

«NANDE HUTU» 难得糊涂 or «THE ART OF BEING MUDDLED»: FROM ANCIENT PHILOSOPHICAL WISDOM TO PRAGMATIC «PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE» IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Introduction

The calligraphy *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂¹ is without doubt one of the most well-known works of art of Qing-calligrapher and official Zheng Banqiao (1693–1765). The calligraphy can be translated as «It is hard to be muddled», but behind this paradox a high wisdom of life rooted in traditional philosophy is hidden. This high wisdom finds its source in the Daoist ideal of the sage as a fool. However, after more than 250 years, this ancient spiritual ideal seems to have given way to a pragmatic, rather instrumental interpretation of the saying. This paper attempts to show how in contemporary Chinese society the high wisdom of the saying has become a popular strategy for dealing with stress and disappointment. In this attempt, some in the academic and popular discourses on the calligraphy frequently used expressions exemplary for respectively the ancient-philosophical and the popular contemporary meaning of the saying will be discussed².

The paradox of «difficult to obtain muddledness»

When Zheng Banqiao wrote the saying in 1751, he also added a postscript to it, which goes as follows: «Being smart is not easy. But it is also difficult to be muddled. If you start out being smart, it is even harder to be muddled. Let go! Step back for once! Present peace of mind consists of not planning for future rewards»³. At first sight, the saying merely seems to give advice on how to obtain peace of mind, namely by taking some distance and letting things go instead of pursuing future fame and gain. Letting go should not be interpreted as a way of «giving up» or «abandoning», but as a way to take a detached though not completely disengaging approach to life, especially in situations that are bound to bring one down otherwise such as conflicts, moral dilemmas, and feelings of powerlessness.

¹ Chinese characters will only be added at their first occurrence in the text.

² This paper presents a part of my PhD research which deals with the saying «Nande hutu» in all its different dimensions: traditional philosophical, cultural, social, psychological and moral dimensions based on extensive academic and popular discourse analysis. The term discourse here should be understood in «its most open sense <...> to cover all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds» [Potter & Wetherell 1987: 7]. The academic discourse includes personal interviews with academics, scientific books and articles on related topics; the popular discourse includes opinions derived from different sources such as personal interviews, blog-discussions, magazine articles, a small survey and popular books on the wisdom of life as expressed in the saying.

³ «Congming nan, hutu nan, you congming er zhuanru hutu geng nan. Fang yi zhao. Tui yi bu. Dang xia xin an, fei tu hou lai fu bao ye» («聪明难，糊涂难，由聪明而转入糊涂更难。放一着，退一步，当下心安，非图后来福报也»).

Through applying the wisdom of «Nande hutu», one can obtain (at least temporary) peace of mind. Nevertheless, a crucial requirement has to be fulfilled: one has to give up on expectations and plans for future rewards. If one takes some distance in a matter but at the same time does not allow things to follow their natural course without expecting anything out of it, the peace of mind meant here can never be reached.

At second sight however, the saying most remarkably also puts the generally accepted perception of smartness and muddledness upside down. As Pohl observes, because the mass is considered to belong to the naïve and stupid people, it is generally considered hard to obtain wisdom and intelligence. Nonetheless, according to the paradox in the saying, not intelligence but foolishness is difficult to obtain [Pohl 2007: 274]. So the question can be raised what kind of ‘difficult to obtain foolishness’ is meant here. An answer to this question can be found in the dialectical perception of smartness and muddledness as formulated in some of the sayings in the academic discourse.

The dialectics of smartness and muddledness: the sage as a fool

Probably the most frequently used maxim to explain the meaning of «Nande hutu» is also expressed in a paradox⁴: *da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚, «The highest wisdom looks like foolishness»⁵. The Daoist ideal of wisdom as non-wisdom and the sage as a fool is particularly present in the «Zhuangzi». In different passages (e. g. Inner Chapters II and III), Zhuangzi refers to the uselessness of knowledge to become a wise person. Only he who lives in accordance with the *dao* 道, which by nature is constantly changing, and not in accordance with – in Zhuangzi’s view merely conventional and certainly not absolute – truths and knowledge is a true sage. Therefore, the wisdom of the sage is closer related to being muddled than to an accumulation of in any case relative knowledge.

However, this muddledness is not the kind of foolishness one generally would expect it to be. Neither is it just a substitute for plain smartness. Rather, this muddledness is a smartness that surpasses a so-called first level of smartness (in which one has accumulated knowledge and experience). Muddledness refers to a state of illumination (*ming* 明), a full awareness of one’s true, «empty» (of knowledge) nature and the constantly changing nature of the universe that transcends worldly sorrows without being completely disconnected from it. A metaphor for this state of mind can be found in Zhuangzi’s use of *xiaoyao you* 逍

⁴ The paradox is an often used figure of speech in ancient Daoist writing, which gives the calligraphy a particular Daoist flavor.

