhuilu's did not. The contrast between these two cases shows that family politics can be transformed to a matter of public security under certain conditions.

Family politics is a tricky issue. On the one hand, family members are interdependent on each other; on the other hand, they are constantly engaged in power games because people strive to maintain dignity and domestic harmony at the same time, and domestic injustice occurs when people face some problem in family life. Because of the slipperiness of family politics, even a good official is not supposed to intervene in it.<sup>2</sup>

In imperial China, however, family politics was seen as an important part of public politics. The government not only formally announced official interpretations of ethical codes about family life, but also honored model individuals to better shape ethical practices in everyday life. It was a very common practice to honor women who had committed suicide to protect their chastity (Lin 1990; Elvin 1984; Sommer 2000; Ropp 2001; Carlitz 2001; Theiss 2001; Wang 2003: 225–6).

Because the value system and political institutions of imperial China have been radically altered in the last century, Chinese people are now living in a society with very different values and standards. Suicides caused by trivial quarrels are not praised as ethical models any more; they are even seen as lacking in moral or cultural significance.

A basic assumption in this study is that we should understand suicide as the result of an existential problem for common people in modern China. Many scholars, both inside and outside China, tend to perceive Chinese society as pre-modern, and they interpret China's problems as "feudalist vestiges." Suicide is also often interpreted in this way (Margery Wolf 1975; Philips *et al.* 1999; Xie Lihua 1999). I concede that traditional customs and ideas have caused many problems in China, but we should understand this society in general as a modern one. Modernity does not necessarily imply Westernization or a certain level of economic development. As Weber indicates, modernity is more about the rationalization of social systems and everyday life (Weber 1958; Li Meng 2001). Though different from their Western counterparts, the basic ethos and social norms in Chinese society are modern. Studies by Diamant and Yan Yunxiang support this idea (Diamant 2000; Yan 2003; see also Rofel 1999).

Many people commit suicide not because their ideas are too traditional, but because there are some paradoxes and dilemmas in their lives. In a certain sense, some traditional factors contribute to these problems, but they are operating in *modern* China.

One of these problems, as I have shown, is that some modern ideals like autonomy, freedom and love have caused conflicts in individuals and families and led to suicide.<sup>3</sup> As an unintended result, children have more freedom to ignore the needs of their parents. In order to uphold the freedom of love, the government cannot “force” people to love their spouses. Hence people can have sexual affairs without being punished. The unfilial children and disloyal spouses are blamed in ethical discourses, but are not legally punished. This is why the police could not punish Zhuilu’s husband for mistreating her and pushing her to commit suicide, although they felt deep sympathy for Zhuilu.

Nevertheless, the effect of Zhuilu’s suicide was not merely confined to her nuclear family. Although it was not a matter of public security *per se*, her suicide was transformed to the realm of public politics. For instance, when her grandfather started to bring the lawsuit, he engaged in a kind of interfamily politics. In order to understand public politics about suicide, we must first understand interfamily politics.

When I told people that I was investigating someone’s suicide, they often thought that I was involved in a legal investigation. For instance, when an old woman learned that I wanted to study her daughter’s suicide, she said, “Well, we do not want to pursue it any more, because her husband is good to us. He respects us and often visits us. In addition, he is kind to my daughter’s child. Hence I would not say too much about it. If he stopped being good to us, I would not be able to forgive him.” When I interviewed Zhou Liu’s landlord (8.1), at first he also suspected that I had been sent by the police: “Tell me the truth, and I will also tell you what I know.”

Hence there is another paradox: on the one hand, suicide and family politics are usually not seen as legal issues; on the other hand, people often see suicide as being related to the laws. When someone commits suicide, his or her relatives would lose face if they did not punish those who might be responsible. As we have seen, Haopeng’s parents did not want to argue too much until some relatives suggested that they dispute the issue with the school. The boy’s relatives’ reasoning was like this: if Haopeng’s parents simply buried Haopeng, they would be letting him down and showing cowardice. It was almost the survivors’ duty to fight back for the deceased. Without the debate, suicide is seen as “unworthy” and “miserable,” and the relatives are seen as cowards. When they do engage in such debates, many details of the actual reasons for suicide are ignored. Domestic conflicts are thus transformed into interfamily conflicts.

Guizhi, a woman from Li village in her late twenties, drank pesticide and died on July 21, 1999. Ergou, Guizhi’s husband, was the poorest man in the village and had had difficulties in getting married until Guizhi came to Li village from Yunnan. It was said that Guizhi was not a decent woman and often prostituted herself to earn money.

Guizhi committed suicide after a quarrel with another villager, Wubo, and his wife. After her death, Ergou carried her body to Wubo's house, placed it inside, and asked them to pay 8,000 *yuan*. Wubo lodged a lawsuit against Ergou, claiming: "Ever since he carried the body to my house, my wife, my daughter and I have been wandering everywhere to find a place to sleep. Hence I strongly urge that the court ask the accused to pay me 300 *yuan* for each day that the body has occupied my house." The court ruled that Wubo pay 1,000 *yuan* to Ergou, and Guizhi was buried.

The following is the description of Guizhi's suicide in the court document: "Some workers were building a road through Li village in the summer of 1999, and they put a lot of wheat straw along the road. Wubo, a villager of Li village, wanted to use the wheat straw as firewood, and carried home several cartloads of it. Lingbao, another villager, stopped him and said, 'I am sorry, but the workers have already given me permission to have all the wheat straw. I gave them two boxes of cigarettes, and they agreed that I could have everything.' Wubo apologized and wanted to return the wheat straw, but Lingbao said, 'That's fine. The wheat straw that you have already carried away is yours, and there isn't much of it anyway.' Wubo invited Lingbao to eat watermelons in his melon field, and they were friendly to each other. Lingbao's wife came and asked her husband, 'Lingbao, where is our wheat straw?' Lingbao pointed to the remaining wheat straw: 'There it is.' His wife asked, 'Is that all?' Lingbao said, 'Uncle Wubo did not know that it was ours and took two cartloads.' His wife said nothing.

"That evening Lingbao's wife came to Wubo's house and said, 'Uncle Wubo, can you give us back one cartload of wheat straw?' Wubo said, 'That's fine. I can return both cartloads.' Content with his words, the woman left. One hour later, Wubo and his wife came across Lingbao's wife in the street. The woman said, 'You did not merely carry away two cartloads. Someone said that you carried away at least four.' Wubo asked, 'Who said that?' The woman said, 'Guizhi told me that you had carried away four cartloads, and we can go to ask her.' When they visited Guizhi, Guizhi said, 'I saw you, who fuck the turtle (*wang ba cao de*), carrying four cartloads.' Hearing Guizhi's verbal abuse, Wubo and his wife were angry and cursed her.<sup>4</sup> After a while, however, Guizhi fainted and could not speak any more.<sup>5</sup> Ergou came out and pressed Guizhi's philtrum (*ren zhong*).<sup>6</sup> Guizhi regained consciousness and continued to curse them. Ergou, Lingbao's wife and some other people carried her home.

"The next morning, Lingbao's wife came to Wubo's house and said to Wubo's wife, 'Aunt, will you pay a visit to Guizhi? We are all neighbors and should not fight each other over such a trivial matter.' Wubo's wife said, 'Even if you don't come, I am going to visit her. Such a trivial thing does not deserve too much anger.' She visited Guizhi several minutes later. Guizhi was having breakfast, and Wubo's wife said, 'Guizhi, we should not be so angry over such a thing. We are still good neighbors whatever happens.' Ergou greeted her warmly: 'Aunt, please have a seat.' She sat down on their bed,

and Guizhi said, 'Aunt, that is nothing, and I will not take it seriously. I was not really angry.' Ergou and Guizhi were friendly to her and served her tea. Having stayed there for a while, Wubo's wife thought that the problem was solved and left to work in her field.

"When Wubo and his wife returned from the field at noon, they heard that Guizhi had drunk pesticide and died. The door of their house was open, and the lock was broken. Ergou had carried the body of his wife into their house and urged them to pay 8,000 *yuan*."

There was an obvious mismatch between Guizhi's attitudes that morning and her subsequent suicide. If it was the quarrel that had led to her suicide, how could she have been so friendly to Wubo's wife? Wubo and his wife could not explain this. I visited the wife of Ergou's elder brother, and she said that after Wubo's wife had left Ergou's house that morning, Guizhi had blamed her husband because he had not helped her when she was arguing with the others. Ergou beat her for having stirred up debates between the two families. Guizhi drank the pesticide when Ergou was out. She went to the house of Ergou's brother and said to my interviewee, "Sister-in-law, please do me a favor and bring up my child for me." Her sister-in-law realized that she had drunk pesticide and went to find Ergou in the street. Ergou borrowed a motorized tricycle and was going to take Guizhi to the county hospital, but the tire was flat. He had to find another one. Then, on the way to the hospital, he found that he had no money. Because of all these delays, Guizhi was dead when he arrived at the hospital. Before carrying Guizhi's body to Wubo's house, Ergou had consulted a policeman as to whether it was illegal to break the lock to enter someone's house. The policeman had said that it was not illegal, and hence Ergou broke in and put her body in Wubo's house.

Ergou's sister-in-law said that the direct reason for Guizhi's suicide was not the interfamily conflict, but her quarrel with Ergou. Like many other women we have talked about, Guizhi committed suicide because her husband did not treat her well. The interfamily conflict was at most a cause for the domestic quarrel. When I talked with some other villagers, I found that they also knew the truth. I wondered why Wubo and his wife had not used this fact to defend themselves, as it seemed to be the best evidence to exonerate themselves. Yet Wubo and his wife never bothered to prove that the interfamily conflict had not led to Guizhi's suicide. Instead, they had already admitted that Guizhi's suicide resulted from the interfamily conflict, and wanted to show only how unreasonable Guizhi had been to provoke the quarrel. My friends in the court and the police station told me that Wubo was very nervous after Guizhi's death, fearing that he would be punished. He asked every official he could find what he should do. It was only when he learned that he was not going to be found guilty that he filed the lawsuit against Ergou.

Wubo and his wife did not mention the family quarrel although they did know of it. Some villagers who knew of the domestic quarrel also said that Wubo and his wife were responsible for Guizhi's death. They did not like Guizhi because she was not a decent woman, but when talking about Wubo's wife, they said, "She is

such an unreasonable woman as to deliberately provoke her neighbor, even to the point of death.”

The most striking fact was that Ergou himself had carried Guizhi’s body to Wubo’s house, assuming that Wubo was responsible for her death. This does not mean, however, that Ergou did not feel responsible for the suicide of his wife. Such a feeling did not prevent him from seeing the event as a public one. A suicide can be interpreted as both a domestic event and a public one. Domestic injustice and public injustice are two aspects of the same event.

The villagers knew that Guizhi was not a good wife, and they also knew that Ergou did not treat her well. Ergou was, of course, responsible for her death. This, however, did not conceal the fact that it was the curses of Wubo and his wife that stirred up the trouble in Guizhi’s family.

Many suicides caused by conflicts between a couple are interpreted both ways. People commonly transform domestic politics to public politics. Especially when a wife commits suicide, her natal family will lose face if they do not protest on her behalf. Lingyu, another woman from Li village, committed suicide when her husband quarreled with her because she did not give him money. Their relationship was usually good, and the parents-in-law were also kind to the woman. Her relatives, however, would not forgive him and did not allow him to bury the woman. They insisted on having the police do an autopsy. After the police determined that she did commit suicide, however, they still would not forgive the husband. In order to shame him, they demanded that he break the tile and carry the paper flag in the funeral.<sup>7</sup> Yunrong, a woman from Gaoyangfu, committed suicide because her husband scolded her when she was arguing with her mother-in-law. Her relatives also requested that he break the tile and carry the paper flag. According to the villagers, he kept his head lowered all along the street in the procession. Fangxin, a woman from Gouyi who married into a Jianli family, committed suicide because she had quarreled with her husband. The relatives of Fangxin did not ask her husband to break the tile or carry the paper flag, but asked him to dress the deceased in a red sweater, so that her ghost would very likely come back and haunt him. Some relatives of the woman carried the corpse to every corner of the husband’s house, so that her ghost might haunt those places. At the funeral, the sister of the deceased scolded her brother-in-law vehemently and tore off his sleeves.

In all these interfamily conflicts, the detailed reasons for committing suicide are already unimportant. What matters is the face of each of the two families. Hence we see how domestic justice is transformed into public justice. When the conflict is not between two families, but between a family and a public institute, as in Haopeng’s case, we see the same reasoning used.

There are significant differences between domestic justice and public justice, but in Chinese culture, the principle of public justice is based on the principle of domestic justice. The basic aim is to satisfy both parties, not to judge who is wrong. This is what happened in the cases of Haopeng and Guizhi.

## 10.2 Clear heaven

In the spring of 2002, Hu Suzhi, a 42-year-old woman from Jiang village, attempted suicide in Tiananmen Square. Here is her narrative:

“My husband was a worker in Beijing. One day in 1997 he went to Qizhou on business. On their way back, he and his colleagues wanted to visit home before returning to Beijing. Before they got home, however, my husband was killed in an accident.

“They had parked their car along the street in the county capital, and my husband and his colleagues were about to get in. A truck crashed into them. My husband died in the hospital, and his colleagues were injured. The policemen found that the driver had no driver’s license. He had bought the truck from Fang Jiuzhe, and Fang had bought it from a factory. Although both men had paid for the truck, they had not completed the legal process, and in theory the truck still belonged to the factory. Several days later, the policemen went to the driver’s house, but he was absent. The next day the driver went to the court to give himself up.

“I lodged a lawsuit against the driver, Fang Jiuzhe, and the factory, and requested that the court mediate. At first the court made a verdict that I be paid 40,000 *yuan* in total.

“The court also asked the truck to be sold, and I was supposed to get the money. I knew a person who wanted to buy it, but the driver did not want to sell it to that man. The driver sold it himself and did not give me the money. The judges said nothing about that. I sued them again in the prefecture court, and the judges there wrote a letter to the court of Mengzhou, urging them to reconsider my case. My husband had been a worker in Beijing, and hence we should have been paid more than the standard for a peasant. Not content with the amount of 40,000 *yuan*, I appealed again. This time, however, they reduced the amount to 26,929 *yuan*.

“I was really confused. I had a lawyer, and before they announced the verdict, my lawyer told me that they had decided to pay me, so I went to the court. The court had already released the news to my lawyer, but a woman judge denied it when I was there. She said that it was illegal for them to release the verdict, because they had not decided yet. Although they had made a verdict, the chief judge had not signed it. I did not know why he refused to sign, given that he had helped me a good deal before that. When I had first lodged the suit, the chief judge was very active in helping me. Later when the verdict came out, I found that they had reduced the amount. The woman judge also felt it was unfair and said, ‘If you cannot accept it, go ahead and appeal.’ The chief judge who had helped me a good deal was suddenly biased toward the driver. The driver must have bribed him.

“So I went to the province capital to visit higher officials. In 1999, I wrote a letter to a newspaper in the province capital. The newspaper published my request and also delivered my documents to the government. I visited

the officials. They read my documents and wrote letters to both the local court and the prefecture court. When they received the letters, however, the local judges did nothing. I again went to the province capital, and visited the Province Congress (*sheng ren da*) and the Political and Legislative Affairs Committee (*zheng fa wei*). They again wrote a letter to the prefecture court. They confirmed the verdict that I be paid 26,929 *yuan*.

“At that time, I did not wish higher compensation. I only wanted them to carry out the verdict and have the driver pay me. I had been paid 15,000 *yuan*, but I had not received the balance although two years had passed. I visited the judges, the local congress, and the local Political and Legislative Affairs Committee. The secretary of the Political and Legislative Affairs Committee wrote a letter to the court, but they did not carry out the verdict. I said I would be penniless if they did not pay me the compensation. Some judges said, ‘How do you support your sons’ education if you have no money?’ I went to the prefecture court again, but they still refused to solve the problem. Someone even said, ‘Nobody can solve your problem even if you appeal to the United Nations.’

“I went to Beijing when I had no other way out. Last year [2002], I had no money to pay my taxes in the tax season. I was not unwilling to pay tax, but I would not pay it unless the government paid me what I should get. A citizen is obliged to pay tax. If there had been no problem, I would have paid my taxes without any hesitation. I had not paid my taxes since the death of my husband. When I refused to pay them the first time, people from the township took two bikes away. In the following years, however, they did not say anything when I refused to pay. In 2002, the government made some reforms in taxation and urged every villager to pay. Before 2002, many people protested by refusing to pay tax. A worker did not pay because he had not been paid his salary; a man did not pay because his grain had been destroyed without any compensation when the government was building a road. In 2002, however, the cadres decided to make everyone pay their overdue taxes. The Party secretary declared through a loudspeaker: ‘You should not confuse different issues. Everyone should pay their taxes, but solve your other problems in more appropriate ways.’

“I still refused to pay, so the cadres came to expropriate my possessions and grain. I took three bottles of pesticide and tried to drink them, but someone prevented me from doing so. I said, ‘I will go to Beijing and drink the pesticide there.’ The cadres said, ‘We do not care where you go or whether you drink the pesticide.’ I said, ‘Anyway, if I die, the township should take care of my children.’ They said nothing. Someone grabbed the pesticide bottles and said, ‘Don’t take three bottles. One is quite enough.’ Then I went to Beijing with one bottle of pesticide.

“I took 20 *yuan* with me, which was enough only for a one-way trip. If I could not succeed this time, I would die in Beijing. If I could succeed, I would need no money. My husband was already dead, and I did not care about my life any more. Things would not have been like that if there had been a single

good official in Mengzhou. I arrived in Beijing and slept on some newspapers in the railway station that night. The next morning, I went to Tiananmen Square. Holding my declaration and a banner, I knelt down at the national flag. On the banner I had written: 'Mengzhou is all dark, and I have come to the capital to look for Clear Heaven (*Mengzhou wu ri yue, jin jing zhao qing tian*).' Some policemen immediately came. They led me to their office, and I told them my story. They said that I should go to a special office that dealt with visitors like me. I went to the office and told them my situation. Then I went back to the police, because I had no money to stay in an inn. The policemen did not let me in, so I took out the pesticide and drank it. A policeman grabbed the bottle and sent me to a hospital. I recovered, and they carried me back to their office. They had me stay in a room and said, 'Don't do that again. We will solve your problem.' About two hours later, some policemen from Mengzhou came. The policemen at Tiananmen had called them. Among them was a vice-chief of the Bureau of Public Security. They promised to solve my problem after I returned to Mengzhou.

"I returned to Mengzhou with the policemen. The vice Party secretary of the county government and the Political and Legislative Affairs Committee secretary came to see me. They asked some doctors to take care of me until I recovered completely. Several days later, some people from the local court came and asked why I had been to Beijing. I said that I went there for both taxation and the lawsuit. They came again two days later and paid me all the outstanding compensation. They apologized for what they had done and acted very kindly toward me. The chief justice of the court also visited me and asked what I wanted. I said I had two requests. First, that they put the driver in jail; second, that they pay me all the money I had used to carry on the lawsuit all these years, which by then totaled 20,000 *yuan*. He said that he would report this to the prefecture court. Days later some people from the court came again and gave me 800 *yuan*. They said that the money was their donation for my sons. They also asked the TV station to report my situation and how they had supported my sons in their schooling. As for the driver, they did not mention him at all.

