Surviving the Crisis: Adaptive Wisdom, 
Coping Mechanisms, And Local Responses to Avian Influenza 
Threats in Haining, China

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic research conducted in the summer of 2006, this paper examines local responses to the imminent threat of avian flu in Haining County of Zhejiang Province. During our field investigation, we conducted interviews with officials from the local medical institutions (including the hospitals, the animal husbandry and veterinary station, and health clinics), to bureaus of public health and agro-economy. We also and visited chicken farms, restaurants, and farming households. We address the following factors that commonly structured the perceptions and actions of different social actors in the area: the changing mode of information sharing and communication practices in the local communities; the official drive to professionalize the emergency response management system in the county; and the coping mechanisms that helped the villagers and town residents weather the storm. Our field research suggests that collective survival consciousness was translated into a spirit of voluntarism during the crisis. One important practical lesson we have learned from this study is that the adaptive wisdom embedded in local memories demonstrated its operational worth as a resourceful knowledge base for ordinary farmers to deal with food shortage, famine, plague, and future pandemics.

Key words:
avian flu threats, professionalism, collective survival consciousness, adaptive wisdom
Introduction

“Small pox, measles, TB, hookworm, cholera, and meningitis...” these were the words an elderly villager uttered as he tried to recall his childhood experiences of coping with disastrous and fateful epidemics that had ravaged the villages and towns in the Haining (海宁) region since the beginning of the last century. The 2003 SARS outbreak invoked collective memories of this plague-stricken community. Within two years, the people of Haining were confronted with the possible spread of an equally dangerous outbreak – avian flu. Moreover, the sheer size of various small and large-scale chicken farms in the county made avian flu both a virtual and a real threat that the people of Haining had to live with in the fall and winter of 2005.

This paper examines local responses to the imminent threat of avian flu during the crisis in Haining County of Zhejiang Province based on over three months of research in the summer of 2006. We seek to contribute an ethnographic perspective on the ongoing crisis of hygienic modernity in a locality undergoing tremendous social and economic changes in rural China. Our observations suggest that different social actors in the central market town and its surrounding villages perceived avian flu threats and reacted in different ways as they repositioned themselves in a re-stratified local society after de-collectivization marked by the demise of the People’s Commune in the late 1970s. During field research we found mass media played a vital role in disseminating information about the threat of avian flu. Meanwhile the adaptive wisdom embedded in historical memories might have helped the local residents to overcome fear and anxiety and weather the storm in the fall and winter of 2006.

We have selected Haining as the primary field site for this research because it is where Zhang Letian (one of the authors for this paper) grew up, spent over a decade as a sent-down youth during the socialist rustification campaign (1968-1978), has done anthropological fieldwork since the late 1980s, and worked as a researcher for eighteen years.1 Despite the rare openness of the Chinese government about releasing epidemic information in the aftermath of the 2003 SARS crisis, some officials in the county bureau of public health were still cautious about the political sensibility of our topic. The extensive kinship and social network that Zhang developed over the years allowed both of us to establish rapport with our informants within a relatively short period of time. We conducted interviews with officials from the local medical institutions (including the hospitals, the animal husbandry and veterinary station, and clinics), from bureaus of public health and agro-economy, and from chicken farms, restaurants, and farming households. The intimate perspectives gained from Zhang’s childhood friends and neighbors were crucial for us to address the factors that commonly structured the perceptions and actions of the local people: the changing mode of information sharing and communication; the official drive to professionalize the emergency response management system in the county; and the coping mechanisms that enabled the villagers and town residents to survive the crisis.

1 In 1998 Zhang published a book entitled Farewell to Utopia (gaobie lixiang) which offered a first-hand historical and ethnographic account of everyday social life in a People’s Commune from the 1950s to early 1990s.
The Setting

In the concluding chapter of *SARS in China* (Kleinman and Watson 2006), James Watson makes an assertion about the ironies of globalization hiding behind the SARS crisis: “a premodern agricultural system – based on pigs, ducks, chickens and centuries-old technology – could well turn out to be greatest threat to the postmodern global system” (Watson 2006: 202). Haining, the very site for our field inquiry is where such ironies behind economic globalization and local transformation can be observed and examined in everyday community life. Apart from its nationally-renowned leather-making industry, Haining’s poultry industry has been for decades an important economic bonanza for the province with an annual output of 18 million chickens, ducks, and geese. Ranked 19th among the nation’s top 100 best-developed counties, Haining is a beneficiary of the ongoing infrastructure reconstruction that has significantly altered the local landscape. Hundreds of newly-laid cement roads have connected its villages in a dense network of highways and recently improved waterways at its major central towns.