⁵ Although this saying is attributed to Song-poet Su Dongpo (1073–1101), he probably based himself on another paradox found in the «Daodejing» (XLV. 45), where it is written: «The most straight seems to be crooked, the greatest skill seems to be clumsy» («Da zhi ruo qu, da qiao ruo zhuo», 大直若屈, 大巧若拙) [Wu 2004: 313].

逍遥, «wandering in untroubled ease»⁶. This realm of muddledness as a state of illumination obviously is very difficult to obtain (*nande* 难得).

Another proverb related to «Nande hutu» that adequately expresses the dialectics between muddledness and smartness is the proverb «Congming yi shi, hutu yi shi» (聪明一世, 糊涂一时), literally translated as «smart for a whole life, muddled for a moment». Its meaning can also be translated with the English proverb «Every man has a fool in his sleeve» [Wu & Cheng 2006: 645]. In this saying, the idea is expressed that even a real smart person can sometimes – although unintentionally – do things in a stupid way. That even the smartest person sometimes is a little muddled in itself poses no problem, because this kind of person will never be muddled in real important matters. To clarify this idea, Ouyang Xiulin compares real smartness with wealth: it can make people happy or unhappy depending on how it is used [Ouyang 2006: 23–24]. Real smart people know how to use their knowledge in the right way and when and when not to expose their smartness. Because they are aware of the imperfection of even the wisest person, they are always modest about their skills and knowledge, and do not publicly display them when it is not necessary. In this way, people will not get jealous, and will not cause any harm to others, neither to themselves.

The possibility of becoming a victim of one's own smartness, brings us to the last proverb that also nicely illustrates the dialectics between smartness and muddledness: «congming fan bei congming wu» (聪明反被聪明误) [e.g. Lei 2008; Ouyang 2006]. This saying could be translated as «smartness may overreach itself», and favors the idea of not being too smart, or at least not blindly and at all times. That is to say, a clever person may become the victim of his own ingenuity. Xun Feng explains its meaning by saying that if one is blindly (foolishly) smart, then one «seeds distels and attracts grudge» [Xun 1995: 34]. In other words, not smartly using one's cleverness can be fatal. Very often, keeping a low-profile and adopting a modest attitude – exactly what the sage as a fool does, be it in an extreme way – will optimally contribute to inner peace of mind.

To summarize, what it in these three sayings comes down to is that there can be no real high-level state of muddledness without starting out wise, and no beneficial wisdom without some muddledness. In other words, a wise person might look real plain and even like a fool and does not abuse his smartness, and the real muddlehead is muddled in a smart way. To illustrate this idea, Lei Legeng advances a striking variation on the above-mentioned saying «high wisdom looks like foolishness» just by replacing a few words, to become «major smartness looks like muddledness» («da congming ruo hutu», 大聪明若糊涂) [Lei 2008: 4].

Popular interpretations: «Nande hutu» as a pragmatic coping strategy⁷

⁶ «Xiaoyao you» (逍遥游) «wandering in untroubled ease», is the name of the first section of the Inner Chapters of the «Zhuangzi».

On the one hand, the expressions and philosophical ideals discussed above are also present and similarly interpreted in the popular discourse on the saying. However, this regards the minority of the sources, such as those comments written by – in as far as this can be deduced from a writing style – highly educated people.

On the other hand, not surprisingly, sometimes the same, philosophical ideas are used and explained in a more accessible, and sometimes also more superficial way. Such is the case for instance for the Daoist spiritual ideal of «wandering in untroubled ease». Some popular linguistic variations on this theme include the expression «taking things philosophically» (*xiangdekai* 想得开) and «being natural and unrestrained» (*xiaosa*, 潇洒), both very common in everyday language. Other popular sources which comment on the saying describe «Nande hutu» as a wisdom that urges one not to take things too seriously (*jiaozhen* 较真) at all times, and not to plan too much and bother about things too much (*jijiao* 计较), referring to the postscript «not anticipating future rewards» [Li 2007: 26; Xue 1994: 38]. Instead, one should take it easy, and «muddle through» («hunguoqu», 混过去). These sources use a more popular language to express the same philosophical ideas, but at the same time this popular language somehow deprives the ideas from their deep philosophical meaning. Nevertheless, the aim is still a carefree and harmonious state of mind.

