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Nederlandse vertaling:

*Nande hutu* 难得糊涂 en de kunst van geveinsde onwetendheid

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*Nande Hutu* 难得糊涂  
*and*  
*'The Art of Being Muddled'*

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

*There are two ways to slide easily through life: to believe everything or to doubt everything. Both ways save us from thinking. (Alfred Korzybski)*

## 1.1 *Nande hutu* as an object of study

The object of this study is very concrete, and consists of only four characters: the calligraphy *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂 written by Qing official Zheng Banqiao, and translates as ‘Being muddled is difficult’. So why, among an abundance of other Chinese sayings, does this study focus on *Nande hutu*, and why is there such relevance to an extensive investigation into just one saying?

The impetus for this research was a quote by one of the protagonists in Mo Yan’s novel *Cangbaotu* 藏宝图 (*Treasure map*), who in the middle of a vivid discussion states that ‘Not everyone who wants to be a fool can be so’ (*Nande hutu* 难得糊涂)<sup>1</sup>. The translation was accompanied by a long annotation that provided some background information on its author, Qing calligrapher Zheng Banqiao, and explained the difficulties the translator had experienced to translate the four characters, starting with the translation and meaning of the word *hutu* 糊涂. The translator ended the annotation

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<sup>1</sup> The original French translation was “N’est pas imbécile qui veut” (Mo 2004: 95).

with a small remark about the recent appearance of books on ‘the art of being muddled’ (*hutuxue* 糊涂学), which not only marketed the saying as a popular wisdom of life, but also as a popular strategy to be successful.

How could a saying of more than 250 years old, seemingly inspired by much older philosophical wisdom, still be popular today (a phenomenon that in itself is not uncommon), and moreover, be considered a strategy for success, to the extent that ample books are dedicated to just this one saying? In what way can a philosophy of life that advocates ‘muddledness’ and foolishness be meaningful for different kinds of people of different ages and with a different social background? And, why is ‘being muddled’ so difficult in the first place?

When I initially described the core of this research - the calligraphy ‘Being muddled is difficult’ - to individuals familiar with Chinese culture, and to those who are less so, it elicited a whole range of different responses. Someone asked me how I could do a PhD on something that occurred to her as a popular ‘feel good’-saying, like the ones one might find hanging in public places, or in a doctor’s surgery. Another person, who already had some basic background about the calligraphy’s origin and author, envisaged the calligraphy as a Chinese Rembrandt or a Van Gogh. Yet another person laughingly told me it sounded like an advertising spot for a magical cure for amnesia. To another person, the calligraphy seemed to represent a zenlike *koan* urging people to let their familiar categories (it is difficult to be smart!) behind and become ‘enlightened’. And still someone else remarked it sounded like a coaching quote ‘to get in touch with one’s inner child’.

However, my surprise to these reactions - a surprise that in the first place reflected my own preconceptions and background knowledge - only grew after an initial review of the preliminary data from different Chinese discourses on *Nande hutu*. There indeed seemed to be no clear, unambiguous meaningful answer to the question of what the saying means, and how it makes sense to people from all walks of life. Moreover, the answers were a bit of all the above; the saying seemed to be interpreted in as many ways as there are people, and the web of meaning indeed appeared to be as ‘muddled’, paradoxical and ambiguous as the four-letterword itself.

These surprises marked the beginning of a long journey, not so much into the calligraphy *Nande hutu*, but rather into the popular wisdom of life and the broader meanings the calligraphy seemed to convey. This research became an investigation into ‘the art of pretended muddledness’, into the Chinese philosophical predilection for the vague and the indistinct, into vagueness and muddledness as a social virtue, and into many other related wisdoms of life strongly rooted in Chinese tradition.

Thus, the purpose of this research is double. It tends to a) describe and explain, as much as possible in native Chinese terms, the different meaning(s) of the calligraphy/saying *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂 (‘Being muddled is difficult’), and how it is interpreted, experienced, practiced and evaluated as a wisdom of life in contemporary



society, and b) to explore the underlying social, philosophical, psychological, and moral dimensions that it contains.

Studying how the ancient wisdom of *Nande hutu* is interpreted, practiced, evaluated and discursively constructed in contemporary society, I suggest, will enable us to gain insight into how Chinese people give meaning to their lives, based on a philosophical, psycho-social and socio-cultural perspective. In addition, it will shed light on how different social groups interpret and shape the complex dynamics between continuity (tradition) and change (modernity) brought about by the rapid changes and social transformations in modern society, and how they deal with this new social reality. More fundamentally, this study can increase our understanding of this philosophy of life, which is – to use the phrasing of a Chinese colleague – ‘perhaps the most crucial part of Chinese culture that most non-Chinese people fail to grasp, and most Chinese are not conscious of’.

## 1.2 Research questions and structure

During the dynamic process of data collecting and repeated analysis, the initial vague questions about the meaning and interpretations of the calligraphy *Nande hutu*, and how a paradoxical, ancient wisdom as expressed in *Nande hutu* can be attractive and even become popularized and commercialized in modern, contemporary Chinese society, crystallized into several concrete research questions. At the same time, these research questions determined the structure of the dissertation following this first introductory Chapter One.

### **PART ONE: *Hutu*, *Nande hutu* and their traditional background**

1. What was the intended meaning of the four-letterword *Nande hutu* in its original appearance and context? An answer to this question in the first place leads to the semantic and etymological analysis of the compound *hutu*, followed by the philosophical and societal background of the more general cultural motif of muddledness and vagueness in the Chinese tradition ([Chapter Two](#)). Secondly, this question inevitably leads to its author, Zheng Banqiao, and the socio-historical context in which he wrote the saying ([Chapter Three](#)).

## PART TWO: *Nande hutu* in contemporary society: ‘The art of being muddled’

2. How is the saying interpreted and discursively constructed in contemporary society? (Meaning and interpretations, [Chapter Four](#))
3. How popular (and popularized) is the saying and its derivatives such as the books on *hutuxue*? In which concrete contexts is this popular wisdom of being muddled applied in daily life? How is the saying ‘lived’ in practice? (Popular practice, [Chapter Five](#))
4. How is the saying evaluated by its native practitioners and observers? Are there any limitations to its use, or is there an ethical code to it? How should the wisdom of being muddled be applied? (Social morality, [Chapter Six](#))
5. What is so attractive about pretending to be *hutu*? Why is the practice of being muddled so widely embraced? (Attractiveness and functionality, [Chapter Seven](#))

### 1.3 Data and data collection

As the research started from nothing more than a few clues on how ambiguous the meaning and interpretations of the saying is, on its author, and on the existence of books on *hutuxue*, in an initial stage, I collected everything that was in whatever way related to *Nande hutu* and the notion of *hutu* and muddledness without any limitation and from a variety of ways, including online and library search, an exploratory survey among the Chinese Students and Scholars Association in Ghent, interviews, visits to libraries, bookstores, antique stores and markets in Shanghai, Beijing, Hangzhou, Shenyang, Hong Kong, direct observation of phenomena and objects related to *Nande hutu*, and informal talks.

For most of the interviews, the direct observation, the library study, and for collecting books on *hutuxue*, I conducted fieldwork between 2008 and 2009 in mainly Beijing, Shenyang, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Hong Kong. In these cities, I visited local libraries, bookshops, antique stores and markets. I also paid a visit to the Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall (*Zheng Banqiao Jinianguan* 郑板桥纪念馆) and to Zheng Banqiao’s Old House (*Guju* 故居) in Jiangsu Province, Xinghua city 兴化市.

The workable data thus obtained included transcribed interviews, an exploratory survey, popular magazine articles, journal articles, blogs and online articles, popular books, and newspaper articles on the issue, but also physical artifacts (several copies of the calligraphy, liquor carrying its name, t-shirts, calendars,...), notes of informal talks

with taxi-drivers, cleaning ladies, restaurant owners, bookstore employees, and whomever wanted to share his/her opinion with me on the topic, and a copy of a TV serial on Zheng Banqiao. The main sources will be discussed below in more detail.

The abundance and variety of sources in many aspects were complementary; the discursive elements revealed by each of them often confirmed each other, but sometimes also were contradictory, and they certainly not always had the same focus. Blogs for instance were often more 'critical' (see underneath).

I stopped collecting and choosing data only at the point when newly found data did not significantly add something to the existing categories and theoretical notions that had emerged by then. This phase was first formally described by Glaser and Strauss as 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser & Strauss 1967). More generally, it can be considered as the stage in which the researcher decides the study has reached saturation. That is, when during the coding and analysis of new data, nothing 'new' is heard, seen or read, and most discursive elements find their way into or are exemplary for the - in the ongoing process of data collecting and analysis - by that time formulated categories and theoretical considerations. This in no way means that there are no additional issues that can be pursued. However, data collection has to come to an end at some point, and this moment is 'decided on theoretical grounds, as a consequence of concurrent data analysis and data collection' (Ezzy 2002: 74-75).

### 1.3.1 Academic sources on *hutu* and *Nande hutu*

Not much has been published with regard to the topic in Western research<sup>2</sup>. The only available material with a direct link to *Nande hutu* was the monograph on Zheng Banqiao (Pohl 1990) and a short article discussing the aesthetic aspects and some content elements of *Nande hutu* (Pohl 2007) by Karl-Heinz Pohl, who many years before had made Zheng Banqiao and his art the topic of his doctoral dissertation. Also available were brief references to the calligraphy in an article about the elderly in Beijing, which suggested *Nande hutu* as a way of 'conflict avoidance by retreat' for the elderly (Boermel 2006), and an article on maxims on official websites by Charles Hammond, advancing *Nande hutu* as one of the popular 'strategies of transcendence' in contemporary society (Hammond 2007).

With regard to Chinese scholarly sources, ample articles discussing *Nande hutu* can be traced. Most of these articles also discuss *Nande hutu* in the context of Zheng Banqiao

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<sup>2</sup> Although I did no extensive research into Japanese and Russian studies on *Nande Hutu*, an online search at several occasions did not reveal much in this respect.

and his artistic production. However, a few articles discuss *Nande hutu* from a specific point of view, such as the dialectical interpretation of *Nande hutu* (Lei 2008), the relationship between the ‘muddled’ thinking and traditional Chinese culture (Li S. 2005), the relationship between the calligraphy and the ‘eccentric’ personality of Zheng Banqiao (Wu Z. 2007), and one author emphasizes the ‘decoding’ nature of his research on the calligraphy (Qiu 2007)<sup>3</sup>.

With regard to blog-articles and magazine articles, I sometimes felt the writing style and knowledge of a blog article or magazine article was quite academic. In these cases (e.g. Wang Z. 1993), I tried to know more about the author, and sometimes discovered the author indeed had a scholarly background. In the Chinese context, it is sometimes difficult to judge if an author is considered to be an academic scholar. This is especially the case with elderly academics. These people often have published many excellent articles, but during the Maoist era, they were forced to abandon their academic post and were sent to re-education camps, and after their rehabilitation never managed to obtain a PhD. By the same token, with regard to the academic sources, even when they are published in journals, the references list are often very brief, and one can only guess what the author’s ‘theories’ are based on. Moreover, as many such academic articles are also posted online, one often finds literal quotations or entire parts of texts, in which it is not always clear who copied from whom.

In this research, Chapter Two (Part One) builds on all kinds of primary and secondary scholarly sources related to the more general notions of vagueness and muddledness in traditional philosophy, patterns of thinking, and related topics in Chinese society. Chapter Three (Part One) builds on scholarly research and opinions on Zheng Banqiao, on the period in which he lived (early Qing) and on the scholarly interpretations and studies on *Nande hutu*. The written sources in Chapter Two and three are complemented with opinions of Chinese scholars and specialists on the topic collected during interviews. These interviews will be discussed separately in the interview section below.

### 1.3.2 Survey

Based on some broad preliminary research questions and on the first ‘observation’ of data, in March 2008, I designed a small, anonymous<sup>4</sup> exploratory survey with nine sensitizing, open questions that I sent to the mailing-list of the Chinese Students and

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the electronic versions of these articles can be accessed through the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) on-line documentation page on the web at <http://www.global.cnki.net/>.

<sup>4</sup> In the text, references to survey replies are marked with ‘Anon. (Survey) 2008’.

Academics Association in Ghent (Chisag). I received 50 replies from, at that time, 250-300 members (the president of the association never replied with an exact figure). The respondents of this mailing-group did not only include young, newly arrived students, but also researchers who had already spent quite some time in Belgium, and some were already working. Their age varied between 15 and 35, with most respondents (19/50) between 25 and 30. Five (10%) of them were older than 35.

The questions were as follows:

1. Do you know the calligraphy *Nande hutu*? Do you know other Chinese proverbs/idioms/sayings that convey more or less the same meaning? (你知道“难得糊涂”这句名言吗? 你所知道的与“难得糊涂”的含义相同或者相近的俗语\成语\名言还有哪些? )
2. Where and when did you see it or hear about it? (你是怎么认识它? 在哪儿看或者听说过?)
3. What do you think the idiom *Nande hutu* means? (你本人如何理解“难得糊涂”这句话?)
4. Have you already heard or read (book, article in a magazine or newspaper....) about *hutuxue*? (你听说过“糊涂学”吗? 你自己也看过关于“糊涂学”的书或者文章吗?)
5. If so, what do you think ‘hutuxue’ tells us? (如果看或者听说过的话, 你认为“糊涂”到底告诉我们什么?)
6. Does *hutuxue* and the concept *hutu* sometimes influence your way of thinking and dealing with daily-life situations (work, family, relation, friends, health,...)? If yes, how does it influence your way of thinking and actions? “糊涂学”及“糊涂”这个观念有时也会印象你的思维方式, 印象你的日常生活方式 (工作, 家庭, 朋友, 身体健康, 情人关系等等) 和生存状态吗? 怎么印象你的生活方式和对生活的态度?
7. Why do you think the *hutuxue* has become quite popular recently? 你认为“糊涂学”为什么最近比较受欢迎了?
8. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of applying the way of thinking as represented in *Nande hutu* in one’s social behavior and one’s behavior in society? 你认为用“难得糊涂”的思想方式为人处事有哪些有利之处和不利之处.
9. Do you think there is a relation between morality and applying ‘the art of being muddled’ as a way to conduct oneself in society? If so, in which way? (你认为应用“糊涂学”的处世方式跟道德有关系吗? 为什么?)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> With regard to the ninth question, I want to thank my former Chinese colleague Shen Tie, with whom I reviewed the survey, for the suggestion to add a question on what people thought was beneficial and what not

Although the survey was anonymous, I had the strong impression that most respondents were people who knew me in one way or another and wanted to do me a favor.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, the respondents had spontaneously included their names in the response. Especially in view of the exploratory character of the survey, I did not consider that to be a limitation. On the contrary, with those respondents whom had given their names, I was able to have a follow-up conversation.

During the analysis of the replies, I discovered some people had copied parts of the internet and even an image of the calligraphy. This issue of copying returns in the blogs, and will be discussed in section 1.5 Delimitations and additional remarks.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.3.3 Interviews and other ‘personal communication’

After fine-tuning the questions of the survey, I conducted twenty-two semi-structured interviews ranging from half an hour to two hours with different kinds of people. I included academics, artists, students, young employees and employers or businessmen and –women (middle-aged people that are considered to be in the prime of their lives), a middle school and a university teacher, and some officials. Addendum one (page 361) contains a list of the most important interviewees and some background information such as their age and occupation.

Although in order to avoid too much pre-meditation and standardization in their answers, interviews are generally not set up under the pretext of the research topic, but rather in a roundabout way, I decided not to do so. I was afraid that I would not be able to hide my real intentions (all my ‘real’ questions evolved around *hutu* or *Nande hutu*), and I felt that might be counterproductive. Besides, although interviewees sometimes

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about applying the art of being muddled. She must have sensed why I was curious about the link with *Nande hutu* and morality (translated as *daode* 道德), and probably foresaw only few people would answer positively to this question. The question whether something is morally accepted (ethically right or wrong) is not formulated in the direct way as it is in most Western countries. From a Chinese perspective, morality is always situational, and there are no clear-cut moral judgments, nor a clear division between ethically ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Besides, the Chinese morality (*daode*) is always ‘social morality’. In this respect, the question would have been more appropriate when asking about the relation between *Nande hutu* and *xiuyang* 修养, individual morality or moral self-cultivation. This concept turned out to be an important association with the practice of *Nande hutu*, which I did not know yet at the time of the survey. For more on the issue of Chinese morality, see section 2.4.3 Muddledness in moral judgment.

<sup>6</sup> At the time I conducted the survey, I also worked at the Chinese Department and at the China Platform (International Relations Office) of Ghent University, and I was quite involved in the activities of Chisag.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the strengths and weaknesses of surveys, see e.g. Marshall & Rossman 2006 (4th edition): 125-127. For more in particular on conducting surveys among Chinese, see Heimer & Thogerson 2006.

took the initiative to enter the domain of politics, the topic was not a taboo or politically loaded topic, nor was it an investigation into a sensitive phenomenon or personal experience. Therefore, I informed the interviewees beforehand that I wanted 'to better understand' (*duo liaojie yixia* 多了解一下) what the calligraphy *Nande hutu* meant, and what their personal opinion about this was. I did however tell the interviewees in advance that I did not expect them to do any preparation or research into the subject, and had the impression that – contrary to some of the survey respondents who probably had the internet at hand when answering the questions – they rarely did. All of the interviewees gave their permission to record the interview.

The questions I asked were based on the questions of the survey, although I left out the strong focus on the books on *hutuxue*, and the question that deals with the application of the *hutu* wisdom on life and morality. One question I added – depending on the situation – was whether the respondent could imagine the saying being said by a Western person (to which all but one replied no, at least, not as intended in the Chinese saying). I also often asked for specific examples, as it turned out this is often the only way to make people go beyond what they think is expected of them. Whatever the 'level' of the discussion (interview, informal casual talk, ...), the conversation always stayed 'open' and I did not intervene when a person came to talk about something completely off-topic or unrelated to the questions. My interest in the first place was about the 'stream of consciousness' that was aroused by mentioning the saying *Nande hutu*, and to this end, the questions were only directive.

Without doubt my own identity (as the 'outsider', a Western, non-native speaker, as the 'knowledgeable researcher', as a female) influenced the answers of the respondents in many ways. For instance, many interviewees – and by extension, also the conversation partners of the informal talks – started the interviews with remarking that they 'did not know much about the topic', that is, definitely less than me, whom they considered to be an expert in the study on *Nande hutu*. Consequently, I often started the interview with assuring the interviewee that there were no right or wrong answers. However, even though my non-native identity and my status as a researcher, and very likely also my gender, may have influenced the answers, this did not seem to be problematic for the significance and value of the answers, for the important reason that the interviews were complemented and 'verified' by other, more objective (i.e. less subject to influences by the researcher) sources. In the end, although there were some interesting non-overlapping areas, most of the interviewee responses were covered by the survey, the academic literature, the popular literature, rhymes and sayings, and even popular songs and the TV-serials.

As I already had an abundance of sources (articles, blogs, survey), and also did not have any presupposition with regard to differences in social categories, the sampling of interviewees was quite random. In addition, I was not in the position to undertake long periods of fieldwork in China, so I relied on friends and their acquaintances (*guanxi*,

friends of friends) to find people from different social categories (with regard to age, gender, and social and economic status) willing to share their opinion on *Nande hutu* with me.

Unfortunately, I did not interview anyone of over 65 years of age, a retired person, or an elderly person. Elderly people generally were not very willing to be interviewed by a stranger, I assume more out of fear of the 'formal character' of it, and because of strong feelings of inadequacies about the topic (a concern that other interviewees often expressed at the start of their interview), than out of mere unwillingness. On the other hand, when I occasionally started to talk with elderly people, in a casual and unrestrained context, they always happily shared their view on the topic with me. Besides, elderly people do seem to rejoice themselves in writing in popular magazines; most sources by the elderly stem from magazine articles.

More or less all interviews started with the surprise by the interviewee of why I choose to do research on something so self-evident and commonplace for Chinese people as the wisdom of life contained in *Nande hutu*. Nonetheless, more or less all interviews developed into vivid conversations and often ended with a remark by the interviewee about the usefulness of doing research about something so 'commonplace' in China, both for Chinese to better understand their own cultural roots, and for Westerners to better understand Chinese culture.

The smoothness in which most interviews took place, was certainly supported by the fact that the topic – the saying *Nande hutu*, the person of Zheng Banqiao, and in general the art of being and pretending to be muddled in Chinese society – is rarely discussed as a taboo subject. Only the more critical sources discuss the saying in a possibly sensitive field, either as a criticism on the autocratic system of feudal China, and occasionally on the Mao era, or as a national policy to keep the people ignorant in contemporary society. But even in these cases, during interviews, interviewees rarely hesitated to agree on the recording and using of his/her real name, and rarely displayed a fear of exposing their opinions.<sup>8</sup> This freedom of speech might also be influenced by the fact that for my interviewees, I was some far-away researcher, interested in their opinion on the topic, but nevertheless not intending to publish them for a Chinese public. Although none of them specifically asked me this, I suppose they generally assumed the PhD thesis would not be read by any of their Chinese friends, colleagues, or leaders.

During the research process, I had many interesting informal talks with friends, 'friends of friends', taxi-drivers and cleaning ladies, and with people I met on busses, conferences and other random occasions. Although these kinds of interactions were

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<sup>8</sup> A valuable work that discusses many aspects of conducting interviews in China is *Interviewing Chinese people: From high-level officials to the unemployed* by Dorothy Solinger (2006).



often short, they provided valuable insights into different nuances and popular meanings, and urged me to stay sharp and at all times open to the diversity of the popular interpretations and the terminology used.

In general, I found the listening process, not only at the time of the interview, but also afterwards at moments and places completely out of the research context, extremely rewarding in terms of discovering new insights. In one way or another, listening always drew my attention to exactly these elements and nuances that did not occur to me in a reading process when dealing with written sources, including the transcript of the interviews.

At times when long periods of deskwork were not possible, both the interviews and some occasional talks I recorded, and the fact that for a very long time I carried the recordings with me for odd moments, when driving the car or taking the train, or long periods of waiting, kept me as much as possible 'immersed' in the data, a condition which I found most valuable and ideal for getting to the core of things without losing sight of the nuances.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the interviews were quite exemplary and all encompassing. As a sample, the transcription of the interview with professor Hu Sheng 胡胜, dean at the School of Literature at Liaoning University, is set out in Addendum two (see page 365). Perhaps quite unusually, I also added the longer interviews, which in the text are generally indicated as 'personal communication', in the bibliography. As my sources were a mixture of interviews, the survey and various written sources, this allowed me to cite the interviewees as a source in an in-text summation of references together with written sources without having to add the required 'personal communication' among the written sources.

One last remark concerns the transcription of the most comprehensive interviews. It was without doubt a very time-consuming exercise, but to me, transcribing these interviews contributed tremendously to getting familiar with and grasping the meaning of the different discursive elements, terminology and nuances in the different discourses. Douglas Ezzy (2002: 70) describes the advantage of transcribing interviews as follows:

Transcribing the interview [...] encourages detailed reflection on the issues of the research. [...] Transcription served as a preliminary form of data analysis.

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the importance of immersion in the data, see e.g. Marshall & Rossman 2006: 158. It is for this reason, that Wolcott identifies 'participant observation' (in its broadest sense) as the core research activity in qualitative research (Wolcott 2009: 84-85).

### 1.3.4 Popular magazine articles and official sources

Besides the survey and the interviews, much of the data for the analysis of the contemporary discourse on *Nande hutu* (Part Two) comes from articles from different kinds of popular magazines. Also here, I did not make a selection at the beginning, but stopped collecting new data from magazines when at a certain point new articles did not bring in new discursive elements.

The main types of magazines used were

- related to health and often aimed at the elderly such as *Laonian jiankang* 老年健康 (Health and the elderly), *Yishou yangsheng* 益寿养生 (Beneficial for longevity and preserving health), *Laonianren* 老年人 (The elderly), *Changshou* 长寿 (Longevity), *Yiyao yu baojian* 医药与保健 (Medicine and health care), *Dongfang yangsheng* 东方养生 (Oriental health preservation)
- aimed at students and teachers, such as *Ban zhuren* 班主任 (Head of the class), *Jiaoshu yu ren* 教书育人 (Teaching and education)
- aimed at a more literary reader's public such as *Longmenzhen* 龙门阵 and *Duzhe* 读者 (Reader)
- related to business and finance such as *Licai* 理财 (Financing), *Guanli yu caifu* 管理与财富 (Management and fortune),
- aimed at officials, governmental leaders, ... such as *Renmin Luntan* 人民论坛 (People's Forum), *Guangming Ribao* 光明日报 (Guangming Daily), *Qiushi* 求实 (Truth Seeking), *Zhongguo jiancha* 中国监察 (China Supervision), *Gongan yuekan* 公安月刊 (Monthly edition of the Public Security Bureau), *Dangyuan ganbu zhi you* 党员干部之友 (Friends of the Party cadres)

Very often articles on *Nande hutu* appeared in more general popular magazines in a column dedicated to a domain such as the above mentioned: health, society, literary critique, leisure, etc.

### 1.3.5 Blogs and online articles

Much can be said about online writing and especially weblogs, but the least one can say is that they are extremely rewarding for research into values and phenomena in contemporary society. The blogs I visited offered tremendously interesting accounts of people's experiences and views on *Nande hutu* and 'the art of being muddled'.

Wijnia (2004) states that the weblog can be used for reflection in three areas: a) on the subjective domain, for self-expression and self-reflection, b) on the objective domain, for sharing knowledge, and c) on the inter-subjective domain, for criticism on

society. Weblogs can contribute significantly to collecting the more critical and reflective opinions on an issue. This is especially applicable in China, where social control and stringent censorship - either direct, or as a form of self-censorship - often limit public speech. Thanks to the possibility of anonymous writing<sup>10</sup>, not unexpectedly weblogs, and also anonymous web articles, contributed in particular to a more reflective and critical evaluation of *Nande hutu*; they often went further than the usual references to other sayings and Chinese philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Not only does the implicit self-censorship in non-anonymous interactions stimulate the venting of more critical thoughts in blog-discussions, but also the complexity of social relationships urges people to keep silent in public and openly vent their thoughts anonymously on blogs and similar web tools.<sup>12</sup> Often, internet parody (*egao* 恶搞 or 'evil doing') is used to express resistance or critical thoughts through humorous and satirical videos, photo collections, texts, poems.

The blogs I consulted are too many to mention them all, but a few examples are: the blog-spaces on the largest search engine in China, *Baidu* (百度) ([www.Baidu.com](http://www.Baidu.com)) and on the *Guangming Daily* site <http://www.guangming.com.my/>, [blog.sina.com.cn](http://blog.sina.com.cn), <http://blog.163.com>, and even some blog-domains that were entitled *Nande hutu* (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/nandehutuluo>).

All the aspects of *Nande hutu* mentioned in this research are to a greater or lesser extent covered by blogs and popular online articles.

In the initial stage of the research, I was not selective in the sampling. In a later stage, by the time some major concepts and categories had developed, I sometimes double-checked opinions that had emerged from the other sources, by analyzing some blog-pages. For instance, if a few sources mentioned an idiom related to *Nande hutu* to explain its meaning, I would double-check if this combination and interpretation also appeared on the web. In this respect, blogs and online popular writings contributed immensely to the triangulation (cross-examination) of data<sup>13</sup> found in other sources.

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<sup>10</sup> In 2006, the government prepared a document that did not allow bloggers to use a pseudonym or write anonymously. This attempt however was not successful. As Farrall and Herold (2011: 176) explain, 'the combination of widespread public opposition and carefully reasoned legal arguments [...] appeared to force the government to reconsider'. As a result, in May 2007, real-name registration was officially 'encouraged' rather than mandatory. For more on this issue, see Farrall & Herold 2011: 174-176.

<sup>11</sup> More than for instance the survey, which was also anonymous. In general, I found the interviewees also quite critical. See above section 1.3.3 for some possible reasons.

<sup>12</sup> For a recent work on internet control in China, see the book section *Grassroots agency in a civil sphere? Rethinking internet control in China* by Peter Marolt (2011).

<sup>13</sup> The basic idea of triangulation is that data are obtained from a wide range of different and multiple sources, using a variety of methods, investigators, or theories. This will ultimately enhance the validity and reliability of the research results. On triangulation in data collection in qualitative research, see e.g. Arksey & Knight 1999: 21-31.

As far as I could identify (through pictures or language use), the greatest part of the bloggers are younger people, but also retired professors and businessmen are represented. Because the topic is somehow still very much situated in ancient thought and in a historical context, not only young people discussed the topic. From blogger's pictures, the author's or blog space's background and from language use, I often could identify young and elderly people, and academics. But otherwise, I rarely purposely double-checked an online author's identity or tried to figure out if the text was originally a magazine article or the like, unless I found the reasoning or writing style either particularly biased, or rather 'scholarly'.

### 1.3.6 Self-improvement books on *hutu*, *congming* and on *hutuxue*

The books on *hutuxue*, which I loosely translate as 'the art of being muddled'<sup>14</sup>, certainly were a major source in the contemporary analysis. I collected about thirty of these books, but there certainly are a lot more, with new editions being published frequently. From these thirty, I choose twenty-three books because of their particular focus (such as on officialdom or on people's management), or because of their particularly popularized 'visual' representation, or because they pretended to be 'other than the other' books on *hutuxue*. These twenty-three books are listed in Addendum three (see page 375). As far as I could tell, all the authors of the books were not academics.

In the average Chinese bookstore, these books are displayed in the 'self-improvement section' (*lizhi jindian* 励志金典), next to books on 'being successful' (*chenggongxue* 成功学), psychology (*xinlixue* 心理学), and sociology (*shehuixue* 社会学). They are classified in more or less four reference words (in order of frequency):

- 'popular reading' (*tongsu duwu* 通俗读物)
- 'philosophy of life' (*rensheng zhexue* 人生哲学 ; *rensheng zheli* 人生哲理)
- 'social and moral education' (*shehui gongde jiaoyu* 社会公德教育)
- 'the psychology of being successful' (*chenggong xinlixue* 成功心理学)

Most generally they discuss *Nande hutu* as a 'way to conduct oneself in society' (*chushi zhi dao* 处世之道), but some have a specific focus or starting point such as officialdom or people's management.

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<sup>14</sup> As will become clear further in the research, another – maybe more revealing and striking – option would have been 'The art of pretended muddledness'. However, that seemed to me already too much of an interpretation. Besides, there is no 'pretended' (*zhuang*) in the Chinese phrasing.

Whereas *hutu* is still somehow integrated in the lexicon of everyday language (although not as a frequently used term), the cognate term *hutuxue* is hardly heard outside of the context of the books dealing with this topic; it certainly is not an established concept. The term in itself is worth discussing because of the popular gloss given to its semantics, a popular gloss that, ironically, at once reveals both the widespread popularization of the term and the pragmatic use of being *hutu* as a popular wisdom of life that can be learnt by reading the books. *Xue* here is the nominative suffix, which when appended to a word means ‘the study of’ (also ‘-ology’). Therefore, *hutuxue* can be translated as ‘the study of being muddled’. At the same time, using the word *hutuxue* also suggests the elevation of ‘the art of being muddled’ into a fully-fledged scholarly branch of knowledge as valid and important as any other academic specialization.<sup>15</sup>

The use of the denominative *-xue* is not exceptional. Many other ‘studies’ have been brought to the popular readers’ public, such as *mouluxue* 谋略学 (‘the art of stratagem’), *houheixue* 厚黑学 (‘the art of thick (skin) and black (heart)’)<sup>16</sup>, *guanxixue* 关系学 (‘the art of social relationships’), of which some will re-appear later in the dissertation. Drawing on the emphasis of being muddled as a skill, a subtlety, an attitude and an approach to life, with a specific ethics to it and applicable in many contexts, *hutuxue* seems to be best rendered in English as ‘the art of being muddled’.

I occasionally added an image in the text, for instance when accompanying a cover quote, to show the popular calibre of the books on *hutuxue*. They are mostly interesting from a semiotic point of view; the image speaks for itself.

One final remark about the data is that the abundance and variety of the data and the ways of collecting them was vital for grasping the different nuances and discursive elements in the different discourses. Or, to use Mayfair Yang’s (1994: 49) words, they were vital to understand the different ‘dialects that reflect the various native interpretations’ of the different discourses on *Nande hutu*. The different sources used a

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mayfair Yang’s explanation of *guanxixue* (Yang M. 1994: 8).

<sup>16</sup> *Houheixue* 厚黑学 or *The art of being thick and black*, is worth a study in itself. *Houheixue* was written by scholar and politician Li Zongwu 李宗吾 (1879-1944) and published in 1911, the year the Qing dynasty was overthrown. The book regained immense popularity in the 90s as another of what Geremie Barmé (1999: 138-139) calls ‘crisis management’ books. Initially a political satire, it refers to the means people in power turn to to be successful and stay in power. More generally, it is a – satirical – study of how to advance oneself in the world – be it in government service or in the private sphere – by cultivating a thick skin (i.e. shamelessness) and a dark heart (i.e. ruthlessness). According to Barmé, *Houheixue* was later hailed as a Chinese equivalent to Machiavelli’s *Il principe*.

more or less different ‘language’, tone and focus, as such complementing (triangulating) each other, and contributing to the methodological triangulation.

## 1.4 Data analysis and methodological steps

With regard to its methodological framework, this research, however deeply situated in the ‘cultural studies’ approach, has some affinity with grounded theory. Without fully adhering to the analytic methods of the classic grounded theory (that is, open, axial and theoretical coding), and without the *a priori* purpose of generating a theory e.g. (e.g. Corbin & Strauss 2008; Glaser & Strauss 1967), the rationale of this research bears some relationship with the methodological premises of grounded theory. Grounded theory involves the discovery of ‘theory’ (a general explanation) through the analysis of data, rather than starting from a hypothesis or an existing theoretical framework (Corbin & Strauss 2008; Ezzy 2002; Glaser & Strauss 1967). As a consequence, in grounded theory, ‘all is data’: whatever can contribute to a complete ‘understanding’ of the research object at stake is valuable (Glaser 2001: 145). These characteristics matched well with the starting conditions of this research: no systematic research (apart from a few interpretative Chinese studies strongly related to the author of the calligraphy) had been conducted yet. The only readily available knowledge was the fact that the meaning of the saying was very ambiguous, that it was written by Qing-official and ‘eccentric’ Zheng Banqiao, that it got a popularised touch in the form of books on *hutuxue*, and that it was also fairly popular nowadays. These earlier observations (e.g. the presumed multi-layered meaning of the saying, the existence of books on *hutuxue* and *hutuxue* as a popular phenomenon, the author Zheng Banqiao) guided me in the first data collection.

The core analysis method employed in this research is thematic analysis.<sup>17</sup> Thematic analysis analyzes what is said, rather than how it is said, to whom, and why<sup>18</sup>. Thematic

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<sup>17</sup> A heated debate has been ongoing about the difference between thematic analysis and analysis in grounded theory, and it seems the debate has not yet been decided. Moreover, grounded theory itself is discussed in terms of many variants such as the constructionist variant of Charmaz, and the more ‘classic’ version of Corbin and Strauss. Most importantly, one has to keep in mind that grounded theory is a ‘methodology’ (the underlying principles of an inquiry), and thematic analysis a ‘method’ (technique) for analysis of data in qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss 2008, Ezzy 2002, Glaser & Strauss 1967). As such, thematic analysis can be one of the methods for a fully ascribed classic grounded theory. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue in favor of ‘a “named and claimed” thematic analysis, in which researchers need not subscribe to the implicit theoretical

analysis aims to identify themes (patterns) within the data. In the ongoing process of data collection and analysis, these themes are sorted in categories, that in turn are 'induced' from the data. Thus, the final categories are not defined prior to the data analysis, but emerge during the process of data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006; Corbin & Strauss 2008; Ezzy 2002).

The process of thematic analysis passes along the stages of coding and defining concepts and categories (themes), into describing, analysing and interpreting (Ezzy 2002: 89-90). In this research, these stages can be illustrated as follows:

- (1) In the first stage, some initial codes - apparently significant or recurring themes revealed in parts of texts - were defined by going over the data word by word for statements and opinions. Each statement or opinion was extracted verbatim, which gave codes such as 'wisdom of life', 'complexity of modern society', 'bribery', 'self-cultivation', 'self-preservation', 'wuwei', 'vagueness', several related sayings and concrete references to historically famous figures such as Su Dongpo and Tao Yuanming and so on.
- (2) In order to make these initial codes more workable, they were grouped into concepts (subthemes), such as 'business', 'coping strategies', 'officialdom', 'experience', 'Daoism', 'active interpretation', 'passive interpretation'. By constantly coding and comparing new data throughout the research, new concepts emerged, which in turn were renamed and modified.
- (3) In the final stage, broad 'categories' or groups of concepts (umbrella themes) that reflected similar subthemes and that sufficiently answered the - by that time well articulated - research questions were defined: the intended meaning, interpretations, popularity, practice, ethics and attractiveness of 'the art of being muddled'. These broader categories were structured in chapters. Inevitably, some aspects of categories (themes) overlapped, and re-appeared in other categories. In a last stage, I began the process of description, moving from the description into analysis and - when appropriate - interpretation.

Crucial in thematic analysis is the ongoing process of the analysis. The concepts (subthemes) and categories (umbrella themes) are identified and developed while the research is being conducted. This constant interaction between gathering new sources

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commitments of grounded theory if they do not wish to produce a fully worked-up grounded-theory analysis. This is the rationale behind this study: as I could not foresee what would come up during the analysis, I initially did not intend to generate theoretical claims through the analysis. The research was from the very beginning exploratory and descriptive.

<sup>18</sup> Contrary to for instance structural hermeneutics, in thematic analysis there is minimal focus on *how* a narrative is spoken (or written), on structures of speech a narrator selects, audience (real and imagined), the local context that generated the narrative, or complexities of transcription.

and analysis, urges the researcher to constantly re-define and re-organize the data. Thus, these stages of thematic analysis (coding, conceptualizing, analysing) cannot be seen as separate, chronological actions; they constantly influence and determine each other. For instance, in the process of the analysis of the exploratory survey and the first data, I came to some important but still preliminary findings that were crucial for the further development and foci of the research.

- a) In the different discourses, and in particular in the academic explanations, ample references were made to feudal society and the socio-cultural and personal background of its author Zheng Banqiao to explain the meaning of the calligraphy. These concrete backgrounds seemed to be of utmost importance for a correct understanding of the ‘intended’ meaning of the saying.
- b) The interpretation of *Nande hutu* was far more ambiguous and in general much broader than I assumed when I started the research. The saying not only seemed to be open to interpretation from different (psychological, social, philosophical and moral) dimensions depending on the viewpoint of the author or respondent, but also associated and explained by means of many other ‘popular’ sayings or wisdoms of life, also rooted in traditional ideological, cosmological and philosophical notions. Besides, there was more to it than just being a popular saying: many sources advocated the notion of *hutuxue* and vagueness and the dialectics of wisdom and muddledness as an inherent, unconscious cultural luggage, deeply rooted in the ancient Chinese philosophical tradition, and in the structure of Chinese society.

In the final report, these two observations (a) and (b) eventually lead to Part Two, which covers the first two ‘introductory’ chapters on the philosophical background of *hutuxue* and of muddledness in Chinese society, and on Zheng Banqiao and the socio-historical context.

- c) The books on *Hutuxue* did not appear to be so popular and well-known, but the calligraphy itself all the more so. Besides, the calligraphy above all was perceived (and popular) as a practical wisdom of life accessible to all, and much less as an elitist philosophical saying, or as a piece of art or design object.
- d) Not all sources evaluated the wisdom of life, or rather the practice of the wisdom of life, positively. Many critical sources were skeptical and ironic about the ‘wrong’ usage of the wisdom of being muddled, and this criticism concerned different levels of society. This gave the first impetus to adding the ‘critical’ Chapter Six that deals with the ethics of being muddled, which contains a critical evaluation of the practice of being muddled by native observers and practitioners.



In this process, after the analysis of the exploratory survey, I fine-tuned the guiding questions of the survey for the interviews (see also above section 1.3.3 Interviews and other ‘personal communication’).

For the discourse analysis, I used for some of the time the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program MAXQda. However, I could not include the books and many of the articles as a non-text PDF-file, so using the program was not exhaustive enough to rely on for the whole analysis.

## 1.5 Delimitations and additional remarks

This research is limited in many ways.

In the first place, although the target group is very broad, the use of the phrase ‘Chinese people’ without any distinction with regard to region or locality, gender, social status, or age, is under whatever circumstances too much of a generalization. I will mention some concrete limitations of the target group in this research underneath.

As mentioned above, the research did not start from strictly theoretical presumptions or a hypothesis, and was not guided by anything else than some preliminary observations. This had some implications on determining the target group and sources. Especially in the initial stage of combined data collection and analysis, I did not exclude any source whatsoever. For this reason, there is no clearly argued limitation to the target group or main players; the core of the research revolves around one very specific research topic, consisting of only four characters, but is aimed at a broad target group of research participants. Nonetheless, in reality, the persons behind the written data such as books, blogs and articles from magazines and academic journals were for obvious reasons mostly urban dwellers (in this context, as contrasted to farmers and other people living on the countryside, as well as the immigrated labour workers in the city); they are to a high degree literate, and have the resources and literacy to express themselves through blogs and published articles. For this reason, the opinion of rural dwellers is touched on in the analysis, but not completely absent. For instance, I talked with immigrant restaurant owners, waiters, waitresses, and taxi-drivers from the countryside. However, from these minor interventions, I had to conclude their contributions are valuable but rather limited; within a few minutes or even words, the talks were finished, and they changed the subject, whereas this was not the case with other ‘informal’ conversation partners. Extensive interviewing, which would require

long-term fieldwork, might allow more elaborate opinions, but I suggest that this would not add significantly to the meanings and interpretations presented here.

Among the large group of urban dwellers, no distinct social groups according to social status, gender or age were distinguished beforehand. With the abundance and plurality of sources, the – not always but often – uncertainty about the gender of the source, and the many digital anonymous (or written with a pseudonym) sources, defining the social status, age, gender, location (in terms of North-South differences) of each source was not particularly feasible. Only the gender and age dimension to some extent emerged from the analysis as distinct with regard to a particular aspect of the research.

Secondly, in terms of the covered locality, the research only covers mainland China. As some articles and for instance the recent album (and title song) called *Nande hutu* by Taiwanese pop singer Jordan Lin (Lin Jiudeng 林久登), which displays the calligraphy on the cover, showed, the saying/calligraphy is also quite popular in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Besides, the motif of the vague and indistinct rooted in traditional culture, is without doubt as deeply imbedded in Taiwan and Hong Kong societies as it is in mainland China. However, it would take another comparative research to identify where exactly the differences and similarities with mainland China are.

Thirdly, the described meanings and interpretations of the saying *Nande hutu* in this research are certainly not exhaustive; it would be impossible to include all the possible nuances and dimensions in the meaning, interpretations and practice of the wisdom of life that the saying encompasses. Later research would be able to focus for instance on separate aspects of the saying such as its function as a coping strategy for the elderly, its relation to other popular sayings (which is partly dealt with in Chapter Four), and so on.

Fourthly, with regard to the philosophical background of the research (Chapter Two), which mainly deals with Daoism and Confucianism in their earliest form, I based my research on what emerged from the etymological and semantic analysis, and from the primary data (interviews, articles) analysis. Without doubt, more links between *hutu* and the chaos theory (*hundun lilun* 混沌理论) in ancient cosmology and philosophical writings can be found than what is presented in this chapter, both in other philosophical systems, and in the further developments of Confucianism and Daoism such as the different Neo-Confucian schools.

Fifthly, not so much a limitation, but rather an observation about the copy-behavior is appropriate. During the analysis, I discovered that many sources, from bloggers to survey respondents and academics, had copied sometimes parts, sometimes complete texts, mostly without referring to the original source. For this research, however, it seemed to me not of major significance, unless as an – be it a bit biased – illustration of the commonness of the opinion at stake: we can assume the copier agrees with the particular statement. In addition, the copy-phenomenon is certainly illustrative of the

way public discourse – and in some cases also academic discourse – literally shapes people’s opinions.

In summary, to use the words of Girardot (1988: xiii), ‘there can never be any perfect closure to such an interpretative enterprise’. The data, the data analysis and the interpretative character of the research will always be influenced by the focus and the situational knowledge and background of the researcher, and by the socio-historical background of the topic at stake.<sup>19</sup>

### Quotations, references, translations and transcription issues

I explicitly added many characters in the text, especially in Part Two which deals with the contemporary interpretations. Although for the non-sinologist this might be disturbing, I found that for a research based on the analysis of different discourse on the topic in a language other than that of the dissertation, it is important to give the reader at least an impression of the discursive elements in their native form. Oftentimes, the Chinese characters convey more nuances than the English translation, or are more ‘pregnant with meaning’ than the English renderings. To start with, this is the case with the *hutu* in *Nande hutu*.

All translations and cited paraphrases are my own unless otherwise indicated. Translations of sayings, terms and compounds are, if taken from a dictionary, put in between quotations marks (‘ ’). Unless otherwise indicated, the dictionaries used are the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian Xiudingben* 现代汉语词典修订本, *Jingshan Ciba* 景山词霸 (Kingsoft Powerword, Edition 2007), and the online dictionary MDBG Chinese-English Dictionary (<http://www.mdbg.net/chindict/chindict.php>). I did not mention the consulted dictionary for every rendering in English; especially in Part Two, which is loaded with expressions, maxims, and aphorism, the ample references to dictionaries would be overdone.

To avoid ambiguity, Chinese authors of which there are several with the same surname and the same publication year have the initial of their first name in the in-text citation. To distinguish a work from another work by the same author in the same year, I have added an ‘a’ and ‘b’ after the date of publication in the bibliography and citations.

For quotations and literal translations out of Chinese longer than approximately one sentence, I included the Chinese version not in-text but in a footnote. In these cases, *pinyin* is not added. As some parts with Chinese characters are quite long, in-text

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<sup>19</sup> Or, as Douglas Ezzy (2002: 150) explains from a poststructuralist viewpoint, ‘There is no final or correct analysis’.

Chinese characters only contain *pinyin* in case they refer to expressions, aphorisms, and often recurring, established concepts and notions.

In Part Two, which describes the actual analysis of the different discourse on the saying, I unusually put extracts of interviews and texts shorter than three sentences in a separate quotation box. The reason for this is that in discourse analysis, quotations of sources are not merely ‘illustrations’ of a theory. They are at the core of the research, they are examples of the data itself, or in other words, ‘they are the topic itself, not a resource from which the topic is rebuilt’ (Potter & Wetherell 1987: 173).

All names of informants (interviews, survey, informal talks) and most of the names of online authors (if not anonymous) are pseudonyms, except for those of famous people and famous established scholars, or unless the person gave permission to use his or her real name.

The webpages in the bibliography are accompanied by the phrase ‘retrieved + date’. The date here mentioned is the last access date.

# Part 1: Hutu, Nande hutu, and their traditional background



## Chapter 2 *Hutu*: a philosophical and social background

*Clothed in facts.  
Truth feels oppressed;  
In the garb of poetry,  
It moves easy and free.  
(Rabindranath Tagore)*

### 2.1 Introduction

When exploring the meaning and function of the saying *Nande hutu* ('Being muddled is difficult') in contemporary society, one is immediately exposed to an elaborate but - as its own proper meaning, 'muddledness', emphasizes - not surprisingly a rather vague web of meanings. The first striking thing in the midst of all these different interpretations is the abundance of references to Chinese mythology and Daoist and Confucian concepts. There is clearly no way to discuss the contemporary meaning of the saying without first digging into ancient Chinese thought. For a complete and clear understanding of the concept of muddledness or vagueness as expressed in *hutu*, an etymological and philosophical analysis seems inevitable. Therefore, a first analysis in this chapter will deal with the etymology and the semantics of the compound *hutu* by exploring some early occurrences, by analyzing its different dictionary meanings and variants, and by conducting a semantic analysis. As the etymological analysis will reveal, the different interpretations and functions of *hutu* are all directly or indirectly

rooted in the philosophical and mostly Daoist background of the notion of muddledness or vagueness. More in particular, *hutu*, the indistinct, the hazy and the vague have always been closely associated with the ancient Chinese concept of truth, knowledge and wisdom. Vagueness and indistinctness are in fact characteristics of both the content and the methodology (underlying way of thinking) of ancient Chinese philosophy, which will be dealt with in section 2.3 on the philosophical background of vagueness and muddledness in Chinese thinking.

Having uncovered the philosophical roots, I will return to the question about the meaning and function of the notion of *hutu* in contemporary China by looking at the impact the notion of being muddled has had (and continues to have) on different aspects of Chinese society and Chinese cultural phenomena. The focus hereby will be on social morality, interpersonal relationships, and communication and discourse, as these are important factors in the further research. Thus, in this chapter, the concept of *hutu* will be dealt with from three different perspectives: firstly from its linguistic framework (etymology and semantics); secondly from its roots in ancient Chinese philosophy; and finally from its impact on and occurrence in the above mentioned domains of daily life.

I would like to point out that several excellent studies have already been carried out on the concept of vagueness, suggestiveness, holism and contextuality in Chinese tradition, often in an east-west comparative way. The works of David Hall and Roger Ames (1995; 1998), Chad Hansen (1992), Steve Coutinho (2004), François Jullien (2004a, 2004b), Feng Youlan (1997), and many others have greatly contributed to the understanding of the Chinese appreciation of wisdom as non-wisdom, suggestiveness and indistinctness. It is not my aim to merely repeat this. Apart from a return to the roots of Chinese philosophy in order to understand the important role of vagueness, indistinctness and chaos against order, and an introduction of the concepts of truth, knowledge and wisdom in as far as they are related to muddledness, I will in this chapter also explain how this way of thinking continues to influence everyday life in Chinese society on direct and indirect societal derivatives such as social morality, social psychology and social relationships in particular.

It is also not my aim to exclusively approach this topic from a theoretical angle. Especially in the section on muddledness in Chinese society I will include comments and examples of individual Chinese people in so far as they are relevant for the later understanding of the saying *Nande Hutu*. Additionally, some occasional parallels and dissimilarities with Western philosophy and Western theories of knowledge will be addressed.

In the next section, I will proceed with the etymology of *hutu* and its most relevant semantic associations.



## 2.2 Etymology and semantics of *hutu* and its linguistic derivatives

### 2.2.1 Some early occurrences of *hutu*

This research is not seeking to deliver a full historical study of the periods in Chinese history when the compound *hutu* was commonly used. However, as an introduction to the word itself, it is nevertheless interesting to trace some of its earliest occurrences and specific meanings in written sources.

A first observation is the 548 occurrences of the compound *hutu* in 411 different sources (*laiyuan* 来源)<sup>20</sup> of the *Siku Quanshu* 四库全书 (*The Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*) compilation.<sup>21</sup> *Hutu* appears in all four sections of the *Siku Quanshu*, i.e. in the Chinese Classics (*jing* 经, 32 times in 31 sources), in the histories and geographies (*shi* 史, 204 times in 151 sources), in the ‘masters’ (*zi* 子) on philosophy, arts and science (185 times in 119 different sources), and in the collections (*ji* 集) of Chinese literature (123 times in 106 different sources). *Hutu* even appears in the addenda (*fu* 附, 4 times in 2 different sources). Some important works in which *hutu* is mentioned include the *History of the Song dynasty* and to start with, the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*.

One of the earliest written occurrences of the compound *hutu* appears to be in the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* (*Taiping guangji* 太平广记, book 493), under the entry Guo Wujing 郭务静 where it is written: ‘Cangzhou Nanpi’s district official Guo Wujing in essence is muddled’ (*Cangzhou Nanpi cheng Guo Wujing xing hutu* 沧州南皮丞郭务静性糊涂).<sup>22</sup> This quotation is in fact a paraphrasing of a description of Guo Wujing by Tang writer Zhang Zhuo 张鷟 (660–740) in his *Chao ye qian zai* 朝野佥载. Zhang Zhuo does

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<sup>20</sup> The total of 411 ‘sources’ is somehow misleading, as they include different ‘volumes’ or ‘chapters’ (*juan* 卷) of books or collections, which might be a *juan* of the same source. As an example, *hutu* occurs 56 times in 27 different *juans* of the *Pu ji fang* 普济方, an important work about traditional Chinese medicine published in 1406 (Ming dynasty). As a result, the 411 sources can be reduced to 195 totally different sources.

<sup>21</sup> The *Siku Quanshu* is a compilation ordered by the Qianlong Emperor, completed in 1782. For this compilation, approximately 3500 ideologically and politically accepted books ranging from the ancient Zhou dynasty to the Qing dynasty were collected, catalogued, and annotated, and several thousands more reviewed and commented on. (Wilkinson 2000: 273-277)

<sup>22</sup> The *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* (*Taiping Guangji* 太平广记) is a collection of well-known quotations from 485 titles, compiled in 978 (Northern Song dynasty). The *Taiping Guangji* collects the unofficial biographies as well as miscellaneous works with sociological and mythological content written mainly by novelists from the Han to the early Song Dynasty. (e.g. *Ibid.*: 620)

not literally use the word *hutu*, but colorfully describes what kind of person Guo Wujing was. In this description, Guo Wujing is described as someone who is not very clear in many matters, and even a little foolish. To describe this quality, in the Song paraphrasing version, *hutu* is used.

Another Song source that uses *hutu* in a similar sense is the *Biography of Lü Duan* (935-1000)<sup>23</sup>. In this biography, we read:

The Taizong Emperor [of Song] wanted to appoint Duan as a prime minister, and someone said: 'Duan's conduct is muddled (*hutu*)'. The emperor responded: 'Duan is muddled in minor matters, but he is not muddled in major matters.' He was determined to appoint him.<sup>24</sup>

This refers to the story of Lü Duan, a prime minister during the Song dynasty. He is famous for looking very foolish, but in fact being very clear when it came down to very important matters such as political decisions. The Taizong Emperor (太宗, 939-997) appointed him as prime minister, but when the Emperor died, Wang Ji'en 王继恩 organized a plot to dethrone the Taizong Emperor's son and establish another monarch instead. When Lü Duan discovered and exposed the complot, Wang Ji'en was denounced. A part of this quotation has recently become well-known as a popular idiom, namely the idiom 'Zhuge [Liang] was cautious his whole life, Lü Duan was not muddled in major matters' (*Zhuge yi sheng wei jinshen, Lü Duan da shi bu hutu* 诸葛一生唯谨慎, 吕端大事不糊涂).<sup>25</sup> This idiom originates from a couplet Mao Zedong in one of his writings (1962) presented to Ye Jianying 叶剑英 (1897-1986), a general of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and the short form 'Lü Duan was not muddled in major matters' is now a popular quote for expressing how important it is to know when and where to be muddled.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *History of the Song Dynasty*, Book 28 (*Song shi - Juan er ba - Lü Duan zhuan* 宋史 - 卷二八 - 吕端传).

<sup>24</sup> 太宗欲相端, 或曰: '端为人糊涂'. 太宗曰: '端小事糊涂, 大事不糊涂'. 决意相之.

<sup>25</sup> Zhuge refers to Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 (181-234), a prime minister of the Shuhan 蜀汉 dynasty during the Three Kingdoms Period (220-265). Zhuge Liang is famous for being a wise strategist with unsurpassed intelligence. Although despite all his efforts, he did not manage to put his king (Liu Bei) or his son on the throne, he is generally acclaimed as the embodiment of wisdom, expressed in the popular saying *Zhuge yi sheng wei jinshen* 诸葛一生为谨慎, 'Zhuge was careful his whole life'. Until the present day, he is extremely popular and his person is the inspiration for many popular TV serials, films, comics and historical novels.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://marxistphilosophy.org/maozedongPre1966.htm> (Last accessed 9 February 2012). General Ye Jianying later became chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress from 1978 to 1983. The idiom *Lü Duan da shi bu hutu* 吕端大事不糊涂 was long before Mao Zedong's quote also mentioned under the entry of *hutu* in both the *Ciyuan* and the *Cihai* dictionaries. This idiom is also discussed in Chapter Six, section 6.4.1 Muddledness in 'minor' matters, not in 'major' matters (*xiao shi hutu, da shi bu hutu*).

A poem called *Song gao xin qing* (送高信卿) by poet Yuan Haowen 元好问 (1190–1257) of the Jin 金 dynasty (1115–1234) goes as follows:

Thousands things become vague (*hutu*) while drinking a bottle of wine.  
When saying farewell, chatting is like beating the throat.<sup>27</sup>

Here, *hutu* is used in the sense of a blurred picture of the world after drinking too much.

Another reference to *hutu* is found in the (Song or Yuan dynasty) collection *Jingben tongsu xiaoshuo* 京本通俗小说, in the story *Niu xianggong* 拗相公 (Master Niu<sup>28</sup>):

Master Jing used the base of a shoe to mop on the earthen wall so that the words became vague (*hutu*) [i.e. illegible], and only after completely finishing this, stopped.<sup>29</sup>

A source using *hutu* worth mentioning from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) is the *Yangzhou meng* (扬州梦) by drama and *sanqu* (verse and song) writer Qiao Ji 乔吉 (?–1345) (4th chapter):

Therefore, wandering in dire straits in all corners of the country (*luopo jianghu*) carrying alcohol has blurred (*hutu*) the Golden Millet Dreamland.<sup>30</sup>

The expression *luopo jianghu* 落魄江湖 originates from a poem by Tang poet Du Mu 杜牧 (803–852)<sup>31</sup>, and has become an expression often used in the context of scholar-officials who are not successful in achieving their ambitions (*bu de zhi* 不得志). The Golden Millet Dreamland refers to the story of a poor scholar who dreamt that he had become a high official, but when he woke up, he found the pot of millet still cooking on the fire. The Golden Millet Dreamland therefore generally refers to a daydream, a castle in the sky. Hence, the use of *hutu* in this saying can be understood as making something beautiful, lofty and desirable (the dream of becoming an official) just a vague, unreal idea; the beautiful dream becomes a bad dream.

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<sup>27</sup> 万事糊涂酒一壶，别时聊为鼓咙胡。 The expression *gu longhu* 鼓咙胡, ‘beating the throat’, very probably refers to the fact that in ancient China literati were not always in a position to speak freely, and many things had to be expressed implicitly

<sup>28</sup> *Niu xianggong* (Master Niu 拗相公) refers to Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), a Song economist who introduced major controversial socio-economic reforms. *Niu* 拗 means ‘to disobey, violate’, referring to his stubbornness and controversial reforms.

<sup>29</sup> 荆公将舄底向土墙上抹得字迹糊涂，方纔罢手。

<sup>30</sup> 因此上落魄江湖载酒行，糊涂了黄粱梦境。

<sup>31</sup> The full verse by Du Mu is *luopo jianghu dai jiu xing, chu yao xianxi na zhong qing* 落魄江湖载酒行，楚腰纤细掌中轻。

Also worth mentioning is the collection of early *baihua* novellas *Er ke pai'an jingqi* (二刻拍案惊奇, book 12) of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) by Ling Mengchu 凌濛初:

Hui'an [Zhu Xi] had no way to deal with her. He could only give her the vague (*hutu*) sentence of 'disagreeing and being demagogic' with regard to a higher official [Tang Zhongyou 唐仲友], so he viciously had her painfully beaten and sent to Shaoxing, and cross-examined her again.<sup>32</sup>

This story recounts some anecdotes about Zhu Hui'an 朱晦菴, a literary name for Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), a famous Confucian scholar who became the leading figure of the School of Principle (*Lixue* 理学) and the most influential rationalist Neo-Confucian thinker. Zhu Xi came to know that Tang Zhongyou 唐仲友, his political rival, was very fond of the official prostitute Yan Rui 严蕊, so he tried to make Yan Rui confess that Tang Zhongyou was corrupt. However, she did not confess anything, so he just vaguely (*hutu*) attributed a crime to her to be able to send her away and indirectly punish his rival Tang Zhongyou. In this context, the word *hutu* is used in the meaning of 'not precise', 'vague'.<sup>33</sup>

By the Qing dynasty *hutu* occurs frequently in literature and other references (262 of the total of 411 sources, with 341 occurrences of the total of 548 occurrences in the *Siku Quanshu*). An example of its use is found in the *Ru lin wai shi* (儒林外史), a very famous novel by Qing author Wu Jingzi 吴敬梓, completed in 1750. In this novel, *hutu* occurs in the context of a writ. The sentence goes as follows:

Not only is it unclear why the person is taken away, the [content on the] decree written on the writ is also unclear (*hutu*).<sup>34</sup>

Here, the meaning of *hutu* is 'unclear', 'uncertain', and 'ambiguous'. Another Qing text *Chang sheng duan- Kui yu* 长生殿- 窥浴 by Hong Sheng 洪昇 mentions: 'The pollen on the cheeks is vague (*hutu*), and the rouge on the mouth is messy.'<sup>35</sup>

Although I only mentioned a few examples from the period before the Qing dynasty, we know that the compound *hutu* was certainly in use as from the Song dynasty. Needless to say, this only applies to the written official and literary language. *Hutu* may

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<sup>32</sup> 晦菴也没奈何。只得糊涂做了‘不合蛊惑’上官，狠毒将他痛杖了一顿，发去绍兴，另加勘问。

<sup>33</sup> See for example the edition of Ling 2002 [1998]: 189. Obviously, it is just a story, and even more a story in which Zhu Xi is put in a negative light.

<sup>34</sup> 不但人拿的糊涂，连这牌票上的文法也有些糊涂。See chapter 50 of Wu 1985: 430. Apparently, Wu Jingzi completed the novel in 1750, but only ten years after his death it was published.

<sup>35</sup> 腮边花粉糊涂，嘴上胭脂狼藉。

well already have been in use earlier in the spoken and even written but unofficial language.

The frequent occurrences of *hutu* in the *Siku Quanshu* sources from the Qing dynasty suggest that the term was very common by the time Zheng Banqiao used it in his calligraphy (written in 1751, only 31 years before the *Siku Quanshu* was completed). These early sources also show that the compound was used in slightly different meanings, such as (being) ‘muddled’, ‘unclear’ (thinking, reason...), ‘vague’ or ‘indistinct’, and even ‘illegible’ and ‘ambiguous’. In the next section, I will clarify these different meanings in greater detail through etymological analysis.

## 2.2.2 Etymological analysis

As is the case with most Chinese characters, be it a single character or a compound, *hutu* has different meanings, with quite a few different subtleties. In the early occurrences mentioned above, I already briefly discussed some of these meanings. An etymological analysis will give a better understanding of the various subtleties.

*Hutu* is composed of *hu* 糊 and *tu* 涂. *Hu*’s radical, the signific part, is rice (*mi* 米) and the phonetic part is *hu* 胡. *Hu* as in *hutu* has a second tone. It is a variant of 餬, which in the *Shuowen Lexicon* (*Shuowen Jiezi* 说文解字 (*Juan wu – shi bu* 卷五 - 食部)<sup>36</sup> is explained as *ji shi* 寄食, ‘to seek a living’, but also has the meaning of ‘thick congee, thick gruel’. Later, the meaning of *hu* 糊 (in the second tone) became ‘to paste’, ‘paste’, ‘not clear’, ‘blurred’, ‘confused’, ‘muddleheaded, muddled’, ‘ambiguous’ and even ‘unintelligible’ (e.g. Institut Ricci 2001a: 115-116; Mathews 1993: 324).<sup>37</sup>

The radical of *tu* 涂 is water (*shui* 水), and its phonetic part is *yu* 余. *Tu* has two different graphic variants, namely 涂 and the complex version 塗. In the *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Juan shisan - tu bu* 卷十三 - 土部), *tu* is explained as *ni* (*tu, ni ye* 塗, 泥也), so literally, ‘mud’, but later it became to mean ‘to pollute, make filthy’, and ‘to smear, to apply, to spread, to plaster’ (Institut Ricci 2001b: 268-269).

The modern Chinese dictionary *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (2001: 533) describes *hutu* as:

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<sup>36</sup> The title of the Eastern Han dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* literally translates as: ‘Explaining patterns to analyze graphs’. This dictionary by scholar Xu Shen 许慎 (ca. 58 CE – ca. 147 CE) is the earliest comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters (Wilkinson 2000: 63).

<sup>37</sup> Other meanings of *hu* 糊 in the fourth tone are ‘food of pasty consistency, paste, cream’, and interestingly enough, as a verb: ‘to muddle through, be perfunctory’. This meaning will be one of the interpretations of *hutu* in the analysis of the contemporary discourse (Part Two). *Tu* 涂 (second tone) is also a surname, and a mountain in Zhejiang.

1. *Bu ming shili* 不明事理 (not understanding (logical) reasoning), *dui shiwu de renshi mohu huo hunluan* 对事物的认识模糊或混乱 (vague or confused understanding of things);
2. *neirong hunluan de* 内容混乱的 (having a mixed, chaotic content);
3. (dialect) *mohu* 模糊 (indistinct, vague).

Chinese-foreign language dictionaries often translate *hutu* as ‘stupid, muddled, confused and foolish’. As an example, we find *hutu sixiang* 糊涂思想, ‘confused or vague thoughts’ and ‘stupid ideas’ (Institut Ricci 2001a: 116). A typical modern Chinese-English dictionary entry for *hutu* might be 1. ‘muddled; confused, bewildered’; 2. ‘confusion’; 3. (dialect) ‘blurred, indistinct; dim; vague’ (e.g. Wu & Cheng 2006: 645)<sup>38</sup>.

*Hutu* also commonly appears in expressions. One of these expressions that is most frequently mentioned in contemporary dictionaries is ‘to feign stupidity’ (*zhuang hutu* 装糊涂) (e.g. Wu & Cheng 2006: 645). This combination however is not mentioned in earlier dictionaries, which could imply that the frequent use of ‘pretending to be muddled’ is rather recent. Three other frequent expressions are *huli hutu* 糊里糊涂, ‘muddy, confused, vague, indistinct’, *xili hutu* 稀里糊涂, ‘muddle(head)ed, careless, confused’ (both used adverbially), and *yi ta hutu* 一塌糊涂, ‘in an awful state, a complete mess’<sup>39</sup>. Antonyms of *hutu* are generally given as *mingbai* 明白 ‘(being) clear, understand(ing)’, *qingxing* 清醒 ‘clear-headed’ and *congming* 聪明 ‘smart, bright’.

*Hutu* has two occasional graphic variants, *hutu* 糊突 and *hutu* 胡突, of which *hu* 胡 means ‘careless’ and *tu* 突 ‘to dash forward, to project, to protrude’ and ‘sudden’. These graphic variants are interchangeable with regard to their meaning, but are much less used.

*Hutu* has no entry in philosophical dictionaries, which indicates the word *hutu*, in its most common use, is not philosophically loaded, as the translations in the examples also demonstrate (blur, vague, unclear, muddled, illegible, unintelligible ...). However, as we will see in the next section and in the discussion on its philosophical background (section 2.3), depending on its use, *hutu* can relate to a far-reaching philosophical scope. As for the context of the saying *Nande hutu*, *hutu* touches upon philosophical themes reaching from *hundun* and the primordial chaos, to the Daoist ideal of the sage as a fool and to the Confucian notion of moderation and social morality. Some of these issues will

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<sup>38</sup> In French, the translation is mostly ‘étourdi, confus, embrouillé’ so ‘foolish, rash, absent-minded, confused, disordered’. See for example Xu & Guo 1995: 278.

<sup>39</sup> For a detailed study about the (changing) meaning and use of *yi ta hutu* 一塌糊涂 in Mandarin language, see Duan 2006 and Liu 2006.

be highlighted in the next section, which discusses the different semantic connotations of *hutu*.

### 2.2.3 Semantic analysis

The semantic analysis is directly relevant for what concerns us the most in this phase of the analysis, namely which place *hutu* and its various associations traditionally take in Chinese language and thinking. Although it is not a very common word and not frequently used in daily conversations<sup>40</sup>, it is surprising how deep into traditional Chinese culture the many different associations of *hutu* take us. What Girardot (1983: 275-276) remarks about the symbolism of *hundun*, that ‘symbols tend to cluster and “connotations flock together” so that there is sometimes a surprising linkage of words and meanings’, can also be said of the notion of *hutu*. In this section, I will unravel some of the meanings associated with *hutu* in the Chinese language, in Chinese symbolism, in Chinese mythology and cosmogony, and as related to the motif of vagueness in Chinese culture in general. Of these connotations, the most important are the connotation with the calabash (*hulu* 葫芦), with the cosmic egg or primordial chaos (*hundun* 混沌), with the figure of Hu Shen 胡神, the protector from hail, and with the notion of vagueness (*mohu* 模糊) and the ‘culture of vagueness’ (*mohu wenhua* 模糊文化).

#### 2.2.3.1 *Hulu* or bottle gourd: necromancy, fertility, longevity and spiritual growth

At first glance this may be a little far-fetched, but one of the semantic connotations of *hutu* is with the calabash or bottle gourd, *hulu* 葫芦 (*Lagenaria siceraria*).<sup>41</sup> The bottle gourd is known for its important cultural utility in society. It is used in medicine and for religious rituals, and, although of lesser importance, it also has nutritional value as a food source.<sup>42</sup> The bottle gourd also has a wide range of symbolic meanings, mainly originating from religious Daoism and folk belief, and philosophical Daoism, of which I will mention the most important in their relation to *hutu*.

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<sup>40</sup> For example the Wenlin 文林 Dictionary mentions 32,1 occurrences per million characters of text.

<sup>41</sup> Another character that represents the calabash and the gourd is *gua* 瓜, ‘a melon-like thing’.

<sup>42</sup> Girardot (1988: 212-213) points out that the bottle gourd was very early domesticated by men, probably because of its usefulness in amazingly varying fields of daily life. Girardot sums up its different uses from earliest times: as containers, as food, in medicine and surgery, as floats and rafts, pipes and snuffboxes, cricket cages and bird houses, masks, games, charms, offerings, penis heads, carved decorations, musical instruments and as a pervasive subject of myth and ritual.

Li Tieguai 李铁拐, 'Li with the Iron Crutch', one of the Daoist Eight Immortals (*Ba Xian* 八仙)<sup>43</sup>, is best known for – depending on the patient's needs- either physically or spiritually curing the sick with the medicine in his magical gourd. Most depictions represent him as a beggar with a lame leg<sup>44</sup>, carrying a bottle gourd from which a bat – a symbol of good luck but also a sign identified with primordial chaos, *hundun* (see the next section 2.2.3.2)<sup>45</sup> – escapes. Others say that from the bottle gourd, spirals of smoke ascend, denoting his power of setting his spirit free from his body (Williams 1976 [1941]: 217). In Chinese folklore, it is believed that the cloud that escapes when the bottle gourd is opened can be used to trap demons and spirits. Therefore, the bottle gourd is generally considered to be a protector of good against evil. Because it contains the magic potions of a Daoist magician, it is a strong symbol of mystery and necromancy. In addition, as the bottle gourd is very durable when dried and therefore symbolizes durability, figures of it made out of copper or wood are worn as charms for longevity. (Eberhard 1968: 279-280; 1994: 45-46; Williams 1976 [1941]: 217). Finally, in (mostly South-Chinese) folk belief, the gourd is used as a fertility symbol. It promotes sexual reproduction and, more importantly, the delivery of a son, which is why it is often used in fertility rituals.

In philosophical Daoism, *hulu* is often associated with spiritual transcendence. Firstly, the bottle gourd represents a miniature replica of heaven and earth. The typical shape of the bottle-gourd unites the two: the lower part is the earth, the upper part is heaven. As such, it is symbolic of a cosmic unification of man with the universe.<sup>46</sup> The transcendent aspect of *hulu* is nicely illustrated with the story of Huzi 瓠子, Master Gourd (with *hu* 瓠 as alternative character for gourd) appearing in the *Liezi*. As Liezi's teacher, Huzi challenges a shaman by subjecting him to physiognomy while changing his shape every time they meet. In the last meeting, when the Gourd master appears in 'empty form', the shaman is filled with terror and flees. Critics generally agree that in these meetings, Huzi progressively reveals his true form, until he reaches the embryonic state of emptiness (i.e. the *hundun* condition, see further section 2.2.3.2).

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<sup>43</sup> The Eight Immortals (*Ba Xian* 八仙) are a very popular group of legendary immortals revered in mostly religious Daoism. However, there is not one such group, but their constitution changed over the years. They are mostly depicted together. (Yoshikawa 2008)

<sup>44</sup> One of the most cited stories behind this appearance of Li Tieguai as a lame beggar is that once, when he was asleep, he let his spirit go off wandering by itself. When his disciples found him, they thought he was dead and burned the body. So when his spirit returned, he could not find a body to enter, so Li looked around for a suitable body and chose that of a sick beggar. This is how he came by his lame leg. (Eberhard 1994: 166)

<sup>45</sup> On the bat's association with the gourd, see for example Eberhard 1968: 280.

<sup>46</sup> For an excellent and very comprehensive study of the gourd in Daoist texts and Daoist symbolism, see Girardot 1988. For more on the gourd in the mythology and folk belief of the local cultures of south and east China, see Eberhard 1968.



Liezi, inspired by this enlightening example, goes home and starts cultivating a simple and carefree life in accordance with Daoist principles. (Zhou Z. 2001: 277)

The *Zhuangzi* also refers to the gourd in a context of spiritual growth. In Chapter 1 of the *Zhuangzi*, Zhuangzi and Huizi discuss the usefulness of a gigantic bottle gourd in Huizi's garden. Zhuangzi, contrary to Huizi who sees no use for it, suggests they make a boat out of it to go floating on rivers and lakes instead of worrying about its size and use. As Zhou Zuyan (2001: 277) suggests, the gourd as a vehicle for a carefree life and spiritual union with nature is a metaphor for a vehicle for salvation or spiritual illumination.

Depending on the context, *hutu* can take one of the above meanings of *hulu*. For example, *hulu* exists in combinations such as *huluti* 葫芦提 (also written 葫芦题 and 葫芦蹄) meaning 'muddled, confused' (e.g. Wu & Cheng 2006: 277). *Hulu* also appears in the famous Chinese novel *Honglouloumeng* (*The dream of the red chamber*) by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715?-1763)<sup>47</sup> on several occasions. Probably the most direct association with *hutu* comes in the form of the monk *Hulu* (Hulu Seng 葫芦僧). In chapter IV of the novel<sup>48</sup>, monk *Hulu* is introduced as an advisor to one of the main characters, *Jia Yucun*, for deciding on a '*hulu* case' (muddled i.e. confusing case). *Jia Yucun* used to frequent the *Hulu miao* 葫芦庙, where he had met Monk *Hulu*. Before the temple burnt down, the monk was a young novice who deliberately violated the law to secure his position as an official. As the names of the characters in the *Honglouloumeng* are all symbolically chosen mostly based on homonyms, *huluseng* most likely associates with *hutuseng* 糊涂僧, the muddled monk, i.e. the monk with clouded judgment who fails to do the right thing in the situation (Zhou Z. 2001: 281).<sup>49</sup> In this story, the monk is depicted as someone who cherishes worldly and material pursuits (e.g. an official career) over spiritual growth.

As will become clear from the analysis in Chapter Three, precisely these philosophical connotations of spiritual enlightenment come close to explaining the meaning of *hutu* in *Nande hutu* as interpreted in academic discourse. These connotations

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<sup>47</sup> *The dream of the red chamber* narrates the story of Baoyu, a gentle young boy who prefers girls to Confucian studies, and his two cousins: Baochai, his parents' choice of a wife for him, and the ethereal beauty Daiyu. Through the changing fortunes of the Jia family, this magical work sets worldly events within the context of the Buddhist understanding that earthly existence is an illusion and karma determines the shape of our lives. The several different layers (symbolic, religious, folkloric, philosophical...) of the novel make it a very complex novel to analyze, but also provides an enormous rich source for analyzing Chinese culture.

<sup>48</sup> For a translation of this chapter, see the translation by David Hawkes (Cao 1973: 109-123).

<sup>49</sup> For an extensive analysis of the occurrence and meaning of both *hulu* and *hundun* (see the next section) in the *Honglouloumeng*, see Zhou Z. 2001. In his article, Zhou Zuyan focuses on the relation between the presence of both *hulu* and *hundun* in their spiritual meaning to the character and inclination of its author, Cao Xueqin. For an analysis of the figure of *Huluseng* himself contrasting him as a smart official's accomplice and at the same time a stupid feudal minion, see Zhu 1985.

of *hulu* are also closely linked to the next theme, the theme of primordial chaos or *hundun*.

### 2.2.3.2 *Hundun* and the theme of chaos in early Daoist philosophy

The images of the marital relationship of heaven and earth and the spiritual union with (one's) nature as represented by the gourd are strongly related to the concept of *hundun* 混沌 or the primordial chaos, a theme on which has been much enlarged by Chinese philosophy. The meaning and semantic associations of *hundun* are very complex and varied. Therefore, this section will only highlight the most relevant connotations with regard to 'being muddled'.<sup>50</sup>

Etymologically, the compound *hundun* 混沌 consists of *hun* 混, 'a turbid torrent' (as in the *Shuowen Jiezi*, *Juan shiyi - shui bu* 卷十一 - 水部: *hun, feng liu ye* 混, 丰流也), thus coming to mean 'muddy, disorderly, mixed and confused', and *dun* 沌 meaning 'confused, chaotic, turbid, benighted'. As a compound, this results in 'chaos' (in Daoist sources) and 'mixed, unintelligible, chaotic' and 'stupid' (Institut Ricci 2001a: 255).

Although the term resonates throughout different areas of Chinese cosmological, religious, socio-political and artistic heritage, *hundun* is primarily an ancient Daoist notion. Most early Confucian texts (*Lunyu*, *Shujing*, *Yijing* etc) do not even use the single character *hun* 混. It occurs in just one Confucian classic, the *Zuozhuan* (*Commentary of Zuo*), a commentary on the *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn period, 770 to 476 BC). In this text, *hundun* is the son of emperor Huangdi, who banishes him for his incompetence, and as such is used rather pejoratively. *Hundun* on the contrary commonly occurs in Classics of philosophical Daoism. *Hundun* is most prominently present in the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (e.g. Chapters 7, 11 and 12), but in a shorter form, using both graphic variants of *hun* (浑 and 混), also in the *Daodejing* (e.g. Chapters 21 and 25). The *Liezi* uses *hunlun* 浑沦, also in a reference to a primordial state. Other occurrences are in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (*The masters of Huainan*, 139 BC)<sup>51</sup>, where *hundun* appears in a

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<sup>50</sup> The semantic associations of *hundun* in itself are so rich, that it would lead us too far to elaborate on them all. Girardot's study (1988) *Myth and meaning in early Taoism. The theme of Chaos (hun-tun)* offers a brilliant and thorough analysis of the theme of *hundun* in Daoist symbolism. In this study, Girardot tries to demonstrate that it is the cosmogonic fable of *hundun* that defines the religious vision of early Daoist mysticism. Girardot repeatedly stresses the idea of the 'conundrum' of *hundun*, i.e. the paradoxes and controversies that surround the myth of emperor Hundun. To use his words, '[hundun] as a mythological and metaphysical principle maintains its integrity by revealing itself chaotically: 'there is an extremely complex interpretation of an unknowable number of centers' (Girardot 1988: 275).

<sup>51</sup> The *Huainanzi* 淮南子 is a textual compilation filled with Legalist, Daoist and Confucian elements, ascribed to Liu An (179 BC - 122 BC), prince of Huainan (Han dynasty). This eclectic work reserves the highest praise for

cosmological description. Another important occurrence of *hundun* is in the *Shanhaijing* 山海经 (*Scripture of mountains and seas*)<sup>52</sup> collection of early myths and legends, in which *hundun* 混敦 is described as a 'faceless divine bird whose body is like a yellow sack'.<sup>53</sup>

Isabelle Robinet (2008: 524-525) summarizes its semantic associations as follows:

Semantically, the term *hundun* is related to several expressions, hardly translatable in Western languages, that indicate the void or a barren and primal immensity [...]. It is also akin to the expression "something confused and yet complete" (*huncheng* 混成) found in the *Daode jing* 25, which denotes the state prior to the formation of the world where nothing is perceptible, but which nevertheless contains a cosmic seed. Similarly, the state of *hundun* is likened to an egg; in this usage, the term alludes to a complete world round and closed in itself, which is a receptacle like a cavern (*dong* 洞) or a gourd (*hu* 壺 or *hulu* 壺廬). Moreover, *hundun* also appears as *hunlun* 混淪, a name reminiscent of Kunlun, the mountain at the center of the world where the mythical Hundun 崑崙 lives, changing only the semantic indicator "mountain" (*shan* 山) into "water" (*shui* 水). This shows that Kunlun and *hundun* are the same closed center of the world.

The descriptions of *hundun* as the primordial chaos, as the cosmic egg, its association with mountain Kunlun and even the reference to the bottle gourd that we find here, all refer to a cosmological theme. Indeed, apart from being associated (and often mixed up) with its cognate *huntun* 馄饨, the mixed balls in wonton-soup so well-known in the south of China, *hundun* is probably best known both as the primordial and central chaos in Chinese cosmogony, comparable with the cosmic egg from which the Chinese mythical figure Pangu 盤古 (see further) was born and separated heaven and earth. The notion of *hundun* as the primordial chaos was first found in the story of emperor Hundun in Chapter 7 (Inner Chapters) of the *Zhuangzi*. The story reports what happens with the mythological Emperor of the Center called Hundun, who gets 'plastic surgery' by two well-meaning but (literally) boring guests. The passage reads as follows:

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the teachings of the Daoist school. Liu An himself was reputed for having ascended to heaven in broad daylight. (Lin 1963: 385)

<sup>52</sup> Apart from describing various mountains and seas and their products (plants), myths, witchcraft and religion of ancient China, the *Shanhaijing* also records the geography, history, medicine, customs and ethnicities in ancient times. Despite the uncertainty of its authors and of its focus (geography, witchcraft ...), the *Shanhaijing* is generally considered as one of the treasures of Chinese mythology (Yang & An 2011: 27-29). For a translation, see for example the translation by Anne Birrell (1999).

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed textual analysis of *hundun* in the different Daoist texts such as the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, the *Huainanzi* and the *Liezi*, see Girardot 1988: 47-168.

The emperor of the South Sea was called Shu [Brief], the emperor of the North Sea was called Hu [Sudden], and the emperor of the central region was called Hundun [Chaos]. Shu and Hu from time to time came together for a meeting in the territory of Hundun, and Hundun treated them very generously. Shu and Hu discussed how they could repay his kindness. "All men," they said, "have seven openings so they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. But Hundun alone does not have any. Let's try boring him some." Every day they bored another hole, and on the seventh day Hundun died. (Zhuangzi 2003: 95)

The death of Hundun after seven days when he is given the seven holes (eyes, ears, nostrils and mouth) of sense and sustenance that make up human nature has a major symbolic meaning, for which there are different and quite diverse opinions. Girardot (1988: 81-85) put forward a few opinions that discuss the passage from a different point of view. Needham (1956) points to the socio-political implications of the passage in the sense that *hundun* refers to a returning to 'the pure primitive solidarity' of the ancient tribal communities that existed before the coming of feudalism. As such, Needham prefers to consider the boring of the holes as a symbol for the differentiation of classes, the institution of private property, and the setting up of feudalism (Needham 1956: 107-115).

Izutsu (1983: 303-305) suggests a more religio-mystical interpretation. He compares the *Zhuangzi* story about emperor Hundun with a passage from the former Han dynasty's (206 BC-25 AD) *Shanhaijing* in which *hundun* is described as a 'faceless divine bird whose body is like a yellow sack'. This comparison puts the *hundun* story in a shamanic context, assuming that Daoism is 'simply the elevation of early Chinese shamanism onto a philosophical and mystical plane' (Girardot 1988: 83). The boring of the holes and eventual death could then be described as a metaphor for a mystical journey in spiritual stages that ultimately lead to a return to the creation state.

According to Girardot however, these two interpretations are too narrowly predisposed towards making Daoist thought either into a socio-political ideology, or into mere shamanism.<sup>54</sup> Girardot prefers to follow Marcel Granet's interpretation. Granet (1968: 230-231) interprets the boring of the holes, or the creation of a 'face' – an expression that symbolically anticipates the burden of social status in Chinese society (see also further in 2.4.2) – through the creation of the human world, namely a world of faces and senses. According to Girardot (1988: 83-84),

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<sup>54</sup> With regard to the interpretation of many of the especially Daoist Classics, the discussion about a more socio-political or a more religio-mystical reading is quite common among different experts. The interpretation of the *hundun* story provides a nice example of this kind of discussion.

Granet stresses the significance and prestige of becoming completely ‘human’ or ‘civilized’ by having a ‘face’ with seven openings of sense knowledge and then makes the valid point that, as in many primitive initiations, death is but the necessary prelude to a new creation or rebirth – in this case, being born into the fully human world of culture and society.

Girardot (1988: 84) further explains that in early Daoism, and especially in the *Zhuangzi*, death was ‘ecstatically accepted’ and had positive connotations as it symbolized the return to the chaotic oneness that existed during the creation time. Therefore, the openings of *hundun* should close up again in order to be ‘reborn’. For the Daoists, this meant reversing the creation and the fall of man and return to the condition of the beginning: the condition of the closed serenity of the fetus in the womb where there is no distinction between life and death and man or woman, or the chaos condition (Girardot 1988: 77-112). In other words, a Daoist must first ‘die’, return to the pre-human or paradise world of the emperor Hundun if he is to be anything more than a simple human being: he must learn the arts of “no-face” (Girardot 1988: 85).

In the *Daodejing* (Chapter 52 and 56), we find a similar idea of going back to the initial stage of mankind by closing up of the openings and doors (of the body). Izutsu (2008: 43-44) explains the meaning of this passage as ‘stopping the normal functioning of the five senses and the differentiating activity of the reason which make man become ever more alienated from the original unity of all things’. The result of this closing up of the holes is to regain the real ‘self’, or, as Girardot would say, a return to the no-face condition.<sup>55</sup> As such, this Daoist version of the fall of human beings does not refer to a sin on the part of early humans, or to an ontological separation of a God from the human world. The Daoist fall of mankind involves the division of the whole into parts, the assigning of names (use of language) and the reliance on (so-called moral) judgments injurious to a natural life. As we will see later, this meaning of *hundun* as the human stage devoid of a human ‘face’ that experiences and lives life through the senses which results in desires and (moral) judgments, comes close to what could be understood as ‘being *hutu*’.<sup>56</sup>

The other primary association of *hundun* is with the cosmic egg in which heaven and earth were united as one, and in which Pangu 盘古, the mythological ‘creator of the universe’ or sometimes also referred to as *Hundunshi* 混沌氏, separated heaven and earth bringing order to the universe. One of *pan*’s meanings is ‘basin’, which can mean

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<sup>55</sup> *Hundun* also often appears in Daoist inner alchemy (*neidan* 内丹) texts. In their search for quasi immortality, alchemists begin their work by ‘opening’ or ‘boring’ *hundun*, as such beginning from the origin. For more on *hundun* and Daoist alchemy, see Girardot 1988: 281-298 and Kohn 2006.

<sup>56</sup> This implies striving for the contrary of the Confucian ideal of the complete human, a mode of being that is defined by ethical-moral principles of ritualized social interaction. See also further section 2.4.3.1 Daoist and Confucian Morality.

the shell of an egg. *Gu* can mean ‘solid’, ‘to secure’. According to Williams (1976 [1941]: 313-315), this meaning of *gu* intends to show how Pangu was hatched from the chaos by the dual powers (of *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳) and then settled and exhibited the arrangement of these powers. Although the original Pangu myth does not mention *hundun*, the literatus Xu Zheng (Three Kingdoms period 220-265) later combined the myth of emperor Hundun with the myth of Pangu (Wu X. 2011). It is in this combined myth that *hundun* became the cosmic egg in which after ages (exactly 18 0000 years) Pangu was engendered, and then separated the cosmic egg into heaven and earth. In the sense of the cosmic egg, *hundun*’s meaning comes close to some of the cosmogonic meanings of the phonologically akin calabash or *hulu*, namely as a state of chaotic wholeness. In this respect, Thomas Michael suggests that the story of Lord Hundun resonates with the images of the *dao* as a placental sac. According to him, the story gives a playful characterization of the beginning of the universe when everything that existed was present within the single body of the *dao*, exactly like the placental sac and like the gourd (Michael 2005: 30).

This primordial state of being as depicted in the metaphor of the cosmic egg and emperor Hundun is sometimes also portrayed as uncarved wood or an uncarved stone (i.e. uncivilized), a metaphor for simplicity and plainness as found in the word *pu* 朴<sup>57</sup>. As Izutsu (2008: 23) explains, psychologically, *pu* means the unperturbed state of mind in which man is completely unified with the Absolute. Ontologically, it refers to the ultimate state of ‘undifferentiation’ or ‘equality’, where all things repose in their original unity with the Absolute, where nothing is distinguished and differentiated from others by man-made boundaries. Just as the cosmic egg-state denotes a state or world where nothing is lacking and everything is possible, the stone, still uncarved, can take limitless forms or designs.

In these interpretations of *hundun* as the primordial chaos and as the cosmic egg, the idea of chaos and its absence of bodily senses as a prerequisite of creation and reproduction and more derivatively of ‘spiritual rebirth’ are very prominent. Hence, it is clear that the Chinese meaning of chaos - apart from the one negative, Confucian connotation as a barbaric and threatening principle as mentioned above - is a rather positive one. Therefore, I agree with Girardot’s suggestion to understand chaos here in the classical sense of its meaning in Greek mythology meaning ‘gaping void, formless

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<sup>57</sup> *Pu*’s literal meaning is an uncarved wood, but in Daoism it has come to mean simplicity, plainness, genuineness etc. See for example *Daodejing*, Chapter 15: *dun xi qi ruo pu* 敦兮其若朴, ‘sincere, like a piece of uncarved wood’, and many other references in chapters 19, 28, 37 and 57. Cf also the *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 (*The Master who embraces simplicity*) by Jin dynasty’s Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343), whose esoteric Inner chapters (*Neipian* 內篇) include topics such as techniques for immortality, transcendence, Chinese alchemy, elixirs, and demonology (Yoshikawa 2008: 215-217.)

primordial space preceding creation of the universe' (Kaos), and not as in the common, sometimes extreme negative sense of absolute disorder, utter confusion, or meaningless nonbeing (Girardot 1988: 4). In Chinese language, disorder is not translated as *hundun*, but as *luan* 亂, or as a combination of the two, *hunluan* 混乱.<sup>58</sup> According to Girardot (1988: 4-5), these negative interpretations were in part due to the 'theological exclusivity found in the Biblical ideas of "genesis" and the antagonistic dualism of early Zoroastrian tradition and some forms of Hellenistic gnosticism'. In China, where the notion of a single man- or godlike creator who exclusively created the world has never been accepted, and where theories of antagonistic dualism (God against mankind) have never been developed, chaos never received this negative connotation.

Apart from these ancient occurrences of *hundun* as a signifier for the primordial void and cosmic unity, it is interesting to see that in the contemporary use of *hundun*, *hutu* occurs in definitions of *hundun*. For example, the Chinese-English *Jingshan Ciba* dictionary chronologically summarizes *hundun* as follows:

Firstly, 'chaos, the primeval state of the universe according to folklore' (我国民间传说中指盘古开天避地之前天地模糊一团的状态)

Secondly, 'innocent as a child' (形容蒙昧无知的样子)

Thirdly, 'muddled' (*hutu* 糊涂).

The second meaning describes an uncivilized, uncultured, ignorant, uneducated way of being, as such referring to the state of being unpolluted by the senses and by (logical) reasoning as was the case with emperor Hundun. These three definitions of *hundun* clearly show the importance of *hundun*'s association with a primordial, 'chaotic' yet perfect state of being, as well as with *hutu*.

### 2.2.3.3 Hu Shen, the protector against hail

Apart from the gourd *hulu* and the primordial chaos or cosmic egg *hundun*, there is another mythological association to *hutu*, which is much less known. In some contexts, *hutu* can refer to a god called Hu Shen 胡神 (sometimes also 狐神), a protector against hail. For example, when checking for *hutu* in Werner's *Dictionary of Chinese mythology* (Werner 1932: 179-180), we are referred to 'Hu Shen 胡神'. This entry tells us the following:

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<sup>58</sup> For an elaborate discussion on the different uses and connotations of *hundun* and *luan* in the Daoist and Confucian Canon with a clarifying table of occurrences of *luan* and *hundun* in the Daoist and Confucian texts, see Girardot 1988: 113-133.