Compared with other suicide cases related to public politics, Hu Suzhi's attempted suicide was more like an active protest. Because she could not get the deserved justice in Mengzhou, Suzhi protested in Tiananmen Square, the most sensitive place in China. Someone said that it was really a good and courageous idea for Suzhi to do so, because everything was immediately solved after that. Before Suzhi went to Beijing, other villagers even discussed with her how many bottles of pesticides she should bring. This fact showed that both Suzhi and her friends considered it as a political strategy, not a genuine attempt to kill herself. It was aimed at getting more help from the state. Then how is it different from a "cry for help" in modern suicidology? In order to understand this strategy of hers, we should first see what injustice she was suffering.

Suzhi considered four aspects of the case unjust. First, the driver had sold the



truck without giving her the money; second, the compensation was reduced to 26,929 *yuan*; third, even the 26,929 *yuan* was not paid to her in full; fourth, the driver was not punished.

Suzhi complained that she could not be treated fairly due to the widespread corruption of the officials. In order to examine whether her complaint was justified, I talked with Fang Jiuzhe, one of the defendants, two days after I had interviewed Hu Suzhi. Fang was the manager of a factory and had bought the truck from another factory. Although he did not complete the required registration processes, he had paid the full price.

Fang Jiuzhe said, "The driver at first worked in my factory as a truck driver. He was poor and saved some money after working for several years in my factory. He had bought my truck before he killed Hu's husband. In addition to working for me, he wanted to find some other ways to earn money. Before he got a driver's license, the accident happened.

"His brother-in-law had a driver's license and wanted to go to jail on his behalf. That was a smart idea. If that guy were responsible for the accident, the insurance company would have paid the compensation, and the case would soon have come to an end. When the driver's brother-in-law had spent three days in jail, however, his mother became uneasy. Fearing that her son would suffer too much in jail, she urged him to come clean. When his brother-in-law was released, the driver himself was put in jail, and he had to pay the compensation. How could such a poor guy pay it? The court asked him to sell the truck, and he did that; but he did not give the money to Hu Suzhi. I paid 13,000 *yuan* to the woman immediately after she accused me, but the driver never paid his share."

Fang Jiuzhe also admitted that the driver was not punished except for being put in jail for 100 days. When I asked him whether the driver bribed any judges, he denied it resolutely, "I am sure that he did not. He was poor and did not know any official in the county seat. If he had money to offer as a bribe, he would also have had money to pay the compensation." Before I interviewed him about this case, Fang Jiuzhe had been one of my guides in finding suicide cases. I believe that he did not intentionally withhold the truth from me. According to him, the court was not especially biased toward the driver, although it did not force the driver to pay the money to Hu and did not punish him for failing to do so. This happened because the judges did not carry out the sentence very thoroughly.

In the hope of discovering why the compensation had been reduced, I read some government documents about the compensation. In a mediation statement issued by the court on January 15, 1998, both Hu Suzhi and the driver signed and agreed that the driver pay 40,000 *yuan* to Hu before May 15, 1998, as well as some money to other injured people, and the case was supposed to have been closed.

The driver paid the compensation to the other injured people, but could not pay the full amount to Hu. On January 27, 1998, Hu Suzhi sued again and argued that the driver had not yet paid. She further said that 40,000 *yuan* was not enough, and requested 80,000 *yuan*. On September 7, 1998, the court revoked the mediation statement of January 27 and made another one on January 20, 1999, in which the amount was not changed. The court urged the driver and the other defendants to

pay the compensation. Hu again was not satisfied and appealed to the prefecture court. On April 27, 1999, the prefecture court revoked the verdict of January 20 and urged the county court to investigate again. On May 18, 1999, the Province Political and Legislative Affairs Committee received Hu's accusation and urged the county court to investigate. Hu's lawyer argued that Hu's husband had been a worker in Beijing, and that his compensation should be paid at a higher level. On December 23, 1999, the court issued another verdict including a more detailed calculation about the compensation. It said that although her husband had worked in Beijing, he was not a formal worker. According to the law, the compensation for his death was 18,000 *yuan*. Hu's mother-in-law was 70 years old in 1999. She was to be paid 240 *yuan* each year for 10 years. Hu's first son was 13, and he was to be paid 40 *yuan* each month until he was 16, the total amount being 1,520 *yuan*. Hu's second son was 8, and was to be paid 4,080 *yuan*. In addition, the driver was to pay 800 *yuan* for the funeral. Hence the total amount she would be paid was 26,929 *yuan*.

This was how the compensation amount was reduced. I consulted some judges and policemen on this, who told me that the court could issue a mediation statement if both sides agreed on an amount. If either side did not agree on the amount, all the items had to be calculated in detail. Therefore, 26,929 *yuan* is the official amount that Suzhi was supposed to get. When Hu Suzhi appealed because she was not satisfied with 40,000 *yuan*, the court calculated the amount more precisely and actually reduced it. The verdict was, from the court's perspective, not as unfair as she imagined.

Hu Suzhi's main complaint was that the driver did not pay the compensation. She had already accepted the reduced amount of 26,929 *yuan*, but she could not get even this. According to Fang Jiuze, the driver was poorer than Hu, and he had already paid money to both Hu and the other injured people. It was very difficult for him to pay the remaining balance.

As poor people, both Hu Suzhi and the driver wanted to get more and lose less. When they first consented to the amount of 40,000 *yuan*, the driver did not know that he could pay less in such a case. Because her husband had been killed in the accident, Hu Suzhi supposed that she had enough moral capital to ask for more. The driver, according to Fang Jiuze, also felt sorry and did not complain when asked to pay so much. He did not pay it in time only because he could not afford that much. The payment to other injured people had exhausted his meager resources. This lawsuit virtually destroyed his family. He had planned to save some money and then get married. Because of the lawsuit, he not only gave up the idea of marrying, but also lost all that he had saved so far. After Hu Suzhi attempted suicide in Tiananmen Square, the money that Hu Suzhi got was from the government, not from the driver.

By this I do not mean to imply that Hu Suzhi was not suffering injustice, but rather that the injustice that she suffered and her subsequent protest should be understood in the larger context. She not only complained that the driver did not pay the compensation, but also felt wronged by the state. What she declared in Tiananmen Square was that there was not a single good official in Mengzhou. This

was not because she misunderstood the reality, but because the state had failed to compensate her as she had expected. Even Fang Jiuze, who was accused by Suzhi and was somewhat biased towards the driver, showed sympathy for Suzhi: "She is unfortunate to live in such an unjust society. Nobody shows pity to such a woman, and she has really suffered very much." Given that he denied that the driver had bribed the officials, what did he mean by "such an unjust society"?

When the driver failed to pay Hu Suzhi, she turned to other strategies: a taxation protest and an attempted suicide. This was an important turn. On a practical level, she was no longer playing a power game with the driver, but was engaged in a power game with the state. At first, the state had only been a mediator between Suzhi and the driver, playing a similar role as in the cases of Haopeng (1.2) and Guizhi (10.2). In Suzhi's case, however, the state took a side in the power game because it had failed in its role as mediator.

Pragmatically, the money Suzhi had spent for the lawsuit far exceeded what she got. She said, "I did that not in order to get more money, but only in order to win more *qi*. If I only considered money, I would have given up a long time ago." Suzhi spent much time and money on the lawsuit in order to regain her dignity. The state wronged her not because some officials might have been bribed, but because it failed its duty to preserve people's dignity (that is, to insure that Suzhi get a just compensation for her husband's death). The fact that the driver was too poor to pay the compensation could not excuse the state. When it could not fulfill its duty, the state was also forced to participate in a power game. Both the taxation protest and the attempted suicide were part of a power game between Suzhi and the state.

Hu Suzhi refused to pay taxes not because she did not want to pay, nor because she disliked the tax collectors, but because she could not get the compensation from her husband's death, which she thought the government should have helped her get. As she implied, many people refuse to pay taxes because of certain problems irrelevant to taxation. The cadres can of course rightly say that the peasants should not confuse different issues, because tax collectors are not responsible for their suffering, after all. The key, however, is that this is the only way for the peasants to resist the state. In other words, in the power games with the state, the peasants hold no power (they are always in a passive position) except in the case of taxation. In most other cases, the peasants can only accept what the state assigns to them. In the matter of taxation, however, although everyone is supposed to pay taxes, one can decide whether to pay it or not, and this is one area in which an individual has power. When the peasants are wronged by officials, they are not on a level playing field with the officials to engage in power games, although they might think that they have moral capital. The most likely chance for them to take initiative to resist is to refuse to pay taxes.<sup>8</sup>

An assumption underpinning the taxation protest is that the state is an entity, every official is related to every other, and everyone must be responsible for the mistake of anyone else. Although this is logical in theory, in practice, the tax collectors were not responsible for Suzhi's compensation. They were not obliged to play a power game with Suzhi. In order to really make the state as a whole engage in the power game, Suzhi decided to go to Beijing to look for Clear Heaven,

because the central government is ultimately responsible for every single official. “Clear Heaven (*qing tian*),” meaning a good official who could really help the people, is the standard Chinese metaphor for good officials who really care about the people.

In contrast to many attempted suicides that I have examined, Suzhi’s was obviously aimed at getting help. The public setting is very different from the domestic setting. As I argued in Chapter 7, most suicide attempters do not cry for help by showing how weak they are, but rather they cry for justice by showing that they are not as weak as they appear to be. When they attempt suicide, the other party in the power game is forced to give up or at least to take notice or be publicly humiliated. In Suzhi’s case, however, she was engaged in a power game with the state only because the state was supposed to help her as a mediator. It had nothing to give up, but was forced to help her. In other words, she did not put herself in a passive and weak position when seeking help. Instead, she showed her dignity by urging the policemen to help her immediately.

This is a tricky matter because it represents neither a cry for justice as in family politics, nor a cry for help as in the strict Western sense. It is rather a “struggle for help.” The difference between a cry for help and a struggle for help is nuance, but it shows the different cultural and political significances of attempted suicide.

After Suzhi’s attempted suicide in Beijing, the local government immediately paid the compensation to her. Although she still complained about the driver, she was already satisfied.

Suzhi’s case shows that the state is not merely a mediator. If it only passively mediated interfamily or other conflicts, it could not be a good government. A good state must actively enhance human dignity and make people live a decent life. Hence we cannot conclude that the government is irrelevant to suicide simply because it cannot intervene in family conflicts. A state is “clear heaven” only when it can make people live a life with justice and dignity.

### 10.3 Public injustice

An individual not only lives within the family, but also under the government. Chinese people often compare the country to a big family. Public justice has quite a few similarities with domestic justice. But there is still a significant difference between relatives and strangers. We will further see this in Gao Yan’s case.

On October 25, 2002, right before the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, a case of suicide attracted much attention in the county. A prisoner hanged himself to death, and his brothers were enraged.

The villagers in Jianli had refused to pay taxes for five years, and the township government decided to solve the problem in 2002 when the new agriculture tax was launched and the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was about to be held. It so happened that they found someone had put poison in the food of the village Party secretary, who was in charge of the tax collecting.<sup>9</sup> Gao Yan, an electrician, was suspected of the crime and put in

jail. Soon word came that he had committed suicide. The villagers suspected that he had been beaten to death in prison. Many villagers joined Gao Yan's four brothers to protest.

In March 2003, I interviewed some officials, and they showed me certain court documents. At that time the investigation had been completed, yet the brothers of the deceased were not satisfied. Hence the case did not come to an end, and it was still a very sensitive issue. The officials were kind enough to tell me some details about the case, but refused to show me more documents.

I read the report of the autopsy, a report composed by the Political and Legislative Affairs Committee, and another report composed by the inquisitors (*jian cha yuan*). Below is what I learned from the three reports.

Several days after the collection of taxes, the Party secretary of Jianli noticed that his lunch tasted strange. He fed it to some chickens, and the chickens died. He and his wife were suspicious about it and reported it to the police. The police found that there was cyanide in the food. The Party secretary suspected that Gao Yan had poisoned the food, but he did not have enough proof. To prevent Gao Yan from escaping, they detained him on the pretext that he was riding a motorcycle without a driver's license. In the interrogation, Gao Yan denied that he had committed any crime. Several days later, however, he confessed that he had poisoned the Party secretary's food. About two days later, the policemen found that he had hanged himself and was dead.

According to the autopsy report, Gao Yan did commit suicide. The only unexplained aspect was a perforation of the tympanic membrane, which was very possibly caused by heavy-handed interrogation techniques. The officials argued that he had not been beaten to death. In the report of the Political and Legislative Affairs Committee, it was noted that Gao Yan had confessed that he had put poison in the Party secretary's lunch. Nevertheless, the inquisitors said that the quantity that Gao Yan had confessed to did not match the real quantity. The document said that Gao Yan had lost face when the "truth" got out, and several times he had said that he wanted to die. They tried to argue that Gao Yan committed suicide because of his regret and loss of face. I was unable to determine whether there was a written statement of his confession, as I was not granted access to such sensitive documents. The inquisitors solicited the testimony of three policemen who had guarded Gao Yan, but the court had not yet announced its verdict.

I also interviewed the brother of Gao Yan's wife, a major participant in the protest. He said that Gao Yan was the third of five brothers, and he was 38 years old in 2002. As an electrician in the village, he had to collect electricity fees from everyone, and many villagers consequently disliked him. In 2000, the government returned some of the electricity fees to the village. Gao Yan seemingly embezzled 2,000 *yuan* out of the returned fees for himself. The newly elected Party secretary, who was present when Gao Yan took the money, was unhappy about the situation. The villagers were also angry because they had suspected Gao Yan of misappropriating electricity fees. The villagers checked the ledger. To their surprise, Gao Yan had never

appropriated any extra fees, but had paid many fees with his own money when the villagers had refused to pay. Therefore, the village committee owed him 10,000 *yuan*. That was why he had taken the 2,000 *yuan* for himself.

Because he did not get the full amount back, Gao Yan refused to pay taxes from 2000 to 2002. In 2002, the total tax amount was greatly decreased, and the government urged the peasants to pay their overdue taxes from previous years. Gao Yan said to the Party secretary, "Since the village committee owes me 8,000 *yuan*, please take my tax out of the 8,000 *yuan*." Gao Yan claimed that he had borrowed a good deal of money to pay the electricity fees, and thus he needed help to pay off his debts. One night he went to the house of the Party secretary to talk about this. According to his brother-in-law, Gao Yan did not enter the house of the Party secretary, but talked to him outside the gate.

It so happened that the Party secretary found poison in his food on that same day. The Party secretary's wife had cooked some eggplant, but it tasted a little bitter. She cooked something else and found the same problem. Then the Party secretary went to the police and claimed that there was poison in his dish. A policeman had two chickens eat the eggplant, and the chickens died. They found that there was cyanide in the couple's salt.

When the policemen started investigating, they found that Gao Yan, who, as an electrician, had access to cyanide, had visited the Party secretary that day. The police therefore suspected that Gao Yan had put the cyanide in the salt. According to Gao Yan's brother-in-law, however, the poison was found in the Party secretary's lunch, while Gao Yan had only gone to the Party secretary's house that evening.

Two days after the event, the police summoned Gao Yan. They checked Gao Yan's nails and had him write with a brush. Some other policemen came to search Gao Yan's house. Gao Yan returned home the next morning. Four days later, Gao Yan was summoned again and returned on the same day. One week later, Gao Yan was summoned a third time. Later Gao Yan told his brother-in-law: "A policeman interrogated me in a small room. He said harshly, 'It is obviously you who poisoned the food, and you must confess.' The policeman said, 'If you are the son of your father, don't confess.' I responded, 'If you are the son of your father, then solve this problem in our village.'<sup>10</sup> He slapped me on the face. I said, 'It is unlawful for you to beat me.' The policeman said, 'Today I am not concerned with the law.' He slapped me again on the face, and I lost my hearing immediately. Seeing that I was hurt, he was not so harsh any more. I was released again." His brother-in-law urged Gao Yan to go to the hospital. A doctor examined his ears and diagnosed him with a perforation of the tympanic membrane. The doctor said, "It will be better in two weeks."

Gao Yan's wife asked him, "Did you poison the food? Please tell me the truth." Gao Yan sighed and said, "What can I say if even my wife does not believe me?" His brother-in-law said, "At that time, we did not really believe him. Even his brothers suspected that he had poisoned the food. One day he came to my house, and I asked him directly, 'Tell me whether you really poisoned the food. If you did, we will see what we can do for you. If you did not,

we will think about other solutions.’ Gao Yan insisted that he was not guilty. I thought it over and also agreed that he had had no opportunity to commit the crime, because he had gone to the Party secretary’s house at night, not in the day, and he did not enter the house at all. I said, ‘If you are really innocent, you should fear nothing. You should have sound reason and strong *qi (li zhi qi zhuang)*. If you flee, they will suspect that you run in fear.’ We consulted some lawyers, and we were ready for any lawsuit.”

One week later, a policeman told Gao Yan to go to the police station, with cryptic instructions to “draw matters to a conclusion.” Hearing that, Gao Yan was very happy and thought that the groundless accusations would come to an end. He went to the police by motorcycle and never came back. The next day, a policeman called Gao Yan’s wife and said that Gao Yan had been arrested for riding a motorcycle without a license.

There was no news about Gao Yan until six days later, when someone asked Gao Yan’s two brothers to go to the inquisitors. Two judges told them that Gao Yan had hanged himself to death at 6 pm the previous day. When his cellmates went to have supper at 5:45, Gao Yan did not go with them. The cook saw that Gao Yan had not come for supper and went to see him. It was said that Gao Yan was still alive when he was first found. They sent him to the hospital, and he died there. Gao Yan’s brothers wanted to see Gao Yan’s body, but the judges said that they could not see it until after the autopsy.

Two days later, the forensic medicine experts came from the prefecture and performed an autopsy. Gao Yan’s brother-in-law said, “In theory, there should not be too many relatives present, but they finally allowed all of us to come. Gao Yan had four brothers and many other kinsmen. That day my mother was ill, and I arrived a little late. When I got there, I was surprised to find there were at least 70 people present. They were all villagers from Jianli. Although these people did not like Gao Yan because of the conflicts about electricity fees, they all showed pity after his death.” Gao Yan’s brother-in-law stood right beside the corpse and watched the whole autopsy process. He described it to me: “Gao Yan had closed his eyes and was clenching his teeth. His tongue did not come out of his mouth, and his feet were pointing upwards. It did not seem like he had hanged himself. There was a scar along his neck. I suspected that they had made it up. There was no trauma on the surface of his body. When the forensic medicine experts cut off his skin, I found that on his left shoulder there was a small scar the size of a coin. Between the sixth and the seventh ribs at the right, there was a wound. His six ribs (from the first to the sixth) were apparently broken. Later they explained that five ribs were already broken when Gao Yan was sent to the hospital, but they denied that the other one was also broken. The forensic medicine experts said that there was no blood on his broken ribs, which showed that they were broken after his death. I think their reasoning was sound. My take is this: the policemen beat him very hard and killed him by mistake. They might have thought that he had just fainted, so they kicked him and broke his ribs. His testes was found torn. They explained that he had a testicular disease, but we did not believe that.”