However, in many other sources, the high wisdom of being muddled is not only interpreted superficially, but also very instrumentally, namely as a strategy to obtain mental (e. g. having a sound marriage and satisfying interpersonal relations), material (e. g. being successful in business, in policy making etc.), or physical (e. g. good health) welfare. Especially the popular books about «The art of being muddled» («Hutuxue», 糊涂学) – mostly catalogued under *tongsu duwu* 通俗读物, «popular reading» – usually promote being hutu as a useful strategy. A fine example of this can be found in the book by Yang Tao on «The art of being muddled in one's interpersonal relations and actions». This book is divided in different chapters all addressing a way of practical hutu-art (*hutu yishu* 糊涂艺术), such as «the stratagem of being muddled as in the saying “high wisdom looks like foolishness”» (chapter 2), and «the principle of being muddled for being at peace with the world and oneself» (chapter 6, referring to the Daoist ideal of «wandering in untroubled ease») [Yang 2007: 33-56; 161-188]. Other books on the art of being muddled pragmatically divide their chapters into a realm of application in daily life. For instance in Jian Kun's book the wisdom of being hutu is applied to different domains of daily life: finance, economy, emotional intelligence, morality, marriage etc. [Jian 2004]. These kinds of popular books seem to represent hutu not only as a useful coping strategy in times of conflicts and pressure, but also as a concrete guide to overall wellbeing and success.

⁷ Coping here is used in the sense of efforts to solve personal and interpersonal problems, and different ways of dealing with all kinds of stress and conflicts.

Taking an easy-going approach to life, and using the wisdom of «Nande hutu» as a strategy for more material and mental wellbeing is of course valuable advice, but how to concretely realize this strategy? With regard to applying the wisdom of being muddled, many sources mention the saying «opening one eye, and closing the other» («zheng yi zhi yan, bi yi zhi yan», 睁一只眼闭一只眼), in other words, «to wink at something», pretending not to hear, see or know [Lin 2007: 22; Xue 1994: 38]. This kind of pretended muddledness (*zhuang hutu* 装糊涂) is used deliberately to obtain harmony in whatever situation for whatever purpose. Some of my female interviewees gave the example of the wife that knows her husband is cheating on her but for the sake of family harmony does not say anything about it. Many other sources testify to the importance of this kind of intentionally pretending to be muddled – instead of reaching a higher realm of being muddled – in the popular interpretations.

The ultimate aim of all these advices always concerns inner peace of mind when dealing with feelings of disappointment, worries and anger, and by avoiding useless conflicts and stress. Especially the elderly derive great benefit from the philosophy of «Nande hutu». They generally consider it to be a way to stay mentally balanced and thus keep good overall health (*yangshengfa* 养生法) [Li 2007; Xue 1994]. However, what is most striking in these explanations is the presentation of «the art of being muddled» as a coping strategy by conflict avoidance rather than by reaching a high spiritual state of mind. That is to say, taking a step back and letting go seems to be negatively interpreted as a passive way of retreating that can be applied by whomever wants to have more peace of mind, no matter how smart or stupid he is. In this regard, the majority of the popular interpretations of «Nande hutu» suggest a very useful but passive philosophy of life: by closing one eye and pretending to be muddled, one can keep away pressure and stress.

Conclusion

The expressions explaining «Nande hutu» in the academic discourse discussed above are all in one or another way rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy, and more concretely in the Daoist ideal of the sage as a fool. The kind of wise muddledness as a state of spiritual illumination indeed is, as Zheng Banqiao rightly remarked, exceptionally difficult to obtain.

However, this deep philosophical connotation has lost a lot of its depth in the contemporary popular interpretations of the saying. Although the popular discourse also contains expressions and interpretations occurring in the academic discourse, many of these re-interpretations propose a pragmatic and passive attitude to life that can be adopted at one's own convenience.

A thorough explanation for this 'transformation' of wisdom would lead us too far in this presentation, but could be found in many factors such as the

commercialization of the saying which brings about a rather superficial understanding, including a general ignorance about the explanatory post-script to the calligraphy. In general, it is not uncommon that popular proverbs rooted in high-level thinking simply rephrase and paraphrase the abstraction expressed in the original source [Wu 2004: 323]. In this way, they come to reflect so-called collective wisdom in a popular way, and losing their deep philosophical meaning in the course of popularization is almost unavoidable.

Summarizing, it seems as if the philosophy of life as expressed in the popular interpretations to a large extent have forgotten about the two most crucial characters of the saying, namely *Nande* (difficult). As we may believe many of the popular books and discussions on the use of the saying, practicing ‘The art of being muddled’ should not be too difficult.

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