Located in northeast Zhejiang, Haining is only 125 kilometers away from Shanghai. However Haining’s accessibility and well-connected has posed an unforeseen public health challenge for local, provincial, and national officials. Increased travel and migration into the region have created new contexts for exposure and contagion. Some new and re-emerging diseases such as AIDS and cholera have become a grave concern for both the local authority and communities. With the economic liberalization stimulated by the reform period, Haining has increasingly been integrated into the national and international system of information exchange, effectively promoting the simultaneous development of Haining’s township industries – specialized agriculture and local heritage tourism. This growing integration, however, has also facilitated the possible spread of any pandemic beyond the scope of existing knowledge.

Haining was one of the few counties in the nation that developed and maintained a well-functioning cooperative medical insurance system since rural de-collectivization in China occurred more than two decades ago. Up to 95% of the local residents were enrolled in the medical insurance plan because of its guaranteed protection against high medical expenses, simple reimbursement process, and the list of insurance designated hospitals that included all the medical institutions in the county seat as well as major hospitals in Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai. We surmise that the decent health care coverage that the local residents (not including the migrant workers) have been able to enjoy for the past decade may partly explain the willingness to collaborate with the health officials and show compliance with the rules imposed from the country government during the epidemic prevention campaign.

Prior to the SARS outbreak (2003) and the avian flu threat (2005), the means through which villagers and town residents obtained medical information included the following: interpersonal exchange in the community and embedded knowledge (as part of historical memories transmitted from one generation to the next), magazines such as *Popular
and recommendation from local pharmacies and doctors. However both the cadres and residents in the locality felt that such conventional ways of acquiring health-related information would be insufficient and inadequate in preparation for an outbreak of an acute and contagious disease. As we will discuss in the next section, the communal need for constantly updated information during the avian flu alert exceeded the capacity of all available communication channels.

**Bad News Travels Fast: the Role of Media, Rumors, and State Apparatus during the Avian Flu Crisis**

Upon entering the field, we began our inquiry with the channels through which the people of Haining learned about the epidemic in the first place. We then asked our informants how they reacted and adjusted to news about the Avian Flu threats. In terms of the local pattern of information and communication practices, we found that the traditional means of interpersonal exchange (especially among the villagers) remained as important as ever, while cell phones, telephones, and the Internet also had become necessary means of information exchanges. All the households within the county were covered by a well-functioning network of the somewhat dated wire broadcasting, television and telecommunication services catering to the needs of its 643,857 registered residents. Generally speaking, the flow of information beyond the region depended on the frequency of the movement of people. For information flowing into the local community, the role of the network of telecommunications, the Internet, and mass media remained essential. In addition, household loudspeakers wired to the township government (a legacy of the collective period, one that is highly unusual in contemporary rural areas) controlled and managed by the township government and its affiliated village committees, continue to serve as the most important factors in one-way transmission of information about agro-technology and weather forecasting.

The continued importance of household loudspeakers in Haining is strongly indicative of the state’s penetration into the everyday social life of small towns and rural communities. The township government, with is its efficient organizations, regulated operations, and fast information flow, forms the core of local politics. Official meetings at different administrative levels are therefore reliable means of communicating news of vital importance such as the imminent threat of a certain deadly virus. In post-1949 China, government meetings convened in highly politicized contexts often foreshadowed a series of well-orchestrated events affecting local communities in one way or another. The avian flu crisis of 2005 was no exception to the rule. In 2005, the central Chinese state resorted to this conventional means of information sharing owing to its efficiency and controllability.

In terms of the content of information communicated at such government meetings, there was a substantial change in the aftermath of the 2003 SARS outbreak. For the first time in post-reform rural China, public health rather than economic development started to dominate the local government’s policy agenda, and epidemic prevention was viewed as its first priority. While official meetings remained the best venues for the circulation of information about any deadly disease epidemic among the cadres, it became increasingly
difficult for such crucial information to reach ordinary farming households. The lines of communication between cadres and individual households became more tenuous, especially after the deinstitutionalization of the People's Commune – the structure that had been the most powerful instrument for organizing local social life during the heyday of state socialism (see Yan 2003; Zhang 1998). Government officials were therefore compelled to use mass media as an alternative information relay route.