A man named Hu T'u 狐突, who was put to death for disobeying King Huai Kung 懷公(639 B.C.). The characters *Hu-t'u* 狐突 gradually became changed into *Hu-t'u* 糊塗, which is the name of a temple (origin unknown) at Wan-Ch'üan Hsien 萬全縣, Hsüan-hua Fu 宣化府, Chihli 直隸, the inscription over the gate of which is now Hu Shen 胡神, the Spirit Hu. He is worshipped with great ceremony on the first day of the seventh moon, the anniversary of his birthday, and for three or four days afterwards, the object of the worship being the protection of the crops from hail, the control of which is said to be vested in him. He is depicted as having an ugly countenance of Persian type, with a bristly beard resembling the spines of a hedgehog.

The description of him having 'an ugly countenance of Persian type' with a beard most likely refers to both the meaning of *hu* 胡 as beard (as in *huxu* 胡須), and to that he was of non-Han origin, more in particular from central Asia. In fact, Hu Tu 狐突 (? — 637 BC) was not an ordinary man, but a senior official during the Jin 晉. He had been disobedient in calling back his two sons who fled abroad when the State of Qin 秦 was about to conquer the State of Jin. Hu Tu is also mythically known for persuading the angry spirit of prince Shensheng 申生 (?-656 BC), who was buried disrespectfully by Duke Hui of Jin 晉惠公, to stop the State of Qin conquering the State of Jin. Shensheng replied that the heavenly god had allowed Duke Hui of Jin to be defeated in battle at the land of Han as a punishment. Other sources say this was a dream by Hu Tu, in which the defeat of Duke Hui of Jin on the battlefields of Han was predicted (Chang 1985). In this story, again a noticeably positive meaning of *hutu* is introduced, namely as the protector from evil spirits, and as a brave official who achieved the status of a godlike *shen*.

#### 2.2.3.4 The theme of vagueness or indistinctness (*mohu*)

In a more abstract way, related to the theme of chaos, the term *hutu* is also semantically akin to all expressions of the vague and indistinct. One of the words that comes closest to the meaning of *hutu* is the compound *mohu* 模糊, or 'indistinct, vague, out of focus, both for things that can be seen i.e. scenes, pictures etc, and for ideas, concepts etc.' (Teng 1996: 158). Lexically, *mohu* contains the same character *hu* as in the compound *hutu*. The Chinese dictionary *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (2001: 533) mentions *mohu* as the third meaning of *hutu*, and the Chinese online Baidu dictionary indicates *mohu* as the second meaning of *hutu*. Besides, vagueness is the opposite of clarity and distinctness, two notions that, as we will see later, are in the context of this research put in dialectical position with muddledness (*hutu*).

As a close variant of *hutu*, *mohu* or vagueness is an essential concept in this research. However, as Steve Coutinho (2004: 109) rightly starts his discussion on vagueness in the *Daodejing*, 'vagueness is itself a notoriously vague concept'. Vagueness



can be described with the broad meaning of being without clear boundaries or distinctions with regard to whatever subject it refers to, not only linguistically but also conceptually. Something can be perceived, understood, stated, expressed or sensed in a vague way, meaning not clearly, undefined or not explicit, and open to rich and diverse interpretations. In this research, vagueness will be used in its complete semantic field covering ambiguity, unclearness, indistinctness, and muddledness.

In ancient Chinese philosophy and writings, vagueness and ambiguity were not only useful tools for expressing how the world is and should be perceived, but were also deliberately used to 'blur' the reader, to encourage him to keep his senses and mind open for all possible viewpoints, impressions, interpretations and experiences of *dao*.<sup>59</sup> Hall and Ames (1995: 167) name this broad web of meanings of a concept 'cluster concepts', and argue in favor of the acceptance of such broad meaning clusters instead of trying to logically analyze them. As for 'cluster concepts', one has to accept the different semantic meanings of these terms together in a single *Gestalt* in which all meanings are potentially brought into focus. The consequence of this is that 'one is propelled from reason in the narrow sense of the word into imagination, and thus one is forced to accede to the replacement of logical by aesthetic coherence' (Hall & Ames 1995: 168). On the contrary, people who overemphasize clarity in all matters share a same fate: 'those victimized by hyperconsciousness suffer not only from an excess of history but equally from a surplus of stipulated meanings' (Hall & Ames 1995: 168).<sup>60</sup>

In this respect, Hall and Ames seem to follow the Chinese logic of thinking, which radically differs from the Western one. Steve Coutinho (2004: 10) explains that in Western philosophy, vagueness has always seemed to pose an obstacle to the philosophical ideal of clarity and logical and structured reasoning, and vagueness is – in the same way as chaos (see above) – 'identified with confusion, uncertainty and as a psychological failing rather than as an independent and ineradicable phenomenon with which we are obliged to come to terms'. Vagueness and suggestiveness (in language often expressed by means of ambiguity, polysemy and metaphors) as 'strategies' in

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<sup>59</sup> I will discuss this phenomenon in more depth in section 2.3.2 Background and features of early Chinese philosophy.

<sup>60</sup> In a section called 'the contingency of culture' Hall and Ames (1995: 166-170) argue for more 'intercultural vagueness' and for the value of vagueness – not to confuse with relativism – in intercultural research. One fine example of the benefit of vagueness lies in the field of our own occupation, cultural studies, in which one always has to deal with culturally loaded terms and concepts. Based on the method adopted in their own sinological research, Hall and Ames (1995: 168) put forward the benefit of vagueness in this study field: 'Owning so many answers to so few questions inverts the priorities associated with the search for knowledge. That search now is most satisfying when we find ourselves moving away from sterile clarity, away from coherent understanding, into an increasingly richer muddle. [...] Properly understood, the world is vague and getting vaguer. Per obscurum ad obscurius.'

philosophical language can certainly be found both in Western and Chinese philosophy, but there is an important difference in the integration and necessity of these strategies in philosophical writing. In China, they have generally functioned as an integral and necessary part of philosophical writing, while in Western philosophy, ‘they have all too often been identified, either as rhetorical flourishes with no cognitive value, or as seductive and deceptive evils’ (Coutinho 2004: 110).<sup>61</sup> When it comes to studying ancient Chinese philosophical concepts, this ambiguous and vague approach ultimately brings us closer to the spirit of learning and knowledge in ancient China; vague, non-defined terms do not clearly mark boundaries of a term, and this is exactly what was aimed at describing in Chinese philosophical language: no clear distinctions and no absolute ‘truth’ or reality.

The importance of vagueness in ancient philosophy also resonates in other than philosophical, more ‘practical’ aspects of life such as social relationships, and has not stopped to contribute to an appreciation of vagueness in China. On a socio-cultural level, we can rightly talk of Chinese as of a *mohu wenhua* 模糊文化, in which vagueness has become not only a tool for expressing the world, but also an aesthetic, personal, and social virtue. This is visible in cultural derivatives such as art and in social relationships. In these fields, it is not about showing the absolute and the concrete, but about maintaining fuzziness and chaos from which creativity and interpretation can emerge.

As vagueness and the indistinct are essential characteristics of Chinese traditional philosophy both on content and methodological level, as well as a vital aspect of social relationships, I will discuss these forms of *hutu* in more depth in the next two sections (see 2.3.2 Background and features of early Chinese philosophy and 2.4 Muddledness, the vague and the indistinct in Chinese society ).

## 2.2.4 Conclusion

The etymological and semantic analysis of *hutu* reveals a lot about its different connotations. To some extent, this analysis also explains why certain positive perceptions about *hutu* live with Chinese people. From some early occurrences we learnt that the compound was very likely in use during the Song dynasty and had certainly become commonly used during the Qing dynasty. Zheng Banqiao’s use of exactly this word in his calligraphy is certainly not unusual. Besides, these - albeit few - examples of the earliest use of the compound *hutu*, already spell out some of the

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<sup>61</sup> For an extensive discussion on what Coutinho calls ‘the contest of clarity and vagueness’ in Western and Chinese ancient philosophy, see Coutinho 2004: 1-18.

different meanings of the word, namely muddled, vague, unclear and foolish. The etymological analysis additionally summarizes the most frequently occurring meanings of *hutu* (apart from its first meaning as 'sticky'): muddledness, confusion, vagueness and mere foolishness. The semantic analysis reveals much on the different connotations of *hutu* with elements of cultural heritage such as Chinese cosmology (Pangu), cosmogeny (cosmic egg, primordial chaos), mythology (emperor Hundun, the Pangu, the faceless bird, Hu Shen ....), fertility and longevity rituals (*hulu*) and the philosophical traditions (spiritual ideals as promoted in the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi*).

Although in theory, being muddled has a rather negative appreciation, such as in (modern) expressions as *hutuchong* 糊涂虫, 'blunderer' and *hutuzhang* 糊涂账, 'a mess'<sup>62</sup>, what is perhaps most intriguing about the etymological analysis is that the above described associations are all rather positive, or at least neutral. Especially in Western societies, people attribute a negative quality to being muddled, confused, ignorant or foolish, and generally have an extremely negative association with chaos and disorder as a frightening principle.

Yet, not only in the above associations of *hutu* as a productive and creative principle (*hulu* and *hundun*), as a vehicle for illumination (*hundun*), as the means for a new (spiritual) beginning (*hundun*), and as the virtue of being vague and indistinct, but also during my data gathering, it became clear that being muddled, in the sense of not being clear or distinct (about a matter or situation), is rarely used in a negative, derogatory context.<sup>63</sup> Whenever just plainly used in the context of being foolish or stupid, there are far more negative and derogatory words than *hutu*, such as *sha* 傻, *chun* 蠢 and even the plain *ben* 笨. Also the idiom *hun ran tian cheng* 浑然天成, 'to resemble nature itself; of the highest quality', aptly combines the appreciation of muddledness with the positive notions of simplicity and naturalness.

Obviously, the etymological and semantic analysis does not provide a ready-to-use interpretation of *hutu* for all situations, let alone for interpreting the calligraphy of Zheng Banqiao which I will cover in Chapter Three. Nevertheless, this analysis gives an initial clue to the different semantic fields that surround the word *hutu*, which will be of use for a comprehension of the academic and popular discursive elements later. In addition, the etymological and semantic analysis of *hutu* already briefly touches upon Chinese traditional (mostly Daoist) philosophy and the relatively positive connotations

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<sup>62</sup> For example the *Grand dictionnaire Ricci de la langue chinoise* (Institut Ricci 2001a: 116) sums up a long list of negative terms with the compound *hutu*, such as *hutu chong* 糊涂虫 (blunderer), *hutu daisha* 糊涂蛋 (stupid, confused), *hutu dan* 糊涂蛋 and *hutu dan* 糊涂旦 (idiot), *hutu tong* 糊涂桶 (poor fool) and abusively used *hutu dongxi* 糊涂东西 (fool).

<sup>63</sup> Its most negative connotation occurs in the meaning of 'not being conscientious' (*bu renzhen* 不认真), mostly in one's work and in politics, which will be discussed in Chapter Six.

of being muddled. In the next section I will outline the traditional philosophical background of the notion of being muddled, foolish and unclear and its different connotations, which will further prove to be very helpful in clarifying this 'positive muddledness'. In addition, it will provide the further background needed to understand the different discourses on the saying, both with regard to their content as to the way the discourses are constructed.

## 2.3 Philosophical background: knowledge as knowledge of *dao*, as non-knowledge, and as self-knowledge

### 2.3.1 Introduction

With discussing the theme of *hundun* in early Daoist texts, an initial impetus was given for researching the theme of 'muddledness' in ancient Chinese philosophy. As I tried to illustrate in the previous section, being muddled in all its forms does not have a derogatory meaning, unlike in Western notions of muddled, foolish, stupid and ignorant. Although the character *hutu* in itself is not a philosophical concept, insight into ancient Chinese philosophy will provide the appropriate framework to fully understand this 'positive muddledness'. As we will see, many of the characteristics of ancient Chinese philosophy include distinct patterns of thinking directly contributing to the appreciation and even use of vagueness and muddledness in the Chinese philosophical tradition. Moreover, ancient Chinese philosophy casts questions of knowledge, truth and meaning in a radically different light than Western philosophy, which creates a different perception of knowledge and wisdom as for example expressed in the saying *Nande hutu*, compared to the West.

In what follows, I will firstly deal with the aforementioned issues by discussing some main features of the content and methodology of Chinese philosophy, i.e. by looking at its background and at specific patterns of thinking. A second part will focus on some specific interpretations of the Chinese notion of truth, and a third and final part will discuss meanings of knowledge and wisdom as developed in ancient Chinese philosophy. Both these sections will only examine these issues in so far as they are related to the notion of muddledness, ignorance and vagueness. One aim of this philosophical background is clarifying why being muddled is not considered a negative quality, but rather on the contrary, as a virtue. Moreover, the issues that will be discussed here are not only related to understanding the discursive elements of *Nande hutu* on a content level (i.e. meanings and interpretations), but equally how the

dominant patterns of Chinese thinking have shaped the different discourses on the saying on a more formal level (i.e. how the discourse formally is constructed).

As already mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it is not my intention to provide a complete overview of the different theories on truth, knowledge and wisdom in ancient Chinese philosophy. Many excellent studies have already been dedicated to this highly relevant topic. In this chapter, the discussion will be limited to the specific insights required to understand the concept of being *hutu* in its direct relation with *Nande hutu* and its philosophy of life, and secondly also to understand the way the academic and contemporary discourses are constructed. This requires us firstly to consider early Chinese patterns of thinking, and to dig into the aspects of philosophical themes such as truth, knowledge and wisdom, as these have permeated every aspect of Chinese thinking and Chinese society.

### 2.3.2 Background and features of early Chinese philosophy

In order to get insight into the nature of ancient philosophical theories, one requires an understanding of the intellectual, socio-economical and historical conditions that existed at the time. A new philosophical theory is, among other things, a reaction against an existing philosophy<sup>64</sup>, and at the same time a solution for the given needs of that time. Even if a philosophy is not developed as a reaction against an existing one, the existing intellectual context, the culturally determined worldview and specific patterns of thinking are an important influence on the nature of the emerging philosophical theory.

Applying this truism to the Chinese situation, one identifies some distinct characteristics which were determining for the content and methodology of Chinese philosophy: a pragmatic approach towards philosophical questions, a tradition of thinking as *ars contextualis* and as correlative and dialectical thinking, and a holistic worldview dominated by continuous change and the interdependency of all things in the universe. In what follows, I will address these and some other related factors which influenced the development of ancient Chinese philosophical thinking.

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<sup>64</sup> In view of their smooth coexistence and alternating use by the Chinese people, it is interesting to note that especially on a higher philosophical level, the Daoist philosophizing process was animated by the spirit of conscious antagonism against Confucian essentialist, conservative and moralistic philosophy. The main target of its attack and criticism is the Confucian philosophical essentialism, and more in particular the rectification of names, *zheng ming* 正名, but also the cardinal Confucian moral virtues *ren* 仁 'humaneness' and *yi* 义 'righteousness'. See also further in this section and Graham 1989; Izutsu 2008: 3-7.

As we will see, these factors to a large extent never played a material role in Western philosophy. In this regard, it is interesting to know that the Chinese term for philosophy, *zhexue* 哲学 (literally ‘learning of sagacity’) was a direct loan word from the Japanese *tetsugaku*, and as such also indirectly from the Western culture (Chang 2008). The need to invent a term to refer to ‘philosophy’ suggests at least that Chinese culture had to adjust its patterns of intellectual (‘philosophical’) thinking of ‘sagacity’ in ways previously unfamiliar to them.

It should also be made clear from the beginning that the characteristics discussed are - as it suits a holistic tradition - to a certain extent interdependent; they influence each other and are complemented by the other on different levels (methodology and content).

### **2.3.2.1 Pragmatism as a result of the socio-historical background**

Ancient Chinese philosophy has from the very beginning been determined by a pragmatic approach to philosophical questions. Especially in accounting for the differences between Western and Chinese philosophies, it is generally assumed that the roots of this pragmatic outlook can be assigned to a combination of specific Chinese geographical, historical and socio-economic conditions. During the Warring States period (481-221 BCE), Chinese society witnessed a major economical and political crisis, as is very often the case when a dynasty came to an end and political instability occurred. Apart from the economic and political turmoil, there were natural causes at least partly to blame as well. At the time, China was mainly an agrarian society with limited possibilities for economic growth, so it was forced to deal with an unsustainable increase in the population. The general discontent as a result of the social instability gave rise to the development of new philosophical movements. This period - also known as the ‘Hundred Schools of Thought’ - in which a variety of philosophers made an analysis of and attempted to provide a solution for the political and economic problems of the day - marks the beginnings of ‘philosophy’ in China. The different philosophical (Daoist, Confucian and Mohist) theories that were formulated were deeply rooted in practical concerns, and primarily aimed at only one thing: restoring good order in society (Dessein 2001: 100-101).

This pragmatic approach to philosophical questions conditioned the content of Chinese philosophical reflection for the coming ages. Chinese philosophy focuses on what is immediately apprehended, on what works in practice, not on what is theoretically plausible, and its methodology relies on human experience. As such, all

metaphysics in its strict sense is beyond nature and human experience<sup>65</sup> and is hence usually not the subject of philosophical inquiry, neither is reasoning and theory just for the pleasure of reasoning (as was the case in the West). The primary purpose of the philosophical search was for social harmony. Until the present day, pragmatism has been a dominant motif in Chinese thinking and behavior. Many popular sayings such as *yin shi zhi yi* 因时制宜, ‘adopt measures/methods appropriate to the current situation/time’, and the more politically loaded expressions *zhong ti xi yong* 中体西用, ‘Chinese learning as essential principle and Western learning as practical application’, convey a strategy for dealing with Western influence<sup>66</sup>, and Deng Xiaoping’s famous reform policy of *bu guan bai mao hei mao, zhuazhu laoshu jiu shi hao mao* 不管白猫黑猫, 抓住老鼠就是好猫, ‘It doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice’, all testify to this inclination.

### 2.3.2.2 *Ars contextualis: chaos and order*

As the section above shows, the search for order and harmony is crucial in Chinese philosophy, and also sheds light on the understanding of chaos in its semantic association with *hutu*. Any research on the intellectual background which strongly influenced the first great philosophers and determined the philosophical theories and sensibilities, requires a deeper understanding of the concept of order and harmony.

The themes of order and chaos are already discussed above in the context of the story of Lord Hundun. On a more abstract level, order and chaos also are principal features of Chinese (philosophical) thinking. As Hall and Ames (1998) explain, the traditional Western senses of order are grounded upon cosmogonic myths that celebrate the victory of an ordered cosmos over chaos. Chaos is the ‘yawning gap’, an

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<sup>65</sup> This does not mean Chinese philosophy is not engaged in metaphysical issues. However, the meaning of metaphysical is clearly one of ‘supersensory’ or ‘transcendental’ as for instance in the Daoist idea of illumination as described further. Since there is no separation between man and heaven, Chinese metaphysics always in one or another way includes the experience of man. In this sense, metaphysics does make part of ancient Chinese philosophy as ‘what goes beyond sensory sensations’. For the meaning of metaphysics in Chinese philosophy, see for example Feng 1997; Hall & Ames 1995 and 1998; Hansen 1992, Wen 2009.

<sup>66</sup> This popular policy has also been criticized by many scholars, such as Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930-), who proposed to invert the slogan to become ‘Western learning as essential principle and Chinese learning as practical application’ (*xi ti zhong yong* 西体中用) (Zi 1987: 451). Rosker (2008: 193) explains that this inversion is a little deceiving, because Li’s ‘view of China’s confrontation with the West does not differ fundamentally from those who advocated the appropriation of Western technology and the preservation of Chinese ideologies. The reason for Li’s inversion of their slogan is purely terminological’. That is to say, Li interprets *ti* (essence) in Marxist terms, as the material basis of society, and *yong* (function) as the ideal superstructure that defines the concrete circumstances of individuals in society. For a discussion on Li Zehou’s inverted slogan, see Rosker 2008: 193-194.

emptiness or nothingness, a confused mass of unorganized surds. Classical Chinese culture, on the other hand, was little influenced by myths which contrasted an irrational chaos with an ordered cosmos (see also above on the notion of *hundun*, section 2.2.3.2). Chinese had a different concept of order, which permeates all philosophical speculations, and consequently also social behavior.

To describe the Chinese ‘science of order’, Hall and Ames (1998) introduced the term *ars contextualis*, ‘the art of contextualization’.<sup>67</sup> They identify *ars contextualis* as follows:

*Ars contextualis* suggests a “this-that” rather than a “one-may” or “part-whole” model. Since there is no overarching context determining the shape of other contexts, the world is an open-ended affair comprised by “thises” and “that’s” construable from any number of distinct perspectives. There is no One behind the many; there are, rather many ones, many particular foci that organize the fields about them. The art of contextualization involves the production of harmonious correlations of the myriad unique details (*wan wu* 萬物 or *wan you* 萬有) that make up the world. (Hall & Ames 1998: 40)

As we already saw above when discussing the notion of *hundun*, in the few Chinese cosmological myths, there is no such thing as the victory of an ordered cosmos over chaos, neither is there an ordering principle or agency for explaining the existing chaos. According to Hall and Ames, Chinese thinkers sought to understand and appreciate the manner in which particular things ‘are’, or may be, most ‘harmoniously correlated’. This means that every context is unique in its own, and there is no absolute or metaphysical criterion which determines the right course to follow in striving for ‘order’. In other words, there is no single order that dominates. This also implies that order is not dominated by clear patterns of regularity and uniformity, since every relation is unique and needs to be looked at in its specific context of the moment. This specific idea of order served as the basis for the organization of personal, social and cosmic environments (see also further 2.4).

As such, order is not the opposite of chaos, but in any given context (circumstances, conditions) a most harmonious relation.

### 2.3.2.3 Correlative and dialectical thinking in a holistic cosmology

Apart from Chinese thinking as *ars contextualis*, correlative thinking – sometimes also called analogical thinking – can be perceived as a second distinctive (with regard to

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<sup>67</sup> Hall and Ames (1998) acknowledge that these understanding of order existed at the beginnings of both Western and Chinese cultures, but that in the course of their respective histories, the two cultures made distinctly different choices which led to different senses of order.



Western thinking) and determining (with regard to its influence on later ages) feature of traditional Chinese thinking.<sup>68</sup> Hall and Ames (1995: xviii) define correlative thinking as follows:

This mode of thinking accepts the priority of change or process over rest and permanence, presumes no ultimate agency responsible for the general order of things, and seeks to account for states of affairs by appeal to correlative procedures rather than by determining agencies or principles.

This definition reveals how correlative thinking explains an item or event by placing it 'within a scheme organized in terms of analogical relations among the items selected for the scheme, and then reflects, and acts in terms of, the suggestiveness of these relations'. In this definition, correlative thinking is clearly opposed to the rational or logical thinking grounded in analytic and (scientific) analogical argumentation. Correlative thinking operates with analogies that employ image clusters and metaphors that would be regarded as ambiguous, vague, or even incoherent in formal (Western) thinking.<sup>69</sup>

The roots of this correlation can be traced back to the Chinese perceptions of the world and the place humans occupy in this scheme as for instance reflected in the classical Chinese cosmologies such as in the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*), Daoist cosmology and the dialectical thinking of *yin-yang* poles<sup>70</sup>. Indeed, the most exemplary and probably best known illustration of Chinese correlative thinking which pervaded all 'scientific' thinking and most prominently Chinese medicine are the chains of pairs correlated with *yin* and *yang* branching out into fours and mostly fives (e.g. the five movements or phases *wu xing* 五行, five seasons, five directions, five colors, five sounds, five tastes, five smells, etc.). Even more fundamental however, is the distinct worldview

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<sup>68</sup> Cf Hall & Ames (1995: 278): 'The overall dominance of the correlative mode in classical China is well attested by the attenuated influence of schools of thought that experimented with causal thinking, such as Mohism and Legalism.' In the sequel volume on *Anticipating China* (1995) called *Thinking from the Han* (1998), Hall and Ames attempt to demonstrate the persistence of correlative thinking in China through a discussion of three problems that have shaped many of the comparisons of Chinese and Western thinking: self, truth and transcendence.

<sup>69</sup> In his article *On the very idea of correlative thinking*, Fung Yiu-ming (2010) analyses and rejects all the different scholarly views on analogical thinking (Granet, Needham, Graham, Hall and Ames) and argues that there is no thinking by correlation and analogy which cannot be understood in terms of analytic concepts and which can escape from the logical and rational space.

<sup>70</sup> It should be noted that in this dissertation, dialectics is used in its first meaning, that is, reasoning from two poles in order to clarify their real or apparent contradiction. Tian Chenshan (2010) refers to this typically Chinese strand of thought with the term *tongbian* 通变, 'continuity through change'. For a discussion on the distinctness of dialectics as a characteristically Chinese mindset (as it is used in the context of this dissertation) and in the Chinese Marxist context, see e.g. Tian 2005.

depicted in the *Yijing*.<sup>71</sup> The *Yijing* comprises a system of divination that classifies everything in the world only by means of eight singular divination symbols (eight trigrams, *ba gua* 八卦), each trigram in itself brought forth by the first analogy of the one (*yi* 一) into two (*yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳). By applying continuous analogical associations to these eight trigrams, 64 hexagrams consisting of *yang* (positive) and *yin* (negative) aspects were developed. Each of these 64 hexagrams denotes a particular ‘state’ or stage in the universe, and altogether they constitute all the possible ‘destinies’ of processes and events formed by the ever-changing (*yi* 易) myriad of things (*wan wu* 万物, the universe).<sup>72</sup> This is what the historian of science Joseph Needham (1956: 336-337) calls the ‘cosmic filing system’ in which all possible situations are orderly ‘filed’ simply by means of analogy.<sup>73</sup> This constitution of the sixty-four hexagrams in the *Yijing* should be understood as a holistic structure, following a natural cosmic law or the natural way, *dao*.

In developing the concept of *dao* as the natural way or principle, the *Yijing* centered its ideas on the acceptance of the inevitability of change, which in the natural order takes shape in complex interacting cycles of growth and decline, expressed in *yin* (阴, expressing the ‘dark’ side of the mountain, shadow, passive, negative, cold, ... ) and *yang* (阳, expressing the ‘bright’ side of the mountain, sun, active, positive, cold ....). In this context of constant change, everything is ultimately connected. That is to say, all distinctions naturally appear as opposites which get their meaning from each other and find their completion only through each other. Such is the case for the relation body/matter and mind, subject and object, and all opposing concepts which are ultimately separated in the Western world governed by binary distinctions.

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<sup>71</sup> The *Yijing* at its origin was a mere book of divination. Tradition has ascribed the eight trigrams to the legendary primeval sage Fuxi, 伏羲. At some point in the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1045-256 BC), the 64 hexagrams acquired a name, a ‘judgment’ and an explanation of each line. During the late Zhou dynasty (third century BC), the ‘commentaries’ known as the ‘Ten Wings’ were added, and in 136 BC the *Yijing* became one of the five major Confucian Classics (Smith 2012: 4-5).

<sup>72</sup> For some detailed examples of analogical thinking in explaining the 64 hexagrams, see Fu and Zhou (1997). For an extensive discussion on correlative thinking as a Chinese feature, see Graham 1986, Graham 1989, Granet 1968, Hall & Ames 1995, and Puett 2002.

<sup>73</sup> A very interesting discussion questions the order of correlative thinking applied on the correlation between a holistic worldview and the cosmic (natural) order, the social/state order and to an even lower level of the ‘family order’. As Hall and Ames argue, for instance Schwartz concludes that ‘the “state analogy” may be much more important as a paradigm of Chinese holism and organicism than the biological organism’, while it is usually thought of as the opposite (observation of natural order influenced holistic thinking and thinking about social order). Besides, this ‘state analogy’ could be derived from the family model. See for this discussion Hall & Ames 1995: 270-278.

Clearly, in such a structure, dialectics between two opposites, and especially the result of these dialectics, the transcending unity (or rather reunion) of the opposites, is of utmost importance<sup>74</sup>. Without a complementary interaction between the two, ‘life’ in whatever sense is simply not possible. Especially the Daoists, with their preference for the phase of decline (*yin*, the weak, the soft, the dark, the retreating), recognized decline and all its associations as a returning to the root, a source of energy, necessary for all processes of growth and maturation (Coutinho 2004: 123).<sup>75</sup> Many commonly used expressions still testify to the predilection of dialectical processes, such as ‘Things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme’ (*wu ji bi fan* 物极必反) and ‘Too much is the same as to fall short of’ (*guo you bu ji* 过犹不及).

Applying this to the position of man in the universe, the world as conceived by ancient Chinese philosophers was structured as an interactive relationship between man and nature, with no ultimate creator or God. Thus, the unity of all cosmic beings was seen in terms of wholeness and constant interconnectivity of nature and society. This cosmic unity is well depicted in the expression *tian ren he yi* 天人合一, ‘the harmonization of heaven/nature and man’<sup>76</sup>. The expression emphasizes both wholeness and unity of all things in the universe, and harmony amongst these things, a harmony based on diversity. As we will see further (see section 2.3.3 The Chinese notion of truth), for the Confucians, realizing this unity between man and nature came down to ‘humanization of nature’, whereas for the Daoist this meant ‘naturalization of humans’. The first one emphasized the moral values of human society, and the second one emphasized the intimate value of personal freedom (Rosker 2008: 191)<sup>77</sup>.

Chinese methodology views every phenomenon from its relationship to the whole by means of correlative thinking. This implies a belief that, as a method, (scientific) logical analysis can never deliver a complete comprehension or recognition of reality.

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<sup>74</sup> This ultimate unity is later visibly symbolized in the ‘Diagram of the supreme ultimate’ (*Taiji tu* 太极图), which consists of the eight trigrams surrounding a circle that illustrates the ultimate unity. For the different versions of the diagram in history and their exact dating, see Louis 2003.

<sup>75</sup> Although the terms *yin* and *yang* do not hold a central place in the early Daoist texts, the dialectics between opposites as in the holistic worldview of the *Yijing* is the fundament of all early Chinese cosmology and cosmogony, including the Daoist.

<sup>76</sup> The Chinese *tian* is far from what is generally understood as Heaven in the Western world, and more precisely in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Without going too much into depth here, *tian* as a concept should in any case not be considered as independent of the human world as is the case in the Western interpretation. I shall conveniently translate *tian* as heaven. Hall and Ames prefer not to translate *tian*, and their translation for *tian ren he yi* is ‘the continuity of *tian* and the human experience’ (Ames & Hall 2001: 83). They explicitly describe *tian* - and also *dao* - as a non-transcendent field. See Hall & Ames 1998: 232-244.

<sup>77</sup> In this part, Rosker explains contemporary Neo-Confucian philosopher Li Zehou’s theory on the unity of man and heaven.

Consequently, not only the Chinese worldview but also the Chinese methodology is thus based on analogy and comprehensiveness (instead of Western logical analysis).

This analogical and holistic worldview is in many ways reflected in the first Confucian and Daoist texts. Obviously, by the time of the Warring States (475-221 BC), the Chinese way of correlative thinking deeply rooted in the *Yijing* had already taken shape. This particular mode of thinking not only determined the content and methodology of the first great philosophies, but ultimately also the nature of Chinese thinking and of Chinese behavior in general (Graham 1986; Puett 2002)<sup>78</sup>. As Hall and Ames (1995: 124) state,

The relative indifference of correlative thinking to logical analysis means that the ambiguity, vagueness and incoherence associable with images and metaphors are carried over into the more formal elements of thought. [...] In contradistinction to the rational mode of thinking which privileges univocity, correlative thinking involves the association of significances into clustered images which are treated as meaning complexes ultimately unanalyzable into any more basic components.

#### 2.3.2.4 Language and its relation to Chinese patterns of thinking

Apart from the crucial influence of socio-economic conditions and more ‘intellectual’ argument on the nature of Chinese philosophy, the typically suggestive and ‘vague’ nature of ancient Chinese language is another vital aspect. The reason for this suggestiveness and vagueness in Chinese philosophical language can be found in two phenomena.

Firstly, the nature of Chinese characters is intrinsically suggestive and analogical. According to Fu and Zhou (1997), the origin of the different patterns of thinking took place at the same time as that of the creation of characters, first as pictographs out of

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<sup>78</sup> Puett further discusses two different opinions on the generality of Warring States and Han correlative models as either a defining feature of Chinese thought in general (Granet 1968; Hall and Ames 1995), or as universal (as a trans-cultural difference between proto-science and modern science) (Graham 1986; Graham 1989). For the discussion, see Puett 2002: 145-200. However it may be, the persistent influence of dialectical and correlative scheming on the present Chinese thinking mode have been demonstrated in several psychological experiments, although these studies mostly indicate that the Chinese are ‘more likely’ to adopt a dialectical mode of thinking than are European-Americans, and that this does not necessarily mean that all Chinese people are characterized by a dialectical mode of thinking. (Cheng,Lo & Chio 2010) The degree of holistic thinking can also be tested by means of individual psychological-cognitive experiments (different from the cultural dimensions in the model for differentiating cultures by Hofstede). Such tests with American and Chinese children showed that Chinese children score higher than for instance Americans with regard to a holistic perception (Bond 1992: 23-24).

paintings, and later as ideograms out of pictographs.<sup>79</sup> Especially the development from pictographs towards the more polysemic (polysemous) ideogram was crucial for the development of Chinese thought, as it indicated a transition from thinking from specificity to generality and as such reflects the beginning of generalization and abstraction from concrete things and specific circumstances by means of analogy. A clear example of the importance of images (such as ideograms that have many meanings) and the analogical way of thinking necessary for the correct and complete understanding of the character are the images of the sixty-four hexagrams in the *Yijing*. Each hexagram is just one ideogram (character), but this single character covers many meanings, associations and connotations. The analogy used here, is not, as Fu and Zhou (1997) argue, the typical Western scientific analogy which focuses on consistency of the reasoned connection between different objects, but has dialectics as a central factor.<sup>80</sup>

Secondly, apart from the language itself being intrinsically suggestive and consequently sometimes vague, Chinese ancient philosophers were highly skeptical of language as a tool for expressing true (authentic) knowledge (Coutinho 2004; Hall & Ames 1995; Hansen 1992; Moeller 2006a, 2006b). Especially Daoist texts as the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* are filled with doubts about the use of language to express the ultimate 'truth', *dao*. The idea of the impossibility to put the *dao* in words by naming it or identifying it through language was first expressed in the famous first sentence of the *Daodejing* (Chapter 1): 'The *dao* that is expressed is not the unchanging *dao*' (道可道，非常道).<sup>81</sup> This, however, does not mean language is useless, and the Daoist approach is ultimately sceptical and fatalistic. It is on the contrary a sound tool to communicate, and even to accumulate more knowledge. But it only conveys conventional truths and non-authentic knowledge.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> As Fu and Zhou (1997) argue, the creative process of inventing characters is itself the process of searching for and selecting an appropriate form of expressing one's thoughts through language. Each development indicated another stage or pattern of thinking. It seems to me that this assumption should need further in depth investigation.

<sup>80</sup> Many linguistic studies have been done of the relation of the Chinese language and the particular mode of thinking in which these language patterns fits. Many of these studies are done from a comparative Chinese-English linguistic perspective. See for instance Zhang & Zhang (2001) on the relation of traditional modes of thinking and the use of parataxis and hypotaxis.

<sup>81</sup> Cf also the famous story by Su Dongpo called 'Truth is harder to see than the sun' in which knowing the *dao* is compared with a blind man trying to 'know' what the sun is like through comparisons (told by others) with a brass tray and a candle, comparisons that turn out to be misleading and useless. For a translation, see Lin 1963: 387.

<sup>82</sup> It can be argued that also the Confucian tradition was skeptical about language, of which the 'rectification of names' testifies. Still, as Izutsu (2008: 7-9) explains, through the theory of the rectifications of names, Confucianism holds an essentialist standpoint with regard to language: to every name corresponds an objective and permanent piece of reality, which Izutsu calls Confucian 'essentialism', whereas for the Daoists

As a result of both the scepticism towards language in general, and the holistic but vague and chaotic (unstructured) worldview that can never be ‘accurately’ described by reasoned language<sup>83</sup>, Chinese philosophers were used to express themselves by means of aphorisms, allusions, and illustrations. Especially the Daoist Canon, in which the true nature of the universe is considered a chaotic, boundless and vague whole, exhibits an abundance of metaphors, images and paradoxes. A perfect example is the *Daodejing*, consisting of only 5000 characters, with very few grammatical particles, and a writing style that encourages varied, even contradictory interpretations.<sup>84</sup> Aphorisms, allusions, and illustrations are certainly not what Feng Youlan (1997: 12) calls ‘articulate’, but their insufficiency in articulateness is compensated by their suggestiveness, which comes closer to the reality they refer to, and invite the reader to use his own intuition and imagination. Hall and Ames (1998: 74) explain it as follows:

In a world defined by the vast indifference of Chaos, literal expressions, or metaphorical expressions that may be translated back into literal locutions, are of little account. Allusiveness is essential; nuance is the goal of language. If one wishes to make a statement about something that is irrevocably *vague*, parabolic and metaphoric languages are necessary.

From the above, it is clear that Chinese philosophical language is not only by nature suggestive and allusive, but is also deliberately used as such to express the vague, unspeakable and in essence unpredictable (chaotic) nature of reality; in confounding, it elucidates.<sup>85</sup>

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there was no essential naming. For more on the Daoist skepticism about language and the presumed but often misunderstood opposition by the Daoists to language, see for example Hansen 1992 and Moeller 2006a: 120-127. Certainly, many Western parallels can be drawn with regard to the limitation of language. No topic has received more philosophical attention in the last half-century; Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Derrida have all formulated some form of skepticism about the viewpoint of language as a mirror of a reality or an external world.

<sup>83</sup> As for the Daoists, *dao* is directly associated with the ‘intricate, spontaneous and chaotic regularities of nature’ (Coutinho 2004: 122), it is not difficult to understand why language is not capable to express this. For more on this ‘chaotic’ and indescribable nature of the *dao* and knowledge, see also further on truth and knowledge in the Daoist tradition.

<sup>84</sup> For a detailed discussion on the use of metaphors and paradoxes in the *Daodejing*, see for example Coutinho 2008: 109-131. In this work, Coutinho also explicitly deals with the theme of vagueness in the *Daodejing*, in which he shows that vagueness is not only a ‘stylistic quirk of Daoist writing’, but equally important as a philosophical theme. This viewpoint will also be clarified in the sections below about truth and knowledge.

<sup>85</sup> For an extensive inquiry into the role and function of language and meaning in ancient Chinese philosophy, see for example Hansen 1992 and Izutsu 2008: 6-24. For more on the Chinese way of rhetoric and the lack of logical argumentation, see Hall and Ames 1998: 135-143, Hansen 1992, and Needham 1998.

### 2.3.2.5 Chinese epistemology

As the notion of being muddled and vagueness primarily regards having a muddled or confused ‘knowledge’ of things, and is also often put in dialectical relation with being smart (*congming*), it is valuable to gain some understanding about the Chinese theory of knowledge.

In the same way as ancient Western philosophy did not have any separate discipline called epistemology<sup>86</sup>, ancient Chinese philosophy did not have a separate theory of knowledge (*renshilun* 认识论). This of course does not mean ancient Chinese philosophers were not concerned with questions about the nature of knowledge. What do we know, how do we know it, and how ‘sure’ can we be about what we think we know are equally important topics in ancient Chinese philosophical thinking. In fact, Socrates and the ancient Daoist philosophers came around the same time in history to a similar conclusion regarding certain epistemological questions. As Rosker (2008: 2) remarks, in his famous maxim ‘I neither know nor think that I know’, Socrates ‘acknowledges the total depth of his ignorance, while at the same time denying *a priori* the possibility of attaining any kind of “real” recognition’. Ancient Daoist philosophers held essentially the same opinion. At the end of his research into different kinds of wisdom, Laozi states: ‘To know that you do not know is the best’ (*zhi bu zhi shang yi* 知不知尚矣) (*Daodejing*, Chapter 71). Zhuangzi (Inner Chapters, *Qiwulu* 齐物论, 10)<sup>87</sup> agrees with Laozi by stating: ‘One who knows to stop at where he does not know has attained perfection’ (*gu zhi zhi qi suo bu zhi, zhi yi* 故知止其所不知, 至矣).

However, even such radical epistemological thinking did not exclude further inquiries into the origin of knowledge and to what extent knowledge is ‘knowable’<sup>88</sup>. In this regard, the difference with Western investigations lies mostly in the

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<sup>86</sup> The term was only introduced around 1830 by the Scottish philosopher James Ferrier.

<sup>87</sup> *Qiwulun* 齐物论 is the title of the second chapter of the Inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, and deals with issues such as right and wrong (‘thises and that’s’) and two different knowings, which will be also dealt with further in the research. Feng Youlan (1997) translates as ‘On the equality of things’, Watson (2003) as ‘Discussion on making all things equal’, and Legge (1977) as ‘The adjustment of controversies’. In *The Pristine Dao*, Thomas Michael, who alternatively (and also provisionally) translates *Qiwulun* as ‘Harmonizing (*qi*) objects of experience (*wu*) and theories about them (*lun*)’ discusses the different options of translation depending on the emphasis on *qi* or *lun* (Michael 2005: 79-80).

<sup>88</sup> See also the story of the happy fishes in the *Zhuangzi*, which poses the ultimate question of what we can know and what not. Although it was not a real subject of inquiry in the Pre-Qin period, epistemology as a philosophical subject was mostly developed among the Mohist and in the *Xunzi*. The Mohists made an analysis of different types of knowing, whereas *Xunzi* distinguished ‘knowing’ (*zhi* 知) from ‘wisdom’ (*zhi* 智). In later philosophy, and especially among the Song and Ming Neo-Confucian philosophers, questions such as the nature of moral knowledge (see also further page 67) and the relationship of the knower to the object known were extensively dealt with. For an elaborate account on this, see Rosker 2008.

epistemological foundations. As a consequence of both the scepticism towards language and the absence of absolute binary thinking (such as the division subject-object), epistemological problems based on a scientific worldview with clear and absolute distinctions such as the mind-body, object-subject and right-wrong (*shi fei* 是非) dualism are not found in traditional Chinese philosophy. In the same way, there is no clear distinction between the 'knower' and the 'known'. A fine epistemological example that reflects the absence of the distinction between subject and object is the famous story of Zhuangzi dreaming he was a butterfly. In this story, Zhuangzi dreamt that he was a butterfly, and after having woken up, did not know anymore if he was Zhuangzi who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi.<sup>89</sup> So whereas Western philosophy granted priority to analytical reasoning with a heavy emphasis on arguing from defined premises leading to logical conclusions about reality, analytical theory of knowledge never existed in China (Hansen 1992: 85).

Chinese epistemology, which is directed by pragmatic motives and holistic thinking, does not focus on the 'true' coherence among elements in a single-ordered whole or on the correspondence between a fixed reality and appearance, but instead on what kind of knowledge should be acquired and how well this knowledge guides behavior. Moreover, ancient Chinese philosophers favoured process over permanent form, change over stasis, and different contextual interpretations over absolute objective 'truth' (see e.g. Hall and Ames 1998). Consequently, whereas Western sceptics argued that we can never know any formula to be *true*, Chinese sceptics said that no set of rules or institutions yields a *constantly reliable guide* to action (a constant *dao*) (Hansen 1992: 93). Lin Yutang (2007 [1998]a: 108) amusingly comments on this by saying that a typical Chinese knowledge claim is 'A is right, and B is not wrong either'. In Chinese 'logic', there are no two separate poles but one pole and a negation of this one.<sup>90</sup>

If we were to summarize the Chinese epistemology as a theory of knowledge or truth in comparison with the European approach, then we could follow the following description:

The European approach is defined by a rational comprehension of the external object of cognition, as well as by analysis and a strict separation of subject and object, while the classical Chinese epistemological discourses are defined by an

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<sup>89</sup> *Zhuangzi*, Inner Chapters, *Qiwulun*. For a translation of this story, see e.g. the translation by Burton Watson (Zhuangzi 2003: 44).

<sup>90</sup> Cf also the linguistic analysis of the dichotomies *shi* 是 (right, this) and *fei* 非(not right, not (this)), and *you* 有(being) and *wu* 无 (non being). On the concept of *shi fei* from a linguistic and epistemological point of view, see e.g. Chad Hansen on <http://www.hku.hk/philodep/ch/SHIFEI.htm>. (Last accessed 14 October 2011)



irrational and intuitive method of inquiry, based upon a holistic worldview.  
(Rosker 2008: 6)<sup>91</sup>

Clear definitions and analysis based on logical distinctions such as right and wrong (*shi fei* 是非) therefore do not exist in the Chinese understanding of what is true knowledge and how we can know.<sup>92</sup>

### 2.3.3 The Chinese notion of truth

Some of the dominant features (pragmatism, the art of contextualising and the concept of order, correlative and holistic thinking) that shaped ancient Chinese thinking were introduced in the previous section. These characteristics define the content and the methodology of Chinese philosophy, and are reflected in more concrete philosophical issues such as truth, knowledge and wisdom. This section will start with a reflection on the notion of truth in ancient Chinese philosophy.<sup>93</sup>

As already indicated when accounting for the difference between Chinese and Western epistemological thinking, the Chinese notion of truth is very different from the Western notion of truth. In terms of terminology, the ancient Chinese terms for truth are *zhen* 真 and *cheng* 诚, both generally translated as ‘authenticity’ (*cheng* also as ‘sincerity’), a translation that does not fully cover the meaning of truth as we know it in the West.<sup>94</sup> For instance in the *Zhuangzi*, *zhen* mostly expresses ‘authentic’ as meaning ‘in accordance with the *dao*’. In modern Chinese language, truth is mostly conveyed as *zhenli* 真理, ‘authentic principle’, with *li* as the natural law that lies underneath all natural changes.

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<sup>91</sup> Rosker summarizes here a study by the contemporary Chinese theorist Liao Xiaoping 廖小平 on the specificity of Chinese and European ancient (approaches to) theories of knowledge, see Rosker 2008: 5-6.

<sup>92</sup> For an excellent analysis of the Chinese theory of knowledge in pre-modern and modern China, see Rosker 2008. For a discussion of some terms related to Chinese epistemology in their historical development, see for example Zhang D. 2005: 421-485

<sup>93</sup> In this section, I will only discuss Confucianism and Daoism, as they are most often referred to in the discourse on *Nande hutu*. For extensive comparative research on truth and *dao*, see for example Graham 1989; Hall & Ames 1998; Xu 2010.

<sup>94</sup> The character *cheng* 诚 frequently appears in the Confucian canon, where it often means ‘sincerity’. The character *zhen* 真 on the contrary does not appear in early Confucian Classics (such as the *Analects*, *the Mencius*, *the Book of Songs*, *the Book of Documents*, *the Book of Changes*, etc.). Its first appearance is in the Daoist *Zhuangzi*, where it can hardly be conceived as an equivalent of the Western idea of ‘truth’. For a discussion on *zhen* in the *Zhuangzi*, see for example Chong 2011.

A first and most distinctive feature of truth is that Chinese thinkers are relatively unconcerned with what in the West could be defined as ‘semantic theories of truth’. According to Hall and Ames (1995: 279), this is a result of the dominance of correlative thinking. As they explain:

For semantic truth theories are implicated in analytical, dialectical, and strict analogical modes of argumentation. The undervaluing of speculations concerning truth or falsity in any rigorous sense in classical China is a consequence of correlative thinking which does not invite rational objectivity.

As a consequence of the epistemological foundations and the correlative thinking reflected in the holistic worldview as explained before, the prescribed way to recognize authentic truth starts by approaching reality as a comprehensive organism. This implies that even the synthesis of the various analyzed components can never truly represent reality (the whole), because the parts are taken out of their natural state. The fundamental belief is that true understanding of reality cannot be obtained by empirical, analytical research as is the case in the West. In the Chinese context, understanding the natural *dao* of the world is an intuitive process (*zhijue* 直觉, also translated as ‘gnosis’). It is an understanding one cannot or should not argue about (because talking about it indicates that one has not understood), it is an understanding without apparent rational effort. Hall and Ames (1995) adequately called this ‘intuition of manyness’, and Feng Youlan (1997) speaks of ‘concept by intuition’. In one of my interviews, a Chinese PhD-student mentioned a nice metaphor her professor always used to describe the difference between the Western and Chinese conception of ‘truth’. In the West, truth is like an onion; people like to peel it and analyse every ring separately. But in the end, one can never just put all the rings back together, so as a result, the onion does not exist anymore (as an onion), which makes a ‘truthful’ idea of the onion as an ‘onion’ impossible (Qi Kuiyan, Personal communication, 1 December 2008, Ghent). In the Chinese view, Western knowledge therefore always represents only a part of reality.

With regard to the concrete interpretation of the ‘truth idea’, Harbsmeier (1998: 207) explains the typical pragmatic nature of truth as a consequence of the aforementioned social turmoil:

Whereas Greek philosophers were very often preoccupied with the notions of factual and evaluative truth for its own sake, their Chinese counterparts looked upon language and thought as much more pragmatically embedded in social life. (...) Their key concept was that of the Way (*tao*) of conduct in human affairs, not of objective factual or doctrinal truth.

The emphasis of the Western notion of truth is on an objective and materialistic ‘true’ reality, while the emphasis of *dao* is its usefulness and value in society. Besides, as

already mentioned above, in their approaches to social order, Chinese ancient philosophy did not rely on a metaphysical creator with a clear and absolute separation of man and heaven. On the contrary, the cosmic order on which they based their theories represents the most basic union between man and heaven (*tian ren he yi*), and can be attained by following the right *dao*.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, as Hall and Ames (1998) propose, Chinese philosophers can best be conceived as *dao*-seekers instead of the Western truth-seekers<sup>96</sup>.

But what then are the different interpretations of *dao* in the principal philosophical traditions? As already mentioned before, in the process of developing their own approach to the ultimate *dao*, both Confucianism and Daoism were influenced by the existing cosmological perceptions of the *Yijing* which focus on particular cosmological concepts such as holism, constant change, and unity between man and heaven.

### **Dao in Confucianism**

In Confucianism, the right way for restoring social order lies in following the cosmic order known as ‘the mandate of heaven’ (*tianming* 天命)<sup>97</sup>, with the emperor as the son of heaven and thus serving as a medium between heaven and earth and as a moral role model. Specifically, Confucianism looked at the ancient rulers in times of stability, and discovered that, although an absolute understanding of the cosmic order was not possible through reasoning, restoring the natural order was possible through the right conduct. According to Confucius, the disorder was due to the fact that the ruler during the Warring States was no longer the moral example he ought to be by virtue of heaven, and as such encouraged the different feudal lords to take the initiative themselves and, by lack of a moral example, not to behave morally themselves. As a result, Confucius concluded that by behaving oneself properly in society, i.e. by respecting one’s position in a highly hierarchical society, social order could be restored. To this aim, an official moral code or etiquette (*li* 礼) strongly rooted in ‘human relations’ was installed. Mencius (372-289 BC) first mentioned the five cardinal model roles: the relation of the ruler to the ruled; of father to son; of husband to wife; of elder brother to younger

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<sup>95</sup> According to Xu Keqian (2010: 44), the close relation to the Chinese *dao* and human activity and practice can be proved not only by referring to the character *dao* 道 which is composed of a human steps and a human head, and means ‘way’ (literally and figuratively) or derivatively ‘method’, but is even more shown in the other written form of *dao* 衛, which contains a person *shou* 首 and human conduct *xing* 行.

<sup>96</sup> In their *Thinking from the Han. Self, truth and transcendence in Chinese and Western culture* Hall and Ames (1998) extensively investigate notions such as truth and self in comparative perspective.

<sup>97</sup> For more on ‘the mandate of heaven’ (*tianming*) and ‘knowing the mandate of heaven’ (*zhi tianming*) as a kind of Confucian knowledge, see page 65.

brother; and as friend to friend.<sup>98</sup> The system that allocated a particular blueprint to each role or social position was the rectifications of names (*zheng ming* 正名). This concept, found in all major philosophical schools, described the proper relation between names (*ming* 名) and objects (*shi* 事) and as such made it possible to follow the right course of action for every social agent.<sup>99</sup> Besides, complementary to the system of the proper social position, is the strict social hierarchy, which divided society in distinct primary and secondary professions: primary professions were officials and farmers, and secondary professions were craftsmen and merchants.<sup>100</sup>

## The *dao* of Daoism

The early Daoist looked back to find the right (political) course of action to restore harmony, and went back further in time than the Confucians, namely to a point where there was nothing left to see, i.e. the origin of nature. Indeed, the starting point for the Daoist view on *dao* can be found in Daoist cosmology which relies on the observation of nature (instead of on the ancient rulers as in Confucianism) and focuses on the notion of interconnectivity and complementarity of all things in the universe, be it on micro (atoms, individuals), meso (family, social relationships) or macro (national, universal) level. Restoring cosmic harmony thus meant going back to one's original, spontaneous state by following the natural way or *dao*, i.e. acting in accordance with the *dao* in all its simplicity. By recognizing the *dao* and living accordingly, one can actualize one's inner natural potential or virtue (*de* 德) which is the human realization of a life in harmony with nature, with the outside world, and with oneself.

However, the consequence of the notion of endless correlations and constant change as the only true natural principle, is that the actualization of this *dao* is not absolute: it is in constant change and depends on the context in which it is viewed. Therefore, Daoists put no interest in clearly defining what truth is about, let alone to argue about it. As Laozi states: 'as "thing", the way is vague and unclear; unclear and vague, yet within it is a symbol; vague and unclear, yet within it is a thing [...]. (*Daodejing*, Chapter 21). Consequently, from a Daoist viewpoint, vagueness and indistinctness determine the right way to perceive and experience the world. Analytical and logical thinking based on

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<sup>98</sup> Confucius only mentioned three of the five relationships. From the Han dynasty on, when philosophical works mention human relations, they generally have in mind the Mencian set of five. For a brief treatment of the five cardinal relations in the philosophical history (Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, etc.), see for example Zhang D. 2005: 321-326.

<sup>99</sup> The underlying assumption – although not explicitly expressed – is that words determine thoughts.

<sup>100</sup> On the origin of the two classes, see Creel 1954: 278-279; 314. For a more elaborate account on the bureaucratic system as well as its relation to the period in which Zheng Banqiao lived, see page 105.

clear distinctions will not bring one any closer to the *dao*. What will be the use of intuition, introspection, and observation without judgment. The famous story of the blind man who wanted to see the sun by Song poet Su Dongpo 苏东坡 (1036-1101)<sup>101</sup> is very illustrative of this belief. The story is called ‘Truth is harder to see than the sun’ and goes as follows:

There was a man born blind. He had never seen the sun and asked about it of people who could see. Someone told him, “The sun’s shape is like a brass tray.” The blind man struck the brass tray and heard its sound. Later when he heard the sound of a bell, he thought it was the sun. Again someone told him, “The sunlight is like that of a candle,” and the blind man felt the candle, and thought that was the sun’s shape. Later he felt a [big] key and thought it was the sun. The truth [Tao] is harder to see than the sun, and when people do not know it, they are exactly like the old man. Even if you do your best to explain by analogies and examples, it still appears like the analogy of the brass tray and the candle. From what is said of the brass tray, one imagines a bell, and from what is said about the candle, one imagines a key. In this way, one gets even further and further away from the truth. (Lin 1963: 387)

Consistent with the early Daoists, Su Dongpo emphasises the uselessness of analogies and examples (naming and imagining) in explaining what ‘truth’ is.

In summary, the Chinese notion of truth is very different to the West’s from a pragmatic perspective in search of a behavioural or moral compass (‘how to’), given the cosmological notion of constant change and endless interconnectivity. The Chinese notion of truth is not rationally understandable, nor ultimate or absolute, but variable according to the (ever-changing) circumstances and perspectives. One could therefore say that, in the Chinese tradition, truth as a representation of reality can be compared with an impressionist painting, in which there is no distinction between subject and object: no sharp and distinct contours define the object of the painting, so that the subject (the beholder) has to get personally involved with the object to give meaning to it.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Northern Song poet Su Dongpo 苏东坡 (also called Su Shi 苏轼) (1036-1101) was also an excellent statesman, with an independent and rebellious character. For an anthology of his most important texts, see for instance *Sur moi-même* (Su 2003), translated and introduced by Jacques Pimpaneau.

<sup>102</sup> I thank Renaud Versluys, doctor in Chinese medicine, for this striking metaphor.

These observations about the difficulty of naming and describing ‘truth’ and the importance of ‘experience’ rather than defining and delineating truth brings us to the next part about knowledge and wisdom in the Confucian and Daoist tradition.<sup>103</sup>

### 2.3.4 Knowledge and wisdom in the Confucian and Daoist tradition

For Westerners, in general, wisdom is associated with knowledge of what is right and wrong, and links to our ability to make the right judgment in our actions. In the Chinese tradition, in the same way as ‘truth’ is perceived as a practical, non-metaphysical way of being and acting, authentic knowledge is not based on abstract theoretical constructions of the mind, neither on a metaphysical truth, nor is it mere intellectual knowledge. Knowledge, as Hansen (1992: 85) observes, ‘is more akin to skill (knowing – how – to) than to information processing’ (cf above way-seekers). The main subject of this knowledge is the *dao*; knowing how to act and react in different situations, with the ultimate aim of preserving a state of inner and outer harmony. Therefore, *zhi*, often just ‘knowledge’ in translation, should be considered as ‘practical wisdom’.

The strong association of knowing, *zhi* 知, and the way, *dao* 道, is still reflected in the modern Chinese compound for ‘knowing’, *zhidao* 知道, which literally means ‘knowing the way’. Rosker (2008: 10) formulates an alternative for the translation of *zhi* as knowledge: ‘Knowledge was primarily understood as recognition (*shi* 识) of the structural principles of the all-embracing way (*dao* 道)’. Another translation that comes close to the idea of recognition rather than intellectual knowledge is ‘realization’ (e.g. Hall and Ames 1998; 2001). Hall and Ames (2001: 85) believe that with this translation they pay proper attention to the Confucian precept of ‘the continuity of knowledge and action’ (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一), that is, ‘to know is to authenticate in action’.

Since no absolute, analyzable truths are available, logical reasoning based on the availability of absolute premises (statements) will not bring any true knowledge. True knowledge is non-analytical, and ideally attained by introspection, intuition and experience. That is to say, through peeling the onion we do not know the ‘truth’ about

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<sup>103</sup> Also in the Western tradition, scientific truths are not by all philosophers and scientists acknowledged as ‘absolute’. For instance, the critical social philosopher Erich Fromm (1900-1980) considered scientific (objective) truth not as absolute, but always as ‘optimal’: ‘the history of thought [...] is the history of an ever-increasing approximation to the truth. Scientific knowledge is not absolute but optimal; it contains the optimum of truth attainable in a given historical period.’ Fromm furthermore notes that ‘different cultures have emphasized various aspects of the truth’ and that increasing interaction between cultures allows for these aspects to reconcile and integrate, increasing further the approximation to the truth (Fromm 2003 [1947]: 178-179).

the onion; rather on the contrary. By tasting, smelling, and feeling, we get insight into its quality.

#### 2.3.4.1 Confucian notions of knowledge and wisdom

In the Confucian tradition, ‘knowing the way’ can be understood as ‘knowing the ways passed on by tradition: the human ways of social interaction encoded, with greater or lesser flexibility, by the cultural canon, and inculcated through social praxis’ (Coutinho 2004: 122). *In concreto*, *dao* refers to a specific guideline of how to conduct oneself in society depending on one’s position and the specific relation one is involved in at any specific moment. This guideline is known as the social rites or social etiquette (*li* 礼). This kind of knowledge about past rituals and etiquette also implies that it can be ‘cultivated’ i.e. through self-cultivation (*xiu shen* 修身 or *xiuyang* 修养). Moreover, self-cultivation is imperative for developing a mature, harmonious and socially successful personality.<sup>104</sup>

This section will introduce two particular kinds of knowledge that often occur in the discourses on the saying *Nande hutu*, and that at the same time are characteristics or rather skills of the Confucian sage: knowing the mandate of heaven (*zhi tianming* 知天命), and innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知).

#### Knowing the mandate of heaven (*zhi tianming*)

A first important knowledge is ‘knowing the mandate of heaven’ (*zhi tianming* 知天命). *Tianming* literally means ‘the command or decree from heaven’, and is generally conceived as the harmonious interrelation *tian-di-ren* 天地人. On the very personal level, Confucius assumed that, since *tian* does not speak directly, the universe must have allocated to humans an intrinsic ‘categorical imperative’, called *tianming*. This personal *tianming* can be described as one’s personal nature, one’s natural talents and inclinations. As such, for Confucius, *ming* means the decree or will (*ming*) of heaven (*tian*), and is conceived as a purposeful force, to the extent that violating or even not following one’s *tianming* was unethical. At some point in later Confucianism, *ming* became to mean the totality of existent conditions and forces of the whole universe (such as one’s lifespan, one’s social and economic status, one’s physical health). For the external success of our

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<sup>104</sup> *Xiu shen* 修身 in the first place refers to the cultivation of one’s personality in order to obtain social harmony, but in a later phase also became associated with attaining more personal freedom. See for example Ivanhoe 2000 and Rosker 2008. The notion of self-cultivation will show to be an important thread in the different discourses on *Nande hutu*, and will be repeatedly discussed at several occasions further in the research.

activity, the cooperation of these conditions is always needed (Feng 1997: 45). In politics, *tianming* emerged as a condition for the ruler's legitimacy as early as the Zhou dynasty (Ames & Hall 2001: 71-72).<sup>105</sup>

Whatever the many different philosophical interpretations and translations, *tianming* is often (especially in contemporary Chinese dictionaries) conveniently translated as fate or destiny, and even vocation. However, *tianming* should not be understood as a passive, absolute force beyond one's control, as the translation as fate or destiny implies. For instance Hall and Ames (2001; 1998: 277) consider *tianming* as 'one's natural defining conditions'. They emphasize that *tianming* should be understood as the relation between heaven (*tian*) and human beings by emphasizing the mutuality of the relationship and explicitly rejecting the very Western notion of irrevocable fate or destiny. It should therefore be stressed that there is an internal aspect to it that can be learnt, namely through self-cultivation and experience. That is to say, if one learns about the way the universe operates and accepts one's role and position in this system, one can adopt the right behavior in every situation, which in turn will also positively influence the external conditions that are part of *tianming*. In other words, putting one's trust fully in *tianming* and accepting its principles will ultimately benefit one's own wellbeing.

Obviously, knowing *tianming* is not easy to realize, and reflects a stage in a person's process of self-cultivation. As the *Lunyu* indicates, knowing the mandate of heaven is the ultimate wisdom of the 'superior man' (the exemplary man who serves as a model)<sup>106</sup>. In fact, Confucius himself recognizes 'knowing the mandate of heaven' as a spiritual stage in the development of his life. In the famous verses in the *Lunyu* (II, 4), he clearly admits he only managed to know (and accept) fate at the age of fifty:

The Master said, 'At fifteen, I had my heart set on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the mandate of heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ [for the reception of truth]. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.'<sup>107</sup>

This passage clearly indicates that, as de Bary (1970: 18) formulates it, according to Confucius, human life can 'by ordered stages of growth and maturity attain a freedom

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<sup>105</sup> For translations and a discussion on the changes in interpretation of (*tian*)*ming* in the different philosophical schools, see e.g. Chan 1970; Lupke 2005; Zhang D. 2005: 125-139.

<sup>106</sup> 'He who does not know the decree of heaven, cannot be considered a noble man.' (不知命, 无以为君子也, *Lunyu*, XX, 3)

<sup>107</sup> 子曰：吾十有五而志于学，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳顺，七十而从心所欲，不逾矩。 This also explains why *zhi ming* has become a metaphor for the age of fifty in China.



wherein one's spontaneous desires are naturally in accord with Heaven, the moral order and vital power in the universe'.

This wisdom of knowing and accepting 'fate' will show to be an important element in the contemporary interpretation of the wisdom of *Nande hutu* (see Chapter Four section 4.3.1).

## Moral knowledge

Another important kind of knowledge in (Neo-)Confucianism is the notion of moral knowledge. Especially in later Neo-Confucianism, the concept of innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知)<sup>108</sup> got priority over any other kind of knowledge, with Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (also Wang Shouren 王守仁, 1472–1529)<sup>109</sup> as its most important supporter.

Innate moral knowledge can be described as the ability to distinguish true from false and right from wrong through the 'heart-mind' (*xin* 心)<sup>110</sup>. As the translation indicates, this ability follows the premise that people are innately good (*liang* 良). If we follow our inner, innately 'good' voice we will be good and act well.

However, it is not because our innate goodness is inherently present, that it is conscious enough to guide our behavior. Besides, in following our *liangzhi*, the right intention is crucial. Therefore, we need to actively cultivate this inner goodness. This can be done in the classical Confucian way, namely through self-cultivation, study of the Classics, ritual music etc.

In modern Chinese, *liangzhi* can also be translated as 'intuitive knowledge', and even 'conscience', bearing the same meaning as *liangxin* 良心 and *daode xin* 道德心. *Liangxin*

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<sup>108</sup> I use the translation 'innate moral knowledge' for *liangzhi* 良知 as put forward by Zhang Dainian (2005) and Rosker (2008). The term was first used by Mencius, and later elaborated on by Wang Yangming. For an in-depth description of the different philosophical interpretations of *liangzhi*, see for example Rosker 2008 and Zhang D. 2005: 411-418.

<sup>109</sup> Wang Yangming 王阳明 is known as the founder and most significant representative of the Neo-Confucian 'School of Mind-Heart' (*Xinxue* 心学). He opposed the prevailing Neo-Confucian philosophical 'School of Principle' (*Lixue* 理学), dominated by the work of the rationalist Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200). See e.g. Rosker 2008: 43-50; Feng 1997: 308-318.

<sup>110</sup> *Xin* 心 literally means (and also depicts a) heart, but in traditional Chinese thinking, the heart's function cannot be disconnected from the mind's function. Or, as Hang Tui-Chieh (1991: 29) defines it: 'Of course, "hsin" does not designate only the physical heart. Most of the time it comprises all "subjective" or psychic phenomena: thinking, feeling, controlling, deciding, having conscious or unconscious attitudes, etc.' Therefore, I prefer the translation 'heart-mind' as used by many authors such as Rosker (2008) (heart-mind and heart), Zhang Dainian (2005) (heart-mind) and Hall and Ames (1998) (heart-and-mind). For more on the heart-mind connection, see e.g. Zhang D. 2005: 391-409.

and *liangzhi* will prove to be very relevant for a right use of the wisdom of *Nande hutu*, and will be addressed in Part Two (Chapter Six section 6.4.3 Conscience).

As we will see further, Daoism pays no attention to such moral issues as good and bad or right and wrong because both are part of the same dualistically structured universe and as such complementary for obtaining natural harmony. Besides, early Daoism in whatever sense does not engage in judging good and bad, as this involves absolute values and judgments, both of which are highly rejected by the early Daoist philosophers.

The two types of Confucian knowledge mentioned here, knowing the decree of heaven and innate moral knowledge, are ultimately ‘useful’ knowledge, in other words, knowledge about how to behave properly at every moment and in any given situation in order to obtain social harmony. As we will see later, they will play a prominent role in the analysis of the different discourses on the saying *Nande hutu*.

#### 2.3.4.2 The Daoist sage as a fool

Both Laozi and Zhuangzi rejected the notion of accumulating knowledge for several reasons.

Firstly, in the same way as there is no absolute truth in Daoist thought, there is also no (absolute) knowledge based on absolute distinctions. Already for Laozi, all distinctions are conventional. They limit our vision, arouse desires, and cause conflicts. Distinctions can never be absolute, or to use the words of Chad Hansen in his analysis of the *Zhuangzi*, ‘for any natural distinction we focus on, we ignore a great many others’ (Hansen 1992: 269).<sup>111</sup> In this regard, Zhuangzi contrasts two levels of knowledge: ‘authentic’ with ‘inauthentic’ knowledge’. Authentic knowledge is deep and understands what is naturally so (*ziran* 自然), and sees things as they really are, unbiased and in constant change. Therefore, the Daoist sage is often called the ‘authentic man’ (*zhenren* 真人).<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> The absence of absolute distinctions in the *Zhuangzi* is a highly disputable issue. With regard to interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*, among many other authors Hansen (1992) explicitly advocates an interpretation of this absence of absolute distinctions as a Daoist pluralism, instead of the Daoist monism as is too often argued for. For instance, Radice (2001: 39) argues that Zhuangzi does not offer a clear distinction between right and wrong meant as a warning that such distinctions threaten the survival of the individual and the natural order of *dao* (ibid.). Coutinho (2004: 60-61) prefers to speak of a ‘radical individualism’ (because of the emphasis on different perspectives) instead of ‘radical relativism’. See also Graham 1989: 176-183.

<sup>112</sup> The earliest occurrence of the *zhenren* 真人 in Daoist context is found in the *Zhuangzi* (Chapter VI, 1). The genuine or true man can be considered as the Daoist sage or ‘perfect/authentic man’. It denotes a person who

Secondly, since language is a conventional, man-made communication system, language can hardly express authentic knowledge (in the same way as it cannot express the real *dao*). Thus the linguistic expression of knowledge can only convey ‘conventional’ knowledge, knowledge that has been reasoned, i.e. non-authentic knowledge. Unfortunately, this kind of knowledge only brings us further from the *dao*, and as such also further from a carefree, happy life.

Thirdly, and consequently, real authentic knowing is – contrary to what the Confucians assume – not something one can achieve through self-cultivation and accumulating ‘knowledge’ (by studying the Classics). This notion is expressed in the famous paradox ‘The farther one pursues knowledge, the less one knows’ (*Daodejing*, Chapter 47). What is meant here, is that acquired knowledge is not only not absolute, but also useless in finding the truth. The real truth is in constant change, and comprises the interconnectivity of the myriad of things. This kind of wisdom does not relate to merely intellectual knowledge. Therefore, the authentic man – the only person who can acquire authentic knowledge – is simply someone who knows how to follow the *dao*, i.e. someone who follows the stream of life without wanting to understand or argue about it, let alone analyze it. According to the Daoists, this will ultimately make him the happiest.

### **Great wisdom looks like foolishness (*da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚)**

The idea of relative inadequacy and uselessness of intellectual knowledge which is reflected in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, is even more spread through later developed maxims. One of the most meaningful – and as we will see later also the most often cited expressions in relation to the saying *Nande hutu* – is the paradox *da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚, ‘Great wisdom looks like foolishness’ (in Chinese-English dictionaries also referred to as ‘Still waters run deep’). This saying is generally attributed to Song poet Su Dongpo (苏东坡 1073-1101)<sup>113</sup>, but its meaning is said to originate from a variant in Laozi’s *Daodejing*: ‘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) (*Daodejing*, Chapter 45).

Many variants of the saying have appeared in literary production since Su Dongpo’s quote, all referring to the same wisdom, that of knowledge as non-knowledge, and

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has ‘actualized’ (realized) his inner self or virtue (*de* 德) in accordance with the *dao* 道. For an analysis of the *zhenren* from a Daoist perspective, see for example Izutsu 2008 and Hall and Ames 1998: 163-171.

<sup>113</sup> Su Dongpo’s full version is ‘Those with great bravery seem to be cowardly; those with great wisdom seem to be foolish’ (*da yong ruo qie, da zhi ruo yu* 大勇若怯, 大智若愚). For more on Su Dongpo, see note 101.

wisdom as non-wisdom.<sup>114</sup> Jordan Paper (2004: 23) introduces the notion of wisdom as non-wisdom as follows:

The common understanding of wisdom in the West is that it is an additional quality to both intelligence and knowledge. Wisdom is understood to involve the use of both in a mature fashion. [...] But there is another meaning of “wisdom” that is antithetical to the normative meaning in that it refers to a mental state that is devoid of content, a state where there is neither intelligence nor knowledge.

In this respect, the saying *da zhi ruo yu* embodies the ideal of the Daoist sage as a fool. The sage is the person who manages to banish all non-authentic knowledge based on distinctions and lives in accordance with nature, which makes him free of conventions and social morality and thus often looks and acts like a fool. The idea of the ‘wise fool’ can be found in early texts such as the *Daodejing* (Chapter 20), where Laozi claims he looks like a fool and his mind is muddled and chaotic, whereas ordinary people look bright and intelligent.<sup>115</sup> The positive effect of ‘foolishness’ that results from transcending the knowledge determined by absolute distinctions is very powerful; it allows the sage to be emotionally indifferent and unconcerned with prior knowledge or rational judgments, and consequently can enjoy absolute and boundless happiness free of worry and anxiety. This is, according to the Daoists, the ultimate outcome of following the nature of things and one’s own nature, and of not being ‘bound’ by distinctions and preconceptions.

This spontaneous state of mind is also symbolized in the Daoist expression *xiaoyao you* 逍遥游, ‘wandering carefree and at ease’<sup>116</sup>, a metaphor for the state of mind of the illuminated man. This expression depicts the ideal of spontaneity resulting from true knowledge of the *dao*, and consequently also from actualizing one’s inner *dao* (i.e. *de* 德) which will automatically bring about a carefree life in harmony with nature. Coutinho (2004: 69) explicitly explains his translation of *xiaoyao you* as ‘wandering beyond’ by emphasizing the meaning of *yao* 遥, ‘distant, remote’. According to him, it is not just

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<sup>114</sup> For a brief historical treatment of some of these variants of the saying, see Wu H. 2004: 313-316. As already mentioned, the saying will return in both the academic and the popular discourse (Chapter Four), although especially in the popular discourse, the Daoist wisdom of illumination which endorses this saying is often minimized.

<sup>115</sup> 我愚人之心也哉！沌沌兮，俗人昭昭，我独若昏。

<sup>116</sup> *Xiaoyao you* is also the title of the first chapter of the Inner Chapters in the *Zhuangzi*. Feng (1997) translates as ‘Happy Excursion’, Watson (in Zhuangzi 2003) as ‘Free and Easy Wandering’, Coutinho (2004) as ‘Wandering Beyond’. Interestingly, *xiaoyao* is also the Chinese translation of ‘Peripatetic’, i.e. belonging to the school of Aristotle, who is said to have been a ‘peripatetic’ lecturer, teaching while wandering in the Lyceum gymnasium in Athens.

‘careless and free wandering’, but wandering into the distance, by transgressing boundaries and limitations (of the mind). In this respect, Coutinho relates the state of *xiaoyao you* to the figure of the shaman. According to him, a shaman

has often acquired a wealth of traditional knowledge, and personally acquired experimental knowledge about the nature of things: plants, animals, people, spirits, and perhaps most importantly the ‘propensities’ of things, their capacities to affect us and to affect the things around us. (Coutinho 2004: 71)

In the same spirit, Feng Youlan (1997: 22) describes the early Daoists as ‘roaming beyond our world’ (other-worldliness), whereas Confucianists roam within the boundaries (of human society; this-worldliness).

### Self-knowledge and illumination

In practice, for Daoists, there is however some sort of valuable knowledge, namely self-knowledge (*zi zhi* 自知). As the self is just another manifestation of *dao*, and all things are ‘products’ of the same *dao*, consequently, if one ‘knows’, i.e. has insight into oneself without judging, one knows the nature of others, and one knows the myriad of things. For Laozi, self-knowledge is a prerequisite for the experience of illumination (*ming* 明) (i.e. the real understanding of the *dao*) that typifies the Daoist sage, whereas knowing the nature of others is just ‘wisdom’ (*Daodejing*, Chapter 33: 知人者智，自知者明). This is explained by the assumption that man’s knowledge of his own true nature leads directly to an immediate and intuitive cognition of the *dao* of which he is a part.

The stage of wisdom gained through self-knowledge and experienced as ‘non-wisdom’ described above can thus be considered as a stage of ‘illumination’ (*ming* 明). This illumination or clarity of understanding clearly describes the experience of the sage when realizing reality via a different function of the mind than just plain human reasoning (Izutsu 2008: 41). How to develop this stage of illumination, is a question that lies far beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, assuming that it is far from easy, some explanation of how to reach this state of non-knowledge or non-wisdom is useful for a better understanding of some of the interpretations of the saying *Nande hutu*.

For Daoists, the main gate towards illumination is to turn inwards through introspection, and by thoroughly doing so achieve a state of ‘chaotic unity’.<sup>117</sup> One has to develop a ‘chaotified mind’ (浑其心, *Daodejing*, Chapter 49), a mind that ‘has completely

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<sup>117</sup> See also section 2.2.3.2 *Hundun* and the theme of chaos in early Daoist philosophy and section 2.3.4.2 The Daoist sage as a fool.

ceased to exercise its discriminating and distinguishing function, a mind which has transcended all distinctions and oppositions' (Izutsu 2008: 40), or, as Moeller (2006) calls it, a state of mind from a 'zero perspective'. According to Izutsu, such a state of mind is the result of an ecstatic experience in which the mind loses its consciousness and awareness of everything, including the Self. As he explains, this process of what he calls 'illuminative intuition' is extremely difficult. The reason for this, is that the mind of ordinary people (the developed mind, *cheng xin* 成心 or the fixed mind, *chang xin* 常心) forces them to distinguish and discriminate between things, classify them, and as a result, establish 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' as eternal and unchangeable categories based on 'essential' differences. In this way, man becomes ever more alienated from the original unity of all things. Undoing this to regain the real undifferentiating, chaotic 'self' requires the opposite of the natural movement of the mind, i.e. a centripetal instead of centrifugal process (Izutsu 2008: 43-44). As he continues:

This drastic change of direction is, according to the Taoists, to be effected by the 'closing up of all the openings and doors of the body' (Lao-tzu), that is, by stopping the normal functioning of the five senses and the differentiating activity of the reason. Obstructing thus all the possible outlets for the centrifugal tendency of the mind, man goes deep down into the depth of his mind until he encounters the 'smallest thing' (hsiao) – as Lao-tzu calls it – which is no other than the Way itself as individualized in the form of the real existential core of the man. (Izutsu 2008: 44)<sup>118</sup>

This explanation undoubtedly is connected to Zhuangzi's Lord Hundun who did not have any 'openings and doors', and when he got them, died. In fact, Zhuangzi himself indicated the steps of spiritual illumination, in which the practice of 'sitting and forgetting' (*zuowang* 坐忘) plays a major role and illustrates the complete absence of intellectual effort that characterizes the Daoist sage. In the Inner Chapters (*Dazongshi*, 9), Yan Hui discusses his stages of illumination with Confucius (Zhongni 仲尼), and ends up by *zuowang*. When Confucius asks for some explanation, he replies:

I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great

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<sup>118</sup> For an elaborate treatment of the psychological process of illumination, see Izutsu 2008: 41-53. Izutsu analyses the structure of this process. He concludes that even though this process is very difficult, within the sphere of ordinary experience, there is a place where we can catch a glimpse of the ontological 'chaos', and that is in our dreams.

Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything (*zuowang*). (Zhuangzi 2003: 87)<sup>119</sup>

This ‘sitting and forgetting’ as a state of concentration by sensory detachment is in fact a way to reach an intuitive understanding of the cosmic wholeness, which later became the Daoist notion of ‘meditation’. As a way to ‘understanding’, Zhuangzi links the idea of *zuowang* to the process of ‘to forget how to’ (to undo learning) that Laozi had already put forward. As Jordan Paper (2004: 26) appropriately comments, ‘to be in a state of forgetfulness is to have not only no intelligence or knowledge, but, in effect, no awareness of, let alone concern for, accomplishments’. Interesting in this regard is the explicit use of the character *wang* 忘, forgetting, which implies there is something ‘added’ which has to be forgotten, and also indicates it is an active process.<sup>120</sup> Also the absence of concern for future accomplishments will be of later importance for our understanding of the saying *Nande hutu*.

Discussing the same idea of non-knowledge, however more physically expressed, Thomas (2005: 122-123) analyses the human body by using Zhuangzi’s distinction of the ‘foundational body’ and the ‘constructed or artificial body’ (with body as the metaphor for human beings). Thomas explains that the ‘assent and rejection’ (*shi fei* 是非) and ‘likes and dislikes’ (*hao wu* 好恶) that are detrimental for the (physical and mental) body (‘inwardly injure the body’, *nei shang qi shen* 内伤其身) are derived from the body that is not pure and natural anymore, but ‘added’ with ‘artificial or educated knowledge’ and an ‘artificial or educated desire’, which precisely create the ‘assent and rejection’ and ‘likes and dislikes’. Therefore, the Daoist sage in the *Zhuangzi* should be considered as the person who is without this artificial or educated knowledge and without an artificial or educated desire. That is to say, the real Daoist sage is a person that might look like an uneducated, uncivilized and unconventional fool.

Therefore, it should be stressed that the Daoist sage is not just perceived to be foolish for treating his acquired wisdom with disdain, but also for acting foolishly, in the sense that he is aloof and indifferent to the normal, generally accepted order of the world, and prefers chaos to order and vagueness to distinctiveness. As Girardot (1988: 269-274) explains, in the early Daoist texts terms such as *yu* 愚, *chi* 痴, *sanren* 散人, *yeren* 野人, and *kuang* 狂 are all expressive of the mythological paradigm of the primordial and uncivilized *hundun* and suggest the unique experiential condition and mode of behavior attained by the Daoist sage.

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<sup>119</sup> 堕肢体，黜聪明，离形去知，同于大通，此谓坐忘。

<sup>120</sup> On *zuowang* 坐忘 as a true resource and active force, see also Romano 2005.

Jordan Paper (2004: 24) adds to this that wisdom in the *Zhuangzi* thus consists of two stages. First, one must have the mystic experience which also entails having no intelligence or knowledge as described above. Secondly, having had this experience, one must accept that the feeling of ultimate reality as experienced during the process of illumination is indeed the nature of existence and the cosmos. This kind of wisdom is null-wisdom, wisdom beyond intelligence and knowledge. As such, the mystic experience i.e. developing a 'chaotified mind', is the creative principle and necessary condition for a new beginning, for a new 'order'. Girardot also highlights the Daoist fool as another 'Mr Hundun' who represents chaos and plays a crucial role in the transition to a new period of order. According to him, 'It is only with reference to the experience of chaos that a "transvaluation of values" is accomplished, that change, a new creation or revolution, is effected in either social or individual life' (Girardot 1988: 272; see also above 2.2.3.2 Hundun 混沌 or the theme of chaos in early Daoist philosophy). As such, the 'muddled mind' can be considered as a positive, creative and active stage of spiritual development.

In summary, all the aforementioned descriptions of wisdom as non-wisdom, the sage as a (mad) fool and the particular state of illumination as a state of chaotic unity strongly remind us of Lord Hundun, who embodies the perfectly natural, spontaneous and 'uncultured' person, whereas the boring of the openings leads to a false clarity and a false – and rather useless- distinction between right and wrong (*shi fei* 是非). The ideal state of *hundun*, chaos, vagueness and indistinctness includes transcending the senses and abandoning 'cultivation' and unnatural intellectual and moral education (cf the uncarved block), in order to achieve the state of being one with nature.

### 2.3.4.3 Some Buddhist parallels: truth, knowledge and wisdom

Buddhism plays a major role in Chinese tradition, either as a separate religion or as an important influence on Neo-Confucianism, and as such, it, directly or indirectly, certainly also had an influence on the author of the saying *Nande hutu*, Zheng Banqiao's philosophy of life. Some Buddhist ideas on truth and wisdom that come close to the Daoist (and to a lesser extent Confucian) concepts will be introduced in this section.

Firstly, the most important Buddhist concept in this respect is the doctrine of the two truths. This doctrine differentiates between two levels of truth in Buddhist discourse: a relative or commonsense, worldly truth, and an ultimate or absolute, spiritual truth. This distinction is made to deal with doctrinally inaccurate statements about the true nature of reality when communicating easily in daily life. Thus, when common expressions such as 'I', 'you', 'person' are used, although in the Buddhist reality they do not really exist, they can hardly be considered a lie. This is considered as talking about another 'truth', a so-called apparent truth, by making use of conventional language. To put it differently, this doctrine holds that truth exists in a conventional and ultimate



form, and that both forms are co-existent. Ultimate wisdom, i.e. true wisdom about the true nature of reality (an illusion hiding emptiness) is the experience of the emptiness of the self, and of all the natural phenomena. In this respect, Jordan Paper (2004: 28) suggests a comparison between the notion of emptiness in the *Prajnaparamita* with the null-experience and absence of knowledge and intelligence of the Daoist sage.

The theory of the two truths could also be linked to the Daoist idea of conventional language, truth and knowledge. Especially Zhuangzi's dialectics of truth is very similar. For him, both right and wrong are infinite series and are to be synthesized in the all-inclusive *dao*. However, as Chan Wing-tsit (1970: 361) observes, there is a striking difference: for the Buddhist, the worldly truth is considered as inferior, whereas Zhuangzi grants equality to all things, whether worldly or not.<sup>121</sup>

Secondly, the Buddhist ideal of self-knowledge corresponds to the Daoist ideal of self-knowledge. Through realizing the true nature of the self (emptiness) through meditation, one realizes the true nature of all aspects of human life. In this respect, Izutsu (2008: 46) likes to compare the Daoist 'seeing oneself' (*zi jian* 自见) or self-intuition to what Chan Buddhists call 'seeing one's (real) nature' (*jian xing* 见性). They both consider knowing the true self as a stage towards 'knowing the universe'.

Thirdly, the idea of an intuitive approach to true reality as in Chan Buddhism is related to the 'intuitive illumination' as in the Daoist tradition. As Zhou Mai explained to me by using a Buddhist metaphor: a person's life can be as simple, natural and intuitive as that of a flower; it opens naturally and brings joy and gratification (Personal communication, 26 May 2008, Beijing). This joy and gratification is inherent to the naturalness of human life itself. By not taking into account the true meaning of the nature of life, and by endlessly caring about things in the outside world (due to real ignorance and the attachment to illusory knowledge), one will always stay dependent on the changes of things from the outside, and thus will never have permanent peace of mind.<sup>122</sup>

### 2.3.5 Conclusion

In looking at the background of ancient Chinese philosophy, some crucial elements have been introduced to this research. With regard to the content of Chinese philosophy, in the context of social instability and disorder which gave rise to a growing feeling of

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<sup>121</sup> For a brief discussion on the treatise of two levels of truth, see e.g. Chan 1970: 360-361 and Feng 1997: 245-246.

<sup>122</sup> For the method to illumination in Chan Buddhism, see for example Feng 1997: 255-265.

dissatisfaction and the need for change, a pragmatic approach to dealing with philosophical questions was adopted by the thinkers of the day. Chinese philosophy and epistemology was directed towards the development of a how-to (behave) knowledge in order to restore and maintain social harmony, instead of the Western approach of developing philosophical thinking through analytical and logical reasoning.

On a more methodological, abstract and unconscious level, different patterns of thinking determine the Chinese approach to philosophical questions. These patterns of thinking include thinking as *ars contextualis*, correlative thinking, dialectical thinking and holistic thinking, and are reflected in the Chinese epistemology and in concrete notions such as the ancient cosmological worldview (as found in the *Yijing*) and in perceptions of truth, knowledge and wisdom. They not only pervade all philosophical thinking, but also dominate thinking and behavior in daily life, of which some issues will be discussed in the next section.

Within these patterns of thinking, 'methods' and philosophical concepts, there is a strong tendency to appreciate vagueness and suggestiveness, and to value indistinctness as a door to both genuine clarity as a spiritual ideal, and chaos (*hundun*) as a creative principle. For instance, vagueness and suggestiveness are inherent features of the Chinese mode of thinking, which is dominated by correlative scheming and holistic thinking. In addition, the very nature of Chinese language (characters), which is suggestive and associative, contribute to the appreciation and use of suggestiveness in (philosophical) language. Besides, there is a strong conviction that philosophical concepts such as truth, true knowledge and wisdom should not be approached by analytical and logical reasoning, but, on the contrary, in a holistic, intuitive and experience-based way. In the Daoist tradition, knowledge claims are even considered to be useless. Neither truth nor knowledge is absolute and can never lead to a life in the spirit of *dao*. Therefore, a true sage is someone who has 'transcended' or has overcome knowledge: by recognizing and experiencing the unity and interdependency of everything. The true sage has returned to the state of purity and primordial chaos, where he is free of false distinctions and moral judgments. To reach this stage of clarity, he has abandoned acquired knowledge and educated intellect by way of introspection and intuition, a transformation that is considered to require a strong insight into life to begin with.

This inherent and genuine appreciation of vagueness and indistinctness, as well as the (Daoist) spiritual ideal of letting go of knowledge, have strongly influenced the intellectual tradition and in general the entire Chinese culture and cultural patterns of thinking and behavior. The subject of the next section will be the influence of this cultural conditioning on aspects of Chinese society and daily life.

## 2.4 Muddledness, the vague and the indistinct in Chinese society

### 2.4.1 Introduction

In the above section, some important aspects of ancient Chinese philosophical thinking such as the typical holistic, dialectical and correlative thinking, the suggestiveness of the language, the art of contextualization and some philosophical theories on wisdom and knowledge have been introduced. All these features contribute in one way or another to an appreciation of the vague and the indistinct, and consequently vagueness, muddledness and opacity are not categorically considered to be negative.

The typical patterns of thinking (methods), as well as the philosophical perceptions of truth, knowledge, and wisdom and non-wisdom (content) have permeated virtually all products of Chinese culture, including the intellectual heritage (philosophy, science, medicine, literature and art) and the social sphere (social relationships, social morality, interpersonal communication and verbal discourse). For instance, with regard to science, the philosophical orientation towards *dao* based on a holistic, intuitive method nourished the spirit of practical reasoning instead of scientific reasoning oriented towards an objective, analyzable truth. As logical premises and logical deduction were traditionally not applied in formal Chinese thinking, science as an inquiry into the objective and true reality which could be analyzed by reasoning alone was never at stake in China.<sup>123</sup>

One of the clearest and long-standing examples of correlative, dialectical and holistic thinking in the Chinese scientific tradition is traditional medicine. The main ancient reference work, the *Huangdi Neijing* 黄帝内经, is entirely based on the cosmology of the *Yijing* and the in the *Yijing* expressed cosmology, including the *yin-yang* philosophy and the five agents, which serve as the foundations of traditional Chinese medicine. The relations between the five agents are structured according to a far-reaching system of

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<sup>123</sup> One should remark here, that, as also Chinese academics have observed, this cultural tendency has seen some changes on the path to modernization. Even more strikingly, is the gradual adoption in Western countries of different ways of thinking than the traditional Western mode of thinking. As Xu Keqian (2010) observes: ‘Interestingly, while the modern Chinese philosophy has gradually accepted and established the Western conception of “Truth” on its way towards modernization, the “post-modern” Western philosophy is just undergoing a process of deconstructing its traditional concept of “Truth”, thus, in a certain sense, going closer to the traditional Chinese “Dao”.’ Other authors also comment on this growing ‘synthesis’ and mutual influencing of both viewpoints – logical and analytical, and comprehensive and intuitive (e.g. Wang 1993).

correlation, and applied accordingly to the body (with the body as a micro-cosmos), and on the relationship of the body with its direct environment and the wider universe or macro-cosmos.

Likewise, with regard to aesthetic practices, Chinese art shows a strong appreciation of the vague and the unclear and cherishes the ideal of spontaneity and ‘cultivated clumsiness’. It is not exaggerated to state that in arts, the motif of vagueness and indistinctness, including the absence of a distinction between subject and object, has been elevated from philosophical concept to aesthetic virtue. More precisely, suggestiveness is one of the four characteristics of Chinese art. As Pohl (2008: 89) argues, Chinese ‘value suggestiveness as a poetic quality in a work of art’ and ‘“cultivated clumsiness” expresses an amateurish unrealistic quality’. It indicates the virtue of not showing one’s professional ability, of not showing off with one’s qualities. On a more formal level, in general, ancient Chinese painters were not guided by the search for a form with clear and distinct contours, but rather by an attempt to grasp the indefinable, unfathomable reality in its process of constant change and circularity.<sup>124</sup> As such, clouds and mists are meaningful elements in traditional landscape painting, especially during the Song dynasty (960-1279); they symbolized a vague and suggestive perspective on reality. This artistic appreciation for – literally – vagueness is also present in traditional landscape architecture, namely as the aesthetic preference for skillfully constructed gardens bathing in a foggy environment, which is considered the ideal constitution for experiencing such constructs.<sup>125</sup>

However, these examples (science, medicine, art, etc.) still illustrate rather ‘elitist’ ideals rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy and only articulated and practiced by those educated in the Classics. Especially with regard to the high spiritual ideals, they were only studied by the scholar-literati, that is to say, a very small minority of the population that also happened to be the leadership elite. As a group of Chinese academics put forward during their evaluation of China’s evolution towards modernization:

The lofty moral values and humanistic spirit [...] only existed in the ideals pursued by a few philosophers and intellectual elites and not in the sustained practice of the Chinese people at large. Moreover, these ideals were bound to remain a

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<sup>124</sup> On the subject of vagueness and indistinctness in traditional Chinese painting, see for instance François Jullien’s *The great image has no form, or on the nonobject through painting* (Jullien 2009).