According to the forensic medicine experts, Gao Yan was suffocated, but this did not imply that he had committed suicide by hanging.

After the autopsy, Gao Yan's kinsmen requested that his body be frozen immediately. The judges agreed that it would be frozen for one year. Two hours later, however, his kinsmen again came to the morgue and found that the corpse was not in the icebox. They were enraged and went to the government. At that time, many villagers from Jianli also came. The gate of the government building was closed, and they shouted that they wanted to report something to the leaders. The gate guard asked them, "Which village are you from?" They answered, "We are from Jianli." The guardian said, "I cannot open it if you are from Jianli." The villagers said, "If you cannot open the gate, can you deliver our report to the leaders?" The gate guard said nothing. The villagers got angrier and shook the gate. There were so many people that the gate was soon broken. They poured into the yard, and some officials came out. The officials were angry: "Who has broken the gate of the government? It is unlawful, and we will arrest those who have broken the gate." The Gao family said that Gao Yan's body had not yet been frozen, and the officials responded, "We will freeze it right now. Don't worry about that. You should go now, otherwise you will be arrested." Gao Yan's brothers returned to the hospital and found that the body was frozen.

The Gao family had doubts about the authenticity of the autopsy and requested another one. Later some forensic medicine experts came from Beijing and were about to perform an autopsy, but the Gaos were asked to pay the autopsy fee of 10,000 *yuan*. Gao Yan's brother-in-law said, "We made a mistake this time. We thought that it was a trap, and they would not change the autopsy report even after the second autopsy. Hence we did not pay them, and the second autopsy was not performed." According to his brother-in-law, the Gaos made several mistakes. First of all, if they could have linked Gao Yan's death to the whole event in Jianli, the situation would have been very different. "The villagers all supported them because they wanted to have all the problems in Jianli solved. Gao Yan's eldest brother, however, was not very capable and dared not relate the death to the whole affair. Hence the villagers were disappointed and did not help us any more."

Gao Yan's brother-in-law even doubted there had been poison in the food. "They made it up. I heard that cyanide is extremely potent. The Party secretary and his wife tasted it but were not dead; so how could it have been cyanide?"

The Gaos went to the prefecture government, the provincial government, and even the central government, but their efforts were futile. When I was about to interview his brothers, Gao Yan's brother-in-law said, "You cannot find any of them now. None of them is at home – they are all working hard to challenge the case." They printed many copies of indicting statements and submitted them to officials of all levels of government. At the end of the statement, they wrote, "There are no peaceful days in Mengzhou, but there are clear heavens in Beijing (*Mengzhou wu ning ri, Beijing you qing tian*)."



In March 2003, the Gaos again went to Beijing. They were sent back to Mengzou. Some Beijing officials were about to intervene in the case, but they could not come due to the SARS epidemic. The Gaos again went to Beijing several times, but there has been no result, and they do not want to pursue it any more.

The focus in this case is on whether Gao Yan really committed suicide. The Gaos insist that Gao Yan did not commit suicide. Their major argument was that Gao Yan did not poison the food, and thus there was no reason for him to take his own life. Given that he left for the police station so nonchalantly that day, it was unthinkable that he would have killed himself.

In the documents I read, there was no solid evidence against Gao Yan for this alleged crime. The documents were ambiguous when describing Gao Yan's confession. Even if he did admit to the crime, he did not know the real quantity of the poison allegedly put in the food. The reasoning that Gao Yan had committed suicide because of a loss of face is not convincing. When I raised this question, the policeman further explained that Gao Yan lost face because he did not know whether the people who had taken the poison were killed because of it. This is even less convincing. Gao Yan stayed a long time in the village after the poison incident. How could he not have known whether the Party secretary was alive?

Nevertheless, the police's insistence that Gao Yan committed suicide was not groundless. The forensic medicine experts were from out of town and so could not have been related to anyone in Mengzou. Moreover, the autopsy was performed in the presence of a great many people. My contacts at the police station told me that the police could not be so unified as to conspire in such a complex case. The police chief was not a popular leader, and many policemen disliked him. If he had dared so brazenly to violate the law, the policemen in his department would surely have testified against him. Because of Gao Yan's suicide, three guards were imprisoned. If Gao Yan had died for a reason other than suicide, such as being beaten by the policemen, the guards would of course have protested. It seemed unlikely that the police beat Gao Yan to death and pretended that he had committed suicide.

Since this case was never finalized, we cannot make conclusions yet, but there are two facts that are unlikely to be refuted. First, Gao Yan did not poison the food; second, Gao Yan committed suicide. The paradox is that these two facts seem to contradict each other. The Gaos would argue: why would he commit suicide if he was not guilty? The police would say: how could he be innocent if he committed suicide?

The Gaos did not have any strong evidence to prove that Gao Yan did not commit suicide. The details in the autopsy were not powerful enough to convince a forensic medicine expert. The Gaos knew nothing of what had happened after Gao Yan was imprisoned, so how could they know that nothing had happened during that period that might have pushed Gao Yan to commit suicide? They denied Gao Yan's suicide so firmly because they trusted in Gao Yan's innocence.

As I have shown above, the police did not have any convincing evidence to prove

Gao Yan's guilt either. They believed that Gao Yan was guilty because they were sure he committed suicide.

Although the Gaos and the police disagreed with each other, both followed the same logic: if Gao Yan did not poison the food, he would not have committed suicide. They had different opinions because they focused on different facts.

The logic about suicide in this case is different from the one in family politics. In family politics, people commit suicide when suffering domestic injustice. These people have moral capital, but they cannot use it when treated unjustly. In such a dilemma, they commit suicide to resist. When people did not know the exact reason for Zhulu's suicide, they thought that her husband must have treated her unjustly (1.2), but in Gao Yan's case, both sides assumed that Gao Yan would not have committed suicide if he was innocent and had been treated unjustly by the police. If he really had committed suicide, it was more likely that he had poisoned the food. For a similar reason, when Haopeng's corpse was first found, people did not believe that he had really committed suicide either (1.2).

It is assumed that if Gao Yan had poisoned the food, he would have been regretful, and that such a feeling would have led to his suicide. This interpretation seems similar to the psychological dynamics of guilt as studied by Giddens (1971c). If Gao Yan had committed suicide due to guilt, however, he should have had such feelings before he was imprisoned, and he should have committed suicide earlier. The dominant feeling that leads a criminal to commit suicide is not shame or guilt, but fear. A standard Chinese idiom to describe the suicide of a criminal is "to commit suicide out of fear that the crime might result in harsh punishments (*wei zui zi sha*).” A criminal commits suicide not because he is guilty, but because he fears the punishment when he is caught.

Gao Yan's brother-in-law had already thought about what they would do in the event that Gao Yan really had committed the crime: "If you did, we will see what we can do for you. If you did not, we will think about other solutions." Here he implied that if Gao Yan really had poisoned the food, they would help him to flee safely. At stake was not whether he was guilty, but whether he could stay safe in such a complex situation. Given that Gao Yan denied that he had committed the crime, his brother-in-law asked him to "fear nothing," but have "a sound reason and strong *qi*." Gao Yan had no need to fear, because he had enough moral capital and whatever others thought, he would vindicate himself. If he had seemed fearful, people might have imagined that he did not have sound reason or strong *qi*, and hence he would have shown himself to be more likely to be a real criminal.

People followed the same logic when judging whether Gao Yan had committed suicide. If he had not poisoned the food, he would have feared nothing and would have protested the fabricated charges. If he had poisoned the food, without any moral capital, he would have feared that he could not beat the charges. Hence he would have been likely to commit suicide. At stake is the position he occupied in his power game with the police, not his own feelings of guilt.

From Gao Yan's eyes, we have a better sense about the difference between domestic injustice and public injustice. In family politics, people who have no moral capital seldom commit suicide. Those who have some moral capital but are

mistreated are prone to commit suicide to show their righteousness. For instance, Kang Yu was so spoiled that his wife often cursed him, but he did not commit suicide (4.2). Shi Lei was also seen as an indecent man by his parents and wife, but he did not commit suicide (4.1). On the other hand, Surong had quite a bit of moral capital but could not use it when she helped her brother (4.2). It was not fear that pushed her to commit suicide. Therefore, moral capital might push one facing family injustice to commit suicide, but it prevents one from doing so in the face of public injustice. People imagined that Gao Yan would not have committed suicide if he were innocent.

A classical Confucianist saying reads: "In domestic politics, love is more important than justice; in public politics, justice is more important than love" (Zheng and Kong 2008: 2352). Although public justice and domestic justice belong to the same system, and the state is often compared to a big family, the two still follow different kinds of logic. Family politics consists of power games between family members, but public politics occurs between strangers. When a family member commits suicide, his or her relatives regret it, and their own lives are thrown into chaos. Hence one who has moral capital would win a power game by committing suicide. But in public politics, strangers do not regret other people's suicides. A person who commits suicide does not win in a power struggle (not a power game, but real struggle), but only shows his or her weakness. Hence usually when one suffers undeserved injustice in public politics, one is supposed to struggle for vindication, not commit suicide, since moral capital makes such a person hopeful. When a guilty person is punished justly, on the other hand, he or she fears punishment and commits suicide. Hence if Gao Yan had committed suicide, it could have shown that he lacked the moral capital with which to struggle; but if he were innocent and had moral capital, he should not have committed suicide.

Nevertheless, there is also another possibility in public politics: although one may have enough moral capital, one sometimes finds the situation so irreversible and hopeless that it is impossible to be vindicated. And consequently one may also commit suicide. This situation is somewhat similar to that in family politics, except that suicide resulting from family politics is usually caused by an inability to pursue happiness, and in public politics it results from the inability to escape from undeserved punishment. This is the only possible interpretation that might reconcile Gao Yan's suicide and his innocence. Although he did not poison the food, the policemen beat him so viciously that he was forced to admit to it. According to this interpretation, although the policemen were not so cruel as to beat Gao Yan to death, they were extremely heavy-handed with him. He thought that he could never be vindicated from this alleged crime. Suicide, then, was his resistance against the inquisition in a most desperate situation.

In fact, this was the most popular interpretation of the story in the immediate aftermath of Gao Yan's death. With this interpretation gaining widespread support, not only the guards and the police but also the county government became very nervous. There were rumors that all the important officials in the county might be punished due to this suicide. My contacts at the police station said to me in secret, "If the Gaos had not insisted that Gao Yan had been murdered, but instead

had argued that he had been forced to commit suicide, it would have prompted a powerful protest, and I am sure that the chief of police would have been dismissed, along with some more important officials. Moreover, if they could have linked this accident with the taxation protest in Jianli, the whole village would have supported them, and they would have won the lawsuit. These people are silly, and they only see it as a problem for their family, fearing that they might be implicated in the taxation protest. By accusing the police for a not very sound reason, they finally lost the villagers' support and put themselves in a dilemma."

Therefore, in public politics, either when a criminal fears punishment or when an innocent person is pushed too hard, he or she may decide to commit suicide. The former is understood as the admittance of one's guilt in a crime, and the latter is seen as resistance to unfair policies. Because suicide can also be a form of resistance in public politics, sometimes it is used as an extreme method to fight for political rights. The story of Hu Suzhi is a typical example.

## **Discussion**

In this chapter, we have examined the relationship between suicide and public justice from several perspectives. The philosophical basis for the state is in the Chinese ideas about life and human dignity. Everyone who is serious about a life of fortune should cultivate and protect dignity in family life. Hence domestic justice is the normal rule for human dignity. But nobody can live only in the family. Hence there are also conflicts between different families or between strangers.

Millions of families constitute a country, which is responsible for making sure that its citizens can live a decent life, and every citizen is at the same time responsible for the harmony of the whole country. In addition to the relationships between family members, there is also a kind of ethical relationship between a citizen and the state. In traditional China, this ethical relationship is found in each subject's loyalty to the emperor; in modern China, it is found in the citizen's loyalty to the state.

The state is responsible for ensuring that citizens live a good life. A modern government cannot intervene in family politics, but must fulfill its duty in other ways. Hence it should try its best to prevent wars, conflicts, crimes and diseases, to develop the economic and military power, to establish hospitals, and to weed out corruption. Although all these functions work similarly with those of a Western government, they are based on different cultural ideas. In Confucianism, the state is not a necessary evil, but is ethically responsible for the well-being of its citizens.

Therefore, in addition to the functions mentioned above, the state must also help people to live a dignified life. Public justice does not merely mean being immune from external harms. Even if the economy is developed, corruption is weeded out, neither war nor crime is permitted to flourish, and public health is well protected, if many families still remain disharmonized, then the state is not a good one. Hence the state must try to protect everyone's dignity, teach people to harmonize their families, and make everyone live as they should.

Although both public justice and domestic justice are aimed at protecting human

dignity, there are different rules in the two spheres. Despite living in the same country, strangers could not love each other as family members. Hence violence is inevitable for the state, but it is supplementary to its ethical functions.

Domestic justice and public justice are both necessary for a good life. Public justice is meaningless without domestic justice, and domestic justice should be enhanced and protected by public justice. Therefore, although suicide is largely a domestic issue in China, public intervention is still necessary.

## 11 Making good luck

Now we can understand that although neither the police nor the hospitals are responsible for suicide, suicide is still a public issue in China. The state might not be directly responsible for any single suicide case that happens in the family, but it still fails its duty if domestic injustice pushes many people to commit suicide. Given that most suicides occur due to domestic injustice, how can public intervention in suicide be possible? In other words, how can the government promote personal happiness and dignity? Without a satisfactory answer to this question, suicide intervention would be impossible, and any discussion of family politics here would be meaningless. In today's China, this question is central not only for suicide intervention programs but also for understandings of happiness and justice. It is not my aim to search out any perfect answer in this chapter, but by concluding what I have discussed so far, I hope to be able to raise some important questions that might help to inform future research and intervention.

By now, several programs for suicide research and intervention have been launched in China, and the most outstanding ones are the Support Groups for Women's Health of the Rural Women, and the Center for Suicide Intervention and Prevention of the Beijing Hui Long Guan Hospital. Although their short-term work has had negligible effects on suicide rates, these programs have at least pushed Chinese society and the Chinese government towards greater awareness of the seriousness of suicide. In certain periods, I participated in the intervention program of the Rural Women. I also interviewed some central figures in the intervention program of the Hui Long Guan Hospital. Besides these two major programs, there are also others that actively intervene in suicides, as well as individuals who pursue the same goals.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of this chapter, I will examine the achievements and problems of suicide intervention in today's China. In the second half, I will examine the discussions of suicide by Mao Zedong and Lu Xun, two central figures in modern Chinese intellectual history.

I argue that education is the best way for public politics to intervene in suicide, yet stigma, inherent in the Chinese idea of personhood, is a serious problem in suicide intervention. The problems that the intervention programs encounter are related to the problems that suicidal people encounter in family politics, and these were already foreseen in Mao's and Lu Xun's discussions of suicide at the

beginning of Chinese modernity. To ensure the happiness and fortune of individuals is not only a contemporary problem, but also a central task in modern China.

### **11.1 Psychiatry and suicide intervention**

Although I have been arguing that suicide in China is not primarily a psychiatric problem, I do not mean to imply that psychiatry is irrelevant to suicide prevention. In many cases, after all, depressed people are more inclined to commit suicide. Nevertheless, in the cultural and social context of China, suicide intervention should be understood in a different sense. Its task is not only to prevent people from becoming mentally ill, but also to help them attain and maintain a happier and more meaningful life. My experience in the psychiatric clinic of Mengzou shows that this is a most important issue for psychiatric intervention in suicide cases.

Two brothers from Jiuhe established a small psychiatric clinic in the county seat in 2000. As the first psychiatric clinic in Mengzou, it is now flourishing. Most of its patients suffer from schizophrenia, and to a lesser extent from depression. "Sometimes middle school students call us for psychological problems. We ask them to come in and talk with us, but we do not charge them for this. In such a small county, it is unthinkable to pay for chatting. We charge only when we sell medications or have the patients hospitalized." Apparently psychological counseling has emerged in Mengzou, but the psychiatrists do not consider it as regular business. Such counseling is not very different from informal consolation or chatting between villagers. I do not think, however, that they make no charge only because the patients are unfamiliar with the psychiatric counseling process; the understanding of the cultural meanings between medical treatment and talking is more profound. As I pointed out in Chapter 6, mental illnesses are seen as being separate from social life. Although people know that some mental illness results from social problems, they do not see social intervention as a means of healing. Psychological counseling is not seen as a chargeable service because it is not technical and "professional" enough, even though psychiatrists do it.

Such a separation between medical healing and talking also prevents these patients from being stigmatized. Both doctors and visitors see their conversations as common chatting, and hence the visitors are not stigmatized as patients with mental illnesses. The stigma involved for those who are designated as patients with mental illnesses comes not because of the diseases themselves, which are in no way seen as evil or shameful, but rather because the sufferers are seen as less than full persons. The doctors said, "Few people from Mengzou come to this clinic. Usually patients from other counties come to our clinic, and patients from Mengzou visit clinics in other counties." These patients are more concerned about being stigmatized as non-persons than suffering from mental diseases, and hence they try to hide their illnesses from people who know. If suicidal people seek psychiatric treatment, they will soon be stigmatized as "madmen" and "non-persons." The result of psychiatric treatment might then make them more depressed instead of enabling them to think through their problems.

At first, the two brothers wanted to name their clinic "The Mental Health Clinic

of Mengzou,” but because “mental health” was a difficult term for the common people, they named it “The Asylum of Mengzou.” “Because of this name, everyone knows what we are doing here at first glance.” Everyone knows what an asylum is, but few people know what “mental health” means, although the latter is more precise. Because there is an apparent stigma in the term “asylum,” it is more convenient for the common people. This again shows the significance of mental illnesses in the eyes of the common people. The psychiatrists are making use of the stigma and intensifying it, not removing it.

While people in China have come to realize that suicide is a serious problem, some psychiatrists wish that people would also recognize the psychiatric nature of suicide. The link between stigma and psychiatry, however, shows that the medicalization of suicide sometimes keeps suicidal people in a stigmatized and dangerous position.