The wide-spread use of television greatly enhanced the role of media in information dissemination on a daily basis in rural China and exerted a strong impact on the way ordinary farmers learned about what is going in the world beyond Haining. During our field interview, a chicken farm owner said, “[During the crisis] I watched TV news everyday. I first learned about bird flu in July last year [2005]. I had a gut feeling that this [virus] might affect us one day. Several days later, stories of bird flu dominated the domestic news headlines on TV. The next day, the deputy chief of our village asked us to immediately clean and disinfect our farms.” In the eyes of local cadres and owners of chicken farms and poultry factories, bad news traveled faster than expected because of the CCTV news that townsfolk watched every evening. In this way, overreactions tended to occur. After news of avian flu infection in Heishan County of Liaoning Province (thousands of miles away from Haining) on November 4, 2005, market prices of poultry dropped by at least 50% the next day. A cadre from the Chinese Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Station said “even though we had not a single suspected case of virus infection the whole poultry industry was hurt (by the bad news).” One manager of a township poultry factory told us that he had no idea what avian flu was like and “it’s the stuff media wanted us to believe…and we were bound to suffer because of public fear generated by the negative coverage of the avian flu threats.”

In addition to the official information transmitted through meetings at different levels and the news media, rumors and gossip spread all kinds of flu-related news, and multiplied the degree of uncertainty and anxiety in the local community. Tea houses, restaurants, barbers, and markets were the most common venues for the informal exchange of information. The local saying that “a small snake at the Minor East Gate would be described as a python by the people at the Major East Gate” describes how easily the realities of everyday life could be manipulated through informal exchange of information. During our field interview, a hostess of a restaurant in Yanguan, one of the central market towns of Haining mentioned that her friends and clients told her there had been several cases of virus infection in Ding Bridge Township and the farmers there had to kill and bury their chickens and ducks. But to the best of our knowledge there had been no confirmed avian flu cases in the entire county during the crisis last fall. Another example of local information conflicting with official sources involved compensation policies. According to the Chief of the County Bureau of Public Health, the compensation for each chicken destroyed for bird flu prevention was 20 yuan. Yet the chicken farmers told us that the actual amount was much smaller. As it turned out, what our informants considered to be facts about avian flu were based on information that they gathered from unidentifiable sources. In the local context these “facts” were distorted, manipulated, and reconstructed as “truths” by local farmers and town residents.
Official responses to Avian Flu threats: perspectives of the local cadres

The SARS crisis of 2003 was a wake-up call for the government officials who learned to view the threat of avian flu in a whole new light (Kaufman 2006). After taking lessons from the SARS experience, local cadres perceived the new possible epidemic as a major source of social instability and were fully aware of the cost of any delayed medical response. Despite a lack of firm evidence that a pandemic was imminent, officials and staff members of the county bureau of public health clearly felt that whether they could effectively administer prevention measures was a matter of life and death (xingming jiaoguan). Not only were their careers at stake this time, but also the well being of their friends and relatives in their local communities. After receiving the administrative order from the State Council, the county government state quickly mobilized its rank and file to wage a large scale disease prevention campaign in a manner reminiscent of the mass sanitation movements that took place during the Maoist era.

To demonstrate his strong will and commitment to public welfare, the Mayor of Haining established a special task force in November 2005 to deal with the threat of avian flu. Work teams were organized in all the townships within the county to meet the challenge. All the work teams were headed by the township chiefs in an effort to ensure accountability. Reinforcing the sense of security and assurances from public health officials, special funds were budgeted to meet the needs of epidemic prevention and disease control. During an interview, Mr. Xu Wenjie, the chief officer of Haning's Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Station (xumu shouyizhan) reported that as long as he could demonstrate the actual need for disease prevention, a set amount of money would be allocated to the Station. His administrative superiors in charge of public health would pay unexpected visits to chicken farms and market fairs to gather reliable information via on-the-spot investigations. The special government funds set aside also covered the total cost of immunizing all the live chickens in the County. The recombinant bivalent vaccine against bird flu and Newcastle disease was developed by the Harbin Veterinary Research Institute.