<sup>125</sup> I thank one of my informants, Zhang Da, an artist himself, for directing my attention to this phenomenon in art and in Chinese garden architecture.

chimera during the two thousand years when the docility of the people was regarded as the law of heaven. (Zi 1987: 450)<sup>126</sup>

Nevertheless, as I have shown in earlier parts of this research, the strong tendency towards pragmatic and ‘practical’ reasoning proved to be the most suitable approach for the development of society in an orderly, organized and socially moral way. How society was organized in ancient China determined the daily life of every member of the population, and not only the elite. So whereas in earlier parts of my research I described the philosophical background of what could be conceived as a predilection for the vague and the indistinct, in what follows I will turn to the application of these philosophical and cognitive tendencies with three concrete examples of social interaction rooted in everyday life: (social) morality, interpersonal relations, and interpersonal communication and (public) discourse. As we will see in Part Two, social morality and interpersonal relations are most relevant when it comes to interpreting the calligraphy *Nande hutu*. As this section will address issues relating to both social and personal spheres, it will inevitably also touch upon some psycho-social and moral dimensions of Chinese society.

#### **2.4.2 Social structure, the absence of a rule of law, and the importance of social morality**

The foundations of the social structure are at the heart of social morality and interpersonal relations in China. These foundations find their roots in Confucian thinking, and more precisely in the conviction that the key to social order is proper public behavior.

The origins of Chinese society stem from the early agricultural beginnings of the clan system. Confucius appointed the family unit (*jia* 家) as the primary role model for

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<sup>126</sup> In this article, Zi Zhongyun (1987) makes concluding remarks on an academic meeting with Chinese intellectuals about the Chinese road to modernization. In this part of the article, he discusses the two different schools who argue about the role of traditional culture in China's modernization. The positive school argues that, since China stayed independent and unified and survived ups and downs, internal upheavals and foreign aggression, there must be strong elements in the Chinese national heritage with lasting values. For the modernization process, these elements should be brought into play and adapted to the new conditions. The negative school argues that the mainstream of traditional Chinese thinking is based on absolute imperial authority which runs counter to the spirit of modernization. For this group, Chinese traditional culture bloomed on the soil of the ancient aristocratic clan system of an agricultural society, and can therefore not survive alone when that specific kind of society has come to an end. According to Zi Zhongyun, the ultimate question is how to create a ‘new’ culture which is at the same time modern and Chinese.

interpersonal relations and for all public behavior. The family and in particular its five principal relationships of ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend, became the model behavior patterns. Consequently, greater society was also modeled on the family unit, with the emperor as the father (in contemporary society the Chinese Communist Party<sup>127</sup> would fulfill the father role). This model, together with the strong emphasis on respect for the elderly, caused ancient Chinese society to be overwhelmingly patriarchal and hierarchic. In this society, the hierarchy started with the emperor as the ruler of heaven (*tianming wangquan* 天命王权), who – ideally – was a highly self-cultivated person with high moral integrity. On the lower levels, the one in the highest position – the senior, superior, father, teacher – decided everything. As such, the Confucian social system called for absolute role-playing within a rigid hierarchy; first within the family, then within the community, and finally within the entire nation.

In this structure of strict role modeling, a person's position is always relative. That is to say, his position is always changing and depends on his position relative to others and in relation to the whole. Moreover, a person can simultaneously possess different positions: as a father and the main figure of authority at home as he relates to his children and his wife, as an older brother to his younger brother, and as a subordinate to the emperor, and not to forget, also as a son to his own father. Chad Hansen (1985) explains it as follows: Chinese society can be characterized by a holistic part-whole structure. In this structure, the 'parts' are the individuals, and the 'whole' is a certain social relationship an individual has with a greater construct. This greater construct can be the family in narrow sense, the family in larger sense, or society as a whole (the 'big family'). Moreover, in such a part-whole structure, each part is by definition part of something else, and that 'something else' is, in turn, also part of something still bigger. Besides, in most cases, each part is simultaneously part of different constructs. As such, the relation of the part to the whole is not a single line of relationship, but a whole bundle of lines. Since each of these lines represents a specific social relationship, each of these lines is connected with a different behavioral code.

To illustrate this kind of social relationship, Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1992: 62-63) uses the metaphor of concentric circles that appear when throwing a rock into the water. Each individual is at the center of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone's circles are interrelated, and one touches different circles at different times and places. Fei Xiaotong calls this a 'differential mode of association'

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<sup>127</sup> Further throughout the research I will refer to the Chinese Communist Party by using its shortened forms CCP or the Party.

(*chaxu geju* 差序格局).<sup>128</sup> Considered like this, Chinese social relationships are highly contextual: because a person is always embedded in a net of human relationships, situation takes priority over agency in Chinese understandings of selfhood and action. In every other encounter or situation, one's position should be reconsidered. As such, the Chinese are encouraged to act depending on the – constantly changing – circumstances. This metaphor thus not only emphasizes the self-centredness of the Chinese individual, but also the high-contextuality and elasticity of social relationships; each social relationship can take priority over another one depending on the context. As Fei Xiaotong's self-centered model is a comprehensive yet flexible representation of the most basic unit in society – the Chinese individual – in relation to his social environment (interpersonal relations and society), this model will be used in Part Two to conceptualize some functional, moral and psycho-social dimensions of *Nande hutu* drawn from the contemporary discourse on the saying.

It should be understood that the Confucian model code does not impose by law a standard of public behavior. According to Confucius, law cannot order society (no law can rule man). It is from this principal that the traditional notion of the absence of the rule of law stems (Hansen 2004 [1991]: 72). This absence of rule of law in Confucian society is rooted in the idea that people are by nature good<sup>129</sup>, but that they, to develop their virtues (*de* 德), need rituals (*li* 礼) and moral examples through which they will abide to this rituals, instead of compelling laws. The idea behind this is, that if people are ruled by virtue and guided by social etiquette, they will have a sense of shame and behave themselves (see e.g. *Lunyu* II, 3 and XIII, 6)<sup>130</sup>. From a Confucian point of view, social order is dependent on everyone's responsibility to develop one's (social) virtue through self-cultivation and following the role-model.

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<sup>128</sup> Fei Xiaotong 费孝通 (1910-2005), a famous Chinese anthropologist/social scientist, developed his theory based on different 'modes of association' with regard to the social structure to explain the difference between Western and Chinese societies. Whereas the Chinese social model is based on a 'differential mode of association' (*chaxu geju* 差序格局), Western societies are based on an 'organizational mode of association' (*tuanti geju* 团体格局). In the Western kind of society, each individual has the same type of relation to one another. In this sense, the individuals are, contrary to in Chinese society, interchangeable (Fei 1992: 62-74). For a translation of his *Xiangtu Zhongguo* 乡土中国, see *ibid.* For more on his intellectual importance in social sciences, see Arkush 1981.

<sup>129</sup> Confucius himself did not specifically focus on the nature of man. Mencius however took the innate goodness of man as the basis of his philosophical theory.

<sup>130</sup> Shame indeed is by many found to be more important in East-Asian traditions than in Western traditions, and often contrasted to the Western moral notion of guilt. However, guilt is certainly not an unknown emotion to Chinese, especially in the context of failure to fulfill one's duty and obligations towards the family and the social order. See e.g. Yik 2010: 209-210 and Bond 2008 [1986]: 205-207.

Besides, absolute laws, with clear-cut, black and white divisions between right and wrong, between what is acceptable and what not, are incompatible with the aforementioned individualized nature of relationships and variable roles in Chinese society. This reluctance towards formal legislation created an arbitrary process where, in imperial China, the only law that existed was penal law. This law was not codified and open to interpretation by local magistrates as they saw things according to their understanding of Confucian rites and historical precedents. Justice was made even more arbitrary because these officials were at the same time detectives, judge and jury.<sup>131</sup> In such a hierarchical and arbitrary society where one is not protected by the rule of law, the only way of protecting oneself is by conforming to the roles prescribed for one's social class, sex, age and position.

Obviously, in a hierarchical society where the almighty ruler (either emperor, local official, elderly, or father) has absolute power and there is almost no personal freedom for the majority of the population, serious oppression of personal and societal development ensued. This culture of fear also caused people to prefer to deliberately blurring reality, and adopting a muddled, self-effacing and resigned attitude (Li S. 2005; Zhuge 2008). Furthermore, the educated elite – especially those who were very clear and critical about the given situation – would often keep silent or use indirect means such as poetry to vent their opinion, in order not to fall in disgrace with the Emperor or the higher authorities. In this way, for most of the Chinese people, muddledness and vagueness served less as a philosophical ideal, but more as a means for self-preservation (*baohu ziji* 保护自己), both to stay mentally healthy by ignoring reality, as well as physically by pretending not to know or see the truth or not articulate publicly one's knowledge and thoughts.<sup>132</sup>

It should be clear that the meaning of muddledness in this context has nothing to do with the high spiritual ideal as represented in the sage fool, but as we will see in Part Two, the practice of 'pretending to be muddled' is abundantly present in contemporary interpretations of *Nande hutu*.

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<sup>131</sup> Cf also one of the first occurrences of *hutu* in a legal context as described on page 30, where *hutu* means unclear, undefined, vague (in meaning).

<sup>132</sup> This notion of self-preservation will re-appear on many occasions both in the scholarly explanation of *Nande hutu* (Chapter Three), and in Part Two on the contemporary interpretations. It will be discussed as a central function of the wisdom of *Nande hutu*, as well as in the context of criticism on the misuse of this wisdom.



## 2.4.3 Muddledness in moral judgment

### 2.4.3.1 Daoist and Confucian Morality

As I discussed above, one of the theoretical starting points of Confucian morality is the individual ‘natural condition’ (as reflected in *tianming*) that urges one to act ethically right. Since *tianming* is always personal, Confucian ethics is not abstract, nor universal, but clearly personalized. Another principal foundation is moral knowledge or intuition (*liangzhi* 良知) that comes from the inner mind. These theoretical assumptions – *tianming* and *liangzhi* – are sustained by a set of moral prescripts, the moral etiquette (*li* 礼). Confucian morality thus consists of a system of ethical norms with an emphasis on learning from examples, environmental conditions and practice, and the cultivation of moral responsibility and social commitment. This morality based on Confucian prescripts of behavior and moral examples is designed specifically to maintain social order and guarantee continuity of the existing political system. As such, morality has always been embodied in the social structure and in the nature of personal relationships within society.

However, this morality is neither fixed nor absolute. In Fei Xiaotong’s theory of the Chinese individual in society as explained above (see page 80), each intersection of one’s own circles with those of another individual represents a different kind of relationship to which accordingly a different moral code applies. So in the same way as *tianming* and *liangzhi* are very personal notions and cannot be clearly defined nor universalized – the Chinese pattern of social organization embraces no ethical concepts that transcend specific types of human relationships, nor is there a comprehensive moral concept (Fei 1992: 74). Consequently, there are no absolute and universally applicable ways of moral behavior for an individual, because everything is dependent on the specific context and the specific position one takes in this context. Fei Xiaotong (1992) calls this ‘situational morality’. In his model, the different and simultaneous concentric circles around the center (the individual) cause a high degree of fuzziness in the boundaries of social morality. The closer the circle, the more moral weight. To illustrate this striking phenomenon, Fei (1992: 78-79) gives the example of a corrupt practice:

The degree to which Chinese ethics and laws expand and contract [in terms of concentric circles] depend on a particular context and how one fits into that context. I have heard quite a few friends denounce corruption, but when their own fathers stole from the public, they not only did not denounce them but even covered up the theft. Moreover, some went so far as to ask their fathers for some of the money made off the graft, even while denouncing corruption in others. When they themselves become corrupt, they can still find comfort in their “capabilities.” In a society characterized by a differential mode of association, general standards have no utility. The first thing to do is to understand the

specific context: Who is the important figure, and what kind of relationship is appropriate with that figure? Only then can one decide the ethical standards to be applied in that context.

This juxtaposition between moral code and righteous proper moral behavior is reflected in the translation of the Western word ‘morality’ into Chinese. When modern Chinese writers sought to translate ‘morality’ into Chinese, they choose the compound *daode* 道德 (way-virtue), which consists of both *dao* and *de*. *Dao* in this context refers to public, objective guidance, and *de* (virtue) refers ‘the physical realization of *dao* in some part of the human system- a family, a state, or an individual’ (Hansen 2004 [1991]: 69). For the individual, it means one’s personal actualization in the outside world (reality) according to one’s personal *tianming*. As the outside world (one’s environment, social situation etc.) and the role one plays in the system are constantly changing, morality is neither absolute nor fixed. As such, in modern speech, *daode* also refers to ‘ethics’ as an expression of how one should behave in a certain profession, context, ... (e.g. ‘business ethics’, *shangye daode* 商业道德 or professional ethics, *zhiye daode* 职业道德).<sup>133</sup> What is even more interesting, is the modern Chinese version for ‘ethics’ (as what the Western philosophical branch considers to be good and bad), which is *lunli* 伦理, ‘the principles of relations’.<sup>134</sup> *Lunli* in the first place emphasizes the importance of human relations and not the relation of humans to nature (Zhang D. 2005: 321).

However, as morality generally involves ‘the other’ and primarily has a social function (making society ‘acceptable’ for everyone), we should keep in mind that the implementation of this situational morality is primarily Confucian. That is to say, it should be considered the dominant moral code in a society which at its core allows the ruler to rectify names in appointing people to status positions (cf the aforementioned rectification of names), and in which judgments are ideally based on moral knowledge and knowledge of the moral examples in the Classics.<sup>135</sup>

One of the contemporary meanings of *hututu* in the dictionary is described as ‘not being able to distinguish right from wrong’ (*fenbian bu liao shifei* 分辨不了是非)<sup>136</sup>. This somehow comes close to the Daoist concept of how morality should be treated. A Daoist

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<sup>133</sup> On the etymology and the historical use of the compound *daode*, see Zhang D. 2005: 337-344.

<sup>134</sup> In the context of ‘the art of social relationships’ (*guanxixue*), Mayfair Yang (1994: 328) translates *lunli* as ‘human relationships and ethics’.

<sup>135</sup> For the scholar-official in the past, moral education consisted mostly of memorizing moral precepts found in the Classics which were in the past believed to reflect the Mandate of heaven (*tianming*). Moral education is up till today a course at secondary school, where it serves as a valued legacy of the past. As such, it is also a valuable tool for ensuring the legitimacy of the Party.

<sup>136</sup> See e.g. the popular online dictionary Baidu 百 , Retrieved 19 June 2011 from <http://baike.baidu.com/view/131225.htm>.

sage does not feel the need to distinguish because he understands and accepts that right and wrong are of the same order. Ancient Daoist philosophers do not consider it to be a high form of wisdom because, in a Daoist worldview, things continuously change, and as a result, there should be no need for an absolute, unchangeable value. Consequently, there is no such thing as ‘morally right’ and ‘morally wrong’. If one follows the *dao*, one cannot do but ‘right’ (Izutsu 2008: 12-14). Especially the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the *Qiwulun*, focuses on this notion. What Zhuangzi wants to explain in this section is that as with all distinctions, there is no moral distinction which would not be arbitrary and therefore useless. From the Daoist point of view, moral distinctions and judgements are *a priori* characterized by vagueness and indistinctness because they are not absolute. What is right from one perspective, can be wrong from another, and thus there are no definite distinctions between morally right and morally wrong.

As is often misunderstood in the interpretation of Zhuangzi’s view of morality, this does not mean Daoist morality is fundamentally a strict moral relativism. It is just that distinctions and moral evaluations are always right in view of their particular perspective, and therefore the distinction between right and wrong can only be boundless and vague. As Coutinho (2004: 62) explains, ‘while it is true that judgments have no absolute application, nevertheless, evaluations are always made from within some context and for some particular purpose’. Moeller (2009: 34) adds to this, that ‘the *Zhuangzi* – and Daoist philosophy in general – does not intend to blur distinctions that, after all, constitute the world and its changes, but instead tries to find a way to harmonize what is distinct’. In fact, Daoist morality should rather be considered as a kind of amorality. Right and wrong are inseparable and even complementary parts of the same reality (‘whole’), and if one follows one’s *dao*, there is no need to distinguish (morally) good and bad, because things will anyway always turn out according to *dao*.<sup>137</sup> In other words, in the same way as the only real sage is a fool, the only real moral personality is the moral fool.<sup>138</sup>

This ‘foolishness’ is clearly reflected in the attitude of the sage towards morality. It is not important if the sage adopts a relativist or an absolute attitude towards morality, but rather how he deals with morality. The sage is neither moral nor immoral, but is devoid of moral conceptions (Moeller 2009: 34). This implies a returning to the natural, spontaneous state of *hundun*, in which distinctions in the world are not ignored, but recognized and at the same time not (morally) judged (see also 2.2.3.2 *Hundun* and the

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<sup>137</sup> Cf also Hansen’s second conclusion on what Zhuangzi teaches us about following moral conventions: ‘We can go with the ‘usual’ since it provides the basis for useful cooperation and interchange with others.’ (Hansen 2004 [1991]: 79)

<sup>138</sup> See also Hans-Georg Moeller’s (2009) book *The moral fool*.

theme of chaos in early Daoist philosophy).<sup>139</sup> In this respect, the perfect (Daoist) moral fool is considered to be the infant; it does not need morality to do what is ‘right’ (See e.g. Chapters 10 and 55 of the *Daodejing*). Rather, as Moeller (2009: 101) explains,

It does what it does naturally and does not look at the world in categories. We cannot measure it, and it does not measure us – or anything- in moral terms. It is a fine image of the amoral lifestyle.

#### 2.4.3.2 Morality in daily life: *du* and common sense

The aforementioned Confucian and Daoist views on morality are all high philosophical ideals. In daily life however, the morally righteous person often relies on more easily applicable criteria for measuring right and wrong. One of these criteria is *du* 度, literally translated as ‘degree’ and ‘limit’, but also as ‘tolerance’ and ‘consideration’. *Du* is – although not used as a philosophical concept in the *Zhongyong* 中庸 – often explained in Chinese by referring to the *Zhongyong*, namely as the way to determine ‘the middle’. The philosophy which is expressed in the *Zhongyong* (often referred to as the ‘Doctrine of the Mean’)<sup>140</sup>, is actually a long essay written as a practical guide for managing one’s inner being and outer behavior. The *Zhongyong* teaches people to be aware of and to control their emotions, in order to be focused and harmonious. This self-control – better understood as emotional self-restraint (*hanyang* 涵养) – is a crucial aspect of Chinese morality. That is to say, no matter the circumstances, one should always act according to one’s position, even if this means pushing aside or covering up one’s emotions or opinion. When individual behavior and interpersonal relations are well controlled, the

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<sup>139</sup> For a brief treatment of classical Chinese ethics dealing with Confucius, Mozi, Yangzhu, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi and Xunzi, see e.g. Hansen 2004 [1991]: 69-81 and Zhang D. 2005.

<sup>140</sup> *Zhong* literally means ‘middle’ or ‘what is central’ (from which ‘focus’) but here it can refer to ‘equilibrium’, in the sense of ‘not too much and not too little’, that is to say, ‘just right’. *Yong* 庸 literally means ‘mediocrity’, ‘ordinary’ and ‘the usual’ or ‘use’, which suggests that the focus for achieving harmony lies in the ordinary daily-life routine. The word originally is derived from a verse in the *Lunyu* (VI: 26), which is also its only occurrence in the *Lunyu*: ‘The virtue embodied in *zhongyong* is of the highest moral order’ (中庸之为德也, 甚至矣乎 - 论语·雍也). However, the expression was not further explained at this stage. Later, *Zhongyong* became a text belonging to the Confucian canon of the Neo-Confucian movement as compiled by Zhu Xi. See for an etymological description of *Zhongyong* and for its changing interpretation in the philosophical theories Ames & Hall 2001, Zhang D. 2005: 329-337 and Chan 1970. Many different translations of *Zhongyong* circulate, such as ‘Moderation’ (Zhang D. 2005), ‘The doctrine of the mean’ (Legge 1970), and ‘Centrality and Commonality’ (Tu 1989). Feng Youlan (1997) compares the *Zhongyong* to the Aristotelean idea of the ‘golden mean’, and therefore translates it like that, whereas Hall and Ames (2001) explicitly reject this translation. They translate as ‘Focusing the familiar’, emphasizing the family as the governing metaphor throughout the *Zhongyong*. Until the present day, the *Zhongyong* is part of the moral education in primary and secondary schools.

aim of Chinese morality – overall harmony – is obtained. However, this is all very personal and subjective, and no black-and-white, clear demarcations for morally upright behavior are defined. Hu Sheng stresses the idea of *zhong*, the middle, as strongly linked with ‘standard’ (*biaozhun* 标准) and ‘limit’ (*xiandu* 限度). As he expresses it: ‘The *Zhongyong* is about not being excessive (without measure), and maintaining a sufficient “just right” measure (*du*), which one should not cross.’<sup>141</sup> For him, *du* is about possessing the quality to grasp the most appropriate response or action at different times and places, in a spirit of moderateness and self-control, to obtain the best possible (i.e. most harmonious) ‘result’. Applying this to social morality, he uses the expression ‘being happy without excess’, and ‘being grieved without feeling distressed’ (*le er bu yin, ai er bu shang* 乐而不淫，哀而不伤) (Personal Communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang).

Here, a very important notion is stressed, namely that applying *du* does not mean that one should ignore one’s emotions, but that one should make sure one’s emotions do not dominate one’s inner being and behavior. In this sense, the attitude promoted in the *Zhongyong* in some way relates to the emotional indifference that is associated with the Daoist ideal of *hundun* and the sage fool.

*Du*, emphasizing moderation in all its aspects, is thus especially useful in dealing with the blurred distinction between good or bad and right or wrong, and is as such an important moral criterion that regulates discourse and behavior. Applying *du* helps one to keep the middle between extremes, between (too) good and (too) bad, and to limit excesses of all kind, with the main aim of personal or social harmony. In this sense, it transcends (or rather avoids) the absence of absolute distinctions.

*Du*, however, is itself not an absolute criterion either, since there are no static ‘extremes’, and in general no stagnant circumstances in which one could apply *du*. It equally implies a vague notion which obtains its full meaning and interpretation every time and again in different situations. One of my interviewees, Mr. Fu, a general manager at a big multinational in Beijing, explains that *du* should be considered as a kind of intuitive feeling that cannot be explained well in words, let alone its use be strictly delineated (Personal communication, 28 May 2008, Beijing). As described above, Chinese people tend to resort to an intuitive and experience-based form of thinking in perceiving and understanding the universe. Shi and Feng (2010: 559) explain that in everyday life,

Chinese people more often than not use intuition in making judgments or decisions and do so in a variety of settings, including poetic interpretation and

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<sup>141</sup> 中庸[...]就是不过分，保持一个比较好的恰到好处的一个‘度’，不要‘过’。

academic tasks. This also means that they make judgments that are general, simplified, and vague, and that they do so quickly.

Lin Yutang (2007 [1998]a: 86-89) stresses another source of moral judgment that is somehow based on the Daoist belief that there is not one truth, not one absolute 'right or good' and one 'wrong or bad', and that these issues should be perceived through intuition and experience. Keeping in mind that these lofty philosophical (Daoist and Confucian) convictions and theories were only studied by a small minority of the population, Lin Yutang observes that Chinese people, although they might not all consciously accept the idea of an intuitive instead of a reasoned and logical truth, they essentially agree with it, and in their daily lives use a different kind of logic than Westerners to guide their reasoning about right and wrong, namely 'the logic of the common sense'. He argues that Chinese people have a natural distrust of arguments that are too perfect and theories that are too logical. For them, against such 'freaks of logical theories', common sense is the best and most effective antidote; it is always 'more realistic, more human, in closer touch with reality, and more truly understanding and appreciative of the correct situation' (Lin Y. 2007 [1998]a: 89).

It is however very important to understand that common sense is not related to reason alone, but to reason and human nature (feelings). Lin Yutang calls this feature 'reasonableness' (*qingli* 情理), and thinks of it as a part of Confucian humanism. Reasonableness - what's in a word - is composed of both *qing* 情, 'human feelings', 'affection' and 'human nature', and *li* 理 'principle', which indicates that something is 'reasonable' (morally acceptable) when one takes into account the feelings of others. In this sense, changing the rules and behavior according to the situation can be considered as 'common sense'. Of course, even this standard leaves one with a feeling of indetermination and vagueness, as in different situations a different common sense is used.

Some more critical authors do not think so highly of the 'humanistic' aspect of the 'common sense' in Chinese morality, and do see a - although rather cynical - distinct moral criterion. In *About war and ethics*, late critical writer Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952-1997)<sup>142</sup> comments on the morality of the people in contemporary China:

The key point of debate among Chinese people is not who is right or wrong, but who is nice or bad. Once a party is confirmed as a good sort, his opposite must

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<sup>142</sup> Wang Xiaobo 王小波 is probably one the most critical writers of modern times, known for his witty and often satirical essays. See for an introduction on him for example Huang Y. 2007. For an English translation of some of his novels, Wang X. 2007.

consequently be wicked. And the good will naturally criticize and badmouth the bad.<sup>143</sup>

This, according to him, is the essence of Chinese morality. There is no sound argument or tolerance towards non-mainstream elements, and equality is not an issue in academic debates which deal with ethical issues.

As I have shown here, in practice, morality in daily life is very subjective and depending on one's perspective; the commoner uses his own 'standards' – be it *du*, common sense or the division good and bad – and applies this whenever appropriate in a given situation. This makes any substantial discourse on morality completely vague and subjective.

#### 2.4.4 Muddledness in social relationships: the paradox of the clear water without fish

Social morality is best observed in everyday life's interpersonal relationships (*renji guanxi* 人际关系), and as such, vagueness and ambiguity are also vital characteristics of the 'art of social relationships'.

To the Chinese, maintaining a healthy network of social relationships is crucial for their psycho-social equilibrium. An important criterion for understanding the dynamics of interpersonal relationships is the high contextuality (*ars contextualis*) as explained above. A holistic interpretation of society and social relationships is that a person's personal position in any given situation is always dependent on the relational pattern he finds himself in. However, since a person is often involved in many different relationships at the same time, no absolute guidelines exist to guide his behavior.

A good example of the Chinese relational ambiguity and the importance of flexible interpretation can be found in the use of the word 'family', *jia* 家. As Fei Xiaotong (1992: 62) analyzes, the word *jia* (family) is used in many different meanings: *jialide* 家里的 (the one at home) can mean one's wife. *Jiamen* 家门 (kinsmen) may be directed at a big group of uncles and nephews. *Zijiaren* 自家人 (one's own people) may include anyone whom you want to drag into your own circle, to indicate intimacy with them. As Fei explains, the scope of *zijiaren* can be expanded or contracted according to the specific

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<sup>143</sup> Cited in a book review of Wang Xiaobo's *My spiritual home* (*Wode jingshenjiayuan* 我的精神家园, published in 1997) by Zhu Yong. Retrieved 10 May 2009, from <http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/English/e20026/book.htm> (Zhu 2002).

time and place (circumstances). *Jia* can even be used very generally to indicate ‘everyone under the sun’, i.e. one big family.

Secondly, a key concept for understanding personal and social relationships and behavior is the psycho-sociological phenomenon of face. Face can be expressed in two different ways. The first one is *lian* 脸, where it means ‘the recognition of character and integrity which is preserved by adherence to social norms’. The second one is *mianzi* 面子, where it could be defined as ‘reputation gained through success and ostentation’ (Ward & Lin 2010: 665) or as ‘publicly recognized prestige and social advantage’ (Yang M. 1994: 328). *Mianzi* is a combination of a sense of moral imperatives, social honor, and self-respect, and can be accumulated by showing oneself capable, wealthy, generous, and possessing a large network of social relationships (*guanxi*) (Yang M. 1994: 140-141). As such, whereas *lian* is linked to morality, *mianzi* is less subject to moral evaluations. Therefore, Hwang and Han call *lian* the ‘moral face’ and *mianzi* the ‘social face’. According to them, *lian* is not only a social constraint for maintaining moral standards, but also an internalized force of self-restraint, and in many cases, self-censorship. As they argue, ‘*Mian* is more variable than *lian*. Everyone has only one *lian*, but possesses various levels of *mian* in different social situations’ (Hwang & Han 2010: 479-481). Especially with regard to interpersonal relationships, *mianzi* is more influential in one’s behavior.

The importance of face results from the typical structure of society and its philosophical, mostly Confucian background. Since an efficient rule of law never existed, but instead a strict hierarchical system dominated by the most powerful and influential, one’s social network (social support) and social status was of utmost importance, to the extent that it could be life-saving. Both social support and social status are intimately tied to losing and gaining face, and consequently face is crucial for maintaining personal inner but also social harmony, the ultimate aim of all social interaction and personal relations. Therefore, in order to either gain face (*gei mianzi* 给面子), or not lose face (*diu lian* 丢脸) oneself, or not make others lose face, being or pretending to be muddled, or presenting a vague picture of something one is very clear about, is a socially accepted practice. The practice of giving and losing face can also urge someone to stay modest and in the background when the etiquette of the position or relation requests so.

The ‘art of social relationships’ is also articulated in many expressions rooted in ancient literature and often based on real-life historical role models. Of these expressions, many are concerned with whether or not to expose one’s knowledge and smartness in social relationships. The most striking expression with regard to muddledness in interpersonal relations is the saying *shui zhi qing ze wu yu, ren zhi cha ze*



*wu tu* 水至清则无鱼, 人至察则无徒. The saying first occurred in a story of the *Dadai Liji* 大戴礼记 (1st century BC) where Confucius replied to his disciple Zi Zhang on the question of how one should enter officialdom.<sup>144</sup> The saying could be translated as ‘When the water is too clear, there will be no fish; when people are too scrutinizing, they will not have followers’. The saying expresses the idea that when water is too clear, the fish are afraid to show up and be too ‘visible’ and get caught. Besides, when there are no small fish then the bigger fish do not survive, so the conditions necessary for fish to survive are not present, and the natural circle of life cannot be completed. The same is true for people and their relations. If a person is too clear (often expressed as *jingming* 精明 or *touche* 透彻, ‘penetrating, incisive’) about all matters, and too analyzing and in constant search for truth, other people’s weaknesses become too apparent and too important, and this frightens people off. The unclear boundaries in relational positions and the required relational reciprocity means that there is often great danger of losing face when things are too clearly and directly aired. Therefore, people do not generally feel comfortable around someone who is overly inquisitive and analytical. Han Shengwang explained that for instance in academic circles, the saying is considered a philosophy of life that promotes modesty and restraint. That is to say, if a professor – or someone who is assumed to be knowledgeable – shows himself to be or acts in a way which is too smart, too clear, and too wise and too far-sighted (*ruizhe* 睿哲 or *ruizhi* 睿智), then people think of him or her as a tough character, and no one feels comfortable being in their presence or social circle. In addition, if no one likes the professor, then he or she will ultimately end up alone and unsuccessful. For intellectuals, such as professors, this is not the right way to achieve broad following and support students and ultimately advance in their career, so they behave as modestly as possible so as not to frighten students off (Han Shengwang, Personal communication, 29 September 2008, Beijing). As we will see further in the research, the saying *Shui zhi qing ze wu yu, ren zhi cha ze wu tu* appears to be an important thread in the discourse on *Nande hutu*. It frequently occurs in the contemporary discourse on *Nande hutu*, and emphasizes the

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<sup>144</sup> The *Liji* or *Classic of Rites* was originally rewritten and edited by Confucius' disciples after the burning of books during the Qin dynasty (213-206 BC). Ever since, many other scholars made attempts to redact the *Liji*. One of these scholars was Han dynasty’s Dai De (戴德, also called Senior Dai or Dadai 大戴) who reduced the original 214 books to 85, which was further reduced by his younger brother Dai Sheng (戴圣, Junior Dai) to 46 books, to which three were added by the end of the Han Dynasty, bringing the total to 49. The saying *shui zhi qing ze wu yu, ren zhi cha ze wu tu* 水至清则无鱼, 人至察则无徒 can be found in the story *Zi Zhang wen ru guan* 子张问入官 (*Juan* 8 卷八). The saying also appears in the *Hanshu* (*juan liushiwu*) - *Dongfang shuozhuan* (*di sanshiwu*) 汉书 (卷六十五) – 东方朔传 (第三十五) (*The history of the former Han, rol 65: the biography of Dongfang Shuo*, 35). The *Hanshu* was finished in 111 AD.

importance of interpersonal relations as a realm of application for the wisdom of *Nandehutu*.

The notion of modesty is another important aspect of the saying *shui zhi qing ze wu yu*, as the example by Han Shengwang of the practice of the saying in academic circles, already indicated. Modesty as a moral virtue has already been discussed above when introducing the moral criterion *du* in the context of the *Zhongyong*, which advocates moderation and the propensity for the middle way between extremes as a philosophy of life. In our discussion of the *Zhongyong*, Hu Sheng (2008) points out that there is a big difference between a Westerner's and a Chinese meaning of experiencing and defining what is 'excess' (extreme). Westerners are trained to express themselves and their opinions clearly, whereas Chinese emphasize moderateness, self-restraint and self-control, that is to say, many things do not have to be articulated, and vagueness and suggestiveness is common practice. Being too excessive, for instance in expressing one's opinion, gives people a feeling of 'showing off', of 'rashness'. Rashness (*changkuang* 猖狂) has two times the animal key (豸), meaning that too explicitly pronounced personal opinions are uncivilized, too aggressive, beyond humanity. Hu Sheng (2008) raises the example of when people get a golden medal during the Olympic Games (which had just finished in Beijing at the time of our conversation): Westerners would rather happily say something like 'This medal is mine now (这块金牌是我的)', whereas Chinese athletes would say 'I did the outmost I could (我尽量努力)'. According to him, Chinese people would prefer to indirectly and in accordance with the virtue of modesty say partly how happy, proud, or excited they feel, instead of openly display their thoughts and emotions and bringing them to the foreground (Hu Sheng, Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang).

Another expression which highlights the principle of not showing off with one's knowledge and experience or social status in interpersonal settings is the saying 'high trees catch the most grievous wind' (*Gao shu duo bei feng* 高树多悲风) by poet Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232). This saying expresses the idea that being in a high position – be it social, intellectual or moral – makes you more vulnerable to, for instance, the hatred and malice, jealousy, and slander of others. Thus, being smart and possessing a high social position can be a burden, and the only way to protect oneself from this is by staying modest and not showing off, and, in the worst case, pretending not to know or not admitting to have a particularly high social position. Two similar expressions are *chutou de chuanzi xian lan* 出头的椽子先烂, meaning 'The rafter that sticks out will be rotten first', and *qiang da chutou niao* 枪打出头鸟, meaning 'The gun hits the person who takes the lead (the person who stands out among his fellows)'. These two sayings again express the popular idea that people who cut a smart figure will sooner or later become the target of public criticism, and the victim of their smartness.

These cultural viewpoints on vagueness, (pretended) muddledness and modesty in social settings shaped a specific psychological tendency, which is frequently referred to in popular interpretations of the saying *Nande hutu* (Part Two).

#### 2.4.5 Communication and discourse

Vagueness and modesty in one's behavior and in social interaction is directly reflected in verbal as well as non-verbal behavior on different levels such as interpersonal communication and public discourse. The way things are communicated in China tends - especially in comparison with the Western style of clear and unambiguous messaging - more often than not to be vague, suggestive, ambiguous and generalizing (looking at the whole). As one young Shanghainese girl explained, Chinese people are rather implicit, and they feel awkward (*gangga* 尴尬) when they express things that are clear for everyone and need no explanation, such as issues related to face and social status (Personal communication, 22 May 2008, Shanghai).

Indeed, it is generally assumed that Chinese are predisposed to being vague and suggestive in their communication and like to use a 'roundabout' way of expressing their thoughts. In section 2.3.2.4, I already discussed the inherent but also deliberate use of vagueness and suggestiveness in philosophical language. In daily life however, on a very mundane level, there are other aspects that cause communication and discourse to be vague, ambiguous and unclear, at least for the outsider. From a psycho-social viewpoint, these aspects are related to the aforementioned common features of interpersonal relations, namely the search for harmony, the emphasis on modesty and moderation, and the fear of losing one's face or causing others to lose face.

Given the dependency on the specific context one is engaged in and the variable role one should take, Chinese people seldom directly express their thoughts or feelings, but prefer to speak in vague, fragmented terms. The aim of this style of communication is to make sure neither the other, nor oneself loses face. For Chinese people, this style of communication does not cause problems because they are aware of the role play they are - willingly or not - engaged in, it often leaves the typically objective-minded Westerner confused and frustrated. For instance, a Chinese conversation partner will rarely directly say 'no' with its negative implications or make negative comments, even if this would be the most truthful reply or remark. A fine example is the use of the expression *bu fangbian* 不方便, 'It is not convenient'. For example, when a Chinese conversationalist wants to express the fact that something cannot be done because he cannot, is not in the position to or simply does not feel like doing so, whatever the real reason might be, he would often answer: 'It is not convenient'. This reply is less negative and more likely to avoid conflict than simply saying no, since it leaves room for

interpretation. To Chinese people this answer is sufficient, and to insist on explaining why could in some situations be a serious violation of etiquette. Other examples of an ambivalent, or prevaricating response to an unwelcome request would be ‘we will think it over’ (*kaolü kaolü ba* 考虑考虑吧) and ‘there are some difficulties’ (*youxie kunnan* 有些困难). As Hu Sheng also explained during our conversation, non-committal or vague answers can bring the conversation or situation to a place where there is the possibility for a vacuum (room, *kongjian* 空间), like the kind of flexible space of a trampoline (像弹簧一样有伸缩空间) (Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang).

There is, however, an apparent contradiction in the two elements that define interpersonal communication. On the one hand there is the strong emphasis on strict hierarchical roles and well-defined rules of behavior that also govern how people of different status within their relationships should address and interact with one another, while on the other hand, there is the Chinese verbal style often described as indirect, imprecise and ambiguous. As Chang (1999: 436) observes, the usual answer to this apparent contradiction is that it is ‘precisely because Chinese relations are well-defined, there is little need to be verbally explicit since utterances can be interpreted against definitions of the relationship’. Such improper utterances would be detrimental for the harmonious development of the conversation and consequently negatively influence the relationship. In other words, the aim of such an indirect style of speaking is ‘to protect the relationship and allow the parties in the conversation maximum freedom of maneuver. A tentative approach permits the relationship to evolve harmoniously’ (Bond 1992: 53) As in the example above, ‘It is not convenient’ can be interpreted in so many ways that there will always be one way that is suitable to maintain the interpersonal harmony in the discussion. Chang proposes the idea of ‘indeterminacy in speech’ to resolve the seeming contradiction between ‘well-defined’ role relationships and the tendency to engage in indirect, ambiguous verbal discourse. This indeterminacy could be defined as

an indeterminate linguistic space, created by the exchange of indirect messages, which allows interactants considerable flexibility in negotiating relational position and role behavior within the confines of a relational system.  
(Chang 1999: 537)

As such, indeterminate conversation is a way of negotiating the boundaries of the different roles one finds oneself in.

Besides, Chinese people are particularly aware of the ebb and flow of power and how it can flow in unpredictable directions, which can be especially threatening in societies with a strong focus on maintaining face and a lack of legal protection. As Bond (1992: 55) remarks: ‘Yesterday’s opponent may be tomorrow’s superior and is likely to construe prior disagreements as proof of disloyalty. It is best to bite a fiery tongue’. Chinese

people always keep in mind the Confucian wisdom that ‘a word uttered by a gentleman cannot be drawn back, even by a team of four horses’ (*junzi yi yan, si ma nan zhui* 君子一言，驷马难追). In other words, what is once said cannot be undone.

The fear of negative consequences such as loss of face and disharmony in the relationship also explains why self-concealment in conversations is an important aspect of interpersonal behavior. Chinese people generally will not reveal much about themselves in social settings, let alone about their inner thoughts and feelings, at least in the initial stages of a relationship. As Bond (1992: 54) explains,

the slower revelation of intimate information is necessary in order to establish trust before one makes oneself vulnerable to possible danger through public exposure. And these dangers are considerable in a society which emphasizes moral rectitude and unchanging circles of acquaintances.

In contemporary China, a particular case of this caution of speech and self-concealment can be found with the elderly. Marked by the emotional consequences of political violence of the Cultural Revolution, they grew up with the idea that people should not be trusted, and up till the present day display a strong need for vagueness, muddledness and hiding their real intentions in public. Kleinman et al. give the example of an older man, a Chinese physician and clinical academic, who experienced the trauma of violence during the Cultural Revolution. By using metaphorical though not in the least ambiguous language, he explains that in his opinion,

to survive in China, you must reveal nothing to others. Or it could be used against you. ... That’s why I’ve come to think the deeper part of the self is best left unclear. Like mist and clouds in a Chinese landscape painting, hide the private part behind your social persona. Let your public self be like rice in a dinner: bland and inconspicuous, taking on the flavors of its surroundings, while giving off no flavor of its own. Too strong a personal flavor and you may entice others to jealousy or hatred. (Kleinman, Yan, Jun et al. 2011b: 6)

Therefore, as Cui Li explains, in public behavior, vagueness and muddledness are nothing more than an external appearance (仅仅是一个表面的现象). It does not reflect one’s inner self (*neixin* 内心) (Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang).

This kind of concealing and circuitous speech and behavior also has close links with the way Chinese people deal with the truth. In accordance with the absence of an absolute philosophical truth, the truth becomes flexible in daily communication too. Besides, Chinese people are not always eager to hear a true explanation of the truth, whether it is valid or not. For them, the exact reason or explanation is less important than maintaining face or not making others lose it. This concern for the rules of face giving is also an essential feature of public speaking, in which the preference for vague, imprecise and generalized speech dominates the way of communicating.

Related to the search for interpersonal and public harmony, which conditions all forms of communication, the virtues of modesty and self-effacement also play an important role in all forms of communication. Above, I also discussed the virtue of expressing oneself in a moderate way and venting a ‘middle-way’ opinion as advocated in the *Zhongyong*. The culturally conditioned lack of (the need for) well-articulated self-expression simply means that there is ‘no desire to transcend the larger scheme of things’ (Bond 1992: 53). Chang (1999: 536) adds to this, that

compared to Western cultures, where communication is often seen as an expression of the self, Chinese cultures treat communication as a means of reaffirming the communicator as a member of society and maintaining social harmony.

Therefore, in some situations, it does one honor to pretend to be ignorant, stupid or just uninformed about a matter, or at least express oneself in vague, moderate terms.

I would submit that what is true for interpersonal and group communication, also applies to public discourse, i.e. all public communication conducted by or oriented to the wider society. For the sake of maintaining social harmony and preventing social unrest, the Party is in the first place selective about spreading news, but also prefers to distribute general and vague news coverage and reporting instead of clear, specific news when this could cause upset. For this purpose, all public communication is censored by the Party; written and public communication through clever systems of censorships and oral, personal communication through self-censorship of the speakers.

One of the clearest uses of vague, official language that concerns all citizens can be found in legal discourse. Traditionally, Chinese society is characterized by an absence of rule of law (cf above), but in contemporary society, rule of law is gradually becoming more important. However, as one of my interviewees explained, a complaint often heard is that the law is formulated in extremely vague and ambiguous terms (Sophie, Personal communication, 22 May 2008, Shanghai). As a result, many people do not put trust in the law, and do not rely on it, afraid it might be ‘interpreted’ wrongly.

Conditioned by thousands of years of censorship, Chinese people often do not care about knowing the precise details of a fact or a situation. To them, clear and truthful information is not considered to be any added value to their lives, because being in receipt of this kind of information is – in their view- unlikely to change anything at all to their situation or more generally to their daily life. A typical example of this attitude is when a train, plane or boat is delayed in departing while passengers have already boarded, and no reason is publicly announced for many hours. In China, most of the passengers would accept this imposed ignorance, resign to the situation, and turn instead to some pleasant distraction such as having a snack, taking a nap or playing cards. The underlying idea is that fundamentally nothing can be done about the situation, so why bother making a fuss and disrupting the social harmony. Receiving

unreliable, vague or no information at all, has become a habit to which they have become accustomed and which has in the past rarely been questioned. This attitude strongly relates to the issue of accepting fate, or at least accepting one's position and the knowledge and information to which he has or does not have access, and more sociologically, to the absence of a rule of law in a strictly hierarchical environment where docility is a social virtue (cf also above 2.4.2 Social structure, the absence of a rule of law, and the importance of social morality).

#### 2.4.6 Conclusion

From the above, it seems clear that vagueness, muddledness, ignorance or foolishness, often expressed in a modest attitude, are not only key motifs of ancient Chinese philosophy, but also characteristics of Chinese morality, social relationships, and communication and discourse. The strictly hierarchical society and the absence of a rule of law causes people to adopt a muddled attitude to life, accepting without questioning the vague and unclear information they are offered. In a social context, every personal relationship has its own moral code, which is heavily influenced by the fear of losing face or making others lose face, which urges people to be accommodating, flexible, and modest, even if this involves putting one's knowledge, experience and position to the side. On a more psychological level, a muddled, flexible and modest (not excessively smart) attitude ensures one's network of relationships remains broad and healthy and is not diluted over time, as is clearly expressed in the saying *shui zhi qing, ze wu yu* 水至清则无鱼.

In addition, in interpersonal and public communication, information is often expressed in a vague, suggestive manner, containing an ambiguous, unclear message which should leave enough room for an interpretation that is in no way upsetting to the recipient. In all these areas, vagueness and unclearness have a clear function; to establish or maintain inner (personal) and outer (social) harmony.

Obviously, the profound cultural shaping of a *mohu* reality which has been instilled in all Chinese people has had a profound impact on people's wellbeing on various levels. We might call it a conditioned feeling of well-being, in which the resignation to vagueness and the predilection for muddledness results in feelings of comfort, peace of mind, social harmony and - contrary to what Westerners are used to - personal security.

Many of the social phenomena and characteristics discussed in this section will be looked at further and be contextualized in the various interpretations of the saying *Nande hutu* in contemporary discourse (Part Two).

## 2.5 Conclusion: *hutu* as a philosophy of life

In this extended introductory chapter, I have attempted to show that *hutu*, muddledness and vagueness is a vital motif in both ancient Chinese philosophy and the daily lives of ordinary Chinese people, and as such it has developed into an all-encompassing philosophy of life throughout Chinese society.

In order to arrive at these conclusions, *hutu* was analysed using three different methodologies. Firstly, an investigation in some early occurrences of *hutu* showed that the compound *hutu* was certainly in use during the Song dynasty, and by the time of the Qing dynasty (when *hutu* appeared in *Nande hutu*) had denoted slightly varying meanings such as blur, muddled, vague, illegible, unintelligible, and unclear. The etymological analysis revealed similar meanings such as vague, ambiguous, foolish and muddled, and also introduced the for this research important notion of ‘to pretend to be muddled’ (*zhuang hutu*). The semantic analysis clarified some of the associations of *hutu* with ancient cosmology and mythology, where it has positive meanings, such as protecting, life engendering and life prolonging, and is considered a creative principle. This analysis also gave a first insight into the philosophical connotations of *hutu*, namely with the story of Lord Chaos (*Hundun*), the mythical ruler of the Central Sea, who embodies the person without sensory features and without differentiating functions.

Secondly, *hutu*, vagueness and indistinctness were discussed as a characteristic of both the methodology (correlative, holistic thinking, intuition and experience) and the content (concepts of truth and knowledge) of Chinese philosophical tradition. At a methodological level, vagueness and indistinctness are closely related to the belief in the absence of an absolute, clearly distinct and analyzable truth, but rather in an intuitive and ‘inner feeling of’ truth (*dao*). The *dao* - be it the Daoist *dao* as indefinable oneness, or the Confucian expression of *dao* in *tianming* and moral knowledge - should not be approached in an analytical, reasoned way, but from a practical and intuitive perspective based on previous experience. Suggestive and vague language in philosophical writing was not only a result of this ideal, but also a helpful tool in urging the reader or listener to appeal to his creative and intuitive qualities, rather than his logical and rational thinking. From a content perspective, since the belief is that there are no absolute distinctions, ‘truth’ is not absolute and should not serve as a guiding principle for knowledge transfer, knowledge has a different status in China than in the West. Especially in ancient Daoists texts, the ideal of ‘non-knowledge’ or ignorance and the concept of muddledness as a virtue instead of as a weakness are very prominent. Several metaphors and sayings testify to the appreciation of the vague, indistinct and unclear, such as the story of Lord Hundun and the ideal of the sage as a fool. The methodology and content respectively of ancient Chinese philosophy also represent the



unconscious dimension of muddledness (pragmatism, correlative and holistic thinking), and the more conscious, substantive dimension, articulated in philosophical language and concepts such as the Daoist sage as a fool, a state of ‘unified chaos’ as a spiritual ideal.

Thirdly, many of the philosophical concepts related to vagueness and suggestiveness still resonate strongly, for instance in Chinese social morality, and in popular sayings such as *da zhi ruo yu*. More specifically, the pattern of vagueness and the (apparent) absence of clear meanings and distinctions are also observed in everyday social settings and relationships, in regular conversation and in public discourse. Here, vagueness, indistinctness and (pretended) muddledness turn out to be essential tools for outer (social) and inner (personal) harmony. Part of the cultural conditioning of Chinese people is their strong desire to avoid expressing or hearing firm opinions or comments that might be upsetting the other party’s feelings, and to maintain harmony and peace. As a result, vagueness and (pretended) muddledness are qualities that contribute to the need for maintaining self-respect and the respect of others (face), which is potentially put at risk if strong ideas and thoughts are articulated too openly. They also underpin the virtue of being modest and promote social and personal wellbeing.

Altogether, the ‘elitist’ and the ‘commonplace’ muddledness make up the so-called ‘culture of vagueness’ (*mohu wenhua* 模糊文化) or ‘culture of chaos’ (*hundun wenhua* 混沌文化) (e.g. Chen 2008). Hence, this chapter of my dissertation has provided some preliminary insights into both the formal level and the content level of the contemporary discourse on the saying which will be the topic of Part Two. As we will see in Part Two, muddledness has a relatively positive connotation, and should rather be considered a virtue than a weakness. In addition, it will soon become clear that there is not just one clear, objective, unambiguous, absolute and intellectually ‘smart’ understanding of the wisdom of being muddled. Rather on the contrary, the analysis will lead us into a web of meanings, all equally valuable and ‘true’.



## Chapter 3 *Nande hutu*: the calligraphy

*If one does not know the age of the people from ancient times, then one should not falsely talk about their words. Knowing their age, but not knowing their (immediate) surroundings, then one should even not hastily talk about their writings.*

不知古人之世，不可妄论古人之文辞也。知其世矣，不知古人之身处，亦不可以遽论其文也。

(Wenshi tongyi 文史通义)

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter showed that the ‘ideal’ of muddledness and vagueness is a prominent feature in the Chinese psyche. This chapter will address the fundament of this study, namely the intriguing and at first glance quite unfathomable calligraphic saying *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂, ‘Being muddled is difficult’, and its famous author, Zheng Banqiao 郑板桥.

Studying Zheng Banqiao is a very pleasant experience. As a multi-faceted, intriguing and contradictory personality, Zheng Banqiao occupies several positions in the Chinese appreciation, ranging from role model of the incorruptible and morally upright scholar-official in the early Qing dynasty, to popular TV personality in contemporary China. There are many studies about his life and achievements, and his honest, upright character, but also many anecdotes and folk stories describing his flamboyant and humorous side, which make it a pleasure to investigate his life and works. Indeed, being

one of the *Yangzhou Ba Guai*, the ‘Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou’ (see also further section 3.2.1.3) known for his excellent calligraphies, paintings and poems, many studies about Zheng Banqiao have been undertaken, not only in the Chinese artistic and academic world, but also in the West. In particular on the eve of the 300th anniversary of his death, in 1993, there was a wave of interest in Zheng Banqiao, and many studies of his character and artistic work were produced. This very rich source of material often highlights his contradictory character.

The more specialist art books mostly deal with Zheng Banqiao’s background and his art, or with a subset of his artworks (his calligraphies, paintings or poems). In addition, many articles deal with the influence of Buddhism and Daoism on his work. Interestingly though, only few of the studies which I found deal specifically with the calligraphy *Nande hutu*. However, these studies rarely pay attention to the underlying wisdom of the saying. The saying is merely considered in its function as a very intriguing piece of art that represents an innovative style in the history of Chinese calligraphy. Moreover, on closer inspection, while some of these studies might use the saying in their title, they do not analyze the calligraphy in any detail in the content of the text itself, and deal even less with Zheng Banqiao’s thinking behind it.

There are a few exceptions though. For instance, an exploratory article by Karl-Heinz Pohl (2007) called ‘*Nande hutu*’ – ‘Schwer ist es, einfalt zu erlangen’ explores the artistic qualities of the saying, and - based on this - also explores its meaning. Another exception is the study of Li Shaolong 李少龙 (2005) who writes a detailed article on the social context of the calligraphy, its relationship with Chinese social structure, its meaning and interpretation, as well as on the reason for its present popularity. Another study by Lei Legeng 雷乐耕 (2008) goes deeper into what he calls a ‘dialectical reading’ of the calligraphy, in which he plays with contradictions that surround the calligraphy, for example the notions of smart and muddled, passive and enterprising, fake and real muddled-headedness. A third Chinese academic study of Liu Hong 刘红 and Huang Mingfeng 黄明锋 (2005) deals with the different kinds of interpretations according to the life-span of Zheng Banqiao himself.

It is quite understandable that most academic research on the saying is biased towards its artistic qualities. In the end, it is just one among many popular calligraphic sayings. Moreover, at first sight, the wisdom of life that lies at the root of the saying *Nande hutu* is self-evident for Chinese people. The way of thinking and behaving that underlies the maxim is impregnated in the Chinese mind and needs no explanation. However, another reason might be that explaining the meaning behind the calligraphy is quite a *hutu* or fuzzy thing to do. Even during the exploratory research, looking for the most frequent discursive elements in the interpretations of the calligraphy, it became clear that there are as many interpretations as there are people discussing the

calligraphy, and myths and folk stories surrounding this popular piece of art and its author.

In order to conduct an in-depth analysis of these different uses and interpretations of the calligraphy in contemporary society, it seemed prudent – before getting caught up in a web of different meanings – to explore firstly the author’s intended meaning. It was the artistic tradition of the scholar-literatus, initiated by Song artist Su Dongpo 苏东坡 (1073-1101)<sup>145</sup>, to express one’s own character, thoughts and emotions in the artistic product (calligraphy, poem, painting) (Pohl 1990: 30). So as a first step, this research will go deeper into the character and life-style of its author, Zheng Banqiao, including the highs and lows of his career as an official and the socio-cultural context in which he lived.

Fortunately, Zheng Banqiao had a lot of his poems, songs and inscriptions on paintings and calligraphies imprinted by his nephew in his own eccentric style, sometimes even with a foreword by himself. For instance, although they do not occupy a prominent place in the *Collected Works*<sup>146</sup>, his famous sixteen *Family Letters* (*Zheng Banqiao Jiashu*) were written for the moral and literary education of his cousin Mo (whom he familiarly calls Brother Mo). As a result, these letters have a moralistic, intimate character which clarifies his thoughts and ideals not only about literature and art, but more importantly about daily life issues, different aspects of society, and, in general, the ‘mundane world’. Several editions of his *Collected Works* (*Zheng Banqiao Ji* 郑板桥集) are available, and together with the academic studies on his life and artistic output based on reliable sources such as the *Historical Biographies of the Qing Dynasty* (*Qingshi Liezhuan* 清史列传), the *Qing Dynasty Draft History* (*Qingshi Gao* 清史稿), the *Xinghua County Annals* (*Xinghua Xianzhi* 兴化县志), the *Draft on the Weixian County Annals* (*Weixian Zhigao* 潍县志稿), and the *Records of the Prefecture of Yangzhou* (*Yangzhou Fuzhi* 扬州府志) they present a consistent impression of what kind of person Zheng Banqiao was, of his particular artistic style and life style, and of his view on art and society.

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<sup>145</sup> For more on Su Dongpo, see note 101. For an investigation of Su Dongpo as an example of the ways in which scholar-officials functioned in relation to the rest of society during the Song dynasty, see Mote 1999: 153-156.

<sup>146</sup> The *Collected Works* (also *Quanji* 全集, *Complete collection*) are generally a compilation of the works of an individual. These writings are often arranged by genre such as poems, letters, notes, prefaces, discussions etc. They are sometimes compiled by the author himself, sometimes by his friends, disciples or relatives, and are a valuable source for an individual’s intellectual and social activities. It is quite common to find different editions from different editors, as is the case for Zheng Banqiao’s *Collected Works*. In 1742, Zheng Banqiao for the first time published a collection of his works, only containing *ci* and *shi* poems, and in 1749, he re-edited his collected works, and added the sixteen *Family Letters* and some new poems. He always had them print in his own particular handwriting.

This chapter will firstly briefly examine the structure of Chinese society in general and the social and cultural context in which he lived, in particular those elements in society that help us understand the calligraphy. Then his personal life history and character will be covered, with an additional discussion about the philosophical influences he experienced during his life (section 3.2). After we have learnt about Zheng Banqiao's life-style and character, I will turn to the calligraphy itself in the second part (section 3.3). Here, I will firstly narrate the very 'moment of creation', in order to get as close as possible to the intended meaning of the saying (3.3.1). A following section will analyze how scholars who are more or less familiar with Zheng Banqiao's life and works explain the meaning of the saying and the postscript. This will set out the different interpretations of the content of the calligraphy, often referring to Zheng Banqiao's personal situation (3.3.2). A third part will deal with the meta-discussion on the saying, which basically can be divided into a positive (active) and a negative (passive) interpretation. As such, this discussion will also reveal notions within Chinese psychology and social morality related to the wisdom of being *hutu* (3.3.3).

It is important to note that this chapter will be based mainly on studies and discussions by academic experts who often refer to the person of Zheng Banqiao and the given context, whereas in Part Two, different discursive elements of various (popular, academic and official) discourses on the saying in contemporary society will be analyzed. This does not mean that the scholarly interpretations completely differ from the interpretations by 'common people'. Rather on the contrary; many notions and associations used to interpret and explain the saying are used both in a scholarly context, and in the popular sources such as blogs and magazines. Although the terminology is sometimes quite divergent, the different sources often emphasize and describe the same philosophical (Daoist and Confucian) ideals, the same sayings and the same 'wisdoms of life'. These 'umbrella' interpretations, related sayings and notions – discursive elements that reappear in both academic and more popular sources – that give meaning to the saying are summarized in Chapter Four.

## **3.2 The author: Zheng Banqiao**

### **3.2.1 Historical and socio-cultural background**

Zheng Banqiao lived in a complex period in Chinese history: both quite orthodox and stable with regard to social order, but unorthodox and innovative with regard to arts

and literature and the cultural milieu. He lived through the reigns of the three great Qing emperors: he was born in 1693 during the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1661-1722), lived through the Yongzheng reign (1722-1735), and died in 1765 during the government of the Qianlong emperor (1736-1795). I will first sketch the structure of society during these three periods from a more sociological point of view, after which I will turn to the historical and cultural background of his time.

### 3.2.1.1 Social stratification and elite culture during the Qing dynasty

Traditionally, Chinese society was divided into four classes: scholars and gentry, including officials (*shi* 士)<sup>147</sup>, farmers (*nong* 农), craftsmen (*gong* 工), and merchants (*shang* 商). An official was always a scholar, since to be an official one had to pass the civil service examinations, which tested a candidate's knowledge of the Classics and whether or not he had the right 'frame of mind' to govern according to Confucian standards.<sup>148</sup> The higher the rank one obtained in the imperial examinations<sup>149</sup>, the higher one's post was, i.e. the closer to the emperor, and the higher one's power. Scholars were a privileged class, even if they had been successful in the examinations but were unemployed, which was the case for the great majority of the scholars. The most important privileges included freedom from manual public service and from (household) chores, freedom from corporal punishment, and stipends (Weber 1964 [1951]: 129).

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<sup>147</sup> The character *shi* 士 refers to a scholar or gentleman, and can be found in combinations for gentry, *shenshi* 绅士, as well as for a Confucian scholar *rushi* 儒士, Daoist scholar *daoshi* 道士, and also in the contemporary education system 'bachelor' *xueshi* 学士, 'master' *shuoshi* 硕士, and 'doctor' *boshi* 博士.

<sup>148</sup> The particular phenomenon of Confucian scholar-literati, is also reflected in the Chinese term for 'scholar', which initially was *ru* 儒. From this, the Chinese term for Confucianism *Rujia* 儒家 (School of Scholars) or *Rujiao* 儒教 (Teaching of scholars) or even *Ruxue* 儒学 (Study of Scholars) came into existence. For an extensive insight in the literati in the Qing dynasty, see Granet 1951: 88-99 and Marsh 1961. For a comparison with scholars in the Indian and Western tradition, see Weber 1964 [1951]: 107-141. For more on the social roles of literati in Early to Mid-Qing, see Elman 2002.

<sup>149</sup> The names and degrees in the imperial examinations during the Qing were as follows: the first examination was the 'Government Examination' *yuanshi* 院试, with the resulting title of *xiucai* 秀才 or *shengyuan* 生员; the second was the 'Provincial Examination' *xiangshi* 乡试, a triennial examination, with the resulting title of *juren* 举人 'recommended man' or graduate; the third examination was the 'Metropolitan Examination' *huishi* 会试 with the resulting title of *gongshi* 贡士; finally the 'Palace Examination' *dianshi* 殿试 which took place at the palace to obtain the title of *jinshi* 进士 'presented scholar' or doctor (Wilkinson 2000: 529; Elman 2002: 379). As we will see later, Zheng Banqiao obtained the highest degree, the *jinshi* degree.

Second in social status were the farmers. They owed this position to their task of producing the necessary food. In practice, their position was lower than the artisans, and they were largely dependent on family ties for their social security. Third in rank were the artisans, who produced useful objects. Merchants ranked at the bottom because they did not actually produce something, neither mentally nor materially. Since the main aim of the government was social order and not wealth creation, they were regarded as not of any benefit to society.

At the beginning of the Qing dynasty, Chinese society was still organized according to these four distinct social, or rather occupational, classes, based on the Confucian social division for maintaining social order. The emperor, belonging to the highest social class, had absolute power, and was assisted by governor-generals (administering more than one province), provincial governors, military commanders and circuit intendants (*daotai* 道台) (Hucker 1985: 83). Their duties and powers overlapped, so that no official, whether in the provinces or in the capital, could enjoy independent political power. The smallest administrative unit was the county, ruled by a district magistrate (*zhixian* 知县), the post Zheng Banqiao obtained.

In principle, the status of scholar was not hereditary, and from the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) onwards, when Confucianism became the state doctrine, the examinations were officially open to all male subjects not originating from an artisan or merchant class. This implied that farmers could also acquire the status of scholar. Although being wealthy or having a noble status was not a prerequisite in receiving a recommendation for entry to the examinations, in practice however, considering the difficult subject matter and the time consuming study requirements, it was very rare for someone of a laboring, non-aristocratic background such as a farmer to achieve a high rank.<sup>150</sup> By the time of the early Qing dynasty rich merchants could advance themselves or their family members by buying a degree (and circumventing the official civil examinations), or by paying for a good education for their heirs in the hope that they would attain the scholar status and become part of the imperial civil service. This practice of buying degrees certainly contributed to the dilution of the literati so despised by Zheng Banqiao.

Rankin, Fairbank and Feuerwerker (1986: 29-39) mention a second interesting social division overlapping the horizontal class structure with its extreme differences of wealth. According to them, there was an additional important vertical organization of

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<sup>150</sup> See also Granet 1951: 98-99 and Weber 1964: 116: 'it was not until the Han dynasty [...] that the bestowal of offices according to merit was raised to the level of a principle. [...] it is highly probable that literary education, perhaps with a few exceptions, was at first actually, and perhaps also legally, monopolized by "the great families"'. For an excellent in-depth analysis of the civil examinations in late imperial China, see Elman 2000.



society, based on kinship and locality. Especially in Central and South China, extended family lineages were a major form of social organization. These extended family ties enhanced the security and continuity of elite families and provided services and opportunities for poorer lineage members. In short, one's position in society was as much dependent on what lineage one belonged to, as what one's economic and occupational status was.

However flexible social mobility theoretically was, high social status thus remained largely the preserve of the wealthy (able to afford study-leave and tutors in preparation for the examinations, or able to buy a degree), or of the well-connected families with a high degree of influence and connections (*guanxi* 关系) within the wider family. This situation ultimately led to widespread corruption by wealthy individuals buying scholarly degrees and, hence, entry to officialdom, or bribing within one's network in return for an official post or to have legal and official matters arranged to one's benefit. No matter to which class one belonged, the reality was that the whole of society was ruled by a very small minority of the population, namely the imperial family, officials, degree holders, landlords and rich merchants (who might have bought a degree) and examinees.

This system of social stratification rooted in Confucian hierarchic, bureaucratic and patriarchic thinking was in the first instance linked to the idea of the big unification (*da yi tong* 大一统). The centralized idea of unification only cherished one kind of 'right' behavior, and left no room for dissident behavior, certainly not amongst the lower in rank, namely the bulk of the population. Everything that did not fit into the idea of unification was ignored or – sometimes violently – excluded.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, although in Chinese feudal society the status of scholar-official was the highest aspirational ideal, and scholars enjoyed the highest social status, in practice this was out of reach for most 'ordinary people' from the less wealthy classes. As such, this lofty ideal of unification has undoubtedly produced what Li Shaolong (2005) calls serious forms of human oppression (*renxing yayi* 人性压抑).

Two obvious manifestations of this oppression by the hierarchical system (*dengji zhidu* 等级制度) are the division of society into the four classes and the system of 'nine ranks and eighteen grades' (*jiu pin shiba ji* 九品十八级). The 'nine ranks and eighteen grades' were categories into which all officials and the posts they occupied were divided. This ranking system determined prestige, compensation, and priority in court

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<sup>151</sup> See, for example the impressive book inquisition (*zhishi fenzi de xuexing shalu* 知识分子的血腥杀戮) under the Qianlong emperor during the 1770s. Despite the relative social stability, the Qianlong emperor – being a 'barbarian' himself – still feared Ming loyalism under the intellectuals, and all books with disrespectful references to Manchus were put on an index, banned and burned (Pohl 1990: 5). Cf also Zelin 2001: 189-191.

audience<sup>152</sup>. In such a society, one could either be lucky enough to be born into or manage to maneuver oneself into a better ‘class’. This hierarchic structure should in the first place be linked to the patriarchal family system, in which filial piety played a major role. Precisely this non-creative and conservative ideal of being subservient to one’s elder represents a very submissive, passive aspect of society. The conservatism that is incorporated in such a system prevents any progress, either on a personal level or on the (national) cultural level. Moreover, according to Li Shaolong (2005: 76-77), in a society dominated by bureaucracy, patriarchy and hierarchy, resistance is always temporary, and mostly fruitless, which created a fatalistic spirit characteristic of the entire culture. This kind of society in which the value of an individual is suppressed, created continuous feelings of insecurity, instability and powerlessness, which permeated Chinese culture for thousands of years. It should thus not surprise us that these feelings needed to be sublimated in one way or another.

Li Yi (2005: 31) agrees with Li Shaolong by stating that from the Han dynasty on, Confucianism was the state ideology, but that by no means did the Chinese elite abandoned Legalism and the right to rule by punishment<sup>153</sup>. Moreover, during the next two thousand years, the Chinese elite always declared Confucianism on the surface but practiced Legalism in their heart (*yang ru yin fa* 阳儒阴法)<sup>154</sup>. So besides self-cultivation (*xiuyang* 修养 or *xiu shen* 修身) through education - in general only accessible for the highest class - docility and conformity were the main ‘individual virtues’. This type of society, in which the uneducated – about ninety-five percent of the population – was ruled and highly oppressed by the educated, clearly gave rise to a lot of frustration and feelings of powerlessness. As we will see later, according to Li Shaolong, these were the ideal conditions for a saying like *Nande hutu* to come into existence.

In this system, the ruling scholar-officials who were highly educated in the Confucian Classics, were, through continuous self-cultivation, supposed to be a role-model for

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<sup>152</sup> The most senior was rank (*pin* 品) one. Ranks were commonly further subdivided into two classes: upper grade (*zheng* 正) and lower grade (*cong* 从), which altogether made up for eighteen grades (*deng* 等 or *ji* 级) as in the expression ‘nine ranks and eighteen grades’. In some periods and for some posts, the 18 grades were further divided into upper (*shang* 上) and lower (*xia* 下) echelons. Thus the normal number of gradations was eighteen, but thirty was also common (Hucker 1985: 177).

<sup>153</sup> Legalism (*Fajia* 法家) is one of the so-called ‘Hundred Schools of Thought’ that emerged during the period of the Warring States (475 BC-221 AD). The most representative figure, Han Feizi 韩非子, promoted rule of law (*fa* 法) and punishment. See for more on Legalism for example Feng 1997: 155-165.

<sup>154</sup> The expression Li Shaolong uses here is more commonly known as *wai ru nei fa* 外儒内法, ‘Confucian from the outside, but Legalist inside’. It comes in different variations, such as *wai ru nei fo* 外儒内佛 and *wai ru nei dao* 外儒内道, all referring to Confucianism as a reference framework for social morality and ordering society, and whatever one chooses for as a guideline for one’s inner life.

their subordinates and represent social morality and virtue. Confucianism regards the ultimate sovereign as the father and mother of the people (*min zhi fumu* 民之父母). In feudal China, the term *fumuguan* 父母官, ‘father-mother-official’ therefore denotes a local magistrate because of his (intended) intimacy with the common people of the county he is responsible for. However, officials were often known for corruption and abuse of power. For instance, because business was always done under official supervision, the rich merchants, who dominated social and public life in cities such as Yangzhou, often tried to maintain good relations with government officials by offering gifts or outright bribery. In addition, the local junior ‘office runners’ or clerks who were socially looked down upon, and the local scholar-gentry (i.e. the great majority of scholars who were successful in the examinations but were not employed as officials) who assisted the district magistrate were both renowned for being very corrupt. As the group of local scholar-gentry occupied a highly privileged position, they were afforded the freedom for corrupt practices to develop. In this overly corrupt environment, the highly educated and powerful official Zheng Banqiao would always sympathize with the weak, the poor and the oppressed.

### 3.2.1.2 Manchu rulers, Ming loyalism and the Hanxue movement <sup>155</sup>

The early Qing period in which Zheng Banqiao lived was characterized by Ming loyalism. The Kangxi Emperor accomplished a long period of social stability by employing Chinese scholars in most of the sub-provincial offices, and had them share power in high posts. He was also a fervent supporter of scholarship and the arts, and adopted the conservative Song dynasty’s idealist philosophy of the Neo-Confucian School of Principle (*Lixue* 理学) as the state ideology. By doing so, he was guaranteed the support of the Chinese scholars he needed to govern his empire.<sup>156</sup> Nonetheless, his benevolence could not avoid the strong Ming loyalty amongst most of the Chinese scholars, especially those born during the Ming reign. As Pohl (1990: 2-3) rightly observes, these anti-Manchu feelings were especially strong in the lower Yangzi provinces such as Zhejiang and Jiangxi, and south of Jiangsu where the memory of the

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<sup>155</sup> This and the next part are largely based on the study of Karl-Heinz Pohl (1990: 1-32) about the life and works of Zheng Banqiao. His work focuses on the eccentricity of Banqiao as a person, and accordingly also of his artistic work. The book contains a biography, an exposition and discussion of Banqiao’s views on literature, calligraphy and painting, as well as translations, interpretations and illustrations of representative works. For more generally on the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, see Mote 1999: 856-948 and Peterson 2002: 120-309.

<sup>156</sup> For more on institutional adaption during the early Manchu rulers, see Fairbank 1992: 146-151.

Yangzhou massacre<sup>157</sup> was still very much alive. Kangxi launched military attacks against the rebels, and in addition he set up a political campaign to win the support of the alienated Chinese gentry. Through this campaign, many scholars started to realize that the new dynasty was not as barbaric and uncivilized as initially feared. In addition, it reinforced the view that this dynasty would be more stable than the chaotic late Ming, and that it would be deeply committed to Confucianism, the root of Chinese civilization (Pohl 1990: 3). So when Kangxi's son, the Yongzheng Emperor began his reign in 1723, the Qing Empire was firmly established. However, beneath the surface many scholars still refused to accept the foreign rule under the Manchus. Recognizing the importance of loyalty (*zhong* 忠) as one of the basic virtues in Confucianism, Yongzheng wisely tolerated this anti-Manchu tendency. When the Yongzheng Emperor died after only twelve years of reign, his son Qianlong took over, and the Qing dynasty reached its peak. During this time Ming loyalism seemed to have disappeared<sup>158</sup>, and the Qianlong Emperor ordered one of the most illustrious accomplishments of his reign: the compilation of the *Siku Quanshu* (四库全书, *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*). For this compilation, approximately 3500 ideologically and politically accepted books were collected, catalogued, and annotated, and several thousands more reviewed and commented on. Obviously, the Qianlong Emperor, just like his father, considered himself as a patron of scholarship and the arts. The first half of the Qianlong reign is generally known as a period of peace and increasing prosperity, as well as a fertile time for scholarship and the arts (Pohl 1990: 5).

Besides persistent Ming loyalism, another major social phenomenon was the emergence of the *Hanxue* movement. During the early Qing dynasty, many scholars were of the opinion that the Neo-Confucian School of Principle (*Lixue* 理学) of the Song and Ming dynasties relied too much on Daoist and Buddhist concepts for their interpretations of the Classics. Especially the Neo-Confucian idealistic school of Wang Yangming 王阳明 (1472-1529), the School of Heart-Mind (*Xinxue* 心学)<sup>159</sup> with its metaphysical approach to epistemology, received a lot of critique for being too focused on inner reflection as a way of understanding the world. As a result, a new intellectual movement rose which advocated a return to the classic scriptures of the Han period.

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<sup>157</sup> Yangzhou lies in the south of Jiangsu province. The Yangzhou massacre took place from 20-29th of May in 1645, when Manchu conquerors conducted mass killings of the residents of Yangzhou after taking the city from the forces loyal to the Southern Ming regime (1644-1662). There is a vast literature on the massacre of Yangzhou, see for instance Mote 1999: 830-831. For more on Ming loyalism during the Kangxi Emperor, see e.g. *Ibid.*, 850-855.

<sup>158</sup> At least on the surface, cf note 151 about the book inquisition during the reign of Qianlong.

<sup>159</sup> One of Wang Yangming's most important concepts is the concept of 'innate knowledge' (*liangzhi* 良知). See also page 67.

According to the adepts of this school, without a study of the original Classics there could be no study of philosophical principles. Therefore, this intellectual movement got the name ‘Han Learning’ (*Hanxue* 汉学). Apart from a return to the original sources of Confucianism which had been recorded by the scholars of the Han dynasty, the emphasis lay on a rational, empirical approach to learning. The most influential thinker of *Hanxue* was Gu Yanwu 顾炎武 (1613 – 1682), whose critique on useless book learning and metaphysical speculations of the Neo-Confucian philosophy started a new trend in scholarship during the Qing dynasty<sup>160</sup>. Some of his thoughts are also reflected in Zheng Banqiao’s works. Although he was a strong Ming loyalist, he was under the protection of the Kangxi emperor, and under his influence, the *Hanxue* movement became an important intellectual movement in the early Qing period. In search for confirmation of their textual studies, the *Hanxue* scholars were very interested in the archeological remains of the Han, Wei, Jin and Tang dynasties. From this interest, two more branches developed from the *Hanxue* movement: the ‘Metal and Stone Studies’ (*Jinshixue* 金石学) and the ‘Stele Studies’ (*Beixue* 碑学). The first one indirectly stimulated calligraphic studies, while the latter had a revolutionary impact on calligraphy and the art of seal engraving during the Qing dynasty, and thus indirectly also on Zheng Banqiao.

### 3.2.1.3 Yangzhou, the mecca for artists, and the degeneration of the Confucian scholars

When Zheng Banqiao wrote the calligraphy *Nande hutu*, he had not yet retreated to Yangzhou to become a full-time artist. However, many stories of his time in Yangzhou after he had left his post in Weixian (see further) illustrate how Zheng Banqiao flourished in this highly cultured environment, and apparently tried to follow his own wisdom of life during his time there.

The city of Yangzhou, where Zheng Banqiao would later settle down, lies at the juncture of the Yangzi river and the Grand Canal. At that time, Yangzhou was not only an important link in communication and transportation but also a prosperous salt market where rich merchants gathered. These merchants built luxurious gardens and villas, and were rich enough to pay high prices for artists to decorate their villas with paintings and calligraphies. The Qing government, meanwhile, established the office of ‘Lianghuai Transport’ (*Lianghuai Zhuanyun* 两淮转运) in the city with the purpose of

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<sup>160</sup> Gu Yanwu, also known as Gu Tinglin 顾亭林, was a Chinese epistemologist and geographer. His positivist approach to a variety of disciplines, and his criticism of Neo-Confucianism had a huge influence on later scholars. His works include *Yinxue Wushu* (音学五书) and *Ri Zhi Lu* (日知录). See on him for instance Fairbank & Reischauer 1979: 231-232, and Rosker 2008: 92-97.

supervising commercial activities. Lianghuai was one the largest of China's eleven salt districts at that time, and the importance of the 'Lianghuai Transport' office attracted many merchants to come to live in Yangzhou. These favorable circumstances helped in stimulating the city's economic growth as well as its cultural activities, and it soon became the largest centre for business, culture and amusement in Southern China in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. These developments made the city of Yangzhou a highly inspiring place for artists, and many poets and painters were attracted to its artistic and innovative atmosphere. Many of these artists enjoyed eccentric life-styles and adopted unorthodox, innovative artistic styles. They were later referred to as the 'Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou', the so-called *Yangzhou Ba Guai*<sup>161</sup>, a group of artists which Zheng Banqiao joined after leaving his post in 1753 (Zhang A. 2002: 200).<sup>162</sup>

In this cultural setting, the rich salt merchants, who originally had belonged to the fourth and lowest class of society, became the dominant economic and cultural force in Yangzhou, to the extent that their dominance slowly led to the subversion of the traditional Confucian social stratification. By first purchasing the lowest scholarly degree and then having the resources to educate their sons who subsequently became scholars, they could move up into the gentry class. The traditional scholars, on the other hand, although occupying the highest social position and belonging to the cultural elite, were not always well-off. This was especially so in cases where they did not descend from a gentry family, or where they did not have an official appointment. As Pohl (1990: 28) states,

the merchant however, could easily move into the gentry class, first by purchasing the lowest scholarly degree (*shengyuan*) [...] and then by having the

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<sup>161</sup>The term 'eccentric' in the first place refers to the expressive and individualist artistic style each of these artists had (contrary to the mainstream trend), but also to the strong personalities each of them had. Up till today, there is discussion among Chinese art scholars about who exactly these 'Eight Eccentrics' were. The most commonly accepted opinion lists Wang Shishen 汪士慎 (1686-1759), Huang Shen 黄慎 (1687-1768), Li Shan 李鱣/李鱓 (1686?-1756), Jin Nong 金农 (1687-1764), Luo Pin 罗聘 (1733-1799), Gao Xiang 高翔 (1688-1753), Li Fangying 李方膺 (1696-1755), and of course Zheng Banqiao (1693-1765) (Sun 2003: 4). Instead of just the eight artists referred to, the 'Eight Eccentrics' should rather be considered as a group of artists who share certain common characteristics in their life and art (Zhang A. 2002: 200). Li Shan seemed to have been a very good friend of Banqiao, and he certainly admired Jin Nong (Qin 2004: 46-60). Amongst other scholars, Sun Li (2003) discusses in his 'The Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou' the fifteen so-called members of the school, mentioning the eight core painters and the seven additional: Hua Yan 华喦, Gao Fenghan 高凤翰, Bian Shouming 边寿民, Min Zhen 闵贞, Li Mian 李勉, Chen Zhuan 陈撰 and Yang Fa 杨法. For a brief (English) discussion on the paintings of the Yangzhou Eccentrics see also Cahill 1976: 88-107, with a reference to Zheng Banqiao on p. 96.

<sup>162</sup>For a more elaborate account on the socio-cultural milieu of Yangzhou in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, see e.g. Pohl 1990: 27-32 and Qin 2004: 46-61.

resources to educate their sons who then could pass the examinations and become 'scholars'. Thus money and not scholarship became the key to social success: entry into the gentry class.<sup>163</sup>

Nevertheless, the social prestige of the scholars - rich or poor - remained very high, and the merchants - although sometimes wealthy and powerful - were still socially looked down upon. As a result, some of the more cultured rich salt merchants started to patronize scholars, poets and artists, hoping in this way to uplift their social position and self-image. At the same time, these rich merchants, through initiating a decadent life style, aroused a degenerate *nouveau riche* culture. This in turn influenced the life-style and artistic motivation of the literati, whose lofty artistic intentions lost a lot of their authenticity.<sup>164</sup> Almost everybody with cultural aspirations, including the merchants, called themselves 'literati' (Pohl 1990: 30). It was precisely this degeneration of the literati that Zheng Banqiao condemned. In fact, Zheng never fully respected the scholars, and the aforementioned degeneration made his indignation only grow, as he wrote in his *Fifth letter to Brother Mo from the magistrate's residence at Weixian*<sup>165</sup>:

The ancient people said of Chu-ko Liang that he was "indeed a famous scholar," which means that the term "famous scholar" could be applied worthily only to him. Now the city is full of painters and writers of calligraphy who are called "famous scholars." Would this not make Chu-ko Liang's cheeks burn and turn the high-minded ones' teeth cold (make them sneer)? (Lin Y. 1949: 496)

### 3.2.2 Zheng Banqiao

Much of Zheng Banqiao's personal opinions and feelings are known through his *Family Letters* (*Zheng Banqiao Jiashu* 郑板桥家书), which altogether can be considered as a book

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<sup>163</sup> For more on the relation merchant-official from an economic point of view, see Fairbank 1992: 179-182. For more on social mobility during the Qing dynasty, see Fairbank & Reischauer 1979: 30-32.

<sup>164</sup> Although Zheng Banqiao never liked to paint for money or just to please the merchants, he did have friends among them and also joined their artistic salons. His artistic style undoubtedly was influenced by the presence of the salt merchants in Yangzhou. For some Chinese studies discussing the relation between the salt merchants as patrons of the art and Banqiao's artistic production, see for example Yang & Zhu 2003 and Zhang J. 2005.

<sup>165</sup> Whenever I refer to a translation of the *Family Letters*, it will be the translation of Lin Yutang in Lin 1949: 483-496, and Zheng 2002: 2-67. Lin Yutang translated eleven of the *Family Letters* - be it partly - in English. Not translated by him are the Letters III, IV, IX, XI and XII. There is also a French translation by Jean-Pierre Dieny (1996). For more on the *Family Letters*, see also Mi 2005 and Tong 2003.

of moral education<sup>166</sup>. Also very valuable are the inscriptions and calligraphies, and even the many anecdotes surrounding him. Although for many of them it is not proven they can be directly attributed to him, they are nevertheless very useful for understanding what kind of person Zheng Banqiao was.<sup>167</sup>

In general, Zheng Banqiao is known as an excellent calligrapher, poet and painter. He became especially known as probably the most eccentric (*guai* 怪) member of the *Yangzhou Ba Guai*, the ‘Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou’ (see above), also known in artistic spheres as the ‘Yangzhou School’. His fame is not only due to his artistic recognition as an accomplished poet, painter and calligrapher, but also – and certainly not less so – due to his independent, eccentric and at the same time righteous and honest character. The following sections will deal primarily with his character, because understanding what kind of person he was is of higher importance for this research than his artistic style and ability.

### 3.2.2.1 Early life: misery and a bohemian life-style

Zheng Banqiao 郑板桥 (his penname, meaning Zheng ‘Wooden Bridge’) was born in the 1693 and died of illness aged seventy-three in 1765. He died in the garden where he used to live at that time, and was later buried in his native village, Xinghua 兴化, Jiangsu 江苏 province, (Qin 2004: 46). He is also known under his given name Zheng Xie 郑燮, ‘Zheng the harmonizer’. His style name was Kerou 克柔, ‘Mildness that overcomes’.<sup>168</sup>

Born into a poor family, he lost his mother at the age of three, and was further raised by his nursing mother, mother Fei, whom we know he was very attached to<sup>169</sup>. His father remarried but when he was thirteen, his stepmother died too. He had no brothers or sisters, but his paternal uncle had a son, Brother Mo 墨, who was twenty-four years younger than Zheng Banqiao, whom he considered as his younger brother. It is to this

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<sup>166</sup> For more on the moral value and practical use of the *Family Letters*, see for example Mi 2005.

<sup>167</sup> For a complete English biography of Zheng Banqiao, on which a lot of this part is based, see Pohl 1990: 33-63. For a Chinese study on the eccentricity of Zheng Banqiao, see for instance Wei Zhiyou (2008a), who discusses the reasons for Zheng Banqiao’s eccentricity (such as the *zeitgeist*), the ways in which he expressed his eccentricity, and the influence of his eccentricity on further generations. For other Chinese artistic studies on Zheng Banqiao including a historical background and biography, see Qin 2004; Sun 2003: 39-43; Lin 2006; Zhang X. 2005 (calligraphy), and some unofficially published editions by the Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall (Zheng Banqiao Jinianguan) on Zheng Banqiao called ‘Banqiao’ in 1985, 1986, 1988.

<sup>168</sup> As it was the tradition that names were given according to quote from ancient book, Zheng Banqiao’s names without doubt are chosen from the phrase *xie you rou ke* 燮友柔克 occurring in the *Shangshu - Hong Fan* (*di liu pian*) 尚书- 洪范 (第六篇). Remarkably, the dialectics of *rou* and *gang* will become an important element in the interpretations and explanations of the *Nande hutu* (see page 201).

<sup>169</sup> See for example the poem ‘A Poem for my wet nurse’, translated by Chaves 1986: 434-435.



Brother Mo that Zheng Banqiao wrote most of his *Family Letters*. He learnt to paint from his father at a very young age. At the age of seventeen, he was sent to Zhengzhou to study for the county examination to become a *xiucai* 秀才 ('Excellent Talent') or student, *shengyuan* 生员, a scholar preparing for provincial examinations<sup>170</sup>.

In 1714<sup>171</sup> at the age of twenty-two, Zheng married a woman of the Xu-clan in Xinghua, and then he moved to Yangzhou where he tried to make a living as a painter and calligrapher. As Pohl (1990: 35) states, 'he must have been attracted not only by the beauty of the city, but also by its cultural atmosphere, the gardens and patrons, and, last but not least, by the availability of entertainment and amusement such as brothels and theatres'. As many anecdotes and also lots of his own poems show, he became heavily immersed in the bohemian life-style that was so prominent in the city. Being by nature a somehow unrestrained, unconventional and fun-loving person, this kind of atmosphere was difficult for him to resist. Many of his early poems testify to his drinking and affairs with singing girls. He was also notoriously bisexual as he frankly admits in one of his autobiographical notes: 'I very much delight in beautiful landscape. I also love women; even more so, I like sex with men and intimate play with female servants and boys [...]' (Pohl 1990: 35-36).<sup>172</sup> As Pohl explains, in these years, he often used the terms *luotuo* 'unconventional, unrestrained' and *fengliu*, 'free-spirited, talented in letters and unconventional in life style' in his writings.<sup>173</sup> Especially his early poems are full of the joys (but also sorrows) of the poor scholar and artist,

However, his financial situation did not actually allow him an overly decadent lifestyle; he had a wife, two daughters and one son to support. But he was young and careless and could – at least to a certain extent – rely on financial support of his father (Pohl 1990: 35-36). The big turning point change came with the death of his father in 1722 (he was 30 then). It was then that he started to realize how his life was full of contradictions: his love for amusement, his sense of responsibility, and his poverty. From this period date the 'Seven Songs' (*Qi Ge*), in which he laments about his situation but also confesses how ashamed he is about wasting his youthful years. When in 1724 also his six years old son died due to hunger and cold, Zheng Banqiao finally decided to take more responsibility for his remaining finances, his family and the clan. He started teaching again, and additionally sold his paintings, which was quite unusual (and disgracing) for artists in those times (Qin 2004: 10). When in 1725 he unexpectedly got a

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<sup>170</sup> Cf note 149.

<sup>171</sup> According to Kang and Ye (2009: 188), it was in 1715.

<sup>172</sup> Zheng Banqiao even wrote an essay on the beauty of the male buttocks, which can be considered as a classic of homoerotic literature. For a translation and for more on his homoerotic tendencies, see e.g. Wu C. 2004: 103-104.

<sup>173</sup> For a detailed description of the various meanings of *fengliu*, see Feng 1997: 231-240.

generous gift of his friend Cheng Yuchen 程羽宸 in order to start a new life free of misery and grief, he temporarily could escape the pressing situation at home, and journeyed for the first time to Beijing where he spent a lot of time with Chan adepts and had vivid discussions with many of them, not ignoring taboo subjects. It appears that already in those days, he got the reputation of being *kuang*, ‘unrestrained, wild, and unconventional’ because of his frank and critical expression (Qin 2004: 16).<sup>174</sup>

After his return in 1729, Zheng successfully began his literary pursuits, such as the *Ten Songs with Daoist Sentiments* (*Daoqing Shi Shou* 道情十首), which express both an exaltation and idealization of the simple life, as well as an aversion for officialdom.<sup>175</sup> In all those years, he had indeed not been interested in pursuing an official career, probably because he was too attached to his freedom as a poor scholar and artist. Moreover, in his family, there was a tradition of refusing to serve the Qing Manchu rulers (Pohl 1990: 40-41).

However, not long after his return from Beijing, he finally changed his mind and picked up study for the civil service examinations. The most likely reason for this change of heart was his domestic situation. The hardships and poverty he and his family had to endure had become unbearable. His son had died already, and he could not bear the pressure of further hardship on his wife and daughters. Another reason might be that, at the age of thirty-five, he had decided that it was time to settle down and had more or less reconciled himself with the Manchu rule. So when he finally engaged in pursuing an official post, he was ready to take up responsibility for a life according to the Confucian etiquette. In other words, he decided to put his talents to good use and work in a responsible and meaningful way within society. As a result, Zheng (temporarily) put aside his natural inclination towards nonconformity and free life-style in order to serve the people (Pohl 1990: 37-41).

In 1732, only four years after he obtained the *juren* 举人 degree, he passed the provincial examinations, and, in 1736, at the age of forty-three, he achieved the second

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<sup>174</sup> According to Meng Zhen (2006), Zheng Banqiao’s ‘wildness’ should be considered as an example of the particular phenomenon of the ‘wild’, broad-minded and unruly but upright famous scholar (*kuangjuan mingshi* 狂狷名士) represented by figures such as Ruan Ji (210–263) and Ji Kang (223–262), two members of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*Zhulin Qi Xian* 竹林七贤), and later Xu Wei (1521–1593) and Shi Tao (1642–1718) and contemporaries of Zheng Banqiao such as Jin Nong (1687–1764). Of these scholar-officials, many also left officialdom or at least were unusual and unconventional in some ways, and Zheng Banqiao, who publicly admired many of them, very likely was inspired by their unrestrained and unusual behavior. (ibid.)