Fortunately, the psychiatrists of the Beijing Hui Long Guan Hospital tread very delicately around this issue. They do not arbitrarily link suicide to mental illnesses, but convincingly show that suicide in China, unlike its counterpart in the West, does not necessarily result from mental illnesses, especially depression (Phillips *et al.* 1999; Phillips, Li *et al.* 2002; Phillips, Yang *et al.* 2002; Phillips 2003). Twenty years of work in China has enabled Michael Phillips, the leading doctor of this hospital, to gain a good understanding of Chinese society, and also earned him the reputation of a “second Bethune<sup>2</sup>.” He not only works hard on suicide prevention in China, but also tries to push the Chinese government to show concern about this issue.

In 2002, the Beijing Hui Long Guan Hospital launched a suicide intervention program. Since the spring of 2003, a suicide hotline has been available in this hospital. But among all their intervention projects, “the relatives’ association (*qin you hui*)” organized by Zhang Xiaoli seems to be the most successful.

In October 2002, Zhang Xiaoli organized this association for the survivors of suicide. More than 200 people had participated in its 80 activities by 2008. According to Zhang, this association has several aims: 1) to provide an opportunity for catharsis among the survivors, 2) to provide an opportunity for them to tell the stories of their relatives, 3) to provide an opportunity for education, 4) to help the survivors to get rid of their guilt, shame and self-accusation and prevent themselves from committing suicide, 5) to help them tell the truth to other people, especially to the deceased’s children, 6) to help them to be relaxed and have a better mental state, and 7) to provide referrals to appropriate mental health institutes where necessary.

Since 2002, the survivors have come every Saturday. At first, the organizers followed the suit of some similar associations in the West and asked them to tell each other their stories. Because each time there were newcomers, the existing members had to exchange their stories with them as well. Each time the activity lasted ever longer, and everyone became depressed. Zhang Xiaoli decided to change the procedure one year later. She no longer asked participants to tell their stories, but organized relaxing activities, like outings, flying kites, and some entertainments. The result was much more successful.



After a period, not only survivors, but also suicide attempters came. Zhang found that the groups were very different, and that it was problematic to have them talk to each other. She hived off the attempters into another, separate group. There she gives a psychological test, after which those who are really ill are sent for treatment. Others are divided into small groups, each consisting of eight to ten persons, who are required to sign a contract, agreeing not to disclose each other's personal information. Each group gathers ten times. Participants introduce each other in the first gathering, tell their own stories from the second to the fifth gatherings, learn about depression in next two, learn to re-identify themselves and change their ways of communication in next two again, and go on an outing in the last gathering. Zhang tries to teach them to respect other people, become more responsible and more flexible, and realize their dignity in everyday life.

The key term for the survivors is "support," but that for the attempters is "confidence." In both groups, the first principle is to treat participants as friends, not as patients, although some psychological methods are employed. In the past six years, many members of the association have changed significantly. Some of them are now very active in suicide intervention.

The reason for the greater success of "the relatives' association" is that Zhang has a profound understanding of the mentality of Chinese people and their suicide modes and creatively joins psychological methods with Chinese ways of consolation. Although the Beijing Hui Long Guan Hospital began its suicide prevention programs in the spirit of psychiatric research, it has now gone far beyond mere medical studies. The programs have not only passively prevented people from committing suicide, but have also tried to improve the lives of ordinary people. Unfortunately, Dr Zhang Xiaoli suddenly passed away on March 18, 2009, and we are not sure how the relatives' associate will continue in the future.

## 11.2 Suicide intervention of the rural women

The Rural Women began as a magazine, *Rural Women*, but it has already become a famous non-governmental organization (NGO) in Beijing. It launched a suicide program as early as 1996. It established two Support Groups for Women's Health on August 24, 2002, in Zhengding county, Hebei province, financed by the Ford Foundation. In 2003 and 2004, it established similar groups in two other counties in Hebei. In 2006, it extended its program to both men and women.

In 2000, I visited Ms Xie Lihua, the chief editor of *Rural Women*, and Ms Song Meiya, its vice chief editor and the supervisor of the suicide program. In 2002, I visited Ms Xu Rong, the current supervisor of the program of suicide intervention of the Rural Women. In March 2003, I accompanied Ms Xu Rong to Zhengding and participated in their intervention program. In 2005, I visited all seven villages in the three counties where they have launched the program for women and I evaluated their programs. In 2008, again I evaluated their programs, which were already covering both sexes.

Ms Xu and her staff started training the group members from Zhengding in the winter of 2001. The Women's Federation (*fu lian*) of the county recommended

two villages to Ms Xu, and the heads of the Women's Federations in both villages became the heads of the two groups. He Qiong was the head of the Women's Federation in Village A,<sup>3</sup> and she selected four other young women as the group leaders. Each of them ran an enterprise and had at least 100,000 *yuan*. The head of the Women's Federation of Village B was Wen Yuanbo, who was in her fifties. The other members of the group in Village B were women cadres responsible for enforcing the one-child policy. In the winter of 2001, the 10 group members and some women cadres of Zhengding went to Beijing and were trained in related topics.

In the spring of 2003, Ms Xu Rong told me her ideas about the groups: "When I am in Zhengding, I can help them to solve a certain number of problems; but when I leave here, I am afraid that my efforts will bear no further fruit. I want the women to support each other and make the program effective in an ongoing way. Therefore, I helped the villagers to establish two groups and hold regular activities. Each group has five leaders now. Village A is relatively rich, and the group leaders are all wealthy young women. Village B is relatively poor, and the group leaders are middle-aged women cadres."

I wondered what strategies and tactics these groups used to prevent suicide, and Ms Xu said, "It is very difficult to directly interfere in suicide cases because you cannot foresee them. I have learned about some cases in the two villages, but have not talked with the relatives of the deceased yet. It is a very sensitive topic."

When I first arrived at Zhengding on March 6, 2003, He Qiong, the group leader in Village A, told Ms Xu Rong and me the story of Huaying.

Huaying, Shang Xianshi's wife, was 36 years old in 2003. Having been running a furniture factory for 10 years, Xianshi was very wealthy. He had spent 100,000 *yuan* to buy a car. Xianshi and Huaying had two daughters and an adopted son. The three children were all attending school. When Xianshi became rich, he engaged a prostitute from the northeast as his mistress. He rented a house for her in the county seat. Several months before my visit, Xianshi's mistress bore him a daughter. The woman sometimes called Huaying and cursed her on the phone.

On August 25, 2002, one day after the establishment of the Support Group, Huaying visited He Qiong and complained about her husband. She confessed that she wanted to commit suicide and began to weep. He Qiong said to me, "I did know about the affair in her family, but I had never talked with her until she visited me. She complained that Xianshi was not concerned with the family at all, and hence she did not want to live any more. She wanted to kill Xianshi before committing suicide, but I dissuaded her: 'It would be better even if you divorced him. Think it through and do not make your situation worse.' She said that she wanted to die, and actually I had no idea how to help her."

After that, Huaying visited He Qiong several times and often said that she wanted to die. Several days before New Year's Day, Huaying visited her again and said, "I have decided to divorce him, but since we are busy before New Year's Day, I cannot do so right now." He Qiong dissuaded her from divorcing.

She had a talk with Huaying before I went to Zhengding, and Huaying said that Xianshi was behaving a little nicer by then. He Qiong said, "As long as Xianshi lives family life seriously, Huaying should not divorce him. She is already 36 and will have difficulty remarrying." Many people talked with Xianshi, and said that he had changed a little. Sometimes, although Xianshi stayed home at night, he was absent most of the day. Once when this happened, Huaying followed him to the county seat. At the bus station, however, Huaying could not find him and returned home. Nobody in the village knows where Xianshi and his mistress live in the county seat.

It is said that Xianshi was a good young man before he became wealthy, but that he became immoral and inconsiderate after his factory flourished. In Village A and other nearby villages, there are many furniture factories. While much cheap wood is harvested from the surrounding forest areas, since there had been too many factories, not all could survive the harsh competition.<sup>4</sup>

Together with He Qiong, Ms Xu and I visited Xianshi's factory. Huaying was not a talkative person, yet she was very friendly to us. Because Xianshi was also present, we did not have a chance to talk about her case.

The fact that Huaying sought out He Qiong for help indicated that the group was somewhat effective, but from what He Qiong told us, it was unlikely that the group could help Huaying to escape her difficulties. The power games in Huaying's family are like many that we have examined earlier. Similar to Surong (4.2), Huaying was an industrious woman, but her husband had had an affair. Xianshi somewhat resembled Shi Lei (4.1) and Zhou Liu (8.1–2), who had had affairs after becoming rich. Although we do not know much about Xianshi's mistress, she seemed to be similar to Ge Man (4.1) but more fortunate.

Huaying immediately visited He Qiong after the establishment of the Support Group because she had the greater moral capital in the power games with her husband. Compared with her husband, she was in a morally superior position. Huaying could resist by divorcing, committing suicide, or even killing Xianshi. This fact put He Qiong, the Support Group leader, in a dilemma. On the one hand, she was supposed to help Huaying to resist domestic injustice; on the other hand, however, she could not support Huaying overly much if this risked causing harm to the harmony and happiness of the whole family. Her aim, after all, was to help Huaying be happier. If she helped Huaying out of her troubles but destroyed the family, Huaying would be more miserable. This was why He Qiong could blame Xianshi when talking with us but could not do so when consoling Huaying. For the same reason, she had to dissuade Huaying from divorcing, although she predicted that they would do that sooner or later. She was an outsider and could not let herself be involved in family politics. What she could do was only passively dissuade Huaying from committing suicide, killing her husband, or divorcing. Here the politics of intervention could only prevent the situation from getting worse, but could not really improve happiness in family politics. Although He Qiong succeeded in preventing Huaying from committing suicide on one occasion, how could she prevent her from attempting it again?

The attempted suicide of Zhu Ming, a group leader of Village B, more clearly shows the dilemma that the suicide intervention programs face.

Zhu Ming was 43 in 2002. She was tough and capable, as strong as a man. Her husband, however, played mahjong every day and lost a good deal of money. He seldom worked in their field, and Zhu did all the work herself. Zhu often said, "I do not expect him to help me. I will be content if my husband does not waste too much money." She complained several times to Wen Yuanbo, and Wen also often talked with Zhu's husband. Her husband did not change at all, and Zhu Ming became very angry. When she found that her husband had borrowed a large amount of money, Zhu Ming could not stand it any more, because they did not have any money with which to pay the debts. Her daughter and son both attended school, and they had to pay for their tuition. Zhu Ming was a face-lover and had no idea what to do about her situation.

One day in March 2002, she visited Wen Yuanbo and wept in her house. She complained that she was too upset and depressed to survive, and Wen tried to persuade her to think it through: "Whatever happens, you have to bring up your children as a priority." The next morning, some cadres came from the township to collect taxes, including the head of the township Women's Federation. Wen Yuanbo called Zhu Ming in the early morning and found that Zhu's voice was very strange, as if she were not listening. Aware that there must be something wrong, she headed to Zhu's house with the head of the Women's Federation. When they got to Zhu's house, they found blood everywhere. Zhu was lying in bed, and there were many tissues strewn around the house. Zhu Ming had attempted to cut her artery at the wrist but could not find the artery. They immediately sent Zhu to the township hospital, and she survived.

Zhu did not return to Village B after leaving the hospital. She went to her sister's house in a nearby county. Wen Yuanbo told her husband what had happened; to her surprise, the man was not upset, but remarked, "She has learned another tactic!" When Wen told him that Zhu was at her sister's house, he said, "Then I must find something," implying that he would find a stick as a weapon to defend himself should people from Zhu Ming's lineage come to fight him. He did not think about visiting Zhu Ming at all.

One week later, Wen visited Zhu Ming in her sister's house, and Zhu felt much better. When Wen told her what her husband had said, Zhu Ming was very disappointed. Nevertheless, she promised that she would never commit suicide: "If I had died, my husband would not have taken care of my children, and they would be more miserable." When she returned home, her daughter helped her debate issues with her husband. He quit gambling for a while but soon resumed it.

At the time that Zhu Ming attempted suicide, although the Support Group had not been formally established, the leaders had begun its initial work, and the group members had been trained in Beijing only a couple of months before. The fact that a group leader attempted suicide did not imply that the

group's work was futile, but it showed that the Support Group was facing serious difficulties.

By talking several times with Zhu Ming's husband, Wen Yuanbo had become more involved in family politics than He Qiong was. She apparently sided with Zhu Ming and blamed her husband. Zhu Ming's husband, however, did not think Wen contributed to the harmony of his family, but regarded her intervention as another of Zhu's tactics to win in her ongoing domestic battle with him. He also saw Zhu Ming's attempted suicide as a new tactic in the power game. Unlike Kang Hui, who immediately yielded when his wife attempted suicide (3.1), Zhu Ming's husband was prepared for more fighting.

The fact that Zhu Ming finally gave up the idea of committing suicide did not imply that she had achieved happiness. When she attempted suicide to resist her husband, she had hoped that he would have been moved by her daring and dramatic action. She gave up the idea because she had learned that even suicide could not change her husband. If she had died, her husband would not take care of their children. For the sake of her children, she decided against killing herself. She was so disappointed with her husband that she did not want to engage in a power game with him any more. What would her life be like if Zhu Ming was even reluctant to argue with her husband? Although Zhu Ming was unlikely to attempt suicide again, her relationship with her husband worsened.

In these two cases, we have seen two types of suicide intervention. In Huaying's case, He Qiong could only try to persuade Huaying to think through her problems but did not get involved in family politics. The problem was that He Qiong was in a very passive position and could hardly change anything in Huaying's family. In Zhu Ming's case, Wen Yuanbo was actively involved in the family conflicts and sided with Zhu Ming in resisting her husband. Although she helped Zhu Ming think through the illogic of committing suicide, Wen Yuanbo could not help her to harmonize her family or achieve a happier life. The two cases show that it is very difficult for outsiders to directly intervene in family politics without disrupting domestic harmony. Although sometimes one can be dissuaded from committing suicide, one needs to find the courage to survive within oneself – no outside force can influence this. Zhu Ming was actively involved in the suicide intervention program, yet she could not prevent herself from attempting suicide. Given that her family was in constant conflict, how could Wen Yuanbo guarantee that she would never try again?

What is more, both Huaying and Zhu Ming held considerable moral capital and were in advantageous positions in family politics. This fact prompted outsiders to show sympathy and side with them. People of both villages also told me other suicide stories, in which they had little sympathy for the deceased. Two members of the Support Group of Village B told me how a young woman had committed suicide when her boyfriend had left her. Because they believed that she was a wanton woman, they commented, "Who would bother to talk with such an immoral person? How can we interfere in such a case?" My study shows that many suicidal people in disadvantageous positions could not think through their problems. The Support Groups have more difficulties preventing such suicide cases.

As we have seen throughout this study, family politics is different from public politics. When a public authority mediates a family conflict, it often takes sides, misinterprets and transforms the meaning of the conflict and does harm to some family members. Direct public intervention can successfully prevent violence, harsh conflicts, or even suicide in certain cases, but it cannot really solve the domestic problems that push people to commit suicide. In other words, it can help prevent the situation from getting worse in some cases, but cannot improve people's personal happiness. Although this is better than nothing, it cannot solve the key problems.

If direct intervention is not that helpful, how can a suicide prevention program be possible? Ms Xu Rong, who had come to understand this problem, offered an alternative: education. Although the Rural Women program is aimed at preventing suicide, it is not confined to direct intervention. The job of the Support Groups is not to passively prevent suicide, but actively to improve people's lives. Education is at the core of the routine work of the Support Groups.

The Rural Women program now has three branches: the editing board of the magazine, *Rural Women*; the suicide intervention program; and the training school, which teaches techniques to the rural women and helps them to run small enterprises. Ms Xu wants to bridge the suicide prevention and the training programs through the Support Groups. "If they could learn some techniques and support themselves through running enterprises, the women would not gamble and idle, and they might be more serious in living a family life." She has brought several women from Zhengding to Jiangxi province to teach them how people there had made profits from their home enterprises, and she was interested in exploring what enterprises people in Zhengding could develop.

Earning an income via running enterprises was only the first stage of the program. The two groups tried to make the villagers' lives more enjoyable through other activities also.

First of all, more women subscribed to the magazine *Rural Women*. Most rural women had never read before they subscribed to the magazine. Reading not only widened their knowledge, but also gave them pleasure. He Qiong even tried to write for the magazine.

Second, Ms Xu encouraged the villagers to establish a reading group and a small library. When I was in Zhengding, Ms Xu discussed this with the group members several times, but they had not yet carried it out. The group members wanted to organize some women to read *Rural Women* together, and then they planned to read some books about agriculture, running enterprises, and women's health. Such a reading group was aimed at both enriching the women's knowledge and providing them more opportunities to communicate with each other. Some villagers said, "After the decollectivization, one problem in the countryside has been that everyone minds their own business, and we have no opportunity to communicate with each other. Now the village committee is not powerful and cannot help people with anything. If people have more opportunity to talk with each other, they will be more likely to think through their difficulties, and fewer of them will commit suicide when gambling for *qi*."

Third, Ms Xu regularly brings in experts to give lectures. She told me how she brought Dr Michael Phillips to give a lecture about suicide in Zhengding. As a graduate from a medical school, Ms Xu often lectures on medical issues facing women. During the period that I was in Zhengding, she gave two lectures to the villagers regarding hygiene issues. She also tries to bring suicide attempters to Beijing for education.

Fourth, the most noteworthy achievement of the Support Groups is their cultural activities. Before the establishment of the Support Groups, there was a performance troupe in Village B, and most of its members were elderly. When the Support Group was established, it often cooperated with the troupe. Many members of the troupe also attended the activities of the Support Group. There was no such performance troupe in Village A, but after the Support Group was established, the group members also established a troupe. Now there are about 50 members in this troupe, and most of them are young people. The two troupes have become very active, and they even often perform in other villages. Ms Xu said, "The villagers had nothing to do in their free time, and hence many of them gambled or visited prostitutes. After the establishment of the troupes, many villagers participated in their activities, and they have more forms of cultural activity." According to He Qiong, some women in Village A quit gambling after they joined the group.

In spring 2003, when Ms Xu and some *Rural Women* journalists came to Zhengding, the two troupes performed for them. Many of their programs were good. The troupe of Village A put on a mini-drama about a family debate between the wives of two brothers, which especially impressed the journalists. Their mother-in-law was supposed to stay in the house of each son for one month. The event occurred on the last evening of one month, and one wife urged the old woman to go to the house of the other son as soon as possible. When the old woman got there, her daughter-in-law was playing mahjong. She said, "Next month has not come yet, so you should not come until tomorrow morning." The old woman had to go back to the house of her first daughter-in-law. Because neither daughter-in-law wanted to take care of the old woman, she was wandering around in the chilly winds and finally fainted and fell to the ground. The old woman died in the hospital, and her two sons discussed a funeral. Although they had not been filial when their mother was alive, they decided to make the funeral extravagant.

No suicide happened in this drama, but it exposed some essential problems in the countryside that are likely to cause suicide. Actually Wen Yuanbo herself had some problems with her daughter-in-law. When commenting on the drama, she said, "Everything might be easier if people could criticize themselves more. Perhaps people can be educated by the drama."