Along with the financial support from the county and township level authorities came the professionalization of epidemic prevention teams consisting of well-trained technical specialists from the Agency of Animal Husbandry (affiliated with the County Bureau of Agricultural Economy) and the local Center for Disease Control (affiliated with the County Bureau of Public Health). To our surprise, the epidemic prevention station (an office that had become marginalized following the demise of People’s Commune) provided the organizational basis for re-introducing the disease prevention mechanism at the grassroots level. In addition to those who were assigned to “sentry posts” in all the townships of Haining, some villagers volunteered to serve as monitors who would closely watch for any signs of a virus infection around the chicken farms and backyards of villagers who raised poultry. Shortly after their emergence, these amateur monitors were organized into teams that received technical training regularly. This new mechanism was set up in 181 villages of the entire county. A total of 200 village monitors would routinely visit all the chicken farms and poultry factories to make sure any suspicious illness would be identified on the spot.
During the deployment of epidemic prevention methods, techniques were standardized and regulated by the county offices for public health. One such standardized practice was the requirement for the immunization of broiler chickens at least once during their 45-day growth and breeding cycle. Free range chickens would be immunized twice during the bimonthly growth cycle. Breeding chickens would receive three to four immunization injections. Owners of chicken and duck farms became responsible for administering the vaccines themselves after signing official forms from the Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Station. Veterinarians would also make sure poultry raising households were covered by the compulsory vaccination scheme.

A volunteer monitor checking the health status of a broiler chicken during a routine visit to a chicken farm in Haining (December 19, 2005)

An owner displays an immunized broiler chicken raised on December 19, 2005 (Haining, Zhejiang).
Since 2005 the county officials had themselves kept busy establishing a countywide early detection and rapid response system. In preparation for “worst-case” scenarios, they sponsored an exercise at the County Hospital on the afternoon of December 16, 2005. As many as one hundred staff members from various medical institutions participated in the exercise. A hotline was established between the village health clinics and county hospitals and the Center for Disease Control to ensure that suspected cases would be identified and reported in a timely manner. Meanwhile the Center for Disease Control offered intensive training programs focused on topics including: definitions of avian flu; avian flu prevention at chicken farms and poultry factories; various prevention methods; disinfectant choices; characteristics of avian flu and routes for the spread of the virus; and the usual symptoms of infected poultry and human beings. These training programs imparted knowledge and skills to the people in the local community, especially the chicken farm owners.

Confronting the risk: views from the chicken farm owners

During our interviews with owners of local chicken farms and poultry factories, we often asked the following questions: Were you and your business affected by the threat of avian flu? In what ways? What did you fear most? Most of our informants told us that they were far more afraid of hearing any news related to the possible spread of the virus than they were of dealing with the threat of the bird flu. They explained that any bad news aired on TV would result in a significant drop of prices since nobody would dare to eat or raise chickens during the fateful winter of 2005. For example, an owner of a household chicken farm who had an annual production of 1 million breeding chickens was apparently a victim of media-generated public fear concerning food safety. The price for a single breeding chicken dropped from 1.7 yuan in July to 0.2 yuan in December 2005. The farmer had to bury many of the breeding chicken alive even though none of them were infected.

Among the big losers were those farming households in the business of broiler chicken production. The unit price dropped from 6.4 yuan per kilogram in the summer of 2005 to only 3.6 yuan per kilo in the first half of November. At that time many chicken farmers intended to pull out of the market. Only one owner figured that if he stayed on, he might turn a huge profit later. Betting on good prices in the foreseeable future, he bought 30,000 broiler chickens in October. But the market situation continued to worsen throughout the fall and in the end the speculator lost 100,000 yuan.
To our surprise, most poultry farmers remained confident throughout the crisis. Their attitude derived from years of experiences with raising chickens, ducks and geese and their ability to tell a sick bird from a healthy one at a mere glance. Nevertheless they stayed on high alert during the prevention campaign and worked closely with the local animal husbandry and veterinary station. The chicken farmers’ compliance and cooperation with the local public health authorities indicated a medicalization of the routine practice of poultry breeding. They started to view culling difficulties as medical problems with medical solutions and relied on professional interventions during the prevention campaigns. Some of the chicken farmers proved themselves to be the quick learners with their knowledge about the different anatomical characteristics of a “plagued chicken” compared with a chicken infected with the avian virus. They insisted that if necessary they would rather destroy one thousand innocent birds than spare one suspicious bird (ning ke cuo sha yiqian, bu ke fang zou yige). The unconditional support from the chicken farmers of Haining was extremely important for securing the first line of defense again the spread of the deadly virus in Haining. Meanwhile, with the nationwide diffusion of the mass media, official public information campaign increased awareness and modified behaviors throughout the crisis.