<sup>175</sup> According to Kang Ji and Ye Xiaomin (2009: 189), Zheng started to write the *Ten Songs of Daoist Sentiments* in 1725 and finalized them in 1729, but it was only 14 years later in 1743 that they were published. For more on the *Ten Songs with Daoist Sentiments*, see Pohl 1990: 40; 117-120; Qin 2004: 28-29; Zheng 2007; Wei 2008b, and Yin 2002.

place in the national examination and obtained the highest degree possible, the *jinshi* 进士 degree.<sup>176</sup>

### 3.2.2.2 Life as an official

After obtaining the *jinshi* degree in the first year of Qianlong, he assumed a magistrate's post first in Fanxian 范县, Shandong 山东 Province (1742)<sup>177</sup>. Possibly this was thanks to the influence of his friend prince Shen (Shen Junwang 慎郡王), one of the Kangxi emperor's twenty-four (official) sons<sup>178</sup>. In practice, only five percent of degree holders would get an official post, so without support from friends in high places, a degree holder was not very likely to obtain an official post (see also above). Four years later, he became county magistrate in Weixian 潍县, also in Shandong Province, where he served as an official until 1753.

Chinese society at that time was still a feudal society according to the Confucian model: highly hierarchical, bureaucratic and patriarchal (cf above). Although the Confucian ideal was to serve the people and set the right example as an official, officialdom was probably the most corrupt of all the layers in society. Zheng greatly surpassed his corrupt colleagues and superiors as well as the rich people of his county in showing real sympathy and great concern for people suffering hardship. The first and second year that Zheng served in Weixian, he was severely tested by natural disasters. The county experienced a disastrous drought, resulting in mass starvation and mass migration of the population. Zheng adopts some unusual measures to alleviate the catastrophic conditions in his county. As Pohl (1990: 45) cites from the biography of Zheng Banqiao in the *Qingshi Liezhuan* 清史列传:

When Cheng became a magistrate in Wei-hsien, there was a year of such bad harvest that people ate human flesh. Cheng Hsieh launched a great program for repair and construction work. He called on the starving people from far and near to do work in exchange for food. He ordered the wealthy families of the town to open their kitchens on a rotating basis and to feed the hungry with cooked gruel.

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<sup>176</sup> See note 149.

<sup>177</sup> As from the Tang dynasty (618-907), a district officer was by law a stranger in the country he rules. That is to say, he was employed minimum 500 li (about 250 km) away from his birthplace. Other such rules included not being allowed to marry in his own district neither to own land. This rule would limit too much expansion of power and autonomy of the local official through 'interpersonal relations'. (Dessein, Heirman, Delporte, 2001: 150)

<sup>178</sup> According to Zheng Dekai (2007: 27) another important connection for getting his official's post in Fanxian was his good friend and famous Daoist teacher Lou Jinyuan (see also page 125).

He also assumed responsibility over the stored grain in the graneries and sold the grain for a cheaper price. As a result, countless people survived.

The *Zhongxiu Xinghua County Annals* (*Zhongxiu Xinghua xianzhi* 重修兴化县志) further describe a reply by Zheng Banqiao to some of the people opposing his relief work and reluctance to request the approval of his superiors for this kind of relief measures:

What kind of times are these? If we wait until the reports to the higher authorities have gone back and forth, there will be no people left. If someone should be dispatched, I will take the responsibility!<sup>179</sup> (Qin 2004: 31)

While administering the relief program he kept a record of those who ‘borrowed’ grain, and ordered the people to write out receipts as bonds for later repayment. However, when he left his post in Weixian upon his so-called retirement, he burnt the ‘receipts’, releasing the poor from their commitments.<sup>180</sup>

Another story reports of how Zheng Banqiao intervenes in an accident between a porridge vendor and a rich merchant. The story goes like this:

As he sees the accident happen, he is urged to judge the situation. First he asks everyone nearby whose fault it is, but no-one dares to point at the rich merchant. Thereupon the merchant blames a stone, because it was in his way, so Zheng decides to put the stone to trial, and invites the people nearby to be witnesses. Of course, when asking questions and hitting the stone to make it confess, it turns out the stone is mute and blind, so Zheng accuses the merchant of purposely blaming somebody (something) else, and as such deceiving him personally. And, according to the Confucian etiquette, cheating an official is like cheating your father. When he orders the merchant to be beaten, the merchant begs him for forgiveness. Thereupon, he gives him the choice of either paying a big fine, or accepting the lashes. Of course, the wealthy merchant happily pays the fine, which Zheng donates entirely to the poor porridge vendor. (Ouyang 2006: 12-13; own paraphrase)<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> 此何时? 俟辗转申报, 民无子遗矣. 有遣, 我任之! See also Pohl 1990:45.

<sup>180</sup> This is probably the most cited and historically reliable story with regard to describing Zheng Banqiao’s concern for the people and his independent and rebellious character. All works about the life and works of Zheng Banqiao here cited contain this story with more or less the same content elements.

<sup>181</sup> This story has become extremely popular, to the extent that it has been selected as one of the stories about ancient Chinese Literature and Art Figures to be printed as a story with nice illustrations. This English language picture story called ‘Zheng Banqiao tries a rock’ was published in 1986. As there are probably many slightly varying versions, the story here accounts of ‘riffraffs’ and ‘fat landlords’ that obstructed the old porridge vendor, and of the rock being the ‘demon’ that tripped the old man. See Huan 1986.

As Ouyang Xiulin observes, putting a stone to trial, interrogating a stone and hitting a stone is really something no other official would dare to do.<sup>182</sup>

Most stories likewise depict him as a courageous defender of the weak, always in conflict with his superiors and never subservient to any higher-ranking officials. Apart from having strong feelings of sympathy for the poor and powerless, over time he felt increasing resentment towards officials and even scholars in general. In fact, Zheng strongly opposed the four divisions of Confucian society made up of scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants (cf above). In his *Fourth Letter to Brother Mo* (written in 1744), he clearly gives his opinion on the existing classification and how it should be changed, and on the wickedness of officialdom:

I think the best class of people in the world are the farmers. Scholar should be considered the last of the four classes. The most well-to-do farmers have a hundred *mu* (about sixteen acres), the next seventy or eighty *mu*, and the next fifty or sixty *mu*. They all toil and labor to feed the rest of the world. Were it not for the farmers, we should all starve. We scholars are considered one class higher than the farmers because we are supposed to be good sons at home and courteous abroad, and maintain the ancient tradition of culture; in case of success, we can serve and benefit the people, and in case of failure, we can cultivate our personal lives as an example to the world. But this is no longer true. As soon as a person takes a book in hand, he is thinking of how to pass the examinations and become a *chūjen* or *chinshih*, how to become an official and get rich and build fine houses and buy large property. It is all wrong from the very start, and the further one goes, the more wicked one becomes. (Lin Y. 1949: 491)

These very personal thoughts show how indignant and disappointed Zheng Banqiao was about scholars in general, and more in particular those who were official. Unable to be obedient, he was in constant conflict with his superiors, until one day it reached a climax during a catastrophic famine in Shandong. Zheng could not bear seeing the poor people suffer, and decided to open up the imperial grain store for them. Obviously, he encountered much opposition from his superiors for this act, and he finally left office, after which he retired to write and paint in Yangzhou rather than to compromise his integrity. This catastrophe and the aftermath in his professional life left a deep impression on Zheng, in such a way that many of his poems deal with this topic. In one of these poems, he already announces his retirement:

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<sup>182</sup> This is a wonderful example of how Zheng Banqiao purposely but smartly pretends to be a fool in favor of the people. As we will later see, this is one of the smart ways to pretend to be muddled (*zhuang hutu*).

Amidst the autumnal clouds, geese will accompany me home;  
In the spring, cranes will seek their food, as I will with them.  
I will leave and hide my ineptitude well,  
The lakes will be full of fragrant watershield.<sup>183</sup>

In fact, the calligraphy *Nande hutu*, written in 1751 two years before he left officialdom, might also be considered as a foreboding of his leaving; he already expresses the idea of the uselessness of his 'brightness', articulates his longing for more peace of mind, but at the same time acknowledges how difficult it is to let go and retreat and not be concerned with future rewards.

Many versions deal with his leaving office. Based on extensive text analysis, Zhou Jiyin 周积寅 (2002: 149), who published many articles on Zheng Banqiao and the Eight Eccentrics, discerns two versions of this event: one explanation is that he was dismissed from office (*ba guan*), and one that he took leave himself (*ci guan*). His investigations show that the historical sources closest in time to Zheng Banqiao, such as the *Biographies of the Qing dynasty* and the *Xinghua County Annals* all mention that he took leave. For instance the *Biographies of the Qing dynasty* mention that because he offended superior officials, he asked to be discharged on account of poor health (Wang Z. 1987: 5882-5883)<sup>184</sup>. More recent sources, however, including a popular TV serial and short stories, mention that he was dismissed. The earliest documented version may be the most plausible: Zheng since long was thoroughly dissatisfied with the unwillingness of higher authorities to help people in need, and was so angered by their inaction that he asked to be discharged. Pohl (1990: 47) also mentions that the real reason for his retirement was charges of corruption and embezzlement against him in connection to his relief work set up by the local gentry.

Several stories surround his leaving as an official, and there is even one story that recounts the situation in which Zheng Banqiao swore not to be an official any longer. In this story, Zheng Banqiao went to the countryside or mountains, disguised as an ordinary man with some official clerks. This was something he did often. Once, they had been away for more than a month and had only three eggs left, no money nor dried food. One night when the two clerks were sleeping, Zheng saw two mice stealing the eggs. Because he really enjoyed the spectacle and did not want to disturb the mice, he let them take the eggs. Then he thought to himself, Why not tease the two companions a bit? So he woke them up to ask who took the eggs. He accused one of the clerks who

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<sup>183</sup> For a translation of these poems, see Pohl 1990: 223-228, and more in particular the cited excerpt, Pohl 1990: 228. Pohl explains that watershield is a symbol of retirement from office, as well as a delicacy which seekers of fortune must deny themselves.

<sup>184</sup> At that time, as it suited a Confucian official not to abandon his social duties, poor health was the only excuse for which an official could retire.

initially denied. But then his other companion said he would beat him twenty times to see if he would confess. On the first strike, the clerk confessed to something he did not do. At that very moment, Zheng, who was understandably very upset about this, realized that in his past career so many false confessions were done out of fear of getting beaten. This is said to be the moment he decided to leave officialdom, because he realized the terrible suffering the state had given the common people (*laobaixing* 老百姓), the iniquity of officialdom, and his own mistakes and lapses during his career as an official (Ouyang 2006: 19).

Some anecdotes also recall the way he left, taking with him only three donkeys loaded with books as to illustrate how little he cared about his official title, material belongings and personal wealth compared to his books (arts and literature) (see e.g. You 2010; Zhong 2008b). But whatever the anecdotes say, the truth is that Zheng had been at odds with officialdom to begin with, and gradually became more and more frustrated with his inability to fulfill the Confucian ideal of serving the people. One of his *Lyrical poems, Life of an official*, testifies to this:

After ten years the silken quilt is worn and torn,  
Having tasted a full turn of officialdom.  
Rain has past by the locust tree hall, the sky now clear as water.  
Just right for pouring some tea,  
Just right for opening a bottle of wine  
And then again back to piles of books and notes.  
Holding court, there is always shouting and brawling,  
And the office servants make people to puppets.  
Can a conscientious official be just and compassionate?  
The wine is done, the candle burnt down,  
The cold is leaking through as the wind arises –  
How many great hopes lost.  
(Pohl 1990: 242)

It would seem that the eccentricity for which he is known in his own special style of calligraphy and painting may be a good reflection of his character. He was undeniably an ebullient, independent, proud and stubborn man. He is known for his terrible habit of wearing at people. He once remarked of himself ‘to be especially good at scolding at scholars’ (*you hao ma xiucai* 尤好骂秀才) (Qin 2004: 46). At the same time – and it is exactly this contradiction that make him such an interesting person – he was a man of high moral integrity and social conscience, ever incorruptible (*liang xiu qing feng* 两袖清

风<sup>185</sup>). He obviously represented an official who took his social responsibility very seriously and tried hard to live according to these ideals. Not only was he concerned with the poor and underprivileged in his county, but in general with all the little in power and lower in position, as well as with the most vulnerable such as children and women, whatever their background was.<sup>186</sup>

### 3.2.2.3 The ‘eccentric’ and devoted artist

Zheng Banqiao was an artist at heart, with a critical and unconventional temperament. The arts strongly appealed again, and he was happy to (re)turn to a life of aesthetics and quietness. So when he left his post in Weixian in 1753<sup>187</sup>, he first returned to his native Xinghua, but spent a lot of time in Yangzhou, where he got involved in a group of artists that were innovative in their artistic style. It was however only about a hundred years after his lifetime that this group became known as the so-called ‘Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou’ (*Yangzhou Ba Guai* 扬州八怪)<sup>188</sup>. Many of these artists were initially scholar-painters who followed the literati tradition in their artistic pursuit and later on turned to be professional painters. As they had to sell their paintings and calligraphy to earn a living, they were attracted to Yangzhou, a large commercial city at the time. It was indeed the liberal atmosphere, freedom of expression and prosperous economy in Yangzhou that allowed them to focus on the expression of their own feelings and temperament, and thus their paintings were different from those of the Orthodox School. Their art was considered ‘eccentric’ since they did not adhere to the conventionally accepted manners and habits. An example of this is the innovative free-hand painting of flowers and birds for which the artists of this school are generally known, as well as for stimulating the development of other new styles. Among the *Yangzhou Ba Guai*, Zheng Banqiao is known for his ‘three perfections’ (*san jue* 三绝) : painting, poetry and calligraphy.

Various stories, known from the historical annals, local gazetteers and from his own *Family Letters*, poems and inscriptions, document Zheng Banqiao’s eccentric nature. One such story gives an account of how little he cared about what people thought of him,

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<sup>185</sup> The expression *liang xiu qing feng* 两袖清风 literally means ‘cool wind in the two sleeves’. This refers to the long wide sleeves of the traditional outfit of officials that are not full of hidden gifts and money paid to bribe someone.

<sup>186</sup> For instance his letters XIII and XIV to brother Mo discuss the treatment of servants’ and poor neighbors’ children. For a translation, see Lin 1949: 492-495.

<sup>187</sup> Qin Jin’gen (2004: 38) discusses the suggestion of some authors that it was in 1752, based on ages and dates in some of his poems.

<sup>188</sup> For more on the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, see note 161.



and of how sharply and creatively he ridiculed the ‘usual’ and ‘conventional’. It was the tradition that a genuine scholar-artist did not paint on demand for money, but made art as a present or for himself to keep. So it was highly unusual, disgracing and ‘unorthodox’ for such artists to set themselves up with commercial intent. It seems a lot of his contemporaries did use their art not just to make a living (as he had done himself in his younger years), but to become rich, which afforded them an abundant life-style in an affluent city such as Yangzhou. In his latter years he daringly published a price list for his paintings. In William Henry Scott’s *Yangchow and its Eight Eccentrics*, the following words by Zheng Banqiao are cited:

If you present cold, harsh cash, then my heart swells with joy and everything I write or paint is excellent. [...] Honeyed talk of old friendships and past companions is only the autumn wind blowing past my ear. (Scott 1964: 11)

Moreover, the postscript to the pricelist mentions: ‘Written in 1759 on the advice of Monk Cho-kung who suggested that I should decline visitors’ (Pohl 1990: 59). As this amusing postscript of the price-list suggests, Zheng might just have wanted to make it clear that he did not want to live up to obligations, or – as a celebrated painter-calligrapher - he wanted to make it clear he was fed up with visitors offering him a lot of money for his paintings. Whatever his intentions and given his outspoken and daring sense of humor, it would be highly doubtful that the pricelist with inflated prices for his paintings was intended as a money-making scheme, especially given the other accounts of his integrity and incorruptibility. It was more likely a warning that he would not paint for those he despised like the rich salt merchants. One of these accounts refers to a salt merchant who was an admirer of Zheng’s painting and who wanted to pay a lot of money for one of his paintings. Zheng Banqiao refused to sell it to him out of idealism:

A salt merchant, by doing investigations into Zheng Banqiao, came to know that he was very fond of dogmeat. So he disguised as an old man and waited a long time at the outskirts of the city where he started to braise dogmeat until one day Zheng Banqiao passed. He offered him dogmeat which, as expected, Zheng Banqiao accepted. After the meal, the merchant asked Zheng Banqiao to make him a painting as a favor for the delicious meal. Thereupon, Zheng Banqiao improvised a two-fold painting. The next day, the paintings were already hanging at the wall of the salt merchant’s house, who gave a big banquet to celebrate this. When Zheng Banqiao got to know about this, he quickly went back to the place where he ate the dogmeat, but the old man was nowhere to be found. Just then he suddenly realized what had happened, and it was much to his regret. (Dai J. 1994)<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> See also Pohl 1990: 56-57.

Indeed, after he had returned to Yangzhou and started to sell his paintings again, the situation was quite different from his time in Yangzhou before he became an official. He now was quite famous and had no problem selling his paintings if he wanted to. In those days, he used to have a seal on which was written ‘the same old Banqiao as twenty years ago’ (*ershi nian qian jiu Banqiao* 二十年前旧板桥)<sup>190</sup>. So he regarded himself as the same old Banqiao. The only difference was that people now treated him differently (Qin 2004: 44, own paraphrase).

### 3.2.3 Philosophical influences

Although Zheng Banqiao’s fame is partially based on his eccentricity, independent thinking and particular approach to life, one should not forget that he – as a highly learned scholar-official and a holder of the highest possible degree in the civil service examinations – was deeply emerged in traditional Confucian learning, including the Daoist and Buddhist texts as designated for the civil service examinations. At the end of his life, he characterized himself in his relation to the ‘three teachings’ (*san jiao* 三教) or three major currents in Chinese philosophy as ‘no immortal, no Buddha, no wise one’ (*bu xian bu fo bu shengxian* 不仙不佛不圣贤) (Qin 2004: 60), but from all his personal writings and from the historical sources, we know how deeply immersed he was in Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, and that they had a deep influence on his life-style and way of thinking. In addition, the three teachings had been a major topic of intellectual debate in the late Ming, and this intellectual discussion certainly left its marks on the scholar Zheng Banqiao.<sup>191</sup>

Educated as a Confucian scholar, it needs no explanation that Zheng Banqiao’s knowledge and ideals as an official were deeply rooted in the Confucian ethics and structure of society. During the Qing dynasty, the re-interpreted learnings and ideas of

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<sup>190</sup> For an overview of all his commonly used seals, see for instance Qin 2004: 195-199.

<sup>191</sup> According to some authors, the expression *bu xian bu fo bu shengxian* could betray some ideological influence by late Ming philosopher Li Zhi 李贽 (1527-1602), who advocated himself to be skeptic from his youth, repelled by anything or anyone – Confucian, Buddhist or Daoist – identified with an organized creed. According to Li Zhi, the three teachings should anyway be considered as one because they all in one or another way aim at delivery from this world, ‘for only by escaping the world can they avoid the sufferings of wealth and rank’. (de Bary 1970: 211; Brook 1993: 21). In many of his writings, Li Zhi’s repeated critical, independent and individualistic thoughts correspond very well with Zheng Banqiao’s convictions and behavior (see e.g. Meng 2006: 61). Li Zhi also strongly valued an ability to ‘live in the present’ (*dangxia* 当下) as opposed to the ideal of the ritually defined self (Epstein 2001: 76), a use of words we also find in Zheng’s postscript of *Nande hutu*: *dangxia xin an* 当下心安.

Confucius (see above) were taught in schools and examined in the official civil service examinations. Moral virtues such as loyalty (*zhong* 忠) to the dynasty, filial piety (or child-virtue, *xiao* 孝) extended to dealing with all elders (not only within the family) and consequently also obedience to the father/landlord/superior/emperor, benevolence (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 义) were emphasized in order to obtain (and maintain) social harmony. Especially in his position as a scholar, he showed himself as a true ‘father-mother-official’ (*fumuguan* 父母官), and throughout his life he turned out to be – although rather late in his life – surprisingly successful in the Confucian (hierarchical) social structure. It was only at the age of sixty-one – the age that Confucius himself said he ‘was already obedient (to the ‘Decree of heaven’, *tianming* 天命)’ (*Lunyu*, II, 4) – that he finally decided to stop struggling with his moral integrity in a world full of corrupt officials and degenerated scholars, renounce his lofty ideals as an official and leave officialdom for good, to obey another ‘Decree of heaven’, namely that of the artist in him. By doing so, he somehow unwillingly turned into a ‘bad’ Confucian.<sup>192</sup>

Clearly, the Daoist philosophy of life comes closest to Zheng Banqiao’s inner temperament. He is also known as *Banqiao Daoren* 板桥道人, ‘Banqiao the Daoist’. Long before he assumed an official post, he was very fond of the Daoist way of ‘leisurely wandering around’ (*xiaoyao you* 逍遥游)<sup>193</sup>. When he taught school at Jiangcun at the age of twenty-six, he often wrote poems that testify to his love for nature and natural pureness (Zheng 2007: 26). In addition, in his *Ten Songs with Daoist Sentiments* (*Daoqing Shi Shou* 道情十首)<sup>194</sup>, he introduces an old fisher, an old woodgatherer, an old monk, an old Daoist, an old scholar, and a little beggar boy, all glorifying a plain and simple life. In the Ninth Song he writes, ‘Praise for Zhuangzi, homage to Laozi’, and the last sentence of the poem glorifies the Daoist ideal of returning to nature: ‘Singing these ten Daoqing songs, I return to the mountains.’ (Pohl 1990: 220-222) Also during his time as an official and later during his time in Yangzhou, several of Zheng’s good friends were Daoist masters (*daoshi* 道士), of which probably the closest and at the same time most famous friend was Lou Jinyuan 娄近垣. Lou Jinyuan was also called Lou Zhenren 娄真人, ‘(Daoist) authentic man’<sup>195</sup>. He was not just an ordinary mystical Daoist master, but excelled at medical knowledge too. He maintained a very close relationship with the Yongzheng emperor, such that he was asked to cure the emperor of a serious disease, which he successfully did. Zheng Banqiao was only four years younger than Lou

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<sup>192</sup> According to the Analects, an official should not leave his post just to maintain his personal integrity, and thus put aside the duty that exists between sovereign and subject (*Lunyu*, XVIII, 7).

<sup>193</sup> The theme of *xiaoyao you* 逍遥游 indeed is very prominent in the *Zhuangzi*. See also page 70.

<sup>194</sup> See note 175.

<sup>195</sup> See also note 112.

Zhenren, and they were from the same region. Moreover, their attitude towards life was very similar, which enhanced their friendship even more (Zheng 2007: 27).<sup>196</sup>

In his *Family Letters*, Zheng also frequently makes use of Daoist symbols and ideas. An excerpt from his *Second letter to brother Mo* shows his concern with nature and the ‘natural life’ according to the Daoist principles:

What I hate most is to have caged birds; we enjoy them while they are shut up in prison. [...] Now nature creates all things and nourishes them all. Even an ant or an insect comes from the combination of forces of the *yin* and *yang* and the five elements. (Lin Y. 1949: 492-493)

And a little further he continues:

Generally the enjoyment of life should come from a view regarding the universe as a park, and the rivers and streams as a pond, so that all beings can live in accordance with their nature. Great indeed is such happiness! (Lin Y. 1949: 492-493)

Lastly, one of the most obvious expressions of real Daoist sentiments is the calligraphy *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂, which I will review in depth in the next section (3.3). The wisdom of life that lies at the core of the saying expresses the deepest foundations of Daoist thinking, namely to cultivate an authentic, lighthearted and carefree approach to life.

With regard to Buddhism, among Zheng’s best friends, Buddhist monks ranked very highly. As Qin Jin’gen (2004: 61) observes, just by leafing through his *Collected Works*, one can find many poems donated to monks, of which some describe the life style and living environment of the monks, others narrate the thoughts of the monks, and still others tell about his friendship with the monks. Some of these poems cannot hide the admiration and envy Zheng had towards the simple, quiet, and carefree life of monks in seclusion. It is very likely that Zheng Banqiao enjoyed his time with his befriended monks as a way to be free of the responsibilities and worries of his public life as an official. Especially Wufang Shangren 无方上人, whom he met during an outing in Jiangxi Lushan 江西庐山, became an important and long-standing friend (Qin 2004: 15). Wufang Shangren lived his whole life in the background of society, untrammelled by convention. In his younger years, he lived on Lushan mountain, and later became the abbot of Wengshan Monastery 瓮山寺 in Beijing. During his time in Beijing, he often had long discussions with Zheng Banqiao. At the end of his life, he lived as a recluse. As a consequence of his low-profile life, there are very few historical sources about him. But he certainly was not just an ordinary monk, and even became known as the ‘honorable

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<sup>196</sup> For a brief analysis on the life, works and thoughts of the Daoist master Lou Jinyuan, see Kong 2006.

zen (*chan*) senior'. Besides, he was very proficient in poetry, painting and stamp carving (Jin 2001: 69-70).<sup>197</sup>

Chinese *Chan* Buddhism in particular had a strong influence on Zheng Banqiao's thinking as well as art (see e.g. Qin 2004: 60). Zheng Dekai suggests three reasons for the importance of *Chan* monks (*fangwai renshi* 方外人士)<sup>198</sup> in Zheng Banqiao's life. The first is the fact that the Emperor, more in particular the Yongzheng Emperor, as well as the gentry were very much in favor of *Chan* Buddhism, which must to some extent have contributed to the presence of *Chan* Buddhist friends in Zheng Banqiao's connections. Among his connections, Zheng Banqiao had a lot of friends in high positions who were *Chan* adepts. The second reason is that from a very young age, he was familiar with *Chan* Buddhism in his family, often through the presence of befriended monks of the family. Being by nature authentic and kind, Zheng Banqiao felt a kindred spirit with these Buddhist monks. Moreover, they were all men of letters who were passionate about poems and painting, so they shared a common interest, which could be considered a third reason for his affinity with *Chan* Buddhism. They all belonged to a group of people of the same interest and passion for paintings and writings, which they could share as good friends do (Zheng 2007: 25-26).<sup>199</sup>

In his article *Waking up the deaf and foolish, chase away worry and trouble* (*Huanxing chilong, xiaochu fannao* 唤醒痴聋, 销除烦恼) - Zheng Banqiao's own words of motivation for writing the *Daoqing Shi Shou* - Wei Zhiyou 卫志友<sup>200</sup> (2008b) explores the Daoist and Buddhist elements in the *Daoqing Shi Shou*. He analyzes the ten songs from three points of view. Firstly he discusses the absorption of formal elements of Daoist and Buddhist thinking such as the allegories of the 'bell for awaking the world' (*xingshizhong*

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<sup>197</sup> *Wufang* 无方 in Buddhism might refer to 'no place, nowhere' or 'unlimited to place or method, i.e. Buddha's power' (Soothill & Hodous 1998 [1937]: 379). *Wufang Shangren* is not a very well known monk and he is rather difficult to document on. In fact, most of him is known through the writings by Qing scholar and poet and also friend of Zheng Banqiao, Yong Zhong 永忠. For more on *Wufang Shangren*, see Zheng 2007; Jin 1999; Jin 2001. For a letter of Zheng Banqiao to *Wufang Shangren*, see Zheng 2000: 307-308.

<sup>198</sup> Throughout the text, the author uses the term *fangwai renshi* 方外人士, meaning 'people living outside of the mundane world', such as Buddhist recluses. The term originates from Zhuangzi, who distinguishes traveling in the transcendental world (*fangwai* 方外) i.e. outside the sphere of human affairs, and traveling in the mundane world (*fangnei* 方内), i.e. inside the sphere. Later the former came to mean Buddhism, and the latter Confucianism. (Chan 1970: 199)

<sup>199</sup> For a thorough study on the relation of Zheng Banqiao and *Chan* (zen) Buddhism, see Jin 2001. The author explains the relation and contacts of Zheng Banqiao with Daoist and Buddhist monks and their influence on him. Other studies mentioning Buddhism as a main influence are Qin 2004; Zheng 2007; Jin 1999, and Wei 2008b.

<sup>200</sup> Wei Zhiyou 卫志友 has written some excellent articles about Zheng Banqiao and the philosophical influences that become clear in his works. See for example Wei 2008a, 2008b.

醒世钟), the *Chan* type of realization (of the world) (*chanwu* 禅悟), and the allegory of fishing (*diaoyu* 钓鱼), all very particular to Buddhist and Daoist thinking. He also distinguishes the absorption of Buddhist and Daoist elements into the content, such as the sensation of drifting through life as in a dream<sup>201</sup>, and the difficulties of distancing oneself from the material world. A third investigation leads to the typical Buddhist and Daoist style elements we find in the *Daoqing Shi Shou*. Here the author mentions the frequent references to nature (description of nature as a style element), the use of connotations (instead of using clear and distinct language), and the use of subtle and vague phrasing (*yinyue qi ci* 隐约其辞, *mohu bu qing* 模糊不清) in the language of giving instructions. These elements would help the Daoist or Buddhist pupil to comprehend (the truth) through own body and mind experience (*yi shenxin qu tiwu* 以身心去体悟), and not through reasoning. Especially the ideal of being aloof from worldly matters is very prominent in Zheng Banqiao's later works as an official. He becomes less susceptible to ambitions such as striving for fame and fortune, and clearly yearns to become free and unrestrained again.

As we can see from the above, Zheng Banqiao embodies the characteristically Chinese, threefold philosophical influence known as 'the unity of the three teachings' (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一). As a highly trained scholar, he was heavily influenced by traditional Confucian and Daoist thinking, which has continuously and simultaneously influenced the mentality, way of thinking and spiritual inclination of the Chinese people, and more in particular of scholar-literati.

This melting of the three teachings is a phenomenon rooted in ancient philosophical history. As a way of coping with the interweaving of various religious and philosophical traditions, China originated an amalgamated version of Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism in the ancient past. In general, Confucianism represents social order and public conduct with a strong focus on the community, (philosophical) Daoism represents an ambivalent reaction to Confucianism with a focus on individual amorality and a carefree, long life, and Buddhism (but also religious Daoism) adds a spiritual transcendent flavor to this by looking to the meaning of life and death. Neo-Confucianism is the official philosophical movement that incorporates all these elements at a theoretical level. Neo-Confucianism was primarily developed during the Song (960-1279) dynasty, and relied heavily on Daoist and Buddhist metaphysics to expand the initial ideas of Confucianism, and in that process absorbed both Daoist and

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<sup>201</sup> The author here refers to the famous passage about the dream of the butterfly in the *Zhuangzi*, see also page 58.

Buddhist elements.<sup>202</sup> By the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the Neo-Confucian amalgam of thoughts knew a strong revival, as the Manchu rulers allowed many religions to co-exist and especially favored *Chan* Buddhism.

Obviously, in the case of Zheng Banqiao, being an independent thinker, not bound to or concerned with traditional dogmas, he was not afraid of an unorthodox interpretation of the Confucian Classics and any other teaching. For instance in his *Ninth Family Letter*, he promotes a personal and critical view as essential to studying, and shows himself to be prejudiced against monks and Confucian scholars.

The monks are sinners against the Buddha. They rob and they kill and seek after women and are greedy and snobbish, for they have not followed the doctrines of purifying their hearts and seeking their original nature. The government graduates are also sinners against Confucius, for they are neither kind nor wise, and devoid of courtesy and justice. (Lin Y. 1949: 487)

In addition, in the *Fourth Letter to Brother Mo* he discusses the fate of scholars who strive to become officials and insists they should keep quiet because

the moment we [scholars] open our mouths, people will say, “All you scholars know how to talk. As soon as you become officials, you will not be saying the same things.” That is why we have to keep quiet and accept the insults. (Lin Y. 1949: 491)

Moreover, his feeling of indignation towards the degenerating Confucian schooled literati grew in parallel with his disapproval of officialdom. In fact, being anything but submissive (as many of the anecdotes such as the measures he took during the catastrophic famine above illustrate), highly moralistic and always acting true to his own beliefs, he was his own best example of his criticism towards scholar-officials.

Zheng Dekai (2007) similarly concludes in his study about the influence of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism on Zheng Banqiao, that Zheng was without doubt a great follower of the Confucian doctrine, but that his ‘strange’, individualistic and innovative character and consciousness made him discontent with clinging to the old-fashioned way. This lifelong difficulty with the balance between his unconventional, unruly and independent character, his inclination towards Daoist and Buddhist spirituality and his strong belief in the Confucian ideals of righteousness and benevolence tested him

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<sup>202</sup> For more on Neo-Confucianism, see also note 109. For an in depth analysis of the origin of the concept of the ‘the unity of the three teachings’ as a subject of philosophical debate and how it evolved in late Imperial China, and in particular for the problematic application of ‘syncretism’ - a word often used to translate *he yi* 合一 - to Chinese thought and religion see Brook 1993. The concept of the *san jiao he yi* will re-appear in the discussion on the popular interpretation of the saying in Chapter Four (see 4.5).

severely, to the extent that at the end of his life, Zheng himself characterized his relation to the three teachings as ‘no immortal, no Buddha, no wise one’ (*bu xian bu fo bu shengxian*) (see above page 124). In this respect, the actual meaning of Zheng Banqiao’s own words for defining his relation with the three teachings lies in his inability to stick and commit himself to just one school of learning. According to Zheng Dekai, throughout his (public) life, Zheng gave priority to Confucianism, while relying on Daoism and Buddhism for his inner life - which up until today is still a common attitude in China. The strong resilience of Confucianism, the soberness of Daoism, and the Buddhist asceticism and benevolent attitude all had a deep impact on him during his life (Zheng 2007: 28). Later in his life, he discarded Confucianism more and turned to Daoism, in parallel with the changes in his character and life-style (having retired from public life). In one of his later lyrical poems, he refers to his poetic development reflecting his inner life:

When I was young and indulged in the pursuit of pleasures, I studied the style of Ch’in [Kuan] (1049-1100) and Liu [Yung] (fl.1034). In my middle years, when I was filled with strong emotions, I studied the style of Hsin [Ch’i-chi] (1140-1207) and Su [Shih](1036-1101). Now that I am old, without worldly desires and unmindful of emotions, I study the style of Liu [Kuo] (1154-1206). Everybody changes with the times and does not notice it. Who can ever escape destiny?<sup>203</sup> (Pohl 1990: 230)

Zheng Banqiao recognized his changes, and ended up free of any desire for social status, a strong reputation or future fame and fortune. It was a long journey, but having lost or renounced most of his lofty official’s ideals, only the free and unrestrained artist Zheng Banqiao remained.

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<sup>203</sup> All of the mentioned men are Song poets. Qin Guan 秦观 was a student of Su Shi (Su Dongpo), excelling in *ci* 词 song-lyrics. Liu Yong 柳永 was also well-versed in *ci* poetry, and known for his ability to render the sublime accessible in the vernacular, a quality which some critics called ‘vulgarity’. Xin Qiji 辛弃疾 was besides poet also a famous military leader. For Su Shi, see note 101 and note 145. Liu Guo 刘过 called himself Longzhou Daoist Master (*Longzhou Daoren* 龙洲道人), which betrays his Daoist inclination.



### 3.3 *Nande hutu*: ‘Being muddled is difficult’

聪明难，糊涂难，由聪明而转入糊涂更难。放一著，退一步，当下心安，非图后来福报也。  
*Being smart is difficult, being muddled is also difficult. But it is even more difficult to turn from being smart into being muddled. Let go for once! Take a step back! Present peace of mind consists of not planning for future rewards.*  
(Zheng Banqiao)

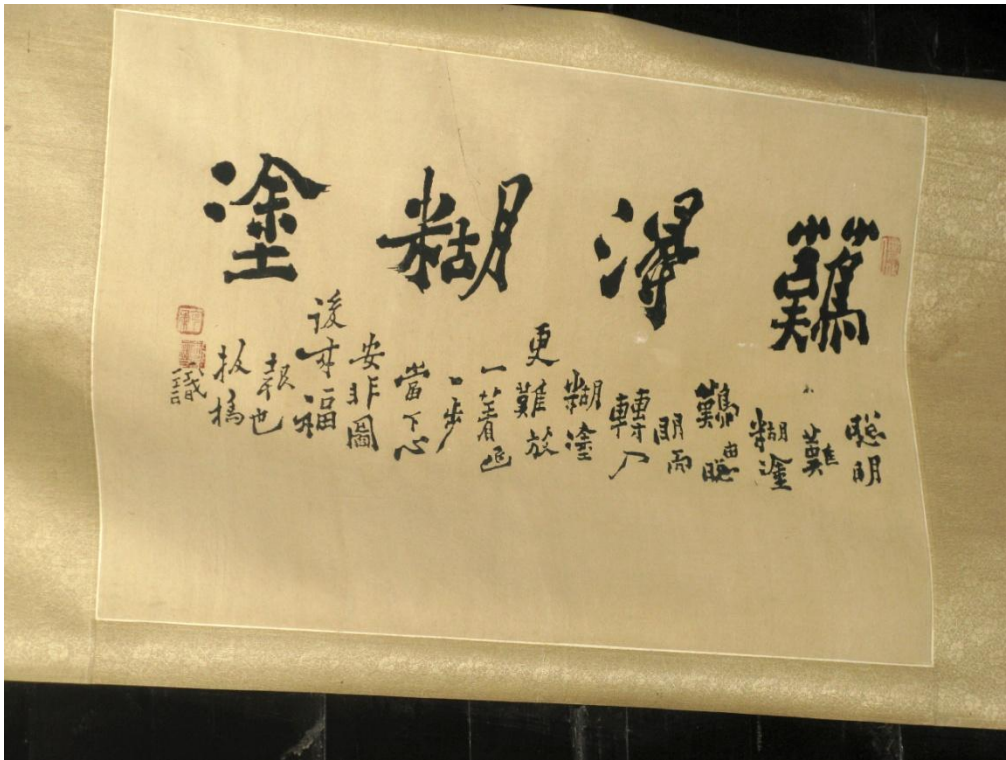


Figure 1 *Nande hutu* (own picture taken in the old family house of Zheng Banqiao in Xinghua, 2009)

*Nande hutu*, written in 1751, two years before Zheng Banqiao retired from officialdom, is probably one of his most often copied works. The horizontal roll (*heng'e* 横额) on which we often find the calligraphy today, was originally a *bian'e* 匾额, a horizontal tablet with inscription.<sup>204</sup> Zheng Banqiao was especially eccentric with regard to his

<sup>204</sup> Out of curiosity I tried to find out where the original calligraphy written by Zheng Banqiao (*bian'e*) is now. The results were many confused answers. The conservator of the Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall in Xinghua suggested that it is probably in the museum in Weifang where Zheng Banqiao served the longest duty. A waiter at the Belgian Embassy in Beijing was convinced it is in the art depository of the Forbidden Palace in Beijing. In reality, as confirmed by most of the art books, it should be in the art depository of the Weifang

calligraphic style, and the calligraphy *Nande hutu* is not an exception. It is well-known not only for its content, but also for its peculiar style of writing. In fact, the whole calligraphy has an unusual presentation. At first glance, one might get a strange sense of aesthetic perception. Even a complete layman in art, might find the whole calligraphy neither beautiful nor appealing. The characters are written seemingly awkwardly, they are far from regular and do not even represent an ‘established’ particular calligraphic pattern or style<sup>205</sup>. This is because the calligraphy is written in Zheng Banqiao’s own calligraphic style, which he called the ‘six-and-a-half script’, *liu fen ban shu* 六分半书. This particular style is a combination of different existing calligraphic styles, with as main basis a variation of the clerical official script (*lishu* 隶书)<sup>206</sup> known as the ‘eight parts’ *ba fen* 八分.<sup>207</sup> However, the longer one looks at the calligraphy, the more one starts to appreciate it, or at least, becomes intrigued by it<sup>208</sup>. Besides, the attentive beholder might notice the uncommon use of the radical (no. 172) in the character *nan* 難 (difficult), which is written quite peculiarly. The same is true for the character *de* 得 which is written here with the water-radical 得 (no. 85), a common calligraphic variant for *de* 得.

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Research Centre of Industrial Arts (潍坊市工艺美术研究所藏). These different versions again testify to the almost mythologization that surrounds both Zheng Banqiao and the calligraphy.

<sup>205</sup> There are basically five major styles in Chinese calligraphy: *zhuan* 篆书 (seal style), *li* 隶书 (official style), *cao* 草书 (cursive style), *xing* 行书 (running style) and *kai* 楷书 (regular style). Each style has gone through changes and evolutions throughout Chinese history in terms of their character forms and artistic structures. See for example Yu 2007: 334-337.

<sup>206</sup> Cf note 205.

<sup>207</sup> His own strange (*guai*) style incorporating different official calligraphic styles suggests Zheng Banqiao mastered a lot of calligraphic styles, and could easily move from one form of calligraphic expression to another, from eccentric to regular and from awkward to elegant and fluid. For an extensive (English) discussion of Zheng Banqiao’s particular calligraphic style including the discussion of some sample pieces, see e.g. Pohl 1990: 96-120. Probably one of the most amusing anecdotes about the ‘Banqiao ‘style’ (*Banqiao ti* 板桥体) is the story of the young Zheng Banqiao practicing copying other calligraphers’ styles, which was the usual way to practice calligraphy in ancient China. The wit of the story lies in the double meaning of the Chinese character *ti* 体 which means both the ‘human body’ and ‘style’. It is said that Zheng Banqiao was so engrossed in his calligraphy practice that he often unconsciously kept on writing on his own body (*ti* 体) at night in his sleep. One night, he continued writing on his wife’s body, and she angrily cried out: ‘Everybody has his own body!’ (*ren ge you ti* 人各有体, ‘everyone has his own style’). Why don’t you write on your own body (‘why don’t you write your own style’)? This remark awakened Zheng Banqiao: he had to create his own style (*ti* 体). See for more on Zheng Banqiao’s particular style and an explanation of the *liu fen ban shu*, Pohl 1990: 96-111.

<sup>208</sup> Apparently, Mao Zedong was so intrigued by Zheng Banqiao’s style that he studied this style thoroughly. In the Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall in Xinghua, there is a calligraphy displayed written by Mao Zedong in his particular style especially for the occasion of the opening.

The calligraphy can be found everywhere in China, in different sizes, forms and exposures, whereby even the seal takes different shapes and contents. In many of the different versions, one can see the last sentence saying ‘Banqiao knows’ (*Banqiao shi* 板桥识, (cf Figure 1: *Nande hutu* (own picture taken in the old family house of Zheng Banqiao in Xinghua , 2009). The existence of different seals might indicate that this saying became popular soon after its public showing – a hypothesis that is confirmed by the comments made by his near contemporary Qian Yong<sup>209</sup> - and that it was captured in different times and carved in different ways. It might eventually have been provided with personalizations and additions by different copiers. Besides, it is often displayed and sold together with the less well-known but equally interesting saying *Chi kui shi fu* 吃亏是福, roughly translated as ‘Suffering brings good fortune’ (see Figure 2: *Chi kui shi fu* 吃亏是福 and *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂 (own pictures taken at the Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall, 2009).



Figure 2 *Chi kui shi fu* 吃亏是福 and *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂 (own pictures taken at the Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall, 2009)

This calligraphy has almost exactly the same structure as *Nande hutu*, and its paradoxical content - hardship brings good fortune - is as similar as ‘difficult to attain muddledness’.<sup>210</sup> All these peculiar style features make up for the popularity of the calligraphy.

As appealing as the paradoxical content though, is the wisdom behind the calligraphy. To fully grasp the meaning of the calligraphy, I will first elaborate on the

<sup>209</sup> For this quote on *Nande hutu* made by Qian Yong, see further page 144.

<sup>210</sup> Cf the English sayings ‘It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good’ and ‘Every cloud has a silver lining’. Allegedly, this calligraphy is said to have been attached to a letter Zheng Banqiao once wrote to his brother Mo. This saying is also extensively dealt with as one important association of *Nande hutu* in the contemporary interpretations, see Chapter Four, section 4.4.2.

background story of the calligraphy, namely the specific situation in which Zheng Banqiao is said to have written the calligraphy. After this introduction, I will turn to the translation and to the different interpretations of the saying as put forward by (mostly Chinese) scholars in the academic discourse on the calligraphy. As the saying cannot possibly be fully understood and appreciated by simple translation and interpretation of the characters, scholars who discuss the saying do not just address the content of the saying, but go deeper into some other dimensions of the saying. Depending on their perspective, they elaborate on issues such as the relation of the saying with the personality of Zheng Banqiao and with the given structure of society, and on how and why the interpretation is ambiguous. Therefore, a third section will bring together additional observations, comments and some speculation about the philosophical and societal background as well as some psychological and moral dimensions of the saying as revealed by scholars.

### 3.3.1 Background story: meeting the *hutu laoren*

In searching for the intended meaning of Zheng Banqiao's calligraphy and having looked at his character, life and circumstances in the previous section, understanding what drove him to write this particular calligraphy *Nande hutu* is certainly useful. As is the case with many anecdotes that surround him, there are a few stories which describe the condition in which he wrote the calligraphy, but that cannot be authenticated. The variations more or less describe the same story. The most often cited story (e.g. Su 2006)<sup>211</sup> goes like this :

When Zheng Banqiao served as an official in Wei county, he used to go out to the countryside disguised as a common person. Sometimes, his motivation was to get to know real life and the living circumstances of the ordinary people and to connect with them. At other times, his trips were aimed at visiting some interesting location without being recognized as an official. One day, he went to visit the Zheng Wen Gongbei Stèles 郑文公碑 at Yunfengshan 云峰山 in Shandong<sup>212</sup>. He enjoyed it so much that he forgot about the time and could not get back home. So he searched for a place to spend the night in the mountains and found a simple hut. The owner of the hut was an old man who called himself 'the

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<sup>211</sup> Other sources mentioning this story are too many to mention all. See for example Qin 2004: 138 and Zhu 2003.

<sup>212</sup> Situated in Laizhou, Shandong, not far from where he served office. The reverence for steles had known a revival as a consequence of the Hanxue movement, see page 110.

stupid old man' (*hutu laoren* 糊涂老人). The two men got into a lively conversation, during which Zheng Banqiao realized by his way of speaking - which was far from ordinary (*chu wu bu fan* 出语不凡) - that this man was a highly cultured (*ruya* 儒雅) man and certainly not the stupid (*hutu*) old man that he pretended to be. In his room, a beautiful ink stone as big as a table was displayed. The old man invited him to write something as a memento. Zheng Banqiao was deeply touched by the rare exquisite manners of the 'stupid old man', and wrote: *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂, signing with 'Xiucai during the Kangxi Emperor, Juren during the Yongzheng Emperor, and Jinshi during the Qianlong Emperor'<sup>213</sup>. Thereupon, as there was still place left, Zheng Banqiao asked the old man to write something in reply. The old man wrote: 'Obtaining a beautiful stone is difficult; obtaining a rough stone is particularly difficult; but turning a beautiful stone into a rough stone is even more difficult. Beauty lies on the inside, strength on the outside. The hut of the recluse is not like entering through a rich man's door'.<sup>214</sup> The old man used a seal saying: 'Government (academic) examinations, no. 1; provincial examination no. 2; court examination no. 3'<sup>215</sup>. By seeing the old man's seal, Zheng Banqiao saw his guess was right: the old man did not call himself *hutu laoren* because he really was; on the contrary, he was the highest possibly educated man, an official who had obtained the highest degree in the imperial examinations, but who - with purposely using this name - meant to say that he was fed up with official life, and therefore had voluntarily withdrawn from public life. As there was still place left to write, Zheng Banqiao wrote a postscript in accordance with the sentence structure of the *hutu laoren*: 'Being smart is difficult. Being muddled is also difficult. But it is even more difficult to shift from being smart to being muddled. Let go for once! Take a step back! Present peace of mind consists of not planning for future rewards'<sup>216</sup>.

First of all, the fact that the old man had 'retreated' (or went in recluse, *yintui* 隐退) was certainly not unusual. Many officials in feudal China at some point in their official career got fed up with it and voluntarily left officialdom. The most well-known example

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<sup>213</sup> *Kangxi Xiucai, Yongzheng Juren, Qianlong Jinshi* 康熙秀才 雍正举人乾隆进士. With this threefold formulation emphasizing the long period in between his lowest and highest grade, Zheng Banqiao might want to have indicated that it took him a long and painstaking way from *xiucai* (age 24) to *jinshi* (age 44), which was to a great extent due to his familial circumstances (poverty, many deaths in his direct and close family etc.). It can also be considered as a kind of self-mockery, as this suited his character very well.

<sup>214</sup> 得美石难，得顽石尤难，由美石转入顽石更难。美于中，顽于外，藏野人之庐，不入富贵之门也。

<sup>215</sup> 院试第一，乡试第二，殿试第三。 Cf note 149 mentioning the different levels of the official examination. Both Zheng Banqiao and the *hutu laoren* obtained the highest degree in the civil examinations, the former referring to the degree (*jinshi*), the latter to the court examination (*yuan shi*) as expressed in the seals.

<sup>216</sup> 聪明难，糊涂尤难，由聪明而转入糊涂更难。放一着，退一步，当下安心，非图后来报也。

of deliberately leaving officialdom is without doubt the famous poet and official (for a short time) Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (365–427), who deliberately left officialdom to go and live a simple life far from officialdom.<sup>217</sup> In some cases, they were also politically outcast by dishonoring or disobeying higher officials or, in the worse case, the emperor himself, of which the Song poet and official Su Dongpo (1036–1101) is exemplary.<sup>218</sup>

The Chinese characters *meishi* 美石, ‘beautiful stone’, and *wanshi* 顽石, ‘rough stone’, which the old recluse uses in his writing can be interpreted as follows. The character *wan* 顽 means hard and unyielding, and *wanshi* therefore might refer to precious stones such as the hardest of all, the diamond. But a rough stone, however strong and of high quality it may be, does not look ‘beautiful’ on the outside. What is more, turning a beautiful, carved stone into a more precious and stronger, but rough and uncarved stone again is not easy. One of my informants, a university teacher in Chinese literature, suggested that *meishi* can sometimes allude to officials, whereas *wanshi* might mean someone with a strong and ‘pure’ character, stubbornly following his own path (Shen Tie, Personal communication, 2008, Ghent). Indeed, the character *wan* also means stubborn, and is often used in sayings related to being stubborn and even ignorant (in the sense of insensitive and impercipient cf *wu zhijue* 无知觉)<sup>219</sup>. As such, *wanshi* can refer to having an unyielding heart-mind (*xin* 心), indicating a stable person who does not just follow every opportunity that comes his way, and is not corrupted. *Wan* also has a connotation of ‘striving for self-improvement and staying unyielding’ (*zi qiang bu qu* 自强不息). In this meaning, it alludes to the first hexagram of the *Yijing*, 乾 *qian* ‘Heaven’, whose symbol is explained as ‘the power of the celestial forces in motion, wherewith the Superior Man labors unceasingly to strengthen his own character (*zi qiang bu xi* 自强不息)’ (Blofeld 1968: 85). *Wanshi* thus alludes to being both strong and upright inside, and to being stubborn and independent.

The ‘rough stone’ in fact plays a very prominent role in two of the most famous novels of Chinese literature, *The story of the stone*, better known as *The dream of the red chamber* (*Hongloumeng* 红楼梦) by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715?–1763)<sup>220</sup>, and the *Journey to*

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<sup>217</sup> For more on him and his leaving officialdom in relation with Zheng Banqiao, see further page 151.

<sup>218</sup> Su Dongpo 苏东坡 in particular was in conflict with the political faction headed by Wang Anshi. He once wrote a poem criticizing Wang Anshi's reforms, especially the government monopoly imposed on the salt industry, and upon this was banned. (Su 2003: 11–18). On Su Dongpo, see also note 101 and note 145.

<sup>219</sup> Cf also the saying *wanshi dian tou* 顽石点头, ‘be so persuasive as to make the insensate stone nod in agreement’ (Xiandai Hanyu Cidian Xiudingben 现代汉语词典修订本 2001: 1297), and the combination *yuan wanshi* 愚顽, ‘be ignorant and stubborn’ (*yumei er wangu* 愚昧而顽固) (ibid.: 1537).

<sup>220</sup> See also note 47.

the West (*Xiyouji* 西游记), attributed to Wu Cheng'en (ca. 1505–1580)<sup>221</sup>. In the *Xiyouji*, the main character, the Monkey King or Sun Wukong 孙悟空<sup>222</sup> who accompanies the monk Xuanzang on his journey to retrieve Buddhist sutras from India, was born from a mythical stone formed from the primal forces of chaos, the *wanshi*. In mythology, the *wanshi* 顽石 represents the stone, or rather colorful magma, that Nüwa, the mythical goddess, created by melting five stones with the basic colors (red, yellow, blue, white and black) to repair the wall of heaven (e.g. Yang & An 2011: 31; Wu X. 2011: 175).<sup>223</sup> One version of the Pangu myth also mentions that Pangu 'split the *hunyuan shi* (浑元石, chaotic, primeval stone) open' to form heaven and earth' (Wu X. 2011: 175).<sup>224</sup>

In *The dream of the red chamber*, the *wanshi* plays a very symbolic role. The protagonist, Jia Baoyu, is born with a piece of luminescent jade, a magical stone in his mouth. This stone is sometimes referred to as *wanshi*.

It also seems plausible that there is a direct relation between the *hutu laoren*'s use of the *wanshi* in his calligraphy and the Daoist idea of the uncarved stone, which represents the pure, natural and 'uncivilized' state of the cosmos where nothing is lacking before people started to 'carve' the undifferentiated whole in social ranks, desirable moral behavior, herewith alluding to Lord Hundun (see also in section 2.2.3.2 *Hundun* and the theme of chaos in early Daoist philosophy).

Although it is not known with any certainty whether or not this is the true story behind the calligraphy and Zheng Banqiao's motivation to write it, the very long postscript explains clearly what he might have meant by it. And in case the story is indeed true, it would seem likely that during the meeting with the *hutu laoren*, Zheng realizes how difficult it is for him to free himself of all his worries, ambitions and ideals in the way the *hutu laoren*, who, after all, also had been a high official like him, had done. Therefore, he writes, *Nande hutu*: it is very difficult for me to drop my emotional, moral and 'scholarly' burden and be carefree and untroubled (again) like I once was and as you (the old man) are today.

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<sup>221</sup> Originally published anonymously in the 1590s during the Ming dynasty, the authorship of the *Xiyouji* has been ascribed to the scholar Wu Cheng'en since the 20th century.

<sup>222</sup> His given name Wukong 悟空 means 'Awakened to emptiness'. He is also called, Shi Hou 石猴, meaning the 'Stone monkey'.

<sup>223</sup> The story is found in the *Huainanzi*, Chapter 6. Mark Lewis (2006: 111-116) deals in depth with the different meanings of the five-colored stone, such as its association with the five phases (*wu xing* 五行), with the cultivation of long life and the prevention of illness and decay, and with the broader notion of the formation, transformation and curing of the human body.

<sup>224</sup> The version of the Pangu myth mentioned here is noted in the book *Hei'an Zhuan* 黑暗传 (*A biography of darkness*) written in the Qing dynasty. (Wu 2011: 175)



### 3.3.2 Translation and meaning

A review of the most important works on Zheng Banqiao<sup>225</sup> reveals that he himself did not document an interpretation of the meaning of his calligraphy. The only, certainly very valuable, explanation made by Zheng himself is the lengthy postscript (*ba yu* 跋语) written under the four characters. So it should come as no surprise that investigating the true interpretation of the saying, which describes a certain muddled state of mind, has been rather a ‘muddled’ undertaking. The absence of a clear explanation by the author himself, and the fact that the calligraphy is open to many interpretations, has attracted many Chinese scholars and artists to the calligraphy. Many discussions and different analyses have been put forward and have often been copied by others. In my attempt to uncover the web of meanings of the saying as understood and lived by Chinese people, I discovered that – at least at first sight – there seems to be as many interpretations as there are people talking about it. As professor Han Shengwang rightly observed:

When one uses this saying, it is endowed with, it is itself also *hutu*. It is not so that *Nande hutu* has an exact explanation. [...] There is no ‘definition’. It is just that, one puts forward this saying. It is such a kind of saying, *Nande hutu*. It is the kind of saying, that [explained] by scholars and intellectuals is fine, and by the common people is also fine. This endows it with too many meanings really. Everyone uses this saying, but the particular meaning everyone gives to the saying is different.<sup>226</sup>  
(Personal communication, 29 September 2008, Beijing)

In fact, the way she hesitatingly formulates her opinion, is in itself an indication of the difficulty of explaining the meaning of the saying. Especially in the contemporary discourse on the saying (discussed further in Part Two), the saying seems to be more or less interpreted according to everyone’s own needs, beliefs and even temperament (which does not mean there are no common elements)<sup>227</sup>. Equally, when analyzing the academic discussions and comments on the saying, different levels of interpretations revealed themselves. The first, direct level is related to the interpretation of the

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<sup>225</sup> See e.g. the works of Karl-Heinz Pohl (1990; 2007), Li Shaolong (2005), Lei Legeng (2008), Liu Hong and Huang Mingfeng (2005), Zhang Xigeng (2005), Qin Jin’gen (2004) and Meng Zhen (2006).

<sup>226</sup> 就是用这个词的时候，它赋予，它就也是糊涂。并不是“难得糊涂”有一个确切的解释。[...]没有一个定义，只是他就是提出“难得糊涂”。 “难得糊涂”就是这么一个话。这么一个话，文人墨客也好，普通百姓也好，这个赋予它太多意义。大家都在用这个词。但是他给它的含义特别不一样。

<sup>227</sup> A quick search on Google directly asking for ‘the meaning of *Nande hutu*’ (难得糊涂的意思) gives about 2 720 000 results (25 April 2012). A search on the homepage of the Chinese search engine Baidu 百度 resulted in 1 360 000 hits. A search on the Baidu ‘knowledge’ (*zhidao* 知道) section resulted in 58 966 hits.



content, where scholars and ‘men of letters’ (*wenren* 文人) discuss their idea of ‘the’ right interpretation. A second level reveals scholarly comments not directly related to the interpretation, but to the philosophical and societal background, and to related moral and psycho-social dimensions, often linked to the person of Zheng Banqiao himself. I will discuss these interpretations in the next section (3.3.3), but will first elaborate on an English rendering of the saying, which will give an initial insight into its meaning. Having put forward a translation, I will sentence by sentence look at the different interpretations of the saying as discussed in the academic discourse.

### 3.3.2.1 ‘Being muddled is difficult’

*Nande hutu*  
难得糊涂

Before even thinking about translating the four characters or the whole calligraphy, it is important to find a suitable and appropriate English rendering of the word *hutu*. Although *hutu* is not a term associated with ancient Chinese philosophy and should therefore not be considered difficult to translate, the term does not have one unambiguous meaning in the English language that expresses exactly what it stands for in this context. The section on the etymology and semantics of muddledness (*hutu*) and its linguistic derivatives’ (Chapter Two, section 2.2) set out an etymological analysis. The etymological analysis revealed the most common translations are ‘muddled’, ‘confused’, and ‘vague’ or ‘indistinct’, and also showed there are many – albeit sometimes just slightly - different meanings. The semantic analysis showed there are many positive connotations of *hutu*. Especially from a more philosophical perspective, *hutu* has close associations with the Daoist ideal of the sage as a fool who lives in a mental state devoid of judgments and of emotional and intellectual attachments. These connotations are distinctly positive. With this in mind, I wanted to find an English word that at least could be approached impartially by the reader, and that at the same time came as close as possible to the Chinese characters.

As a result, I decided to use the word ‘muddled’ for several reasons. ‘Muddled’, although not a very common English word, is the translation that is closest to the original meaning of *tu* 涂 / 塗 (mud). Its meaning refers to the idea of not being clear or coherent, and to being disordered, and can also convey the idea of ‘wanting to know but just not being clear about the situation’ as an unintentional state of mind. *Hutu* is also an antonym of *congming* 聪明, ‘smart, sharp, acute (of sight and hearing, cf 耳聪目明)’ and of *jingming* 精明, ‘astute, discerning, clever’, meanings that in this research are often put in contrast to *hutu*. Another reason in favor of this choice was the appropriate connotation of the verb ‘to muddle’ with the Daoist inspired meaning in *Nande hutu*: muddle as ‘to behave, proceed, or think in a confused or aimless fashion or with an air of

improvisation'. Also the English derived meaning in 'muddle through', which will be used in the contemporary interpretation as one interpretation of *Nande hutu* (*de guo qie guo* 得过且过), suggests some kind of 'aimless wandering' and even more 'to achieve a certain degree of success but without much skill, polish, experience, or direction', all meanings that slightly approach the Daoist ideal of 'wandering free and easy'.<sup>228</sup> Besides, muddled, much more than any other English translation, leaves the reader with a neutral connotation as for instance in its meaning of 'made muddy or turbid, as water' or 'mixed and stirred', which I find crucial for its meaning in this research. 'Muddled' to some extent evokes a sense of naivety, of unstructured, unpolished thinking.

Another possible translation could have been 'confused', antonym of 'enlightened' and 'orderly', both related to distinctness and clearness. However, it occurs to me that confused refers too much to a state of mind in which a person is unintentionally not clear about something, and mentally disoriented, and this is not exactly the state of muddledness *hutu*, would ideally refer to. On the contrary, as we will see in the next section, in its ideal philosophical meaning, the *hutu* expressed in the saying *Nande hutu* transcends lack of clarity, confusion or mental disorientation; this kind of *hutu* departs from 'having understood', and is not the result of stupidity, a lack of intelligence or clarity of mind. Even in the more popular interpretations, *hutu*, as an intentional muddledness, is a characteristic of really smart people who are aware of their 'muddled' state of mind and for whom it is a deliberate tactic.

Similarly, it occurred to me that another frequent translation for *hutu* is 'stupid', which carries a strong connotation to 'slow-witted, dull' which is certainly not the meaning intended here. *Hutu* can be used in the sense of 'stupid', but its semantic field is much more subtle. Stupidity expresses a lack of intellectual and even emotional acuity, whereas *hutu* expresses the idea of not knowing very clearly - either intentionally or not, as the case may be - and not necessarily because one is lacking in intelligence. Besides, stupid carries a strongly negative connotation: someone who is stupid or does stupid things does not earn much respect or approval. Another argument for not choosing the word stupid nor confusion was that both words are never translated as *hutu* in Chinese. For all these reasons, I could find nothing that surpasses 'muddled' and 'muddledness' as an appropriate translation.

What has proven to be a difficult translation for the word *hutu*, has been even more so for the saying as a whole. While searching for a suitable English translation of the four characters for use throughout the whole dissertation, I soon discovered that apart from the 'classical' dictionary entries and the occasional translation in Chinese journals

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<sup>228</sup> See for instance its meaning in the online Thesaurus dictionary <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/muddle> (Last accessed 3 January 2012).

or magazines with a brief English abstract, there are surprisingly many web-based discussions trying to uncover an appropriate English translation of the saying<sup>229</sup>.

To start with, *nande* 难得 generally means ‘hard to come by’, or ‘rare’, but it occasionally also refers to ‘luckily that’ (Institut Ricci 2001b: 577), which is a meaning that, as we will see later, could also be very appropriate here, because the *hutu* referred to here is considered to be desirable.

The first translation I encountered - long before I was aware of the complexity of the saying or had decided to research it in detail - was the French translation in Mo Yan’s novel *La carte au trésor* (*Cangbao tu* 藏宝图). The translator used the phrase ‘N’est pas imbécile qui veut’ (Not everyone who wants can be a fool) (Mo 2004: 95; 111-114). Since I knew the translator, I asked him about this choice of words. He explained how much time he had spent doing research to find a suitable translation for this four character-word. The more he worked on the translation, the less he had the feeling it was right. This illustrates nicely how difficult it is to cover the full meaning of these four characters in one short translation.

Indeed, the problem starts when one wants to incorporate the intended meaning behind the calligraphy in a translation. This is exactly what happens in many of the Chinese-English dictionary entries, and even more so in Chinese blogs, where people debate the best translation. Some examples of such interpretative translations in English are: ‘Enjoy the state of mind of silliness’, ‘A fool’s paradise’, ‘Be a wise fool’, ‘I wish I were smart enough to play the fool’, ‘No man is wise at all times’, and even ‘The comedy of errors’. Another quite striking translation by an overseas Chinese blogger was ‘Ambiguity is gold’ (Anon. 2001). Although this translation is not in the least a structured translation of the original characters, the word ‘ambiguity’ (as ‘open to different interpretations’) does convey the meaning, in so far as *hutu* can denote ‘not being able or not wanting to come to a clear, undisputed interpretation of things and situations’<sup>230</sup>. Although these seemingly random translations often served the purpose of clarifying the meaning of the calligraphy, I found them too far removed from the original characters to be useful.

The most common English dictionary translation (probably the ‘most copied’) is ‘Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise’ (Wu 1999: 1820 and Wu & Cheng 2006: 1110). This translation could somehow imply the idea of ‘what one does not know, cannot hurt’. Among Chinese academics, I found translations such as ‘Woolly-headed’ (Lei Legeng 2008) and ‘The occasional muddleheaded’ (Li haolong 2005), and novelist

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<sup>229</sup> See e.g. <http://www.chinapage.com/calligraphy/zhengbanqiao/discussion2bg.html> and <http://www.librarything.com/topic/5305> (Last accessed 10 November 2011).

<sup>230</sup> Remarkably, it is also in this sense that ‘Ambiguity is gold’ could in first instance be applied to the saying itself, as the saying itself is very open for different interpretations.

Annie Wang (2006) uses the expression ‘Leaving things ill-defined is better’. What many possible translations have in common is too much emphasis on conveying an interpretation in the translation. This approach risks leaving no room for broader interpretations, which is precisely what the calligraphy does in its Chinese form. All these arguments resulted in the translation of *Nande hutu* as: ‘Being muddled is difficult’. However, in this dissertation, I will often use the untranslated ‘*Nande hutu*’ and ‘*hutu*’.

The translation task becomes easier when translating the postscript, which offers an explanation by Zheng Banqiao himself of the four characters. Karl-Heinz Pohl (1990: 174), author of a monograph about the life and works of Zheng Banqiao, proposed the following interpretation for the full saying: ‘It is not easy being muddleheaded. Being bright is not easy. But it is also difficult being muddled-headed. If you start out being bright, it is even harder to be muddleheaded (聪明难, 糊涂尤难, 由聪明而转入糊涂更难). Do not move too hurriedly, step back for once! Present peace of mind is not anticipating future rewards (放一着, 退一步, 当下安心, 非图后来报也)’<sup>231</sup>. I largely agree with Pohl’s translation, although I prefer muddled (cf above) and would like to add that *fang yi zhao* probably translates better as ‘let go for once’ (instead of ‘do not move too hurriedly’), meaning that one should let things take their own natural turn when it is appropriate in the given situation.

For the translation of *congming* 聪明, ‘smart’ is a suitable English rendering. *Congming*, with its meaning of ‘wise’ and ‘acute hearing *cong* and sight *ming*’ literally suggests cleverness, intelligence, and wisdom even more. It denotes a state of mind which has not only to do with intelligence and intellectual knowledge but also with being sensible (*dongshi* 懂事), with being able to understand things as they are without bias (thus: clear). In this more philosophical sense, it denotes a state close to complete clarity (*ming* 明), and is also used as such in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.<sup>232</sup> ‘Bright’ is certainly an appropriate alternative English word for *congming*; it stays close to the Chinese character (*ming* 明 as ‘shining, light’), and moreover has the connotation of ‘clear’, which is the contrary of muddled or vague. So it works well in a paradoxical setting in the English language too. In the saying it is contrasted with *hutu*, an ideal state of mind alluding to *hundun* (senseless being without hearing *cong* 聪 and sight *ming* 明), so I preferred to use ‘smart’ and ‘smartness’, although in some contexts ‘bright’ will appear too in the following chapters.

Although there are probably other justifiable translations for the four characters, the main idea is that *hutu* represents a state of mind that is difficult to attain (*nande*). Why

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<sup>231</sup> His German translation seventeen years later is slightly different, especially the title: ‘It is hard to acquire simplicity’. *Fang yi zhao* 放一着 becomes ‘Lass einmal los!’ instead of ‘Don’t move too hurriedly’ (Pohl 2007).

<sup>232</sup> See for instance Thomas Radice (2001) in *Clarity and survival in the Zhuangzi*.

this is so difficult will become clearer in the next section, where I will discuss, sentence by sentence, the different interpretations and comments on the calligraphy as put forward by scholars and *wenren*.

### 3.3.2.2 The dialectics of being smart and muddled: ‘Being smart is difficult, being muddled is also difficult. But it is even more difficult to turn from being smart into being muddled’

*Congming nan, hutu nan, you congming er zhuanru hutu geng nan.*

聪明难，糊涂难，由聪明而转入糊涂更难。

The first thing that strikes you when reading the saying is the word play and the paradoxical use of being smart (*congming* 聪明) and being muddled (*hutu* 糊涂). The use of the juxtaposition of two opposing concepts is quite common in Daoist rhetoric and philosophy. The same can be said of word plays and the use of opposites to clarify something in Chinese discourse in general.<sup>233</sup> It reflects the fundamentals of *yin-yang* philosophy, namely the interaction between *yin* and *yang* as two complementary qualities that constantly blend into each other, as such expressing the ideal of a vague sphere between right and wrong, black and white, true and false, a sphere that comes closer to a ‘reality’ or the ‘truth’ than the strict (Western) dichotomy does (see also section 2.3 and 2.4.3).

Lin Yutang (2005 [1942]) made the point in his article *The wisdom of the Chinese people* (*Zhongguoren zhi congming* 中国人之聪明):

In China wisdom and muddledness were one of the same complex, and when talking about the use of ‘smartness’, apart from pretending to be muddled, there is no other application; it is namely the wisdom of obliterating wisdom with wisdom. The discussion of the syncretism of smartness and muddledness, is precisely the discussion on the highest smartness.<sup>234</sup>

Lin Yutang continues by saying that, because Chinese understand that wisdom does not bring you any further if you do not use it correctly, and because they understand that doing/being is ultimately the same as not doing/not being, they adopt this particular

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<sup>233</sup> The use of opposites is a direct result of the characteristically Chinese dialectical way of thinking and cosmological worldview. See on this Chapter Two, section 2.3.2.3 Correlative and dialectical thinking in a holistic cosmology. For the use of paradoxes in Daoist thinking, see for example Hansen 1992: 222-227.

<sup>234</sup> 故在中国聪明与糊涂复合为一，而聪明之用处，除装糊涂外，别无足取。即以聪明抹杀聪明之聪明。聪明糊涂合一之论，极聪明之论也。

attitude about *congming* and *hutu*. According to him, this attitude towards wisdom and knowledge is reflected in the main philosophical traditions (cf Chapter Two).

In fact, in one of his writings, the calligrapher Qian Yong 钱泳 (1759-1844), one of Zheng Banqiao's near contemporaries who was familiar with the historical and cultural background and societal context, explained clearly what he must have meant by writing *Nande hutu*:

Zheng Banqiao once wrote a four-letter motto called *Nande hutu*, precisely the words of an extreme smart person. So-called *hutu* people are rarely smart, and for smart people it is also difficult to be *hutu*. For *hutu* to function as a way of conducting oneself in society and at the same time preserve one's integrity, a smart person needs a bit of *hutu* in being smart. If a person is simply smart, then he creates thistles and thorns, and will certainly attract resentment and blame. A person should, on the contrary, better use the magical function of being *hutu*.<sup>235</sup>

On the one hand, it is often understood that people who are really smart and intelligent are generally people who have understood the ways of the world. However, this 'quality' does not make them any happier (*congming nan* 聪明难). Since they are also aware of the limitations of mankind, and often unable to do anything about it, they become more vulnerable. In addition, especially for someone like Zheng Banqiao who understood the ways of the world but felt that he was the only one striving to make the world a better place (being the only truthful and upright official in a corrupt environment), being smart was especially difficult, disappointing and painful (e.g. Xiang 2002).

On the other hand, 'muddling through life' is in itself not difficult, but for an upright, idealistic and stubborn person like Zheng Banqiao, this attitude is clearly not an option, let alone turning a blind eye and pretending to be muddled or ignorant about situations that go against his ideals and convictions. For such a person, being muddled is indeed very difficult (*hutu nan* 糊涂难).

What is even more difficult is to turn from a smart person back into a 'muddled' person (*you congming er zhuanru hutu geng nan* 由聪明而转入糊涂更难), which is precisely the state of mind Zheng Banqiao recognized in the *hutu laoren*, and what he himself longed for. Indeed, he had not been able to oppose the corrupt elements of officialdom, and had not been willing to ignore his conscience (*liangxin* 良心)<sup>236</sup>, nor had

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<sup>235</sup>郑板桥尝书四字于座右,曰'难得糊涂',此极聪明人语也.余谓糊涂人难得聪明,聪明人又难得糊涂,须要于聪明中带一点糊涂,方为处世守身之道.若一味聪明,便生荆棘,必招怨尤,反不如糊涂之为妙用也. This quote is repeated by several authors, e.g. Dang 2007, Li 1986, Liu & Huang 2005, Wang Z. 2007.

<sup>236</sup> *Liangxin* 良心 will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Six (section 6.4.3 Conscience), which deals with the ethics of being muddled as understood in contemporary society.

he taken a detached<sup>237</sup> approach in the matter, which would have required a stage of *hutu* beyond *congming*. This *hutu* stage is exactly what he did not manage to attain (e.g. Xiang 2002). In being smart, he meant that one needed to be smart (strong, brave) enough to adopt a *hutu* attitude in order to survive in society, and not just adopt a blind *hutu* at the expense of a certain level of smartness.

To illustrate the point of it being very difficult to transform smartness into a higher level of muddledness, Zhang Jiacheng makes the comparison with driving a car. When one has learnt how to drive a car and maybe even got a driving license; if someone asks you not to drive, to forget completely how it should be done, this would be almost impossible. That is how difficult it is to become *hutu* again when one is already *congming*. (Personal communication, 5 November 2008, Ghent)

Most authors agree that Zheng Banqiao's use of *hutu* in this saying should be considered a Daoist element, or, at least, that Daoist influence in this saying is most decisive and direct. More in particular, the core influence of *Nande hutu* primarily comes from Laozi's and Zhuangzi's suggestions for a carefree life (Li S. 2005; Liu & Huang 2005; Pohl 2007), an ideal Zheng Banqiao indeed turned to again in his later years. According to Pohl, the real meaning of the paradoxical sentence can be found in ancient Daoist wisdom expressed in the typical Daoist rhetoric: although it is generally considered to be hard to attain wisdom and intelligence (because the mass is considered to belong to the 'naïve' and stupid people), the saying turned the generally accepted order upside down: not intelligence but 'stupidity' is difficult to attain. Pohl suggests a comparison with a saying of the Western cultural sphere: 'o sancta simplicitas' (Pohl 2007). This Latin phrase literally means 'O holy simplicity!'. To be *simpliciter* in Latin is both to be innocent, humble and modest (which comes very close to the meaning in this expression) but can also mean 'to be ignorant, credulous and naïve'<sup>238</sup>.

Indeed, as early as in the *Zhuangzi*, Yanhui 颜回 explains the notion of *zuowang* 坐忘, the last and highest stage of illumination, to Zhongni 仲尼 (Confucius): to practice *zuowang*, even *congming* 聪明 is to be discarded (see also page 72). Furthermore, in a way, the philosophy of life as expressed in *Nande hutu* corresponds with the two first chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, *Xiaoyao you* 逍遥游 and *Qiwulun* 齐物论. The first chapter, 'Wandering carefree and at ease' (*Xiaoyao you*) is a symbolic expression for pure happiness, a natural

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<sup>237</sup> Detached will in this dissertation be used in its sense of impartial, neutral, dispassionate and reserved, rather than apathetic and disinterested.

<sup>238</sup> Here, an association is made to Socrates' opinion on wisdom and truth, namely that 'I know what I do not know'. With this saying, Socrates intended to say that the only real wisdom is knowing that you know nothing (for real). See for more on this, Chapter Two section 2.3.4 'Knowledge and wisdom in the Confucian and Daoist tradition'.

state of mind without judgments or worries.<sup>239</sup> The second chapter, *Qiwulun*, discusses ways of how to reach this ideal, namely through the leveling of controversies. As Zhang Jiacheng explained,

[For Daoists,] the way to obtain happiness is exactly by adjusting right and wrong, by [accepting that] good and bad are the same. That is precisely being muddled. (Personal communication, 5 November 2008, Ghent)<sup>240</sup>

This leveling of right and wrong and abstaining from judgments and comments and from taking position, does make one on the surface look like a fool who is not aware of what is going on in many situations. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that most discourses on *Nande hutu* use the following paradox to explain its meaning: *da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚, 'The highest wisdom looks like foolishness'.<sup>241</sup> The Daoist ideal of wisdom as non-wisdom and the sage as a fool is particularly present in the *Zhuangzi*. In different passages (cf above on *zuowang* and Inner Chapters II and III), Zhuangzi refers to the uselessness of knowledge to become an 'Arrived person', *zhiren* 至人, or ultimate Daoist sage. Only he who lives in accordance with the *dao*, 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 real sage is more closely related to being muddled than to an accumulation of (in any case 'relative') knowledge.

With regard to the relation of *yu* with *hutu* in *Nande hutu*, it is indeed important to note that *yu*, although sometimes translated as 'ignorance' in the sense of simplicity and naivety can certainly not be compared with the *yu* of a child, nor of 'common people'. As Feng Youlan (1997: 103) comments on this *yu*:

The *yu* of the sage is the result of a conscious process of cultivation. It is something higher than knowledge, something more, not less. [...] The *yu* of the sage is great wisdom, and not the *yu* of a child or of ordinary people. The latter kind of *yu* is a gift of nature, while that of the sage is an achievement of the spirit.

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<sup>239</sup> For more on *xiaoyao you* 逍遥游, see page 70.

<sup>240</sup> 达到幸福的方法, 就是齐是非, 好和坏是一样的, 等等, 就是糊涂. Wang Zisong directly associates the wisdom of *Nande hutu* with the lacking of premises and deduction in judgment and conclusions. Because of this, he says, it is indeed difficult to use logical reasoning to prove right and wrong. He argues that truth indeed should be 'experienced' in the end, but some *daoli* (principles, truths) can be judged to be right or wrong through the people's free debate and discussion. (Wang 1993)

<sup>241</sup> This saying is dealt with in more depth in the section on the Daoist philosophical concept of wisdom as non-wisdom (see page 69) and will reappear in Chapter Four for a more popular interpretation (see page 206).



So according to Feng Youlan, there is a big difference between the *yu* of the child, and the *yu* of the sage. This perfectly conveys the meaning of *hutu* in *Nande hutu*. As a kind of muddledness which transcends smartness as an emotional, intellectual and rational quality related to experience, it is generally very different from childhood innocence.<sup>242</sup>

The aspect of experience gained with age seems to be a crucial component of understanding *hutu*. In line with Feng Youlan's remark on the translation of *yu*, some sources (e.g. Zhang Jiacheng 2008) suggest that people can be divided into three 'stages' (*jieduan* 阶段) of 'muddledness' or 'smartness'. The first stage is being muddled when you have not been educated yet or have not acquired the knowledge through study yet, such as the naivety, simplicity and ignorance of a child. The second stage is when adults know - or are supposed to or think they know - how to behave properly in society. The third stage is when, as an 'experienced' person, having accumulated knowledge and life experience, one realizes how useless knowledge really has been, and how beneficial it is for one's well-being to have a pure state of mind like a child's. However, even if at this stage, one might want to return to the carefree state of mind of a child, this is not possible unless one detaches oneself from one's intellect by letting go and distancing oneself from it (see the next section).

Wang Tangjia (2008) explains the state of mind in which one turns from *congming* into *hutu* in slightly different words. According to him, the *hutu* that transcends *congming* is a way to 'turn a blind eye to and to turn a deaf ear to matters' (*shi er bu jian, ting er bu wen* 视而不见, 听而不闻). This however, should not be taken in the negative sense; it means literally seeing and hearing as if only your eyes have seen and your ears have heard, while your inner eyes and inner ears do not take it in, and consequently what you perceive (hear and see) does not occupy any space in your mind-spirit (*xinling* 心灵) and your mind-spirit remains internalized. Conversely, if you let yourself fill up with and become pre-occupied by all the things you see and hear, then there is no room left in your mind for imagination and inner joy.

Both these interpretations are reminiscent of Lord Hundun and his initial absence of a 'face' (senses, knowledge, rationality, emotions...) which once he had obtained it, would lead to his death. More generally, this notion is reminiscent of *hundun* 混沌, chaos, as the creative principle.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Cf also the quote in the *Lunyu* (V, 21), which attributes a positive connotation to being stupid (*yu*): 'The Master said, "When good order prevailed in his country, Ning Wu acted the part of a wise man. When his country was in disorder, he acted the part of a stupid man. Others may equal his wisdom, but they cannot equal his stupidity".'(子曰: “甯武子邦有道则知, 邦无道则愚.其知可及也, 其愚不可及也.

<sup>243</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the theme of chaos and its relation with *hutu*, see section 2.2.3.2 *Hundun* and the theme of chaos.

In summary, we could follow the suggestion of Liu and Huang (2005: 15) to replace *hutu* in Zheng Banqiao's calligraphy by *da zhi* 大智, 'high wisdom'. This would result in the following: achieving (common) smartness is difficult, being able to achieve high wisdom naturally is even more difficult, but being able to come to high wisdom from the state of common smartness is even more difficult to obtain<sup>244</sup>. This indeed is the core of Zheng Banqiao's *hutu*: plain smartness is difficult to obtain, but transcending this smartness to a higher state of mind called *hutu* is the most difficult. How this can be done, is the topic of the next section.

### 3.3.2.3 The road to muddledness: 'Let go for once, take a step back'

*Fang yi zhao, tui yi bu*  
放一着，退一步

In the discussions about the meaning of *fang yi zhao, tui yi bu* 放一着，退一步 with both Chinese and Western scholars, it turned out that the phrase can adopt slightly varying interpretations according to different contexts, whereas the basic meaning stays the same: taking one's distance in a matter and let things (temporarily) take their own course is often for the best. For example, the phrase can be terminology for a tactic used in chess, as well as in martial arts, where 'taking a step back' can give your opponent the impression that you are weak (and maybe even confused), in order to make him attack you, and then, in turn, use the opponent's own power against him. This idea is also prominent in *The Art of War* (*Sunzi Bingfa* 孙子兵法) of the philosopher and strategist Sunzi (544-496 BC)<sup>245</sup>, and probably also in many other games and occupations.

How ever it may be, with this sentence, Zheng Banqiao may have indicated a way of achieving the ultimate muddled state of mind: by letting go and taking a step back. In addition to the Daoist-inspired paradoxical use of *congming* and *hutu*, most authors agree that this also represents a common Daoist rationale. Living according to the *dao* consists of letting go of worldly burdens embodied in worldly ambitions such as fame and fortune (*mingli* 名利), passions, and all kinds of longings and strivings (e.g. Lei 2008). Not being able to let go, but keeping a firm grip and control on worldly matters will lead to oblivion when disappointment, fear, anger, and hate are the result of the deviation from

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<sup>244</sup> 做到一般的聪明难得,能做到大智自然会更难得,而由一般的聪明达到大智就更加难得.

<sup>245</sup> *The Art of War*, an influential ancient Chinese book on military strategy, is attributed to the Legalist Sunzi (544-496 BC), an ancient military general, strategist and philosopher. It has become very popular recently both in Asia and in the West, in many different circles of life, including business and politics. For instance, in business, people use this strategy for their negotiations and business dealings, in order to obtain success in the 'trade war'. See for example Ambler & Witzel 2004 [2000]: 89-91.

one's natural condition. Taking a detached approach to life naturally allows one to follow one's inner *dao* instead of being carried away by intense emotions and mental fixations of the moment.

However, as I mentioned before, this does not mean shying away from conflicts or challenges one encounters, nor avoiding discussions about right and wrong. As many scholars emphasize (e.g. Hu 2008; Li S. 2005; Zhou 2008), the road to real muddledness is not about taking an evasive attitude – be it mentally by pretending not to know, see or hear, or physically by retreating far away from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Rather, letting go and taking a step back should not be taken too literally. *Hutu* represents a state of mind which can be – if desired – evoked at all times at any place and in whatever circumstances. This is where the saying *da yin yin yu shi* 大隱隱于市 often comes into play. The saying means something like ‘Real retreat is retreat on the market place’ or ‘Retreat in the middle of town’, and has different variations. These variations range from just the one sentence to ‘*da yin yin yu chao, zhong yin yin yu shi, xiao yin yin yu ye* (大隱隱于朝，中隱隱于市，小隱隱于野) ‘Major retreat is in officialdom, mediocre retreat is at the marketplace, minor retreat is in nature’. This saying teaches us that taking a step back does not mean one should retreat as a recluse in a remote place far from the responsibilities and duties and rights of society. The real art of life is to find peace of mind in the hustle and bustle of the mundane world by not becoming completely absorbed by it.

We also find this idea of retreating in Lin Yutang's reflections on the nature of philosophy and on the real sage. According to him, contrary to the philosophy of the tramp retreating in nature as often depicted by Daoist masters and the mythical *Ba Xian*<sup>246</sup> in search for immortality, Confucianism represents an opposite influence in Chinese thought. Lin Yutang (2007 [1998]: 108-109) explains this as follows:

The logical conclusion of a thorough-going Taoist would be to go to the mountains and live as a hermit or a recluse, to imitate as far as possible the simple carefree life of the woodcutter and the fisherman, the woodcutter who is lord of the green hills and the fisherman who is the owner of the blue waters. [...] Yet, it is poor philosophy that teaches us to escape from human society altogether. There is still a greater philosophy than this naturalism, namely, the philosophy of humanism. The highest ideal of Chinese thought is therefore a man who does not have to escape from human society and human life in order to preserve his original, happy nature. [...] “The Great Recluse is the city recluse,” because he has sufficient mastery over himself not to be afraid of his surroundings. He is therefore the

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<sup>246</sup> See also note 43.

Great Monk (the *kaoseng*) who returns to human society and eats pork and drinks wine and mixes with women, without detriment to his own soul.

Indeed, Confucianism does not think highly of the typical Daoist recluse who retreats completely from society. The *Analects* (*Analects*, XVIII, 7) discuss the Confucian opinion on the recluse:

Confucius, while travelling from state to state, met many men whom he called *yinzhe* 隱者, 'those who conceal themselves'. [...] Most of these men ridiculed Confucius for what they regarded as his vain efforts to save the world. [...] To those attacks, a disciple of Confucius, Zi Lu once replied: 'It is unrighteous to refuse to serve in office. If the regulations between old and young in family life are not to be set aside, how is it then that you set aside the duty that exists between sovereign and subject? In your desire to maintain your personal purity, you subvert the great relationship of society [the relationship between sovereign and subject]' . (Feng 1997: 60)<sup>247</sup>

Thus, a person should not renounce his moral and social obligations, even if to do so would bring peace of mind. Accordingly, other Confucian concepts such as moral knowledge, knowing *tianming*, and the wisdom of the sage in general should result from life's experiences, always in relation to others within society. As such, these characteristics of wisdom in one way or another always relate to age and personal growth; only continuous active involvement in life, and active moral cultivation can lead to true peace of mind. Another demonstration of this idea of wisdom as it relates to experience and spiritual growth can be found in Confucius' quote in which he describes his spiritual growth in stages of ten years (see page 66).

It is important to remark, however, that the early Daoists recluses (as for instance Yang Zhu (370-319 BC) were not always ordinary recluses who 'escaped the world', desiring to maintain their personal integrity, and who, once in retirement, made no attempt ideologically to justify their conduct. On the contrary, they were often men who, having gone into seclusion, attempted to work out a system of thought that would give meaning to their actions (Feng 1997: 60-61).<sup>248</sup> According to Daoist thinking, the

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<sup>247</sup> Cf de Bary (1970: 16): 'A detached attitude towards things might be admirable, but the Confucian conception of human life and the self did not allow the individual to be seen in isolation from his social environment or the moral imperatives of Heaven. It was unrealistic, wrong and selfish to conceive of human existence apart from the concrete relationships and obligations inescapably involved in the production and sustaining of human life.'

<sup>248</sup> Here, Feng Youlan reflects on the question of the broader context of the very nature of Chinese philosophy, that is to say, whether or not Chinese philosophy is 'this-worldly' or 'other-worldly'. According to him, the ideal of Chinese philosophy is the synthesis of this-worldliness (realism) and the other-worldliness (idealism).

highest achievement of the sage is the identification of man with nature, which is exactly the spiritual state of mind *hutu* aims at. If men want to achieve this identification, they do not necessarily have to abandon society, let alone negate life altogether. This is also true for the wisdom of *Nande hutu*. As professor Han Shengwang explained during our conversation, ‘The background philosophy of *Nande hutu* urges one to embrace society (*ru shi* 入世), and not to be above worldly considerations (*chushi* 出世)’<sup>249</sup> (Personal communication, 29 September 2008, Beijing).

Thus, in this respect, the two great philosophies do not clash, but rather converge. Moreover, according to Lin Yutang, it is exactly this ‘Great Recluse’ who lives in the middle of busy daily life that embodies the possibility of the merging of Confucianism and Daoism. The ‘Great Recluse’ manages to adopt a constant carefree attitude (Daoist) while still being socially responsible and engaging (Confucian).

The perfect example of this real sage who combined both social responsibility with a deep but lighthearted love of life and who knew when and where to retreat and would always keep peace of mind was without doubt Tao Yuanming 陶渊明 (317-420). Tao Yuanming is also the historical figure with whom Zheng Banqiao is often associated (e.g. Hu 2008; Qi 2008; Qing 2008; Wu Z. 2007; Yang 2008; Zhuge 2008). Tao Yuanming already at a very young age was torn between ambition and a desire to retreat into solitude. He later served in several minor posts, but his dissatisfaction with the corruption of the Jin Court prompted him to resign. He refused to bow to powerful but corrupt officials just for the sake of convenience, position and material gain, and made the difficult decision to reject life as an official. As many of the allusions to him in his writings show, Zheng Banqiao greatly admired him. However, although Tao Yuanming was extremely wary of company, he did not leave officialdom to live in complete seclusion; he went to live the plain life of a farmer together with his wife, simple and humble, and in total harmony with himself and his surroundings, living in communion with the poor, enjoying good wine and the beauty of nature and poetry. As Lin Yutang explains, this is the Tao Yuanming known to the Chinese people: a righteous official who left officialdom without completely renouncing worldly occupations. He may be regarded by some as an escapist, although he clearly was not. What he tried to escape was politics rather than life (and the pleasures and worries of life) itself;

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Cf ‘According to Chinese philosophy, the man who accomplishes this synthesis between this-worldliness and other-worldliness, not only in theory, but also in deed, is the sage.’ (Feng 1997: 6-10)

<sup>249</sup> 难得糊涂的后背哲学是让你入世，不让你出世。 *chushi* 出世 can mean ‘to be born’, but also ‘renounce human society’ and ‘stand aloof from the mortal world’ (Wu & Cheng 2006: 223). Often, *ru shi* 入世 is associated with Confucianism, and *chushi* 出世 with Daoism, since Confucianism promotes a life in society and participation in society, whereas Daoism embraces a life not pre-occupied with worldly matters such as (social) status, (social) morality etc.

Of the earth and earth-born, his conclusion was not to escape from [life], but ‘to go forth alone on a bright morning, or perhaps, planting his cane, begin to pluck the weeds and till the ground.’ T’ao merely returned to the farm and to his family. The end was harmony and not rebellion. (Lin Y. 2007 [1998]b: 117-118)<sup>250</sup>

In the same way, Zheng Banqiao certainly did not renounce his familial and social duties; his departure was only for his political career, even if this – from a Confucian standpoint – meant that he became a ‘failed’ scholar-official (see quote page 150). The only thing he really wanted to attain was peace of mind. Moreover, Zheng Banqiao did not aim to be completely detached and aloof from life; therefore, as an artist, but also as someone who genuinely knew how to enjoy life, he was too attached to the beauty of life itself.

To summarize, *fang yi zhao, tui yi bu* conveys the ideal of facing life with all its complications and limitations, knowing when and where to retreat and let go and leave things to take their own course, which is for the best. Cultivating an attitude of aloofness by physically retreating from society is not what is intended, but rather mental retreat which can achieve the desired peace of mind. This insight about the wisdom of *Nande hutu* brings us to the last phrase of Zheng Banqiao’s calligraphy: obtaining peace of mind by not being pre-occupied with future results.