In the following years, Xu Rong made great progress. She had organized several conferences in Beijing and brought some people who had attempted suicide to take lectures there. Zhu Ming was much more optimistic, although her husband had not changed. Another mini-drama was performed by the villagers of Village A, which criticized those husbands who had taken mistresses after getting rich. Hou Xianshi, Huaying's husband, had been touched very much by this drama. Huaying finally persuaded her husband to change for the better. She made some friends among the

women she met in Beijing. With their help, she and her husband began another enterprise, selling salt. She was very happy when I met her again in 2005.

Ms Xu established similar groups in other counties, and all are working well. For instance, a man in Haixing county committed suicide because his parents favored his brother. His wife and two children were very depressed and faced a difficult situation. When Ms Xu established a Support Group in this village, the woman thought through her situation and participated in group activities. Now she is a very active member of the newly established group. Ms Xu learned something from this case: "Although the woman's parents-in-law were responsible for both her husband's death and her desperate situation, we should not vindicate her by blaming them. We cannot get involved in family politics, but we can help her to think through her problems and live a family life in a better way."

In traditional China, social organizations such as lineages and village associations (*xiang yue*) used to educate the villagers and hence protect the basic family order. In the 1930s, Liang Shuming, a famous thinker and social reformer, attempted to renew the village associations and reform the peasants, but his efforts failed (Alitto 1986). In a certain sense, the Support Group seems similar to these traditional organizations. It is not aimed at interfering in family affairs, but is effective in educating and hence in regulating the basic social order in the countryside. In Ms Xu's words, it is aimed at helping people to think through and live better. If there is sufficient funding to support these groups, I believe that their work will contribute to the decrease of suicide rates in the long term.

There are two basic modes for public politics to interfere in suicides in domestic settings. The first is to prevent suicide passively, such as by limiting the use of pesticides; the second is to improve people's lives more actively, such as by educating them about living a better life. Although I do not think that they are equally convincing in theory, both modes are necessary in practice.

For instance, the Ministry of Agriculture in China has been making efforts to control the production, storage and use of pesticides, the major means by which suicide is committed. In recent years, the production and sale of concentrated pesticides have been banned. The Ministry of Agriculture also plans to urge local governments to store pesticides collectively, and ordinary peasants will only be allowed to access them when necessary (see Jiang Yonghua *et al.* 2003; Eddleston and Phillips 2004). This passive method is by no means related to people's everyday life, but making pesticides inaccessible will make committing suicide more difficult and prevent people from rushing to death when gambling for *qi*. I am suspicious about how successful such a program can be, given that pesticides are so indispensable for the peasants. Nevertheless, I think that it is better than nothing. Similarly, psychiatric treatment will prevent some people who are mentally ill from committing suicide. Although I do not think that this strategy addresses the real reasons for most suicides, it will impact the suicide rate and decrease it by degrees.

Because of the difference between public politics and family politics, the most meaningful way to actively prevent suicide is by education, i.e., by helping people to think through their problems and live a more serious life. Only when people are



more prudent, perseverant and tolerant can they attain true happiness without rushing to suicide. After a period of investigation, both of the two major intervention programs in China are now focused on this central issue: education.

Nevertheless, there is a problem that both programs will face sooner or later: namely, that of stigma. As we have seen several times, the notion of personhood in China has sociological significance. This concept is deeply woven into both family politics and public politics. Mentally ill patients, beggars, bachelors, criminals, the disabled and others who cannot live a family life are considered non-persons. Suicide itself does not carry a stigma, but the stigma of those “non-persons” seriously prevents people from considering their problems as the equivalent of those of “normal people.” Non-persons are even seen as ineligible to commit suicide, and the suicides of mentally ill people are not counted as suicides. The aim of suicide prevention education is to help people live a better life and become more dignified persons. The practice of education, however, might exclude people who cannot be educated, such as the retarded, the illiterate, and so-called immoral people. Although the intervention program of the Beijing Hui Long Guan Hospital tries to avoid stigmatizing its clients, it is difficult for the clients to avoid this problem in the long term. The asylum of the brothers in Mengzhou seems to be more usual in terms of psychiatric practice in China.

Therefore, there is a profound paradox in the suicide intervention programs in China: the paradox between life improvement and stigma. In traditional China, equality was not highly valued, and stigma was integrated in both domestic and public political practices. The notions of freedom and equality, however, are very central in the ideology of modern China. Hence it will be necessary for the suicide programs to face up to and solve these problems.

In a certain sense, the difficulties that the intervention programs encounter are not very different from the paradoxes that suicidal people face. As we have seen throughout this book, the concepts of freedom and equality have brought both happiness and problems to the lives of ordinary people. They have intensified conflicts related to domestic injustice, and these are the cause of many suicide cases. In order to provide a better life, both privately and publicly, Chinese society is facing many challenges.

Therefore, suicide is not merely a practical problem. It reflects some very profound issues in Chinese modernity. In order to successfully control the suicide rate, we have to rethink modernity in Chinese settings. Indeed, suicide has become an important topic since the May Fourth Movement, the beginning of modern China. In order to put this contemporary problem in a broader context, I will conclude this study by reviewing two famous discussions of suicide in the early twentieth century.

### **11.3 Revolution**

Although the suicide rate has not been considered a serious social problem until recently, discussions of suicide are threaded throughout the intellectual history of modern China. In the New Cultural Movement of the early twentieth century, suicide became a hot topic among Chinese intellectuals, and many important figures

participated in the debates about suicide (Liu and Qian 2003). It seemed to them that suicide was more or less related to the basic situation of China.

In 1918, Liang Juchuan, a famous intellectual and the father of Liang Shuming, jumped into a lake in Beijing and drowned himself. Many important intellectuals, including Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, Tao Menghe, Xu Zhimo and Liang Shuming himself, published articles discussing the meaning and causes of suicide. Western sociological thinking about suicide was also introduced, and many people became familiar with Durkheim's work soon after its publication. In 1919, Zhao Wuzhen, a girl from Changsha city, committed suicide, and the intellectuals of Changsha published many articles about this event. Mao Zedong, who was 26 years old, published at least nine articles (Mao 1992a–i). Following the death of Zhao Wuzhen, nationwide discussions about suicide became heated, and were linked to the attack against feudal institutions, the feminist-oriented movements, and family revolution. Famous writers like Lu Xun and Mao Dun also participated in this discussion. Among these discussions, Mao Zedong's articles on Zhao Wuzhen and Lu Xun's story on Xianglin Sao are outstanding pieces.

Zhao Wuzhen was a common girl from Changsha. Betrothed to Wu Fenglin, she was supposed to marry on November 14, 1919. Her parents and brother, who loved Wuzhen very much, were quite serious about her marriage. When they finally decided on Wu Fenglin, Wuzhen also agreed happily. Her brother heard that Wu's mother was a difficult person. When the matchmaker told them that Wu did not live in the same house with his mother, neither Wuzhen nor her family considered that as a problem. Wu went to Hankou that year and planned to return home before the wedding. Several days before the wedding, there was a rumor that Wu had been arrested in Hankou because of illegal trading. Believing it was true, Wuzhen regretted the marriage and talked about suicide several times. The bridegroom finally came back, and the rumor proved groundless. On the way to the wedding, however, people found blood flowing out of the bridal chair. When they opened it, they found that Wuzhen had cut her throat with a knife. People carried her to a hospital, and she died there. There were several reasons floating about the town as to why she had committed suicide. It was said that when she had heard about the illegal trading, she also heard that Wu was 50 years old and ugly (although he was 30, and not ugly). Someone said that Wu used to have a wife who had died, and that he had a daughter. Someone said that Wuzhen had been engaged to another man, who had died before the wedding. His ghost came to her and begged her not to marry. Yet another version was that because she was unwilling to marry Wu Fenglin, her father had slapped her. Zhao Wuzhen's father refuted all these rumors in a newspaper article.

Witke points out that this event was not that unusual. It was possible that Zhao Wuzhen committed suicide based simply on the groundless gossip or on mental illnesses, but because it happened in the era of the May Fourth Movement, this trivial event did not pass unnoticed, instead immediately attracting a good deal of attention (Witke 1967). Two days after Zhao's death, Mao Zedong published his first essay on this event, titled "Commentary on the Suicide of Miss Zhao" in *Da Gong Bao* of Changsha. He thus begins his essay:

When something happens in society, we should not underrate its importance. The background of any event contains multiple causes of its occurrence. For example, the event of a “person’s death” can be explained in two ways. One is biological and physical, as in the case of “passing away in ripe old age.” The other goes against biological and physical factors, as in the case of “premature death” or “unnatural death.” The death of Miss Zhao by suicide belongs to the latter category of “unnatural death.”

A person’s suicide is determined entirely by circumstances. Was Miss Zhao’s original intent to seek death? No, it was to seek life. If, in the end, Miss Zhao chose death, it was because circumstances drove her to this. The circumstances in which Miss Zhao found herself included: (1) Chinese society, (2) the family living in the Zhao residence on Nanyang Street in Changsha, (3) the Wu family of the Orange Garden in Changsha, the family of the husband she did not want. These three factors constituted three iron nets, which we can imagine as a kind of triangular construction. Within these triangular iron nets, however much Miss Zhao sought life, there was no way for her to go on living. The opposite of life is death, and so Miss Zhao was obliged to die. (Mao 1992a)

He analyzes how the three nets drove Miss Zhao to despair her life and commit suicide, which would have been impossible if any of the three nets had opened. In his later essays, Mao further attacked the traditional marriage system, and this attack became a major theme in the subsequent discussion of Zhao’s event.

It seems to Witke that Mao’s link between this woman’s suicide and the social system was farfetched. Strictly speaking, Zhao Wuzhen did not have any new thought and did not complain about the traditional marriage system. Although she suspected that Wu Fenglin was conducting illegal trade, she should have been relieved when the rumor proved wrong. Even if Wu Fenglin had really conducted illegal trading, Zhao’s suicide did not seem to be in protest of the old marriage system.

We should not overlook the first paragraph in Mao’s essay, in which he emphasizes that this seemingly trivial incident was not insignificant. This shows that Mao was aware that there was no direct relationship between Zhao’s suicide and the social system, but he wanted to argue that there was something more profound here. Although Zhao Wuzhen did not intentionally attack the social system, she was forced to die by the social system. Zhao’s death was accidental, but social injustice was responsible for such a contingent incident.

Hence Mao further argues at the end of his essay:

Yesterday’s incident was very important. The background to this incident is the rottenness of the marriage system, and the darkness of the social system, in which there can be no independent ideas or views, and no freedom of voice in love ... In continuing this discussion and presenting some of my own views, I have done so with the express hope that others will earnestly discuss the case of this young woman, a martyr to freedom and to love, from many

different perspectives, and will cry “Injustice (*yuan wang*)” on her behalf. (Mao 1992a)

Mao’s logic is not so farfetched as Witke argues. Instead, Mao wanted to place “trivial” conflicts in the family into the sphere of public politics. Wuzhen herself was not responsible for her misfortune, but the traditional marriage system and Chinese society as a whole was. In order to give common people like Zhao Wuzhen more freedom, a social revolution was necessary, according to Mao.

In another essay, Mao discusses the problem of Miss Zhao’s dignity (*ren ge*) (Mao 1992b). On the one hand, he argues that she had no dignity, because she was not respected and did not have a free will; on the other hand, Miss Zhao showed her dignity when she resisted against the social system with her suicide.

As I argue in Chapter 3, the ideas of “freedom” and “love” are integrated into the notion of personhood in modern China. This is exactly what Mao wanted to elaborate on in his essays. Social revolution and family revolution were necessary because the modern ideas of personhood were stifled by the old systems. By overthrowing these systems, this young man wanted to liberate the free will of everyone in China and make everyone a dignified and free person. Eight years later, in his “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” Mao presents his famous analysis of the situation of Chinese people: “These four authorities – political, clan, religious and masculine – are the embodiment of the whole feudal – patriarchal system and ideological system, and are the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants” (Mao 1994: 453). We see his basic ideas about the four ropes in his analysis of Zhao Wuzhen’s suicide, especially the metaphor of the iron nets.

As Mao had hoped, his revolution successfully transformed the basic family system in China. By destroying the old political system, it also radically changed family structures. In a certain sense, the family’s transformation is one of the most successful aspects in Mao’s revolution. Nevertheless, this radical change does not really prevent common people like Zhao Wuzhen from committing suicide. Instead, people are also vulnerable to the new ideas advocated by Mao. As I have argued throughout this study, although modern ideas about freedom, equality, dignity and personhood have offered new possibilities for personal happiness, they have also produced new problems and intensified domestic conflicts. Mao’s revolution in public politics did not bring forth happiness to Chinese people as he had promised.

## 11.4 Good fortune

Lu Xun, the most important writer in modern China, describes this issue from another perspective in his novella “New Year’s Sacrifice” (*zhu fu*) (1981). The novella begins with the narrator’s return to his hometown before the eve of a New Year. By describing the celebration for the New Year, Lu Xun draws a sharp contrast between the happiness of the other people and Xianglin Sao’s suffering. When the narrator accidentally meets her, Xianglin Sao asks him whether human

beings have souls, and whether they can meet their relatives after death. One day after his ambiguous but affirmative reply, the narrator learns that Xianglin Sao has died.<sup>5</sup> With a deep regret, he recalls Xianglin Sao's story. Xianglin Sao had become a maid in the town after her first husband had died. At that point, her mother-in-law kidnaps her and forces her to marry another man. Despite her resistance and a suicide attempt, she finally gives up and bears a son to her second husband. This is her first suicide attempt. Resistance and even suicide are required to demonstrate chastity when a woman is forced to remarry. This attempted suicide is considered honorable. But her reputation becomes totally different when she finally yields to her new husband, and the second marriage changes her to a "dirty woman." Before she returns to the town, however, nobody cares about her second marriage, and people think that she is lucky to find a good husband. Her life deteriorates with the sudden deaths of her second husband and her son. After her brother-in-law drives her out of the house, she returns to the town. The miserable woman tells the story of her son's death again and again, until it annoys everyone. Her yielding to her second husband becomes a shameful experience that haunts her. Because of this second marriage, she is despised and can never change her status. The combination of personal suffering and social discrimination ruin her life. She makes a final attempt to change her situation by donating a threshold to a temple. Whether her sin is atoned for is unknown, but in real life, her status does not improve. She has become a beggar when the narrator meets her.

This story is also an attack on the old marriage system, but it inquires deeper into family order and the existential situation of Xianglin Sao. Although Xianglin Sao suffers from people's disdain due to her remarriage, her situation is not unbearable until her son dies. It is hard to say how the old marriage system is responsible for Xianglin Sao's misfortune. When her first husband dies and her mother-in-law forces her to marry another peasant, she attempts to resist because it is both against her will and against the convention, but the second marriage does not push her into misfortune. On the contrary, Xianglin Sao ceases to be a widow and has a harmonious family. Although people in the town do not like that, their opposition and disdain cannot really prevent her from living a better life. Even after the death of her second husband, she still makes a living with her son. We can imagine that if her husband and son had not died so unexpectedly, she would not have been so vulnerable to the old family system, although she married twice. When her son is killed by a wolf, however, her situation entirely changes. She is not only despised by the people in the town, but also loses any interest in living. In other words, her family is destroyed, and she is driven to the margin of the social order and becomes a non-person. Her situation is somehow similar to that of Ge Man (4.1), Chaoyuan (6.3) and Sihuang (6.3). People can tease her without feeling guilty, make fun of her suffering, and do not have to treat her as a respectable person. Such a phenomenon still exists even after the old family system is gone. Lu Xun not only attacks the traditional ideas about widowhood, but also inquires into the fundamental ideas about personhood, fortune and stigma in Chinese culture.

As a capable and honest woman, Xianglin Sao feels wronged for being treated so poorly. Similar to Ge Man (4.1), she makes some attempts to regain full

personhood. When she returns to the town, she often repeats the story of her son in order to win people's sympathy. Gradually she realizes that people do not treat her as a full person and always mock her. An old woman suggests that she donate a threshold to a temple, so that her two husbands will not struggle for her after her death. Xianglin Sao finally saves enough money for the threshold, but she finds that her efforts are futile, as she remains a non-person.

Xianglin Sao's suicide is her attempt to regain personhood. The direct reason for Xianglin Sao's suicide is the narrator's answer that there is a hell. Xianglin Sao asks those questions because she wishes to meet her son there. She commits suicide after getting an affirmative answer from the narrator. Xianglin Sao suffers too much as a non-person, and she wants to meet her son to rebuild her family. This is not an action of despair, but an attempt to reunite with her family members after death. As a non-person, she does not have a family to provide her true happiness. The chance of reunion after death, though unreliable, offers the last hope for her to become a full person again.

In essence, the traditional family system is responsible for Xianglin Sao's misfortune. The transformation of such a system, however, does not prevent people from suffering similar misfortune in today's China, but creates new groups of stigmatized people. Xianglin Sao and some other non-persons struggle with fortune all their lives, yet power games cannot really change their social status. In fact, efforts to reduce suicide are unintentionally creating non-persons in China. Lu Xun has revealed a paradox inherent in Chinese ideas about life, fortune, personhood and injustice, which is even more intense in modern China. Social revolution has been unable to remove injustice from Chinese society. In order to help people attain more happiness, public politics should be more prudent.

The title of Lu Xun's story, "New Year's Sacrifice" (*zhu fu*), refers to a kind of sacrifice on New Year's Day. It literally means "to wish good fortune." I believe that Lu Xun does not merely want to show the misfortune of Xianglin Sao by contrasting her situation to the happy atmosphere on New Year's Day. To wish them good fortune might be a moderate yet profound gesture towards those suicidal people.