Learning to live with danger: Farmers’ attitude and behaviors throughout the crisis

Why were the farmers (especially chicken farmers) and town residents of Haining so willing to cooperate with state officials during the crisis? In our attempts to tackle this question during fieldwork, it was nearly impossible for us to get a straightforward answer because “for every 100 folks there were as many as 100 ways of thinking and reasoning” (baixing, bai tiaoxin) as the local saying went. Initially the varied responses from the farmers made it difficult for us to perform an adequate analysis of the behavioral patterns. Through repeated visits and frequent conversations, however, we were able to identify the following shared attitudes toward epidemic prevention in the local community.
At the very beginning, most farmers took precautionary measures after they heard about bird flu. Their sources of information could be as official as the instructions communicated through the wired loudspeaker service and TV news, or as unofficial as the rumors that circulated in tea houses or restaurants. In a sense, the farmers’ cautious attitudes ensured the smooth implementation of the disease prevention policy. The rapid transmission of any breaking news about the spread of avian flu would almost certainly lead to a sharp drop in poultry prices. Fearing the negative consequences caused by public fear, the local government launched a damage-control effort to support its poultry industry, a key source of revenue for Haining’s economy. After the bird flu alert was lifted, the officials of the County Bureau of Agricultural Economics encouraged their kitchen staff to purchase chicken from local sources in order to set an example for the rest of the County. Yet many suspicious town residents were reluctant to buy local chickens.

Meanwhile, we learned from our informants that the frequent and repetitive news coverage started to have a cry-wolf effect on some farmers who saw no signs of any chicken disease. An elderly villager told us that when he and his fellow villagers first heard about the flu, they took it very seriously and stopped eating any kind of poultry almost immediately. Later on, they became wary of what they had been told about the possible spread of flu virus because they only believed in what they saw with their own eyes. When they found that nothing had actually happened to any of the chickens and ducks roaming free in the farm and the backyards of their fellow villagers, they lost patience and decided to resume the routine consumption of poultry with any hesitation. Some less affluent villagers and migrant workers were particularly tempted, and wanted to take full advantage of the low prices of the chicken available at the local markets.

What motivated the villagers to engage in such seemingly risky acts was the tendency to link what they learned about the bird flu with the notion of “chicken plague.” Several chicken farmers shared with us the conventional methods of dealing with diseased chickens in the locality. At the first sign of a “plague-stricken chicken,” farmers would kill the bird instantly and cook it in boiling water after removing all its internal organs. When we asked if they would actually eat the chicken, they said they would if “it’s well cooked.” We found that during the avian flu crisis, chicken consumption might have increased for the chicken farmers even though they made a conscious effort to cut down their production target. One chicken farmer told us that he managed to sell off all 30,000 broiler chicken by mid-November 2005 despite the extremely low price and the local concern with the epidemic. Most of the people who bought his chickens were poor peasants because “only the townsfolk were scared to death, not we farmers who knew how to deal with chicken plague.” In comparison with frugal chicken farmers and villagers, the responses of the town residents in Haining to the avian flu threats were more likely to be influenced by cultural assumptions about plague and messages conveyed through the mass media.

Discussion: Pandemic, Collective Consciousness, and Disaster Survival

Learning lessons from the SARS epidemic, the Chinese Government established an
emergency response mechanism according to new health regulations that aimed at enhancing public awareness and information transparency (Kleinman and Watson 2006). Instead of withholding relevant information, state officials at all levels made reasonable efforts to ensure adequate media coverage of the avian flu threat in the fall of 2005. What helped county officials weather the storm with a high level of preparedness, as we found during our research in Haining, was the support from local people who were guaranteed full access to flu-related information communicated through various channels during the avian flu alert. The sense of fear and anxiety created by mass media’s repeated coverage of avian flu outbreaks in other parts of the country, according to a country health official, ensured a high level of compliance with the prevention rules and regulations from the farmers and town residents. The official wished that the media coverage of other fatal diseases such as HIV/AIDS could achieve the same results so that he and his colleagues would be able to keep the rate of infection under control.

After the initial phase of panic, ordinary town residents and villagers were able to overcome anxiety and quickly adapted to living with uncertain danger (Kleinman 2006). Within months, the production of poultry bounced back to its normal level and the market was gradually stabilized. To develop a better understanding of local behavioral patterns during the avian flu alert, we plan to look at the power of a collective consciousness – a collective consciousness that farmers relied upon to cope with and survive a series of policy-induced disasters since 1949 (Zhang 1998 and 2005). In the heyday of socialism, the survival consciousness that existed among relatives, neighbors, and other fellow villagers and acquaintances was a source of motivation for fellow members of the production brigade, allowing them to steer through chaos and maintain order at the village level.