#### 3.3.2.4 The ultimate longing: ‘Present peace of mind consists of not planning for future rewards’

*Dangxia xin an, fei tu hou lai fu bao ye*  
当下心安，非图后来福报也

This last sentence of the postscript gives us insight into the state of mind that should be the result of, or at least should be targeted, while retreating and taking a step back (in the practice of being *hutu*): present peace of mind. Liu and Huang (2005: 15-16) aptly explain that letting go and taking a step back for the purpose of future reward, is not the true high wisdom. As the sentence states, present peace of mind can only be attained when one does not anticipate future ‘rewards’, that is to say, when one does not calculate or intentionally do things to obtain something, to be successful in something, not even with the best, most honorable and lofty intentions, as was the case for Zheng Banqiao. When a person attains a state of mind in which he understands the ways of the world, and knows when to retreat and when to take a step back, and uses his

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<sup>250</sup> For more on Tao Yuanming as a ‘lover of life’ and as the achiever of ‘a harmonious philosophy of the half-and-half, lying somewhere between action and inaction’, see Lin Y. 2007 [1998]b: 111-118.

wisdom to do the right thing, he should do so without regard to personal gain or the eventual outcome. He should be content with the plain act itself, without expecting something from it. In this way, he can never be disappointed by his actions. Thus, the most important condition to obtain inner peace (*xinli anning* 心理安宁), is by being focused on nothing but this inner peace of mind, instead of being calculating and seeking future personal gains (e.g. Li 1986).

This ‘unpre-occupied’, purposeless attitude is probably the most difficult virtue to achieve as it requires a state of mind where one is emotionally and rationally detached and does not get absorbed by what still has to come. As such, Zheng Banqiao’s ‘peace of mind’ corresponds with the Daoist detachment, which is quite different from the Confucian sense of detachment. In Daoist thinking, the highest achievement is a form of detachment which is both emotionally and rationally indifferent towards human conventions and (unnatural) moral codes and knowledge, and in general towards any limitations that prevent the person from ‘wandering free and easy’ (in his heart-mind). This ideal peace of mind is symbolized in Lord *Hundun* and in the sage fool. Confucian detachment however, does not allow the individual to isolate himself from his social duties and from the moral imperatives of *tianming* (cf above). Renouncing these obligations and worries in one’s inner life is morally wrong, even if to do so brings peace of mind. Zheng Banqiao’s inclination towards Daoism in this sense has become clear in his exit from officialdom: even if his official retirement meant failure as a Confucian scholar, to him it seemed the right course of action in order to maintain his integrity and attain greater peace of mind.

Some authors argue that this peace of mind can be present in the smallest aspects of daily life. For instance, Hu Sheng (2008) explains that *dang xia xin an* 当下心安 merely means that whatever one does, at whatever stage one is ‘proceeding’ (advancing or retreating), one should seek for mental equilibrium (*xinli de pingheng* 心理的平衡) and not struggle with the situation or the action one is about to do (or not do), nor act (or non-act) with an understanding of the likely future impact. What really counts is the inner equability of the moment. During our conversation, Hu Sheng (2008) explained what *hutu* and inner peace in daily life is about. The example he used was the interview with me. He intended to enjoy our conversation, without expecting anything from it, without a ‘hidden’ agenda, or without even wanting to take anything from our talk. In this way, there can be no disappointments and no worries, since there are no desires and there is nothing to be expected; only the moment itself is of any importance. This certainly did not mean that he did not value our interview, or that I should not do the interview. What he meant is the importance of how one deals with the situation, and how one’s attitude in whatever engagement might be. (Hu Sheng, Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang) In the same way, Zheng Banqiao did all he could to support the weak and underprivileged, but all he saw was the sustained corruption, degeneration and injustice. Somehow he did not manage to distance himself

from the corruption, nor did he manage to obtain some peace of mind in the given situation. Therefore, having endured so much hardship and disappointment in his life, he decided to leave office. His departure should not be seen as a rejection of his (Confucian) lofty humanistic ideals, but, rather on the contrary, that he could not ignore the degeneration of these Confucian ideals which is what he saw happening to most of his fellow-officials and superiors, and consequently sought a way out, to at least maintain his own integrity and find some peace of mind.

This, and other reflections on the reasons why Zheng Banqiao wrote the calligraphy, on the relation with his given background, and on how we should put this all together in order to develop a nuanced and balanced interpretation of the calligraphy will be the topic of the next section.

### 3.3.3 The duality in *Nande hutu*: active against passive interpretation

As repeatedly shown in the previous sections, the interpretation of the four characters is much broader than one at first glance might think. On the one hand, 'Being muddled is difficult' is not just about being blindly tolerant and accommodating like a fool. Neither does it mean to turn a blind eye (to be ignorant), nor to conveniently escape things in life that can be hard to endure or understand. These all would be some of the most superficial interpretations of *hutu*. Zheng Banqiao's muddledness on the contrary is far from ordinary; it is a kind of light, conscious and smart muddledness that 'transcends' ordinary smartness, in such a way that it also 'transcends' worldly matters, and more in particular, worldly worries. On the other hand, the saying clearly articulates Zheng's resentment and disappointment with officialdom and the degeneration of Confucian scholars; only two years after he wrote the calligraphy, he retired from office. With this in mind, it is interesting to have a look at those elements in the scholarly discussion on *Nande hutu* that do not directly relate to the content of the saying, but to its social, philosophical and psychological dimensions.

In accordance with the artistic ideal accepted by the scholar-official of the time that officials do not paint for a public, but use their artistic work as a vehicle for their thoughts and emotions, some scholars rightly focus on the relationship between the wisdom behind the saying and Zheng's personal life-experiences. For instance, Liu and Huang (2005) go as far as giving three meanings to the calligraphy which directly link to three stages in Zheng Banqiao's life. They consider *Nande hutu* as an expression of his cynicism (*ji su zhi yu* 嫉俗之语) during his years as a young bohemian, as a way of venting his feelings (*gankai zhi yu* 感慨之语) of discontent and aversion of officialdom during his years as an official, and as an indication of finally having grasped the 'truth' at the age of fifty-six (*wu dao zhi yu* 悟道之语). Other – often simultaneous –



interpretations are related to society at the time of Zheng Banqiao, and sometimes stretch out to contemporary society. Here once again, we are confronted with opposing but also complimentary points of view. However, the most frequent interpretations (Lei 2008; Li S. 2005; Liu & Huang 2005; Zhang Jiacheng 2008; Zhou 2008) come down to one basic division: the wisdom of *Nande hutu* – just as all things in life – like a ‘double-edged sword’ (*shuangrenjian* 双刃剑), with an engaging and inspiring (positive) aspect to it, and a passive (negative) aspect to it.<sup>251</sup>

The first standpoint of this dichotomy focuses on the positive, active and engaging (*jiji* 积极) quality of *Nande hutu*, and links it with personal (moral) integrity, self-cultivation, social engagement, and peace of mind. The second standpoint mainly considers *Nande hutu* as a strong criticism of society, which – especially in the course of its growing popularity – has turned from an understandably but still negatively motivated strategy of self-preservation, into a mere passive (*xiaoji* 消极), subtle way of evading conflicts and difficulties, often for one’s own personal benefit. Both relate to either the person of Zheng Banqiao himself, or to society, or to both. Each point of view is to a meaningful extent only a matter of focus.

### 3.3.3.1 Active and positive interpretation

The interpretations set out above (see 3.3.2) clearly show that *Nande hutu* contains a positive, active message; it represents a profound wisdom of life (*rensheng zhihui* 人生智慧) for attaining peace of mind. First of all, the positive, active and aspiring quality of the saying should be found in the person of Zheng Banqiao himself. The moral principles and the philosophy of life that he practiced during his life clearly showed his moral integrity (*guqi* 骨气) (e.g. Wu Z. 2007; Xiang 2002). One of the clearest examples showing his personal integrity is probably that shortly after he wrote the calligraphy, he resigned from office in order to keep his integrity, instead of continuing to be caught up in a web of corruption and injustice.<sup>252</sup> So, for Zheng Banqiao, to ‘let go and take a step back’ (*fang yi zhao, tui yi bu* 放一着, 退一步) was his own upright way of dealing with the limitations of the given conditions of office (corruption and selfishness in officialdom). The result of this kind of distancing attitude is temporary (inner) equilibrium (*zanshi pingheng* 暂时平衡) or peace of mind.

Secondly, apart from obtaining some inner balance, the higher realm of wisdom people might reach when mentally taking a step back may allow them to react better to a given situation than when they are disillusioned and feel imprisoned by powerlessness

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<sup>251</sup> This division is sometimes also mentioned in the more popular sources, but never well explained.

<sup>252</sup> On the issue of his leaving officialdom, see section 3.2.2.2 Life as an official p. 120.

(*wunai* 无奈), which would only result in giving up or becoming ‘indifferent’ (*mamu* 麻木). In this sense, *Nande hutu* can be considered as Zheng Banqiao’s personal tactic (*celüe* 策略) to maintain or attain (temporary) inner peace without becoming disengaged or indifferent. As an official, he himself did not fully obtain the inner peace referred to in *Nande hutu*, and could do nothing but retreat from officialdom in order to stay mentally sane. He remained fully engaged, especially in confrontations with his own limitations and the limitations of others and of the society he lived in. This in a way detached (emotionally indifferent to possible outcomes) but still involved state of mind can be obtained by mentally distancing oneself or by temporarily retreating. Although at first glance it might look as if the situation is abandoned, the result is positive: more peace of mind in a situation where one is anyway not able to act otherwise, without having lost one’s integrity and social engagement. In this respect, this active component of *Nande hutu* also relates clearly to what is discussed before, the ideal of retreating in the middle of the hustle and bustle of life (see page 149): distancing without completely disengaging oneself from society.

The dialectics of being smart inside while looking and acting muddled on the outside (cf *da zhi ruo yu*), constitute one of the most contradictory and therefore most difficult aspect about Zheng Banqiao’s *hutu*. Many scholars (Hu 2008; Lei 2008; Wu Z. 2007) relate this to a third, positive and active aspect of being *hutu*, namely the practice of self-cultivation (*xiu shen* 修身, ‘cultivate morality’) through ‘forming the mind’ (*sixiang xiuyang* 思想修养). Part of this mostly moral self-cultivation consists of not showing off with one’s knowledge but, instead, learning to be modest and not to articulate firm opinions or put oneself in the centre of attention. This modest, humble and low-profile attitude is a very highly esteemed Confucian ideal, and aims in the first place at social harmony. It can be obtained by practicing self-restraint or self-control.<sup>253</sup>

In the context of self-cultivation, some authors again particularly stress the virtue of social engagement and solidarity, of which Zheng Banqiao was the perfect example, at least during his time as an official. The ultimate aim of self-cultivation should not just be personal peace of mind, but harmony and peace in the world (*tianxia* 天下). According to Lei Legeng (2008), the core meaning of Zheng Banqiao’s *hutu* lies in the high wisdom of being good in interpersonal relations, in making concessions, in self-constraint and self-denial when it is for the benefit of others, instead of for personal peace of mind. The

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<sup>253</sup> The Confucian notions of self-cultivation, self-restraint and self-control were already briefly touched upon in Chapter Two. They will also show to be major discursive elements in the contemporary discourse on *Nande hutu* (see Part Two).

ultimate aim of a *hutu* attitude is not for personal good fortune and reward, but is (or should be) solely aimed at stabilizing society and avoiding individual resentment.<sup>254</sup>

As the word ‘self-cultivation’ implies, it also means one can consciously ‘study’ in order to shape one’s state of mind. Confucian ethics is based on education (learning the Confucian rituality and etiquette) as the primary means to moral self-cultivation. This theoretically means that the state of muddledness is something one can learn, and as such indeed has an encouraging and hopeful quality. This idea of the *hutu* state of mind that one can learn to achieve (through self-cultivation) is consistent with the idea of *hutu* as a higher state of mind related to one’s age and experience: the older and more experienced one becomes in the practice of self-cultivation, the more peace of mind one reaches.

How ever you consider it, when carefully reading ‘Let go, step back for once! Present peace of mind consists of not anticipating future rewards’, one can sense the optimistic tone. Zheng Banqiao eventually stepped aside and left the situation for what it was without losing his personal integrity nor his social engagement (he did not become a recluse, rather on the contrary), regardless how difficult this was for him. For many authors, the saying contains an encouragement to cultivate a way of thinking and to act above worldly considerations, worries and the material world without fully retreating from it. As Liu and Huang (2005: 16) describe it:

Of course, the fact that the truth is difficult to see through should not prevent one from pursuing the truth. In the same way, the fact that the realm of high wisdom is difficult to reach, should not prevent people from continuously pursuing this kind of realm. [...] So *Nande hutu* - apart from being a complaint - also contains an encouragement. This has absolutely nothing to do with the *Nande hutu* as understood by those muddleheads.<sup>255</sup>

With ‘the *Nande hutu* as understood by those muddleheads’, Liu and Huang undeniably refer to one of the more negative interpretations of the saying, in which really muddled people, who do not understand the real meaning of *Nande hutu*, let alone understand why it is ‘difficult’ (*nande*), resort to the saying for their own personal petty ambitions

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<sup>254</sup> In 2006, two years before the article with his analysis of *Nande hutu*, Lei Legeng (2006) wrote an article about *lihaixue* 利害学 (‘the art of advantages and disadvantages’) as a way to conduct oneself in society (*zuoren chushi* 做人处世). This article basically comprises all the content he mentions in his article on *Nande hutu*. Here too, he stresses the idea of solidarity and harmonious society, in which he references books about *Nande hutu* and *hutuxue*.

<sup>255</sup>当然, 真理难穷并不妨碍人们去追求真理. 大智的境界难以达到也不妨碍人们去不断地追求这种境界.[...] 所以“难得糊涂”于感叹之外,也含有勉励之意.这对于那些浑浑噩噩者所理解的“难得糊涂”,真是风马牛不相及也.

such as social status and material benefit. This brings us to the second, negative and passive connotation.

### 3.3.3.2 Passive and negative interpretation

Considering the socio-cultural background of *Nande hutu*, as well as the personality of Zheng Banqiao and the context in which the calligraphy was written, the saying undoubtedly represents a lament on life, and in particular on Zheng Banqiao's specific situation at the time of writing. As a young artist, his life was full of misery, with the early death of his mother, the death of his son, and the long periods of extreme poverty. Later, while serving as an official, his personality was marked by the disappointment and anger with the people in power and the corruption among his colleagues. The state of mind he acquired through all his life experiences, namely being angry and feeling highly indignant about the ruling corruption, yet at the same time being grieved and disappointed by all that had happened before and - even more so - about what had not happened for the poor people, is certainly reflected in the saying.

The Fourth May author and critic Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936) (1933) observed the following in his *Zhun feng yue tan* (准风月谈)<sup>256</sup> that 'The four seal style characters irregularly carved can considerably represent the discontent of a celebrated scholar' (那四个篆字刻得叉手叉脚的，颇能表现一点名士的牢骚气). Referring to Lu Xun's comments, other authors elaborate on this a little more by saying that

by using *Nande hutu*, Banqiao gave free vent to his complaint and criticism on society, in a hidden way satirizing and speaking sarcastically about the corrupt wind in officialdom in those days. At the same time, with this saying, he also warned himself and the future generations [not to become like that].<sup>257</sup> (Su 2006)

Also Liu and Huang (2005: 15) describe the four characters as

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<sup>256</sup> *Zhun feng yue tan* (准风月谈) dates from 1933, and embodies a collection of small essays. *Zhun* 准 here indicates incompetent, unqualified, and *fengyue tan* 风月谈, literally wind -moon-talk, here means: small or petty talk (sometimes also referring to 'matters concerning love; seductive arts of a woman'). Therefore it is sometimes translated as 'semi-frivolous talks'. In this period, Lu Xun's essays tackled serious contemporary issues by means of frivolous talk using hints and implications and suggestive language. He meant to challenge the conventional beliefs by suggesting that he is incompetent, and, as a layman, not competent to talk about literature or social issues. (Tang 1998: 119-121). For a brief outline of the life and works of Lu Xun, often called 'the father of modern Chinese literature', in the literary tradition, see for example *ibid.* and Yang L. 1994: 200-204.

<sup>257</sup> 借“难得糊涂”四字，板桥发愤世嫉俗之“牢骚”，藏锋不露地讽刺、挖苦当时官场的腐败之风，同时也以此警示自己和后人。

Concentrating feelings of bitterness, torment and helplessness. But with its ridiculing and jeering brushwork, the calligraphy at the same time throws a sharp knife to that society.<sup>258</sup>

In discussing the relevance of the hardship and toughness of society during this period of history in relation to *Nande hutu*, many authors strongly focus on the position of the so-called literati (*wenren* 文人). Although the Yongzheng (1723-1735) and Qianlong (1735-1796) periods in the Qing dynasty are considered to be stable and prosperous periods in Chinese history, Ming loyalism was still very much feared by the successive emperors, to which the so-called book inquisition by the Qianlong Emperor testifies.<sup>259</sup> This did not stimulate a free and open atmosphere for literati-officials, and many of them kept quiet for the sake of self-preservation.<sup>260</sup> This applied even more so to all those literati serving as officials, as was the case with Zheng Banqiao. It was always better to pretend to be ignorant and indifferent to some (political) matters, and not to take sides, than to give vent to one's doubts and critics on 'sensitive' issues, and thus risking to lose one's social status. As such, being *hutu* served as a self-imposed strategy for self-preservation (*baohu ziji* 保护自己).

Long before Zheng Banqiao's time, many historical examples testify to this perilous situation. One of the more famous examples of this phenomenon is Su Dongpo (苏东坡, 1037-1101). Su Dongpo got the highest official's degree at the age of nineteen, which was quite spectacular. However, he often was in conflict with officialdom and his superiors, and his criticism was often taken as a revolt against the emperor. As a result, he spent several years in exile. However, he always refused to adapt to convention, and remained true to his beliefs.<sup>261</sup>

Many authors (e.g. Li S. 2005; Lü 2007) argue that this negative and passive interpretation, namely *Nande hutu* as a strategy for self-preservation, was indeed somehow understandable. It was the result of a cultural conditioning in an autocratic society (*zhuangzhi xitong* 专制系统) where human oppression (*renxing yayi* 人性压抑) was ruling society, people's margin for real action was very small, and individual power was very limited (see above 3.2.1.1). In such a world of oppression, inequality and harsh punishments in which the individual gave his life in the hands of just one person (the Emperor) without any rights for himself and in no way could take control of his fate

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<sup>258</sup>这四字条幅,凝聚着多少辛酸、苦痛与无可奈何!但同时它又是以揶揄和嘲弄的笔触向那个社会投掷出的一把利剑。

<sup>259</sup> Cf note 151.

<sup>260</sup> For more on Ming loyalism, see section 3.2.1 Historical and socio-cultural background.

<sup>261</sup> On Su Dongpo, see also note 101 and note 145.

(*mingyun* 命运)<sup>262</sup>, let alone realize his dream of being well-off and prosperous (Lü 2007: 224), the high wisdom behind *Nande hutu* can easily deteriorate to a tool for mere self-preservation through conflict avoidance (*taobi maodun* 逃避矛盾), namely by retreating and becoming indifferent. This intentional ignorance of course suited the Emperor and local officials because it meant less individual protest let alone collective uprising.

As explained above (Chapter Two page 78), we should keep in mind that the lofty, Confucian ideal of social harmony and harmony with nature (Heaven) through self-cultivation and rituality as described and developed in philosophical concepts, was never a reflection of daily reality of that time. On the contrary, ordinary people were not engaged in lofty practices of self-cultivation through music, studying, calligraphy and painting. Life of the ordinary person consisted of suffering (*chi ku* 吃苦), and this suffering was clearly not only due to natural catastrophes and political revolts and the fear and terror that accompanied these phenomena. As such, many scholars seem to agree that the structure of society has in fact always been an impetus for attributing a negative, passive, quality to the wisdom of *Nande hutu*, by intentionally adopting a muddled and ignorant attitude in conflict situations. The lack of personal freedom, the oppression and feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness that the majority of the people experienced in the feudal, hierarchic society contributed to the need for vagueness, fatalism and numbness as a way of coping with daily life. As a result, *Nande hutu* became a tried and tested ‘strategy for survival’, a popular ‘survival wisdom’ (*shengcun de zhihui* 生存的智慧), but at the same time, it also lost its profound philosophical and positive meaning (Li S. 2005: 75).

Li Shaolong argues that *Nande hutu* especially during the process of its large-scale popularization became a particularly passive and evasive (*xiaoji yuanhua* 消极圆滑) ‘strategy’ to conduct oneself in society, and in this became popular by all members of society (not only for literati). According to him and many others, nowadays nothing seems to be left of the positive, engaging component of it (Li 1986; Lü 2007; Zhou 2008; Zhuge 2008).

Thus, being muddled as a passive, evasive strategy for self-preservation is not new. It existed long before Zheng Banqiao articulated the sentiment in the calligraphy and the wisdom of the saying became popular. Nevertheless, this function of the saying as a popular strategy of survival in an authoritarian system is still highly relevant in contemporary society, an observation that will be dealt with in Part Two (see especially Chapter Six section 6.2.4).

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<sup>262</sup> For more on the notions of *tianming* 天命 and *mingyun* 命运 as fate, see further page 185.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I first discussed the specific *Zeitgeist* in which Zheng Banqiao lived, his life experiences and the philosophical influences he underwent as an initial introduction to a suitable translation and interpretation of the saying. From this analysis, we learnt that Zheng Banqiao's life was, from his early childhood onwards, filled with hardship, deaths and losses of close family members, and poverty. When he finally decided to enter officialdom, he became so disappointed by the corruption, injustice and the degeneration of the scholar-literati that he could do nothing but leave in order to find greater inner peace of mind in his artistic life. In this way, he could maintain his personal integrity and at the same time continue to be engaged in society instead of distancing himself completely from everyday life. His life's choices and works show how greatly immersed he was in Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, a common Chinese phenomenon referred to as 'the syncretism of the three teachings' (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一). However, especially for his inner life, he seemed most favorably disposed towards Daoism. The calligraphy *Nande hutu* is just one exponent of this Daoist inclination.

In a second part, the specific circumstances in which Zheng Banqiao wrote the calligraphy and the story of the *hutu laoren* were discussed in order to better understand what the reasons were that made him write the calligraphy and to be able to come to a more holistic interpretation and translation of the saying. Turning to a suggestion for an English interpretation of the saying, I put forward some arguments in favor of the translation of 'Being muddled is difficult'.

When discussing the different academic interpretations of the calligraphy/saying and its postscript, it turned out this was quite a 'muddled' undertaking; there appeared to be many different views on the correct interpretation of the saying, interpretations often determined by a different focus. One of the most explicit outcomes of the analysis of the postscript is the idea that being muddled is a form of wisdom rather than a kind of foolishness as one generally would expect it to be. Besides, being muddled as in *Nande hutu* is not just plain smartness (*congming* 聰明), but rather a smartness that surpasses a certain, already high, level of smartness. Therefore, it is really very difficult to attain it (*nande* 难得).

Another aspect of Zheng Banqiao's wisdom of life that appeared to be quite prominent was the idea of letting go and take a step back (*fang yi zhao, tui yi bu* 放一着退一步) not as a way of becoming completely disengaged but as a way to take a detached, or, in its most philosophical interpretation, an emotionally and intellectually indifferent approach in life, especially when one is confronted with the limitations of life, conflicts, moral dilemmas, and feelings of powerlessness. Through applying the wisdom of *Nande*

*hutu*, one can in these situations obtain temporary peace of mind. However, there is a requirement that has to be met, which is that one has to make decisions and act without contemplation of the impact on or the achievement of future reward. If one cannot distance oneself from personal intentions and ambitions, however lofty they might be, the high-level muddledness as a wisdom that goes beyond ‘common’ wisdom to attain peace of mind, will never be in reach.

Therefore, not surprisingly, throughout the analysis, the aspect of ‘(life) experience’ (*jingli* 经历) seemed to be an essential characteristic of the *hutu* according to Zheng Banqiao. Most authors believe that Zheng Banqiao’s *hutu* is achieved through the very act of living, and can therefore only be obtained at a certain age, having reached a certain ‘wisdom’ of life. In this respect, there showed to be not merely an important link between *hutu* and experience in the Daoist interpretations of *hutu* as a higher stage of wisdom as of the Daoist sage, but also in the associations of *hutu* with the Confucian notion of self-cultivation as a life-time process.

On a philosophical and societal level, the wisdom of *Nande hutu* revealed some moral and psychosocial dimensions. The saying has both a positive, active, and a negative, passive interpretation. In the philosophical and more positive interpretation, the real meaning of the saying lies in attaining one’s natural flow (*dao*), and returning to human essence by self-cultivation. This will allow one to be emotionally and intellectually (i.e. attached to and dependent on knowledge) indifferent without being disengaged. As such, *Nande hutu* represents a light-hearted state of emotional equanimity and intellectual indifference, focused on inner balance in any given situation, and especially when feeling powerless or in a conflict situation. The following passage of the *Zhuangzi* (Chapter VII: 6) articulates eloquently the philosophy of life that *Nande hutu* alludes to:

The Perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror – going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Therefore, he is able to deal successfully with things but is not affected by them.<sup>263</sup>

From a sociological point of view, Zheng Banqiao’s ‘pretended muddledness’ represents a way of dealing with the harshness and inequality of society by taking a detached but wise and – ideally – still engaged approach to life. As such, muddledness constitutes an indispensable element of Chinese feudal society. This was especially the case for literati and *wenren* who were often considered to be a potential danger to the Emperor and the nation state. For them, pretending to be muddled was not just a state of mind to deal with the negativity in society, but they intentionally did not show off and hide their smartness and criticism in order not to offend anyone higher in status.

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<sup>263</sup> 至人之用心若镜，不将不迎，应而不藏，故能胜物而不伤。 Adapted translation from Zhuangzi 2003: 95.



However, many authors argue that the wisdom of being muddled over time has developed into a passive, evasive strategy for self-preservation and selfish ambitions, unconnected to any social engagement. In view of this, we can ask ourselves whether or not this negatively motivated ‘pretended *hutu*-ness’ as an evasive, self-preserving attitude is still needed or desirable in contemporary society. In contemporary China, the structure of society has seen immense changes in comparison with the feudal, imperial China, and people certainly enjoy more freedom to live their life according to their own standards, and to pursue their ambitions and dreams. So, why would the wisdom of pretended muddledness still be so attractive to many in contemporary Chinese society? This and other questions related to the interpretation and use of *Nande hutu* will be addressed in depth in Part Two.

To summarize, *Nande hutu* undoubtedly articulates Zheng Banqiao’s personal philosophy of life (*rensheng zhexue* 人生哲学). On the one hand, his philosophy of life is profoundly philosophical in relation to ancient Chinese wisdom, while on the other hand, it could only have originated from the social background, concrete life experiences, and character of Zheng Banqiao, and from the structure of feudal society at large at the time. Clearly, the ideal, detached state of mind, yet fully engaged in life and strong enough internally to be able to let go that is described in the saying, is, as Zheng Banqiao rightly sighed, exceptionally difficult to attain (*nande* 难得).



Part 2: *Nande hutu* in contemporary society: ‘The  
Art of Being Muddled’



## Chapter 4 *Nande hutu*: a popular wisdom of life

*Something will work out tomorrow, I thought. And if not, then tomorrow I'll do some thinking. Ob-la-di, ob-la-da, life goes on.*

(Haruki Murakami, From: 'The Elephant Vanishes: "Family Affairs"')

### 4.1 Introduction

Now that the calligraphy *Nande hutu* is discussed in relation to its author and to the socio-cultural background at the time of its creation, this chapter will deal with how the saying *Nande hutu* is perceived in contemporary society: What does Zheng Banqiao's ancient philosophy of life have come to mean in this completely different context, and how is its wisdom explained and interpreted in the contemporary discourse on the saying?

Obviously, there is not just one interpretation and meaning attributed to the saying. The different online discussions, the articles in magazines, and the plurality of replies I received during my interviews, informal talks and in the survey testify to the vibrant and dynamic web of meaning. Consequently, this chapter contains a mixture of both academic and popular opinions, and of young, middle-aged and older people from diverse social and educational backgrounds. Although the absence of a clear division in academic and popular interpretations might at first glance go against scientific common sense, the reason for this non-division is triple. In the first place, the initial research question is not to know what the difference between academic and popular sources is,

but how the saying on the whole is perceived in contemporary society, and why it is still so attractive. In this respect, a strict division academic-nonacademic is insignificant. Secondly, this being the case, it also turned out the scholarly and non-scholarly sources to a great extent used the same discursive elements, which made a strict division not representative for the way in which the different discourses on the saying are conducted. Admittedly, the common elements are not always discussed similarly - academics would use more philosophical terminology, while non-scholarly sources were not less philosophical but expressed in a more mundane and accessible language, but this is in fact a reason in favor of putting them together: they represent both the 'dynamic' and 'lived' folk (*su* 俗), and the refined, static and intellectual (*ya* 雅) interpretation.<sup>264</sup> Wu Zeshun nicely demonstrates this syncretism of *su* and *ya* with regard to *Nande hutu*. He starts his article on *Nande hutu* with a poem of Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770), to explain that the bitterness and difficulties of life closes the gap between poets and 'ordinary people' (Wu Z. 2007). Moreover, I risked to repeat common explanations and concepts in a sometimes only slightly more philosophical or intellectual language. Thirdly, I often could not guarantee whether a source was academic or nonacademic, or from which educational or social background it originated, let alone to which age group the source belonged. Oftentimes, this distinction was too unclear. For instance, it happened an online author was so careful, eloquent and well-informed in his argumentation, that I could guess this person was quite aged, highly educated and literate, yet I could not be sure of this. The other way around, some academic articles did not seem to be profoundly investigated and were sometimes even copied. For these three reasons, it made more sense to put all the interpretations together in the large web of meanings. What thus is presented in this chapter is an amalgam of meanings, interpretations and associations that describe *Nande hutu*'s wisdom of life as experienced in contemporary China by academics and common people, and at the same time by people of different age groups and educational and social backgrounds.

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<sup>264</sup> *Su* 俗 and *ya* 雅 are concepts more or less referring to a theoretical framework for evaluating primarily artistic products (theatre, poetry etc). *Su* 俗 represents the dynamic, folk (local, ethnic) and 'commonplace', 'lived' interpretation (cf. *fengsu* 风俗, 'social custom'), whereas *ya* 雅 is the 'elegant', intellectual, rigid and 'correct' (*zheng* 正, one of the first meanings of *ya*) interpretation (cf *fengya* 风雅, 'elegant, refined'). The concepts have since long been debated in Chinese intellectual history. Although they are not considered as genuine theoretical concepts, they offer some theoretical evaluation criteria. Their meaning and the associated appreciation became totally different after the Cultural Revolution, when a trend of anti-intellectualism emerged. In addition, the 'glocalization' now advocated the local culture which had been considered as 'natural' and vulgar in the past, as 'elegant' (*ya*). Cf the slogan *minzude cai shi shijiede* 民族的才是世界的 ('Only the ethnic can be international'). For more on these concepts, see e.g. Cao & Li 2009.

The next step in the analysis was to find a structured way to present them. This structure presented itself throughout the analysis of the different discursive elements: people seemed to turn to different ways of explaining the calligraphy. One way is to rely on the powerful force of dialectical reasoning or the use of opposite pairs. In these explanations, dichotomies and their dialectic dynamics are used to come to an explanation of what is meant by *hutu* and its wisdom of life. A second way is to refer to philosophical concepts and phrasings that are well-established in Chinese culture. These frequently recurring concepts thus became 'key concepts' in the understanding of *Nande hutu*. A third way of explanation is to explain *Nande hutu* by using other popular proverbs and aphorisms, often – like *Nande hutu* – with a philosophical or at least literary background. Thus, the structure of this chapter corresponds to these three ways: the use of opposites, philosophical key concepts, and related proverbs. Inevitably, to some extent, these different ways of giving meaning will overlap in the three sections: many of the philosophical expressions and notions are also expressed in a dialectical way, and the related aphorisms often have a philosophical background. This confirms our presumption that these ways of expressing and explaining a concept through dialectical phrasing, paradoxes and related sayings and expressions are not only illustrative of the ancient ways of indirect speech without clearly defined definitions (cf Chapter Two), but are inherent to traditional Chinese reasoning, and until today, are the most common ways of explaining things. Especially the influence of the philosophy of *yin-yang* dialectics, where conditions reaching one extreme ultimately revert to its opposite, is still very present. In fact, the use of dialectics itself is used by Zheng Banqiao in the saying by putting *congming* in juxtaposition with *hutu* (cf also 3.3.2.2). Besides, famous aphorisms and phrases very often are rooted in ancient philosophy, but are expressed in a popularized way.

I also want to emphasize that, in the current discourse on the saying, there are uncountable nuances in the understanding of the wisdom of *Nande hutu* by Chinese. In this chapter, I limit myself to notions that after a while became recurring in the analysis, and as such are considered to be the major 'themes'. However, it is well possible that a Chinese reader does not find his own opinion on the saying in this chapter.

Before I finally proceed to the different interpretations and the way the wisdom of *Nande hutu* is perceived in contemporary discourse, it is necessary to mention that without doubt, for many sources the saying is only known by these four characters; many people are ignorant of the postscript, or know just the beginning, stating that it is difficult to be *hutu*, that it is also difficult to be smart, but that it is the most difficult to turn from smartness into *hutu*. This notwithstanding, apparently, there is no need to know the postscript to give meaning to it. However it may be, the lack of knowledge of the postscript certainly contributed to some of the shallower, more instrumental

interpretations of the saying. In this respect, Chapter Five, in which the concrete range of application is described with many examples, will be even more illustrative.

## 4.2 The use of opposite pairs

In Chapter Three, it became clear that the notions of being smart and being muddled appear to be not what they are generally accepted to be; the *hutu* Zheng Banqiao referred to should be considered as a kind of muddledness that goes beyond common smartness, as a wisdom that entails letting go of worldly worries and ambitions. In the contemporary discourse, questions about how *hutu* 糊涂 and *congming* 聪明 relate to each other, about the nature of being *hutu* and about the very act of pretending to be *hutu* are – following the dialectics in the saying itself – often discussed by referring to the dialectical relation of *hutu* and *congming* (sometimes also *jingming* 精明 or *qingxing* 清醒), and in terms of major and minor *hutu* and *congming* (*xiao* 小 and *da* 大 *hutu* and *congming*), and of real and fake/pretended (*zhen* 真 and *jia/zhuang* 假/装) *hutu*. One anonymous online author expresses it as follows:

There is a division in major and minor smartness, and a division in real and fake muddledness. The so-called minor smartness and major muddledness are ‘real’ muddledness and fake wisdom. On the contrary, major smartness and minor muddledness are precisely fake (pretended) muddledness and real wisdom. The so-called *Nande hutu* in social behavior is no other than major wisdom hidden in difficult to obtain muddledness.<sup>265</sup> (Anon. 2008)

This quotation goes to the core of the philosophy of life expressed in *Nande hutu*. In this section, I will analyze what these core oppositions reveal about the philosophy of *Nande hutu*.

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<sup>265</sup> 聪明有大小之分，糊涂有真假之分，所谓小聪明大糊涂是真糊涂假智慧.而大聪明小糊涂乃假糊涂真智慧.所谓做人难得糊涂，正是大智慧隐藏于难得的糊涂之中.



#### 4.2.1 ‘Minor/major’ smartness and ‘minor/major’ muddledness

Not surprisingly, as it is also the basis of Zheng Banqiao’s mentioning of *hutu*, most discussions turn around the relation between *congming* and *hutu*. Even the titles of popular books such as *You yi zhong mingbai jiao hutu* 有一种明白叫糊涂 (There is a smartness called *hutu*) (Xiao S. 2008), and even *Mingbairren bu zuo hutu shi* 明白人不做糊涂事 (Smart people don't do stupid things) (Zhao & Meng 2007) use the dynamics of opposites to attract attention.

In fact, the dichotomy mostly used to clarify which *hutu* is expressed in *Nande hutu* is not the distinction fake and real *hutu*, but the distinction between ‘minor smartness’ (*xiao congming*) and ‘minor muddledness’ (*xiao hutu*), and ‘major smartness’ (*da congming*) and ‘major muddledness’ (*da hutu*). Some of the popular book titles directly refer to this dichotomy, see for instance *Xiao hutu da zhihui* 小糊涂大智慧 (Yan 2006), a brief version of the longer subtitle on the cover, saying ‘the *hutu* of human behavior in society, the high wisdom of a happy life’ (*wei ren chushi hutu, xingfu rensheng da zhihui* 为人处世糊涂, 幸福人生大智慧). In this interpretation, minor muddledness is equivalent to real wisdom; it is the kind of wise muddledness that is an expression of great tolerance, broad-mindedness, of being experienced in life and knowing when pretending to be muddled is appropriate. An example of minor muddledness was given by a lady who works in a big company where she arranges pick-ups at the airport. One day the driver was two minutes late and when the customer could not find him, he phoned her to complain. When she in turn phoned the driver, he told her that he was at the airport. So either the driver was lying, or the customer did not find him at the airport. Although she was quite sure the driver was late, she did not say anything and pretended to be confused herself, because this matter did not really hurt anyone, and she wanted to give the driver a second chance (Mrs. Qi, Personal communication, 28 May 2008, Beijing).

When can we speak about ‘minor smartness’? As its occurrence as a dictionary entry shows, *xiao congming* is an established compound, meaning ‘cleverness in trivial matters; be sharp-witted but pretty-minded (rather derogatory sense)’ (在小事情上表现出来的聪明(多含贬义) (Kingsoft Powerword). The *New Age Chinese-English Dictionary* (Wu & Cheng 2006: 248) mentions the expression *shua xiao congming* 耍小聪明, ‘to display minor smartness’ and ‘to resort to clever tricks’, also expressing a negative meaning.

*Xiao congming* also plays a major role in many divisions in levels of smartness and wisdom. One division that returns most frequently is the division of wisdom in three stages. The first stage ‘ignorance’ (*wu zhi* 无知), obviously is the stage of *zhen hutu*, like the innocent child, and like really ignorant, stupid people. The second stage is the stage of ‘minor smartness’, *xiao congming*. The third stage is the stage of *da congming* 大聪明, or genuine *hutu*, as in the saying *da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚 (see also further in section 4.4.1.)

Ouyang Xiulin (2006: 24) holds the opinion that a typical characteristic of ‘minor smart’ people is to be too calculating and contemplating benefits for themselves. This is what he calls ‘calculated people’ (*suanjiren* 算计人). According to him, this kind of people all invariably think they are clever and have an excellent stratagem to obtain what they want, but because they often have bad intentions (*yongxin xian’e* 用心险恶), or rather, selfish hidden agendas, they cannot keep up appearances for ever. Someone who always seems to know everything at all times under whatever circumstances does not seem trustworthy and will not get sympathy, trust and care of other people, so will never be really ‘successful’ (*chenggong* 成功) as a human.

Another characteristic of *xiao congming* is that it cannot be ‘pretended’; it is a feature of someone who is not wise and thinks of himself a being smart. Such a person feels no need for ‘pretending’ to be *xiao congming*.

In this division, ‘major smartness’ (*da congming*) is equivalent to the most difficult kind of *hutu* (Wang Z. 2007). Many authors attribute the ‘major smartness’ to people with clear self-knowledge (*zi zhi zhi ming* 自知之明) (Chen L. 2007; Dang 2007; Gao 2011; Ouyang 2006; Wang Z. 1993). This emphasis on self-knowledge is reminiscent of the passages in the *Zhuangzi* and in the *Daodejing* in which the importance of self-knowledge for being truly muddled (i.e. illuminated) is expressed.<sup>266</sup> Self-knowledge implies being conscious of one’s own limitations, and consequently also of the limitations of others and the world around. Only someone who knows his limits, who knows how humble and insignificant he by nature is, and who understands his position in the world, can, by virtue of acceptance, be really muddled about things. Yet, someone who does not recognize the natural state of human beings and human life to the full, does not recognize the limitations inherent to it, and consequently will never be able to take distance and pretend to be muddled in a situation, as this would go against his conscience. This is why only really smart people (with a thorough self-knowledge) can achieve the higher muddled state of mind (*da hutu*) that is meant here.

Li Shaolong (2005) adds to this the ambivalence of major smartness. From a philosophical perspective, ‘muddledness’ core connotation refers to a strong identification with and profound comprehension of oneself in the first place, and consequently also of others and human life in general, which is the highest possible form of wisdom. However, this generally implies a complex mixture of a positive, ‘illuminated’ attitude that views everything from a holistic perspective (i.e. nature, society and human life clearly connected), and the – albeit often temporary – mental agony and helplessness the awareness of the limitations inherent to human life can

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<sup>266</sup> See page 71.

bring along. These are the real features of ‘major smart people’ (*da congmingren* 大聪明人).

Another characteristic of those people who are major smart is, that – having enough self-knowledge and knowledge about the worldly limitations, including other person’s and society’s limitations – they do see through all things and might also not be very satisfied with a lot of things, but are only clear (*qingxing* 清醒) in major matters, and can take a detached approach in minor, i.e. less important matters. This kind of smart people know how to control themselves in minor matters, and are able to judge a situation with regard to actually taking action or not taking action. On the other hand, people who are minor smart (*xiao congming* 小聪明) are muddled in a foolish way, that is to say, they are often muddled in important matters (*da shi hutu* 大事糊涂), and think they are smart in minor matters (*xiao shi congming* 小事聪明)<sup>267</sup>. Knowing when and where to be *hutu* in a matter and being able to discern the impact of one’s *hutu* behavior is of utmost importance in the ‘art of being *hutu*’.

Zheng Banqiao was certainly a person of ‘major smartness’, but even he, by writing this saying, admitted he did not manage to achieve such a high-spirited, muddled state of mind while being an official. Instead of compromising his moral integrity, he decided to leave and go back to his old way of ‘serving the people’, namely by creating art<sup>268</sup>. Two other historical examples of *da congmingren* are undoubtedly Tao Yuanming, who deliberately but voluntarily left officialdom in order to live a natural life among common people, and Su Dongpo, who even became the victim of his own smartness.<sup>269</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Real muddledness and fake muddledness

A second important distinction is made between real (*zhen* 真) *hutu* and fake (*jia* 假) or pretended (*zhuang* 装) *hutu*, sometimes also referred to as *zhuang sha* 装傻. For most authors, real *hutu* emphasizes that one does not have a clear understanding (*mohu bu qing* 模糊不清) about things, people and situations, and is genuinely ‘ignorant’ and

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<sup>267</sup> On the highly relevant issue of judging what are ‘important’ and what ‘unimportant’ matters, I will elaborate in Chapter Six, section 6.4.1.

<sup>268</sup> In one of his most famous poems, he literally states: ‘All my paintings of orchids, bamboo and rocks are meant to be for the comfort of the hard-working people in this world. They are not meant to be a contribution to the patrons.’ (Pohl 1990: 205).

<sup>269</sup> Both Tao Yuanming and Su Dongpo occur frequently in the discourse on Zheng Banqiao and *Nande hutu*. See for more on Tao Yuanming page 151; on Su Dongpo page 63, note 101 and note 218. On Su Dongpo becoming a victim of his own smartness, see further 4.4.4.

stupid. Real muddled people also do not consider themselves to be muddled; they do not have enough self-knowledge for this. They often even think they are doing well, or at least pretend to think so. Although Zheng Banqiao in his calligraphy claimed that even *hutu* is difficult to obtain, some authors attach a positive connotation to it, as a kind of pleasure and delight, and even a great luck (真糊涂是愉快的, 是幸福的) (e.g. Li X. 2007; Zhuge 2008). A nice example from daily life is given by a writer who was in hospital for a long time and was told to be terminally ill. As he explains, from the beginning till the end, he was very optimistic, did not really realize profoundly how serious his illness was, so he was really *hutu* about it, and happier than if he would have recognized the gravity of the situation. This positive state of mind certainly contributed to his recovery (Li X. 2007).

A very famous yet extreme example of the real *hutu* (*zhen hutu*) person who seemed to even be happily *hutu* mentioned by many sources, is Lu Xun's Ah Q 阿 Q, the prototype of the stupid, naïve, and ignorant victim of society. In *The true Story of Ah Q* (*Ah Q zhengzhuàn 阿 Q 正传*), the protagonist Ah Q is a genuinely *hutu* person, a weakling who constantly rationalizes the humiliations and insults he repeatedly suffers by claiming 'spiritual (or moral) victory'. In a sense, he approaches life with naïve but cheering optimism. He does so certainly not out of smartness, but for the sake of self-protection and self-consolation. Lu Xun presents him as a pitiful product of the autocratic society.<sup>270</sup> This is – although seemingly not as difficult as Zheng Banqiao mentioned – the most striking example of real muddledness, according to some also expressed in the expression *huli hutu* 糊里糊涂, 'muddy, in a daze'. In the understanding of most people, the tragedy of Zheng Banqiao was that he was very smart and clear-headed to start with, and could not possibly return to a state of *zhen hutu*.

A minority of sources describe *zhen hutu* 真糊涂 as *da zhihui* 大智慧 (e.g. Yue 2007) or use *da hutu* (major muddledness) in a different sense (Jian 2004), which indicates that the use of opposites in itself is not always clear and depends mostly on what the author or speaker understands as real and minor *hutu*: the first, authentic *hutu* mentioned in Zheng Banqiao's meaning, or the higher inner sphere, the sphere beyond real smartness.

How ever it may be, there seem to be two opposites of *zhen hutu*: fake *hutu* (*jia hutu* 假糊涂), and pretended *hutu* (*zhuang hutu* 装糊涂), the expression so often mentioned in the different discourses on *Nande hutu*. A survey respondent defined it as follows:

There are two kinds of *hutu*: one is real *hutu*, ignorantly conducting oneself in society. Another kind is pretended fake muddledness (*zhuang de jia hutu* 装的假糊涂), when someone is clear in the heart-mind about right and wrong and black

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<sup>270</sup> On the popularity of the phenomenon of Ah Q-ism in the 1930s, see also Chapter Six page 283.

and white and can only pretend not to be able to distinguish good from bad, just like in ‘from *congming* turning into *hutu*’.<sup>271</sup>

Exactly this ‘pretending’ (*zhuang*) seems to be the most problematic and contradictory aspect in the discussion on *Nande hutu*. On the one hand, this high-spirited muddledness is indeed ‘pretended’, be it as a kind of smart pretence. On the other hand, if this muddledness is pretended, how can it lead to real peace of mind then? The solution lies in defining and delimiting *zhuang*, since also here, many authors employ a different definition.

According to Zhuge Yibing, there are several ways of *zhuang hutu*. One way is the way ignorant people who do not understand much about life, stupidly *zhuang hutu* out of self interest or material gain and social status. The other way is the way of smart people (such as is often the case with *wenren* 文人 and intellectuals), who know the way of the world, but had to pretend to be *hutu* for the sake of self-preservation (see also above 3.3.3.2). In fact, what they longed for was to be genuinely *hutu* again in order to have some peace of mind (Personal communication, 19 September 2008, Beijing).

Lei Legeng (2008: 4) supports this opinion, and adds another distinction to *zhuang hutu*: the ‘common’ pretended *hutu*, which people apply either to avoid conflicts and responsibility out of mere stupidity, or for the sake of self-preservation, both included in the above interpretation, and a third category which is the smartly pretended *hutu* of Zheng Banqiao. As his life-events show, Zheng Banqiao’s *hutu* indeed was sometimes also fake and pretended – and as some anecdotes show, even very daring – but always in a very smart way in order to achieve something for the benefit of others. A nice example of this ‘tactic’ is when Zheng Banqiao during his time as an official in Weixian decides to play the fool and trial the stone the merchant accuses of being the cause for the accident with the porridge vendor, with as a result that the poor man receives the compensation that Zheng Banqiao – through the ‘tactic’ of pretending to be really stupid – obtained from the rich merchant (for the complete story, see p. 118). Consciously pretending to be *hutu* thus can have the right results, on the condition that it is not done in a spirit of conflict avoidance, but as a way of dealing with a situation as best as possible. This kind of consciously pretended muddledness for the benefit of others originates in a very high sphere of wisdom. It is a kind of smartness that requires special self-restraint (*hanyang* 涵养) and efforts and, moreover, is a kind of muddledness that common people (*yiban ren* 一般人) will not easily attain (Lei 2008: 4).

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<sup>271</sup> 糊涂有两种：一种是真糊涂，懵懵处世，似是天生，装不来，求不到；一种是装的假糊涂，明明是非黑白了然于心，偏偏装作良莠不分，既由“聪明转入糊涂。”

Clearly, Zheng Banqiao had no difficulty with smartly pretending to be really *hutu* to obtain something positive out of it. However, the first kind of pretended muddledness or willed ignorance for the mere sake of self-protection and avoiding of conflicts was something he firmly despised. There is an amusing anecdote occurring during the catastrophic famine in Weixian. Zheng Banqiao wanted to sell the grain of the official graneries for a very cheap price and ordered the wealthy people to open their kitchens to the poor people on a rotation base, but his wife who was afraid of the repercussions of his superiors urged Zheng Banqiao to ‘feign stupidity’ in the matter<sup>272</sup>. He is said to have angrily responded with the words: ‘Feigning stupidity, I cannot possibly do that’ (装糊涂, 我装不来) (Su 2006). Obviously, the pretended *hutu* that was the most difficult for Zheng Banqiao, is not the *hutu* of stupid and calculating people, nor purposely pretending to be a fool (as he did himself), but the high inner sphere (高档的心理境界), an inner sphere of serenity and emotional equanimity.<sup>273</sup>

Other authors mention more levels of *hutu*, for instance first the real *hutu*, 真糊涂 like Ah Q, secondly the stupidly pretended *hutu* when one renounces one’s principles (which is for instance the case with corruption), thirdly the person who considers himself smart but in fact is *hutu*, and lastly the person who longs for becoming aloof (transcending) from worldly matters, and who wishes to become *hutu* (again) (Zhao 1991). Most common people are either in stage two or three, whereas real Ah Q-ism is rare, and the *hutu* of people like Zheng Banqiao who are smart but genuinely want to distance themselves from worldly worries is indeed extremely rare. Those kind of people might continuously cultivate this inner sphere, but do not necessarily reach it.

Thus, apparently the most confusing aspects of *Nande hutu*’s ‘pretendedness’ is that it is a pretended muddledness that is either forced (due to unwanted circumstances, the structure of society, powerlessness, and aimed at self-preservation), or intentional in a negative way and not aimed at inner peace of mind, but rather out of mere lack of wisdom.<sup>274</sup> In this respect, a less confusing translation other than ‘pretended’ for *zhuang* 装 would be ‘appearing to be’ or ‘giving the impression that’ (although this translation is further away from the original meaning of *zhuang*). As such, the real fake *hutu* can be understood in two ways: firstly in the sense of consciously but smartly pretending to be ignorant to obtain something beneficial with it (cf Zheng Banqiao and the trial of the stone), and, secondly, in the sense of appearing muddled on the outside, but not on the

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<sup>272</sup> See also 3.2.2.2 Life as an official (page 117).

<sup>273</sup> Other frequently occurring expressions are ‘a kind of inner sphere’ (心灵的一种境界) (e.g. Zhou 2008), a detached (aloof from life) human sphere (超然的人生境界) (e.g. Wang 2008) and ‘a very high spiritual sphere’ (很高的精神境界) (e.g. Anon. (Baidu)).

<sup>274</sup> On these different forms of *hutu* see also Chapter Six, section 6.2 Critical voices.

inside, both meanings containing the underlying condition of being smart to start with. This is the only true higher form of fake *hutu*.

To summarize, in its positive though difficult interpretation, the ideal *zhuang hutu* is like real wisdom (*zhen zhihui* 真智慧), and *zhen hutu* is like *jia zhihui* (假智慧).

What it comes down to is that there can be no real muddledness (*zhen hutu*) without being smart (to start with), and no major smartness (*da congming*) without some muddledness (being or showing oneself to be only smart can be fatal) . A real smart person looks like a fool (on the outside), and the real muddlehead should be muddled in a smart way. Lei Legeng (2008) makes a striking variation on Su Shi's famous words 'high wisdom looks like foolishness' (*da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚), by saying 'major smartness looks like muddledness' (*da congming ruo hutu* 大聪明若糊涂). This kind of sublime smartness does not appear openly, but is at the very inside of the person; it just looks really plain (*pingchang* 平常).<sup>275</sup> As Feng Youlan (1997: 340) states, the difference between a sage and a 'common' person, lies in the consciousness of the deeds, and what they mean for the doer. The sage (smart person) does not behave much different than the way most people do, neither does he have to do something extraordinary to prove he is a sage. So 'having a high understanding', what he does has a different significance to him. In other words, he does what he does in a state of enlightenment, while other people do what they do in a state of (real) ignorance'.

In summary, *Nande hutu*'s *hutu* is equivalent to major smartness (*da congming*), *minor hutu* (*xiao congming*), pretended muddledness (*zhuang hutu*) and real wisdom (*zhen zhihui*), whereas the often misinterpreted, negatively appreciated *hutu* corresponds to minor smartness (*xiao congming*), real and major muddledness (*zhen* and *da hutu*) (cf Ah Q), and fake wisdom (*jia zhihui*). (Anon. 2008).

### 4.3 Philosophical key concepts and expressions

Most explanations of *Nande hutu* are in one way or another referring to some philosophical notions and motifs, sometimes in a highly intellectual language, at other times in a more mundane language. Some sources emphasize the Confucian background

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<sup>275</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the Daoist idea of the real sage who looks like a fool, see 2.3.4.2 The Daoist sage as a fool.

of the saying, others the Daoist interpretation, and still others, however rare they are, refer to the Buddhist influence and aspects of the saying. Many authors also use examples and quotations from the *Mengzi* to illustrate an aspect of their interpretation of *Nande hutu*, and some writers even go as far as mixing them all in one book, as such presenting an interpretation of *Nande hutu* in its broadest, most useful meaning, and as such appealing to whoever wants to find a personal affinity with the saying. The author of *You yi zhong mingbai jiao hutu* 有一种明白叫糊涂 (*There is a smartness called hutu*) certainly raises his readers' curiosity:

From ancient times until now, countless wise men after engaging in and understanding human life, all discovered the shadow of *hutu*. Confucius discovered it and named it 'Zhongyong', Laozi named it 'wuwei', Zhuangzi named it 'xiaoyao', Mozi named it 'fei gong (No attack/no evasion)'; Poet Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin dynasty also discovered it when picking chrysanthemum in the Eastern Li, but when he started to write [about it], he nevertheless forgot about it – he clearly was enough *hutu*, and had no choice but to not to go into detail and say: 'Herein lies the real truth, that when one desires to differentiate [in words], then one ends up by forgetting the words'. [ ....] It was only by the Qing dynasty that famous scholar Zheng Banqiao raised his arm in call for action, and loudly raised the big *hutu* flag, in a loud voice declaring: *Nande hutu!* (Xiao S. 2008: 3)<sup>276</sup>

In the same line but with a special focus on the self, another author mentions on the cover of his book *Nande hutu de chushi zhihui* 难得糊涂的处世智慧 (*Nande hutu: the wisdom of how to conduct oneself in society*) four philosophical influences:

Confucianism, 'limiting the self (self-restraint)';  
Daoism, 'without a self';  
Buddhism, 'self-denial';  
Legalism, 'overcoming the self'. (Qing 2008)<sup>277</sup>

Although from an academic point of view, these two 'statements' seem to be rather superficial, too obviously used as a marketing strategy, they certainly cover the philosophical interpretations articulated in both popular and academic discourse. As these statements already hint at, many of the philosophical keywords and concepts used

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<sup>276</sup>古往今来，无数圣贤智者在参悟人生后，都发现了糊涂的影子。孔子发现了取名（中庸）；老子发现了，取名（无为）；庄子发现了，取名（逍遥）；墨子看见了，取名（非攻）；东晋诗人陶渊明在东篱采菊时也发现了，但他提起笔时却又忘记了——他也真够糊涂的，只好语焉不详地说（此中有真意，欲辨已忘言）……直到清代，才由名上郑板桥振臂一呼，呼啦啦地擎起一面（糊涂）大旗，高声地宣称：难得糊涂！

<sup>277</sup> 儒家：限我；道家：无我；佛家：忘我；兵家：胜我。



in the discourse on *Nande hutu* are in one way or another related. This is, as already mentioned above, largely a question of focus, which often comes down to choosing a Confucian or a Daoist perspective, as these two appear to be the main influences. Therefore, in what follows different philosophical elements are often intermingled in the explanation of one concept.

### 4.3.1 Being natural, unrestrained and carefree

One of the frequently mentioned expressions that describes the state of *hutu* in *Nande hutu*, is rooted in the *Zhuangzi*: *xiaoyao* 逍遥, ‘carefree, free and unfettered’, and the expression *xiaoyao zizai* 逍遥自在, ‘be at peace with the world and oneself; be leisurely and carefree’. (Wei 2006; Xiao S. 2008; Xie 2009; Yang 2007; Zhang Jiacheng 2008). Other frequently used variants are *xiaosa*, 潇洒, ‘light-hearted; be lifted above the sordid bustle of life; being natural and unrestrained’. *Xiaosa* is composed of ‘deep and clear (of water)’ (*xiao* 潇) and ‘splash, sprinkle’ (*sa* 洒), in which both the meaning of ‘clear (as water)’ and flexible and soft as water are conveyed. The metaphor of water is used to explain the meaning of *hutu* (see 4.3.8). Especially *xiaoyao* and *xiaosa* are directly related to Zhuangzi’s philosophical description of the perfect happiness, in which one should (re)turn to a natural and light state of mind not limited by judgments and conventions (as explained in detail above, see page 70). For instance, popular author Xiao Shengping dedicates a chapter of his book to ‘returning to the uncut jade and turn over to authenticity’ (返璞归真), in which he discusses issues such as ‘finding back one’s lost childlike innocence’ (找回失去的童心), ‘simplify your life’ (简化你的生活)<sup>278</sup> and ‘Alike Zhuangzi’s *xiaoyao*’ (像庄子一样逍遥) (Xiao S. 2008). Also the Baidu explanation of *Nande hutu* as ‘a manifestation of the serene state of mind that comes after having completely realized the nature of human life’ (人生大悟之后的宁静心态的表现) is reminiscent of the Daoist ideal of emotional serenity (Anon. (Baidu)).

Another recurring phrase that expresses the ease and lightness of a *hutu* state is *congrong* 从容, ‘calm; rest; to go easy and unhurried’ (Ci 2011; Gao 2011; Sun 2009; Wei

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<sup>278</sup> One survey respondent referred to a maxim he saw in the streets in Ghent, saying ‘Min is max’. He or she probably meant the more commonly used saying ‘Less is more’, and said that this is also a kind of *hutuxue*. ‘Temporarily taking a step back, is a great progress, temporarily being reconciliatory and forbearing can make one’s dealing with others more perfect’ (暂时的退让，其实是一种巨大的进步，暂时的忍让会让我们的为人处事更完美), the respondent explained.

2006; Wu X. 2007; Xie 2009). One blogger uses the popular phrase ‘to chill’ to convey the meaning of *Nande hutu* in popular speech (lingo) (Anon. 2006a).

A characteristic of people who adopt a muddled, *xiaosa* attitude to life, is that in any given situation, they never think of themselves as being smart and start a discussion (绝不自作聪明, 大发议论). On the contrary, *xiaosa* people who adopt the wisdom of being *hutu* always seem to ‘act as if they do not know anything and are not clear about anything, and dodge out of the way by pretending to be *hutu* (做出一副什么都不知道、什么都不清楚的样子, 躲躲闪闪装糊涂), yet are well aware of things (心知肚明)’. Of course, like anyone else, they also make mistakes. Still, they are able to achieve success one way or another (左右逢源), and live their life carefree and unrestrained (活得逍遥自在) (Anon. (Survey) 2008; Wei 2006; Xie 2009; Yang 2007; Zhouxuan91 2010).

*Hutu* is in many ways also related to taking a broad look on life (putting things in perspective), expressed in the phrasings *xiangdekai* 想得开 and *kandekai* 看得开 frequently used among young people and on blogs. *Xiangdekai* 想得开, the potential verbal form of *xiangkai*, is the contrary of *xiangbukai* 想不开, ‘take a matter to heart; take things too hard (serious)’ meaning to be obsessive about things, and even ‘look at the dark side’. It thus means to ‘not take to heart; to be carefree and adopt a lighthearted perspective’, and seems to express a kind of mental effort to open one’s mind and ‘be philosophical’, from which a possible translation as ‘taking things philosophically’, representing a positive, lighthearted attitude in life.

All these expressions of a carefree state of mind are often used in combination with phrasings such as *bu yao tai jingming* 不要太精明, and *bu yao xiang de tai duo* 不要想太多, expressing the idea of not always being too clear about everything and not trying to understand everything, and that sometimes one should ‘close one eye and open another’ (*zheng yi zhi yan, bi yi zhi yan* 睁一只眼闭一只眼) and pretend not to know or see. Another association with a free and lighthearted attitude is that one ‘should not be too serious about all things’ (*bu yao tai jijiao* 不要太计较). *Jijiao* can mean both ‘to bother about; to haggle’ and ‘to plan; stratagem’, indicating a state of mind in which one is either too occupied by worldly worries and obsessed with one’s right, and a calculating attitude in which one is too pre-occupied with future results and expectations. A related idea is that of not being too ‘serious’ (*jiaozhen* 较真) about all matters, in which *jiaozhen* refers to being overly conscientious (*renzhen* 认真), which can be either good or bad, but often turns out to be needlessly tiring and exhaustive for mind and body.

In summary, *Nande hutu* is obviously strongly associated with living a happy, carefree life. As one of the popular book covers states: ‘*Nande hutu* is the most enjoyable and pleasant stage in human life’ (难得糊涂方是人生佳境) (Shi 2009). Underneath, some related ‘wisdoms of life’ to become natural, carefree, unrestrained and emotionally balanced are introduced.

### 4.3.2 Knowing fate

A frequent philosophical connotation in the perception of the wisdom of being muddled is the notion of ‘knowing fate’ (*zhi ming* 知命 or *zhi tianming* 知天命)<sup>279</sup>. This notion was already discussed in Chapter Two as one of the important Confucian ‘knowings’ (see 2.3.4.1), but also appears in almost all the books on *Nande hutu* I got hold of, as well as in discussions in different magazines and journals, and many of my informants referred to it in one way or another. *Zhi (tian)ming* generally refers to not only understanding one’s lot and the overall cosmic scheming, but also to accept it. This idea is reflected in the expression *le tian zhi ming* 乐天知命, which for instance constitutes a chapter in the book *You yi zhong celüe jiao hutu* 有一种策略叫糊涂 (There is a strategy called ‘muddledness’) (Ming 2008). *Le tian zhi ming* alludes to an attitude of ‘enjoying what is natural and obey what is destined’ and advises one to ‘be content with one’s lot’, and ‘to accept fate and be happy about it’. This saying was originally found in the *Yijing* (generally considered to be a Confucian text) but is also found in the *Liezi*, a Daoist text (*Liezi*, Chapter 39). Especially the ‘be happy about it’ and ‘enjoying’ (*le* 乐) is crucial in this respect: just accepting is not good enough; one should rejoice oneself in (knowing) fate.

A similar expression in which *ming* is mentioned in relation to *Nande hutu* is the expression *an shen li ming* 安身立命, ‘settling down and get on with one’s pursuit’ (Ming 2008; Qing 2008; Yang 2007; Zhong 2008a). Get on with one’s pursuit refers to following one’s natural predestination, thus following one’s *ming*. The great wisdom of ‘the art of being muddled’ should be the foundation of this aim in life. As life is always full of frustrations, twists and turns, and worries and troubles (坎坷和波折), a detached approach to life will help one in settling oneself in society (Ming 2008).

The expression *zhi ming* indeed entails some consequences on one’s behavior and approach to life: if one accepts the decree of heaven, one should do what one (morally) has to do (i.e. one’s moral duty), regardless of the external success or failure of the action. This strongly relates to the idea of not doing things for future rewards as in the postscript of *Nande hutu*. One who ‘knows fate’ can discern when and where to be or

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<sup>279</sup> For an explanation of the concept of knowing fate, see Chapter Two page 65. Whereas in the philosophical part (Chapter Two) I preferred to render *tianming* as ‘the decree of heaven’, I shall here conveniently translate both *tianming* and *ming* as ‘fate’, as in the contemporary discourse, *ming* is used in combinations such as *suan ming* 算命, *zhi ming* 知命 and *mingyun* 命运, in which ‘fate’ is an appropriate English rendering. It is however important to make a distinction between *tianming* and *mingyun*, as for the common Chinese, they are not the same: *tianming*, ‘the decree of heaven, law of nature, destiny, fate’ is the overall, cosmic scheme, the natural law, whereas *mingyun*, ‘destiny, fate, lot’ could be considered as one’s personal *tianming*. See also note 283.

pretend to be muddled, and when it is necessary to seriously take things into consideration as they are and if necessary take action.

Clearly, in the practice of daily life, the notion of knowing fate becomes especially relevant in (moral) dilemmas, feelings of powerlessness and conflicts, precisely the situations in which a detached but still active approach can be required to maintain inner peace. Confucian thought believes in the inherent individual potential to obtain mental maturity and happiness, no matter how great the efforts of a person who makes use of this potential to improve his or her life are. If he fails in spite of all these efforts, he is advised to accept 'fate' without any resentment towards others or him- or herself (Tseng, Chang & Nishizono 2005: 137). Knowing fate indeed urges one to accept life as it is, to take a step back and not to fight against reality and all its limitations, on the condition that one has done one's utmost to improve (the situation, oneself...). Feng Youlan (1997: 45) summarizes deeds done in the spirit of 'knowing *ming*' as follows:

[...] to know Ming means to acknowledge the inevitability of the world as it exists, and so to disregard one's external success or failure. If we act in this way, we can, in a sense, never fail.

The idea of not failing is certainly very comforting. Some authors (e.g. Zhang W. 2008) mention, although without a direct reference to knowing fate, the principle of 'heavenly timing, beneficial circumstances and harmony inside (the person)' (*tian shi di li ren he* 天时地利人和), or in the abbreviated version, *tian di ren* 天地人.<sup>280</sup> This notion of the 'harmoniously combined forces of heaven, earth and men' expresses exactly what *tianming* represents. As such, the absence of 'mouldability' applies to people as well as to situations and places. A person might not yet have the right constitution or state of mind for 'acting' in a particular situation and for being able to conduct change, yet at the same time, the place or circumstances cannot be 'ready'. There are three conditions to make a person succeed in his actions: the circumstances and the people involved, the timing, and the person himself. If one feels this is not the case, then it is the right time to be *hutu* and take a step back, until the overall situation has improved, or until the situation has taken a positive turn. Otherwise one cannot be 'successful', whatever the good intentions are. Or, as de Bary (1970: 18) explains,

The ideal of freedom-in-action implied that active involvement in the world and personal commitment to doing Heaven's will need not require constant and compulsive action in the world.

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<sup>280</sup> This saying is mentioned in the *Mengzi - Gong sun chou xia* (孟子-公孙丑下).

To make the right distinction between times of action and of retreat is, of course, very difficult, and in this sense comparable to the wisdom of being muddled, which requires the same right sense of distinction. This issue of determining when and where to retreat and act will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Whereas *zhi ming* is a particularly Confucian concept, the Daoists have a similar idea of ‘the right time and the right place’. It is a common Daoist understanding that the ‘ten thousand things’ (*wanwu* 万物) follow their own *dao*, and consequently, nothing in the world can be forced into a state or action for which it is not ready yet. The ideal of the right moment entails the concepts of acting at the right time, and being at the right place at the right time. As Moeller (2006a: 95) explains:

These concepts are connected with the concept of a correct temporal sequence of events such as, for instance, the cycle of the four seasons or of day and night. Life and death [...] are also conceived of as temporal segments within a continuous and regular course of time. The sequence of segments that have to be present at the right time makes up the complete and permanent whole.

So there is no need to be too pro-active. One should rather be sensitive to the right moment and the right place, because if things are done at the right time and the right place, events will naturally unfold in a productive and efficient way. This is what popular author Xiao Shengping describes as ‘obey the heavenly timing, follow the nature of earthly life, and follow men’s heart-mind’ (顺天之时随地之性 因人之心), or briefly said – as a slight variant on the aforementioned *tian shi di li ren he* 天时地利人和 – not going against ‘the heavenly timing, the nature of earthly life, and men’s heart-mind’ (*Tian shi di xing ren xin* 天时地性人心). Therefore, as he suggests, one should be a bit more easy-going (*suihe* 随和) and ‘free and easy’ (*suibian* 随便) (Xiao S. 2008: 41). Other authors use a similar language, such as ‘follow fate and follow one’s nature (随缘随性) (Si 2007: 23) to express the same idea.

However, this correctly judging the ‘readiness’ of the factors involved is not easy. Sometimes it is not clear if things are ‘well-prepared’ to be successful. In this case, one anyway has to wait until things have become clearer. A Chinese friend once mentioned the case of her husband being jobless for a long time. It was not that he did not search for a job, only, he always started what she felt was ‘the wrong business’. In his eagerness to find a job, he always got too quickly involved in business projects that were not ready to succeed, not well enough prepared, not in the right city, or with the wrong persons. Consequently, he ended up even more disappointed, which - apart from financial worries- also put a lot of mental strain on the family. But she herself pretended to be *hutu*, in the first place to avoid familial conflicts, but also because she put trust in the idea that one day, all conditions would be beneficial for him. She turned out to be right, because her husband got involved in a major engineering project. But as she explained,

if she would have been ten-twenty years younger, it would have been much harder to adopt such a resigned attitude and not become unhappy by it.

The idea of waiting for the right opportunity to 'act' (for the better) is in the contemporary discourse often referred to with the idiom *sui ji ying bian* 随机应变, literally 'follow opportunities and adapt to changes', thus meaning to be pragmatic, play to the score and change according to the situation (e.g. Wen 2004b: 97; Wu X. 2007). In his book *Zuoren de hutu zhehui* 做人的糊涂哲学 (*The muddled wisdom of upright behavior*), popular author Wu Xuegang (2007: 291-319) spends a complete chapter on this idea, strongly emphasizing the notion of change (*bian* 变), by saying that one should 'change upon the potential [to change]' (因势而变), 'with steadiness deal with the myriad of changes' (以不变应万变), 'grasp the opportunity when it is there' (机遇来了要抓住), and that 'when there is change, then there is an opportunity' (有变化就会有机会). Another saying that is sometimes mentioned is *shun shui tui chuan* 顺水推船, 'push the boat along with the current', which has a connotation of making use of an opportunity that naturally comes up to gain one's end, thus to take advantage of the situation for one's own benefit.

It is certainly not surprising that *zhi ming* is mentioned in the discussion on *Nande hutu*. Until the present day, Chinese have a rather affectionate relationship with fate (or as Bond calls it, 'the great leveler'). In this respect, Bond (1992: 61) rightly observes the strong contrast of Chinese people with Westerners. Westerners are very combative with fate, regarding her as 'the measure of their ignorance and their inability to bend Nature to their wills. They struggle mightily with her dictates and often respond to failure in life's struggle with depression'. Chinese on the other hand, although often unconsciously, rather resignedly accept the inevitability of good and bad things that happen to them, convinced that everything that happens is part of the natural cycle of *dao*. This conviction of cyclic recurrence in the spirit of a dialectical interaction between *yin* and *yang*, good and bad, right and wrong, reassures them that also negative experiences and events will sooner or later take a (more) positive turn.

Very important in this respect, is that as a consequence, accepting fate (*zhi tianming*) essentially is not a passive notion that does not allow people freedom for taking control of their lives (cf also the discussion on page 65). Knowing the decree of heaven precisely allows a person to act when appropriate. If one realizes (and accepts) the very nature of either the (Confucian) decree of heaven, or the (Daoist) natural principle (*dao*), it is easier to distance oneself without becoming uninterested, apathetic, and disengaged. Zhou Mai explained that

Knowing fate is very important, because it allows you to let 'nature' to take its natural course, and do thing following the natural principle, according to a rule. That is to say, sometimes when one persists too hard in something, it can make

one inactive. But if you give it some room, you will gain freedom.<sup>281</sup> (Personal communication, 26 May 2008, Beijing)

In other words, if you put your trust in fate, you can leave room to let situations and events transform or change in accordance with *tianming*, which in itself is a very liberating experience. Yet, the ultimate aim is always inner harmony (peace of mind) and social harmony.

Besides, accepting fate does not prevent the Chinese to have other ways to ‘actively’ deal with their fate and take - at least to some extent - responsibility for their lives. Practices of ‘fate management’ (sometimes also called ‘metaphysical risk management’ or ‘fate control’) such as geomancy (*fengshui* 风水), fortune telling (*suanming* 算命), face reading (*mianxiang* 面相), auspicious numbers and homonyms (such as *liu* 六, ‘six’, as a symbol of ‘smooth’ as in *liu* 流, *jiu* 九, ‘nine’ as a symbol for longevity as in *jiu* 久 ‘long’, and *ba* 八, ‘eight’ as a symbol for *fa* (*cai*) 发(财), accumulating wealth) on which a lot of money is spent when for instance buying license plates, telephone numbers, house and office numbers, and occasional but sometimes simultaneous Daoist and Buddhist worshipping in the local temples, are vital aspects of their daily life. Nevertheless, some of these practices tend to lose their relevance among the younger generations (especially in mainland China).<sup>282</sup> Also in social relationships, there is a strong inclination towards defining warm and favorable encounters as *yuanfen*, 缘分, ‘lot or luck’ (by which people are brought together), which is by some authors also brought into relation with the wisdom of being muddled, namely as a way to establish lucky encounters and even popularity (做人有人缘) (e.g. Anon. (Survey) 2008; Wei 2006). Fate control thus asserts ‘that life events are predetermined by external forces, but that there are ways for people to foretell and influence the negative impact of these forces’ (Leung 2010: 228).

There are also other, more ‘modern’ signs that people do not passively sit back and accept things as they are, but rather want to actively find ways to improve their quality of life. As one of my younger informants explained, this is the reason why the books about ‘the art of being muddled’ and on ‘changing one’s fate’ (*gaibian mingyun*)<sup>283</sup> are so

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<sup>281</sup> 知道天命了这个很重要，然后你就顺其自然，按照自然的法则，按照一种rule去做事情。就说有的时候你太执着一个东西你就会变得不主动，然后你稍微有一点空间你就自由了。

<sup>282</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, these practices were considered to be superstition, and therefore strongly forbidden and mercilessly punished. They remained unchanged and popular in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

<sup>283</sup> It is important to bear in mind that in contemporary speech, *tianming* 天命 and *mingyun* 命运 are not the same. *Tianming* is associated with the overall cosmic scheming, originally embodied by the Emperor, and is used in situations that are completely out of one’s control, and can thus not be avoided, such as environmental disasters. *Tianming* is what ‘the Old Heavenly Man’ (*lao tianye* 老天爷) has decided on. *Mingyun*

popular, especially among the younger generation.<sup>284</sup> As Yue Qing (2007) highlights on the back cover of his book *Nande hutu: you 'congmíng' bian 'hutu' de rensheng da zhihui 难得糊涂: 由 '聪明' 变 '糊涂' 的人生大智慧 (Nande hutu: the great wisdom of life of changing from smartness into muddledness): 'fate is not determined by heaven; success and defeat is human-made' (命运并非天定-成败自在人为, see above Figure 3 page 222).*

This evolution notwithstanding, human understanding of the universe is always limited in knowing what is 'best' or most appropriate. The sayings *ren suan bu ru tian suan* 人算不如天算, 'Man's calculation is not as good as that of heaven', and *tian wu jue ren zhi lu* 天无绝人之路, 'Heaven never fails in giving a way to people' are illustrative of this conviction.<sup>285</sup>

Whether one views the Daoist or the Confucian way in understanding fate, the message is clear: keep to your natural inclination (*tianming; dao*), and do not expect too much, and especially do not do anything for future rewards, because things will work out according to their natural disposition and according to the natural principles. When one has learnt to recognize and accept the cosmic law (fate) that implies that everything has its proper time, proper place and proper disposition, it is easier to let go and take a step back (*fang yi zhao, tui yi bu*) when the situation requires so. *Zhi tianming*, having faith in whatever course things take or one takes oneself, is crucial to find the courage and strength to be muddled and apply the wisdom of taking distance and letting go. This brings us to another 'art of living' associated with *Nande hutu*, the art of letting go.

### 4.3.3 Retreating and letting go

Zheng Banqiao already pointed out that *Nande hutu* teaches one to let go and take a step back (*fang yi zhao tui yi bu* 放一着退一步). Xiao Shengping starts the first chapter of his book *You yi zhong mingbai jiao hutu* 有一种明白叫糊涂 (There is a smartness called hutu) with explaining that pretended *hutu* as a kind of smartness that allows people to 'let go'

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is more experienced as one's individual (*geren* 个人) fate, but also the fate of a nation, or of a group of people. For instance, historical textbooks still discuss the Opium War (1839-1942) by saying that this changed the fate (*mingyun*) of the nation. *Mingyun* is to some extent controllable, whereas *tianming* is not experienced as such.

<sup>284</sup> See e.g. Zhang Junjie's (2008) book 'Thank you: using gratefulness to change one's fate', and the among students very popular book *Xuexi gaibian mingyun (meige xuesheng dou yinggao du de shu)* 学习改变命运 (每个学生都应该读的书) (*Learning how to change one's fate - a book that every student should read*) (Li X. 2006). Many blog discussion also deal with 'how to change one's fate' (如何改变自己的命运).

<sup>285</sup> For more on the relation between cosmic order and human agency from a comparative perspective, see e.g. Zhu 2006.



should be understood on different levels: there are some blames that one should not see clearly (有些瑕疵不需要‘看清’), there are some past events that one should not retain (有些往事不需要‘记得’), there is some ‘noise’ that one should not hear (有些噪音不需要‘听见’), and there are some things one should not speak thoroughly about (有些事情不需要‘说透’). The use of the different sense faculties here (seeing, retaining, hearing, saying) is reminiscent of the absence of sense in Lord Hundun. These expressions teach us that *hutu* is about forgetting and letting pass by, and even more so about being able to distinguish what one should take to heart and what not. Also students in the survey refer to the art of letting go as ‘teaching me not to rigidly adhere to things’ (教我不要拘泥), or explain that ‘there are a few things in life one should take a broad look at, one should not be reluctant to let go (要看开要舍得放弃). One of the things one should let go off, is the striving for fame and fortune (*mingli* 名利), sometimes also expressed as ‘not seek fame and wealth’ (*danbo mingli* 淡泊名利). (e.g. Yang 2007: Chapter 7). This is the attitude Zheng Banqiao also adopted, by not becoming attached to his position as an official.

More pressing, and perhaps also more difficult, is letting go in times of setbacks and painful situations and in dealing with negative emotions (such as Xiao Shengping’s ‘blame’ and ‘noise’). Indeed, especially in confronting difficulties, one should be careful and alert to differentiate when to advance and when to yield, and never be too rash and stir up trouble (只有小心从事, 知进知退, 不冒失, 不惹祸) (Xiang 2002), often expressed as ‘If you can forbear, then forbear; if you can yield, then yield’. This yielding and letting go is considered as ‘letting nature take its natural course’ (*shun qi zi ran* 顺其自然, see above), and often seems to be the preferred course in times of conflicts, worries and feelings of powerlessness (Dai 2008; Si 2007; Wang Z. 2005; Xiao 2007; Zhou 2008). Or as a survey respondent explained:

If it is yours, please grab it. If it is not yours, then one better not use up energy. Temporary losses and setbacks cannot be sufficient to beat a person down. Better pretend to be *hutu* once in a while.<sup>286</sup>

What indeed is most important in these meanings, is that yielding and taking a step back is not cowardice but, on the contrary, a kind of wisdom that allows one to take a broader, more relaxed look on life, which will ultimately benefit social and inner harmony. In this respect, two elements are interesting to elaborate on: the idea of

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<sup>286</sup> 是你的, 请抓住.不是你的, 就不必要耗费精力.一时的失败和挫折, 不能足以打倒一个人.请偶尔假装糊涂.

letting go instead of digging deeper and going to the bottom of a problem, and the ideal of letting go as an active engagement instead of as a passive, renouncing attitude.

Firstly, as a student in the survey expressed it, in the Chinese mindset, there is no need to go the bottom of everything (不必追根问底). The same is true for Chinese psychology: the ‘therapy’ is not to dig deep into one’s subconscious and subconscious experiences to solve a problem, even if the root of the problem can be found there. Instead, keeping busy seems much more efficient to divert the attention away from the problem. Western psychology might consider distraction an efficient but only temporary solution, but for Chinese, it is conceived as more appropriate than anyway not be able to root out the fundamental cause of the problem, and to risk digging up or creating even more problems. Besides, in many cases, for instance when other people are involved, this method is certainly more efficient in obtaining harmony than directly addressing the conflict, and ‘stirring up trouble’. Consistent with the strong need to maintain harmony, the fear of – by digging deep into the root of a problem or into one’s psyche – uncovering even more upsetting issues prevents people from wanting to solve a problem at the bottom. Thus, suppression is considered to be a more mature or at least more respected way of coping with problems than uncovering (see e.g. Lin, Tseng & Yeh 1995: 291-294).<sup>287</sup> For instance, as one of my informants, a middle-aged university professor explained, if one would really get into a discussion about the relation of a so-called friendship because a friend did not respect the friendship by staying away at the meeting you organised, this would potentially put the relation in danger, and so the preferred course is pretend not to bother about it (Personal communication, Beijing 2008). Consequently, the more serious the case of mental conflicts and psychic unbalance, the more Chinese people do not see the need for (or rather are afraid of) digging deep into the problems and accidentally digging up even more problems. They rather long for a concrete, practical ‘solution’. I remember I once was the interpreter for a Chinese refugee in a refugee camp who was not allowed to live with her boyfriend who stayed in the same building. As she was hurting herself, the social worker proposed to go and see a psychologist, but she refused, insisting on the fact that the only thing that could relieve her was not in the least difficult or psychologically complicated, but very concrete: letting her see her boyfriend in the other group and send her back to China. All the rest would not help, she tried to convince us.

Secondly, in the Chinese mindset, there is a positive, active logic behind taking a step back and yield, instead of digging deep into the problem. Already Laozi stated that ‘If one knows when to stop, one will avoid danger and can endure long’ (*Daodejing*, Chapter

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<sup>287</sup> Repression of negative feelings and thoughts and other Chinese coping patterns will be addressed in more depth in Chapter Seven, section 7.3 Harmonizing strategies.

52). The phrase ‘knowing where to stop’ is also found in the *Great Learning* of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 礼记, one of the four books selected and annotated by Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi, 1130-1200). In these philosophical meanings, ‘stopping’ is regarded as the prelude to deliberation, and even more so, to its contrary, taking action. This ideal of stopping in order to advance is very prominent in the discourses on *Nande hutu*, most often expressed in the positive and active notion of ‘retreating in order to advance’ (*yi tui wei jin* 以退为进) (Gao 2011; Qing 2008; Sun 2009; Wang X. 2005a; Wei 2006; Wu X. 2007; Yang 2007). Popular author Qing Yue (2008) even highlights this expression on the cover of his book *Nande hutu de chushi zhihui* 得糊涂的处世智慧 (*Nande hutu: the wisdom of how to conduct oneself in society*) to emphasize that the wisdom of being muddled will contribute to ‘getting ahead’ in one’s life.

Clearly, the way we should understand *fang yi zhao* 放一着 is not the same as totally giving up (*fangqi* 放弃) or not doing anything at all. It indicates one should yield (give way) or step aside for a while, which is not quite the same as ending up in a complete impasse. In this sense, *yi tui wei jin* 以退为进 means retreating (temporarily abandoning) to get ahead in a better way than if one had not yielded (放弃是为了更好的前进) even if this means moving forward in a zigzag way (*qu zhe qian xing* 曲折前行) (Zhao & Meng 2007).

This kind of moving forward is ideally not aimed at gaining an external result; the aim can simply be inner peace. Thus, *fang yi zhao, tui yi bu* should not be considered as plain avoidance of conflicts (*taobi maodun* 逃避矛盾), or ignoring feelings of powerlessness, anger and grief that accompany human life but are difficult to endure. On the contrary, letting go and taking some distance of a matter in a situation might as well have a beneficial effect, without having to be an active agent. Another often mentioned saying that confirms this conviction is ‘With one step back, you will discover a boundless sea and sky’ (*tui yi bu wei le kaikuo tiankong* 退一步为了开阔天空). This expression means that, when in potentially disturbing situations you take a step back and let things take their natural course, this might open up your mind and broaden the understanding of the situation, in such a way that the situation might even take on a whole different scenario. The connotation with the sea and sky as boundless, suggests a broadening up of the understanding; it refers to being unrestrained, free and far-ranging (in the mind). This process of opening up should not always be initiated by human acting; it is embedded in the process of letting go that gives room to more naturally developed options.

Another ‘active’ connotation with letting go lies in the idea of letting go as a personal choice. As the online author (with pseudonym Gao Ming) explains,

In whatever situation, a person can always choose to be happy. Since things are what they are, why not smile to oneself. Better let go of burden carried along in

the course of one's life, and be a little relaxed.[...] Being good at letting go of burden, will result in constant happiness.<sup>288</sup> (Gao 2011)

The idea of *fang yi zhao, tui yi bu* as something active and engaging, and as not equivalent to giving up, obviously is of vital importance. A *hutu* state of mind should not result in an impasse; it is not the end of something. Rather on the contrary, it should give an impetus to something new, to a further development of the problem or situation.

This positive reasoning about retreating and taking a step back resonates very well with the traditional way of dialectical thinking, in which retreating ultimately will lead to advancing, be it on another level. The theme of 'withdrawing in order to advance' is very prominent in the *Yijing*. Throughout the sixty-four hexagrams, the *Yijing* outlines the (moral) conditions for 'advancing' and 'withdrawing', and for engaging and disengaging. For instance hexagram sixty-two, *xiao guo* 小过, 'Predominance of the small', emphasizes that one must know the appropriate moments to advance and to retreat. In the commentary, we read the following:

When it comes to the great matter of nature and life, one must know the appropriate moments to advance and withdraw, to sustain and negate, one must know the principles of filling and emptying, effacing and fostering. (Cleary 2003: 225-228)

Consistent with a dialectical and cyclic worldview, retreating will always turn to its opposite, and thus does not necessarily mean that things are 'given up' or should be given up. There is no turning without returning, no grasping without letting go, no approaching without retreating. Also the Daoist preference for the 'declining' phase is reminiscent of this; declining naturally will (re)turn to growing (see also Chapter Two).

#### 4.3.4 The art of not-contending

As *Nande hutu* implies a detached, mild attitude, urging people to 'let go and take a step back', *Nande hutu* is also associated to the Daoist notion of *wuwei* 无为. *Wuwei* as an aspect of the wisdom of being muddled is most elaborately referred to by scholars, but it is evenly present in for instance the popular books on *hutuxue* (e.g. Xing 2009: 255-256) Younger people on the contrary, do not tend to refer to it.

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<sup>288</sup> 一个人在任何情况下都可以选择快乐，既然如此，我们为什么不对自己微笑呢？丢掉人生旅途上不必要携带的行李，轻松一些[...]善于放下包袱，欢乐就会常在。

To correctly interpret these opinions, it is necessary to first understand the notion of *wuwei*. In its first occurrence in the *Daodejing* (Chapter 58), it reflects on how a good ruler should govern. Especially the phrase *wuwei er zhi* 无为而治, ‘managing through non-action’, aimed at political leaders and governing the country. As such, it is the Daoist counterpart to the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation and, by extension, of bringing harmony to the whole universe.<sup>289</sup> However, the notion got a broader interpretation already in the *Zhuangzi* and is, in general, by many Chinese not so much associated with governing, but with a wisdom of life of being relaxed, of weakening one’s desires (*danhua yuwang* 淡化欲望) in order to be able to do things without any expectations or aims, and in a not-contending spirit. By the same token, *wuwei er zhi* 无为而治, originally meant as advice for (political) leaders in managing the country, has come to mean managing the family, the classroom.<sup>290</sup>

*Wuwei* can be translated as ‘non-action’ (Needham 1956), as ‘doing nothing’ (Graham 1989), as ‘inaction’ (Watson 2003), as ‘nondual action’ (Loy 1985) or ‘non-assertive action’ (Hall and Ames 1998), but this might be somehow misleading. *Wuwei* is in fact a specific type of action; it is any action that is performed with no self-consciousness nor with a purpose, and yet is done very efficiently and effortlessly (Slingerland 2003), in other words: action without a purposive effort<sup>291</sup>. It is not doing nothing, but not-‘doing’ as the doing or action (*wei*) that ordinary humans perform after deliberation and for a purpose, and thus in contrast with the spontaneous processes of nature which are ‘so of themselves’ (*ziran* 自然) (Graham 1989: 226). *Wuwei*, on the contrary, can be ‘performed’ by following along with the way things naturally are without adding any human effort. Coutinho (2004: 33) explains it as follows:

[...] action that does not *impose* artificial constraints, but that senses and *follows* the tendencies of things, events and processes. It works with the natural changes of things as closely as possible, minimizing the effort necessary to bring about certain states of affairs.

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<sup>289</sup> It should be stressed here that *wuwei* as a spiritual - and not only political - ideal does not only appear in the work of classical Daoist thinkers like Laozi and Zhuangzi, but also in the Confucian works of Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi. The notion of *wuwei* here referred to by different authors is the *wuwei* associated with Daoism, which is also the *wuwei* that is most often conceived of, because the idea is more frequently and elaborately discussed by Daoist authors. For an in-depth analysis of the different meanings in the different Chinese traditions (Daoism and Confucianism) in early China, see Graham 1989 and Slingerland 2003.

<sup>290</sup> The Daoist notion of *wuwei er zhi* will be discussed in a political context in Chapter Five (section 5.4). For an example about the ideal of *wuwei er zhi* as ‘managing the family’ see e.g. page 241.

<sup>291</sup> The notion of ‘effortless action’ contains the most controversial aspect of *wuwei*. Indeed, how can one consciously ‘try not to try’? And if it comes about naturally and spontaneously, why do Daoist thinkers have to tell us to pursue it. For a discussion on this paradox see Slingerland 2003.

In line with this aspect of ‘naturalness’, Coutinho translates *wuwei* as ‘acting without artifice’.<sup>292</sup> This interpretation of not acting harshly and against the natural order of things and events, but as action without a purpose (by not expecting something from it) indeed comes close to our understanding of *Nande hutu* as an attitude in which one takes distance but never expects anything of a situation. Also the emphasis on the importance of acceptance and contentment without staying passive and refraining from achievement or realizing goals, corresponds at least to some extent to other interpretations of *Nande hutu*. As also the *Daodejing* explains, in practicing *wuwei*, many things are obtained, not intentionally, but as natural outcomes of the natural principle (*dao*) (*Daodejing*, Chapter 37):

The *Dao* in its regular course does nothing [purposely], and so there is nothing which it does not do. If princes and kings were able to maintain the *dao*, all things would of themselves be transformed by them.<sup>293</sup>

This in a way reminds us of the practice of *yi tui wei jin*, where retreating naturally results in a new situation, another emotional state of mind. This is what a *hutu* attitude, if adopted well, results in. Moreover, *wuwei* is not just a philosophical notion. As a very economical way of doing things, it also represents a guideline for physical self-preservation by not exhausting the body, which allows people to obtain the highest age possible<sup>294</sup>. For some - as we will see further (Chapter Seven) mainly the elderly - *Nande hutu* indeed is considered a method for preserving one’s health (*yangshengfa* 养生法, ‘nourishing life’), in which maintaining inner peace contributes to the preservation of the body and consequently to attaining longevity.

Although most authors agree on the primary influence of Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s thoughts, not all of them associate *Nande hutu*’s *hutu* with *wuwei*. For instance Zhou Mai, a professor of philosophy, is of the opinion that *wuwei*, at least in its original philosophical sense, is not what is meant with taking a step back and let go (*fang yi zhao tui yi bu* 放一着退一步). *Wuwei* is not about temporary taking some distance, but about

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<sup>292</sup> Girardot (1983: 274) links the idea of *wuwei* to the idea of the Daoist sage as a ‘sacred fool’, and proposes to view the significance of *wuwei* as ‘natural’ or ‘wildly spontaneous and free’ behavior contrary to the accepted order.