# Notes

## 1 Suicide as a Chinese problem

- 1 In this book, I have changed most of the names of people and places. When necessary, I also slightly changed some details to protect the identity of my informants.
- 2 The Bureau of Public Security is the general name for police in China.
- 3 For the concept of 'face', see a more comprehensive discussion in Chapter 8.
- 4 In Gouyi in 2001, there were six cases of completed suicide: a woman of 35 in Gaoyangfu, a woman of 37 in Weizhuang, a woman of 32 in Li village [Lanzhi, 6.3], a woman of 70 in Shuizhou, a man of 75 in Xu village, and a man of 20 in Li village. In the same place in 2002, there were eight cases of completed suicide: a woman of 70 in Shuizhou [Eryao, 6.2], a woman of 20 in Xianjialou (Sanxiu), a woman of 30 in Yu village, a woman of 22 in Song village, a man of 70 in Yu village, a man of 60 in Chai village, a man of 60 in Wang village, and a man of 35 in Jianli [Gaoyan, 10.3].
- 5 I could not get the precise number for 2001. As for 2002, there were five cases in Shouzhen (a man of 20, a woman of 39, a man of 20 [Luosheng, 2.3], a woman of 22, and a woman of 38); seven cases in Mengzou including the county seat and some villages around it (a man of 51, a man of 65, a woman of 25, a man of 21, a boy of 15, a man of 60 [Zhou Liu, 8.2-3], and a man of 35); six cases in Daizhuang (a man of 51, a man of 23, a man of 65, a woman of 50, a man of 72, and a woman of 39); eight cases in Zhongzhuang (a woman of 32, a woman of 83, a woman of 57, a man of 29, a man of 26, a boy of 12, a woman of 27, and a woman of 67); seven cases in Qianlou (a woman of 36, a man of 22, a woman of 26, a woman of 32, a woman of 33, a woman of 24, and a woman of 26); eight cases in Duzuo (a man of 40, a man of 20, a woman of 30, a man of 26, a woman of 20, a man of 35, a woman of 38, and a man of 50); six cases in Jiuhe (a man of 22, a woman of 37, a woman of 23, a woman of 35, a woman of 30, and a woman of 32); and six cases in Xiacun (a man of 60, a man of 50, a woman of 72, a woman of 32, a woman of 76, and a woman of 20).
- 6 Aristotle thus distinguishes the two kinds of justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "one kind of justice in the narrow sense, and of what is just according to this justice, concerns itself with the distributions of honor or property or the other things which are to be shared by the state. Another kind is that whose aim is to correct the wrongs done in exchanges, and it has two parts; for of exchange some are voluntary but others are involuntary" (1984, 1130b30–1131a3). The former is distributive justice, and the latter is corrective justice.
- 7 Yan Yunxiang records some sayings similar to this in his book *Private Life Under Socialism* (Yan 2003: 99).
- 8 Pearson and Liu (2002) also express a similar idea after describing the suicide of Ling: "It is too simple to argue that she was 'an oppressed Chinese woman'" (356).

## 2 Two philosophies about suicide

- 1 For instance, Durkheim says, “At least one might say that they usually consist of disappointments, of sorrows, without any possibility of deciding how intense the grief must be to have such tragic significance” (Durkheim 1951: 298).
- 2 See *Summa Theologiae* II-II Q64 Article 5 “Whether it is lawful for anyone to kill himself” (Vitoria 1997: 168–85).
- 3 Suicide in the West is often understood as a particular type of homicide. Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of suicide is a part of his section on homicide. In the laws of the early modern period, suicide is also understood as the murder of oneself. In fact, Agamben himself briefly talks about the understanding of suicide from the perspective of *homo sacer* (1995: 136–7).
- 4 Mike Gane also notices the difference between the methodology in *Suicide* and the methodology described in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, although his understanding is different from mine (see Gane 2000).
- 5 “To Live” is the title of a famous novel by Yu Hua, in which the novelist incisively examines the idea of “to live” through the tragedy of a peasant family. It was translated into English in 2003 (Yu Hua 2003).
- 6 In *The Republic* (439a–41c), Socrates divides the soul into a calculating part, a desiring part, and a spirited part. The calculating part rules the other two (Plato 1991: 118–20).
- 7 This is well shown in some classical Confucian works. See Chan Wing-Tsit, *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (1986), Chen Lai, *Song Ming Li Xue (Neo-Confucianism)* (1992).
- 8 “Ethical discourse is usually principle-based, with meta-theoretical commentary on the authorization and implication of those principles.” In contrast, “moral experience is always about practical engagements in a particular world, a social space that carries cultural, political, and economic specificity” (Kleinman 1999: 365).
- 9 In contrast to Margery Wolf, I see them as regularities rather than rules. Bourdieu distinguishes “rules” and “regularities” with this analogy: “You can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, obeys certain regularities” (Bourdieu 1990: 64).

## 3 Familial love

- 1 Wang Qumeng, the son of a former landlord in Gouyi, suffered much in the Cultural Revolution, but now is a millionaire. He runs a big company in Beijing. Peasants in Gouyi often work in his company in Beijing, and this makes villagers in Gouyi richer than those in other villages.

## 4 Family politics

- 1 Underground prostitution emerged in this area in the late 1980s. In 1998, legal measures to oppress prostitution became harsh. Nevertheless, the number of prostitutes did not decrease significantly, although their operation became more secret.
- 2 The trading city was established in 2000. It is a special area for all kinds of trade, and there are several streets of stores in it. The long-distance bus station is to the south of the trading city, and the local police office is to its west.
- 3 When Kang Yu’s father was young, he also had had a mistress in Shanxi and divorced Kang Yu’s mother, and this is why Surong said that their family had this tradition. Kang Yu’s biological mother was a kind woman, and Surong always referred to her when talking about “my mother-in-law.” Because Kang Yu and Surong were not good to Kang Yu’s stepmother, there was gossip that she had also committed suicide. When I asked Surong, she denied it, but I am not sure whether that was true.



- 4 The tricycle (*san lun che*) is a very popular vehicle in rural China. It can be either mechanical or motored, and people often use it to carry patients to the hospital. This should not be confused with a children's "tricycle" in America, though the latter is also popular in China.

## 5 Fortune

- 1 Here is the story of Mufang, Lu Li's ghost wife: Mufang turned 18 in 1980 and was supposed to go to high school that year. She was a good student in the class and had high expectations. Her father promised that if she could pass the exam and enter high school, he would buy her a bike and a recorder. Although the girl studied very hard, unfortunately, she failed the exam, and hence her father did not buy her anything. On New Year's Day when they were making dumplings, she drank pesticide. She became frightened after doing so and said to her grandmother, "Grandma, I have drunk pesticide." Her grandmother thought that she was joking and said, "Don't utter those ominous words on such a holiday." Mufang collapsed after a while, and her grandmother realized that it was true. When they carried her to the hospital, she was already dead.
- 2 For Chinese people's ambiguous attitudes toward their ancestors, see *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* by Ahern (1973: 191–219).
- 3 During the Cultural Revolution, peasants earned work points according to the length of time that they worked in the field, and were paid according to how many work points they had earned.
- 4 There was another temple for Empress Gouyi in Jianli, and its relic is still visible.
- 5 In folklore, Gao Jianli, who was a close friend of Jing Ke, the famous assassin in the Warring States period, and also an assassin himself, stayed in this village with his ancestral family. The village got its name after that.

## 6 Suicide and madness

- 1 In the late medieval and early modern eras, suicide (*fel de se*) was punished in many countries as being both an impious and an illegal act. It was claimed that suicide did harm not only to God, but also to the king and to the state (Blackstone 1899, Book IV, Chapter 14; quoted from Dublin 1963: 141–2). In the Tudor dynasty of England, the corpse of a mentally competent suicide was ritually punished and buried in a shameful way, but suicides who had suffered from mental illnesses were excepted (Sprott 1961; Minois 1998; MacDonald and Murphy 1990; Dublin 1963; Fedden 1938; Institute of Medicine 2002: 23–5).

## 8 Face

- 1 The area where the Entertainment Palace is had been a village, and it became a part of the county seat after the railway station was built in 1993. Although many people predicted that this area would soon flourish, it has not yet become urbanized. New restaurants have been built here, but most of them are actually brothels. It is another red-light district, similar to "the trading city" (4.1). Ironically, the new psychiatric hospital was located among these "erotic restaurants." The house that I stayed in was right behind the Entertainment Palace.
- 2 Huidong's three brothers all built very big houses. Huidong's own house has 20 rooms. There is a pond in Huidong's huge yard, and he was building a stone bridge across the pond when I visited him. He said that he also planned to build a small pavilion in the middle of the bridge. Out of his house, he said, "Look to the west. The fields that you can see are all mine."
- 3 I met a man who told me how Zhou Liu invited him to see a painting by a "famous artist." It turned out that it was the man's own work.

- 4 According to Qi Xinfang, Zhou Liu's first wife did not learn that he was dead for a long time, and even his sons were reluctant to come because they hated him. Zhou Liu's sister-in-law, the woman with whom he had had an affair, took care of his funeral.
- 5 Someone said, "When they were sold, the two children knew what was happening to them. They immediately addressed their buyer as 'Dad.'" I am not sure how reliable this information is, but it reminds me of how Ruyi flattered Zhou Liu's first wife by claiming that she was better than her Mom.

## 9 Thinking through

- 1 This is a very popular metaphor for "being unable to think through." The further a person gets into a tunnel, the more difficult it is for him or her to come out. Similarly, the more one sticks to an idea, the less likely it is that he or she can attend to other important business.
- 2 The exchange of marriage (*huan qin* or *zhuan qin*) is an old custom of marriage between poor families. A man in family A will marry a woman of family B, and a man in family B will also marry a woman in family A. Neither family has to spend much money in this exchange of marriage. This is called "*huan qin*." It could also happen among three families: a man of family A marries a woman of family B, while a man of family B marries a woman of family C, and a man of family C marries a woman of family A. This is called "*zhuan qin*." Weizhen's brother married his wife as a practice of "*zhuan qin*," the exchange of marriage among three families.
- 3 "Having neither a heart nor lungs" is a very popular saying in China, meaning that one is too confused and stupid to consider something carefully.

## 10 Public justice

- 1 There are oilfields in some parts of Mengzhou. Stealing petroleum is an unlawful yet lucrative business.
- 2 A very popular idiom goes: "A good official cannot judge a domestic debate (*qing guan nan duan jia wu shi*)."
- 3 For filial piety in today's China, see Rubie Watson's article "Families in China: Ties That Bind?" (Watson 2004).
- 4 A villager told me another version: The wheat straw was from Wubo's field, but the workers gave it to Lingbao. Guizhi told Wubo and his wife that Lingbao had taken their wheat straw, and they went to argue with Lingbao. Having learned that it was Guizhi who had told them the truth, Lingbao blamed her. Hence Guizhi went to argue with Wubo.
- 5 Some villagers said that Wubo and his wife had beaten her, but this was not shown in the court records.
- 6 The philtrum (*ren zhong*), the middle point right below the nose, is very important in Chinese medicine. Pressing the philtrum is a common way to re-awaken a person who has collapsed with shock.
- 7 These two critical rituals in a funeral are supposed to be performed by the eldest son of the deceased. During the funeral, a tile is supposed to be put on the top of the corpse. Before the coffin is carried to the cemetery, the eldest son breaks the tile, symbolizing that the ghost of the deceased will not come back. The shards of the tiles are held to be sacred, and they will bring good luck if kept in the house. In the procession to the cemetery, the eldest son holds a white paper flag. If the husband does these things, it brings great shame on him.
- 8 This situation has changed since 2005 when agricultural tax was cancelled.
- 9 Here is the sketch of the taxation protest in Jianli. In 1990, Jianli was a rich village. The village committee had 10 acres of fruit trees and could earn 100,000 *yuan* each year, which belonged to all the villagers. Several years previously, the new village

committee had been elected. From that point, the village could not earn any money and was even forced to borrow 300,000 *yuan*. The villagers were angry and requested that the county government investigate what had happened in the village committee. The county government sent a working team to investigate. The working team, however, was unable to find an understandable cause. Some people declared that they would not pay taxes until the village's financial situation was cleared up. A man named Gao Qiuzhi organized many villagers to demonstrate in the county seat. They went by truck to the county government and requested that the officials respond. Gao Qiuzhi, the major protest organizer from Jianli, bought some law books and studied them every day. The government tried many ways to put down the protest but all failed. The villagers of Jianli were very well organized. In the summer of 2002, Gao Qiuzhi built a new house. Although he was always careful not to break the laws, he did not ask for a license from the Department of Real Estate in the county, which was necessary for building new houses. The policemen wrote a big sign on his new house, 'Demolish' (*chai*). Gao Qiuzhi knew that he could not resist this time and immediately paid his taxes after the harvest. This did not save him, and he was soon arrested. After Gao Qiuzhi was arrested, the protest organization in the village was destroyed, and most of the villagers paid taxes. Although the government was successful in the collection of taxes, some villagers were still disobedient and as a protest wrote out banners with large lettering. The village leaders were very sensitive about whether other villagers might harm them. The policeman asked Gao Yan to write with a brush because they wanted to see whether it had been he who had written out the banners with large lettering. In addition to Gao Qiuzhi and Gao Yan, two other men were arrested.

- 10 "If you are your father's son" is understood both as "If it was your father who sired you and you are not a bastard," and "if you are the true son of your father and a real man."

## 11 Making good luck

- 1 For instance, Guo Wenxiang, a middle-aged woman innkeeper from Beidaihe, rescued more than 30 people who attempted suicide by jumping into the sea. See <http://www.cctv.com/news/talkshow/2022/jiuren.rpm>
- 2 Norman Bethune (1890–1939) was a Canadian doctor who came to China and died there during World War II. Mao Zedong highly praised him in his famous article "In Memory of Dr Bethune."
- 3 Although Zhengding is the real name of the county, the names of the people and villages in this county are all pseudonyms.
- 4 Later Ms Xu Rong found out that almost all the bosses of these factories had mistresses, and most of their wives had attempted suicide.
- 5 The author does not explicitly say that Xianglin Sao commits suicide, but it is implied in the novella.

# Bibliography

- Abu-Laghud, Lilla. 1986. *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ahern, Emily M. 1973. *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Alitto, Guy. 1986. *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-Ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Aristotle. 1984. *Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Hippocrates Apostle. Grinnell, Iowa: Peripatetic Press.
- Atkinson, John. 1978. *Discovering Suicide*. London: Macmillan.
- Augustine. 1998. *City of God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ban Gu. 1962. *The History of the Early Han Dynasty (Han Shu)*. Beijing: Zhong hua shu ju.
- Beck, T. Aaron, Maria Kovacs and Arlene Weissman. 1996. "Hopelessness and Suicidal Behavior," in John Maltzberger and Mark Goldblatt (eds). *Essential Papers on Suicide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Blackstone, William. 1899. *Commentaries on the Laws of England (in four volumes)*. Chicago: Callaghan.
- Bohannon, Paul. 1967. *African Homicide and Suicide*. New York: Atheneum.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *In Other Words*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Burton, Robert. 1921. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. New York: Tudor Publishing Company.
- Carlitz, Catherine. 2001. "The Daughter, the Single-Girl, and the Seduction of Suicide," in *NAN NU: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China*, Vol. 3, Issue 1.
- Chan Wing-Tsit. 1986. *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Chen Feinian. 2001. Family Structures, Familial Relationships, and Socioeconomic Changes in China and Russia. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, PhD dissertation.
- Chen Lai. 1992. *Song Ming Li Xue (Neo-Confucianism)*. Shenyang: Liaoning Jiao Yu Chu Ban She.
- Chen Weixiang, Cai Yuqin and Chen Mei. 2003. "The Analysis of Hospitalized Patients of Mental Illnesses," in *Journal of Nursing Administration (Hu li guan li za zhi)*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, 15–16.
- Chen Zhizhao. 1989. "A Theoretical Analysis and Empirical Study of the Psychology of 'Face'," in Yang Guoshu (eds), *The Psychology of Chinese People*. Taipei: Gui guan tu shu gong si.

- Croll, Elizabeth. 1981. *The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1987. "New Peasant Family Forms in Rural China," in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 14, Issue 2, 469–99.
- Da Dan. 2001. "Chinese Suicidology in the Past 50 Years," *Medicine and Society (yi xue yu she hui)*, 2001, Issue 4, 15–17.
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition (DSM-IV). 1994. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
- Diamant, Neil Jeffrey. 2000. *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949–1968*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dominio, George, Marisa Dominio, and Annie Su. 2001–02. "Psychosocial Aspects of Suicide in Young Chinese Rural Women," in *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, Vol. 44, Issue 3, 223–40.
- Douglas, Jack. 1967. *The Social Meanings of Suicide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Du Yongsheng. 2002. "The Clinical Comparison and Analysis of Suicidal Behaviors between Delusive Depression and Non-Delusive Depression," in *Fujian Medical Journal (Fu jian yi yao za zhi)*, Vol. 24, Issue 3, 30–1.
- Dublin, Louis. 1963. *Suicide: A Sociological and Statistical Study*. New York: Ronald.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1951. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. New York: Free Press.
- . 1960. "The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions," in Kurt H. Wolff (ed.), *Durkheim, 1858–1917*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Eddleston, Michael and Michael Phillips. 2004. "Self Poisoning with Pesticides," in *British Medical Journal*. 2004. No. 328, 42–4.
- Elvin, Mark. 1984. "Female Virtue and the State in China," in *Past and Present*. No. 104, 111–52.
- Farberow, Norman and Edwin Shneidman (eds). 1961. *Cry for Help*. New York: Blakiston Division.
- Fedden, Henry. 1938. *Suicide: A Social and Historical Study*. London: P. Davies Limited.
- Fei Xiaotong. 1975. *Earthbound China*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Feuchtwang, Stephan. 1992. *The Imperial Metaphor: Popular Religion in China*. London: Routledge.
- Firth, Raymond. 1971. "Suicide and Risk-Taking in Tikopia Society," in *The Sociology of Suicide*. London: Cass.
- Freedman, Maurice. 1971. *Chinese Lineage and Society*. London: Athlone Press.
- Furth, Charlotte. 1999. *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in Chinese Medical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gallin, Bernard. 1966. *Hsin Hsing, Taiwan: A Chinese Village in Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gane, Mike. 2000. "The Deconstruction of Social Action: The 'Reversal' of Durkheimian Methodology from *The Rules* to *Suicide*," in W. Pickering and Geoffrey Walford (eds), *Durkheim's Suicide: A Century of Research and Debate*. London: Routledge.
- Gao, Ge. 1998. "An Initial Analysis of the Effects of Face and Concern for 'Other' in Chinese Interpersonal Communication," in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 22, Issue 4, 467–82.
- Gibbs, Jack and Walter Martin. 1964. *Status Integration and Suicide; a Sociological Study*. Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Press.
- Giddens, Anthony (ed.). 1971a. *The Sociology of Suicide*, London: Cass.
- . 1971b. "Theories of Suicide," in *The Sociology of Suicide*. London: Cass.