The awakening of such a localized collective consciousness provided the dynamics for disaster survival in the entire Haining region in the fall and winter of 2005. All poultry farmers expressed a willingness to collaborate with the County Bureau of Public Health in the process of disinfecting farm premises, immunizing chickens, and destroying diseased chickens with hardly any attempt to resist. Every forms of resistance employed by farmers (Scott 1985) showing defiance toward state policy were common in the Haining during the Maoist and post-reform eras. In comparison to the authority of government officials and the efficacy of preventive measures administered by professional health officials, the collective survival consciousness of ordinary farmers functioned in a different yet equally effective way in practice. Amidst the crisis, farmers passed on related information from any source to their relatives and friends in no time. They did not even bother to check the reliability of what they heard about the bird flu because “this was a matter of life and death and our friends should be told as soon as possible.” “Bad” information became useful information which goaded farmers to action.

Our research also suggests that the collective survival consciousness was translated into a form of spontaneous voluntarism which had disappeared after de-collectivization started more than two decades ago. Retired veterinarians mobilized themselves to offer immunization assistance to individual chicken farmers. During the prevention campaign, the
A communal awareness of farmers was intensified and the level of mutual trust between the local state and community was at its highest during the crisis. Meanwhile the avian flu threat enabled the medical authorities and county government to reach out collaboratively to farmers and town residents. As a result, officials at the County Center for Disease Control and Public Health Bureau received dozens of phone calls (included false alarms) about suspected cases of virus infection during the alert.

In *Private Life Under Socialism*, Anthropologist Yun Xiang observes the gradual development of “uncivil individual” on the basis of his long term fieldwork in a village in Heilongjing Province: “ …its retreat (the state) in the socialist postcollective period (has had a) negative impact on the private lives of the individual villagers— …the development of ultra-utilitarian individualism in a context where the survival of traditional culture, the legacy of socialism, global capitalism are competing with each other” (Yan 2003: 233). Yan argues that individuality in China tends to be ego-centered because the Chinese government discourages people from participating in the public sphere (Yan 2003: 220-235). The findings emerged from our study seemed to disagree with Yan’s analysis. However, upon close scrutiny we are convinced that our data complements rather than contradicts Yan’s argument. In the Haining case, the voluntarism could well be a response to government mobilization. The question for us ponder is not about the source of voluntarism but the reason why the local government was able to mobilize participation in epidemic prevention campaign during the crisis.

We contend that part of the reason for the smooth collaboration between the health authority and the community was the effort of the local state to invest in public health infrastructure and its ability to maintain the cooperative medical insurance system when de-collectivization and the commodification of medical services started more than two decades ago. While it is premature for anyone to applaud the Haining model of healthcare for China’s New Rural Initiative aimed at improving the quality of basic medical services and the conditions of infrastructure in the countryside, the willingness of the county government to share the fruits of its economic boom with the local community (though far from enough) may have helped preserved if not strengthened the bond between the authority and the town residents and farmers established from the socialist era. Should we conduct our research in other localities such as a poor rural county (see Kaufman 2006: 62-66), we would almost certainly have a radically different ethnographic picture. Moreover, we were inferred by a conversation during lunch with the deputy chief of the county bureau of public health that compared to threats of SARS or Avian Flu that may “come and go,” the increasing cases of AIDS/HIV disease infections among prostitutes, truck drivers and would be far more difficult to handle. The deputy chief confided with us that there was no way to mobilize the community in the fight against AIDS owing to the long-standing stigma discrimination against the people living with the virus in this region and elsewhere in China (see Kleinman, Kaufman, and Saich 2006).

Lastly a cautionary note about the efficacy of “adaptive wisdom.” In this paper we have used “adaptive wisdom” as an operative term to refer to the kind of local knowledge...
embedded in collective memories which often demonstrated its operational worth as a resourceful knowledge base for ordinary farmers of Haining to deal with food shortage, famine, plague, and future pandemics. While dealing with the Manchuria plague in 1910, the Chinese bureaucrats, local gentries, and medical practitioners learnt that yi (plagues, epidemics) could infect human beings and animals. The Manchuria plague thus marks the historic shift from yi (plague) to modern chuanranbing (infectious disease) in China (Benedict 1996; Nathan 1967). Since then an increasingly sophisticated system of global knowledge based on western medical science has dominated the field of disease prevention. Therefore it was highly unlikely that such indigenous knowledge would overtake professional medical expertise in epidemic prevention despite its practical function for reducing the tensions and anxieties amidst the crisis.
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