<sup>293</sup> 道常无为而无不为。侯王能守之，万物将自化。

<sup>294</sup> In Daoist philosophy, besides the integration of body and mind, the preservation of life has always been the highest goal. Preserving life thus means preserving the mind and the physical body. Practices such as *taijiquan* and *qigong* in some periods became so important that they became the main focus of reverence (cf de Eight immortals, who have been linked to the initial development of *qigong* exercises). In the later developed ‘internal alchemy’ (*neidan* 内丹), a series of physical, mental, and spiritual disciplines aimed at prolonging the life of the body and creating an immortal spiritual body that would survive after death.

constantly considering and following the natural flow of things, and never acting against this natural flow. This does not necessarily involve retreating. *Wuwei* in any case is a far more than just temporary peace of mind: it expresses a way of dealing with the world, or managing the country as a ruler, and as a very particular way of doing things without effort nor purpose. According to him, although the aim is the same (inner harmony), the *hutu* as put forward by Zheng Banqiao was not intended to contain such a far-reaching and deep meaning as the concept of *wuwei* does (Personal communication, 26 May 2008, Beijing). Another informant emphasized another difference. *Wuwei* entails a conscious choice of being indifferent and not acting against one's natural disposition and the natural rhythm of *dao*, while in many ways (or in many interpretations) one, as a smart, experienced person, becomes *hutu* out of necessity (out of self-preservation). This was the case for the men of letters in feudal society, and – as we will see in chapters six and seven – is still the case for many people in contemporary society, such as the elderly who experienced the horror of the Cultural Revolution and the rapid, disorientating social changes of the last decades, and cannot but pretend to be *hutu* about what has happened and is still happening to them. For them, adopting a *wuwei* attitude indeed is no choice, but a necessity to stay mentally healthy.

In summary, even when letting go and not contending might sometimes seem to be a cowardly, immoral or evasive practice, this is – if applied well – still for the best: waiting for a better opportunity, or waiting until things settle themselves naturally, instead of stirring up harmony.

#### 4.3.5 The propensity for the middle way

The wisdom of *Nande hutu* is often put in relation to the *Zhongyong*, the propensity for the middle way. For instance, in the student survey, ten people out of fifty in one way or another associated *Nande hutu* with *Zhongyong*. Also the other way around, in many of the very popular books on the *Zhongyong*, *Nande hutu* takes a prominent place. For instance, the introduction of a popular book on the *Zhongyong* mentions the following:

*Zhongyong* is a kind of strategy and way of low-key, cautious behavior, a kind of 'great wisdom looks like foolishness', like the wisdom of life of *Nande hutu*.<sup>295</sup> (Ma 2009)

The philosophy as expressed in the *Zhongyong* is a guide for managing one's social conduct, both in terms of one's inner life and outer behavior. The *Zhongyong* teaches

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<sup>295</sup>中庸是一种低慎行的策略和处世方法，一种大智若愚，难得糊涂的处世智慧。

people to be aware of and to control their emotions, in order to be focused and harmonious.<sup>296</sup> Since *Nande hutu* is mostly applied when it comes to (negative) emotions such as anger, frustration, angst, powerlessness, resentment and disappointment, what interests us is what the *Zhongyong* advises people to do with regard to their emotions and the attainment of ‘peace of mind’ (inner harmony). Feng Youlan (1997: 173) explains that it is said in the *Zhongyong* that:

[...] to have no emotions of pleasure and anger, sorrow or joy, welling up: this is to be described as the state of *chung*. To have these emotions welling up but in due proportion: this is to be described as the state of *ho* [harmony].<sup>297</sup>

What is meant here is that the problem is not that people have emotions, but that these emotions, if they arise, should be balanced with the outer world to obtain or maintain harmony. And as Feng Youlan continues, what is said of emotions is also true of desires:

In personal conduct as well as in social relations, there are medium points which serve as right limits for the satisfaction of the desires and the expression of the emotions. When all desires and emotions of a person are satisfied and expressed to the right degree, the person achieves a harmony within his person which results in good mental health. Likewise, when all the desires and feelings of the various types of people who comprise a society are satisfied and expressed to the right degree, the society achieves harmony within itself which results in peace and order. (Feng 1997: 173)

The *Zhongyong* thus advocates moderation and emotional self-restraint (*hanyang* 涵养), primes people to control their impulses and take a moderate attitude towards everything. In social relationships, it also emphasizes the idea of modesty and humbleness (*xuxin* 虚心); one should avoid expressing strong opinions and taking a prominent position, but instead take a low-key position and remain in the background. In practice, moderation and self-restraint often come down to keeping one’s real intentions, thoughts and feelings unarticulated or articulating them in a vague, suggestive way.

This behavior is often referred to as the strategy of self-concealment (*yincang bu lu* 隱藏不露), i.e. ‘concealing and not exposing’ one’s inner emotions and thoughts.

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<sup>296</sup> See for a more elaborate account on the philosophy of the *Zhongyong*, Chapter Two, section 2.4.3.1 Daoist and Confucian Morality.

<sup>297</sup> Many different translations of this verse circulate, among which for instance Ames and Hall’s translation as ‘The moment at which joy and anger, grief and pleasure, have yet to arise is called a nascent equilibrium (*zhong*); once the emotions have arisen, that they are all brought into proper focus (*zhong*) is called harmony (*he*).’ (Ames & Hall 2001: 86).



Sometimes, especially when it is embarrassing and one might put oneself in an awkward situation and make oneself or others lose face, one does not want to let others know one's cleverness and point of view on a matter.<sup>298</sup>

In general, the popular interpretation of both *Nande hutu* and the popular readings of *Zhongyong* contain ample examples of similarities in terminology and expressions used, most often referring to inner emotional equanimity (*xinli pingheng* 心理平衡).<sup>299</sup>

One of my informants, a university professor in Beijing, told me he can understand why people associate *Nande hutu* with the philosophy of the *Zhongyong*, but he personally expressed his strong doubts about this connotation. According to him, *Zhongyong* in a sense promotes conformism and compromise, and this is exactly what Zheng Banqiao did not aim at. *Nande hutu* is about 'temporarily distancing oneself' and finding some inner peace without compromising deep inside, which is not the constant mediocrity, passive background position the *Zhongyong* promotes (Zhou Mai, Personal communication, 26 May 2008, Beijing).

It seems that the alleged relation of the wisdom of pretended muddledness and the propensity of the middle way to a certain extent depends on how thorough one's interpretation of *Nande hutu* goes. Although both *Zhongyong* and Zheng Banqiao's *Nande hutu* are aimed at inner peace, the virtues and ideals mentioned in the *Zhongyong* are based on Confucian morality in which extremes in whatever way are 'immoral'. Besides, the *Zhongyong* puts more emphasis on obtaining social harmony (by being socially engaged) than on personal harmony, whereas the (mainly) Daoist interpretation of *Nande hutu* aims at inner harmony by knowing and accepting *dao*. This however, does not necessarily imply that there can be no excesses (*guofen* 过分) in one's thoughts, emotions and conduct, or that one should be 'moderate'; one should try not to be swept away by these excesses. The fact that people associate *Nande hutu* with the *Zhongyong* might just be another indication of how people are indeed familiar with their traditional philosophical background, but at the same time get heavily influenced by the popularized discourse on these traditional philosophies, while not necessarily having a thorough philosophical understanding of them.

Lin Yutang seems to have found a comprehensive point of view on the *Zhongyong* that could well explain why *Nande hutu* is also associated with the *Zhongyong*. According to

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<sup>298</sup> On the issue of self-concealment, see also Chapter Two page 94.

<sup>299</sup> The books on *Nande hutu* and the books on *Zhongyong* sometimes even have the same structure and a similar title. For instance the title *You yi zhong zhihui jiao Zhongyong* (有一种智慧叫中庸, *There is a wisdom called Zhongyong*) (Ma 2009) sounds very much like *You yi zhong mingbai jiao hutu* (有一种明白叫糊涂, *There is a smartness called hutu*) (Xiao 2008). This similarity applies to many of the 'popular reading' books in the 'self-improvement' category.

him, it is exactly in the *Zhongyong*, that Daoism and Confucianism find a way to merge engagement /action (Confucianism) and detachment/non-action (Daoism):

It is that spirit of sweet reasonableness, arriving at a perfect balance between action and inaction, shown in the ideal of a man living in half-fame and semi-obscure: half-lazily active and half-actively lazy; not so poor that he cannot pay his rent, and not so rich that he doesn't have to work a little or couldn't wish he had slightly more to help his friends; who plays the piano, but only well enough for his most intimate friends to hear, and chiefly to please himself; who collects, but just enough to load his mantelpiece; who reads, but not too hard; learns a lot but does not become a specialist; writes, but has his correspondence to the *Times* half of the time rejected and half of the time published – in short, it is that ideal of middle-class life which I believe to be the sanest ideal of life ever discovered by the Chinese. (Lin Y. 2007 [1998]b: 109)

This reflects the scholarly discussion in Chapter Three on the issue of retreat in the middle of the hustle and bustle of life (*da yin yin yu shi* 大隱隱于市), where the discussion is about muddledness as a way of active engaging conduct in society, and not as a way of escaping society (see page 149).

#### 4.3.6 Tolerance and endurance

One important aspect of 'the art of being muddled' is articulated in terms of 'tolerance' and 'endurance' (*ren* 忍). As Yan Bo explains, 'if one cannot be tolerant, one cannot be *hutu*, but if one cannot be *hutu*, one can even less be tolerant' (不能忍便不会糊涂, 不会糊涂也根本忍不下去) (Yan 2006). *Ren* is a vital concept in the Confucian moral etiquette, as well as a major point of attention in one's self-cultivation (*xiuyang* 修养). In the Confucian doctrines, *ren* is a necessary quality in life; a person should endure stress and suffering because these 'negative' experiences can be beneficial for a person through strengthening his will, resilience and inadequacies. This is also echoed in the writings of Mencius (quoted by Cheng et.al.):

When Heaven is about to confer a great office to any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty. It confounds his undertakings. By

all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies.<sup>300</sup> (Mencius, *Gaozi xia* 孟子-告子下) (Cheng, Lo & Chio 2010: 400).

In this sense, as Cheng et al. (2010: 400) stress, *ren* should be considered ‘a virtue linking with moral obligations and responsibility to others in relation to preserving social harmony and group cohesion’.

In its contemporary interpretation, *ren* can still be understood as both tolerance with regard to people, and endurance and patience with regard to (difficult) situations. With regard to tolerance in social relationships, other related compounds frequently appear in the discourse: *renrang* 忍让, ‘be forbearing and conciliatory’; *rongren* 容忍, ‘tolerate; put up with’; *yinren* 隐忍, ‘bear patiently’; *rennai* 忍耐, ‘endurance, patience, restrain oneself’; *kuanrong* 宽容 or *kuanhou* 宽厚 ‘lenience, forgiveness’, *dadu* 大度, ‘magnanimous’, and *baorong* 包容, ‘forgiveness, to be understanding’. The above mentioned expression *bu yao tai jijiao* 不要太计较 (see page 180), if applied in interpersonal relations, also testifies to this attitude. The notions of taking a step back and forbearance also occur simultaneously, as in the long saying *tui yi bu, haikuo tiankong; ren yi shi feng ping lang jing* 退一步海阔天空, 忍一时风平浪静, ‘taking a step back, and one will be as boundless as the sea and sky (or: unrestrained and far-ranging); tolerance for a moment, will bring forth calmness and tranquility (literally: calm seas and gentle breezes)’. Sometimes, this interpretation even goes as far as stating that a *hutu* attitude also entails to endure humiliation in order to carry out an important task, or to suffer in silence, as expressed in the sayings *renru fuzhong* 忍辱负重, and *renqi tunsheng* 忍气吞声, ‘submit to humiliation’ (e.g. Gao 2011; Mi 2008).

*Ren* should ideally also be without any purpose or intention (忍者无故). The only motivation behind being tolerant should be that ‘just as trees in nature are what they are, people in life are also what they are’ (Yue 2007: 34-35)<sup>301</sup>, an idea that corresponds well with the Daoist ideal of following the natural disposition of things and people without further expectations (cf *Nande hutu*’s postscript ‘being without expectations or plans for the future’ *fei tu hou lai fu bao ye* 非图后来福报也).

All this might sound very passive, but in the same way as retreating contains an active connotation, also *ren* contains an active aspect, namely as a mechanism for coping with stress; it helps to sustain the Chinese motivation for achievement. This is for instance expressed in the compound *rongren* 容忍, the capacity of tolerating and accepting an undesirable experience or condition, in which *ren* is more than just

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<sup>300</sup> 天将降大任于斯人也, 必先苦其心志, 劳其筋骨, 饿其体肤, 空乏其身, 行拂乱其所为, 所以动心忍性, 增益其所不能.

<sup>301</sup> 大自然中的树如此, 生活中的人亦如此.

tolerating undesirable conditions of the present. It also gives hope for a better future; tolerance or forbearance in any given situation is mainly for the best (awaiting better opportunities), and always with hope for a better turn. (Lin, Tseng & Yeh 1995: 51) In this respect, the Chinese proverb *neng qu cai neng tiao* 能屈才能跳, ‘knowing how to bend will enable you to jump’ is also illustrative. Before being able to ‘act’, one should first be able to undergo, be patient and accommodating. Besides, *ren* also leads to peace of mind, articulated in the expression *neng ren zhi an* 能人治安, ‘forbearance brings a peaceful mind’. As Lin et al. (1995) explain, *ren* thus serves as an active ego defense mechanism in being patient and enduring, but also a social defense mechanism. In social relationships, it encourages an individual to tolerate and forgive others. From this, the connotation of forbearance with Zheng Banqiao’s *hutu* is evident: forbearance – in many cases another word for pretending to be *hutu* or ignorant about painful or hurtful situations – can give you peace of mind. However, *ren* alone will not be enough for one’s well-being. For obtaining peace of mind from *ren*, one should also take things at ease and not be too obsessive about things (see for instance the sections above on *xiaoyao* and on the art of not-contending).

Understandably, *ren* is not easy to accomplish, in the same way as *hutu* is difficult to accomplish. It is a vital part of the virtue of *ziwo xiuyang* 自我修养, ‘self-cultivation’, and just as *zhi tianming* 知天命, ‘knowing fate’, also comes with age and experience.

#### 4.3.7 Knowing contentment brings happiness (*zhi zu chang le*)

In an online article, an anonymous writer offers advice on how to avoid stress and enjoy a long life: one should know contentment and always be happy (*zhi zu chang le* 知足常乐), as well as be *hutu* (Anon. 2002).<sup>302</sup>

The saying *zhi zu chang le* is present in almost all sources that discuss the wisdom of *Nande hutu*, from the survey by young people to the articles by and for older people and by academics. The saying knows a long history. It is an important ‘knowing’ (i.e. experiencing) in the Daoist tradition articulated in the expression *zhi zu* 知足, ‘knowing contentment’. In the *Daodejing* we find ‘knowing contentment’ in several verses, such as in Chapter 33, ‘He who knows contentment is rich’ (*zhi zu zhe fu* 知足者富) and ‘He who knows contentment will avoid disgrace, and he who knows when to stop will not be in

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<sup>302</sup> This is only one of the many online articles that are copied a few times on different webpages. Mostly an original source is mentioned, but it is nevertheless difficult to track if this is indeed the original source.

danger and they will [live] for a long time' (知足不辱，知止不殆，可以長久) (Chapter 44).

Knowing contentment also means not to be pre-occupied with the desires, wishes and ambitions of the self. As Laozi (*Daodejing*, Chapter 46) writes, 'No disaster is greater than not knowing contentment; no blame greater than the desire for gain. Therefore being content with knowing contentment is the eternal contentment' (禍莫大於不知足；咎莫大於欲得。故知足之足，常足矣). The *Zhuangzi* echoes this observation: 'He who knows contentment will not become tired from seeking profit' (*Zhuangzi*, Miscellaneous chapters, *Rang wang*, 11). The idea is that if one is not occupied by a desire for the worldly achievements and fame and fortune that the self constantly poses on the individual, one will be in a state of constant contentment, and will not tire the mind or body.<sup>303</sup>

This philosophical idea was later expressed in the popular saying *zhi zu chang le* 知足常乐, 'Knowing contentment brings happiness'. The meaning behind this popular saying is to be content with what one has and with the way things go, and not search for more than there is for you in this life. Contentment is a state of harmony with nature, and this includes 'not seeking fame and fortune' (*danbo* 淡泊) (Jin 2006; Si 2007; Wang X. 2005a; Yan 2006; Yang 2007). Or, as a survey respondent explained in this context: *Nande hutu* is like 'a clear heart with few desires, indifferent towards fame and fortune' (清心寡欲, 淡薄于名利) (Anon. (Survey) 2008). Therefore, the saying is often expressed simultaneously with 'letting go' (*fangqi* 放弃) and 'knowing where to stop' (cf above in the *Daodejing*). One example is the eleventh chapter of the book *Mingbairren bu zuo hutushi* 明白人不做糊涂事 (*Smart people don't do stupid things*) entitled 'knowing contentment and knowing when to stop – smart people understand when is the right timing to let go' (W. Zhao & Meng 2007)<sup>304</sup>.

Popular author Xing Yanguo (2009: 257-258) gives the example of a professor in psychology who wanted to explain to his students the principle of *zhi zu* 知足. He brought an exceptionally beautiful glass cup to the classroom, and while the students were admiring the cup, the teacher purposely dropped the cup as if it were an accident. The students all felt sorry that the cup was broken, but the teacher said: 'You will certainly all regret the cup is broken, but these feelings will not bring the pieces of broken glass back to their original shape. As from today, please remind the cup whenever in your life you encounter events you cannot change back in life.' What the

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<sup>303</sup> The relation between *Nande hutu* and mental and physical health will be dealt with in more depth in Chapter Seven, in particular section 7.4 The elderly: harmonizing mind-body (*yangshengfa*).

<sup>304</sup> 知足知止—明白人懂得适时放弃.

teacher wanted to make clear, is that in dealing with unfortunate events, one should accept the invariableness of events and accommodate oneself to them. As the author explains, one should accept the arrangement of fate (*mingyun de anpai* 命运的安排), since there is little that can be changed about fate; the only thing we can change, is ourselves. Popular author Si Zhe (2007: 223) laconically expresses it as follows:

There are a lot of people who complain about the malpractices of this society, but complaining cannot change reality, why not change oneself in order to accommodate society? Since you cannot transcend the mundane world, then you better happily accept it [the way it is].<sup>305</sup>

Other sources emphasize the free choice of being content and happy, and argue that in any given situation, a person can always choose to be happy (Gao 2011).

A related saying that also describes both the wisdom of being *hutu* and the wisdom of knowing contentment is *sui yu er an* 随遇而安, 'feel at home wherever one is; accept the circumstances with good will', in other words: take things as they come.<sup>306</sup> This attitude encourages one to adapt to and accept circumstances with good will, thus taking things as they come and even more so, making the best of things.

The Chinese, conditioned by a long history of disasters and injustice, indeed have a strong disposition to be content with what they have and make the best out of it. Lin Yutang (2007 [1998]: 65) observes it as follows:

A strong determination to get the best out of life, a keen desire to enjoy what one has, and no regrets if one fails: this is the secret of the Chinese genius for contentment.

Lin Yutang relates this to the 'negative' approach of the Chinese towards happiness: the question of happiness is always reduced to the question of a man's wants and desires. And in this, the Chinese take the negative approach through their philosophy of contentment. Another, more direct explanation is that since Chinese people basically

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<sup>305</sup> 有许多人抱怨这个社会的种种弊端，但是抱怨不能改变现实，何不改变自己来适应社会？既然不能超脱世俗，那就痛痛快快地接受它吧。

<sup>306</sup> This phrase can be found in the *Roots of Wisdom* (*Cai gen tan* 菜根谭), sentence no. 360 (*Ju* 句 360): *shi jie yuan, ui yu er an* 万事皆缘，随遇而安, thus 'everything is predestined, take things as they come'. The *Cai gen tan* contains a collection of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist aphorisms compiled by Ming writer Hong Yingming 洪应明. It was designed to help the reader navigate a path of safety through chaos, corruption and confusion of the late Ming period. As Barmé (1999: 140) explains, 'it had been unavailable on the mainland for decades until, in the early 1990s, it was realized that this collection of survivor's wisdom could be of service both in support of the Party and in providing readers with ways and means of negotiating their way around it as well as the treacherous waters of economic reform'.

put no trust in extreme emotional conditions, happiness is always put in perspective. Consequently, real happiness needs and tolerates unhappiness.<sup>307</sup>

#### 4.3.8 Overcoming hardness with softness (*yi rou ke gang*)

An expression often used to emphasize the benefits and strengths of a *hututu* state of mind is ‘Overcoming hardness with softness’ (*yi rou ke gang* 以柔克刚). The general explanations in Chinese dictionaries are much like ‘using softness to control or restrain strength (firmness)’ (用柔软的去克制刚强的).<sup>308</sup>

This expression is derived from the dichotomy of soft (*rou* 柔), and hard (*gang* 刚) in the *Daodejing* (Chapter 81). *Rou* is gentle, mild, flexible and soft; *gang* is strong, hard and inflexible. As Zhong (2008b) cites, ‘The truth about *hututu*, is Laozi’s notion of softness’ (*Nande hututu de zhendi, shi Laozi de rou* 难得糊涂的真谛是老子的柔). According to tradition, the young Laozi already sensed the importance of this duality. As a young boy, his teacher, opening his mouth wide, once asked him: ‘Is my tongue still there?’ Laozi replied: ‘Yes’. And the master continued: ‘Are my teeth still there?’ Laozi replied: ‘No, they all fell out’. When the master asked him how this could be, Laozi replied: ‘Your tongue is still there because it is soft (*rou ruan* 柔软), your teeth fell out because they are hard (*jianying* 坚硬).’ The master was so delighted by this insight, that he answered that this reasoning is not only applicable to teeth and tongues, but to all things in the world.

This anecdote reflects the Daoist paradox of softness surpassing hardness and weakness surpassing strength as found in the *Daodejing* (e.g. Chapter 36 and 76). Softness is often described as feeble like water, but water is omnipresent, and can in some cases even be ‘harder’ than something that by nature is hard and looks hard on the outside. So by being flexible and soft on the inside, one can attain more (inner peace, harmony without harming others) than with a rigid and hard attitude.<sup>309</sup>

Nearly all the popular books about *Nande hututu* mention the notion of softness overcoming firmness. For instance Yang Tao discusses the idea of ‘mild *hututu*-ness is better than hardness meeting hardness’ (*ying peng ying bu ru ruan hututu* 硬碰硬不如软糊

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<sup>307</sup> According to Lu Luo (2010: 328), the word happiness (*xingfu* 幸福) did not enter Chinese colloquial vocabulary until recently. Research has shown that Chinese students were found to be less familiar with the concept of happiness than were their American counterparts (ibid.: 328).

<sup>308</sup> See e.g. the online Baidu 百度 explanation, <http://baike.baidu.com/view/98634.htm> (Last accessed on 13 March 2012).

<sup>309</sup> For a brief study on philosophical maxims related to softness and hardness and their later proverbial equivalents, see Wu H. 2004: 309-311.

涂) (Yang 2007: 172-173), expressing the preference for being ‘softly muddled’ rather than using rigidity and inflexibility to deal with rigidity and inflexibility. Other books talk about the ‘soft way’ of conducting oneself (柔道处世) (Wu X. 2007), or just plainly use the expression *yi rou ke gang* 以柔克刚 (Lei 2009).

In fact, the expression mostly occurs in books on leadership, in which it is advised to adopt the ‘soft’ but smart way to deal with major problems in one’s business or as an political leader (official). For example in a book called *Yong ren guanli hutuxue* 用人管理糊涂学 (*‘the art of being muddled’ in people’s management*), the author dedicates one chapter to ‘the combined aid of softness and hardness, as a way of being *hutu*’ (*Gang rou bing qi, hutu er wei*) (刚柔并济糊涂而为) (Wang X. 2005b: 71-110), and uses expressions such as ‘observe flexibility, do not dispute’ (*shou rou bu zheng* 守柔不争).

This philosophy of life of being flexible and soft naturally fits in with a muddled, detached state of mind, and can also be put in relation to the above mentioned association of *Nande hutu* with *wuwei* 无为. In the *Daodejing* (Chapter 43), we find a correlation between softness and *wuwei*:

The softest thing in the world overcome the hardest things in the world. [...] Through this I know the advantage of taking no action [with a purpose]. Few in the world can understand teaching without words and the advantage of taking no action.<sup>310</sup> (Chan 1970: 161)

This association with water as being flexible, immanent, mild, and at the same time strong, typifies the kind of wise ‘muddled’ people meant here. This kind of people generally like to adhere to a philosophy of life that is called *sui bo zhu liu* 随波逐流, ‘drift with the tide, go with the stream’ (Ouyang 2006: 21; Tao 2008; Xiao S. 2008). The saying expresses an attitude in which one does not try to control worldly matters if it is useless, but also not to let oneself be dominated by these worldly concerns. Instead, by being soft and flexible (in the mind) as water, one can obtain inner peace. Tseng et al. (2005: 148) call this dealing with hardness by mildness and flexibility ‘rules of adaptation’, as they suggest ways to deal with life whatever comes up, but especially when ‘hard’ times come up.

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<sup>310</sup>天下之至柔，驰骋天下之至坚。[...] 吾是以知无为之有益。不言之教，无为之益，天下希及之。



### 4.3.9 Being flexible on the outside, but determinate inside (*wai yuan nei fang*)

Another four-letterword frequently used to describe the wisdom of *Nande hutu* that is also related to a mild and flexible attitude, is *wai yuan nei fang* 外圓內方, ‘being flexible on the outside, but determinate (literally: edged, bordered) inside’. This expression seems to find its roots in the *Yijing*, and more in particular in hexagram eleven, *Tai* 泰, ‘peace’ or ‘tranquillity’. In this hexagram, *yin* (submissive, receptive, passive, earth) lies at the outside (above), and *yang* (strong, creative, active, heaven) lies within (below). The hexagram thus shows the ideal unification of the two main vital forces *yin* and *yang*, in which *yin* obeys *yang*, and *yang* governs *yin*. This combination results in tranquillity and deep harmony. Moreover, only when *yin* and *yang* are harmoniously combined, it is possible to accomplish things and be successful. (Cleary 2003: 71-72)

The expression *wai yuan nei fang* thus refers to the double-sided quality of a harmonious person, in which *yuan* 圓 (round, earth, *yin*) is often explained with the compound *yuantong* 圓通, ‘being flexible, accommodating’, and *fang* 方 (square, heaven, *yang*) with *fangzheng* 方正, ‘being upright; righteous’ and *yanzheng* 嚴正, ‘being solemn and just’. Noteworthy is that in its contemporary use, the art of being flexible and determinate (*fang yuan zhi dao* 方圓之道) is discussed in terms of ‘determinateness as the root of the upright person, and flexibility as the way for conducting oneself in society’ (*fang wei zuoren zhi ben, yuan wei chushi zhi dao* 方為做人之本，圓為處世之道). Thus, *fang* reflects the inner moral quality of having opinions and principles (主張和原則) and being morally upright, whereas *yuan* means that on the outside, in one’s dealings with other people, one should be smooth (tactful) and worldly-wise, and harmonizing and mature (圓滑世故，融通老城)<sup>311</sup> (Xiao S. 2008: 40). Or, to say it in *hutu* terminology, one should be ‘*hutu* (foolish) on the outside, but clear (smart) on the inside’ (外面糊塗，心里清楚) (Xing 2009: 239). A compound that also expresses this virtue is *biantong* 變通, ‘being flexible and pragmatic; accommodate to the circumstances’, in a sense of being able to let go of rules and set standards in social settings. Also the dichotomy of soft (*rou* 柔) and hard (*gang* 鋼) (cf above 4.3.8) is used to convey this meaning, namely as *wai rou nei gang* 外柔內剛, ‘being soft on the outside, firm on the inside’.

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<sup>311</sup> Interesting to note is that the compound *yuanhua* 圓滑 also has a strong connotation of being smooth and evasive, and of being slick in sly in one’s conduct. As it often appears in the discourse as a way to describe what pretended *hutu* is about, it is quite difficult to pinpoint whether or not it is a positive or a negative quality.

With this in mind, it should not surprise us that an attitude often put in relation with the ideal of *wai yuan* is modesty in one's behavior. In this context, the ideal of modesty is frequently accompanied by phrasings such as being *didiao* 低调, 'low-key; not showing off; not wanting to make a point and get one's right', and *xuyuan* 虚圆, 'humble and tactful' (Anon. (Survey) 2008; Shi 2009; Sun 2009; Wu X. 2007; Yang 2007).

The quality of being strong (in one's moral principles) on the inside and flexible and modest on the outside could also be considered a useful precondition for the above mentioned 'art of letting go', and 'the art of tolerance and endurance'. In these arts of living, a person should be confident of the decisions and choices he makes and of the course of action he takes (or does not take), and flexible, accommodating and modest in his behavior. An example of this attitude is shown in Anna Boermel's research on the elderly in Beijing. Some of her informants said the saying suggests to gain pleasure from the knowledge that one is right even though one cannot express it openly (but rather pretends not to be involved or interested), even though others might think poorly of oneself (Boermel 2006: 408). If one is firm inside, one can find consolation in one's own serenity and equanimity, and there is no need whatsoever to try to convince someone.

In the same way as *yi rou ke gang* 以柔克刚 is often put forward as a characteristic of sound leadership, also the skill of being *wai yuan nei fang* 外圆内方 in its broad interpretation is considered to be in particular a characteristic for leaders. For instance, Yang Tao elaborates in depth on the virtue of being determinate and clearheaded inside, and understanding and flexible in the relations with one's inferiors (see Yang 2007: 57-105, and further page 242). In this context, it is associated with not exposing one's inner thoughts. One popular author calls one of the chapters in his book 'Not displaying and not revealing, being in a lower position to get the upper hand – people who put themselves in a low position are the smartest' (不显不露, 低处制胜—把自己置于低处的人最聪明) (Si 2007).

Thus, in the contemporary discourse in *Nande hutu*, 'edged' or determinate on the inside (*nei fang*) should be related to the notion of smartness and wisdom as a starting point of muddledness. If one has understood the ways of the world, this creates inner firmness, stability and moral authority, which are necessary qualities for being flexible, modest and easy-going in one's interpersonal relations (*wai yuan*). If one can adopt such an inner state of mind and display such a double-sided attitude, one will be in harmony and achieve a lot.

#### 4.3.10 Buddhist concepts

As the two quotations at the beginning of this section illustrated (see page 178), 'the art of being muddled' is also explained in terms of Buddhist wisdom. Although a strong

minority, some sources refer to Buddhist ideals and notions to describe what the meaning of *Nande hutu* is about. These Buddhist references mainly include the notions of detachment (*shede* 舍得), of self-transcendence (*chaoyue ziwo* 超越自我) and self-denial, as an explanation for the *hutu* state of mind *Nande hutu* aims at, as well as for explaining the art of letting go and not be pre-occupied with future results (e.g. Gao 2011; Qing 2008; Xiao S. 2008).

Most often, the references are made to *Chan* Buddhist concepts. Such is the case with the connotation with the three stages of human life in *Chan* Buddhism, expressed in the saying *kan shan shi shan, kan shui shi shui; kan shan bu shi shan, kan shui bu shi shui; kan shan shi shan, kan shui shi shui* (看山是山, 看水是水; 看山不是山, 看水不是水; 看山还是山, 看水还是水). This expression is attributed to the *Chan* master Qingyuan Xingsi 青原行思 (671-740). In this expression, the first stage is the stage of pureness and naivety like a child. If you tell a child this is a mountain, he will accept it and consider it to be the truth. People in this stage are very happy. Soon however, the child will discover that things are not what they are, and that what you see, hear or feel is not always 'true' (the truth). Behind the apparent truth, there are other levels of truth in which other principles rule. In the same way, doing contributions and sacrifices are not always rewarded, and one is confronted with so much injustice and grief. This discovery makes the person in this stage sad again. Most people spend their whole life in this stage, but a few people, however difficult it may be, manage to arrive at the third stage in which they have understood that life is one big dream, and judging knowledge claims such as 'a mountain is a mountain' is useless. So, one can as well say that what one sees is still a mountain. Exactly this third stage is associated with the high level of smartness that *hutu* is, when one has become aware of the principle of the 'double truth' (see also Chapter Two, section 2.3.4.3 on Some Buddhist parallels: truth, knowledge and wisdom ) (Xiao S. 2008).

## 4.4 Related proverbs

The above expressions and keywords that originate in ancient Chinese philosophy as found in the opinions of contemporary Chinese academics and 'commoners' shed light on how *hutu* and the wisdom of *Nande hutu* is generally understood in contemporary society, and especially on how broad the interpretations are. Apart from these philosophical explanations, virtually all sources in one way or another refer to a famous proverb or maxim that is rooted in traditional philosophy, to explain one or another

aspect of the wisdom of *Nande hutu*. These frequently used proverbs and maxims altogether seem to articulate the overall wisdom of *Nande hutu* well: the common beliefs and opinions rooted in the philosophical tradition with regard to being foolish, wise, intelligent and muddled that were passed on throughout Chinese history, the internal mechanism of being or pretending to be muddled, and the general dynamics ‘pretended muddledness’ brings forth.

#### 4.4.1 ‘Great wisdom looks like foolishness’ (*da zhi ruo yu*)

The proverb *da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚 can without doubt be considered one of the most important threads in the discourse on *Nande hutu*, especially when it comes down to interpersonal relations. The saying figures on the cover of many of the books about ‘the art of being muddled’ (e.g. Lie 2005; Wen 2004b; Yang 2007), and it appears in nearly all layers of the discourse on the saying, ranging from scholars to taxi-drivers and students. Thus, it most accurately articulates the meaning of *Nande hutu* as understood by Chinese people. In its most ordinary form, this saying changes into expressions such as *shazi zhexue* 傻子哲学, ‘the philosophy of the fool’, or, as a taxi-driver explained, *zhuang sha chong leng* 装傻充愣, ‘pretend to be foolish and muddleheaded’.

As already discussed in the more general exploration of muddledness in Daoist philosophy in Chapter Two, the saying emphasizes the ideal of the sage fool (see page 69). The most important word here is without doubt *ruo* 若; someone might look or act like a fool, but inside embodies the highest wisdom (cf the sage fool). As one author states, ‘the greatest cleverness looks like clumsiness and roughness, and eloquence (being good at arguing) appears like blunt speech’<sup>312</sup> (Zhong 2008b).

In relation to *Nande hutu*, the associations of *da zhi* with *congming* and of *yu* with *hutu* are self-evident: hidden under a layer of foolishness (*yu*), there is great wisdom.<sup>313</sup> Popular author Xiao Shengping (2008: 2) compares this ‘illuminated’ state of mind with moments of instant understanding (compared to an *Aha-erlebnis*) that lead to the discovery of the triviality of things, which enable one to let go of troublesome and useless attachments and obsessions. He gives the – very practical and mundane and far from any lofty ideal – example of a college student who used to buy a box of instant noodles, to discover that his roommates always asked him for one or even took one behind his back. Smart as he was, he decided to try it another way and just buy one

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<sup>312</sup> 最灵巧的东西好似笨拙，粗糙，最善辩的好似言语迟钝。

<sup>313</sup> *Yu* also appears in other sayings with a positive connotation. One example is the proverb *yu gong yi shan* 愚公移山, ‘the old – stupid – man moves mountains’, meaning ‘where there's a will, there's a way’ testifies to this.

whenever he felt like eating one. Inevitably, he experienced the disadvantages of this new tactic: running to the shop too often, be obliged to conquer pouring rain and heavy wind, to anyway end up sharing his noodles with his roommates because he does not feel comfortable with eating them on his own when surrounded by his roommates. Then one day, he finally understood: even if he lost one instant noodle-pack a day, this would only equal thirty *Renminbi* a month, an amount that certainly could not compete what all the trouble he had with going to the shop every day. From that moment on, he just bought bowl after bowl without ever counting again how many of the bowl he himself had eaten, and adopted a relaxed and easy-going attitude towards his instant noodles, which also benefited the relation with his roommates. So one needs (a moment of) complete understanding to make the opposite, a *hutu* state in which one can let go of things and take a step back, possible.

As *Nande hutu* is mostly put forward in difficult and pressing situations when one would expect the virtue of being smart and clever to be exposed, exactly in such situations the real wise person shows his wisdom by retreating, and gives the impression of being a fool, not smart enough to control the situation.

Obviously, this kind of *yu (hutu)* is very difficult. As Zheng Banqiao also indicated, the most important feature of ‘difficult to attain’ muddledness is indeed that one has to start from ‘having understood’ and see through life (*kantou hongchen* 看透红尘), with a clear mind before being able to be happily muddled, fearless and carefree. Consequently, this kind of *yu* can only be a stage beyond accumulated experiences and knowledge closely associated with age (Cui 2008). In Confucian terms, this competence can only be attained by those with solid self-restraint and the ability to control themselves in different situations, generally considered as a result of conscious self-cultivation, and thus also related to age and experience (e.g. Xiao & Yang 2008). Or, in other words, ‘cultivating great foolishness is wisdom’ (修成大愚方为智) (e.g. Chen 2011; Qin 2006; Xiao 2002).

#### 4.4.2 ‘Suffering brings good fortune’ (*chi kui shi fu*)

The saying ‘Suffering brings good fortune’ (*Chi kui shi fu* 吃亏是福) is another famous calligraphy written by Zheng Banqiao, expressing an equally deep wisdom of life as *Nande hutu* does. *Chi kui* 吃亏 can mean both to suffer losses or to lose out, and to be

taken advantage of.<sup>314</sup> Allegedly, this calligraphy was attached to a letter Zheng Banqiao wrote to his brother Mo with regard to a family issue (see also further on page 297) (e.g. (Lei 2008). In the contemporary discourse on the saying, it is closely associated with *Nande hutu*. Titles such as ‘the art of being muddled’ in social conduct and the saying *Chi kui shi fu* (*Chi kui shi fu de zuoren hutuxue 吃亏是福的做人糊涂学*) (Gao 2011) and the simultaneous appearance of both sayings in one article (e.g. Xiao 2002) are no exceptions. *Nande hutu* is also used in the introduction of the popular TV serial called *Chi kui shi fu*, to indicate that one cannot avoid meeting setbacks and suffering in life, but that one does not have to make life too hard on oneself. Instead, one should pretend to be *hutu* once in while, which can make one’s moods calm and smooth (*anran pingshun 安然平顺*).

The wisdom of *Chi kui shi fu* relates to *Nande hutu* on two levels. Firstly, it is formally often displayed and sold together with *Nande hutu*<sup>315</sup> as an antithetical couplet (*duilian 对联*). Secondly, this saying contains the same paradoxical phrasing that turns the generally accepted order upside down: suffering is not a bad thing, because there can be no luck without suffering. This dialectical phrasing again emphasizes the circularity of things and events (nothing is absolute), and consequently the unavoidability and even necessity of *kui*, grief or losses. In view of the circular law of nature, there can be no good fortune and happiness (*xingfu 幸福*) without losses, disadvantage and grief.<sup>316</sup> As such, the saying also highlights the ideal disposition of being emotionally detached from worldly matters without completely disengaging, as is the case with the sage fool. The real sage knows how useless and futile it is to react emotionally or even rationally on bad luck. Following the natural law of circularity and constant change, one cannot foresee, let alone judge (in advance) the - either detrimental or beneficial - consequences of an event or experience.

Here, another saying comes into play that stresses the impossibility of absolute judgments and the relativity of good and bad and right and wrong (*shi fei 是非*): the story of the old man losing his horse *sai weng shi ma 塞翁失马*, originally occurring in the *Huainanzi* (139 BC)<sup>317</sup>. The saying could be translated as ‘A loss may turn out to be a

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<sup>314</sup> In the *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Juan wu- kui bu 卷五-亏部*), *kui 亏* (虧) is described as ‘damage of vital energy’ (亏, 气损也). Its Western counterpart would be related to the slogan ‘No pain, no gain’, which emphasizes the relevance of adversity, pain, bother or effort in the pursuit of happiness.

<sup>315</sup> See Figure 2 *Chi kui shi fu 吃亏是福* and *Nande hutu 难得糊涂* (own pictures taken at the Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall, 2009) (page 133).

<sup>316</sup> This observation is consistent with the findings of Lu Luo (2010) who conducted a comparative study on Chinese well-being, in which one distinctive dominant feature is the complementary relationship between happiness and unhappiness.

<sup>317</sup> See also note 51.

gain’, or ‘Every cloud has a silver lining’.<sup>318</sup> Lin Yutang (1963: 385) retells the story as follows:

There was an old man at a frontier fort in the north who understood Taoism. One day he lost his horse, which wandered into the land of the Hu tribesman. His neighbors came to condole with him, and the man said, ‘How do you know that this is bad luck?’

After a few months, the horse returned with some fine horses of the Hu breed, and the people congratulated him. The old man said, ‘How do you know that this is good luck?’

Then he became very prosperous with so many horses. The son one day broke his legs riding, and all the people came to condole with him again. The old man said, ‘How do you know that this is bad luck?’

One day the Hu tribesmen invaded the frontier fort. All the young men fought with arrows to defend it, and nine tenths of them were killed. Because the son was a cripple, both father and son escaped unharmed.

Therefore, good luck changes into bad luck, and bad luck changes into good. The workings of events are beyond comprehension.

The story closely relates to the observation by Laozi in Chapter 58 of the *Daodejing*: ‘Bad luck leans on good luck, and good luck is concealed by bad luck. Who knows where this will end?’<sup>319</sup> The moral of the story tells us that it can be difficult to foresee the twists and turns which compel misfortune to beget fortune, and vice versa. Misfortune begets fortune, and fortune begets misfortune, and this goes on without end and cannot be (rationally) grasped or changed. As such, the father’s stoical attitude of not hastily concluding if circumstances are favorable or not, is exactly the attitude characterizing the real (Daoist) sage who is emotionally and mentally indifferent to judgments about good and bad because he knows about the impermanence of things. Besides, he knows that he cannot know (foresee) the outcome of events. This acceptance of change as a natural condition of life, together with the ignorance about the concrete form this change will take, causes any kind of moral judgment or evaluation of good and bad to be useless and, even more so, detrimental to one’s peace of mind.<sup>320</sup> In this respect, the typical circular thinking that – if practiced to the full – causes a kind of emotional and moral indifference is not only typical for Chinese philosophy, but also for Chinese

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<sup>318</sup> The full saying is 塞翁失马，焉知非福， translated as ‘When the old man from the frontier lost his horse, how could one have known that it would not be fortuitous’.

<sup>319</sup> 祸兮福之所倚，福兮祸之所伏。孰知其极？

<sup>320</sup> Or, as Moeller (2006c: 101) explains: ‘If one is able to minimize one’s emotionality and intellectual tendency to evaluate, one is no longer subject to the emotional and intellectual friction caused by unfortunate circumstances’. Thus, inner peace is attained.

psychology and how people take stand in life events: nothing is absolute, and so there is no use in getting emotional about how things turn out in life, because at some point there will also be a reverse situation to it. (Lin, Tseng & Yeh 1995: 289-290).

Another related expression is *sui yu er an* 随遇而安, 'make the best out of all situations', thus, to take circumstances as they come and accept them with good will. Other related sayings are *da nan bu si, bi you hou fu* 大难不死必有后福没, 'after the survival of weighty troubles always comes good fortune', *chi yi qian zhang yi zhi* 吃一堑长一智, 'a fall into the pit, a gain in your wit', and *shi zhi dongyu, shou zhi sangyu* 失之东隅, 收之桑榆, 'lose at sunrise and gain at sunset' (attributed to Feng Yi 冯异, a general in the later Han dynasty). Literally this last phrase means something like 'lost it in the eastern corner (where the sun shines), find it by the mulberry and elm (poetic expression for evening)', expressing the idea of the darkest hour is that before dawn.

Clearly, as one author (Gao 2011) states in his article called *Chi kui shi fu de zuoren hutuxue* 吃亏是福的做人糊涂学, one should not make the mistake of comparing *chi kui shi fu* with Ah Q's 'moral victories':

*Chi kui shi fu* is not easily (lightly) obtained; one needs tolerance and magnanimity. *Chi kui hi fu* is not the easy Ah-Q-ism, but the interdependence of good fortune and misfortune, the dialectics of life's costs and gains. It is a profound wisdom of life.<sup>321</sup>

Thus, the wisdom expressed in *chi kui shi fu* is as difficult to obtain as *hutu* is, for which the same preconditions such as having understood worldly matters and not being pre-occupied with losses and gains are required. For instance Ouyang Xiulin (2006: 157) considers two difficult preconditions for this wisdom. The first one is *zhi zu* 知足, which is explained above and revolves around being content with one's lot, with what one has and encounters without being envious, disappointed or judgmental. The second precondition is rooted in the idea of *anfen* 安分 (also written 安份), 'be content with one's lot' and 'knowing one's place', expressing the idea of not going beyond one's bounds. According to him, people have to give up the idea that they can change anything as long as they do a lot of efforts and work hard. This idea of 'mouldability' only leads to disappointment and grief. Other authors such as Ming Gao (2011) consider *ren* 忍, tolerance and endurance (explained in depth above in section 4.3.6 'Tolerance and endurance') as the main precondition for succeeding in the 'art of suffering'.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>321</sup>吃亏并不是轻易能做到的, 需要有容忍雅量。"吃亏是福"并不是简单的阿Q精神, 而是福祸相依、付出与得到的生活辩证法, 是一种深刻的人生哲学。

<sup>322</sup>一个人能吃亏, 是宽容大度、忍辱负重、能掘能伸的象征。



Also the books on *hutuxue* refer to the wisdom of accepting hardship, and discuss the quality of ‘learning to find pleasure in hardship’ (*xuehui ku zhong qiu le* 学会苦中求乐) for instance by diverting the attention away from the hardship by taking part in joyful activities, having one or more hobby's and so on (e.g. Qin 2002). Another author in a magazine for the elderly suggests in the column ‘preserving one’s health and healthcare, psychological navigation’ (*yangsheng baojian, xinli daohang* 养生保健, 心理导航) to ‘look for joy in enduring hardship’ by applying the wisdom of being *hutu* and ‘ignoring the hardship’. As the feelings that come with hardship will not remain as intense as they might be at a certain moment, by pretending not to see the cause and the consequent negative feelings, as time goes by, the emotions will at least to some extent fade away. He also gives other suggestions for older people on how to deal with hardship in the spirit of *Nande hutu*. First, one should ‘learn how to rationalize things’ (*xuehui lizhi chushi* 学会理智处事), and secondly one should learn how to expand one’s friends, because when one is vexed, one might as well look for ‘soulmates’ (*zhixin pengyou* 知心朋友) to talk about ‘things of the heart’ (*tantan xin* 谈谈心). By applying these three things (looking for joy in hardship, rationalize things, talking with soulmates), the mind will be balanced (Li D. 2007). Interestingly, these exact phrasings are also copied on, for instance, a website aimed at informing youngsters about psychological and physiological issues important in their lives (Ying 2004). Thus, the advices seem to apply to all age groups.

In these suggestions, the wisdom of ‘suffering brings good fortune’ is – like *ren* 忍 and retreating – conceived of as a rather active mechanism for achieving inner harmony, and as such gives an active connotation to the wisdom of being muddled.

#### 4.4.3 ‘When the water is too clear, there will be no fish’ (*shui zhi qing ze wu yu*)

With regard to explaining the wisdom of life of *Nande hutu* in interpersonal relations, the most frequently used expression is *shui zhi qing ze wu yu, ren zhi cha ze wu tu* 水至清则无鱼, 人至察则无徒, translated as ‘When the water is too clear, there will be no fish; when people are too scrutinizing, they will not have followers’. This saying was already discussed in Chapter Two in the exploration of muddledness in social relationships, the context in which muddledness appears to be a virtue (see page 90). Certainly, there is a reason why being muddled in interpersonal relations is so ‘popular’. Popular author Wen Jie (2004b: 19) starts his chapter on this saying by saying that

Man’s most common problem is that he likes to demand completeness and to criticize or to blame others, pursues ‘perfection’, and cannot tolerate the smallest

shortcomings in others, and when he sees one, he arbitrarily denounces it. But man is not a sage, so who could be without excesses? [...] If you look for friends who do not make mistakes and are without shortcomings, I am afraid you will be alone your whole life.<sup>323</sup>

Here, we learn that people who are too calculating, scrutinizing and always seem to know everything under whatever circumstances will not get much sympathy, trust and care of other people, which is detrimental for their social life: they will never be really 'successful' (*chenggong* 成功) in social relationships.

This saying indeed particularly emphasizes that if one is too serious (*jiaozhen* 较真), too clear (*jingming* 精明) and too scrutinizing (*jijiao* 计较) about others, and especially about other people's weaknesses, people will not feel at ease, and will have the impression they are constantly being looked at and analyzed. This also implies having too harsh demands toward other people (要求太苛刻). If one's demands and expectations towards another person are too high, this other person always risks not to be able to meet the demands, and thus risks to lose face, which will eventually be detrimental to the relation. As an online author prophetically writes:

In social conduct, one's demands towards others should not be too high; towards small weaknesses, missteps, one should be forgiving and understanding, and to one's best abilities appreciate and encourage other people's strong points, forgivingly excusing his or her heartless or pardonable small missteps. Only that is the way to social conduct and dealing with people. If there are no people who want to be intimate with you, that will make you fall to loneliness without compliance, and plunge into the realm of isolation without any help, and then one only has oneself to blame.<sup>324</sup> (Song 2007)

In the end, with such an analyzing, demanding attitude, one might obtain exactly the opposite of what one desires: loneliness, distrust and insecurity (see e.g. Sun 2007).

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<sup>323</sup>人最常见的毛病就是喜欢求全责备，希图'完美'，容不得别人的半点缺点，见人一短便横加指责。人非圣贤，孰能无过? [...] 若寻求不犯错误没有缺点的朋友，恐怕要一生孤独了。The author gives many examples of famous leaders such as Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220) and Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 (181-234) who embody this saying, both in a failing way and in a successful way. Although often portrayed as a cruel and merciless tyrant, Cao Cao has also been praised as a brilliant ruler and military genius who treated his subordinates like his family. Moreover, he was very skilled in poetry and martial arts. According to Pohl (1990: 66), even Zheng Banqiao admired Cao Cao as a great man of action and creative power whose poems 'posses an air of impetuous unrestraint and a sense of social responsibility'.

<sup>324</sup> 所以做人不能太过严苛地要求别人，对于小的弱点、过失，应该要包容、谅解，并尽量欣赏、鼓励别人的优点，包容原谅他的无心或情有可原的小过失，才是处世待人之道。否则，没有人愿意亲近你，尽然使自己落得孤独无依，自身陷入孤立无援之境，那也是咎由自取的。

Author Ye Feng (2007: 22) illustrates this idea by depicting how larvae - whom people consider to be the most filthy things - grow out of an environment of dung and dirt (*fentu* 粪土), to eventually become cicadas that ‘in the Autumn wind drink dew as clean as a whistle (在秋风中喝洁净露水)’, and how a pile of withered grass in itself might not be brilliant (glorious, radiant), but that it is ‘the habitat of those glistening and shining glow-worms in the Summer nights (那些在夏夜中闪闪发光的萤火虫却是生存在其中的)’.

How can one realize this ideal of being ‘not too clear’ in practice in order to maintain healthy relationships? One main characteristic of people who are appreciated and loved is that they know how to ‘leave some room’ (*liu yi dian kongjian* 留一点空间 or *yudi* 余地) for a flexible interpretation of a situation. ‘Leaving room’ reflects the need for flexibility in delimiting boundaries as well as the need for ambiguity in interpersonal intercourse. This *kongjian* is also understood as a way of expressing modesty, an aspect that is strongly associated with the saying *shui zhi qing ze wu yu* (e.g. Han 2008; Hu 2008). The moral code of the *Zhongyong* advises one to take a moderate approach to life and to avoid taking a prominent, explicitly articulated position or point of view in any given circumstance. Pretending to be *hutu* is just one way to realize this, and as such is an admirable mode of behavior to maintain and nourish one’s interpersonal relations.

Altogether, the saying expresses the idea that being clear and penetrating without the wisdom of knowing when to pretend to be muddled in interpersonal relations can have unwanted negative consequences, namely ending up alone with one’s smartness.

#### 4.4.4 ‘Cleverness may overreach itself’ (*congming fan bei congming wu*)

The possibility of obtaining undesirable consequences (such as ending up without friends) because of one’s sharpness and clarity brings us to another proverb that also nicely illustrates the dialectics between smartness and muddledness: *congming fan bei congming wu* 聪明反被聪明误. 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, thus a person can be too smart for his own good. Xun Feng (1995) explains its meaning by saying that if one is blindly (foolishly) smart, then one ‘seeds thistle and attracts grudge’. In other words, not smartly using one’s cleverness can be fatal. Very often, keeping a low-profile and adopting a modest attitude as described in the saying ‘When the water is too clear’ and in many of the expressions in 2.3 will optimally contribute to inner peace of mind. Another saying that conveys this wisdom is *nong qiao cheng zuo* 弄巧成拙, translated as ‘being too smart will result in an awkward situation’, in other

words, one can suffer from being too smart, or one can try to be clever only to end in blunder.

To illustrate this, many authors (e.g. Chen 2011; Ouyang 2006) use a fine example taken from the *Dream of the red chamber* (*Hongloumeng* 红楼梦)<sup>325</sup>. In this story, Wang Xifeng 王熙凤 ('Splendid Phoenix'), a femme fatale-like lady is extremely clever and rules the household, but in the end ruins the family with her over-cleverness and over-calculating. With her remarkable multi-faceted personality, Wang Xifeng can be kind-hearted toward the poor and helpless, but, at the same time, she can be cruel enough to kill. For instance, when a poorer member of the Jia family shows interest in her, she tricks him repeatedly into rendez-vous which turns out to be a trap, and eventually gets the offending man killed (Chapters 11 and 12). Especially when her power is challenged, she is capable of great cruelty; she personally schemes for the suicide of her husband's concubine second sister You whom she hated. She is the typical example of the 'calculated', 'minor smart' person as mentioned above: very smart, but not always using her cleverness the appropriate, i.e. upright way.<sup>326</sup>

An historical example that embodies this particular proverb is the poet Su Dongpo (苏东坡, 1037-1101)<sup>327</sup>. It is to Su Dongpo that a very similar saying is attributed, namely 'People all raise children wishing that they become smart. I have been mistaken by smartness all my life'<sup>328</sup>. As tradition goes, the proverb *congming fan bei congming wu* is derived from Su Dongpo's words. Indeed, Su Dongpo spent much of his time as an official exiled because of alleged criticism on the emperor and his closest associates, but always remained true to his convictions.

A third example personalizing the proverb 'Cleverness may overreach itself' is found in the person of Yang Xiu 杨修 (175-219). Yang Xiu is described as one of the two 'talented' officers under Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220)<sup>329</sup>. Officially, Cao Cao executed Yang Xiu in 219 because he mistook the warlord's night signal for an order to retreat. But tradition has it that Cao Cao is considered to be the 'stupid' general without moral dignity, and that he killed Yang Xiu because he was too smart and boastful and a threat to his own power.

Zhong Ling (2008a) argues that both Su Dongpo and Yang Xiu - unlike Wang Xifeng - were indeed real smart (*da congming*) men, but did not manage to escape the fate of too

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<sup>325</sup> See note 220.

<sup>326</sup> In the *Hongloumeng*, a variation on this saying appears: 'The strategem has been thought through too cleverly. Instead, your life has been harmed' (机关算尽太聪明，反误了卿卿性命).

<sup>327</sup> See also note 113.

<sup>328</sup> 人皆养子望聪明，我被聪明误一生。

<sup>329</sup> On Cao Cao, see note 323.

much cleverness as expressed in the saying. Clever people may pay a high price for being too clever.

Author Xiao Shengping (2008: 2-3) uses the striking image of the smart but *hutu* state of mind as a paper lantern, to indicate the importance of muddledness as a way of protecting one from too much smartness. In this image of a paper lantern, smartness is like the burning candles inside. If the candles are bright, the lantern is also bright and can well light the road; if the candle is extinguished, the lantern is like darkness in the middle of the night. But the candles have to be surrounded by paper at the four sides, because even if the flame is excessively weak, it can still burn others and oneself. Therefore, one needs to appropriately use paper (*hutu*-ness) to close it off in order to protect the flame and also others and oneself. In the same way, clearness and understanding needs muddledness to close it off to offer some protection against too much smartness. But to do so, one needs to have attained a high level of smartness. As the author states:

For giving smartness an overcoat of *hutu*, one needs the wisdom of conducting oneself in society (*chushi* 处世)<sup>330</sup>, as well as the courage for conducting oneself in society. A lot of people cannot accomplish anything, suffer and feel troubled. This is exactly because they think they understood, but are lacking the clarity and courage for ‘pretending to be *hutu*’.<sup>331</sup> (Xiao S. 2008: 3)

Precisely this lack of courage and modesty is a characteristic of the ‘minor smart’ (*xiao congming*) person, the person who thinks of himself as being very smart but is not, and ‘abuses’ his smartness in such a way that it becomes fatal to him.

#### 4.4.5 ‘Every man has a fool in his sleeve’ (*congming yi shi, hutu yi shi*)

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’ or ‘A

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<sup>330</sup> *Chushi* 处世, literally: dwelling in human life, dwelling in the world, from which ‘human conduct’, and ‘conduct oneself in society’. Although they have a slightly different pronunciation, one should be attentive not to confuse *chushi* 处世 with *chushi* 出世: ‘to be born’, but also ‘renounce human society’ and ‘stand aloof from the mortal world’ (Wu & Cheng 2006: 223; 227).

<sup>331</sup> 给明白穿上糊涂的外套, 既需要处世的智慧, 又需要处世的勇气. 很多人一事无成, 痛苦烦恼, 就是自认为自己明白, 缺乏“装糊涂”的明白与勇气.

wise man is not free from momentary stupidities' (Wu & Cheng 2006: 248; 645).<sup>332</sup> The saying originates in the Ming compilation of vernacular story collections *Jing shi tong yan* 警世通言 (Book three, *di san juan* 第三卷) by Feng Menglong (冯梦龙, 1574-1645), third role (*di san juan* 第三卷)<sup>333</sup>. 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 se* poses no problem, because this kind of person will never be muddled in important matters. As a young employee at a university explained to me:

Smart people rarely are *hutu*. Moreover, they know when to pretend to be *hutu* to avoid conflicts. In their heart, they already weakened these conflicts.<sup>334</sup> (Zhang Yang, Personal communication, 23 September 2008, Shenyang)

To clarify this idea, Ouyang Xiulin (2006: 23-24) compares real smartness with wealth: it can make people happy or unhappy depending on how it is used. Real smart people know how to use their knowledge in the right way and when and where 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 out of desire to look smart and gain power, or when it is not necessary. In this way, people will not get jealous, and will not cause any harm to others, neither to themselves. (Ye 2007: 26-29)

This saying also reveals an interpretation that was made by some people I had occasional talks with such as taxi-drivers and cleaning ladies. They explained the *Nande* in *Nande hutu* as 'rarely, seldom', in the sense of that one should only rarely be *hutu*, and not as 'difficult to obtain'. This translation is perfectly acceptable, as far as one does not take the long postscript into account that gives too many clues for a deeper interpretation.

Thus, in being *hutu* one should be *congming*, but too *congming* leaves no room for carefree living. Therefore, one needs to be *hutu* once in a while (*yi shi* 一时) while being *congming* too.

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<sup>332</sup> As a variation sometimes the opposite is also used, namely *hutu yi shi* 糊涂一世, meaning 'dream away one's life'.

<sup>333</sup> The *Jing shi tong yan* 警世通言 is the second of a trilogy of vernacular story collections, compiled and edited by Feng Menglong. The following is mentioned: 'Let us now talk about a man who is since ancient times the smartest of all. He was smart his whole life, and only momentary confused' (如今且说一个人, 古来第一聪明的, 他聪明了一世, 懵懂在一时).

<sup>334</sup> 聪明人很少糊涂, 而且他们知道什么时候可以装糊涂为了避免冲突. 他们心里已经淡化了冲突.

## 4.5 Discussion

In this chapter, I outlined how ‘the art of being muddled’ is generally understood and interpreted in contemporary China. Depending on which aspect one wants to emphasize, there is a diversity of interpretations (and sometimes even contradictions such as the use of *da hutu* and *xiao hutu*) that cover a wide range of meanings and connotations. Still, in this web of meanings, there are some major concepts and rationales that determine the overall interpretation.

A first important observation is the amalgam of Daoist, Confucian and even Buddhist elements in the different interpretations of the saying. For Daoism, this merging is reflected in the associations of *Nande hutu* with *wuwei*, not contending, self-knowledge, inner harmony by ‘going with the flow’ and being soft and flexible, and with the sage fool, and in the emphasis on a carefree, natural and unrestrained living (*xiaoyao*). Notions such as knowing fate (and accepting it), self-cultivation, social harmony, modesty, moderation, tolerance and endurance testify to the Confucian inspired interpretations. The few Buddhist elements stress self-denial and the existence of three stages of human life. This threefold mixture of philosophical elements (*san jiao he yi* 三教合一) to interpret just one saying is not uncommon in Chinese culture. In Chapter Three, I already discussed this factual *mélange* in the context of the threefold philosophical influence on Zheng Banqiao (see Chapter Three, section 3.2.3 Philosophical influences). But how does this mixture of often contradictory philosophical points of view on the whole make sense and is it ideologically and morally acceptable? The answer lays in a double-sided interpretation and use of the *san jiao he yi*. The phenomenon does not only offer a threefold foundation of knowledge (philosophically and intellectually, *ya* 雅 level), but since long serves as the mental framework to which the common Chinese turn in the practice of daily life (*su* 俗 level). Thus, the mixture of three philosophical schools is not only an intellectual reality, but also serves the Chinese pragmatic mind in dealing with all kinds of life issues. In this respect, the different schools of thought can be considered as ‘moods of the Chinese mind which may be manifested in the same individual at different times or on different occasions’ (Plopper 1969: 15). Moreover, the choice to which philosophical (or rather mental) framework one likes to relate is a pragmatic one: one chooses the framework that best fits in with the needs of the day. In this respect, an analysis of the interpretations of *Nande hutu* offers insight into the quest for meaning of Chinese people.

An example of this pragmatic thinking is reflected in the phenomenon of ‘Confucian in character but Daoist in appearance’, that is to say, Confucian with regard to one’s inner ambitions and strivings, Daoist with regard to how one individually deals with

life<sup>335</sup>. This aphorism denotes the Chinese practice of adhering to Confucianism as long as things go well and one – as a member of society along Confucian lines - manages to realize the Confucian ideals, but seeking relief in Daoist (or Buddhist) philosophy when things do not go as one would like or expect, when one encounters setbacks and feels frustrated, disappointed or angry.<sup>336</sup> Hu Sheng observed the following about the Chinese people:

In their bones, that is, their inner hart, on the inside, is a kind of Confucian thought. On the outside, they have a kind of Daoist way of thinking. [...] Confucianism pursues the ideal of ‘cultivate morality, bring order in the family, manage the country, and bring peace to the universe’. This country (*guo*), that is the feudal state, and *tianxia*, that is the unification of everything under heaven. That is the Confucian pursuit. But when one cannot fulfill this requirement, one can feel frustrated, and then one can use the Daoist way of thinking for clearing things up, because of Confucianism and the tragic consciousness and tragic feelings this evokes. [...] In human life, there will always be many powerless situations, so one needs a way out, an outlet for catharsis, otherwise one becomes nuts. In this way, by using Daoism is a way of consolation and relief, one can expel one’s own discontent and uncomfortableness like poison. (Hu Sheng, Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang)<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> A more literal translation would be: ‘on the inside Confucian, on the outside Daoist’. Sometimes also *nei ru wai fo* 内儒外佛 (‘on the inside Confucian, on the outside Buddhist’) is used. In fact, the format of the saying is adapted to what the user wants to describe, and so there are different versions, as for instance the opposite which is used by Li Yi (2005) as *wai ru nei fa* 外儒内法 to describe the attitude of the Chinese elite (see page 108 and note 154).

<sup>336</sup> In this respect, we could say the Daoist and Confucian philosophies serve as a kind of cultural protocol for coping with life. The usefulness of the Daoist and Confucian styles of coping is recently even promoted in psychological counseling and therapy. For instance Tseng et. al (2005) discuss the emergence of a Daoist cognitive psychotherapy in China in the beginning of the 1990s. Because the main thrust of the therapy is to help the patient to obtain cognitive insight and become detached (or relieved) from excessive desires and expectations, the therapy is called *chaotuo xinli zhiliao* 超脱心理治疗, ‘detached psychotherapy’ (Tseng, Chang & Nishizono 2005: 152-155: 152-155). For more on the therapeutic value of Confucian and Daoist thought, see e.g. Bond 2010, Lin, Tseng & Yeh 1995, Tseng, Chang & Nishizono 2005. For a critical investigation into the relation of Daoism and psychology that highlights some potential pitfalls on different dialogues between Daoism, psychology and psychotherapy, see e.g. Cohen 2010. For more on the ‘typically Chinese’ coping method embodied in the saying *Nande hutu*, see also further Chapter Seven.

<sup>337</sup>骨子里，就是内心，内在的，是一种儒家思想，外在的，是一种道家的思想。[...]儒家讲究“修身齐家治国平天下”，这个“国”，指的是诸侯国，而“天下”，是指“天下一统”的天下。这是儒家的追求。但是当这种诉求不能得到满足的时候，会有挫折，会用道家思想来消解因为儒家思想而引发的悲剧意识，悲剧情怀。[...]人生会有很多无奈，否则的话人会被逼疯的啊，所以人要找到宣泄的出路，怎样要把自己的不满，不舒服，就像是排毒一样，用道家思想来作为一种安慰。作为一种慰藉。Cf also Lin Y.



Many historical figures testify to this particular attitude, such as Tao Yuanming and to a certain extent also Zheng Banqiao. As a reaction to failure in their life as a (Confucian) official and in realizing their (Confucian) ideals as scholar-literati, these scholars-officials turned towards Daoism and retreated from public life.

Secondly, from the descriptions, the most basic interpretation of *Nande hutu* is that of a pretended muddledness that goes beyond or transcends ‘ordinary’ smartness, in such a way that it becomes a high wisdom (*da zhihui* 大智慧), indeed very difficult to achieve. To enter this stage of ‘advanced’ muddledness (instead of real muddledness as in the figure of Ah Q, *zhen hutu*), one has to ‘look through life’ (*kantou hongchen* 看透红尘) first; there can be no real high-level state of muddledness without starting out wise. As such, the only ‘right’ (Daoist) *hutu* is the *hutu* of the sage fool. Conversely, there can neither be beneficial wisdom without some muddledness, as the saying *congming yi shi hutu yi shi* 聰明一世糊涂一时 explains. In other words, a wise person might look real foolish and does not expose his smartness, while a real muddlehead can still be muddled in a smart way. To illustrate this idea, Lei Legeng (2008: 4) advances a variation on the aforementioned saying ‘high wisdom looks like foolishness’ (*da zhi ruo yu*) just by replacing a few words, which becomes ‘major smartness looks like muddledness’ (*da congming ruo hutu* 大聰明若糊涂). However, this is extremely difficult and requires a process of spiritual growth through an accumulation of age and experience, a process that is reflected in the Confucian virtue of self-cultivation.

Thirdly, the state of mind obtained by practicing ‘the art of being muddled’ corresponds to being emotionally and rationally indifferent, and to being carefree, lighthearted, natural and unrestrained (*xiaoyao*) by weakening one’s desires and ambitions, especially in meeting setbacks. Such a state of mind is sustained by related philosophical ideals like retreating and letting go, knowing fate, and following the natural way of not-contending, the propensity for the middle way, overcoming hardness with softness, modesty, tolerance and endurance, and being accommodating and flexible on the outside but determinate on the inside. Besides, *Nande hutu* is to be strongly associated with other popular wisdoms of life that also give advice on how to rightly ‘use’ smartness in order to obtain inner peace of mind and social harmony, such as ‘Suffering brings good luck’ and ‘Cleverness may overreach itself’. Especially with regard to social relationships, one should learn how and when to be muddled, in order not to end up lonely and isolated.

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2007 [1998]a: 115: ‘Life under the Confucian code of decorum would be unbearable without this emotional relief. For Taoism is the playing mood of the Chinese people, as Confucianism is their working mood. That accounts for the fact that every Chinese is a Confucianist when he is successful and a Taoist when he is a failure. The naturalism of Taoism is the balm that soothes the wounded Chinese soul.’

At first sight, these wisdoms of life and attitudes seem to suggest passive reconciliation with one's lot, including mischief that is beyond one's abilities or responsibilities, and to present a kind of self-transcendence and self-denial by adopting an accommodating and detached attitude not only toward the world, but also toward one's own (negative) emotions and thoughts. However, on a deeper level, the contrary is true. These wisdoms contain very active elements on different levels. As Yan Bo (2006) puts on the cover of his book *Xiao hutu da zhihui* 小糊涂大智慧 (*Minor muddledness, major wisdom*), 'hututu is not powerlessness (inability), but a still not activated potential' (糊涂不是无能, 而是未曾被启动的潜能). Being tolerant, compromising, knowing and resigning to fate, enduring hardship and even retreating and letting go are all done for the best; they emphasize a deep faith in the natural law of circularity, and in the dialectical principle of continuous change that guarantees that situations and emotions never remain what they are. Moreover, the more extreme, the sooner they will tend toward their opposite. By retreating, pretending to be *hututu*, taking a low-key positions and adopting a flexible, easy-going attitude, one does not only obtain or maintain harmony, but also gives situations and emotions the required 'room' to develop in a better, more harmonious direction when the conditions and timing are right. Because everything is constantly alternating and temporary, there is no need to be overly sad, happy, emotionally or intellectually engaged and analytic about whatever comes up. Moreover, the above mentioned 'passive' attitudes are a conscious choice, at least in the ideal situation; one chooses to take distance, resign to fate and so on, either to maintain social harmony (Confucianism), or to obtain inner peace (Daoism). As such, all the here presented 'wisdoms of life' and virtues can be considered as patterns of coping that are not entirely passive and fatalistic, but are also characterized by activism. In this respect, Lin et al. (1995: 330) observe the following,

The Chinese consider it a philosophy and an art to learn how to be dynamic, flexible and practical in dealing with problems. The ultimate goal of *gongfu* (Chinese boxing) is not to hit the enemy but rather to utilize the situation and the enemy's own force to defeat him. [...] When the pressure is too high, learn to be patient, to tolerate, until there is an opportunity to master and to achieve.

Another very important outcome that also explains the absence of an 'active' and enterprising attitude when it comes to suffering, is the positive interpretation of negative (stressful) experiences, namely as a necessity for fostering personal growth and hardiness. Especially Confucian doctrines stress the appreciation of meaningful aspects and consequences brought about by negative encounters, such that no active changes should be undertaken to eliminate the stressful experiences (see e.g. Cheng, Lo & Chio 2010: 400). This is particularly expressed in the virtue of forbearance (*ren* 忍), and in the saying 'Suffering brings good fortune' (*chi kui shi fu* 吃亏是福).

Thus, the ideal of equanimity, endurance, tolerance and mildness expressed in *Nande hutu* is experienced in a very profound way, and equips the Chinese with an extraordinary resilience. These psychological functions will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

In view of the above, many of the here discussed related ‘wisdoms of life’ and attitudes in fact not only explain how *Nande hutu* is interpreted by the Chinese in contemporary society, but at the same time, each of them gives practical advice on how to attain the peace of mind *Nande hutu* aims at. As such, these wisdoms of life should altogether be considered complementary; the study of ‘the art of being muddled’ thus became the study of many different but complementary ‘arts of’. Important to note in this respect, is that from many of the strategies of life put forward here, such as the *Zhongyong*, the expressions *Congming yi shi hutu yi shi* and *Yi rou ke gang*, separate books in the same line as *hutuxue* exist, evenly presenting the philosophy of life at stake as a way to more mental, physical and material wellbeing, and containing many of the same content elements as the books on *hutuxue*. Although it would lead me too far to do a thorough investigation into the differences and similarities of these books, the existence of similar books with a similar content at least indicates that the discursive elements in the discourse on *Nande hutu* are or have become very commonplace and to a certain extent interchangeable: they promote the same mixture of Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist ways of improving different aspects of life (family, work, health, business, politics, ...), of being successful in social relationships, and of gaining more inner peace. The only significant difference seems to be a matter of perspective. This chapter thus has become a chapter not only discussing *Nande hutu* as a philosophy of life, but exploring several related Chinese philosophies of life.

Besides, as shown in the analysis, some discursive elements are profoundly philosophical and are likewise used and explained by the more ‘scholarly’ sources, whereas their description by non-scholarly sources (such as bloggers, taxi-drivers,...) is more popularized and rooted in daily life experiences. It is certainly not uncommon that popular proverbs rooted in high-level thinking simply rephrase and paraphrase the abstraction expressed in the original source. In this way, they come to reflect so-called collective wisdom in a popular way and accessible for a wide public (Wu H. X-Y 2004: 323). Whereas they inevitably lose some of their profound philosophical meaning in the course of their popularization, they nevertheless constitute authentic cultural ‘wisdoms of life’.

Popular author Yue Qing’s explanation to the *Nande hutu* fan on the back cover of his book *Nande hutu: you ‘congming’ bian ‘hutu’ de rensheng da zhihui 难得糊涂: 由‘聪明’变‘糊涂’的人生大智慧* (*Nande hutu: the great wisdom of life of changing from smartness into muddledness*) (see Figure 3) summarizes well the whole range of contemporary interpretations of *Nande hutu*: it is a kind of experience (*jingli* 经历), a realm (*jingjie* 境界

), a competence (*zige* 资格), a wisdom (*zhihui* 智慧) and a magnanimity (*qidu* 气度). *Nande hutu* is a popular wisdom of life open for interpretations by people from all walks of life, all equally valuable and 'right', and all kinds of people are attracted to it.



Figure 3 Backcover of Yue Qing's *Nande hutu: you 'congming' bian 'hutu' de rensheng da zhihui* 难得糊涂: 由'聪明'变'糊涂'的人生大智慧. (*Nande hutu: the great wisdom of life of changing from smartness into muddledness*) (2007).

In describing expressions, sayings, virtues, and wisdoms of life related to *Nande hutu* both in their philosophical and mundane interpretations, this chapter laid bare the key interpretations and the values and beliefs they represent. In the next chapters, these interpretations, values and beliefs will reappear and will be discussed from a practical, moral and psycho-social perspective.

The 'art of being muddled' clearly is not just a mixture of transcendent, impractical and elitist wisdoms of life that are completely unrelated with the reality of human life. It on the contrary offers practical advice on how to face various daily life situations. This brings us to the next chapter, which deals with the popularity of the saying (in its meaning of beloved, fashionable and even commercialized) and some of the different application domains of these virtues and wisdoms.

## Chapter 5 The Art of Being Muddled: application of a popular saying

*If you learn to use a perfect afternoon in a perfectly useless manner you have learnt the meaning of life.*  
(Lin Yutang)

### 5.1 Introduction

Whereas in the above chapter we learnt how the saying is interpreted by different people and on different levels, this chapter will examine the popularity of the saying, and how it is concretely experienced and ‘lived’ as a practical philosophy of life in contemporary China.

As already hinted at in Chapter Three and illustrated in Chapter Four, the interpretation of *Nande hutu* not only obtained a particular ‘popularized’ (in the sense of widely accessible) touch, but also has become very popular in the sense of beloved and favored, and even commercialized. The first part of this chapter will deal with this popularity, popularization and commercialization. The popularity, but also popularization and commercialization of the saying is most concretely reflected in its practical use in different domains of daily life: love relations, family life, work related issues, school and education, business, and the highly relevant field of officialdom and

politics. As such, these use-contexts<sup>338</sup> will show how the aforementioned virtues and wisdoms of Chapter Four are concretely put in practice. This will be the topic of the second and third section. In addition, there appear to be a few domains in which ‘the art of being muddled’ is not so commonly applied. These domains will be addressed in the fourth section.

In this chapter, also some issues related to the difference in use according to gender and age drawn from the different discourses will be briefly touched upon.

Lastly, it is also important to note that this chapter, in a similar way as Chapter Four, describes opinions and ‘practices’ from different sources, ranging from scholars to cleaning ladies, students, taxi-drivers, officials, businessmen and -women, teachers, artists, ‘popular authors’, and elderly people. As such, this chapter represents a melting-pot of scholarly and non-scholarly sources, and describes their use of and experiences with this popular wisdom of life.

## 5.2 It is popular and ‘fashionable’ to be muddled

### 5.2.1 Historical popularity

Historically, it seems the calligraphy became publicly known and famous soon after Zheng Banqiao wrote it (Zhong 2008a).<sup>339</sup> This assumption is supported by the fact that Qian Yong 钱泳 (1759-1844), who was a near contemporary of Zheng Banqiao, has written a comment on *Nande hutu* (see also page 144). Also late Qing official, military general and devout Confucian scholar Zeng Guofan 曾国藩 (1811-1872) seems to have expressed his opinion on Zheng Banqiao’s *hutu* to his brother, saying that

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<sup>338</sup> A term I borrowed from Mayfair Yang’s study on *guanxixue* 关系学 (Yang M. 1994).

<sup>339</sup> E.g. Zhong 2008a: ‘This saying spread fast, from mouth to mouth until today (可这句话不胫而走, 广泛流传迄今)’. Undoubtedly, as the saying is rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy, the concept of the sage fool and *da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚 were well-known long before Zheng Banqiao wrote the saying. Cf Li Shuhui (2007: 8): ‘This kind of several thousand years old wisdom has unceasingly influenced us since several thousand years, and has immersed in our blood, and sunk into our bones, and finally congealed as a philosophy, and even raised up to the status of a religion, accumulating a cultural mentality, given shape to Chinese people’s own character (这种思想几千年来一直影响着, 融化在我们的血液中, 渗透到我们的骨髓里, 凝练成一种哲学, 上升为一种宗教, 积淀成一种民族的文化心理, 形成了中国人特有的国民性)’.

Generally speaking, the world is in disorder. I hope that you brothers, study to be harmonious and *hutu*, starting from not distinguishing right from wrong and black from white. Di An excelled in not recognizing the ways of the world, in simply being chaotic and never revealing himself. If you, my brothers, ever and again reveal yourself, this road will eventually not bring luck. You presently abstain from being like me, and better be simple and muddled and kind, and not reveal yourself.<sup>340</sup> (Xie 2004)

With regard to later literary sources, many articles entitled *Nande Hutu* testify to its ongoing popularity. Some examples are the article in the popular magazine *Yiwen lu* 益闻录 anno 1882 (Anon. 1882), and some other occurrences in the first half of the twentieth century such as for instance an article dating from 1937 that deals with some famous historical warlords such as Zhuge Liang and Lu Duan (Guan 1937), and one article dating from 1946 that promotes *Nande hutu* as a way to be more relaxed (*suibian* 随便) and discusses the phenomenon of Ah Q-ism that was quite *en vogue* in that period (Wu 1946).<sup>341</sup> The most notable of these articles is probably the critical article called *Nande hutu* by Lu Xun in 1933<sup>342</sup>. During the Mao era, hardly any written sources seem to be traceable. By contrast, as from the reform era under Deng Xiaoping, the calligraphy seems to have gained increasing popularity, especially among officials. Ample articles of the 80s and 90s testify to its use in official sources (e.g. Li 1986; Ye 1984).

Many Chinese informants explained that this is not so strange: in those days, the saying undoubtedly was used in its most negative sense, as an ironic *zuoyouming* 座右铭, a (justification) motto for officials who, although often only locally, enjoyed more freedom of decision and at the same time, the freedom to ‘become rich’, and who gave free rein to their power. In their official’s practice, pretended muddledness was adopted for their own benefit and to cover things up. This idea is reinforced by the occurrence of many critical articles in the 90s that criticize the use of *Nande hutu* as a motto (especially for officials) (e.g. Geng & Xu 1996; Liu 1998; Niu 1996; Wang 1993; Xun 1995; Zhou 1995). These articles often contain titles such as *Wei guan cong zheng bu gai zhuang hutu* 为官从政不该装糊涂 (Officials in politics should not pretend to be *hutu*) (Zhou 1995) or *Gongchandangren bu neng jiang hutu* 共产党人不能讲糊涂 (Party members should not speak

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<sup>340</sup>大抵世之乱也，必先由于是非不明，黑白不分，愿诸弟学为和平，学为糊涂。迪安妙在全不识世态，一味浑含，永不发露。我兄弟则时时发露，终非载福之道。弟当以我为戒，一味浑厚，绝不发露。(曾国藩与弟书，第 95、141 页, *Letter of Zeng Guofan to his brothers*, no. 95, page 141).

<sup>341</sup> For more on Ah Q-ism, see also Chapter Four section 4.2 The use of opposite pairs. For more on its popularity in the beginning of the 20th century, see further page 283.

<sup>342</sup> See also page 158.

about muddledness) (Geng & Xu 1996).<sup>343</sup> The late 80s and the 90s indeed are known for excessive corruption (e.g. Barmé 1999; Kleinman, Yan, Jun et al. 2011a). Although her research context is not quite the same, in discussing the growing popularity of *The art of social relationships* (*Guanxixue* 关系学) in official discourse in this period, Mayfair Yang (1994: 156-157) explains quite convincingly:

The excesses of the Cultural Revolution made people so cynical and mutually distrustful that they lost their capacity for moral judgments, gave up their socialist ethics of brotherhood and respect for the state and the collective, and retreated into small private circles. People became selfish, lost their sense of law and morality, and started using whatever opportunities their positions provided to help only those who were useful to them.

This was certainly the case for officials, but the moral degeneration also applied to the masses. The aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and later the Tiananmen incident, and at the same time the economic reforms and openness, caused the atmosphere to be heavily politically charged. But it also caused the masses to be eager for any kind of opportunities and selfish support. As a consequence, this period gave rise to many modern and traditional 'handbooks' on strategies for surviving in chaotic times<sup>344</sup>, as a part of what Geremie Barmé (1999: 138) appropriately calls 'crisis publishing'.

Apart from its popular use as a slogan among officials, also the increasing popularity of *Nande hutu* in business is already stressed in this period. For instance one article dating from 1987 called *Nande hutu - lingdao yishu mianmianguan* 难得糊涂 - 领导艺术面面观 (*Nande hutu - over-all insight into the art of leadership*), which marked the launching of the Open Door policy by Deng Xiaoping, quite interestingly discusses the relationship between 'leadership' in business and *Nande hutu* (Fang 1987).

Especially around the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Zheng Banqiao in 1993, the saying frequently occurred in public life, and a TV serial on Zheng Banqiao in his time as an official was shown. Some of the young survey respondents gave this TV serial as main channel of their information about Zheng Banqiao and *Nande hutu*, and the title song of a popular TV serial in 1994 called *guo ba yin jiu si* 过把瘾就死, ('Excessively hold on to

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<sup>343</sup> The criticism on officials using too much of the *Nande hutu* strategy will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

<sup>344</sup> At the same time, this period is also characterized by highly critical, often cynical art and popular music, and all sorts of publications. One very famous example is the in 1998 released popular album by the father of rock music in China Cui Jian 崔健, called 'The power of the powerless' (*Wuneng de liliang* 无能的力量), a possible reference to the Czech playwright Vaclav Havel's essay (1978) 'The Power of the Powerless', that had circulated in mainland China during the 1990s (Barmé 1999: 359). Geremie Barmé (1999) sketches an inspiring portrait of these 'high days of irony' in *In the Red*, in which he examines both official and popular culture and their dynamic relation during the post-Mao era.



one's cravings and die') was entitled *Hutu de ai* 糊涂的爱, 'A muddled love'. Also one of the protagonists in Mo Yan's novel *Treasure Map* (*Cangbaotu* 藏宝图), presumably written in 1999, declares that 'nowadays, a lot of prominent people have the calligraphy hanging for their own pleasure'.<sup>345</sup> The saying has become what Su Zaiqing (2006) calls a 'national quintessence' (*guocui* 国粹).

## 5.2.2 Contemporary popularity and commercialization

Also nowadays, the saying is widespread and well-known, even among overseas Chinese, to which many literary products, cultural derivatives such as popular artifacts and commercialized products testify. The saying is not only well-known by elderly and higher educated people; in the survey among students and researchers, 95% of the subjects confirm they know the saying. Some respondents even answered the question with 'Of course I do, I am Chinese'. All the Chinese people I socialized with were in one way or another familiar with the saying, ranging from taxi-drivers, to book-stall owners or sellers and local noodle- and *jiaozi* -restaurant owners. The saying is considered a 'China Daily hot word', to which its appearance on a website to learn English testifies.<sup>346</sup>

Although young people do not seem to frequently use the saying in their spoken language, elder people certainly do. On the survey-question how they know the saying, some of the students responded they heard their parents or even grandparents and 'older people' use the saying.

With regard to literary sources, for instance, popular writer and overseas Chinese Annie Wang (2006) uses the saying in her novel *The people's republic of desire*, to illustrate that 'in China, smart people leave things vague'.<sup>347</sup> Often, the saying is only used to have a catchy title for an article, theatre play, or popular song (e.g. Bai 1994), whereas the content might just vaguely refer to some situation where people keep their mouth shut

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<sup>345</sup> This quote was my first conscious encounter with the saying. Mo Yan lets his protagonist explain that the *hutu* in the saying is not the smartness that town people now expose: 'Vous êtes adroits mais sans intelligence; vous êtes intelligents mais sans clairvoyance, vous êtes clairvoyants mais sans sagesse, vous êtes sage mais votre pensée n'a pas d'altitude, votre pensée saurait prendre de l'altitude que vous ne sauriez toujours pas faire les imbéciles, alors que nous, nous qui comprenons les choses, savons faire l'imbécile' (Mo 2004: 95).

<sup>346</sup> See [http://zn8398.com/zn\\_article/Html/?49245.html](http://zn8398.com/zn_article/Html/?49245.html) (Last accessed 24 October 2011). The saying is here translated as 'Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise'.

<sup>347</sup> When returning to her fatherland as an overseas Chinese, many people asked her the question if a returnee, an American overseas Chinese *huaqiao*, "should follow the traditional Chinese, the modern Chinese, or the American model? Or should they go one step further, and say that they come from California or London?", on which she answers: 'Well, in China, smart people leave things vague. It's called *Nande hutu*' (Wang 2006: 2).

or pretend to be ignorant or unclear about a matter. Some authors even go as far as to say that

*Nande hutu* might even be nothing less than Confucius' enormous *Lunyu*, hanging in lettered men's study, in farmers' houses, in restaurants and bars, in take-away restaurants in remote and backwards places, in the offices of influential officials and in the big living rooms of stars and celebrities. *Nande hutu* is now a kind of fashion, a trend, and we can find this trend everywhere on the streets. Apparently, Confucius is inferior to Zheng Banqiao. (Shu 2001)<sup>348</sup>

But it goes even farther; the saying has also been highly commercialized and economically marketed. Different copies of the calligraphy can be bought on flea markets or in calligraphy departments of an antique quarter or shop in China. One can also easily online order vases, ink-stones, t-shirts and similar products with the saying on it. I once asked an employee in a company if he knew the saying, and he said he did but did not know much about it, and asked me to wait a minute. After some time, he came back with an outprint of a website called *Nande hutu* where one could online buy vases, pencilboxes etc. Even overseas Chinese (*huaqiao* 华侨) use the calligraphy for 'marketing' purposes. The figure underneath shows a calendar in a German restaurant which associates *hutu* with being drunk (see Figure 4 *Nande hutu* on a calendar in a Chinese restaurant in Germany, 2009).<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>348</sup>也许不亚于孔子那一堆的《论语》.[...]，悬于文人雅士的书斋、乡野村夫的居室；挂到珠光宝气的酒楼饭店、穷乡僻壤的快餐小店；书于权贵政客的办公室、明星大腕的会客厅.....这是一种时尚潮流。这种时尚潮流，我们在今天的街市上是可以随处遇到的，可见孔圣人的不及郑板桥。

<sup>349</sup> Although I did not include Taiwan and Hong Kong in the research scope, I did bump into some books and articles in Taiwanese magazines and bookshops and even a song with the title *Nande hutu* by famous Taiwanese singer Jordan Lin.



Figure 4 *Nande hutu* on a calendar in a Chinese restaurant in Germany, 2009.

As shown in this figure, in its most commercial use the saying humorously refers to really being stupid, as a characteristic of the real muddlehead, or as a result of too much drinking. This last association finds its most ‘useful’ expression in the famous brand of *baijiu* called *Xiao Hutu Xian* 小糊涂仙 (of which the above restaurant owner might be a distributor). All information of this *baijiu* can be found on the website [www.nandehutu.com](http://www.nandehutu.com). This liquor is produced in the brewery called *Yunfeng jiuye* 云峰酒业, exactly the place where – according to the story of the *hutu laoren* - Zheng Banqiao first wrote down the calligraphy: the Yunfeng Mountains. Apart from that, the connotation of *jiu*, alcohol with being muddled (drunk) is not only at first instance evident, but also as a reference to famous people such as the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*Zhulin Qi Xian* 竹林七贤), Li Bai 李白 (701-762), Su Dongpo and even Zheng Banqiao who were famous for drinking because they could not bear their smartness and needed to escape from the ‘clarity’ and misery in their lives.<sup>350</sup> Others call the saying ‘fashionable’ (*shimaoyu* 时髦语) (Hu 2008; Zhong 2008a).

Closely related to the commercialization of the saying, is the ‘popularization’ in terms of its accessibility for a large, not only elitist group of readers. The best example of this is the frequent use in popular magazines ‘specialized’ in different domains of life such as women’s issues, health, business, politics, education, aimed either at a young, middle-aged or elderly readers public, and even more so the appearance of *hutuxue* 糊涂

<sup>350</sup> I want to thank professor Yang Sai from Fudan University for this suggestion.

学 or ‘the art of being muddled’ as early as the 90s. These books are continuously reprinted and new books keep on appearing. As many of the titles (see Addendum three page 375) indicate, these books are not difficult to read literature; they are most often classified as ‘popular reading’ (*tongsu duwu* 通俗读物). Other classifications are ‘philosophy of life’ (*rensheng zhexue* 人生哲学, *rensheng zheli* 人生哲理), ‘social and moral education’ (*shehui gongde jiaoyu* 社会公德教育) and ‘the psychology of being successful’ (*chenggong xinlixue* 成功心理学), and all can be found in the ‘self-improvement’ (*lizhi jindian* 励志金典) section next to other books with the *-xue*, equally popular such as ‘The art of being successful’ *chenggongxue* 成功学, ‘The art of thick (skin) and black (heart)’ *Houheixue* 厚黑学<sup>351</sup>, and more ‘scientific’ books such as psychology and sociology. Some authors even associate the saying with the Bible: the webpage of online writer Shi Meigui (2010), in discussing the eighty quotes of *The incisive human art of being muddled*, underscores its ‘holiness’ by showing a picture of the ‘Holy Bible’. The roses that surround the picture of the Bible clearly refer to her own penname – *meigui* 玫瑰, ‘rose’ (Shi M. 2010).

Many of these books repeatedly use the power of four-letterwords, using these for titles of chapters and sections, often making word-plays or slight variations on well-known philosophical quotes, which altogether makes them look very convincing and well-thought.

Most of the covers have classical paintings or calligraphies displayed - as it suits a traditional painting - often with some minor figure wandering around, referring to the age-old wisdom that *Nande hutu* conveys, and to Zheng Banqiao as a scholar-literatus (See Addendum three page 375). One of the most recent books dated anno 2009, *Nande hutu de rensheng zhexue* 难得糊涂的人生哲学 (*The philosophy of life of Nande hutu*) is quite different in this respect. As the only one among many others, it does not look like a Chinese book, and without characters, one would assume it is a Western self-improvement book (see Figure 5 Sun He’s *Nande hutu de rensheng zhexue* 难得糊涂的人生哲学 (*The philosophy of life of Nande hutu*) (2009).)

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<sup>351</sup> On *Houheixue* 厚黑学 or *The art of being thick and black*, see also note 16.