- . 1971c. "A Typology of Suicide," in *The Sociology of Suicide*. London: Cass.
- Glenn, David. 1984. "Inalienable Rights and Locke's Argument for Limited Government: Political Implications of a Right to Suicide," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 46, Issue 1 (Feb 1984), 80-105.
- Goffman, Erving. 1955. "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," in *Psychiatry*. 18 (August). 213-31.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1978. *The Causes of Suicide*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- He Chuan and Niu Xiuying. 2004. "The Comparison of Suicides between Alcoholism Patients and Depression Patients," in *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry (Lin chuang jing shen yi xue za zhi)*, Vol. 14, Issue 1, 48.
- He Zhaoxiong and David Lester. 1999. "What Is the Chinese Suicide Rate?," in *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, Vol. 89, Issue 3, 898.
- . 2002. "Sex Ratio in Chinese Suicide," in *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, Vol. 95, Issue 2, 620.
- Hendin, Herbert. 1996. "Psychodynamics of Suicide, with Particular Reference to the Young," in John Maltzberger and Mark Goldblatt (eds), *Essential Papers on Suicide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Henry, Andrew and James Short. 1964. *Suicide and Homicide; Some Economic, Sociological and Psychological Aspects of Aggression*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Hillman, James. 1976. *Suicide and the Soul*. Zurich: Spring Publications.
- Ho, David, 1976. "On the Concept of Face," in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 81, No. 4.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1996. *Leviathan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1997. *A Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student of the Common Laws of England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hume, David. 1985. "Of Suicide," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Hsu, Elisabeth. 1999. *The Transmission of Chinese Medicine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hu, Hsienchin. 1944. "The Chinese Concepts of 'Face'," in *American Anthropology*, Vol. 46, No. 1.
- Huang, Xingtu. 2001. "An Analysis of the Suicides of Patients with Mental Illnesses in Rural Areas," in *Modern Practical Medicine (xian dai shi yong yi xue)*, Vol. 13, Issue 4, 198.
- Hwang Kwang-Kuo. 1987. "Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game," in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 92, No. 4.
- Iga, Mamoru and Kenshiro Ohara. 1971. "Suicide Attempts of Japanese Youth and Durkheim's Concept of Anomie," in *The Sociology of Suicide*. London: Cass.
- Institute of Medicine. 2002. *Reducing Suicide*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Jeffreys, Mervyn. 1971. "Samsonic Suicides: or Suicides of Revenge Among Africans," in Anthony Giddens (ed.) *The Sociology of Suicide*. London: Cass.
- Ji, Jianlin, Arthur Kleinman and Anne Becker. 2001. "Suicide in Contemporary China: A Review of China's Distinctive Suicide Demographics in Their Sociocultural Context," in *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, Vol. 9, Issue 1, 1-12.
- Jiang Huimin. 2003. "Analysis on the Schizophrenia Patients' Suicide and Strategies," in *Journal of Nursing Administration (Hu li guan li za zhi)*, Vol. 3, Issue 6, 15-7.
- Jiang Luping and Xu Xingjian. 2003. "The Control Study of Suicidal Behavior or No Suicidal Behavior with Depression Patients," in *Health Psychology Journal (Jian kang xin li xue za zhi)*, Vol. 11, Issue 5, 372, 382.

- Jiang Yonghua, Zhu Hong, Wu Chengyin, Zhang Huaiyin, Xia Bilei and He Jingyi. 2003. "Insecticide Control and Suicide in Rural Area," in *Chinese Mental Health Journal (Zhong guo xin li wei sheng za zhi)*, Vol. 17, Issue 12.
- Johnson, Kay Ann. 1983. *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Judd, Ellen. 1989. "Niangjia: Chinese Women and Their Natal Families," in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3.
- . 1994. *Gender and Power in Rural North China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kang Qiong. 2002. "On the Problem of Village Women's Suicide in Our Country," in *Journal of Jishou University (Social Science Edition)*, Vol. 23, Issue 1.
- King, Ambrose and John Myers. 1977. "Shame and an Incomplete Conception of Chinese Culture: A Study of Face." Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, Social Research Center.
- Kleinman, Arthur. 1986. *Social Origin of Distress and Disease*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 1999. "Experience and its Moral Mode," in *Tanner Lectures on Human Value, Volume 20*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Kushner, Howard. 1989. *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Lee, Sing and Arthur Kleinman. 2003. "Suicide as Resistance in Chinese Society," in Elisabeth Perry (ed.), *Chinese Society*. London: Routledge.
- Leighton, Alexander and Charles Hughes. 1971. "Notes on the Eskimo Patterns of Suicide," in Anthony Giddens (ed.), *The Sociology of Suicide*. London: Cass.
- Lemire, Diane. 2000. *The Body in Western and Chinese Medicine: Discourses and Practices*. PhD Dissertation, East Asian Studies Department, McGill University, Montreal.
- Lester, David (ed.). 1994. *Emile Durkheim: Le Suicide One Hundred Years Later*. Philadelphia: Charles Press.
- Li Meng. 2001. "The Disenchanted World and Guarding God of the Ascetic: The Issue of English Law in Weber's Thought," in *Weber: Law and Value (Wei Bo: Fa Lu yu Jia Zhi)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ren Min Chu Ban She.
- Li Xianyun, Michael Phillips, Wang Yuping, Yang Rongshan, Zhang Chi, Ji Huiyu, Bian Qingtao, Xu Yongchen, Malay Zhenwu and He Fengsheng. 2003. "The Comparison of Impulsive and Non-Impulsive Attempted Suicide," in *Chinese Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases (Zhong guo shen jing jing shen ji bing za zhi)*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, 27–31.
- Li Xianyun, Xu Yongchen, Wang Yuping, Yang Rongshan, Zhang Chi, Ji Huiyu, Bian Qingtao, Ma Zhenwu, He Fengsheng and Michael Phillips. 2002. "Characteristics of Serious Suicide Attempts Treated in General Hospitals," in *Chinese Mental Health Journal*, Vol. 16, Issue 10, 681–4.
- Lin Liangdong and Xu Weisen. 2002. "A Survey of the Suicides among Hospitalized Patients of Mental Illnesses," in *Journal of Clinical Psychological Medicine (Lin chuang jing shen yi xue za zhi)*, Vol. 2002, Issue 3, 165.
- Lin, Yuan-Yuei. 1990. *The Weight of Mount T'ai*. Wisconsin University at Madison. PhD dissertation.
- Litman, Robert. 1996. "Sigmund Freud on Suicide," in *Essential Papers on Suicide*. New York University.
- Liu Changlin and Qian Jinjing. 2003. "Studies of Suicide Phenomenon by Thinkers of the May 4th Movement," in *Journal of Historical Science (Shi xue yue kan)*, 2003, 6, 59–68.

- Liu Xiaofeng. 1998. *Preface to a Social Theory of Modernity (Xian Dai Xing She Hui Li Lun Xu Lun)*. Shanghai: Shanghai San Lian Shu Dian.
- Liu Zongfeng, Fu Yunjie, and Yu Xiangfen. 2003. "Delusion, Depression, and Suicidal Behavior," in *Health Psychological Journal (Jian kang xin li xue za zhi)*, Vol. 11, Issue 2, 128–9.
- Lock, Margaret. 1993. *Encounters with Aging*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lu Xun, 1999. "Zhu Fu," in *Pang Huang*, 2nd edition. Tianjin: Tianjin ren min chu ban she. (For English translation, see *The Complete Stories of Lu Xun*, translated by Yang Xianyi, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.)
- Lu Yingzhi, Dong Hanzhen, Tian Mingping and Cai Daqing. 2001. "Factor Analysis of Rural Female with Attempted Suicide," in *Chinese Mental Health Journal (Zhong guo xin li wei sheng za zhi)*, Vol. 15, Issue 6.
- MacDonald, Michel and Terrence Murphy. 1990. *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Maltsberger, John and Mark Goldblatt. 1996. *Essential Papers on Suicide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Mao Zedong (with pen name Ze Dong). 1992a. "Commentary on the Suicide of Miss Zhao," *Da Gong Bao*, November 16, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1992b. "The Question of Miss Zhao's Personality," *Da Gong Bao*, November 18, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1992c. "The Marriage Question: An Admonition to Young Men and Women," *Da Gong Bao*, November 19, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1992d. "The Question of Reforming the Marriage," *Da Gong Bao*, November 19, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1992e. "The Evils of Society and Miss Zhao," *Da Gong Bao*, November 21, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1992f. "Against Suicide," *Da Gong Bao*, November 23, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1992g. "The Question of Love: Young People and Old People," *Da Gong Bao*, November 25, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1992h. "Smash the Matchmaker System," *Da Gong Bao*, November 27, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1992i. "The Problem of Superstition in Marriage," *Da Gong Bao*, November 28, 1919, in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 1)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- . 1994. "Report on the Peasant Movement in Hunan," in *Mao's Road to Power (Vol. 2)*, edited by Stuart Shram. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- Matthews' Chinese-English Dictionary*. 1972. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Menninger, Karl. 1938. *Man Against Himself*. New York: Harcourt.
- Minois, Georges. 1998. *The History of Suicide*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Moran, Patrick. 1993. *Three Smaller Wisdom Books*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Niu Jingui and Guo Shenglan. 2003. "Depression and Suicide," in *Medical Journal of Chinese People Health*, Vol. 15, Issue 7, 441–2.



- Niu Jingui. 2003. "Correlation between Depression and Suicide," in *Journal of North China Coal Medical College (Hua bei mei tan yi xue yuan xue bao)*, Vol. 5, Issue 3, 301–2.
- Okin, Susan. 1989. *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pearson, Veronica and Meng Liu. 2002. "Ling's Death: An Ethnography of a Chinese Woman's Suicide," in *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, Vol. 32, Issue 4, 347–58.
- Perlin, Sermon. 1975. *A Handbook for the Study of Suicide*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Perry, Elizabeth (ed.). 2000. *Chinese Society*. London: Routledge.
- Pettit, Jeremy, Amy Lam, Zachary Voelz, Rheeda Walker, Thomas Joiner Jr, David Lester and He Zhaoxiong. 2002. "Perceived Burdensomeness and Lethality of Suicide Method among Suicide Completers in The People's Republic of China," in *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, Vol. 45, Issue 1.
- Phillips, Michael. 2003. "Overview of Suicide in China," in *Psychiatric Times*, Vol. 20, Issue 11.
- Phillips, Michael, Huaqing Liu and Yanping Zhang. 1999. "Suicide and Social Change in China," in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, Vol. 23, No. 1.
- Phillips, Michael, Xianyun Li and Yanping Zhang. 2002. "Suicide Rate in China: 1995–1999," in *Lancet*, Vol. 359, Issue 9309, 835–40.
- Phillips, Michael, Gonghuan Yang, Yanping Zhang, Lijun Wang, Huiyu Ji and Maigeng Zhou. 2002. "Risk Factors for Suicide in China: A National Case-Control Psychological Autopsy Study," in *Lancet*, Vol. 360, Issue 9347, 1728–36.
- Phillips, Michael, Gonghuan Yang, Shuran Li and Yue Li. 2004. "Suicide and the Unique Prevalence Pattern of Schizophrenia in Mainland China: A Retrospective Observational Study," in *Lancet*, Vol. 364, Issue 9439, 1062.
- Pickering, W. and Geoffrey Walford (eds.). 2000. *Durkheim's Suicide: a Century of Research and Debate*. London: Routledge.
- Plato. 1991. *The Republic*, translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Qin Ming and Preben Bo Mortensen. 2001. "Specific Characteristics of Suicide in China," in *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, Vol. 103, Issue 2, 117–21.
- Rofel, Lisa. 1999. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ropp, Paul. 2001. "Passionate Women: Female Suicide in Late Imperial China—Introduction," in *NAN NU: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China*, Vol. 3, Issue 1.
- Shen, Y., W. Zhang, Y. Wang, A. Zhang, *et al.* 1992. "Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol Dependence in Populations of Four Occupations in Nine Cities of China: I. Methodology and Prevalence." *Chinese Mental Health Journal (Zhong guo jing shen wei sheng za zhi)*, Vol. 6, Issue 3, 112–15.
- Shiga Shuzo. 1967. *Chügoku kazokuhö no genri (Theories of Chinese Law of Families)*. Tokyo: Söbunsha.
- Shneidman, Edwin. 1964. "Suicide, Sleep, and Death: Some Possible Interrelations among Cessation, Interruption, and Continuation Phenomena," in *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, Vol. 28, No. 2.
- . 1974. *The Deaths of Man*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.
- . 1993. *Suicide as Psychache*. Northvale: J. Aronson.
- . 1994. *Definition of Suicide*. Northvale: J. Aronson.
- . 1996. *The Suicidal Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shneidman, Edwin and Norman Farberow. 1957. "The Logic of Suicide," in Edwin Shneidman and Norman Farberow (eds), *The Clues to Suicide*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Sima Qian [Chu Shaosun]. 1959, *Shi Ji*. Beijing: Zhong hua shu ju.
- Sommer, Matthew H. 2000. *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Spence, Jonathan. 1978. *The Death of Woman Wang*. New York: Viking Press.
- Sprott, Ernest. 1961. *The English Debate on Suicide*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- Stacey, Judith. 1983. *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stengel, E. 1971. "The Social Effects of Attempted Suicide," in Anthony Giddens (ed.), *The Sociology of Suicide*. London: Cass.
- Tang Yong. 2001. "Predictive Power of Past and Family History Factors in Schizophrenic Hospital In-Patients Suicide," in *Sichuan Mental Health (Si chuan jing shen wei sheng)*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, 129–31.
- Taylor, Steve. 1982. *Durkheim and the Study of Suicide*. London: Macmillan.
- . 1990. "Suicide, Durkheim, and Sociology", in *Current Concepts of Suicide*. Philadelphia: Charles Press.
- Theiss, Hanet. 2001. "Managing Martyrdom: Female Suicide and Statecraft in Mid-Qing China," *NAN NU: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China*, Vol. 3, Issue 1.
- Vitoria de Francisco. 1997. *Reflection on Homicide: Commentary on Summa Theologiae II-II Q64*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Wahl, Charles. 1957. "Suicide as a Magical Act," in Edwin Shneidman and Norman Farberow (eds), *Clues to Suicide*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Wang Lijun, Michael Phillips, Huang Zhengjing, Zhang Yanping, Yang Gonghuan and Zhao Yunxia. 2003. "Evaluation on the Accuracy of Reported Suicides in the Chinese Population," in *Chinese Journal of Epidemiology (Zhong hua liu xing bing xue za zhi)*, Vol. 24, Issue 10.
- Wang Yuesheng. 2003. *Analyses of Conjugal Conflicts in the Middle Period of the Qing Dynasty (Qing dai zhong qi hun yin chong tu tou xi)*. Beijing: She ke wen xian.
- Watson, James. 1982. "Of Flesh and Bones: The Management of Death Pollution in Cantonese Society," in Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (eds), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watson, Rubie. 2004. "Families in China: Ties That Bind?". Paper given at conference: The Family Model in Chinese Art and Culture, Princeton University, November 6–8, 2004.
- Weber, Max. 1958. *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Scribners.
- Weiss, James. 1971. "The Gamble with Death in Attempted Suicide," in *The Sociology of Suicide*, edited by Anthony Giddens. London: Cass.
- Witke, Roxane. 1967. "Mao Tse-tung, Women and Suicide in the May Fourth Era," in *The China Quarterly*, No. 31.
- Wolf, Arthur. 1974. "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," in Arthur Wolf (ed.), *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wolf, Arthur (ed.). 1974. *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wolf, Margery. 1972. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 1975. "Women and Suicide in China," in Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (eds), *Women in Chinese Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 1985. *Revolution Postponed*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Wolf, Margery and Roxane Witke (eds). 1975. *Women in Chinese Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wolff, Kurt H. (ed.). 1960. *Emile Durkheim, 1858–1917*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- Wu, Fei. 2001. *Sacred Word on the Aves of Wheat*. Hong Kong: Sino-Christian Institute Press.
- . 2005. “Gambling for Qi’: Suicide and Family Politics in a Rural North China County,” in *The China Journal*, Issue 54 (July).
- Xie Lihua. 1999. *The Report of Women’s Suicide in Chinese Rural Area (Zhong guo nong cun fu nu zi sha bao gao)*. Guiyang: Guizhou People’s Press.
- Xu Xiuru. 2003. “Mental Health Education and Crisis Intervention (2),” in *Chinese Journal of Health Education (Zhong guo jian kang jiao yu)*, Vol. 19, Issue 8, 589–91.
- Xue Dewang, Michael Phillips and Yang Gonghuan. 2003. “Characteristics of 75 Suicides of Schizophrenic Individuals Identified in the Community,” in *Chinese Mental Health Journal (Zhong guo xin li wei sheng za zhi)*, Vol. 17, Issue 4, 129–31.
- Yan Lin, Wang Jianping and Li Li. 2003. “An Analysis of the Mental States of Suicidal Patients,” in *Journal of Chinese Clinical Medicine (Zhong hua lin chuang yi xue za zhi)*, Vol. 4, Issue 17, 13.
- Yan, Yunxiang. 2003. *Private Life Under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Yang Guoshu and Wen Chongyi. 1982. *The Sinicization of Social and Behavioral Science Research in China (She hui ji xing wei ke xue yan jiu de zhong guo hua)*. Taipei: Zhong yang yan jiu yuan min zu xue yan jiu suo.
- Yang Zhenao. 2002. “The Suicides of Normal People and Crisis Intervention,” in *Health Psychology Journal (Jian kang xin li xue za zhi)*, Vol. 8, Issue 6.
- Yu Hua. 2003. *To Live*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Zhai Shutao. 2001. “Relationship between Social Factors and Suicide,” in *Medicine and Society (Yi xue yu she hui)*, Vol. 14, Issue 6, 4–5, 21.
- . 2002. “The Mechanism of Suicide,” in *Journal of Clinical Psychological Medicine (Lin chuang jing shen yi xue za zhi)*, Vol. 12, Issue 2, 97–100.
- Zhang Huishi. 2002. “Factors Related to Attempted Suicide in a Consecutive Sample of Schizophrenics,” in *International Chinese Neuropsychiatry Medicine Journal (Guo ji zhong hua shen jing jing shen yi xue za zhi)*, Vol. 3, Issue 1, 12–14.
- Zhang Jie, William Wiecezorek, Chao Jiang, Li Zhou, Shuhua Jia, Yueji Sun, Shenghua Jin and Yeates Conwell. 2002. “Studying Suicide with Psychological Autopsy: Social and Cultural Feasibilities of the Methodology in China,” in *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, Vol. 32, Issue 4, 370–9.
- Zhang Yanping, Li Xianyun, Michael Phillips, Bian Qingtao, Xu Yongchen, Ji Huiyu, Yang Rongshan, Zhang Chi and He Fengsheng. 2003. “A Comparative Study of Suicide Attempters with Mental Illnesses and Those Without in Rural Areas,” *Chinese Journal of Psychiatry (Zhong hua jing shen ke za zhi)*, Vol. 36, Issue 4.
- Zhao Baolong, Yang Dongyuan, Shi Yongbin, Zhu Hongwei, Liu Yuelan, Ji Jianlin. 2002. “The Epidemiological Survey of Suicides among Patients of Mental Illnesses,” in *Journal of Clinical Psychological Medicine (Lin chuang jing shen yi xue za zhi)*, Vol. 12, Issue 4, 235–6.
- Zhao Mei and Ji Jianlin. 2002. “The Study of the Suicide Rate in China,” in *Journal of Clinical Psychological Medicine (Lin chuang jing shen yi xue za zhi)*, Vol. 12, Issue 3.
- Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda. 2008. *Commentaries on the Book of Li (Li Ji Zheng Yi)*. Shanghai: Gu Ji Chu Ban She.

- Zou Shaohong, Zhang Yalin, Dang Haihong and Huang Guoping. 2003. "Association between Domestic Violence and Suicide in Patients with Depression," in *Chinese Journal of Psychiatry (Zhong hua jing shen ke za zhi)*, Vol. 36, Issue 4.