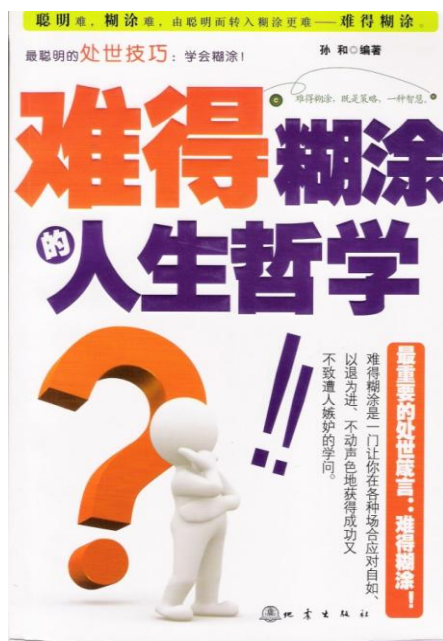


Figure 5 Sun He's *Nande hutu de rensheng zhexue* 难得糊涂的人生哲学 (The philosophy of life of Nande hutu) (2009).

Often, these books have some humorous illustrations inside (see for instance Figure 9 page 306). Semiotically, the importance of these images is self-evident; by leafing through the books one can imagine what kind of reader's public they are aimed at (young and modern people), and how popularized the wisdom of *Nande hutu* has become.

In these books, *hutuxue* is presented as a philosophy of life to become 'successful' in a diversity of aspects of life. For instance Jian Kun's 'new edition' of the '*Hutuxue: zhihui chushi liushisi ke. Yiqing yangxing 'Babaozhou'* 新编糊涂学. 智慧处世六十四课. 怡情养性' 八宝粥' (*The art of being muddled': 64 lessons on the wisdom of conducting oneself in society. The 'Eight treasures porridge' for joyful feelings and spiritual cultivation*) in particular offers an interesting example of 'using' old wisdom in a new setting. At its introduction, this new edition was said to 'get rid of the stale and bring forth the fresh' (*tuichen chuxin* 推陈出新, thus: to innovate, to go beyond old ideas). This book introduces eight 'lessons' in being *hutu* in eight different fields of life, what the author calls the 'classics of eight major muddlednesses' (*ba da hutu jing* 八大糊涂经). Furthermore, the author makes a striking metaphor with the (in Sichuan) popular 'eight treasures porridge' (*babaozhou* 八宝粥, or 'eight treasures tea' 八宝茶) by calling the book 'the porridge of eight major *hutu*'s' (*Ba da hutu zhou* 八大糊涂粥 or *chushi zhihui babaozhou* 处世智慧八宝粥). Having a closer look at the title, we can see that the author proposes sixty-four lessons in being *hutu* in eight fields of life (e.g. love, marriage, business, finance, morality,...), of which each chapter is in turn divided in eight lessons. What the author probably alludes to, is a witty association with the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Yijing* (Jian 2004). Another

association of 'eight times eight', in line with the Chinese auspicious use of homonyms for good luck, could be with 'enrichment' (*fa*). Such a presentation of the book makes it accessible to and attractive for all kinds of people, not only for highly-learned scholar-literati.

But the wisdom of the saying is not 'just another' popular philosophy of life; it can effectively be put in practice. This practical use will be the discussion of the next section, in which the above popularity, as well as the 'wisdoms' of Chapter Four will be concretized.

## 5.3 Concrete applications in different domains of daily life

### 5.3.1 Introduction

The popularity of *Nande hutu* is illustrated by the large domain in which it can be used; its application covers the whole range of life (marriage, kinship relations, work, business and finance, friendship, family, educational context and so on). This section will deal with some of its most frequently mentioned use-contexts as put forward by various players ('end-users') in the discourse on *Nande hutu* in weblogs, the books on *hutuxue*, magazine articles, the student survey and the interviews and informal talks I conducted.

With regard to this actual application or use of the wisdom of being muddled in one's life, it is certainly very difficult to 'prove' when people act '*hutu*' and when not. Being or pretending to be muddled often concerns an either deliberately pretending to be confused or ignorant for some reason that remains unknown, or, and maybe even more often, an unconscious intention or inclination that leads to a certain behavior (action or non-action). In this respect, 80 % of the respondents of the survey declared there is a concrete influence on their thoughts and behavior, but many emphasized that the influence is often unconscious as part of the unconscious cultural luggage. Besides, what people believe and say and what they actually do may not always coincide.

Particularly informative to get real-life concrete examples of 'muddled behavior' were the many books on *hutuxue* and related titles, the many articles in specialized popular magazines (health, business, women's magazines ...) or magazines aimed at specific readers (elderly, *lingdao*-leaders, students ...). Most of the books are indeed classified in domains of application, which range from very concrete domains, discussing one's concrete *hutu* behavior in the context of family, work, business

dealings, financial issues, economics and the like, to more abstract domains, such as emotional and intellectual intelligence, morality, beliefs. For instance Jian Kun's book on 'the art of being muddled' in sixty-four lessons mentions eight chapters covering 'emotional intelligence' (*qingshang hutu* 情商糊涂), intelligence quotient (*zhishang hutu* 智商糊涂), health (*jiankang hutu* 健康糊涂), marriage (*hunlian hutu* 婚恋糊涂), finance and economics (*caijing hutu* 财经糊涂), work (*congye hutu* 从业糊涂), beliefs (*xinyang hutu* 信仰糊涂) and morality (*daode hutu* 道德糊涂) (Jian 2004). Also during the interviews and informal talks, people always drew from daily life experience and social environment to illustrate the scope of use of the wisdom of being muddled, either from their private life, or in the form of general 'suppose that'-examples.

In what follows, I will discuss some of these domains of application based upon concrete examples revealed by the different sources. At the same time, distinctive 'end-users' will be identified by explaining under which circumstances they tend to – unconsciously or not – apply 'the art of being muddled' in their daily life. I did not include domains that were only seldom referred to such as art and literature (two 'elitist' domains), while other, often more general domains such as health, morality, speech and eloquence, are included in other sections and will be discussed also in Chapters Six and Seven. As such, the domains of applications mentioned here are not exhaustive.

The order of the domains of applications is not arbitrary. Consistent with the notion that Chinese society is based primarily on relationships, throughout the analysis it appeared that most of the domains of applications concern interpersonal relationships and social settings. To conceptualize the findings visually, the paradigm of the concentric circles of Fei Xiaotong which I explained in Chapter Two (see page 80) proved to be useful. In this model, the individual (the self) is considered as the centre of extending social relationships. These social relationships extend from the individual in accordingly decreasing significance. As Fei Xiaotong (1992: 74) explains, the process by which the social spheres extend from the self (individual) takes various paths, but the basic path is through kinship. Despite the emerging new social relationships and the individual pursuit of new types of intimacy and love as a consequence of modernization and individualization, kinship and family ties remain important in contemporary China. Thus, I start with the most intimate relationships including marriage, which are closest to the individual, followed by the next important circle, which contains the extended family and kinship relations. Apart from close relatives, this circle also includes not-so-close, yet connected, relational partners, such as in-laws and acquaintances like longstanding friends of the family. A third and fourth circle represents either the educational or the professional circle depending on one's social and economic activities (work, leadership, student-teachers, students among each other, business). A last circle is the circle the furthest from the individual, namely officialdom, the Party, the society

as a whole (see Figure 6 Different application domains of *Nande hutu* based on Fei Xiaotong’s theory on the individual and his social environment. )

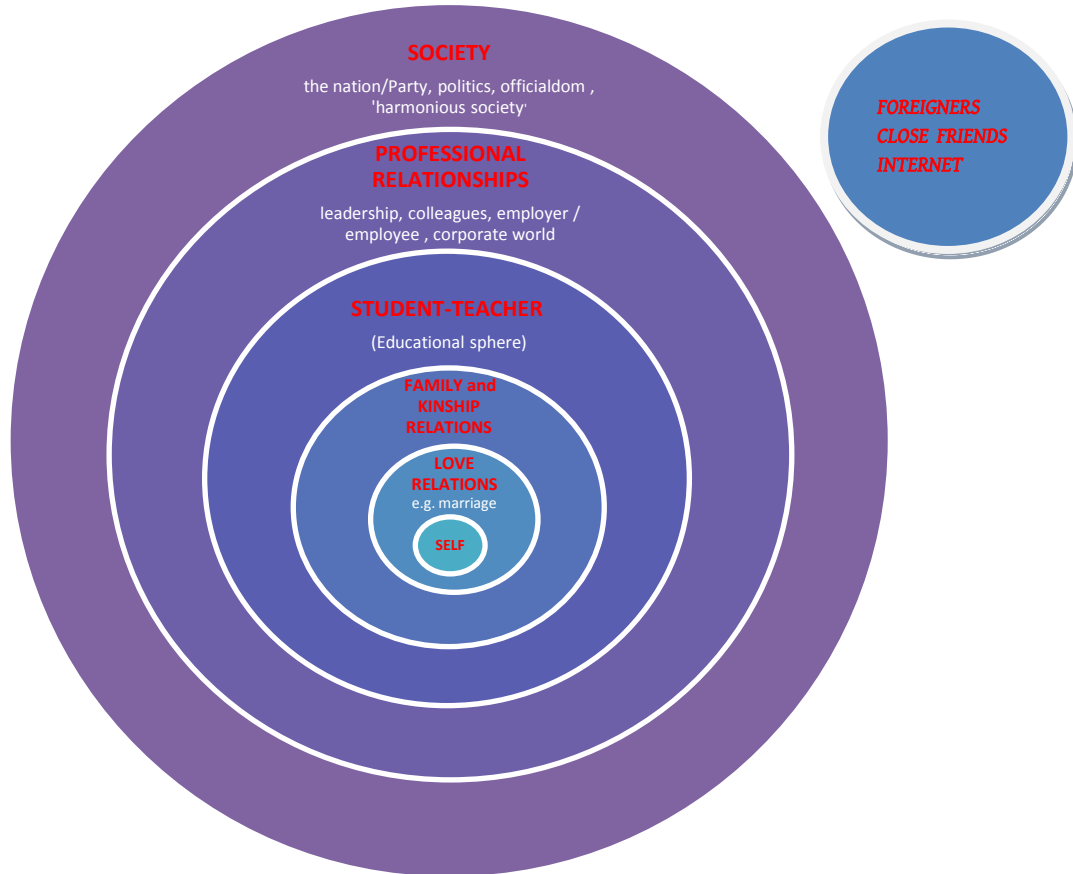


Figure 6 Different application domains of *Nande hutu* based on Fei Xiaotong’s theory on the individual and his social environment.

These different domains of application already reveal the high importance of ‘the art of being muddled’ in social relationships, which will be addressed in depth in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven. Clearly, in this research, the dominance of each application domain is different for every individual and depends on his age and economical status in terms of economic activity (inactive, active, retired), both of which ultimately determine his main daily occupation (student/teacher, professional relationships, family relationships/health).



### 5.3.2 Love relations and marriage

Certainly, one of the main fields in which the wisdom of muddledness is not only appropriate but also vital is the field of love relations (*lian'ai* 恋爱, *aiqing* 爱情), both for married and unmarried. Most strikingly, love relations as a realm for applying the wisdom of being *hutu* is mostly talked about by (married) women. In fact, it is often the first association they make with the wisdom of being *hutu*. More in particular, those women who are married themselves tend to refer to marriage as the most important domain of practicing the wisdom of *Nande hutu*. Both older and younger people - as we will see further - clearly have different priorities.

In this respect, love relations and marriage is one of the two domains where there is a clear difference in the use of the wisdom of being muddled among men and women. Women are said to more frequently pretend muddledness in the domain of marriage, whereas men turn to 'the art of being muddled' whenever issues of face (social status) are dominating the social scene, such as in leadership situation and politics.<sup>352</sup>

Consequently, most of the examples in this section come from female respondents and authors, such as taxi-drivers, cleaning ladies, students, and women in a high official position. Especially in marriage, women turn to the 'tactic' of pretending to be *hutu* because they see the strong advantage (and also effectiveness) of it. They tend to suggest that keeping quiet and maintaining harmony is better than getting in conflict with their husband, even when it concerns important matters. One of my informants, a tourist office manager in Beijing, gave the example of her husband who plays on the stock market and often loses a lot of money, but she does not complain and lets him do as long as it does not create serious problem in the household. In addition, he also spends a lot of the family's household money taking care of his mother, but this is even less a point of discussion for her, gambler or not. After all, she argued, another husband will have other maybe even worse defaults (drinking, hitting her, have a mistress...). (Mrs. Ye, Personal Communication, 17 September 2008, Beijing).

Some advices to be *hutu* for married women incline to - be it consciously and even purposely- submissiveness. For instance, one author in particular, Lin Xi (2007), urges women to pretend to be 'stupid' if they want to keep their husband in the 'besieged

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<sup>352</sup> Although from blogs, articles and the survey I could often not be 100% sure about the gender of the writer, I sometimes added the question in my interviews and informal talks. As far as I could distinguish, apart from women mentioning more examples from their marriage and other love and interpersonal relations, and men more from their work sphere such as politics and leadership positions, there does not seem to be a significant difference with regard to the interpretation and function of *Nande hutu*. See also further in section 5.3.4.

fortress' that is marriage (*weicheng* 围城).<sup>353</sup> So her advice is to just pretend to ignore whenever necessary, because 'only closing one eye will allow [the husband] to sit leisurely in the 'besieged fortress' [of marriage] (睁一只眼闭一只眼才能稳坐围城之中)'. Moreover, she continues, 'when you are a little 'stupid', your husband will be gay and happy and to his heart content' (要是傻一点, 他倒是欢乐开怀).

In this article, Lin Xi (2007) gives many examples of how women should pretend to be interested, in admiration for her husband, docile and the like. The article ends with eight practical rules of how to pretend to be 'stupid', ranging from explaining that real muddledness is related to 'limited IQ', whereas pretended muddledness is 'superb emotional intelligence' (真傻是智商有限, 装傻是情商高超), to 'having a sweet mouth' (嘴巴一定要甜), and to 'using tears to deal with severe fights' (激烈争吵时, 利用好哭泣的作用). This author concludes with saying that 'saying "I love you" several times a day is - even though this is really stupid - very useful' (每天说一声 '我爱你', 甚至更多次。这一招是真的傻, 但也真的有用). She certainly is not alone in declaring such high 'marriage wisdom'.

Before one even starts to think of this from a feminist perspective, it is necessary to explain why she promotes such a foolish muddled attitude. According to her, it seems that the 'strong' and dominant women she knows are quite successful and happy in their job, but not in their marriage. They seem to have too many expectations and demands on their husband, which makes him flinch and is likely to cool down the feelings. Still, according to her, men just are very vain (*xurongxin qiang* 虚荣心强), like to be admired and like to be a little 'macho', and the best way to keep them happy is to go along with this. (Lin X. 2007). This author obviously prefers a harmonious relation above all; this is the most important for her personal wellbeing.

Other sources in this respect advise one to give one's husband or partner some *mianzi* by pretending to be *hutu* and by compromising (给对方留点面子). Besides, it is advised to give some room for conflicts to ease down (给矛盾缓解留点余地), which will at the same time deal with the problem of *mianzi* without even taking action.

Another expression of a *hutu* attitude, is the idea of accepting the shortcomings of one's partner, such as unmannerliness, strange habits and addictions (gambling, cf the example above), a lack of initiative, perseverance or decisiveness and the like characteristics. Here, one should observe the rule that everyone has one's limitations and weaknesses, so there is no need to be too scrutinizing. For example, one older lady in a very high official position, told me she was always mocking against her husband,

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<sup>353</sup> She obviously refers to the famous novel by Qian Zhongshu 钱锺书 (1910-1998), literary academic and novelist, *Fortress besieged* (1947).

complaining about this and that and about what he should change. Then one day her best friend told her that this constant mocking and complaining will without doubt have the opposite effect, so she changed her strategy, stopped complaining about his weaknesses, and instead, started to praise him more. This - a bit to her surprise, she admitted - had an excellent outcome, because gradually he realized himself that he should change a little to please his ever tolerant wife (Personal communication, 26 September 2008).

The discourse becomes more serious when women talk about jealousy and adultery. In fact, they almost without exception, as first example of using the wisdom of *Nande hutu*, imagined a situation of a husband committing adultery or being presumed to commit adultery. But even here, some degree of open acceptance and sometimes resignation are the advised approaches.

One example from popular author Xing Yanguo's chapter on *Emotions and minor muddledness: the great wisdom of a harmonious family* (*Qinggan xiao hutu, jiating hemu da zhihui 情感小糊涂, 家庭和睦大智慧* (Xing 2009: 35-76) deals with the story of a middle-aged (by means of exception) man<sup>354</sup>, mister Lin, who sees his wife having lunch with her former boyfriend. Although he feels very troubled, he does not say something because he trusts her, and wants to continue living with her in harmony. Still, it is not until the commemoration day of their marriage when she 'confesses' her date that the conflict is finally dissolved in their hearts (Xing 2009: 49). A similar story in a women's magazine is told by a writer with the pseudonym Youjian Xiangcao. The author tells the story of an old classmate who was always known as being 'smart' whom she (I assume her gender from the kind of magazine and the story) met again on the streets. When they met, the classmate was really very troubled by her husband bumping into his old girlfriend, but when she asked her what she would do, she said she would not take any action. When she met the friend some time later, she looked very good and - the former meeting in mind - she inquired about the result of the whole affair. The friend said her husband saw his former girlfriend a few times, but after a while came home and told her on his own initiative that what he was cherishing was an old 'idea' from the time he was young, and that he looked at a bright future together with her. She asked the author why she adopted silence as her strategy to deal with the situation, and the friend replied that this was because she wanted to save the marriage, and that she preferred to put trust in her husband rather than being suspicious. So in dealing with the problems of the marriage, she took the 'muddled' attitude, and in this she proved to be very smart while maybe looking foolish in other people's eyes. (Youjian 2005) This story not only

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<sup>354</sup> The only examples from men dealing with yes or no presumed 'adultery' are cited in books. No personal conversation with men, nor articles in popular magazines by men (in as far as could be deduced from the context) contain such examples, let alone start with it (as was the case in conversations with women).

suggests that pretending to be *hutu* can be beneficial, but also that yielding and taking a step back can sometimes leave the required ‘space’ for a situation to develop in the right (beneficial) direction. The image of a young girl typing on her laptop to write here story that accompanies the story testifies to the readers’ public this article is aimed at, namely young and modern women (see Figure 7 Image accompanying the article *Nande hutu de nüren* 难得糊涂的女人 (Muddled women) by an author with the pseudonym Youjian Xiangcao 又见香草 (2005).

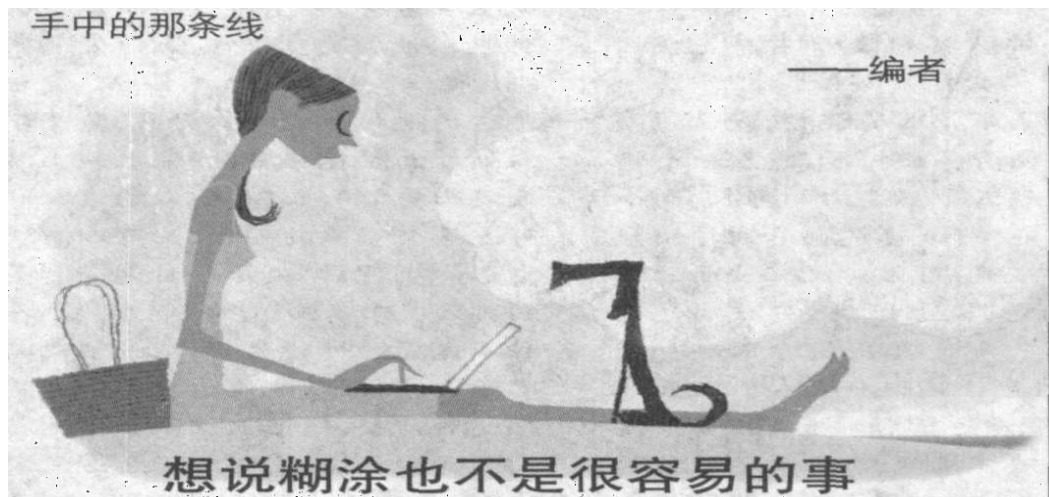


Figure 7 Image accompanying the article *Nande hutu de nüren* 难得糊涂的女人 (Muddled women) by an author with the pseudonym Youjian Xiangcao 又见香草 (2005).

The same resilience and tolerance is applied when a husband does have an affair (*waiyu* 外遇) and his wife knows about it. All the women mentioning this example – from young girls to female taxi-drivers, business women and female professors – agreed on the fact that, however hard it may be to tolerate, they should at least give it some time without confronting him with the situation; very likely he would return to her, and a direct confrontation would inevitably lead to a divorce. This is – as a young female interviewee laughingly added – also the end of the stories about adultery presented in TV serials: the man always comes back to his wife (Personal communication, 23 September, Shenyang).

Also interesting to note is that at least two interviewees suggested that having a *waiyu* will anyway mostly occur in situations where the husband is rich, and firstly can afford to have a *waiyu*, and secondly his wife does not want to lose him out of fear of missing the financial security, luxury and material wealth she enjoys, even if her husband cheats on her. In other cases however, for instance where mobile and cross-border workers who are married men and have commercial sex partners while on work location, return home in the week-ends or holidays, their wives do not enrage them by asking about their sexual liaisons, as these women are often financially dependent on their husbands (Tang, Chua & O 2010: 541). Also in marital discord, Chinese therapists

such as marriage counselors, always advice to endure the situation with the possibility that the broken relationship will be mended, instead of opting for divorce or separation (Lin, Tseng & Yeh 1995: 292).

To conclude, 'the art of being muddled' is used as a potentially extremely helpful method for preserving a healthy and harmonious love relation, and for coping with both amatory and marital troubles. Thus, from these examples, we learn that distancing oneself, pretending to be ignorant, and being tolerant and compromising even if this means shutting up, is the advised approach. This is for instance the case when one has to deal with one's partner's weaknesses or strange and annoying habits or character features, and even with an adulterous partner.

In this respect, certainly the question can be raised whether in the future women – young girls now – would not be more demanding and less inclined towards 'preserving harmony' within the relation. As some sources mentioned, young people in general do not always manage to pretend to be muddled in a relation. In fact, many of them grew up as only child, and they are used to having their needs met, and consequently will not be satisfied with a relationship that does not meet their expectations. One young girl I interviewed spontaneously started to talk about the fact that young people nowadays are too demanding, and do not so easily compromise, both in finding a partner and in their marriage. She mentioned the example of a recent blog (2008) she followed about a young girl who came from a very poor family, and openly admitted she only wants to marry with a very rich guy who can take her out of her miserable economic situation; she would not go for less than that. According to her, this is a reality many young boys are confronted with; the pressure of an independent, demanding girlfriend can sometimes become unbearable (Personal communication, 23 September 2008, Shenyang).<sup>355</sup> Also in marriage, due to the gradually improving marital legislation in favour of women's rights, and the increasing economic independency of women, there is less (material) need for women to pretend to be muddled and be ever-compromising just for the sake of maintaining the relation and its material benefits, and in the case of a *waiyu*, out of fear for being blamed for the husband's missteps and being left alone or excommunicated.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> On this kind of radically 'pragmatic love', see also Bond 1992: 64.

<sup>356</sup> The high divorce rate in China is quite illustrative for this new phenomenon. According to the official statistics of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the divorce rate in China grew from 4 % in 1979 to 13,7 % in 1990 to 21,6 % in 2008. Moreover, 70 to 80 % of the filed legal cases of divorce since 2000 were initiated by women. The main reasons for women to seek divorce are either a husband's infidelity or domestic violence. (Kleinman, Yan, Jun, et al. 2011b: 21-22).

### 5.3.3 Family life and kinship relations

Not surprisingly, the family, as the cornerstone of society, is considered as one of the main areas in which one can and often should adopt a ‘muddled’ attitude, be modest and compromising for the sake of preserving harmonious relations within the family. This includes the relation parents-children as well as the relation husband-wife, brothers and sisters and the extended family such as the in-laws (Jin 2006; Xing 2009: 35-76).

In his book *Hutu zhong de rensheng zhexue* 糊涂中的人生哲学 (*The wisdom of life in being hutu*), Chen Liang (2007: 85-130) starts his fourth chapter with the words:

Harmony is beautiful,  
tolerance and forgiveness are to be cherished:  
‘the art of being muddled’ in the family.  
(和谐为美，宽容为怀：家庭糊涂学)

Or as popular author Jin Yi (2006) opens one of his chapters: ‘*Nande hutu* is beneficial for being in harmony within the family’ (*Nande hutu you li jiating hemu* 难得糊涂有利家庭和睦). These quotations summarize the importance of harmony, tolerance, forgiveness and ‘muddledness’ in family life well.

To start with, one of the most complex and delicate relations is the relation of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. One married woman raised the issue of a mother-in-law- always favoring and taking the standpoint of her son in whatever issue in the household. In such issues, as long as it does not concern her basic principles, the daughter-in-law should pretend to be muddled and let it go (Personal communication, 28 May, 2008).

Another important relation is the relation between parents and children. From the viewpoint of the parents in this particular relation, the most difficult is to find the right balance between pretending to ignore and being strict about issues. For instance, one mother of a teenager daughter explained that for instance, she found her daughter’s first boyfriend was not very suitable, but that she did not involve herself in their relation, even when they broke up and she got a boyfriend from England, which she also did not approve of because she was afraid of not seeing her daughter enough and of losing the traditional values. But still, she did not intervene, because she found that her daughter should live her own life. With regard to study however, she was very strict, and never pretended that she did not care or was indifferent to her daughter’s study

results, because, as she explained, these were in her view ‘important matters’ (*da shi* 大事)<sup>357</sup> (Personal communication, 23 September 2008, Shenyang).

The same kind of concern is reflected in the story of a father of a teenager boy. He explained that his teenage son spends too much money on expensive clothes, but that he does not complain about that and does not go into discussion, but instead pretends not to care. As he reasoned, when his son has to go working himself, he will himself discover soon enough that this life style will make life very hard for him (Personal communication, 19 September 2008, Beijing). Still another father argued that if one insists too much on something, and is too scrutinizing and focused on an issue, this might have the reverse effect. He raised the issue of giving sweets to children: if you are too restricting and controlling, this will make your children even want more, even if it is not really for the taste. Therefore, it is better to be a bit muddled in this affair; close an eye once in a while and your children will naturally not be so interested anymore. This is what he called *wuwei er zhi* 无为而治 in the family, managing the family without doing anything<sup>358</sup> (Personal communication, 30 September 2008, Beijing).

These are all examples of what Yan Bo calls ‘giving some face to the children’ (给孩子留一些面子) (Yan 2006: 54-55). In many ways, being muddled in family life strongly contributes to the feeling of being respected and appreciated, and of having a clear position and status within the family, and thus the rules of face-giving are respected.

In any case, within the family, it is sometimes very difficult to pretend to be muddled or ignorant, because of the difficulty of judging about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in such as small but highly complex (in terms of the different relational rules or the social etiquette that has to be observed) group. As Zhou Mai (2008), a Beijing university philosophy teacher, explained, this was especially difficult in ancient times, when different generations of a family lived together in a courtyard, and the interpersonal relations were very complex. Two sayings still express this sentiment. The first one is the saying ‘Grandfather says he is right, the mother-in-law says she is right’ (*Gong shuo gong you li, po shuo po you li* 公说公有理, 婆说婆有理). This saying expresses that there is no absolute standpoint, no absolute right or wrong, and no indisputable mistake. The second saying states that ‘It is difficult for a distinct official to judge the affairs within a family’ (*Qing guan nan duan jia wu shi* 清官难断家务事), meaning that a great official who accurately judges official matters cannot judge who is right within a family, because the relations are too complex and he is – contrary to when in his own jurisdiction – an

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<sup>357</sup> For more on the distinction between being muddled in minor and in major matters (*xiao shi* and *da shi*), see further section 6.4.1 Muddledness in ‘minor’ matters, not in ‘major’ matters (*xiao shi hutu, da shi bu hutu*).

<sup>358</sup> For more on *wuwei er zhi* as a Daoist ideal and as an contemporary interpretation of *Nande hutu*, see Chapter Four section 4.3.4 The art of not-contending.

outsider. (Zhou Mai, Personal Communication, 26 May 2008, Beijing) So in some situations, one had, and still has, to pretend to be muddled, and act (or not-act) according to one's position.

The other way around, younger people associate the practice of pretended muddledness and its related virtues with the relations towards their parents. For instance, a young Shanghai girl who now works in a foreign company, told me she often disagrees with her parents, but that she would never say that they were not right. She would either try to explain her point, or – knowing that they would not understand or become angry – just say nothing and still disagree (Sophie, Personal communication, 22 May 2008, Shanghai). This obviously is still a 'remainder' of the ideal of filial piety (*xiao* 孝), according to which children should respect their parents and never argue with them about what is right or wrong. This is an example of what Jin Yi (2006: 46) describes as 'being muddled in one's relation with parents is obeying filial piety (和父母糊涂是顺着为孝). Besides, many young people feel the pressure of fulfilling the high expectations of the parents, which gives them a lot of psychological stress for which they try to find a way out without offending their parents.

Together with a harmonious relation between husband and wife as already discussed above, all these relations, if kept in a harmonious state, all benefit the family as a whole. Most importantly, one should know when to pretend to be muddled, be tolerant and modest in accordance with one's position.

### 5.3.4 Students and teachers

#### Students

One might not expect students and young people in general to like to pretend to be or look stupid, because they are too concerned with their outer 'appearance' and the impression they give to other people such as their peers. And although many young people do agree that managing their outside appearance is quite 'tiring' (*lei* 累), they are indeed rather reluctant to pretend not to know or to be too clear about an issue because of the fear of looking stupid and irresponsible.

Younger people are also quite resolute about not being *hutu* with regard to study (and later also work), or goals one has set for oneself; one has to be conscientious (*renzhen* 认



真), diligent and deal with whatever comes up in the process of studying and getting a degree.<sup>359</sup>

Nevertheless, both in the survey I conducted and in the blogs and magazines by and for students, students and young people confirm their 'use' of the wisdom of being muddled and associate *Nande hutu* with being not overly serious (*jiaozhen* 较真) and conscientious (*renzhen* 认真) about everything, with taking things lightheartedly (*xiaosa* 潇洒), as a way of living in which one should turn a blind eye to some issues (*zheng yi zhi yan, bi yi zhi yan* 睁一只眼闭一只眼) to make life and interpersonal relations less tiring and more easy to digest. Charles Hammond (2007) calls this a 'strategy of transcendence' and categorizes *Nande hutu* as one of the 'muddling through'-strategies students adopt to deal with stress<sup>360</sup>. For them, *Nande hutu* represents a wisdom of life that teaches them how to manage their relations with friends and parents. One student in the survey replied on the question if and how *Nande hutu* influenced his/her life-style and attitude to life as follows:

I myself am a very principled person. When I was very young I already liked to distinguish black from white, right from wrong and good from bad. But this way of thinking urged me to relax a little with regard to my (moral) standards towards others.<sup>361</sup> (Anon. (Survey) 2008)

Evenly important however, is the usefulness of the wisdom of being muddled and taking distance in dealing with school issues such as examinations, bad marks, and pressure to succeed and be among the best. Especially in this respect, pretended muddledness offers a way to release pressure (*jian ya* 减压), and to be more relaxed (*qingsong* 轻松).

Young students indeed experience a tremendous pressure from various sources. They undergo enormous pressure in wanting to satisfy their parents' expectations. Often the only child able to 'be successful' and give face to the family, the expectations are very

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<sup>359</sup> A good Chinese friend who had just graduated and is working at a university, read the transcription of the interview by professor Han Shengwang, who repeatedly explains the necessity of some vagueness *mohua* and suggestiveness in Chinese society, and more in particular, in social relationships, and was very upset by reading this. She told me she completely disagreed with this standpoint. Thereupon, without me asking her, she wrote her own opinion on *Nande hutu*, four pages long, amongst other issues explaining that students at the end of the year always get the chance to speak out their opinion about anything and any person in the university. This, as she explained, is the contrary of a muddled attitude.

<sup>360</sup> Charles Hammond (2007: 253) analyzed articles published in various official newspapers, many of them subsequently reprinted by the People's Daily, that offer advice on dealing with stress or frustration. He uses the definition of 'transcendence' as 'expanding one's boundaries of the self to take on broader life perspectives to help one make one's life more meaningful'.

<sup>361</sup> 因为我自己本人是非常遵循原则的人, 在小时候就喜欢黑白分明, 对错分明, 好坏分明. 但是, 这个想法促使我放松了对别人的道德标准.

high, and the need for achievement, and indirect, personal affirmation from their parents, is accordingly (Latham 2007: 27; Lemos 2012). In addition, the internal competition among students creates strong feelings of insecurity and failure. As a young just graduated student admitted, there is an immense competition among high school students to get the best results for an entrance examination for the most highly qualified university. Important to note here, is that the life of especially students in senior high school (*gaozhong* 高中) is dominated by preparation and study for the university entrance examination.<sup>362</sup> The competition to enter the best schools is extremely severe, and the pressure sometimes leads to nervous breakdowns and even suicides. Therefore, they need to turn to the wisdom of *Nande hutu* to survive the stress of the competition in high school. Besides, as this young lady continued, they do not only try not to take notice of (pretend to be ignorant about) the pressure they experience, they also pretend not to know how severe the competition is and do not talk about it with others as this would influence the relationships among students-friends (Personal communication, 23 September 2008, Shenyang).<sup>363</sup> The moment they manage to enter a (good) university, the competition and mental stress continue under new forms; the best students from all over the country are now together in one class, and they cannot but feel forced to perform always better than the others.

This brings us to the role of teachers and tutors in this process and how they experience *Nande hutu* as beneficial or detrimental for students as well as for themselves.

## Teachers

Teachers discussing *Nande hutu* put forward several levels of 'use'. Book titles such as *Being a Nande hutu-teacher* (*Zuo ge nande hutu de jiaoshi* 做个难得糊涂的教师) and *There is an education that is called hutu* (*You yi zhong jiaoyu jiao hutu* 有一种教育叫难得糊涂) are no exceptions.

Among teachers, *Nande hutu* is introduced as a philosophy of life or rather tactic in their teaching and tutoring practice at school. This is even more so the case when they are in charge of a class (the so-called *banzhuren* 班主任). According to these sources, there are many advantages for a teacher and his/her students in pretending to be *hutu*,

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<sup>362</sup> As indicated in Chapter One, most of my survey respondents, are educated people, not always coming from urban areas, but certainly all having received a good education (minimum senior high school and bachelor), having finished or in the midst of studies in higher education or planning to take up these studies.

<sup>363</sup> One student in particular told me there were many 'hidden wars' among her and her fellow students and even friends in senior secondary school, which urged them to handle these relationships with a lot of self-restraint (Personal communication, 23 September 2008, Shenyang).

for instance with regard to students' weaknesses, wrong answers, disobedient and naughty behavior and the like. In dealing with awkward situations, *Nande hutu* is always used in the context of the teacher pretending to be *hutu* (*zhuang hutu*). Many of this kind of 'good practices' amongst teachers deal with either pretending not to have seen or heard something, or with consciously acting as a 'pretended' fool and reacting on a situation to turn the situation to the benefit of the students or him- or herself. For instance, a teacher can avoid a lot of trouble if he or she can manage to pretend not to know about things done (secretly) against him/her to tease or provoke him/her. Also ignoring weaknesses of students and emphasizing their strengths is a way of applying *Nande hutu* in the classroom. Of course, for many teachers this is not so evident, because one has to downplay one's knowledge and intelligence - something a teacher should be respected for - sometimes to the extent of apparently being deceived by the students. But the results are far better than when one always pretends to know everything and be on top of everything. One author gives the example of a teacher called Mao (毛, feather) who was the first time teaching a new class. When introducing herself by starting with her surname 'Mao', she suddenly heard the sound 'mao' (猫, 'cat') whereupon the whole class bursted out laughing. The teacher, fully aware of what was happening, calmly told the class: 'Students, I am very happy that someone praises me to be clever (*miao* 妙). But we just started, so do not start with praising me. From now on, we start our language class, and after some period, you can decide whether or not I am clever.' In this way, the teacher left a humorous, alert and witty, and generous impression (Chen Y. 2007).

Another teacher recounts how she dealt with an uncomfortable situation in the classroom. One day in class the adolescent students were with great concentration focusing on an assignment. All at once one of the smart students raised his hand and said: 'Teacher, she is looking at me the whole time. I feel very uncomfortable.' The girl concerned got red immediately and the whole class started to laugh. Since both the students were diligent and ambitious students, the teacher thought hard how to diplomatically and delicately deal with the situation in such a way that it would not harm the relations between the two students and the other students, because this might affect their future achievements and attitude towards the class and studying. Then the phrase *Nande hutu* came to mind, and the teacher said to the girl: 'Isn't it so that you wanted to ask him to help you with the questions but were hesitant to do so because he was working with so much concentration.' Then she nodded yes and the boy said: 'Oh, is that the reason why you were looking the whole time. Please don't hesitate and go ahead with your questions.' Apparently, the teacher's acting evoked the right reactions, and the peace more or less returned to the class, without any public loss of face (Zhang 2006).

Some authors suggest that pretending to be *hutu* can be a way to deal with lies that students bring up to navigate themselves through an awkward situation. One article in

particular states that often children's lies are 'innocent' (*tianzhen* 天真), that they use lies only to justify their bad behavior, without really harming others but themselves (Chen & Teng 2004). For instance, teacher Tong Lihong (2004) gives the example of a student who was absent without any note or telephone call. The next day, the student's explanation was that he stayed at home to help his mother, whereupon the teacher purposely chose that day's topic of the course 'moral education' on helping one's parents. The student felt so ashamed that after class he came to confess his lie, and after that never did it again. Another article describes a similar story where an often disobedient student did not show up in the morning classes, but went to the teacher of the afternoon classes to say that, although he felt ill, he still wanted to join the classes in the afternoon. The concerned teacher knew this was just 'small talk' to soothe her, but pretended to be *hutu* and purposely told all the other students in public the full story and how deep she was moved by the dedication of this student. Ever after this incident, the student never behaved so badly. (Wu W. 2007) This strategy of pretending not to know about the truth and go along with the lie of the student is also effective in other situations where the teacher is aware of something the student does wrong or is disobedient, but uses this behavior and explanations against him or her. For instance, when a teacher does not say anything when he or she is convinced a student has copied from another student or used notes during a test, but explicitly and publicly praises him or her for obtaining good results. Certainly, he or she will not do this again out of fear of getting caught and being criticized publicly.

These are examples of the smartly and purposely pretending to be *hutu* in the same way as Zheng Banqiao acted as a fool when trialing the stone and obtaining as result that the rich merchant paid the fine to the porridge vendor (see page 118). In the present contexts, this smartly pretending to be ignorant often creates a sudden moment of shame and realization, resulting in a more mature and more responsible attitude of the student. As such, this kind of conscious pretended *hutu* obviously can cause major positive transformations in the attitude of students. They might realize how silly acting 'minor smart' (*xiao congming* 小聪明) (the kind of smartness the student who cried 'mao' showed, or the typical 'justification' lie) is. Or it can make students realize the teacher is not focused on negative characteristics and weaknesses, which in turn benefits their self-confidence. As such, this kind of practice is considered a high-level education, a kind of tolerance and understanding that fosters the educational notions of trust and respect. Or as popular author Wang Zhende (2005) explains, these attitudes urge students to make progress and complete their personality,

because it leaves some freedom to think. If you give the children some time and room to release their emotions, adjust their mental state, and expand their individuality, only then can one rightly find and solve the cut-in point, and grasp the right to take the initiative. A such, *hutu* even is a kind of ‘art of teaching’.<sup>364</sup>

Not only is this *hutu* attitude beneficial for the growth and self-confidence of the students; it is also beneficial for the teacher, since it involves a broad-minded point of view, for instance by taking the position of a student. Especially when dealing with naughty students and students with an attitude, a teacher should learn not to take every little thing or problem that happens in class too seriously (*tai jiaozhen* 太较真).

Besides, a teacher should know in which cases to turn a blind eye to a situation or risen conflict, and be able to pretend to ignore it for the sake of keeping an harmonious relation with the student(s) in question. In other words, one has to be clear about when and where to pretend to be *hutu*, because in some situations one can gain a lot by pretending to be *hutu*, in others not. This skill of discerning when and where to take things seriously and then accordingly let things go, can help teachers to keep a good relation with their students and thus stay happy in their job. In this respect, a muddled attitude can even prevent teachers from ending up with a burn-out (e.g. Wu W. 2007).

Still other teachers focus on the use of *Nande hutu* as a coping strategy to be introduced to the students in the ‘psychological education’ (*xinli jiaoyu* 心理教育) at school.<sup>365</sup> One teacher writes the following about this in the column ‘Psychological universe’ (*Xinli tiandi* 心理天地):

In the dictionary, the meaning often attributed to *congming* is ‘developed intellect’, which is a mental (psychological) quality all people often long for.

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<sup>364</sup> 给了学生一片思想的自由天地.留一点时间和空间给孩子,让他们释放情绪,调节心理,张扬个性,才能找准解决问题的“切入点”,掌握主动权.在这里,“糊涂”更是一种教育艺术.

<sup>365</sup> *Xinli jiaoyu* 心理教育 is recently a prominent course in many primary and secondary schools and universities, although not always obligatory. One of my informants, a professor at Beijing University, explained that the reason for the popularity of *xinli jiaoyu* in universities (as in her case) is threefold:

1. The difficult age of 18-19 year when picking up a new study and often leaving home for the first time.
2. Often these students are the number one students in their home institution, but now all of these numbers one are all together and thus are not all number one anymore. Therefore, they feel the burden of having to prove themselves much more, which creates a lot of frustration and confusion.
3. There is often a sharp distinction among students between rich and poor, and coming from the countryside or from the city. She gave the example of the one student having an MP3-device, while the other has nothing; or one with expensive mooncakes (*yuebing*), another with steamed bread (*baozi*) with beanpaste (*dousha*) on Mid Autumn Festival, which caused the poorest to cry and look for support and comfort from the teacher in a talk with her. (Personal communication, 29 September 2008, Beijing). In general, in accordance with the growing rates of mental illness in China, psychotherapy and psychological counseling have gained increasing popularity, see e.g. Bond 2010, Kleinman, Yan, Jun, et al. 2011a, and Lemos 2012.

However, because '*congmingren*' have a rather strong insight into the internal and external stimuli, they sometimes experience more and deeper suffering than common people do. Therefore, Zheng Banqiao's sigh *Nande hutu* finds a lot of resonance and fulfillment by a lot of people. Here, *hutu* serves as a psychological defense mechanism. Through diminishing the sharpness of people's response on the objective reality, in order avoid the arousal and increase of negative feelings (moods), *hutu* arouses the psychological effect of self-protection.<sup>366</sup> (Wang 2003: 34)

However, this is not always beneficial, as the author continues to explain her view on the misuse and misunderstanding of the saying:

However, to the benefit of whatever psychological defence mechanism, there is at the same time always a corresponding cost. Especially in the case of those non-mature psychological defense mechanisms, the cost can even be higher. When too often used as a non-mature psychological defense mechanism, while reducing emotions and grieves, it can at the same time cast off the very valuable psychological quality of being smart. Therefore, we should be attentive to the extensive use of this kind of *Nande hutu* that is considered as an effective tutoring strategy in the mental health education in schools. The essence of this kind of psychological tutoring strategy is, at the risk of giving up some good individual psychological qualities of the student who receives the tutoring, to finally diminish the negative emotions of the student in question.<sup>367</sup> (Wang 2003: 34)

As the author continues, this kind of 'abuse' of the *Nande hutu*-strategy in tutoring students can create major harm to the mental health education, such as creating an illusory feeling of happiness, downplaying the fine individual psychological qualities (with as example famous scientists having psychological problems, which often is the inspiration or even source of their genius), and blocking the psychological development towards more mental health level (Wang 2003: 35). In these examples, it looks as if the emotional problems are solved, but in reality, it hides even worse psychological

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<sup>366</sup> 聪明,词典上的解释多为“智力发达”,是一种人皆期盼的心理品质。但是,聪明人因其对内外刺激的洞察力较强,往往比常人体验到更多更深的痛苦,故郑板桥“难得糊涂”的感慨,得到许多人的共鸣和践行。在这里,“糊涂”作为一种心理防御机制,它通过降低人对客观现实的反映的敏锐性,以避免一些不良情绪的产生或加重,起到了心理上的自我保护作用。

<sup>367</sup> 然而,任何心理防御机制在获益的同时,都会付出相应的代价,尤其是那些不成熟的心理防御机制,付出的代价会更大。“糊涂”这种不太成熟的心理防御机制,若频繁使用,在减免情绪痛苦的同时,会丢弃聪明这一难能可贵的心理品质。值得警惕的是,“难得糊涂”已被视为一种“有效的”心理辅导策略在学校心理健康教育中广为运用,这种心理辅导策略的实质是以牺牲受辅学生的某些良好的个性心理品质为代价,来达到缓解其不良情绪的目的。

problems. So it is strongly advised to be selective or sometimes even restrain from promoting the method of ‘pretended muddledness’ in psychological education.

In many of the discussions on the wisdom of *Nande hutu* as a tool in education (teaching and tutoring) also age and experience is put forward as an important factor for applying this wisdom correctly. One teacher, who is about to turn forty (as he reveals in the article) in particular starts his essay on the aspect of experience and age with a quote by Lin Yutang:

Human life exists in living. When I was a child, I thought I didn’t understand anything. At university, I thought I understood everything. After graduation, I came to know I didn’t understand anything. During my middle age, I again (wrongly) thought that I understood everything. In my old age, I finally realized I don’t understand anything at all.<sup>368</sup> (Hu 2005: 7)

According to this author, during the twenty-three years he spent studying, teaching and doing research, the greatest wisdom he learnt was to ‘let go’ instead of sticking to ambitions and expectations.

In summary, this articulates well the wisdom of being muddled for both students and teachers: let go of too many ambitions and striving, accept that one does not have to be clear about everything all the time, and accept one’s own limitations (weaknesses) and strengths and those of others, both as a teacher, and as a student.

### 5.3.5 Professional relations: colleagues/superiors

With regard to a professional situation, there are two distinct fields or social networks in which the wisdom of *Nande hutu* appeared from the analysis: firstly, everything related to sound leadership, and secondly, relations with colleagues.

#### *Lingdao* 领导 or leadership positions

In the books on ‘the art of being muddled’, the magazine articles and the many weblogs, ample guidelines for sound leadership are discussed, generally referred to as *lingdao nengli* 领导能力, ‘leadership competence’. These guidelines can be applied to a company leader or business manager (often referred to as *qiye lingdao* 企业领导 or *qiye jingli* 企业

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<sup>368</sup>人生在世，幼时认为什么都不懂，大学时认为什么都懂，毕业后才知道什么都不懂，中年又以为什么都懂，到晚年才觉悟一切都不懂。

经理), a school director, and even political leaders (*zhengfu lingdao* 政府领导 or *lingdao ganbu* 领导干部), as long as it refers to their function as superiors in the work hierarchy<sup>369</sup>. For instance, in one of the earliest popular books on *Nande hutu*, *Nande hutu - lingdao yishu mianmianguan* 难得糊涂 - 领导艺术面面观 (*Nande hutu - over-all insight in the art of leadership*) dating from 1978, Fang Xiyuan introduces some notions of *Nande hutu* and sound leadership that are echoed in later publications that deal with leadership qualities. He distinguishes two types of ‘stupid’ leaders: the first type wants to know everything and thinks he can deal with all matters within the company, and the second type is eager for power and always wants to have the last word in final decisions. Both types are really stupid, but they seem to have a way to deal with everything and get away with it. However, this kind of smartness cannot compensate for their stupidity. Therefore, he characterizes them as ‘minor smart’ (*xiao congming* 小聪明). A leader (in a company) should rather be ‘major smart’ (*da congming* 大聪明), namely *hutu* in trivial (not important) matters<sup>370</sup>. However, a *hutu* leader should be careful about three things. Firstly, the *hutu* meant here is pretending to be *hutu*, not real *hutu*, where he refers to the saying *da zhi ruo yu* 大智若愚 (see above). The difference lies in not knowing and purposely not wanting to know. Playing the fool can be good if it is more beneficial for future results, but this does not mean one should not be clear about the matter. A leader still has to have the right information in order to correctly judge a situation.

Secondly, he should know that pretending to be *hutu* is not aimed at shirking responsibilities, but at flexibly meeting difficulties and emergencies, and at managing the right for decision making. Thus, a company's leader cannot pretend to be *hutu* in all matters; in matters for which he is responsible he should not pretend to be *hutu*, so if he wants to be *hutu* when not appropriate, it is better to just release his hold on the matter (Fang 1987). A general manager in a big company in Beijing gave a good example of this kind of situations. In his company, one night an employee took two waste steel plates worth about a 100 *Renminbi* and put them on his bike, but two other employees saw it happen and reported it to the manager. However, instead of firing him immediately, the manager asked him why he stole these plates. It turned out he had a family of four to support, of which two mute children and a jobless wife. The manager did punish him a

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<sup>369</sup> A *lingdao* 领导 initially is a political leader, government official in a leading position and other top-ranking personnel, also often referred to as *lingdaoren* 领导人, cf. also 单位领导, unit leader’. However, since the opening up of the economy and the mushrooming of private companies, MBA courses etc., a *lingdao* is also a manager or company leader, so whoever exercises leadership. Nowadays, the term *ganbu* 干部 mainly refers to a governmental, and not necessarily a high position, nor does it always refer to an active Party member.

<sup>370</sup> On *xiao congming* 小聪明 and *da congming* 大聪明, see above Chapter Four section 4.2.1. On *xiao shi* 小事, ‘minor matters’, see further Chapter Six, section 6.4.



small fine to demonstrate that what he did was not right, but he also proposed to give his son free welding training in the factory (Personal communication, 28 May 2008, Beijing).

Thirdly, a leader who is good at ‘the art of being muddled’, can hand responsibilities down to his inferiors, loosen interference, but should not be *hutu* in people’s management, in ‘using people’ (*yong ren* 用人), in employing and dismissing people, in punishing and praising people. One should be very clear about one’s subordinates’ behavior and sacrifice. The leader should make a tacit agreement with his employees, about their commitment and his own commitment, and motivate them to sacrifice themselves for the company. One popular author in particular dedicates a whole book on the practice of *Nande hutu* in dealing with employing people (as a manager). In his book *Yong ren guanli hutuxue* 用人管理糊涂学 (‘the art of being muddled’ in people’s management) (Wang X. 2005b).<sup>371</sup> He discerns a threefold division of the practice of people’s management: employing, selecting and dismissing people (*xuanren* 选人), using people (according to their qualities) (*yongren* 用人), and people’s management, namely motivating and keeping them (*guanren* 管人). In his rhetoric, using examples of historical figures, he paraphrases on ancient philosophical concepts and phrases. For instance, one of the subtitles is called *yangchang biduan – hutu you dao* 扬长避短-糊涂游刃, meaning something like ‘exploit to the full one’s favorable conditions and avoid unfavorable ones’ – muddledly (*hutu*) ‘roaming the knife’. In this phrase, the ‘roaming the knife’ alludes to the famous story of the butcher in the Zhuangzi (Inner chapters, *Yangshengzhu* 养生主). What is meant in this saying, is to do something with a muddled attitude in the same way as the butcher expertly handles his butcher’s cleaver.

Most highlighted virtues related to being muddled as a leader are modesty, a low-profile attitude, humbleness, self-control and respect for employees. Phrases such as ‘not displaying and not revealing, being in a lower position to get the upper hand – people who put themselves in a low position are most smart’ (不显不露, 低处制胜—把自己置于低处的人最聪明), ‘learning how to actively give the impression of weakness’ (学会主动示弱) and ‘those who are rich but not arrogant will stay the longest’ (富而不骄则久), ‘people in a high position also should have the heart of an ordinary person’ (居高位也应有凡人心), ‘if one wants to go to the highest place, one should first stay at the bottom’ (欲往高处走 先在低处留) and ‘be pleased with yourself but don’t have your head turned (得意切莫忘形) and the like expressions are amply used in the discourse on leadership and *Nande hutu* (see e.g. Si 2007).

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<sup>371</sup> In the same year, this author also published a book called *Renji jiaowang hutuxue* 人际交往糊涂学 (Interpersonal relations and the art of being muddled) (Wang 2005a).

Wang Xiuhua (2005b) particularly stresses the virtue of ‘focusing on the strong points and neglecting the weak points’ (看重优点, 忽略缺点), not only in choosing the right employee but also in employing people and managing them in a team. This idea fits well with the saying *shui zhi qing ze wu yu, ren zhi cha ze wu tu* (see Chapter Four section 4.4.3). Wang Xiuhua urges managers in the selection process (e.g. during interviews) and in people’s management not to let their emotions overwhelm them, nor to let their decisions be guided by the outer appearance. Although he acknowledges that letting oneself be guided by emotions and outer appearances is a very natural and common tendency, this will cause one to take people’s behavior and expressions too lightly. People are not always what they look like, and people can change too (e.g. someone who made a mistake once will not always make mistakes in the future) (Wang X. 2005b: 31-36).

Other authors focus on being muddled in dealing with conflicts between employees, in decision-making, in encountering problems among employees etc. They emphasize an attitude of pretending to be muddled (as such ignoring internal conflicts), and of being modest and low-profile for the sake of a harmonious working environment (see e.g. (Guo 2002; Le & Liu 2002). In such problematic situations, letting go is highly recommended, especially when there is the risk of failing. This is expressed in phrases such as *guo you bu ji* 过犹不及, ‘going too far is as bad as not going far enough’, meaning that if you are not 100% clear about a situation you better do not act because it might be irremediable if in the end it turns out you were wrong, and *yin er bu fa* 引而不发, ‘draw the bow without shooting’, meaning that you do not have to act without having the situation under control, but rather just indicate the motions. This is also true for handling ‘opportunities’ in a muddled way; the ideal *lingdao* knows when to retreat and pretend not to be concerned but to wait for the right moment (opportunity) to act and deal with a situation (在忍耐中等机会) (e.g. Sun 2009). A saying that adequately expresses this is ‘To push the boat with the current’ (*Shun shui tui chuan* 顺水推船), meaning to make use of an opportunity do get something done, often for one’s own benefit. This attitude strongly relates to ‘knowing fate’ and ‘retreating and letting go’ as described above (section 4.3.2 and section 4.3.3): one sometimes better takes distance in a matter and waits until the timing and circumstances are better suited for the purpose.

Also often stressed in leadership positions, is the benefit of pretending to be *hutu* for the sake of the whole, with as ultimate aim a harmonious working environment (e.g. Guo 2002; Le & Liu 2002; Wang X. 2005b). In pretending to be muddled and displaying modesty, a leader should always take into consideration the overall situation and the totality of the strong and weak points of the team members, regardless of former enmities (*da ju wei zhong, bu ji qianxian* 大局为重, 不计前嫌) (Wang X. 2005b: 186-187). In their research on Chinese leadership, Chen and Farh call this typical type of leadership ‘holistic leadership’, and define it as follows:

In a holistic approach, actors tend to seek a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand by looking at its many aspects and combining available perspectives. (Chen & Farh 2010: 616)<sup>372</sup>

Leadership is also the second domain (after marriage) of which some sources suggest there is a difference between men and women in the application of the wisdom of being *hutu*. This difference is mostly attributed to the concern for face and social status. If sources agree that there are indeed differences between men and women in their interpretation and use of the wisdom of *Nande hutu*, they tend to say that women are more willing to compromise, more flexible (*linghuo* 灵活) because they are less concerned with personal face-issues at times when men seem to let their behavior be dictated by them instead of concentrating on the real issue at stake.

Issues of face certainly prevail in all leadership positions and even more in politics, typically men's worlds. One interviewee in particular, who herself is in a leadership position, explained that according to her, whereas women tend to be *hutu* in their marital relations, men tend to be more *hutu* on what she called the 'macro-level' (*hongguan* 宏观), especially in the field of high-level politics. Men dominate the political scene of decision-making on a very high level, and cannot but be concerned about their face. In general, only men seize the power for decision-making on the highest level. In their domain of decision-making, they have to reach very high accomplishments, for which far-reaching shrewdness is needed (城府要很深). And as she laughingly explained, when you hear a man speaking and you find it seemingly very difficult to understand, this indicates he is pretending to be *hutu* in this matter.<sup>373</sup> The aim of acting 'muddled' is to avoid conflicts, or at least to avoid the conflicts to intensify (避免矛盾, 避免矛盾激化) (Cui Li, Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang). This was confirmed by a sinologist-friend who has spent about seven years in China working mostly in the steel sector dominated by men. According to her, muddledness at first glance seems to be a very male thing, especially in politics and business, where it is a tactic used in negotiations and to smartly or rather shrewdly get things done. But in her view, by nature, a soft, mild and 'muddled' state is a rather female (*yin* 阴) quality, related to flexibility, intuition, compromise, as water.

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<sup>372</sup> 'Holistic leadership' is one of the three types of Chinese theories of leadership. The other two are 'Paternalistic leadership', which is the most indigenous, and 'Daoistic leadership' (which the authors vaguely define by referring to many – not only - Daoist aspects). For more on their comparative research about Chinese leadership in terms of 'theories of leadership', see Chen & Farh 2010. The importance of holistic thinking will also be discussed in Chapter Six on the ethics of the art of being muddled, and in Chapter Seven that discusses some psycho-social functions of *Nande hutu*.

<sup>373</sup> 男人如果你觉得他说话好像很不容易理解, 那就是说明他在这儿装糊涂.

The overall message of the discourse on leadership from the viewpoint of the leader is that 'the art of being muddled' can be a tactic, a strategy for being successful as a leader. This tactic and the virtues related to it can well be summarized with the expression *wai yuan nei fang* 外圆内方, 'being determinate inside, but flexible on the outside' (see above section 4.3.9), which is the perfect attitude for a sound leader: clear and strong inside, but flexible, modest and mild on the outside (e.g. Wen J. 2004a). As such he observes the most respected leadership values: modesty, face saving and protecting relationship harmony for all parties.

The other way around, from the position of an employee or subordinate (*xiashu* 下属), also much is said on how one should behave towards a leader or superior such as one's employer. Popular author Yang Tao (2007: 57-105) starts his chapter on *hutu*-ism on the work floor with the following:

In dealing with one's leaders, the most important skill is to pretend to be a fool at the right moment. Do not reveal your brilliance, and certainly do not correct the mistakes of the opposing partner. In interpersonal relations, pretending to be foolish and ignorant can hide one's shame in looking for a way out of an embarrassing position. One can feign ignorance to conclude [the issue] with humor and retaliate. One can pretend to be an idiot but not be insane enough to delude the opponent.<sup>374</sup>

A young Shanghai girl working for a small foreign company in Shanghai explained me she behaves totally different towards a Western superior than towards a Chinese superior, especially when taking interview for a job. She had the experience that with a Chinese boss, she nearly did not say a word during her work and in contacts with him, but instead focused on 'doing her job'. This is, as she continued, what she felt was expected from her to do, so not to be too 'smart'. On the other hand, when she started to work for a Western employer, she had to 'unlearn' this pretended muddled and modest attitude, because her new employer found her silence 'impolite', and she soon discovered he experienced it as a lack of skills, creativity and working ability. Besides, she explicitly said that she would definitely pretend to be *hutu* in some matters and would not speak frankly about annoying things or problems she encounters if she would still be working in a Chinese company. When I asked her what the difference was with the Western company she was working in now, she said that in this company, there

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<sup>374</sup>与领导交往最重要的技巧就是适时"装傻": 不露自己的高明, 更不能纠正对方的错误. 人际交往, 装傻可以为人遮羞, 自找台阶; 可以故作不知达成幽默, 反唇相讥; 可以假痴不癫迷惑对手.

simply is no need to pretend to be *hutu*; she can speak openly and vent whatever complaint or difficulty she encounters (Sophie, Personal communication, 22 May 2008, Shanghai).

### **Relations with colleagues**

Relationships with colleagues was the first association with the saying *Nande hutu* of a group of cleaning ladies I raised the issue to. In general, ‘the art of being muddled’ in relations with colleagues is expressed in terms of accepting that one sometimes gets hurt, of letting go of resentment and grievance among colleagues, of not having all the honours of an achievement at work solely for oneself, and of gently and in a relaxed way responding to each other (e.g. Wei 2006). Being a domain of interpersonal relations, of main importance in this use-context is also saving face (*mianzi*); one should not let colleagues lose face or avoid losing face oneself, even if that means taking a detached approach toward one’s own complaints and wishes.

Another crucial reason for being ‘muddled’ in relations with colleagues, whether at the same level or higher, is to manage conflicts. One should in the first place avoid that conflicts rise between colleagues. In this respect, pretending to be muddled is mostly effective. For instance, the employer of a tourist information office explained to me that if a colleague does the same job or works as hard as you do but earns more, there is no need to be too ‘clear’ about this and get angry or ponder too much about this, because this will not make you happier. And if you would raise the matter to your superior or even to other colleagues, this risks to bring about a lot of conflicts, which eventually will worsen the working atmosphere. So one better does not ponder about it, but rather puts one’s own desires into the background (Mrs. Ye, Personal communication, 17 September 2008, Beijing). This attitude of self-effacement is often mentioned in dealing with colleagues: ignoring one’s own desires, wishes and feelings in favor of a harmonious working atmosphere is regarded as most mature and morally upright.

### **5.3.6 Business and business management**

Another concrete professional network extending from the individual in his practice of ‘pretended muddledness’ in the corporate world, including business, business management and financing.

Titles of articles, blogs and books such as *Shangchang ye yao ‘Nande hutu’* 商场也要‘难得糊涂’ (In business one should also be muddled) (Guo 2003), *Jingshang hutuxue: zhihui jinnang* 经商糊涂学:智慧锦囊 (‘The art of being muddled’ in business: a brocade purse of wisdom) (Wen J. 2004a), a serial of articles carrying the title *Hutu gonglüe* 糊涂攻略 (The

*strategy of being muddled*) in the 'Business section of a magazine (Zhong 2008a, 2008b, 2008c), and the mentioning of famous business men as examples of successful but 'muddled' managers on the book cover are no exceptions<sup>375</sup>. In these works, *Nande hutu* is discussed at different levels, mostly aimed at being successful in and improving one's business.

To become more successful, two major levels are important. The first level regards leadership and people's management and emphasizes the aspect of interpersonal relations (which is already partly discussed in the section on leadership above). The second level concerns the practice and experience of successfully doing business, including negotiating, purchasing and selling or distributing, marketing and the like practices.

In a chapter called 'Contemporary business management' (*Dangdai qiye guanli* 当代企业管理) in the book *Hutuxue: Nande hutu yu chenggong zhi dao* 糊涂学: 难得糊涂与成功之道 (*'the art of being muddled': Nande hutu and the road to success*), popular author Jin Yi discusses a few topics such as the strategy in human resource management of 'containing mountains and accommodating rivers' (*rong shan na chuan cheng* '容山纳川成' 战略), meaning being broad-minded and tolerant, the tactic of 'multilayered communication to achieve something' (多层沟通乃'绩效'), and 'lend a chicken to produce an egg' as a way to 'carry oneself with ease and confidence' (借鸡生蛋为大气), meaning to use the help of others ('borrow' their capacities or resources) to achieve something for oneself (Jin 2006: 29-40).

With regard to business managers and 'the art of being muddled', most authors who advocate *Nande hutu* as a strategy in doing business start with the premise that very often, someone who is highly experienced and knows everything of the outs and ins of his business, and who is very smart and clear about the facts and figures of his business plan, strategy and finances, is not the most successful. In the first lines of an article in the section 'Management strategy' of the magazine *Guanli yu caifu* 管理与财富 (*Management and fortune*), the message is brought quite straightforwardly, almost in a prophetic tone:

You are very smart, you understand and take to heart all the dealings of your company. Your smartness can be seen from far. But you never reached the success

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<sup>375</sup> See for instance the quotation by Alibaba's CEO Ma Yun 马云 on the back cover of the popular book *Xiao hutu da zhihui* 小糊涂大智慧 (*Minor muddledness, major wisdom*): 'The strategy of being muddled: In this world, there is no outstanding theory, there are only hard-headed results. One should always presume that the people next to you are smarter than you.' (糊涂的策略: 这个世界上没有优秀的理念, 只有脚踏实地的结果. 永远要相信旁边的人比你聪明). (Xing 2009)

you want. In reality, most smart people cannot become successful. Maybe you don't know it, but what you are missing is not experience, funding or even projects, but a little muddledness.<sup>376</sup> (Guo 2003)

The author continues with an example of a friend who owns an automobile parts business that is flourishing very well. The friend himself looks very plain, and belongs to the type of person who 'in his face looks like a pig, in his heart is bright as snow' (*yi lian zhu xiang, xin zhong xueliang* 一脸猪相, 心中雪亮), meaning to say that he looks stupid but his character is very bright and smart. One day he sent one of his employees to Shenzhen to discuss some business. Two days later the employee came back and submitted the accountant living and eating expenses of 7000 RMB (about 700 Euro). The accountant hand the manager this document to sign, which the manager did without a word. He just pretended not to know about anything, until at the end of the year, he cut a lot of his bonus money to pay back the excess in travel expenses. In this way, he let his employee know that all the time he did know. The concerned employee was very grateful that his employer did not confront him with this eye to eye and as such did not make him lose face. As a result, in the future this employee always did his outmost and got many good deals for the company. According to the author, this strategy of pretending not to know was beneficial in two ways. Firstly, it prevented the problem from taking too big proportions, from becoming acute, and it made the 'offender' reflect on his deeds and do some self-examination. With realistic actions he paid back the company without publicly losing face. Secondly, at the same time, the other employees – who of course also knew what was going on – realized how tolerant (*rongren* 容忍) the manager is, which increased the affinity and the coherence in the company. Although the employer, by pretending not to know or see, played the fool for some time, in the end, the company did not suffer any losses or personnel, on the contrary, the business and atmosphere both improved. (Guo 2003)

Another example narrates the story of a friend who started with a little amount of money and now has a flourishing company with many employees, and although the conditions are not as good as in many other companies, the last three years no employee left. According to the manager, this is because he generally acts in a muddled, plain way, and his employees all consider him as an ordinary, modest man without airs (*mei shenme jiazi* 没什么架子), and they want to help him with his business. For instance, he always lets his employees say their opinion and lets them finish their sentences, even if he already knows what they want to say. Or in a discussion he intentionally does not

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<sup>376</sup>你很聪明，企业的一切动作你都了然于心。你的精明让人一望便知。但你并没有取得你想要的成功。事实上大多数聪明的人都不会成功。你可能还不知道，你缺的不是经验，资金甚至项目，而是一点点糊涂。

fill all the gaps, but leaves some opportunities for his employees to come with solutions and good ideas. With this modest, respectful but a little foolish-like attitude, he naturally brings everyone closer together and stimulates their creativity. (Guo 2003)

From these examples, it seems as if, if wanting to have long-term success and gain the trust of your employees, you should sometimes pretend to be *hutu*, and close one eye to an issue, or even go as far as really pretending to be a complete, ignorant fool.

On the more practical level of dealing with the market and growing competition, *Nande hutu* can be an effective tactic. For instance, Zhong Ling (2008c) summarizes the whole concept of being *hutu* in a few four-letterwords in the 'Business news' column:

In the competition, one might as well  
overcome hardness with softness,  
silently put the brake,  
in bending look for spirituality,  
take a step back to advance,  
give way to people to be the first,  
win by striking only after the enemy has struck,  
be flexible on the outside but determinate inside,  
be tolerant to obtain inner peace of mind,  
be virtuous in letting others be first.  
Virtue is human's priority, profit comes after.<sup>377</sup>

All these advices strongly echo the different wisdoms associated with *Nande hutu* discussed in Chapter Four.

Other sources go deeper into the art of negotiation. One of my interviewees, Mrs. Tsui who is a businesswoman travelling up and down from the Netherlands to Hong Kong and China explained that in hard negotiations, the strategy of pretending to be muddled leaves the opposing business partner in a grey zone (*huise ditan* 灰色地毯), which leaves much to the imagination for an outsider, but for an insider is directly aimed at more openness for opportunities. According to her, on the outside, it seems there is all chaos and vagueness, but in the chaos there are hidden rules that lead to achievement. (Mrs. Tsui, Personal communication, 16 September 2008). This of course is strongly reminiscent of the tactic of 'retreating in order to advance' (*yi tui wei jin* 一退为进) (cf Chapter Four). In negotiations, a *hutu* attitude serves as a kind of diplomacy (*waijiao* 外交), as one constantly has to deal with interpersonal relations on which much depends. The trick here is that one has to be clever but at the same time strongly consensus-

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<sup>377</sup>在竞争中则不妨以柔克刚，一静制动，一曲求神，一退为进，让人一先，后发制人，外圆内方，能忍自安，德在人先，利在人后。



oriented (flexible), so that neither the opponent nor oneself loses face. In this respect, pretending to be muddled is a tool to obtain one's goal (达到目的的手段).<sup>378</sup> But, as she added, to be really successful, there are some rules that have to be observed, expressed in the notion of personal integrity or *caoshou* 操守 '(business) ethics', also often referred to as *shangye caoshou* 商业操守 or *zhuanye caoshou* 专业操守 (Mrs. Tsui, Personal communication, 17 September 2008, Beijing). This personal integrity is strongly related to *xiuyang* 修养, 'self-cultivation', and includes incorruptibility. Incorruptibility as a virtue in business ethics is certainly emphasized by many others, as well as prioritizing human relationships before gaining money (做人第一 赚钱第二), and respecting others and giving them face (尊重他人 护其面子).<sup>379</sup>

Another strategy for success in business that is associated with *Nande hutu*, is accepting that one often has to go through a lot of misery before being successful. In this respect, the saying *chi kui shi fu* 吃亏是福 is put forward (e.g. Chapter 1 in Wen Jie's *Jingshang hutuxue: zhihui jinnang* 经商糊涂学:智慧锦囊 (*The art of being muddled in business: a brocade purse of wisdom*, 2004a). The idea of having to go through a lot of trouble before being able to become successful is illustrated with examples of very successful people. For instance, one article discusses the life of Fan Chenggong 范承工, currently vice-president of EMC Company, who has endured major hardship in his life. Especially when after graduating at the age of seventeen he went to New York and worked and studied at the same, he hardly managed to survive. But now, he is one of the most successful managers of a foreign company. Being a famous model example of the successful manager, he nevertheless describes himself as someone 'rather easy-going, rather hutu, rather jovial' (*bijiao suihe, bijiao hutu, bijiao kuaile* 比较随和比较糊涂比较快乐), who lives according to the philosophy of life of *Nande hutu*, recognizing that one cannot go to the bottom of most things in life, and that understanding some specific issues will be sufficient. As he explains, people that are into technology all know this principle: rather not knowing and not believing something unjust. Therefore, before ascertaining things, one is rather a bit *hutu*. As such, this EMC manager is depicted as the ideal, sometimes *hutu*, but happy man, having become immensely successful in

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<sup>378</sup> In fact, many Western people working in China experience this vagueness and deliberately keeping things blur as a major difficulty in their business, and understanding how this 'tactic' works and why it is applied is often very helpful. A sinologist working in a big multinational, explained that even though in the end the results are good and beneficial for both parties, it is sometimes very difficult and frustrating to explain to one's Western superior the tactics of being muddled in keeping information for oneself and creating a chaotic atmosphere. As she explained, this is just how deals are concluded in China. (Personal communication, 17 September 2008, Beijing).

<sup>379</sup> The negative association of *Nande hutu* with corruption will be discussed in Chapter Six, section 6.2.

business after a long and difficult period of sustained hardship, and by learning to adopt a *hutu* attitude towards many issues in life. (Chen 2008)

Not surprisingly, the wisdom of being muddled is sometimes also presented in a most ‘instrumental’ and pragmatic way. In this sense, it is believed that one should certainly not be muddled in one’s business, especially not in marketing, market orientation and purchasing and selling. One should on the contrary be very clear about one’s goals. These writers present the most basic and shallow interpretation of the wisdom of *Nande hutu*, namely the *hutu* of being ignorant and not clear, of *huli hutu* 糊里糊涂 (e.g. Pan 2007).

In summary, in the discourse on *Nande hutu* as a strategy in doing business and in the corporate world, many aspects discussed in Chapter Four are put in a concrete context: pretending to be a fool but being very clear in one’s intentions and goals, respect, modesty, *mianzi*, self-cultivation, getting order out of chaos in negotiations, retreating in order to advance etc. However, no matter how lofty and morally upright the interpretations on the business and management fora are, what they have in common is the recommendation of ‘the art of being muddled’ as a strategy (*celüe* 策略) to be more successful, either in the core business, or in the leadership and management issues.

## 5.4 *Nande hutu* in politics: a particular case

A domain that certainly cannot be left out is the use of *Nande hutu* in the political sphere and in officialdom (*guangchang* 官场). Not only Zheng Banqiao, as a scholar-official, articulated much of his discontent about officialdom in the saying, but also in contemporary China the saying is frequently interpreted and situated in the political sphere. As such, the discussion on *Nande hutu* in officialdom covers a larger domain than the other ‘practical’ domains: it discusses the wisdom of the saying, but – especially in its references to examples – extends to the person of Zheng Banqiao, while dealing with important aspects such as incorruptibility and integrity.

In general, we can discern two main layers in which ‘the art of being muddled’ in the political discourse is promoted.<sup>380</sup> Firstly, *Nande hutu* is promoted as a tool for officials

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<sup>380</sup> With political discourse, I mean all discourse on officialdom and political leadership, both by officials and political leaders, and commoners.

(usually referred to as *guanyuan* 官员, ‘government official’) to do their job properly and successfully. This strategy is presented more or less in the same way as the case of the aforementioned ‘leader’ and business manager. The ideal of the ‘muddled official’ modeled after the example of Zheng Banqiao is hereby applicable on the local level (local officials) and the national level (political leaders). Secondly, the wisdom of being muddled is also considered to be a tool for fostering the harmonious society (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会)<sup>381</sup>. This is reflected at three different levels: at the level of the individual official, at the level of the individual citizen, and at the national level.

Both layers can be found directly in the discourse on *Nande Hutu* as used by officials on official websites, in leadership and other official magazines and in newspapers, and as used by non-officials venting their opinion in either official media or in non-official media<sup>382</sup>.

#### 5.4.1 *Hutu* as a practical wisdom for successful officials

The wisdom of being *hutu* as a tool for officials is – conform the other domains – filled with references to ancient philosophy, well-known maxims and proverbs, and, more than anywhere else, with historical examples. Where it concerns the concrete practice and behavior of an official, two of the most often mentioned sayings that contain all these layers and ‘philosophies’, are the Confucian saying *xiu shen qi jia zhi guo ping tianxia* 修身齐家治国平天下 (‘cultivate morality, bring order in the family, manage the country, and bring peace to the universe’), which strongly emphasizes the ideal of self-cultivation (*xiuyang* 修养 or *xiu shen* 修身) and moral obligation, and, though less mentioned, the Daoist saying *wuwei er zhi* 无为而治 (‘managing through non-action’), which highlights the ideal of non-action of the sage ruler.

Firstly, in the discourse on *Nande hutu* and official leaders, the responsibility to be a moral example for the people and to act in favor of the people is strongly emphasized. In China, the state agents are supposed to be an example of upright morality. For

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<sup>381</sup> The ‘Harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) can be considered as a socio-economic vision that serves as the ultimate goal for the CCP. The concept was made public in 2006 under Hu Jintao, the present president.

<sup>382</sup> In a way, all media in China is ‘official’, since all media is censored by The General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP). The GAPP controls print publications and the distribution of news to both print and Internet publications. Another of GAPP’s responsibilities is approving publication licenses for periodicals and books. News regulation is often done in concert with the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the Publicity Department, the State Council Information Office, and Xinhua News Agency.

Chinese people, Zheng Banqiao clearly embodies this ideal, from which the association with his wisdom of life *Nande hutu* as the right official's practice.<sup>383</sup>

With regard to being an upright official, the well-known philosophical saying 'cultivate morality, bring order in the family, manage the country, and bring peace to the universe' (*xiu shen qi jia zhi guo ping tianxia* 修身齐家治国平天下) is often put forward. The saying originates in *The Great Learning (Liji-Daxue 礼记-大学, Chapter 1)* and highlights the emphasis in Confucian thought on how to systematically and consequently cultivate oneself, manage one's family affairs, the country (or, more general, the territory for which one is responsible), and ultimately bring order to the world. This saying expresses the fundamental principle of self-cultivation, which emphasizes the transformative power of a morally upright person on others.<sup>384</sup> Thus, one should first become a morally upright person oneself, before the family, the nation and even the world are able to benefit from it. Although the saying applies to all levels 'from the son of Heaven down to the common people' (Chan 1970: 87) it especially urges political leaders and officials – who in the Confucian cosmology serve as an example for the people – to cultivate proper moral behavior in order to bring harmony to the country, and, ultimately, to the universe.<sup>385</sup> Obviously, from this perspective, officials are not supposed to act in a real muddled and confused way or pretend to be ignorant about the scope of their responsibility (locality), let alone about their own behavior. Officials should at all times take their responsibility and do their job conscientiously (*renzhen* 认真), not in a sloppy (*mamahuhu* 马马虎虎) way (Wu Z. 2007).<sup>386</sup>

Secondly, other sources, sometimes even simultaneously with the above expression, associate the wisdom of *Nande hutu* and its emphasis on retreating and taking a step back in officialdom with the Daoist notion of *wuwei er zhi* 无为而治, 'managing through non-action' (*Daodejing*, Chapters 3 and 37). The phrase expresses the idea of the *dao* that pursues balance, and when this balance is upset, it naturally works to restore it. Consequently, the sage ruler does not have to undertake anything, because if he lets things take their natural turn, all things will be in order. Thus, the sage ruler does not

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<sup>383</sup> Cf above page 109 on Zheng Banqiao as the ideal Confucian official, namely as a father-mother-official, *fumuguan* 父母官.

<sup>384</sup> Self-cultivation implies a potential moral autonomy, and one's own self-cultivation will also have a transformative effect on other human beings and on society as a whole (see e.g. Shun & Wong 2004).

<sup>385</sup> For more on this saying, see e.g. Chan 1970: 86-87 and Granet 1951: 94-95.

<sup>386</sup> This viewpoint has already been touched upon when discussing the popularity of *Nande hutu* among officials, and the criticism that arose on its use as a motto (see section 5.2.1). This issue will return in Chapter Six, where the more critical sources will be heard.

want to control everything, because he knows the *dao* has its own rhythm and internal logic that – when the time is right - results in change and action.<sup>387</sup>

Applied to the practice of being muddled, this means that sometimes a political leader should not take much action, but rather adopt a detached and modest approach. An official from the Shenyang Bureau of Urban Planning explained it as follows:

Sometimes, [a political leader] in society has to fight, and strive for self-improvement, so as to have future prospects and glory. At other times, he has to be tolerant, restrain himself, and be forbearing and conciliatory, and he will be able to win everyone's respect. (Personal communication, 20 May 2008, Shenyang)<sup>388</sup>

To illustrate this, he put forward the proverb *fu jing qing zui* 负荆请罪, literally, 'carry a birch on one's back and ask to be punished', meaning to ask for a humble apology. This *chengyu* narrates the story of Lin Xiangru 蔺相如 (329-259 BC, Warring States), who was made a high official ranking above Lian Po 廉颇 (327-243 BC) because he had rendered an outstanding service to the state. Lian Po was very grieved at that because despite his own merits, he was now in an inferior position to Lin Xiangru, and started to publicly talk evil of him. Lin Xiangru started to avoid him. Even during court meetings he did not show up, apparently because he was too coward to confront him. But when his servants wanted to leave because of his assumed cowardice, he explained that it was because he put the safety of the state above private grievances. When Lian Po heard that, he was so ashamed that he stripped himself to the waist, and carrying a birch on his back, he went to offer his apologies and declared how stupid and ignorant he had been and how magnanimous Lin Xiangru was. In the end, they became life-and death companions. The moral of the story is that officials should be able to put their personal concerns (pride, grievance) aside in favor of the safety of the nation, and, if required to maintain a harmonious relation, be as magnanimous to forgive one's opponent.

Pretended muddledness used by officials to gain more power (or popularity) in officialdom is reminiscent of the idea of Sunzi's *Art of war*. The most excellent strategem (*zhanlüe* 战略) is to make the opponent yield (surrender), not through war, but by using the opponent's power. Or as another author explained, pretending to be *hututu* in front of your superior can make him yield too (Mou 2004).<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Chen and Farh (2010: 615) also discerned the concept of *wuwei er zhi* (active non-action) as one of the leadership styles put forward by Chinese management scholars.

<sup>388</sup>有的时候要在社会上要去奋斗, 自强. 你才能有前途, 才有光明、未来和前途. 有时候比较包容, 比较克制, 比较忍让. 也能赢得大家的尊敬.

<sup>389</sup> For more on Sunzi's *Art of war*, see also page 148.

How, concretely, should an official benefit from applying ‘the art of being muddled’ in his official’s practice? To get an answer to this question, we have to return to the many different ‘virtues’ and ‘wisdoms’ that are described in the domain of leadership (see above section 5.3.5). For instance, the first chapter of Shi Sheng (2003) *Zheng Banqiao Nande hutu jing: zuo guan da zhihui 郑板桥难得糊涂经: 做官大智慧* Zheng Banqiao's Canon of "Nande Hutu" - *The great wisdom for being an official*, deals entirely with the strategy of being *hutu* in officialdom, and mentions many of these attitudes in the context of ‘leading cadres’ (*lingdao ganbu* 领导干部). This chapter starts with a saying stating that an official should ‘conceal his true intentions and bear patiently’ (*taohui yinren* 韬晦隐忍). This expression literally means to ‘cover light and nurture in the dark’, explaining that one has to know when to draw in one's claw, and that one has to conceal one's strengths and bide one's time. Also popular author Yang Tao discerns the capacity to use the right moment or opportunity at the right time as a for an official extremely relevant skill. For instance, in his chapter on *Official scheming* (*Guance* 官策), he stresses that if you want to be successful, you should grasp the right time and place to make your intentions clear, because very often one better hides one's intentions to wait for the right opportunity (Yang 2007).

Other advices for the upright official mentioned in Shi Sheng’s book encourage an official to cultivate morality (*xiu shen* 修身) and self-control (*hanyang* 涵养), and to be modest and open-minded (*xuhuai ruo gu* 虚怀若谷, ‘receptive as an echoing canyon’) (Shi 2003). This ideal is also expressed in the folk saying, *Zaixiang du li neng cheng chuan* 宰相肚里能撑船, ‘A successful premier can keep a ship in his belly’, meaning that an official leader's mind and heart should be broad enough for poling a boat, thus indicating the quality of being broad-minded, large-hearted or magnanimous (Qin 2006; Qing 2008; Zhong 2008c).

Still more suggestions for upright official’s behavior are ‘to be modest about one’s skills’ (*shen cang bu lu* 深藏不露), ‘to show audacity’ (*houyan* 厚颜), ‘to observe flexibility and not to dispute’ (*shou ruo bu zheng* 守柔不争), ‘to successfully move back’ (*chenggong shen tui*) and ‘to remain in the background’ (*yinshen* 隐身), ‘to look round but have a straight will’ (*xingyuan zhi fang* 形圆志方), and ‘to turn to the military strategem of using both firmness and gentleness’ (*gangrou xiangji de taolue* 刚柔相济的韬略) (Shi 2003). Yang Tao (2007: 271-312) stresses the relation with one’s subordinates, for instance by being tolerant and learning to say ‘I don’t know’ even if one knows. All this is very much in line with the leaders’ qualities discussed in section 5.3.5.

Whatever the source, they all mention examples of famous historical political figures, such as Three Kingdoms Era’s warlord Cao Cao 曹操 (155-220) and his smart officer Yang Xiu 杨修 (175 – 219) (see also page 214), Emperor Guangwu (Guangwu Huangdi 光武皇帝) (6 BC-57 AD), founder of the later Han dynasty, Guo Ziyi 郭子仪 (697-781), who is

known as one of the greatest generals in Chinese history, and Zheng Banqiao himself, to illustrate under which conditions one should behave alike. These 'rules of conduct' reflect both the typical Chinese moral standards of being modest and not openly provocative and assertive, be it with a 'hidden agenda', as well as the strategy of 'retreating in order to advance'. Nevertheless, the success of being muddled as a strategy mainly depends on knowing when and how to use it. On some occasions, at the right time, place, or opportunity, being muddled can indeed be useful for an official. (Shi 2003)

#### 5.4.2 *Hutu* citizens and officials for the 'harmonious society'

In the official discourse, the 'art of being muddled' is by many, and mostly by officials or political leaders, put in direct relation to the 'harmonious society'. To start with, especially the above mentioned ideals of the 'muddled' behavior of an official (self-cultivation, modesty, being compromising, knowing when to yield) are beneficial and even necessary to contribute to the 'harmonious society'. Some survey respondents put forward the opinion that individuals who adopt a *Nande hutu* attitude and are broad-minded, modest and conflict-avoidant, certainly contribute to establishing the harmonious society, and some articles were specifically aimed at describing the usefulness of the wisdom of *Nande hutu* for the harmonious society for all citizens.

One author in particular, identified as the vice-head of the Hangzhou Municipal Committee Propaganda Department, argues that *Nande hutu* embodies a traditional cultural resource of the concept of 'the harmonious society', since it inherently comprises the fundamental search for 'harmony' (*hehe* 和合). Clearly, as he continues, the *hutu* mentioned here is far from blindness and fatuity; it represents a foolishness (*hutu*) of a higher level than the 'normal' smartness, a wisdom consisting of stepping back and easing things down, of being free of worries and anxieties (*kuanxin* 宽心) and at kindly and mercifully treating others, to get 'harmony' in return in the end. (Sun 2007) It is a kind of superior (super-mundane) and refined self-cultivation, and underscores the principles for one's conduct in society, such as not to be pleased by external gains, and not to be saddened by personal losses (*bu yi wu xi bu yi ji bei* 不以物喜不以己悲) as is written in the postscript of *Nande hutu*. The core of *Nande hutu* lies in being indifferent to fame or benefit and in being detached, low-key and in harmony with oneself and the world around. If all citizens including officials would practice this wisdom of being muddled, the natural outcome would be the harmonious society.

If we dig a little deeper in this, we are bound to discover that there is more to it than just bringing about muddled, harmony-oriented, upright and modest citizens and officials. As a popular wisdom of life that encourages individuals to cope with the

complexity of modern society and deal with their grieves and worries in their own inner sphere, it – although not officially promoted as such – functions as a ‘policy’ for keeping the people content and mentally healthy, and as such, avoid social instability. Indeed, on a very personal level, *Nande Hutu* is a commonly accepted and even promoted ‘strategy’ to deal with conflicts and feelings of powerlessness. In the discourse on the saying in official media or other discourses related to the political scene, *Nande hutu* is often mentioned together with wisdoms discussed in Chapter Four, such as ‘contentment brings happiness’ and ‘suffering a loss is good fortune’, wisdoms that in general suggest reconciliation with one’s lot, including mischief that is beyond one’s abilities or responsibilities. *Nande hutu* also appears as one of the ‘strategies of transcendence’ Charles Hammond discusses in his analysis of several articles (mainly posted online) in official newspapers such as the long-standing official newspaper *Guangming Ribao* 光明日报 (*Guangming Daily*) that offer advice on dealing with stress or frustration (Hammond 2007: 255-256; 264). Obviously, offering people a ‘strategy’ to deal with stress and frustration (by means of rationalizing, taking things philosophically, etc) and staying mentally healthy also prevents social instability and national unrest. In this respect, it is also beneficial to the harmonious society.

### 5.4.3 The policy of the ignorant masses

Not only does the wisdom of being muddled and taking a detached approach to life applied by individuals contribute to the – be it on the outside - harmonious society. Also on the national level, *Nande hutu* seems to be interpreted as a strategy to keep the people literally ignorant and ‘muddled’ in order to avoid social instability.

The idea of keeping the people ignorant – if applied rightly and as a philosophical ideal - is quite ancient, and rooted in the *Daodejing*. In these texts, the sage ruler causes his people to be without knowledge or desire, and the smart persons to be afraid to act (*Daodejing* Chapter 3). Laozi indeed urged the wise ruler (they who knew how to follow the *dao*) to keep the people ignorant (*yu* 愚), since it is difficult to live in peace for the people because of too much knowledge (Lin Y. 1949: 58). A bit further, in Chapter 19, Laozi advised the sage ruler to banish wisdom and discard knowledge, to make the people benefit from this. Laozi here talks about how a sage ruler should rule, namely by giving the people as much as possible the means to live according to the *dao*. Therefore, the ruler should start with abolishing everything that works as an inhibition hereto such as too much knowledge.



However, in contemporary society, it seems as if this ideal policy has been interpreted without taking into account some other advices by Laozi as prerequisites for the sage ruler, namely that also the government should be muddled and confused<sup>390</sup>, and act through non-action (see above *wuwei er zhi*). The sage advice for ruling the country by keeping the people ignorant has taken other forms than Laozi intended, namely as to what some call the so-called ‘obscurantist politics’ or ‘the policy of the ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce* 愚民政策) (Han 2008; Zhuge 2008). As Zhuge Yibing, a professor at Beijing Renmin Daxue explained,

Mencius already said so, that you can let the people do things, but not let them ‘know’. Because, whatever they do [keeps them busy], is sufficient. That is the autocratic system. That is what Mao Zedong also said: universities and newspaper offices easily generate bad elements, but he does not call that bad elements, but revisionism. That is it, so simply said, it is precisely the obscurant policy [of keeping people ignorant]. The result of this obscurantism is creating Ah Q-like real muddledness. But intellectuals, they understand people, and pretend to be *hutu*. These two together [real muddledness and pretended muddledness], that is ‘muddledness’. In this way, the autocracy could continue. With regard to the Chinese autocratic society of several thousands of years, this system, up till today, cannot change.<sup>391</sup> (Personal communication, 19 September 2008, Beijing)

Indeed, in keeping the people ignorant on a national level, some phenomena in contemporary China - albeit less explicit and less visible, that is, not articulated as an official policy - attest to ‘pretending not to know or see’ as a way to maintain, or at least create an image of national harmony. For instance, by selectively censoring the media, the central government seems to willfully keep the people ignorant or muddled about certain issues. A good example is the absence of comprehensive media-news on the Tiananmen incident of 4<sup>th</sup> June 1989. As a BBC article *China's Tiananmen generation speaks* suggests, young people often do not even know what happened. This is partly due to the fact that there is nothing about it in the various media, not even a commemoration of

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<sup>390</sup> *Daodejing*, Chapter 58: ‘When the government is muddled and confused, the people are genuine and sincere. When the government is discriminate and clear, the people are crafty and cunning’ (其政闷闷，其民淳淳；其政察察，其民缺缺). (Michael 2005: 79).

<sup>391</sup> 孟子也说过，老百姓你可以让他干，但是不可以让他知道.因为他干什么就行了，这是个专制制度.这个毛泽东也说过，说大学和报社最容易出坏蛋，他不叫坏蛋，他叫修正主义，就是这个，简单说就是愚民政策.愚民政策结果呢就造就了阿 Q 这样的真糊涂.那么知识分子懂得人呢，装糊涂.那么两个合起来，都是糊涂.这样呢，专制社会就可以延续下来了，中国几千年的专制社会，到现在，这个制度还变不了啊. The ‘policy of the ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce* 愚民政策) will later be dealt with as a part of criticism on the misuse of *Nande hutu* (see Chapter Six section 6.2.4 ‘The policy of the ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce*) vs. ‘The harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*)).

victims. Moreover, their parents, who might have experienced the whole incident from very close by, do not want to talk about it out of fear for persecution or out of mere aversion, and adopt the evasive approach by pretending to be ignorant about it. Nevertheless, as the BBC article states, most young people do want to know the truth about what happened. But even if what exactly happened is – selectively or wholly – known, somehow, the final aim – that is, creating social stability – seems to have been achieved, to which the statement of a young teacher from Zhejiang province testifies: ‘Without the crackdown, China would be torn apart and we could not enjoy the happy life we are having now’ (Anon., BBC News, 29 May 2009).