# Index

- abnormal 18, 19; as *mo zheng* 93–101  
 Abu-Lughod, Lilla 7  
 Agamben, Giorgio 19, 22, 199n3  
 aggregate family 46, 65–8, 80  
 altruistic suicide 15, 16  
 anger 11, 26, 39, 74, 96, 103, 107–8, 112, 138, 145, 148–9, 162  
 anomic suicide, 15, 69, 139  
 Aquinas, Thomas 19, 199n3  
 Aristotle 11, 198n6  
 Asberg, Marie 17  
 attempted suicide *passim*  
 Augustine 21  
 Avalokitesvara 75  
  
 bachelor 27, 75, 139, 192  
 bare life 19, 21–23  
 behave as a person 10, 26–29, 52, 66, 116, 130–2, 133, 139, 153  
 Beijing Hui Long Guan Hospital 9, 12, 181, 183–4, 192  
 Bethune, Norman 183, 202n2  
 Bourdieu, Pierre 199n9  
 Bureau of Public Security *see* police  
 Burton, Robert 18–19  
  
 Catholicism 6, 101  
 cemetery 71–2, 201n7  
 Center of Suicide Intervention and Prevention of the Beijing Hui Long Guan Hospital 181  
 Chen Duxiu 193  
 Chen Feinian 11, 67  
 Chen Zhizhao 121  
 Christianity 21, 71, 76, 78  
 clear heaven 165, 167, 170–1, 175  
 confidence 184  
 Confucianism 93, 178–9  
 conjugal relationship 46; conjugal love 33, 45; conjugal interdependence 50–2, 60; conjugal family 60, 62, 76; conjugal village 160  
 corrective justice 11, 196n6  
 Croll, Elisabeth 37, 66  
 cry: for help 111, 159, 167, 171; for justice 171  
 Cultural Revolution 26, 53, 124  
  
*Da Gong Bao* 193  
 depression 4–6, 13, 16–17, 19, 72, 84, 94–98, 104, 110, 115–18, 131, 139–40, 145, 152–3, 159, 182–4, 187, 191  
 despair *see also* hopelessness 87, 140, 194, 197  
 Diamant, Neil 12, 160  
 dignity 10–13, 26–9, 35–7, 40–2, 50–2, 60, 62–3, 68, 74, 89, 91, 93, 103, 106–7, 110–12, 118–19, 121–2, 131, 133, 138–41, 144–5, 152–5, 160, 170–1, 179–81, 184, 195  
 disorders 17–19; bipolar disorder 16; depressive disorder 16–7, 104, 110, 153–4; mental disorder 16–7, 93–4, 96; in psychiatry 17; in Western culture 17  
 distributive justice 198n6  
*diu lian see* loss of face  
*diu ren see* loss of personhood  
 divorce 34, 47–9, 51–5, 58–63, 69, 83, 85–7, 124, 126–7, 136–7, 143, 146, 160, 185–6  
 domestic conflict 9, 28, 67, 69, 74, 97, 134, 161, 195  
 domestic justice *see* justice  
 Donne, John 21  
 Douglas, Jack 9, 15–16  
 Dragon King 75  
 DSM-IV 17  
*du qi see* gambling for *qi*

- Du Yongsheng 5  
 Durkheim, Emile 13, 15–17, 19–22, 27, 52, 69, 193, 199n1
- education 24, 102–3, 141, 166; education problems 3; as a way to intervene in suicide 181, 183, 189–92  
 egoistic suicide 15, 111, 139  
 equality 118, 192, 192  
 Esquirol, Jean-Étienne Dominique 16  
 ethical code 128, 130–1, 152, 160  
 exchange of marriage, the 147, 151, 201n2  
 existential condition *see also* family 13, 23, 29, 33, 45, 63, 71, 88, 139, 160, 196  
 extended family 80
- face *see also* personhood 13, 27, 36, 44, 58, 60, 66, 72, 109, 112, 120–139, 140–1, 148, 153–4, 161, 164; face-lover 95, 113, 122, 128–31, 139, 145, 148, 153, 187; as *lian* (moral face) 120–2, 124, 133; loss of 13, 27, 55, 59, 61, 66, 103, 114, 120–1, 124, 128, 131, 134, 137–40, 153–4, 161, 164, 172, 176; as *mianzi* or *mian* (social face) 120–1, 124, 130, 133; one who cares too much about face suffers a lot (*si yao mian zi huo shou zui*) 148; and personhood 27, 120–1, 131, 139; understood sociologically, morally, politically, and psychologically 121, 139  
 family *passim*; as the existential condition 23, 33, 45, 63, 139, 154–5, 196; family life 10–11, 22–9, 33, 35–7, 41, 45, 49–50, 56, 58, 60, 62–3, 65, 70, 71, 80, 82, 85–7, 89, 93, 97, 101, 103, 105–6, 115, 117–19, 121, 139, 143, 145, 152–4, 160, 179, 186, 189, 192; familial love 13, 22, 24, 33–45, 70, 71, 86, 89, 154; family order 12, 28, 191, 196; family politics 8, 10–12, 22, 24, 29, 41, 45, 46–70, 74, 75, 78, 81, 86–9, 94, 110, 116–17, 131, 137–8, 144, 153, 154, 160–1, 171, 177–9, 181, 186, 188–9, 191–2; family revolution 11–12, 33, 37, 45, 74; at the margin of the family 46–53, 101, 103, 118, 193, 195; *see also* harmonious family  
 Farberow, Norman 16  
 fear of punishment, as a reason for suicide 159, 163, 177–9  
*feng zi see* madman  
 Feuchtwang, Stephan 77
- filial piety 25, 33, 40–45, 76, 116–18, 152, 161, 190  
 fool (*sha zi*), 93–5, 101–3, 132, 150, 152  
 fortune 13, 22–6, 36, 52, 61, 63, 68, 71–89, 146, 152–3, 179, 182, 195–7; life of fortune 24, 28, 33, 35, 45, 87  
 freedom 11–12, 21, 37, 45, 105, 118, 121, 161, 192, 194–5  
 Freud, Sigmund 16, 19  
*fu lian see* Women's Federation  
 full person 24, 26–29, 37, 50, 52, 72, 86, 93–4, 103, 105, 121, 153–4, 182, 197  
 funeral 10, 23, 56, 62, 71–2, 75, 77, 85, 99, 108–10, 114–15, 164, 169, 190, 201n7
- Gallin, Bernard 28  
 gamble for *qi* 13, 57, 107–19, 129, 139–41, 143–4, 152–4, 189, 191  
 Gane, Mike 199n4  
 Gao Jianli 200n5  
 Gao, Ge 121  
 ghost 71–3, 76–82, 99, 164, 193; ghost marriage 72  
 Gibbs, Jack 15  
 Giddens, Anthony 15, 17, 111, 139, 154, 177  
 god 71, 75–8, 82, 85; Christian God 18–19, 21, 78  
 Goffman, Erving 120–1  
 Gouyi, Empress 87–9; temple for 7, 87, 200n4  
*guang gun see* bachelor  
 guilt 51, 174, 176–9, 196; as loss of moral face 139; as reason for suicide 111, 139, 154, 177–8; of the survivors of suicide 75, 78, 97, 163, 183  
*guo ri zi see* family life  
 Guo Wenxiang 202n1
- Halbwachs, Maurice 15, 17  
 Han Dynasty 6, 7, 88  
 harmony 11–12, 24–5, 27, 29, 36, 42, 45, 52, 58, 60–2, 68, 70–1, 78, 82, 97, 118, 144–6, 154, 160, 179, 186, 188, 196; harmonious family 24, 25, 36, 42, 45, 52, 58, 60, 62, 68, 70, 71, 72, 77, 82, 97, 118, 146, 188, 196; harmonious *qi* 27  
 He Chuan 5  
 heart and lungs 146–153  
 Henry, Andrew 15  
 hierarchy in the family 11–12, 45, 118  
 Ho, David 121  
 Hobbes, Thomas 18–9, 21–2  
 homicide 7, 15, 18, 199n3

- homo sacer* 19–20, 22, 27, 199n3  
 hopelessness 25, 47, 50, 86, 114, 116, 129, 140, 145, 152, 154, 178  
 hospital 34, 38, 43, 46, 57, 63, 80, 82, 84, 87, 96, 98–9, 108–9, 128, 134, 140, 142, 163, 165, 167, 173–4, 179, 187, 190, 192–3, ; responsibility for suicide 7–9, 181; psychiatric hospital 9, 13, 181–4, 200n1  
 Hu Hsienchin 120  
 Hu Shi 193  
*huan qin* *see* exchange of marriage  
 Hughes, Charles 16  
 Hui Long Guan Hospital 9, 12–13, 181, 183–4, 192  
 human nature 10, 13, 19–22, 27, 29, 120  
 Hume, David 21  
 Hwang Kwang-Kuo 10, 120  
 hypochondria 98–101  
  
 impulsivity 5, 11, 40, 107–112, 115, 154  
 injustice *see* justice  
 in-laws *passim*; discussion of relationships between in-laws 9, 12, 33, 42, 52, 60, 63–70, 76–82, 86–7, 100, 118 140–53  
 Institute of Medicine of the National Academies 3–5, 16–18, 107, 140, 153–4  
 interfamily conflict 159–64, 171  
  
 Jeffreys, Mervyn 16  
 Ji Jianlin 5  
 Jiang Huimin 5  
 Jie Zhang 5  
 Jin Dynasty, the 6  
 Jing Ke 200n5  
 Judd, Ellen 12, 58, 66  
 justice *passim*; domestic injustice 6, 8, 10–13, 52, 57–8, 65, 69–71, 74, 86, 89, 94–5, 97, 104–7, 145, 159–60, 164, 177, 181, 186, 192; domestic justice 10, 13, 24, 31, 45–6, 70–1, 93, 153–5, 164, 171, 178–80; public injustice 8, 13, 74, 159, 164, 171–9; public justice 10, 13, 70, 159–80  
  
 Kang Qiong 3  
 King, Ambrose 121  
 Kleinman, Arthur 6, 97, 199n8  
 Kraepelin, Emil 17  
  
 Leighton, Alexander 16  
 Lemire, Diane 26  
 Li Xianyun 4–5, 12, 107, 110  
  
 Liang Juchuan 193  
 Liang Shuming 191, 193  
 Litman, Robert 16  
 Liu Meng 3–4, 6, 198n8  
 Liu Shouzheng 6  
 Liu Zongfeng 5  
 Locke, John 21  
 loss of face (*diu lian*) 13, 55, 59, 103, 114, 120–1, 124, 128–9, 131, 133–4, 137, 139–40, 153–4, 161, 164, 172, 176  
 loss of man *see* loss of personhood  
 loss of personhood (*diu ren*) 120–2, 129, 131–9, 140  
 Lu Xun 181, 193, 195–7  
  
 madman (*feng zi*) 93–5, 104–5, 182  
 madness 18, 93–106, 115, 150, 182  
 Mao Dun 193  
 Mao Zedong 124, 181, 193–5, 202n2  
 Martin, Walter 15  
 matchmaking 35–6; matchmaker 53, 67, 83, 193  
 May Fourth Movement, the 192–3  
 Menninger, Karl 16, 19  
 menopause 95–7  
 mental disorder *see* disorder  
 mental illness 3–6, 13, 16, 18, 93–106, 125, 182–3, 193  
 Meyers, John 121  
*ming* *see* fortune  
 modernity 37, 69, 160, 182, 192; modern China 3, 11–3, 28, 33, 37, 45, 69, 74, 160–1, 179, 181–2, 192, 195, 197; modern society 15, 22, 160; modern West 17, 19, 94, 105, 159  
 moral capital 10, 28–9, 35–6, 41, 44–5, 51–3, 58, 60–3, 67–8, 70, 81–2, 105, 110, 115–8, 121, 130, 133–4, 137–9, 144–5, 151, 160, 169–70, 177–8, 186, 188  
 moral experience 28, 199n8  
 moral face (*lian*) *see* face  
 Muslims 6  
  
 natal family, of a woman 35, 54–61, 67, 86, 98, 102, 142, 146, 150, 164  
 natal village 83, 160  
 natural state 27; *see also* state of nature  
 New Cultural Movement 192; *see also* May Fourth Movement  
 Niu Jingui 5  
 Niu Xiuying 5  
 non-person 28, 50, 86, 94, 101–5, 107, 182, 192, 196–7

- normal suicide 105; *see also* typical suicide
- Okin, Susan 13
- parental love 37–40, 45
- patriarchal system 3, 12–3, 118, 195
- patrilineal family 12, 69
- Pearson, Veronica 3–4, 6, 198n8
- personhood 12–13, 19, 22, 26–9, 37, 50, 86, 89, 103, 106, 120–2, 124, 128–30, 139–40, 152–4, 181, 192, 195–7; behave as a person 26–9, 52, 66, 116, 130–1, 133, 153; full person 26–9, 37, 50, 52, 72, 86, 93–4, 103, 105, 121, 153–4, 182, 197; normal person 19, 29, 50, 106, 147; personality 3, 10, 20–1, 23, 35–6, 83, 94, 122, 128–9; *see also* loss of personhood; non-person
- pesticide 3–4, 34, 38–9, 41, 49, 59, 63–4, 67, 73–4, 76, 78–81, 83–4, 93, 102–4, 109–10, 118, 122, 124, 134, 142, 144, 147, 149, 161, 163, 166–7, 191
- Phillips, Michael 3–5, 9, 93, 183, 190
- Plato 26, 199n6
- police (Bureau of Public Security) 7–9, 46–7, 50, 56, 64, 123, 127, 129, 161, 163–5, 167, 169, 171–4, 176–9, 181
- post-self (post ego) 16
- power balance 10, 24, 36–7, 52–3, 62, 67–70, 81, 86–7
- power games 10, 35–7, 39–41, 43–6, 50–2, 59–63, 69–71, 74, 76–8, 80–2, 86, 89, 110, 112, 115–18, 120–1, 130, 133–4, 137–9, 143–5, 151–4, 160, 170–1, 177–8, 186, 188, 197
- power struggle 3, 6, 70, 178
- Pragg, Herman van 17
- prostitutes 27–8, 46–53, 86, 103, 105, 126, 139, 161, 185, 190, 199n1
- psychache 16–17, 153
- psychiatry 5–6, 10, 15–18, 21–2, 94, 105, 107, 112, 153–5, 182, 184, 191–2; psychiatrist 4, 18–19, 182–3
- psychoanalysis 16
- psychodynamics 5, 107, 112, 117
- psychosis 52, 94–6, 105; *see also* madman; madness
- public justice *see* justice
- qi* 13, 26–9, 36, 57, 59–60, 107–119, 129–31, 139–41, 143–4, 152–4, 170, 174, 177, 189, 191; *see also* gambling for *qi*
- qing tian* *see* clear heaven
- relatives' association (*qin you hui*) 183–4
- resistance 11, 41, 52–3, 58, 71, 82, 86–7, 94, 97–8, 101, 104–5, 107, 110, 117–18, 131, 139, 152, 154, 178–9, 196
- retarded persons (*sha zi*) 27, 52, 94–5, 101–2, 104, 125–6, 192
- romantic love 33, 35–7, 49–52, 70
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacque 19, 21–2
- Rural Women* (magazine) 3, 184, 189–90
- Rural Women (NGO) 181, 184–92
- sacred self 120–1
- schizophrenia 5, 16, 104, 182
- self-preservation 18, 77
- serotonin 17, 19, 153
- sexual affairs 9, 41, 49, 51–3, 57, 60–1, 83, 86, 102, 104–5, 123–4, 131–2, 137, 161, 186
- sha zi* *see* fool
- shame 18, 26–7, 42, 54, 62, 103, 128–31, 133, 137, 138–9, 143, 154, 164, 177, 182, 192; as reason for suicide 128–31, 137, 139, 154, 177, 183
- Shiga Shuzo 23, 45
- Shneidman, Edwin 16, 109, 153
- Short, James 15
- Sing Lee 6
- sinological anthropologists 23, 77
- sleeping pill 34, 47–9, 56–7, 96, 112, 114, 134
- social face (*mianzi*) *see* face
- social fact 15, 20–1
- social norm 19, 69, 124, 160
- sociology of suicide 10–11, 15, 17–18, 20, 22, 193
- Socrates 199n6
- somatization 97
- Song Meiya 184
- sound reason and strong *qi* (*li zhi qi zhuang*) 59, 174, 177
- Spence, Jonathan 28
- spinelessness 26, 124, 129, 131
- spiritedness 51, 86, 107, 111–12, 121, 122–31, 133, 139, 141, 154, 199n6; free-spirited person 128, 130; spirited person 124, 128–9, 131, 133, 141; spirited resistance 94, 97–8 *see also* resistance
- state of nature 19–21; *see also* natural state
- Stengel, E. 111
- stigma 52, 94, 103, 181–3, 192, 196–7
- struggle for help 159, 171
- suicide *passim*; in the West 4, 10, 13, 17–9, 22, 29, 93, 112, 153–4, 183, 199n3; suicide intervention 180–92;



- suicide (*continued*)  
 suicide prevention 5, 13, 159, 181–4, 189,  
     192; suicide rate 3–4, 9, 13, 17, 181,  
     191–2  
 supernatural power 71–89, 97  
 Support Groups for Women's Health of  
     the *Rural Women*, the 181, 184–91  
 Sym, John 21
- Tang Yong 5  
 Tao Menghe 193  
 thinking through 13, 47, 64, 96–7, 99, 118,  
     140–55, 182, 185, 187–9, 191  
 trivial 11, 35, 42, 58–9, 63, 74–5, 78, 98,  
     115, 117, 140, 142–3, 145, 162, 193–4;  
     trivial conflict 36, 59, 69, 74, 100, 160,  
     195; trivial power game 153  
 tunnel vision 141–6, 201n1  
 typical suicide 52–3, 94, 97, 105–6; *see*  
     *also* normal suicide
- village association (*xiang yue*) 191
- Wahl, Charles 154  
 Warring States Period, the 6  
 Watson, James 77  
 Watson, Rubie 201n3
- Weber, Max 160  
*wei qu see* domestic injustice  
 Weiss, James 111–12  
 Witke, Roxane 193–5  
 Wolf, Arthur 77  
 Wolf, Margery 3, 12, 23, 28, 69, 160  
 Women's Federation (*fu lian*) 184–5, 187  
 Wu, Emperor 88
- xiang yue see* village association  
 Xianglin Sao 193, 195–7  
 Xie Lihua 3, 160, 184  
 Xu Rong 184–5, 189–90  
 Xu Zhimo 193  
 Xue Dewang 5
- Yan Yunxiang 12, 33, 160, 198n7  
 Yu Hua 199n5  
*yuan wang see* public injustice
- Zhai Shutao 5  
 Zhang Huishi 5  
 Zhang Xiaoli 183–4  
 Zhang Yanping 4  
 Zhao, Emperor 88  
*zhuan qin see* exchange of marriage  
 Zou Shaohong 5