Another, more recent example is the Olympic Games in 2008. Many informants raised the controversy about the way the Olympic Games and the news coverage were conducted. One of my interviewees, professor Han Shengwang at Beijing university, raised this as a striking example of the ‘policy of the ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce* 愚民政策). Everyone knew a lot of problems were going on behind the scene, such as the pollution, the construction problems, the cheap labor issues and so on, issues that were publicly discussed in the international news coverage. However, in China, news agencies never mentioned these problems, and everyone just pretended to be ignorant about this (大家就都难得糊涂了) (Personal communication, 29 September 2008, Beijing). The same may be true for official news about the SARS outbreak (2003), about the problems with masses of poisoned milk powder (2008)<sup>392</sup>, about the Tibet protests in Lhasa (2008), the dealing with dissidents and the news coverage on this, the mass environmental problems and similar taboo situations that might be upsetting for the harmonious society. However, despite many efforts of the government to keep a tight control on the web by severe censorship, the massive amount of netizens without doubt makes it much more difficult for the state to keep the people ignorant.<sup>393</sup>

Still, the notion of ‘keeping the people ignorant’ in the discourse on *Nande hutu* is generally articulated in a nuanced way. That is to say, it should be an understatement that keeping the people ignorant is, whatever the means, all done for the sake of the – be it rather superficial – ‘harmonious society’; too much negative information risks to create discontent and instability.<sup>394</sup> Clearly, the national government is more concerned

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<sup>392</sup> For a moral discussion on the milk contamination scandal, see Chapter Six page 287.

<sup>393</sup> See for instance an article in the Huffington Post on China’s parallel internet ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-x-li/china-internet\\_b\\_1217436.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-x-li/china-internet_b_1217436.html), Accessed 29 February 2012).

<sup>394</sup> Ironically, exactly because the ‘harmonious society’ (*hexie* 和谐) is often cited by the government as the reason for censorship, Chinese netizens started to use the word as a euphemism for censorship when the word for censorship itself was censored. Alternatively, when the word *hexie* (harmony) was censored, they started to use the code word *hexie* 河蟹, ‘river crab’, which sounds more or less the same as ‘harmonious’ in Chinese (*hexie*), to describe censors who constantly ‘harmonize’ internet blogs and forums. (Li 2011: 78-79)

about the (Confucian) ‘managing the country’ (*zhi guo* 治国, see above) and establishing social harmony, than about giving the good (Daoist) example by staying out of control and govern as a sage fool. Therefore, although some people criticize this implicit policy (see Chapter Six), others - for obvious reasons often people in power - agree with this governmental policy of keeping the people ignorant. For instance professor Cui Li, high cadre at Shenyang University, argues, that – since the grave problems the country faces are quite intense, if a leader would always publicly admit the gravity of the problem, people would react on this news and give their opinion, which could be tremendously harmful for solving the problem in the first place (Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang). Research indeed has shown that for the majority of the people (58,1 %) – those who are kept ‘muddled’ – the most important task of the government is to maintain order in the country. For these people, social stability is more important than being well-informed and able to express themselves freely. (D. Guo & Shu 2009: 51).<sup>395</sup> Therefore, a political leader, at whatever level, has to constantly balance between pretending to be *hutu* and being clear. As professor Cui Li added to her statement above, there are of course limits to keeping people ignorant and badly informed about an important matter; at a certain point (到一定的程度), one has to solve this major problem. The moral guidelines for determining that ‘certain point’ will be addressed in Chapter Six.<sup>396</sup>

## 5.5 Friends, foreigners, and the web: exceptional domains

The above showed some domains in which ‘the art of being muddled’ is advocated as useful. Of these domains, most showed to be social settings in which interpersonal

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<sup>395</sup> The study on the perception of well-being and social harmony in China by Guo Dingping was based on the results of the AsiaBarometer Surveys of 2006 and 2007. In these surveys, 58,1 % of ‘ordinary Chinese’ found that ‘maintaining order’ (harmony) in the country’ is the highest priority for political governance; 33,7 % ranked ‘fighting rising prices’ as the second priority of the government. Freedom of speech was of considerable less importance to ordinary Chinese. (Guo & Shu 2009: 51);

<sup>396</sup> The issue of the ‘obscurantist politics’ (*yumin zhengce* 愚民政策) is a particular interesting one, on which I could dwell much longer. However, that would lead us far from the information my informants gave and from the other sources, and on which I base myself in this study. The issue does return as highly relevant in Chapter Six on the ‘critical voices’ and the guidelines for applying the ‘wisdom of pretending to be muddled’ (see section 6.2.4 ‘The policy of the ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce*) vs. ‘The harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*)).

relationships dominate the scene. However, some sources indicate some exceptions on the common practice of pretended muddledness. These exceptional domains concern specific relationships in which ‘the art of being muddled’ is not desired or not necessary, and people do not feel the urge to be modest and to hide their real intentions.<sup>397</sup>

A first domain is the relationships with close friends. For instance, in discussing the saying ‘When the water is too clear, there will be no fish’ (*shui zhi qing ze wu yu*) and its relation to *Nande hutu*, some sources insist on the notion of real friends with whom one does not have to act otherwise than one is just for the idea of having friends. As an online author stated:

Indeed, ‘When the water is too clear there are no fishes’, still there is some ‘cleanness’ and pureness within. With regard to ‘When people are too clear, they will not have friends’, those fair-weather friends (literally; friends only for wining and dining together), those friends who are warm at the surface, but behind your back poke with a knife, I still think it is best to have a few less of those. (Anon. 2007b)<sup>398</sup>

Other sources agree on this: interpersonal relations are so complex, and not everyone can be trusted. As a result, only among real good friends, or with people with whom one does not have any kind of relevant connection (跟你自己毫不相干的人) one can speak and act truly (*zhen* 真) and openly (e.g. Cui 2008; Zhang Y. 2008).

A second ‘exceptional domain’ is the relationships with foreigners, which in this context meant Westerners. The example of a young employee at a foreign company who acts differently with her foreign boss is an illustration of this (see above page 254). Also professor Cui Li, who is in contact with foreigners on a daily base as the leader of a university’s International School, explains that in dealings with foreign students she does not practice ‘the art of being muddled’. Also illustrative in this respect is the almost categorical ‘no’ as answer I received when putting forward the possibility that a Western thinker would have said a saying like *Nande hutu*. Western people are not assumed to be familiar with the typically Chinese rules of behavior, as their cultural conditioning in interpersonal relationships is not based on the same social morality.

A third exception is the domain of online communication, where relationships can stay anonymous. One interviewee particularly referred to the internet and the many blogs and chatrooms where one finally feels free to express one’s true thoughts that

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<sup>397</sup> For a general discussion on the issue of self-concealment, see Chapter Two page 94.

<sup>398</sup> 水至清则无鱼，但却有清静在里面；人至清则无友，那些酒肉朋友，那些表面热火，背后里捅刀子的朋友，我想还是少些为好。

cannot be expressed in the reality of daily life (Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang).<sup>399</sup>

Thus, it appears that with close friends, with foreigners, and on the anonymous internet, people do not feel the need to practice ‘the art of being muddled’, to be modest, to be overly accommodating and compromising, and can expose their inner self and vent their innermost thoughts (*neixin* 内心). These domains do not belong to one of the traditional social networks in which *Nande hutu* is considered a moral and social virtue.

Important to note, is that this is not a general assumption. In view of the above, it should come as no surprise that these ‘exceptional’ categories are mostly put forward by those who are or have already been frequently in contact with foreigners, and who are often online, such as the young and middle-aged. Modernization not only changed the existing social relationships, but from it also new relations emerged. Along with the increase of mobility – social and geographic – that modernity brings about, the individual is confronted with new kinds of social relationships, such as interactions in public life with unrelated (not familiar or acquaintances) or even total strangers such as foreigners. In this kind of relations, the individual is confronted with other unusual reactions and gradually learns not to draw on the traditional etiquette such as face-giving and a modest, self-effacing attitude. Thus, through this new kind of social relationships, i.e. with ‘strangers’ such as foreigners but also with ‘unrelated’ individuals and in virtual relationships, a new kind of morality gradually emerges, a morality in which social trust replaces personal trust (e.g. Kleinman, Yan, Jun et al. 2011a). The elderly, who have been and still are less confronted with this kind of new relationships and are more deeply conditioned by bad experiences in this domain, find it hard to rely on personal trust and have more difficulty in letting go of these cultural behavioral patterns (see for example the quote by one elderly man on page 94).

Applied to the model put forward above (see Figure 6 page 234), close friends, foreigners and the internet are placed outside of the social networks where *Nande hutu* is applied. This does not mean that youngsters and middle-aged people never turn to ‘the art of being muddled’ in dealing with these groups. Very often, culturally conditioned patterns of behavior and the values and beliefs that belong to it do not lose their imperative nature in time. This is for instance the case for issues related to face, where the urge to apply ‘the art of being muddled’ and its related virtues is still strong (see for instance the example on page 174).

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<sup>399</sup> See also my own comments on the use of internet sources in the introduction (section 1.3.5) where I explain that the internet is universally a domain where one easily articulates one’s most critical and innermost thoughts and feelings. In China, where the margin to do so is less, the internet has become a rewarding space for this.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, both the popularity and commercialization, and the practical use of ‘the art of being muddled’ were examined and illustrated.

It seems the saying was quite well-known soon after Zheng Banqiao made it public. Many sources discuss how *Nande hutu* has been handed down to the present time and ‘has entered every household’, and ample, mostly literary, references and magazine articles show the saying was in use in literary circles quite soon after its creation. When it comes to contemporary society, many phenomena show its ongoing popularity and, even more, commercialization. During the 80s and 90s, the saying was especially popular among officials, which can be explained by the complex historical context of the transition period of the reform era. The abundant amount of popular articles and books on the ‘art of being muddled’, the availability of whatever one needs with the calligraphic version of *Nande hutu* on it (t-shirts, vases, calligraphies ...), the *hut* liquor, and the various ‘forms’ in which the saying occurs, show how popular, but also popularized and commercialized the saying now is.

The popularity of the ‘art of being muddled’ is directly revealed in its practical use in different domains of daily life and society, mostly expressed in terms of one’s interpersonal relations or one’s larger social network, including the state. The concrete use-contexts vary from small conflicts with friends about trivial matters (a few cents *Renminbi*, borrowing things and not getting them back), to weighty discussion with one’s parents, and to small and big conflicts with colleagues, superiors and subordinates. Also the state is involved, where *Nande hutu* serves as a tool for the harmonious society.

In all these use-contexts, the saying is by some presented as a high philosophical wisdom that is useful in social relationships and beneficial for one’s own inner peace of mind, and by others as a very pragmatic ‘tactic’ of ‘closing one eye, and opening another’ and intentionally adopting a muddled, foolish, low-key position for whatever the priority at a certain period or moment in one’s life is: successfully doing business, dealing with ordinary examination stress or severe amatory problems, being an upright official, fulfilling one’s role as a father, mother, child or business man, contributing to the harmonious society, managing the country and so on. In other words, the saying serves many masters.

On the other hand, the apparent differences in the daily-life practice of *Nande hutu* also have a lot in common. One common denominator certainly is dealing with the ups and downs of life, and with the complexity of social relationships such as the issue of face-giving and the changing nature of social relationships. Although the various sources use slightly different terminology, apply the wisdom of being muddled more frequently in different areas of life, or stress different aspects of it, they share the same

'fate' and emphasize the practice of being muddled in terms of the same virtues and wisdoms: modesty, broad-mindedness, tolerance, face saving and face giving, self-achievement, retreating in order to advance, self-restraint and self-cultivation. In addition, there is a tendency to use 'the art of being muddled' as a strategy for personal success, especially in one's professional life.

At the general level of interpersonal relationships, a few exceptions in which 'the art of being muddled' is less applied appeared: among close friends, among foreigners, and in virtual relationships. This exception is mainly articulated by younger and middle-aged sources, who have become more familiar with other ways of interpersonal behavior than the elderly have.

No matter how big the wide range of domains of application is, the popular practice of being muddled is not unrestricted; one cannot under whatever conditions pretend not to see, hear or know and adopt a muddled attitude. The ethics of being muddled will be the topic of the next chapter.





## Chapter 6 The ethics of being muddled

*One can be muddled in one's conduct, but one should not be a muddled person. (糊涂做人但不要做个糊涂人)*  
(Si 2007)

*One should be muddled but one should not be in a complete chaos. (要糊涂但不要一塌糊涂)*  
(Xiao S. 2008: Chapter XII)

*In handling affairs, one should be determinate, in upright conduct, one should be flexible. (做事要方，做人要圆)*  
(Wu X. 2007)

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters illustrated how deeply imbedded the predilection towards 'pretended muddledness' in various domains of life and for various reasons is in the minds of Chinese people. Still, the popular saying is not as popular as one might get the impression by reading the above. People from different groups of society, such as established authors, random bloggers, authors of popular magazines and other commoners, articulate their reservation and critical reflections with regard to a wrong interpretation, practice and use of the philosophy of life that *Nande hutu* is.

There are indeed some moral guidelines or prerequisites to delimit the practice of being muddled as articulated by different kind of people from different perspectives. It is not a coincidence that the books on *hutuxue* are sometimes classified under the

reference of ‘social and moral education’ (*shehui gongde jiaoyu* 社会公德教育). In the discourses on *Nande hutu*, expressions and notions that express the typically Chinese social morality often recur. They convey the common understanding of when and where the wisdom of *Nande hutu* is socially and morally accepted, and even encouraged, and discuss the specific conditions required for applying ‘the art of being muddled’.

This chapter thus addresses two issues. Firstly, it will illustrate that, despite all the references to lofty philosophical ideals, social virtues and its seeming popularity, there is much criticism on the ‘art of being muddled’ if wrongly put in practice. Secondly, this chapter will deal with one of the major discussion points of *Nande hutu* in the contemporary discourse: the issue of how and under what conditions the wisdom of life should be practiced. As such, this section will describe the do’s and don’ts of ‘the art of being muddled’, and will deal with some concrete moral guidelines and limitations of ‘the art of being muddled’.

Important to note is that the evaluations and comments presented here are not always the result of my direct inquiries into critical opinions or into the ethics of being muddled in the interviews and the survey (cf my remark in the introduction on this issue, *daode*)<sup>400</sup>. Apart from the rare sources that directly critically address the issue, the comments and critical remarks are ‘read through the lines’.

Also important is that although a lot of criticism is politically oriented, criticism comes from different social groups including academics, young people, middle-aged people, officials, Party members, dissidents, and many anonymous authors.

## 6.2 Critical voices

### 6.2.1 Introduction

In the 1930s, long before the saying became popular as ‘the art of being muddled’, Lu Xun with undisguised criticism vented his opinion on what he calls *hutu-ism* (*hutu zhuyi* 糊涂主义). In his essay *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂 we find:

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<sup>400</sup> Directly asking about ‘the morality’ of *Nande hutu* had already in the survey proven not to be a fruitful idea, but directly inquiring about possible limitations or guidelines equally proved to be rather awkward for a phenomenon so self-evident in Chinese society.

*Hutu*-ism, the standpoint of mere absence of right and wrong, et cetera originally was the high morality of the Chinese people. You say it is to free yourself, to take things philosophically, to be carefree and to have a clear understanding, but that is not necessarily the case. In reality, it is obstinately adhering to something, such as moral legitimacy or the literary orthodox school. (Lu 1933)<sup>401</sup>

What Lu Xun condemns in this essay, is the degeneration of *Nande hutu* from high moral cultural wisdom into a seemingly liberating and detached attitude, but in reality a conservative and obstinate position.

Some authors argue that, during the process of its popularization, the further away from Zheng Banqiao's time the more the passive, resigning, evasive and 'stupid' interpretation of *Nande hutu* got priority (e.g. Li S. 2005; Wang Z. 2007; Zhou 2008) (see also above Chapter Three section 3.3.3.2 Passive and negative interpretation). Also Wu Zeshun (2007) remarks,

what Banqiao could not have even imagined, is that actually, the 'smart' people nowadays use the saying in the opposite meaning as a pretext for growing immorality and lack of civil responsibility. In so far as his own person concerns, in the memory of today's people, because of the dramatizing influence, he is regarded as the crazy and rebel scholar who painted and wrote, loved wine and made love, and who was muddled to the degree that it is really 'cute'. Therefore, Zheng Banqiao and his saying are completely misinterpreted.<sup>402</sup>

The contemporary discourse on the saying reveals many similar critical reflections on the wrong interpretation and practice of the saying in terms of social morality. These comments are expressed in different degrees and on different levels. A first level deals with a general moral degeneration and lack of courage and conscientiousness, which I classified under 'muddling through'. A second level emphasizes intentional immoral use of the wisdom of being muddled, as well as a lack of civil social responsibility. This is the level of feigned ignorance for selfish reasons and often to the harm of others, which particularly applies to officials, whose predilection for muddledness is often discussed in terms of corrupt practices. A third level of critical comments regards the national level, where *Nande hutu* is critically commented upon as 1) a kind of 'conditioned muddledness' of the masses for the sake of self-preservation, and as 2) an intentional

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<sup>401</sup> 糊涂主义，唯无是非观等等—本来是中国的高尚道德。你说他是解脱，达观，心胸开朗，见解通达罢，也未必。他其实在固执着，坚持着什么，例如道德上的正统，文学上的正宗之类。See also footnote 256.

<sup>402</sup> 他怎么也没有想到，聪明的当代人却是反其意而用之，把他这句话当作了消泯道德意识与社会责任的挡箭牌。至于他本人，在当代人心中，因受“戏说”的影响，也就是一个画画写字，爱酒使性，糊涂得十分可爱的狂悖之士。于是，郑板桥与他的名言，整个地被误读了。

national policy for raising the people into ‘muddled pigs’, both of which are inherent to the autocratic society that Chinese society still is.

## 6.2.2 Muddling through

Most criticism regards the passive (*xiaoji* 消极) use of the saying, how the saying has become a pragmatic (*shiyong* 实用) and slick way of conflict avoidance and evasive behavior (*yuanhua* 圆滑), especially with regard to one’s professional and social duties. Many sources argue that, in these domains, and especially in one’s professional occupation, *Nande hutu* has become an attitude of doing nothing, of muddling through (*de guo qie guo* 得过且过) of being slack in one’s work, of being lazy and not conscientious (*bu renzhen* 不认真) and too negligent (*guoyu suibian* 过于随便). For these people, *Nande hutu* provides an excuse for not doing things heartfully and for not trying one’s best (为不尽心尽力作人作事找借口) (e.g. Anon. 2007a; Anon. (Baidu) 2006; Anon. (Survey) 2008; Wang X. 2005a; Xiang 2002; Zhao & Meng 2007). Or as a survey respondent declared, ‘if not mastered rightly, *hutu* becomes an inertia that can cause delay in one’s work or business’ (如果把握不好, 糊涂成惯性了会误事) (Anon. (Survey) 2008). In an article attacking bureaucratism, Zhou Enlai (1898-1976) seems to have condemned this kind of slapdash work, ‘criticizing those who are perfunctory and “muddle through just for the sake of eating” (*hun fan chi* 混饭吃), as well as those who are confused (*huhututu* 糊糊涂涂) or “muddle along” (*de guo qie guo* 得过且过)’ (Hammond 2007: 264).<sup>403</sup> Also the abuse of wisdoms such as ‘knowing fate’ (*zhi tianming*) and ‘Great wisdom looks like foolishness’ (*da zhi ruo yu*) as an excuse (*jielou* 借口) for taking an evasive approach and not doing anything, are discussed in terms of a degeneration into mere resignation (e.g. Anon. (Survey) 2008; Cui 2008; Hammond 2007; Li J. 2006; Lin Z. 1998; Wei 2006).

This muddled, disengaged, evasive attitude is especially undesirable when it comes to moral dilemmas. One informant, a business-man who claimed he himself ‘had taken considerable distance about his business’ was particularly clear about this. According to him, there is a huge difference between pondering and reflecting about a moral issue and eventually not being able to act to improve the situation, and not even wanting to think about it and just pretending to be muddled (mr. Liu, Personal communication, 25 September 2008, Shenyang). In this respect, on a conference about individualism, one participant raised the issue of a girl who was raped on the backseats of a taxi, without

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<sup>403</sup> Cf. also the meaning of *hu* 糊 in the fourth tone as a verb meaning ‘to muddle through’, ‘to be perfunctory’.

any intervention whatsoever of the taxi-driver; he just ignored it, and did not even report the incident to the police. However, the incident received high attention in the newspaper and seemed to locally have created a debate on the moral degeneration in contemporary society (Personal communication, July 2010, Zhejiang). This moral numbness and indifference, and lack of moral integrity and moral principles is what a survey respondent described as the result of taking *hutu*-ness as an overall guiding principle in your life (Anon. (Survey) 2008). In fact, many sources complain about a general moral degeneration in contemporary society (*shehui gongdexin de lunluo* 社会公德心的沦落) (e.g. Anon. (Survey) 2008). A blog-article called *Captain* (*Chuanzhang* 船长) that discusses the emergence of 'the art of's (-*xue*'s) such as *hutuxue* in the light of society's pragmatism and declining morals summarizes this criticism well. The author does account of a story he once read about a sinking boat. In the story, the captain urges women and children to go first to the rescue boat, and declares that whoever does not obey this rule he will shoot. In the end, it turns out there is only room for one more place; one person more or less is decisive for survival, but the captain himself has not yet got into the rescue boat. The author is wondering what is going on in society, where so many so-called 'self-improvement' books now tell you how to cheat people, how not to be cheated yourself, how to treat your underling, how to treat your superior, how to avoid charlatans, how to become one yourself, how to go job-hopping, how to compliment people, how to practice the 'art of personal relationships' (*guanxixue* 关系学), the 'art of thick (skin) and black (heart)' (*houheixue* 厚黑学)<sup>404</sup>, and the 'art of being muddled' (*hutuxue* 糊涂学). The list is endless, but the author asks himself how we can keep up with these mushrooming "how to... books", new ideologies and new theories? His suggestion is to keep it simple and think of what you would do if you were the captain of the sinking ship.<sup>405</sup> (Chen Y. 2005)

What these sources emphasize, is that it is too easy to blame for instance fate (*tianming*) and rely on ancient wisdoms such as taking a step back, *Nande hutu* and related sayings to do nothing or act carelessly and immorally. In all these cases, the wisdom of *Nande hutu* is put forward and applied for one's own convenience, as an excuse for accommodating feelings of insecurity and cowardice and for accepting one's own or other's irresponsible behavior without trying to do something about it.

In most of these cases, the misuse of *Nande hutu* is rather harmless, and testifies to general moral degeneration. But this changes when pretended *hutu* is an intentionally

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<sup>404</sup> On *Houheixue*, see note 16.

<sup>405</sup> The author is a professor in mathematics and vice-rector of Nankai University. The blog [www.yongchuan.org](http://www.yongchuan.org) is his private blog. This article was not accessible anymore on 11 January 2012.

feigned muddledness for the wrong purpose. This brings us to another level of wrongly interpreted and practiced muddledness, the level of the feigned ignorance.

### 6.2.3 Feigned ignorance

A second level of criticism discusses a wrongly applied *hutu*-ism with further-reaching negative consequences. Here, one acts deliberately (i.e. when having the choice) muddled for one's own benefit only while harming others. Many sources argue that although contemporary society has lost a lot of the forces of suppression of the feudal or communist autocratic society of the past, the saying is now too often interpreted as an excuse for purposely letting immoral things happen for the sake of self-enrichment, gaining power and social status, while at the same time harming others, the society or the nation, are harmed. One interviewee defined this kind of muddledness, as 'making use of the weaknesses of others' such as for instance the shrewd, profit-seeking business man who looks like a fool but knows very well where he is heading (Zhang Jiacheng, Personal communication, 5 November 2008, Ghent). This kind of behavior is typically associated with people who are minor smart, that is to say, who think they are smart but are not, or at least not in a 'wise' way (see Chapter Four section 4.2.1 'Minor/major' smartness and 'minor/major' muddledness). Another description of such people is of being 'smooth and evasive' (*yuanhua* 圆滑). (Anon. 2010; Anon. (Survey) 2008; Chen Y. 2007; Li S. 2005; Zhao & Meng 2007; Zhou 2008)

This criticism is most prevalent in the public domain such as officialdom, politics and law, and especially when one's behavior has consequences on a large group of other people. These domains are the realm of public and social responsibility in which governmental officers are supposed to give the good example for the benefit of the greater whole (local jurisdiction or the nation). Especially officials are blamed for not doing their job right, for official concealment and dishonesty and for using *Nande hutu* as a slogan for either justifying their own corrupt and irresponsible deeds and sweeping their misconduct under the rug, or for not doing anything with the excuse of being powerless. (e.g. Li S. 2007).

As explained above (see Chapter Five section 5.2.1 Historical popularity), during the 80s and the 90s, *Nande hutu* was extremely popular in officials' circles, where it was used as a justification slogan for one's immoral behavior, baldly renouncing any moral ideal or principle. Not surprisingly, this is also the period in which corruption flourished after Deng Xiaoping declared that getting rich, by whatever means, was glorious. In the same period, many articles appeared that criticized officials being too muddled in their official practice (e.g. Lin Z. 1998; Xun 1995). A fine example is an article dating from 1996

in a Party magazine (*Dangjian* 党建) that critically analyzed *Nande hutu* in official practice as follows:

In the guiding policy of the executive party (执行党), *hutu* means, the one who is conscientious suffers losses; in facing with principles of good and bad, *hutu* means that having a *hutu* working method is most efficient; in dealing with bad people and situations, being *hutu* is to first protect one's own peace; in dealing with law and guidelines, *hutu* means that being in power and having money is the living god. Some people even go as far as to make of pretended muddledness their frequent modus operandi of dealing with delicate questions and questions of right and wrong, and in matters that do not concern themselves hold in both hands their miracle remedy (*lingdan* 灵丹) to get things done, their 'canon' of upright conduct, their guideline in all behavior and acting, and always use it as a criterion for their words and deeds. [...] People who advocate *hutu* are not *hutu* in all matters. In dealing with fame and fortune and social positions, and with personal failure and success, even if it is just about a tiny bit, they certainly are not *hutu*. They will count with you very clearly. But if you let them continue to be *hutu* like that, failure will naturally be our Party's cause. (Niu 1996)<sup>406</sup>

After Hu Jintao came to power in 2005, the new ideological campaign to address the country's social problems and general instability meant a shift in focus from 'economic growth' (*jingji fazhan* 经济发展) to 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会). This shift was accompanied by mass governmental anti-corruption campaigns.<sup>407</sup> At this stage, popular articles dealing with *Nande hutu* and proper behavior of an official

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<sup>406</sup> 执行党的方针政策，糊涂糊涂，谁认真谁吃亏；是非原则面前，糊涂糊涂，模糊工作法最有效；坏人坏事面前，糊涂糊涂，先保自身平安；法律法规面前，糊涂糊涂，有势有钱是活神仙。甚至有些人把这种棘手问题耍糊涂、是非面前装糊涂、事不关己常糊涂的做法，捧为成事的“灵丹”、做人的“圣典”、行为的“准则”，无时不在用这句话“规范”着自己的言行。[...]崇尚“糊涂”的人并非事事糊涂，他们在名利地位、个人得失面前，哪怕是一丝一毫，也是绝不糊涂的。他们会跟你算得清清楚楚，明明白白。如果任其这样糊涂下去，损失自然是我们党的事业。

<sup>407</sup> Nowadays, these campaigns, mostly targeted at officials, are still ongoing. See e.g. the new 52-point ethics code for Party members issued by the Communist Party in 2010 in an attempt to control growing corruption among officials (BBC article by Sommerville 2010). However, these campaigns do not seem to be very effective: about 80 % get off with a warning, 6 % is criminally prosecuted, and of them, only 3% imprisoned (Lemos 2012: 259) and people do not put much trust in them. Corruption remains a low-risk activity. (See also Bond 1992: 85-86). These and other characteristics of corruption in China during the 80s and 90s is described in a study by the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS) in cooperation with Tsinghua university. This study examined senior official corruption above vice-ministerial level over the period 1978-2002, discussing its roots as well as the ten principal characteristics of corruption in China. (See <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2003/Jun/66715.htm>, Last accessed on 12 December 2011).

appeared that denounced the flourishing corruption. This is reflected in titles of articles that leave nothing to the imagination, such as *Party members cannot be muddled* (*Gongchandangren bu neng hutu 共产党人不能糊涂*) (Liang 2008) and the newspaper article *I would rather be a muddled official, than be muddled in my official work* (*Zuo guan wo ningke hutu, dan gan shi wo bu hutu 做官我宁可糊涂，但干事我不糊涂*), stressing the idea that an official as a person should follow ‘the art of being muddled’, but not in his work (Shou & Zhu). In a chapter on official policy (*Guance 官策*) and *hutuxue*, Yang Tao (2007: 283) argues as follows:

Naturally, when *Nande hutu* serves as the manifestation of the saying *da zhi ruo yu*, there are some limits. When one turns a deaf ear to, or ignores or pretends to be muddled and deliberately stays away from evil trends and noxious influences, and phenomena such as corruption, then that is not *da zhi ruo yu*, but downright foolishness.<sup>408</sup>

Although still often seen as a ‘legitimate use of *guanxi* connections and an equally acceptable way of benefiting your nearest and dearest’ (Lemos 2012: 258), graft and corruption - the first and foremost associations made with the practice of ‘the art of being muddled’ for officials - are one of the major concerns of the Chinese people in contemporary society<sup>409</sup>. As many sources argue (e.g. Anon. 2006b; Li S. 2005; Yang 2007), one should really understand the right official engagement thoroughly and use the active and engaging *hutu* in one's practice to better serve the country, society, and the people, instead of for selfish purposes such as money, power, and social status. Clearly, these corrupt practices for selfish reasons run counter to Zheng Banqiao's ideal of integrity and of not doing anything for future rewards.

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<sup>408</sup>当然难得糊涂作为大智若愚的一种现象有其限度。倘若对于歪风邪气，腐败现象充其不闻，视而不见，假装糊涂，有意躲避，那就不是大智若愚，而是十足的大愚了。

<sup>409</sup> By 2006, an official study on the perception of well-being and social harmony in China discovered that with regard to governance performance, the common Chinese is the least satisfied with political corruption; about 84,8 % did not believe the government had done a good job in the area of political corruption (Guo & Shu 2009: 52).



#### 6.2.4 ‘The policy of the ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce*) vs. ‘The harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*)

In an interview with the editors of the New York-based Chinese language magazine *Chinese Spring* (1984), the interviewer confronts critical author Bo Yang (1920-2008)<sup>410</sup> with an old Chinese joke about a warlord who gave a banquet. One of his guests brought him a basketful of bananas for a gift, but because the warlord had never eaten a banana before, he popped it in his mouth without peeling it. In order not to make the warlord lose face (and themselves fall out of his grace), all the other guests ate their bananas the same way. Bo Yang laconically comments on this:

That’s old-fashioned face-saving. If one of your [i.e. the Chinese] modern-day dictators types did that, they’d come up with some profound philosophical explanation for the benefits of eating bananas. (Bo, Cohn & Qing 1992: 31)

Indeed, perhaps the furthest away from the philosophical explanation of being muddled as the sage fool, is the foolishness and ignorance as the exponent of an authoritarian society ruled by human oppression, injustice and a lack of rule of law. It is the muddledness of the obedient, self-effacing and self-concealing fool. This pretended *hutu* is merely for the sake of self-preservation.

The issue of self-preservation is very reminiscent of what scholars indicated as the negative, passive (*xiaoji* 消极) interpretation of *Nande hutu* in Chapter Three, namely that pretending to be muddled is a forced strategy of survival (see section 3.3.3.2 Passive and negative interpretation). Nowadays, this is still true for intellectuals and real smart people, who hide their smartness and knowledge. But it is also applied by many ‘common people’ such as the elderly who use it both as a strategy to deal with the harshness, oppression and traumas that result from the political system, and as a way to behave in public (see for instance the example on page 95). In both cases, one is sometimes forced to compromise one’s integrity, act untruthfully, or at least not show one’s real intentions and thoughts.

In the first half of the century, the phenomenon of so-called Ah Q-ism, originating in the protagonist Ah Q in Lu Xun’s *The true story of Ah Q* (*Ah Q zhengzhuan* 阿 Q 正传) became quite popular. In this novel, Lu Xun used the person of the foolish and ignorant

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<sup>410</sup> Not surprisingly, Bo Yang (1920-2008), who had joined the Guomindang in the Republic of China and fled to Taiwan in 1949, and who is known for his critical writings and his taunting of Chinese culture, spent about nine years in prison for his alleged criticism on Jiang Jieshi and more in particular for a translation of a comic strip of Popeye. Jiang Jieshi felt insulted by the strip because it apparently parodied the act of installing his son as heir, an intention which Bo Yang in his memoirs rejected (see e.g. Hutchings 2000: 46-47).

Ah Q to illustrate what he describes as two of the worst characteristics of Chinese people: their tendency to make ‘spiritual victories’ out of severe setbacks, and their ‘slave mentality’ which made them either oppressors or oppression’s willing victims. (Hutchings 2000: 286).<sup>411</sup> Long before *hutuxue* became a ‘popular art’, Bo Yang already vented his opinion on the ignorant masses in his work *The ugly Chinaman* (*Choulou de Zhongguoren 丑陋的中国人*). The novel was banned by hardline Marxists in Beijing just a year after it was published in 1985, on which Bo Yang satirically commented by stating that ‘power corrupts since long have turned Chinese people into ‘ignorant pigs’ and caused them to become numb and ‘muddle their way through life’ (Bo, Cohn & Qing 1992: 29-30).

Especially the phenomenon that Chinese people think of muddledness and related characteristically Chinese states of mind as moral and social virtues is highly criticized by him. In the same interview with Chinese Spring mentioned above, he expresses a very critical view on the so-called virtue of forbearance, a virtue associated with *Nande hutu*:

Chinese people think that forbearance is a virtue. Actually, passivity in the face of injustice comes from being insulted so often that one becomes numb to it. But by praising this deficiency as ‘forbearance’, Chinese people can put their consciences at ease. Few Chinese are willing to fight for their own right. (Bo, Cohn & Qing 1992: 30)

This is in line with the criticism of Lu Xun above, who criticizes the Chinese evaluation and perception of muddledness as a moral virtue.

Nowadays, Chinese society is still filled with a large group of ‘ignorant pigs’ as a result of the national policy of *yumin zhengce* 愚民政策, ‘the policy of the ignorant masses’ (see above 5.4.3 The policy of the ignorant masses). The most to blame is the government, who promotes the *yumin zhengce*. This national strategy since long has kept the masses ignorant by censoring all public discourse and making everyone apply self-censorship in their speech and public communication (see also Chapter Two page 96). A group particularly affected by this so-called policy are the intellectuals and those who have suffered much, such as political victims and victims of environmental or other scandals, and who now restrain themselves from publicly speaking out their grief.

There is indeed a clear internal dynamic to this political strategy in the autocratic society, that is to say, the strategy works in two ways; the government keeps people ignorant on delicate issues for the sake of social harmony, and the people want to be ignorant because if they would ‘know’ and vent their criticism, resentment and anger

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<sup>411</sup> On Ah Q-ism as an example of real muddledness, see also above page 174.

publicly, their peace of mind would be disturbed, and they would still feel powerless to change things.

Some sources go even further, and state that the masses are deliberately kept 'muddled' by the *yule shehui* 娱乐社会, the entertainment society. One of my interviewees, a fashion designer in Shanghai, expressed his strong opinion about this. According to him, the government seems to keep the people busy with 'bread and circuses' to take away their attention from the national calamities, local unrests and in general everything that might lead to social instability (Personal communication, 1 October 2008, Shanghai). The most frequently mentioned example in this respect is the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games and the process of dealing with domestic criticism on forced confiscation of space for the Bird's Nest. Many people criticized the way the Party upheld the image of a 'harmonious society', not only to the outside world, but also to their own people. As the fashion designer continued – in this publicly expressing the opinions of many Chinese, as he claimed himself – the Chinese authorities want to show an 'innocent', peaceful China to the outside world, they want to send a *mohu* picture about China to the world (Personal communication, 1 October 2008, Shanghai). This national strategy keeps people toe the line and pre-occupied with entertainment and consumerism instead of with politics and protests.<sup>412</sup>

At this stage, the high philosophical ideal of the moral fool, and the social virtue of muddledness for the sake of the whole, have turned into a culturally conditioned, negatively motivated preference for vagueness and ignorance.

### 6.3 Moral dilemma: action or non-action

What all the critical comments have in common, is a moral argument against too much passivity, disengagement and a lack of moral responsibility while applying 'the art of being muddled'. 'The art of being muddled' indeed seems to contain an intrinsic contradiction, which from a moral point of view balances between muddledness, passivity, resignation and disengagement (*xiaoji* 消极) and an active, engaged (*jiji* 积极) position in society. This aspect of *Nande hutu* has already been discussed in relation with

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<sup>412</sup> Cf the so-called 'be rich and shut up' policy, e.g. Meyer 2002. The underlying rationale is that the legitimacy of the Party is purely pragmatic: we are making progress, life is getting 'better', so we support who is responsible for that.

Zheng Banqiao (see Chapter Three section 3.3.3 The duality in *Nande hutu*: active against passive interpretation), but re-enters the discussion as a point of criticism in the contemporary discourse. The most far-reaching criticism in this respect, is that Chinese people throughout history have become conditioned to be muddled, passive, obedient, and resigning to fate.

It is sometimes indeed a thin line between action, engagement and clarity, and non-action, disengagement and (pretended) muddledness. Two dominant aspects seem to determine the discourse, namely choice and powerlessness (*wunai* 无奈), and potential harmfulness. Or, as a survey respondent explained his view on the matter,

For these situations that we cannot change, or for matters in which we for the benefit of both parties still do not want to involve the law, pretending to be muddled will be better for ourselves, others and society. (Anon. (Survey) 2008)<sup>413</sup>

### 6.3.1 Choice and powerlessness

In the first place, there is a tendency to emphasize the absence of choice, for instance in situations of real powerlessness. This kind of powerlessness is often raised in the context of the autocratic society (as discussed above in section 6.2.4 ‘The policy of the ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce*) vs. ‘The harmonious society’ (*hexie shehui*)), where one pretends to be muddled because one is personally endangered (*weihai zishen* 危害自身) (e.g. Lü 2007; Youjian 2001; Zhuge 2008). Such was and is the case for intellectuals, and for those who were done wrong and want to denounce social injustice or immoral behavior publicly but refrain themselves and pretend to be ignorant out of fear of the consequences this could have. Another example of real powerlessness can be found among the elderly, for whom pretended muddledness and disengagement is a mental survival strategy to deal with past experiences such as the disaster of the Cultural Revolution, and to face the complexity of modern society. In such cases, the choice is limited or involves harm to oneself. As many argue, this kind of passive, pretended muddledness as a culturally conditioned necessity to survive in society is quite understandable and justified. It is a form of genuine self-preservation; there is no choice but to keep silent and pretend to be muddled. Besides, if one in the first place does not

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<sup>413</sup> 我们改变不了的或者为求全他人双方利益却不牵涉法律的事情我们装糊涂的话会对自己、他人、社会更好。

manage to 'preserve oneself', it is impossible to do anything whatsoever to improve things for others.

However, there are different kinds of powerlessness. Professor Han Shengwang explained the criterion of powerlessness as follows: There is powerlessness in which one simply cannot know or understand why something happened, such as the unexpected death of an innocent young person, and when natural disasters occur. This kind of powerlessness is related to fate (*tianming*). In such situations, one has no choice but accepting the situation, as one is basically muddled about the clear reason for the loss or disaster, and has no ability whatsoever to act (*meiyou nengdongxing* 没有能动性). In such situations, the wisdom of being muddled can be a 'virtuous' option for attaining more peace of mind or creating more harmony. But in whatever circumstances one has a choice and opportunity to change things for the better, then passively being muddled should not be an option. She mentioned the example of a friend or colleague who did not show up to an important meeting for a rather poor reason. In such a case, if the main objective is to keep your relation sound and harmonious, then there is no reason one should raise this issue to the friend or colleague involved and potentially create tension, even though the choice is there and there is no situation of powerlessness (Personal communication, 29 September 2008, Beijing).

A more nuanced justification for the 'choice' of non-action appears in expressions such as 'better doing nothing than doing something wrong and harming others', a reminder of the Daoist *wuwei* (Zhang Jiacheng, Personal communication, 5 November 2008, Ghent), or 'better doing nothing worse than the bad-doer than not doing anything at all' (Sophie, Personal communication, 22 May 2008, Shanghai). A nice example given by a taxi-driver is to help a drunken man to cross the road safely, or to intervene in a fight or robbery on the streets. In such cases, one risks to get harmed oneself; the drunken man may turn out to be violent, and the robber might be armed. Thus, it is better not to do anything than to get harmed oneself, and it is certainly much better than getting drunk and annoy others, or worse, robbing something oneself.

### 6.3.2 Harmfulness

The criterion of choice becomes especially relevant when it concerns large groups of people that potentially may get harmed. Such is the case when leaders choose to turn a blind eye to a social phenomenon or situation out of fear of doing something wrong, or out of fear that something worse would happen if they would take action, while their muddled behavior negatively affects the lives of many people. For instance, professor Zhuge Yibing (Personal communication, 19 September 2008, Beijing) raised the example of the anno 2008 ongoing scandal of the contaminated baby formula produced by the

Sanlu Group, a well-known joint-venture giant in the Chinese dairy business. The production and distribution of the contaminated products involved not only ordinary people such as dairy farmers, but also economic or political elite at various levels such as managers, professionals in quality-control agencies, and governmental officials. Besides, it has been reported that the local government was informed of the health issues caused by the tainted milk products in early August. Yet, to ensure the success of the Beijing Olympics, the local government pretended to be muddled and withheld the information for about a month, during which period tons of contaminated baby formula were distributed and sold to consumers nationwide.<sup>414</sup> In this example, those with a huge responsibility who got involved and acted badly knew very well what they were doing, had a choice to act otherwise, but all pretended not to know and act accordingly. Although at the time most Chinese citizens understood the importance of keeping the issue silent until the Olympic Games were finished, an increasing group of citizens did no longer tolerate this kind of official practices. No excuse for turning a blind eye on the matter, not even upholding the nation's face and social harmony, was acceptable, and the scandal consequently caused a major moral crisis; people had completely lost their trust in the nation-state and the Party. As Yan Yunxiang (2011: 59) explains, 'beneath this widespread public panic regarding food safety, there emerged a much deeper crisis in the moral universe, that is, the decline of social trust'.

These quotes and examples reveal a second aspect that determines whether passively retreating is morally accepted or not, namely whether there is harm to it for others or the greater society. If not, such as with the elderly, who use *Nande hutu* as a strategy for staying mentally healthy, or for those who 'muddle through life' without harming others, then pretended muddledness is commonly accepted and even encouraged. By contrast, what is not accepted is passive and deliberate muddledness as a strategy for self-enrichment or self-empowerment while harming others or the society (e.g. in corrupt practices).

However, in practice, also the criterion of harmfulness is quite ambiguous. An illustrative example of this is the example given by Fei Xiaotong of a person who publicly denounces corruption but does not hesitate to enjoy the benefits of it when practiced by his own father (see Fei 1992: 78-79 and page 83). In this case, publicly revealing one's father's corrupt practices would harm the family (both by not

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<sup>414</sup> Yan Yunxiang (2011: 61) further notes that it is outrageous that the government officially assured that the milk products provided for the Olympics and Paralympics were not contaminated, indicating the addition of melanine was indeed a deliberate act under effective control in the production and distribution process. The known number of children struck by the contamination rose to more than 53,000 in less than two weeks, among whom four died and nearly 12,892 were hospitalized with kidney problems. For more on this scandal as a striking example of changes in moral perception in contemporary society, see *ibid.*

benefitting from the graft and by losing face), whereas pretending to be muddled would harm others (depending on the exact circumstances) and social stability in society. In such a case, different networks are involved, and one first has to choose which network one wants to benefit, before one can choose which moral code to abide by.

Fei Xiaotong (1992: 71-79) further clarifies the dynamics of the varying individual moral codes in his model of the Chinese individual (cf page 80 and Figure 6 page 234). As explained above, his model distinguishes different social relationships extending from the individual like ripples around a stone after throwing it in water. In the 'differential mode of association' (*chaxu geju* 差序格局) that typifies Chinese society, social morality depends on the sphere one belongs to at the given moment and place. That is to say, each sphere is sustained by a specific type of social ethic. There are no ethical concepts that transcend specific types of human relationships, i.e., there is no comprehensive moral concept, and every relation is different with regard to its moral implications. The circle the closest to the individual is most meaningful, and the individual will act in favor of this network to the disadvantage of other networks that are further away. Xiao and Yang (2008: 124) use the terms 'big self' (*da wo* 大我) and 'small self' (*xiao wo* 小我) to indicate the degree of extension of the network.<sup>415</sup> In other words, the individual's moral choices and behavior is determined by the social sphere he feels he should or would like to prioritize in a specific situation.

Yan Yunxiang (2011) points out that this kind of variable moral code extending from the individual, combined with the emerging values of self-enrichment following the national emphasis on economic growth and growing individualism that started in the 1980s, has created a new moral order.<sup>416</sup> Not only is selfishness still morally justified by referring to its benefit to the whole (family, society, state), also increasing personal wealth is justified by referring to the greater whole one belongs to. A nice example of the moral justification of one's selective muddled behavior in pursuing self-interest at the expense of others can be found in the answer of the head of a township government publicly known for making fake and faulty goods (a practice in which he harmed and deceived many potential consumers). When in the mid 1980s, a journalist confronted the government official with the question whether he knew that the production of fake

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<sup>415</sup> The notions of *xiao wo* 小我 (small self) and *da wo* 大我 (big self) are taken from Buddhist discourse, but later became commonly used in mostly political and sociological discourses. For instance, the pragmatist philosopher Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962) is notorious for having emphasized the importance of the *xiao wo* (the individual) as a part of the greater self, the *da wo* (see e.g. Chen 2001). In more popular discourses, the pairs are more or less interchangeable with *xiao jia* 小家, 'the smaller family' and *da jia* 大家, 'the larger family'.

<sup>416</sup> A striking example of this disorienting shift in values is cited in Liu Xin's (2002: 200, note 19) *The Otherness of Self: a genealogy of the Self in contemporary China*, where he describes how a revolutionary sociology student turns into a busy business-man in no less than a year.

and faulty goods was illegal and immoral, he, pointing to the row of new houses behind him, proudly answered without hesitation: 'I think that the highest morality under heaven is to let my poor hometown become rich'. Yan Yunxiang (2011: 60-61) reflects on this as follows:

The utilitarian, self-centered logic of moral reasoning [exposed in this answer] that shrugs off the basic ethic – not to purposely hurt other people – with the priority of economic growth, reflects the dangers accompanied by the shift from a collective ethics of responsibility and self-sacrifice, to an individual ethics of rights and self-realization: that is, who will be the moral authority and where is the social sanctioning system after faith in the truth is replaced by a sense of the truth.

This emphasis on self-enrichment and other selfish behavior to the harm of others is, as we saw above, highly criticized by many and made responsible for the growing moral degeneration.

In contrast to the basic acceptance of a – be it conditional - resigning and passive kind of muddledness as discussed above, it is also, and often from a more philosophical standpoint, argued that this alleged passive nature of the saying is a fundamentally wrong interpretation and practice of the real wisdom of the saying. For instance, in the scholarly interpretations on *Nande hutu*, the general idea about the meaning of *fang yi zhao, tui yi bu* was that it does not mean to retreat from society, but instead to take up one's social responsibilities (cf the saying 'Real retreat is retreat on the market place', *da yin yin yu shi* 大隱隱于市, see page 149). The analysis of the contemporary discourse on the saying (see Chapter Four) also revealed that the many seemingly passive attitudes such as *zhi tianming* and retreating and not-contending are basically not as passive as one at first glance would envisage. If wisely put in practice, pretended muddledness expresses the wisdom that one should wait for a better occasion to take action, and let go in order to advance (*yi tui wei jin* 一退为进, cf above Chapter Four section 4.3.3 Retreating and letting go). In addition, even if it is indeed a passive strategy, when adopted for the sake of maintaining harmony, integrity, and for balancing conflicts it should be considered as an active, conscious and morally upright choice.

In summary, pretended muddledness obviously is a double-edged sword (*shuangrenjian* 双刃劍): the passive (*xiaoji*) and active (*jiji*) sides of *Nande hutu* are inevitably both present and take a dominant position depending on the situation. Or as popular author Yang Tao (2007: 173) explains, supporting only one of the two viewpoints is a superficial way of dealing with it, because in fact, in some circumstances the passive and active quality of the wisdom of being *hutu* can transform from one into the other (*huxiang zhuanhua* 互相转化). It can serve the moral purpose of benefiting the



whole, but also serve as a justification for a lack of moral behavior, integrity, and social and civil engagement. It can at the same time benefit some, and harm many others. Its moral legitimacy obviously depends on how the practitioner makes use of it, and with what intentions. This brings us to the next section, which deals with some moral guidelines and conditions for a correct application of ‘the art of being muddled’, that is to say, not as a socially disengaged, selfish tool for self-enrichment or for any purpose that is not morally upright and harmful to others and the state.

## 6.4 Some moral guidelines

Various discussants put forward different moral guidelines for the practice of being muddled to avoid a misuse or abuse, and in doing so, emphasize different elements. A general idea put forward by many sources, including the popular search engine Baidu, is the phrase ‘When one should be *hutu*, then one should do so’ (*gai hutu shi jiu hutu* 该糊涂时就糊涂). But this does not say much about concrete situations. How should we understand ‘when one should’ mean then? This brings us to one of the most crucial points in the ‘art of being muddled’: where and how to apply ‘the art of being muddled’ correctly in order to avoid misuse and abuse.

### 6.4.1 Muddledness in ‘minor’ matters, not in ‘major’ matters (*xiao shi hutu, da shi bu hutu*)

One of the guidelines mostly put forward in the discourse on the use of *Nande hutu* is the dichotomy minor matters (*xiao shi* 小事) and major matters (*da shi* 大事).<sup>417</sup> This expressions is used by respondents and authors from all social groups, often in a slightly varying way, such as *xiao shi yu er da shi ming* 小事愚而大事明, ‘foolish in minor matters but bright in major matters’ (Sun 2009).

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<sup>417</sup> Other translations could be ‘important’ and ‘unimportant’ matters, or ‘greater’ and ‘lesser’ matters. A *da shi* can also mean a major political event (war or change of regime) or a major social event (wedding or funeral). I choose to translate *da* and *xiao* as major and minor respectively in accordance with for example major and minor muddledness and smartness.

This division in major and minor matters as a criterion for being *hutu* draws from one of the first occurrences of *hutu* in historical sources as early as the Song dynasty (960-1279). As I explained in the etymology of *hutu*, the *Biography of Lü Duan* in the *History of the Song Dynasty* mentions the phrase to indicate that Lü Duan is a wise man, by saying that he ‘is muddled in minor matters, but not in major matters’ (*xiao shi hutu, da shi bu hutu* ‘端小事糊涂，大事不糊涂’), a saying that also Mao Zedong adopted in his essays.<sup>418</sup>

In the discussion about major and minor matters, some of my informants (Hu 2008; Zhou 2008) mentioned another Chinese saying to indicate the wrong way of practicing the wisdom of being muddled which is *she ben zhu mo* 舍本逐末. The saying literally translates as ‘to give up the most fundamental and pursue the minor details’, and could be translated as ‘attend to trifles to the neglect of essentials.’ In being *hutu*, one should instead do the opposite, which in the first place requires the ability to make the difference between ‘trifles’ and ‘essentials’. In this sense, ‘trifles’ can refer to minor issues, and ‘essentials’ to major issues. Not being able to make a distinction between trifles and essentials is also mentioned as a typical characteristic of people who are ‘minor smart’ (*xiao xingming* 小聪明, see page 171).

The question remains what can or should be considered as important or essential matters and what not? Although there seems to be no clear-cut and well-defined explanation, most sources argue that interpersonal relations should be considered as ‘minor matters’ (*xiao shi*), and everything related to politics, work and law issues (the rare but existing rule of law) as ‘major matters’ (*da shi*).

Thus, on the one hand there are ‘minor matters’, interpersonal relations including marriage, family life, friendships, relations with colleagues, etc. Considering interpersonal relations as ‘minor matters’ might sound strange for Westerners, but from a Chinese perspective, because of the risk of disrupting social harmony, interpersonal relations are so important that they become matters that should be treated with a lot of forbearance, tolerance and, if necessary, an open, ‘muddled’ state of mind to make sure overall harmony is guaranteed. One interviewee explained that *xiao shi* are the domains in which judgment is not clear, because these issues belong to the domain of *ganqing* 感情 (emotional feelings, sentiment) and *renqing* 人情 (interpersonal favor, human feeling), which are always reciprocal, fuzzy, and never fixed (Personal communication, 26 May 2008, Beijing). By keeping a safe distance, often obtained by pretending to be unclear or ignorant about a situation, one safeguards the relationship.<sup>419</sup> Professor Han Shengwang (2008) explained it as follows:

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<sup>418</sup> See also Chapter Two section 2.2.1 Some early occurrences of *hutu* (page 28).

<sup>419</sup> For more on the situationality and importance of ‘vagueness’ in interpersonal relations, see Chapter Two section 2.4.4 Muddledness in social relationships: the paradox of the clear water without fish.

Chinese people's attitude, their philosophy of social conduct... let's say a lot of Chinese people do not like [things and people to be] too explicit and clear-cut. They often wish to dwell in a blurred state. In a blurred state, the space is rather big, and this gives them much room for choosing [the proper behavior]. [...] In a blurred state, we can go all directions, and this consequently makes us feel comfortable.<sup>420</sup> (Personal communication, 29 September 2008, Beijing)

On the other hand, issues that are more practical and have a larger impact than just one's own social sphere such as work, politics, officialdom and law are 'major matters'. One survey respondent raised the example of an official who arrives late at work (*xiao shi*), but who cannot be *hutu* in his political practice (*da shi*) (Anon. (Survey) 2008).

## 6.4.2 'Upright behavior' (*zuoren*) and 'Handling affairs' (*zuoshi*)

### 6.4.2.1 Introduction

Parallel to the division in major and minor matters, another frequently used moral code for applying the wisdom of *Nande hutu* is also expressed in a dichotomy: the distinction between *zuoren* and *zuoshi*.

*Zuoren* 做人 means 'to conduct oneself', 'to behave with integrity', and 'to be an upright person'. The definition reveals the moral aspect (integrity, upright). In this respect, *zuoren* strongly relates to one's behavior in interpersonal relations, and more general also to one's behavior in society. By contrast, *zuoshi* 做事 is used to denote 'to work', 'to handle affairs', and 'to do a job'. The notions of *zuoren* and *zuoshi* are common expressions for indicating the difference between (moral) behavior in respectively all interpersonal relations operating in the broad context of society, and in all 'practical' matters in which the issue of *renqing* (cf above) is not the major concern, such as professional duties and performances, and different kinds of social responsibilities.

It is impressive how many sources directly refer to this distinction, with a majority in the popular sources, from cleaning ladies, to taxi-drivers and company managers. To mention just a few titles, there are the books on *hutuxue* such as *Zuoren hutuxue* 做人糊涂学 ('The art of being muddled' in upright behavior) (Wen J. 2004b), *Zuoren de hutu zhehui* 做人的糊涂哲学 (*The muddled wisdom of upright behavior*) (Wu X. 2007), and *Zuoren zuoshi de*

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<sup>420</sup>中国人的心态，他的处世哲学，中国人不喜欢特别就是说很多中国人不喜欢特别明确。他经常希望处在一种模糊的状态。模糊的状态，他的空间比较大。就给他一个很大的选择空间。我模糊状态，我们可以这么走，也可以那么走，这样我们会觉得比较舒服。

*hutu yishu* 做人做事的糊涂艺术 ('The art of being muddled' in upright behavior and in handling affairs) (Yang 2007). One popular author in particular entitles his book *Hutu zuoren, congming zuoshi* 糊涂做人聪明做事, and divides every chapter into a *zuoren* and a *zuoshi* section. This results in subtitles such as 'keeping a low profile in one's behavior, ingeniously handling affairs' (低调做人, 巧妙做事), being foolish in one's behavior, clear-headedly handling affairs' (傻气做人, 清醒做事), and 'self-denial in one's behavior, initiating handling affairs' (克己做人, 主动做事). The back cover of his book seems to tell us all we need to know about how to apply 'the art of being muddled' in upright conduct and in handling affairs (see Figure 8) (Shi 2009).

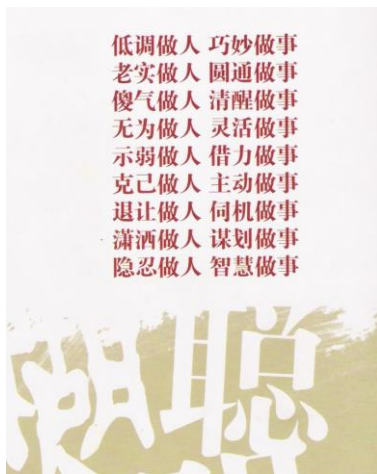


Figure 8 Back cover of Shi Yuan's *Hutu zuoren, congming zuoshi* 糊涂做人聪明做事 (Muddled in upright conduct, smart in handling affairs) (2009)

#### 6.4.2.2 'Upright behavior' (*zuoren* 做人)

*Zuoren* clearly is what the moral practice of being muddled is about. The ideal of *zuoren* is most accurately expressed in the saying 'When the water is too clear, there will be no fish' (*Shui zhi qing ze wu yu*), which contains some fundamental assumptions of the art of social relationships (see page 4.4.3 'When the water is too clear, there will be no fish' (*shui zhi qing ze wu yu*): not being too scrutinizing and clear about other people and their weaknesses, and being modest, tolerant and forgiving.

The basic moral code of *zuoren* (interpersonal relations) is expressed in three moral pursuits: face, self-effacement and harmony. Of these three, face and self-effacement are for the sake of harmony. These virtues are also of utmost importance in the moral discourse on *Nande hutu*.

## Face

Firstly, the importance of giving and receiving face (*mianzi* 面子 or *lian* 脸) can not be overemphasized in ‘the art of being muddled’.<sup>421</sup> Giving face was mentioned in many examples of the practical use of ‘the art of being muddled’ (Chapter Five): children give face to their parents and the other way around, an employer gives face to his employees, a wife to her husband, and a colleague to a colleague. In the book *Zuoren zuoshi de hutu yishu* 做人做事的糊涂艺术 (*The art of being muddled’ in upright behavior and in handling affairs*), one section deals entirely with the idea behind ‘*Hutu you mianzi* 糊涂有面子’ (‘There is face in muddledness’) (Yang 2007: 173), indicating that ‘the art of being muddled’ is part of the ‘art of giving and receiving face’.

Yang Kuo-shu (1995: 36) defines *zuoren* as ‘trying to be a person who is in conformity with the conventions of society’. In emphasizing Chinese people’s high regard for reputation, according to him, the final purpose of *zuoren* is ‘to make a reputation for oneself’, in other words, to gain face for oneself. However, ‘oneself’ can extent to many levels. Hwang and Han (2010: 490) discern ‘face of the ‘big self’ (*da wo* 大我), contrary to the face of the ‘small self’ (*xiao wo* 小我)<sup>422</sup>. Also Smith (2010: 702-703) distinguishes face and group honor, which he defined as strongly related to big face or group face, as two of the major aspects for being successful in achieving harmony.<sup>423</sup> Group face can extent from the nucleus family, to one’s greater in-group, to the nation, depending on which social network prevails in the given situation (cf Fei Xiaotong’s theory on the different moral circles extending from the self, see page 289 ).

I experienced a striking example of this sensitivity for ‘national face-saving’ while working in Shenyang in a governmental office. On request of a Belgian journalist who would come to Shenyang for a commentary on the issue of the laid-off workers in Shenyang<sup>424</sup>, I had suggested a possible interpreter to join them during their visit, but during the time they were in Shenyang, I was away. I did however receive a mail of the journalist asking me for a possible explanation of why the interpreter had gave them up to the Public Security Bureau (*Gonganju* 公安局), a betrayal that caused the much too

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<sup>421</sup> For a general definition of *mianzi* defined in terms of one’s moral reputation, see Chapter Two page 90.

<sup>422</sup> See above note 415.

<sup>423</sup> In identifying four distinctive aspects for achieving harmony, Smith (2010) distinguished face, communication style, modesty and group honor.

<sup>424</sup> During the economic reforms that started at the end of the 1980s, the big state-owned enterprises in Shenyang, previously called ‘the Chinese rustbelt’ because of the dominance of steel industry, gradually had to close down or convert to wholly or partly foreign owned enterprises. This caused large-scale compulsory redundancies and early retirements, often without (the promise of) a laid-off compensation or a retirement pay. (e.g. Hutchings 2000: 278-282).

early ending of their commentary, and an immense loss of budget. When I finally came back, it took me days before my assistant told me what had happened. It turned out that, while on the road, the interpreter, a young and inexperienced student, found the behavior of the journalist, and in particular that of the photographer, obnoxious; they continued to interview, ask sensible questions, and take pictures even when someone clearly indicated he or she did not agree. The problem was that my assistant was terrified to tell me, because she agreed with the interpreter, and I, as a Belgian fellow countryman, would lose face (on behalf of my native country), and she felt bad about that. When I explained her that it did not matter to me because I did not even know the journalist, she had much difficulty to believe me, and thought I was just saying that to reassure her.

## Self-effacement

A second emphasis in *zuoren* and ‘the art of being muddled’ is the notion of selfishness and concern for the whole. The explanation of *zuoren* in the dictionary is quite illustrative in this respect:

1. [conduct oneself; behave], meaning the way one gets along with others (指待人接物 ; 懂得如何做人处世)
2. [be an upright person] being an honest and unselfish person (做正直无私的人).

Of major importance here is the meaning of *wusi*, which is ‘selflessness; disinterested’ (不只是顾自己的利益) and ‘unselfishness’ as in *meiyou sixin* 没有私心, ‘not having selfish motives’. Thus, what is most important in *zuoren*, is to cultivate selflessness and self-effacement; ‘the art of being muddled’ should be in favor of the whole, be it the family, one’s professional network, or the nation.

This virtue of self-effacement is a vital element of the Confucian moral code. Over the centuries, Chinese people have been socialized to pursue the greater good or the larger collectivity instead of selfish happiness (see e.g. Bond 1992, 2008 [1986]; Fei 1992; Hofstede 2008 ; Lin, Tseng & Yeh 1995; Tseng, Chang & Nishizono 2005). A saying often cited in this context is ‘cultivate morality, bring order in the family, manage the country, and bring peace to the universe’ (*xiu shen qi jia zhi guo ping tianxia* 修身齐家治国平天下) (cf above page 262), the most fundamental rationale of moral education. Also other virtues and philosophical wisdoms related to *Nande hutu* such as the notions of tolerance, letting go, and modesty prescribe the moral obligation of self-effacement in favor of social stability and harmony. They all express some kind of ‘art of social behavior’ generally associated with the term *zuoren*.

Lei Legeng (2008), who uses the expression *ke ji li ren* 克己利人, ‘self-denial in favor of others’ to express the same notion, gives some concrete historical examples of conflicts in which one should use the practice of ‘retreating and letting go’ in favor of overall

harmony. One example is the example of the trouble Zheng Banqiao's brother had with the neighbors about a common wall. One day, brother Mo wrote him a letter to say that the neighbors were making trouble of a wall that was part of both their houses and that brother Mo wanted to tear down to rebuild the house. The neighbor argues that this was part of their ancestors' house and therefore did not allow them to tear down the wall. Brother Mo wanted to sue them and asked for Zheng's help, but Zheng advised him to let the matter go in order to keep the good relationship. Probably, Zheng Banqiao wanted brother Mo to put things in perspective, and consider this issue as too minor for disrupting the relations with the neighbors.

Some authors combine face and self-effacement, by emphasizing that one should go as far as to 'put down one's own *mianzi*' (放下自己的面子) in order to keep harmonious relations with others (e.g. Wei 2006: 62-63).

#### 6.4.2.3 'Handling affairs' (*zuoshi* 做事)

On the other hand, in 'handling affairs' - as contrasted to all direct interpersonal relations - one should instead of taking distance, always take things seriously and do one's utmost to bring things to a good end. The term often used here is 'conscientious', 'taking things to heart' (*renzhen* 认真). In one's work or in whatever assignment or activity one is responsible for, muddledness in whatever sense is not desirable. One of my informants, a Chinese PhD student, describes her supervisor as the perfect example of when and where to be muddled. According to her, he is a real muddlehead when it comes to everyday life practical issues, and when dealing with students and colleagues, he is very easy-going (*suiyi* 随意) and does not focus on weaknesses. However, with regard to his professional career (publishing, teaching...) he is very conscientious (Personal Communication, 1 December 2008, Ghent).

#### 6.4.2.4 Conclusion

As Yang Kuo-shu (1995: 36) rightly observe, in everyday life, Chinese spend most of their time not on *zuoshi*, but on *zuoren*; *zuoshi* is often for the sake of *zuoren*. In other words, *zuoren* represents a more dominant moral concern in the art of pretended muddledness than *zuoshi*, which is reflected in sayings such as *shui zhi qing*. The link with the dichotomy above is rather direct: important matters can be associated with doing things and minor matters with interpersonal relations.

Whether one uses *xiao shi* and *da shi* or *zuoren* and *zuoshi*, this division can relatively easily be conceived as related to feelings and emotions (*renqing* 人情 or *ganqing* 感情) (i.e. 'conducting oneself in society' and 'minor matters') and to issues more related to practical concerns and only indirectly with personal contacts (i.e. 'doing things' and 'major matters') such as work, law and politics. Issues that belong to the domain of *da shi*

and *zuoshi* should never be dealt with light-heartedly or unconscientiously. However, in minor matters or in one's relationships in and with society, one should adopt a *hutu* approach in order to obey the moral imperative of harmony and balance. Some important means to this are *mianzi* and self-effacement, two virtues closely associated with *hutu*-ness. This explains why 'the art of being muddled' is often described with the more general expression *chushi zhi dao* 处世之道, a way of conducting oneself in society (e.g. Jian 2004; Linshui 2007; Qing 2008). The expression *chushi zhi dao* is a particularly common way of expressing that there are correct ways of conducting oneself in relationship in and with society

Certainly, *da shi* and *xiao shi* oftentimes overlap and are conflicting, which makes this 'guideline' for applying *Nande hutu* not an easy one. This brings us to another guideline, one's conscience.

### 6.4.3 Conscience

Many sources mention that for properly applying the wisdom of being muddled, as for instance is the case when one is 'major smart' (*da congming*), the notion of 'innate (moral) knowledge' or 'innate good heart-mind' (*liangxin* 良心)<sup>425</sup> is vital. Being a characteristic of the person with major smartness, this high moral conscience can serve as the ultimate standard for judging when it is appropriate to be muddled and when not, and when and where to retreat, let go, and take a detached position.

The concept of 'conscience' has been extensively discussed in the *Mengzi* (circa 372 – 289 BC), and later in different schools of thought, and is closest related to the concept of innate (moral) knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知)<sup>426</sup>. It is important to note that the compound *liangxin* 良心 is not the equivalent of the Westerners notion of 'conscience'. The Western conscience is often associated with the Catholic framework and more in particular with the notion of 'sin'. This is not the case for the Chinese context in which there is no transcendent god who decides on what can and what cannot be considered as a sin, as an offence to God's imposed morality.<sup>427</sup> In the Chinese philosophical

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<sup>425</sup> For an explanation of the translation of *xin* as heart-mind, see note 110.

<sup>426</sup> For more on 'moral knowledge' (*liangzhi* 良知) in the Confucian tradition, see above Chapter Two page 67.

<sup>427</sup> Therefore, there is no such thing as sin. What is often considered as the Chinese equivalent (in the sense of determining for one's behavior) of the Western sin and the feeling of guilt that it produces, is 'shame'. Especially Confucianism with its emphasis on social norms and reference to ideal types as models of behavior was a major influence on the development of the Chinese shame culture. See also note 130, and Bond 2008 [1986]: 205-207.



tradition, ‘good’ (*liang* 良) is what is naturally and inherently good, therefore, a literal translation would be ‘innate good heart-mind’. It represents one’s (*a priori* moral) awareness of benevolence and respect which is given by *tian* 天, and as such functions as the supreme criterion for distinguishing true and false or proper and wrong actions.

It goes without saying that wise persons, such as persons with major smartness, have a strong *liangxin* and trust on this innate knowledge to choose the right conduct and judge every situation in order to act morally upright. Evenly so in ‘the art of being muddled’: by taking distance in a matter, they will not go against their *liangxin*, but remain firm on the inside (*nei fang* 内方). Even the online Baidu ‘psychological analysis’ (*xinli fenxi* 心理分析) of *Nande hutu* explains that Zheng Banqiao could not pretend to be muddled because this would have been against his *liangxin*.<sup>428</sup> This is exactly what made it so difficult for Zheng Banqiao to be muddled; he was not able to pretend to be muddled with regard to the bad practices in officialdom and the inequality in society, because of his conscience (Xiang 2002).

#### 6.4.4 Moral standards and principles

Whether they follow the general criterion of ‘minor matters’ and ‘major matters’, ‘upright conduct’ and ‘doing things’, or one’s moral conscience, many authors argue there is always the foremost importance of one’s own moral standards (*daode biao zhun* 道德标准) and principles (*yuanze* 原则)<sup>429</sup>. The general idea is that in principled matters, one should not be muddled, but in matters that do not go against one’s principles, one should not be too serious, or too haggling towards others. In other words, even when one is clear about what is important (politics, work ...) to deal with conscientiously and without too much room for compromise, and about what is less ‘important’ to behave with great tolerance and a bit ‘muddled’ for the sake of harmony, one should still not discard one’s personal principles. As popular author Chen Liang (2007: 67) writes:

In major problems of principles, one should talk about ‘truth’ and not about *mianzi*, one should talk about principles and not about personal relationships, one should dare to call a spade a spade, and have the courage to be serious and rebut.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> See <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/17378089.html> (Last accessed 12 April 2012).

<sup>429</sup> *Yuanze* 原则 means ‘correct principles of behavior’, thus, rules for proper conduct. Although they are commonly used in contemporary speech, there is a strong association with politically right conduct.

<sup>430</sup> 在大是大非的原则问题面前，讲真理不讲面子，讲原则不讲私情，敢于直言不讳，勇于较真碰硬。

This author clearly is in favor of some detachment with regard to the moral limitations of face and interpersonal relationships, and chooses to prioritize principles above social morality in case there is a tension between the two.

Obviously, there can also be a tension and even contradictions in one's principles. A typical example is the - in the popular discourse often mentioned by women - dilemma of the wife who knows her husband cheats on her. What to do in such situations? Bring it out in the open, or just leave it like that for the sake of maintaining harmony in the family? In my interviews, I deliberately raised the issue about what kind of principles one should consider as priority in such moral dilemmas, but somehow always received 'muddled' replies, which raised new questions. Besides, many sources were themselves quite critical about what principles are and when the term 'principle' is used. For instance, a young Shanghainees girl found that the use of the word 'principle' in official and legal documents is plainly ridiculous (*kexiao* 可笑). Even more, she continued, 'those who speak all the time about principles, in reality don't have some' (说原则上原则上, 实际就是缺少原则) (Sophie, Personal communication, 22 May 2008, Shanghai).

Thus, what are the principles and moral standards Chinese people mention with regard to *Nande hutu* really, and are they the same for everyone? Some authors argue that this is a personal issue, and that everyone should judge from his own experience and moral standards what his or her principles are. Professor Hu Sheng (2008) put forward the following explanation:

Everyone should decide for himself. People's inner spheres are not the same. [...] There are no clear standards. It depends on the position of your inner sphere, on the degree of tolerance it contains. [...] Take for instance a junior school student. If you let him be muddled, he will pretend to be muddled with his teacher, and not do his homework. Everyone is different, and what they pursue is different too. Standards are *living* things, they are not unchangeable. [...] Chinese people in general are the same with regard to principles: uncompromising, there is a bottom line. This exactly is the limit, and if this limit is passed, then one does not allow it anymore, then one does not pretend to be muddled anymore. Before [passing this bottom line], one can leave a bit free space, one can compromise, but having reached the ultimate, then it does not work anymore. [*Nande hutu*] is not almighty, it cannot be an 'indication', according to which everything can be settled, but that cannot be the case. It can just be a way of doing things, a kind of inner sphere one pursues, but it cannot be almighty.<sup>431</sup> (Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang)

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<sup>431</sup>自己定.人生的境界不一样[...] 没有精确的标准.看你的人生境界在哪个位置, 在哪个度上, 就像坐标一样, 你在哪个位置, 你能做到哪, 每个人都不一样, 因为每个人的人生境遇是不一样的.比方说, 小学生

This is consistent with the above explanation by Fei Xiaotong on the varying moral codes in different networks (see page 289), which explains that in a society characterized by a situational morality, universal standards have no use. Only if one understands the specific context and the position of the person at stake can one decide which ethical standards should be applied in that context. (Fei 1992: 78-79)

Another bottom line that relates to principles expressed in this quotation is ‘degree’ or ‘limit’, ‘*du* 度’ (also ‘tolerance’ and ‘consideration’). *Du* is already discussed in Chapter Two as a common but flexible and situational criterion for morally upright behavior (see Chapter Two section 2.4.3.2 Morality in daily life: *du* and common sense). In the contemporary discourse on *Nande hutu*, it is often explained by referring to the *Zhongyong*, namely as the way to determine ‘the middle’. At others times, it is discussed in terms of the ability to take the most appropriate action at different times and places to obtain the best possible, most harmonious ‘result’. Discussed in relation to the *Zhongyong*, awareness of *du* is a result of continuous self-cultivation (e.g. Hu 2008, see also the next section).

#### 6.4.5 Smart muddledness: age, experience, and moral self-cultivation

Many sources argue that immoral *hutu* behavior is generally attributed to a few factors. A first one is the lack of understanding of the background and postscript of the calligraphy and of the person of Zheng Banqiao. This reason is related to the over-popularization and commercialization of the calligraphy. A second reason is related to simply not being smart enough and lacking a kind of moral wisdom (such as moral conscience). This is the case for the ignorance (*wuzhi* 无知) of the child, and the stupidity and arrogance of ‘minor smart’ people (*xiao congming* 小聪明).

In fact, all the aforementioned moral guidelines such as *xiao shi* and *da shi*, *zuoren* and *zuoshi*, conscience, principles, moral standards and *du* are all relative and ambiguous. They are influenced by other, both situational and individual factors, and should therefore always be considered in the given circumstances and with regard to the person(s) involved.

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，你让他糊涂，能糊涂到哪去，充其量是跟老师装糊涂，不做作业。每个人都不一样，追求都不一样，每个人的人生境遇都不一样。标准是活的，不是固定不变的。[...] 中国人大部分人也还是一样的，在原则方面是不让步的，有自己的底线。就是有一个限度，过了这个限度，就不允许了，就不装糊涂了。之前可以留一点余地，可以让步，到了最后，就不行了 [...] 不是万能的。它不可能作为一个标志，什么都能解决，解决不了的。只能是做事的一种方式，你追求的一种境界，但它不是万能的。

An example of this is the notion of ‘knowing fate’ (*zhi tianming*), one of the frequent associations of *Nande hutu* that teaches one to know when to retreat and take a humble, background position (see section 4.3.2 Knowing fate). Explained from a moral point of view, *tianming* contains the moral imperative of a person, and as such also implies the wisdom of knowing when to retreat and take distance. However, *tianming* is a very personal quality, and manifests itself with different persons in various forms and on different levels. In other words, there is no single morally appropriate course of action in following *tianming*. In addition, Confucius admitted he only managed to know (and accept) fate at the age of fifty (Analects II, 4)<sup>432</sup>, so as to indicate that knowing fate comes with life experience and a long process of self-cultivation (*xiu shen* or *xiuyang*).

From all the above speculations, it seems that for a morally appropriate use of ‘the art of being muddled’ the only ultimate criterion is ‘smart muddledness’. One needs to have reached a certain level of wisdom, otherwise *Nande hutu* can too easily be applied as an slick way to avoid conflicts and social responsibilities. At this point, we are back at the most basic meaning of the saying as explained in its postscript: real muddledness departs from smartness. Smart muddledness is the only guarantee to moral integrity. Still, however ultimate this criterion might seem, many sources argue that the degree to which one can attain such ‘smart muddledness’ ultimately also depends on different variables such as age, experience, and spiritual and moral cultivation. Consequently, even this criterion for morally upright muddledness is not universal nor static, but personal, subjective and variable.

In the above view, some of the elderly argue that especially younger people are susceptible for applying the wrong kind of *hutuxue* in their lives. Not only have they not reached the wisdom that is a result of life experiences to rightly understand and use ‘the art of being muddled’, oftentimes they do not know about the postscript or are not acquainted with Zheng Banqiao and the context in which he wrote the saying, or are only acquainted with unreliable information such as in the popular TV serial on Zheng Banqiao (e.g. Cui 2008; You 2007). Some elderly people suggested that the books on *hutuxue* and the like – very likely also written by, in their view, quite young and inexperienced authors – are not good for young people to read because they do not fully understand what *Nande hutu* is about (e.g. Cui 2008). In fact, a few of the younger survey respondents indeed replied that they know the saying by hearing older people talk about it, such as their grandparents, but that they not really understood it very well (Anon. (Survey) 2008).

To illustrate the above reflections on age, experience and self-cultivation, professor Hu Sheng discerned three groups of practitioners of ‘the art of being muddled’ in

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<sup>432</sup> For the full verse, see page 66.

contemporary society. Firstly, a big group of people uses *Nande hutu* as a personal booster or as a fashionable motto (*rengē biaobāng* 人格标榜 or *zìwǒ biaobāng* 自我标榜). As he explains, Chinese people since long like to have a famous motto that serves as an alert or warning to stay vigilant in their moral conduct (*gěi zìjǐ rěnshēng qǐ jǐngshì* 给自己人生起警示). But in contemporary society, people are often more concerned with their individual impression. In reality, he continued, especially since the 80s and 90s, people just like to show off, and in contemporary society, especially younger people like to do so. So if they talk about *Nande hutu*, then it is indeed a kind of self-booster, it is literally a pose (*zhuāngmú zuoyàng* 装模作样), a personal tool (*gōngjù* 工具) to let people see that they have individuality (*wǒ yǒu gèxìng* 我有个性) and that they are different from other people. This is the first, superficial (*qiǎnbō* 浅薄), rather shallow (*qiǎncéngcǐ* 浅层次) use that is not concerned with morally upright behavior. Secondly, there are people like Zheng Banqiao, that is to say, real experienced people who have experienced life's ups and downs, who have gone through a lot of hardship and gains and losses. For these people, *Nande hutu* serves as a reminder not to make everything public or ventilate everything, to avoid that everyone feels uncomfortable. He compares this with the Western well-intended lie (*shànyì de huāngyán* 善意的谎言). At many occasions, as he explains, everyone is well aware of what is going on, but no-one tells, and we all pretend not to know, to be *hutu*. In this way, we will not feel embarrassed or awkward. This group acts out of personal experience from the past (*jīnglìguò de, guòqù shí*). A third small group, consists of those for which *Nande hutu* is a personal style of moral quality (*gédiao* 格调), a human sphere, a personal aspiration (*zhuīqiú* 追求) and ideal that one purchases in the future. Striving for this sphere of muddledness becomes an aim in life, to upgrade, advance and change oneself by means of self-cultivation (*tígāng wǒ zìshēn xiūxiāng, gǎibiàn wǒ wǒ*). (Hu Sheng, Personal communication, 26 September 2008, Shenyang).

## 6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed how the different interpretations and practices of 'the art of being muddled' are morally evaluated by a critical part of its native practitioners and observers. Some authors criticize the passive, *laissez-faire* and resigning approach of those who seem to muddle through life and not take much seriously or to heart. Others warn for the abuse of the wisdom of the saying as a 'feigned ignorance' and for the wrong purposes such as self-enrichment to the harm of others or society. The most

frequent examples given in this context are in the official sphere, where corruption, bribery, deceit and conscious immoral conduct are criticized. Still others broaden their criticism up to the point where the Chinese state is criticized for purposely keeping the people ignorant, passive and occupied with accumulating wealth instead of with venting their resentment, criticism and grief (*yumin zhengce* 愚民政策) as a strategy for self-preservation inherent to an autocratic state. Although this national strategy is discussed in the broader context of ‘the harmonious society’, this contextualization nevertheless is not by all accepted as a valid excuse for applying it. There should be limits to this strategy.

Altogether, one of the core critical points in the discussion on the ethics of ‘the art of being muddled’ regards the tendency to interpret and use its wisdom as a kind of passive, resigning, self-justifying and conflict-avoidant strategy instead of as an active, engaging process. Where its ‘passive use’ is morally accepted in situations where there is no choice but to pretend to be muddled as a strategy of self-preservation, such as for intellectuals and the elderly who do no harm to others in their pretended muddledness, this is not so in whatever muddled behavior that is harmful to others or the state. In this respect, again, the discussion is often situated in the field of politics, officialdom and corruption, and reflected upon as part of a more general moral degeneration. Yet, even harmfulness is not an absolute criterion; it is dependent on which social network the individual wants to prioritize. In addition, it is by some argued that a passive use of ‘the art of being muddled’ is fundamentally wrong. If the wisdom of being muddled is thoroughly understood and accordingly put in practice, there is no such passive aspect to it; its passive nature is only what it looks like on the outside.

To avoid a misuse or abuse of the wisdom of the saying, many sources indicate moral ‘guidelines’ that should be observed. These moral guidelines include the notions of minor matters (*xiao shi* 小事) and major matters (*da shi* 大事), of interpersonal relations (*zuoren* 做人) and handling affairs (*zuoshi* 做事), and of moral conscience and principles. Especially the notion *zuoren* contains all that one needs to know about a morally upright practice of being muddled: concern for face and harmony, and the virtue of self-effacement.

However, whereas these guidelines are still rather vague, situational and even subjective, the only condition that guarantees a morally appropriate practice of ‘the art of being muddled’ is ‘smart muddledness’, which is a characteristic of ‘major smart people’ with a high moral cultivation. Nevertheless, a person’s level of moral cultivation is dependent on his age, acquired experience, and degree of self-cultivation, and is, as such, not absolute either.

Not surprisingly, most of the notions discussed in this chapter should be framed in the traditional Confucian pre-occupation with social morality and social order. Moral self-cultivation, concern for harmony and balance, self-effacement in favor of the whole,

and the art of face-giving emphasize the interrelatedness of the individual with his social environment.

Still, however ‘traditional’ these considerations are, both the practice of *Nande hutu* for selfish reasons or for being successful regardless of others’ wellbeing, and the critical voices reflect a new form of ethical awareness. Firstly, modern society brought about individuals who challenge the traditional moral codes of self-cultivation, self-effacement, overall harmony and stability in favor of individualistic and materialist self-advancement and even self-enrichment. Secondly, modern society also brought about more criticism of established practices of the state such as the *yumin zhengce*, and of the above newly emerged ‘immoral’ practices of one’s fellow countrymen and officials. Nonetheless, this kind of criticism reflects a deep concern for social norms; a part of the masses turned from ‘muddled pigs’ into reflective and critical citizens. This new dual ethical awareness is illustrative of the moral degeneration and its reaction to it in society.

In summary, the right practice of ‘the art of being muddled’ as discussed by its practitioners is indeed an art (-*xue*); it is a ‘high level of moral cultivation’ (*gaodang daode xiuyang* 高尚道德修养) (e.g. Chu 2005; Jin 2006; Lei 2008; Linshui 2007; Qin 2002; Xue 1994; Ying 2004; Youjian 2001), and of being morally upright and socially engaged. It is related to moral knowledge, conscience, principles, age, experience, and wisdom. No matter how popular, pragmatic, critical or modern the interpretation of the saying may be, these moral concerns in one way or another always underlie its practical use. Jian Kun does not without reason conclude his *Hutu* canon (*hutu jing* 糊涂经) with a chapter on *hutu* and morality (see Figure 9 Chapter eight *Daode hutu* 道德糊涂 (Morally upright muddledness) of Jian Kun’s *Xinbian hutuxue: zhihui chushi liushisi ke*). As we read:

The big tree that is morality, can it really grow at one blow? We have to cultivate it, accumulate it, discipline ourselves for a long period of time, and bit by bit and ring by ring add a tree ring for a long period of time, to finally harvest a noble character, great virtue, and high moral prestige. Only this realm is the highest human realm. (Jian 2004: 211)

## 第八章 道德糊涂



这道德之大树能一下子长成吗？我们必得天长日久地修养、积累、磨练，渐渐地一圈一圈地增加年轮，最终收获德高望重。此境界乃人生之大境界。

Figure 9 Chapter eight *Daode hutu* 道德糊涂 (Morally upright muddledness) of Jian Kun's *Xinbian hutuxue: zhihui chushi liushisi ke* (2004).

If done in accordance with the moral guidelines proposed in this chapter, the practice of 'the art of being muddled' will ultimately ensure a feeling of personal wellbeing and security, and contribute to social and societal harmony, which brings us to the last chapter on the attractiveness of the saying.



## Chapter 7 The attractiveness of being muddled in contemporary society

*It is the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention.*  
(William James)

### 7.1 Introduction

The emergence of books on ‘the art of being muddled’, the marketing and far-reaching popularization of the saying, and the many discussions on the use and morality of the saying in popular articles and on online fora and weblogs, all testify to its ongoing popularity. In addition, other expressions and wisdoms that are closely associated with *Nande hutu*, such as ‘Suffering brings good fortune’ (*chi kui shi fu*), the *Zhongyong*, and ‘Great wisdom looks like foolishness’ (*da zhi ruo yu*) also appear next to the books on *hutuxue* in the self-improvement section on the shelves of popular bookshops.

As already briefly discussed in Chapter Three, the calligraphy is popular for many reasons: its characters are written awkwardly in Zheng Banqiao’s own particular style, the intriguing paradoxical content appeals to the imagination (even without understanding it), and there is the association with Zheng Banqiao’s popularity as an upright, eccentric and incorruptible defender of the weak and underprivileged. Also, the saying’s ambiguity and plurality, and the fact that it is strongly related to the author’s personal, philosophical, social and political background give food for thought, not only

for art experts but also for commoners, and as such contribute to its attractiveness. Add to this the recent commercialization and marketing, and much of its present popularity is explained. However, it leaves no doubt that also the actual wisdom of the saying - or at least the interpretations that are given to it - contributes to its ongoing popularity among people of all levels of society. As Li Xiaodai (2005) remarks, 'because the saying has a sufficient degree of refined quality, and at the same time stays close to the mundane world, it smoothly entered every family'<sup>433</sup>.

But what is it exactly that makes *Nande hutu* and its associated wisdoms of life so appealing to people of many different social groups? And how, as a fundamentally ancient philosophical wisdom, is it - seemingly easily - adapted to modern society? From the previous chapters, we can draw some initial conclusions on the attractiveness of 'pretended muddledness'. Chapter Three provided some insights into why Zheng Banqiao wrote the calligraphy in the first place, and what he wanted to convey with the saying against the background of his own resentment and disappointment with corrupt officialdom, namely that muddledness beyond smartness promotes peace of mind. According to him, this can be attained by taking a step back and letting go of things. The wisdom of life he advanced at the same time served as a kind of self-consolation. Chapter Four defined 'the art of being muddled' and its associated wisdoms as meaningful social virtues, as ways to behave oneself in society and to cope with life. 'The art of being muddled' even promises a 'new heaven', as for instance popular author Ming De (2008) wishes the reader in the introduction to his book *You yi zhong celüe jiao hutu* 有一种策略叫糊涂 (*There is a strategy called 'muddledness'*).<sup>434</sup> Chapter Five discussed the wide-spread popularity of the saying and its societal derivatives such as the books on *hutuxue* as a societal phenomenon. This chapter showed that the wisdom of the saying is often used in one's interpersonal relationships such as love relations, the family, and professional relations including in business. Also the harmonious society emerged as an important domain of application. Chapter Six discussed the ethics of the saying, and introduced some moral guidelines that assure a right use of 'the art of being muddled', that is, in accordance to the etiquette of social morality.

In order to explain its attractiveness in more depth, this chapter will go deeper into the underlying, multi-layered functions of the saying. It will examine how, from a psycho-social perspective, 'the art of being muddled' successfully functions both as a characteristically Chinese way of coping and advancing oneself in society, and as a practical way to maintain social and societal harmony. Thus, in line with the ethics of being muddled which discussed some moral dimensions to the saying, this chapter, in

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<sup>433</sup>这四个字由于有着适合的风雅程度同时又不失世俗的智慧,因而顺利地进入了千家万户。

<sup>434</sup> 读糊涂经, 做糊涂事. 希望在这本书里, 每个人都能找到开启人生新天地的钥匙. (Ming 2008: 2)

dealing with its attractiveness, will discuss some psycho-social functions of ‘the art of being muddled’.

As this study is basically concerned with the native experiences of and discourses on the saying, I will start with the answers Chinese people give when they are directly asked to explain the popularity of the saying. Drawn on these observations and the previous chapters, I will first outline the main reasons for the attractiveness of the saying in terms of its functionality in contemporary society. A second section will highlight some typically Chinese coping mechanisms that underlie the popular wisdom of life, and clarify the seeming tension between active and passive coping. A third and fourth section will deal with two ‘special cases’ of functionality. A first case is the case of the elderly, who have been less present in the previous chapters, but who nevertheless seem to be very attracted to the wisdom of the saying. For them, its attractiveness is primarily discussed in terms of physical and mental health. A second case concerns the very specific attractiveness of the saying as a way of being successful and gaining freedom. This function is mainly aimed at younger and middle-aged people, who grew up with the new values of modern society.

Thus, with regard to its different ‘end-users’, this chapter will also shed light on the questions to what extent and for which purpose the different functions are - similarly or differently - applicable to different age groups.

Some of these functions and coping strategies will be discussed in a broader cultural and theoretical framework, either related to psychology and wellbeing in general, or in relation to some socio-historical phenomena, such as the modernization of Chinese society.<sup>435</sup>

In order to conceptualize these different functions and coping strategies, I will for each function base myself on the model given in Chapter Five (see Figure 6 page 234) based on Fei Xiaotong’s theory of the individual and his social networks. Because the individual and his social network are also at the core of this chapter, the model is helpful to visualize the different levels of the attractiveness of *Nande hutu*.

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<sup>435</sup> Some traditional philosophical and social frameworks for many of the concepts put forward in this chapter are discussed in Chapter Two, to which I will refer whenever appropriate.

## 7.2 Primary functionality

### 7.2.1 Reasons for the attractiveness of *Nande hutu*

When inquiring directly about the reason for the popularity of ‘the art of being muddled’, Chinese people give many diverse reasons.<sup>436</sup>

Many authors strongly emphasize that, although there is a big difference in the structure of society in ancient times (when Zheng Banqiao wrote the calligraphy out of frustration and resentment, see Chapter Three) and now, there still is a relation between the current structure of society and the attractiveness of ‘being muddled’. Phenomena in contemporary society mentioned in this regard are the general degeneration of public morality (*gongdexin de lunluo* 公德心的沦落) of which the wrong use of *Nande hutu* is an example (see Chapter Six), the aggravation of the inequality of rich and poor (*pinfu chaju de jiaju* 贫富差距的加剧), the biasing influence of social positions (*shehui diwei de piancha yinxiang* 社会地位的偏差影响), the lack of a sound social security system, and the social injustice (*shehui de bu gongping* 社会的不公平). These new social realities cause people to have strong feelings of powerlessness, social and financial insecurity, and make them experience a huge gap between reality and their personal ideals. Or, as Lemos (2012: 81) explains in his book *The end of the Chinese dream*<sup>437</sup>, ‘Deng Xiaoping’s new China had created a dream in the 1980s, but [...] for most people, the dream, so quick to take shape, had just as swiftly died’<sup>438</sup>. This makes the

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<sup>436</sup> The results presented in this section are drawn from answers Chinese informants gave on the question about the popularity of *Nande hutu* and the books on *hutuxue*, as well as from those direct explanations for the popularity of the saying in the different written and visual sources.

<sup>437</sup> Many real-life examples of the ‘Chinese Dream’ can be found in the *The Chinese dream. Real-life stories of the young in contemporary China*, a book written by An Dun (2008), editor and reporter at the *Beijing Qingnianbao* (北京青年报 *Beijing Youth Daily*). She compiled 11 life stories of young Chinese people that document this Chinese Dream very well. In the foreword, it is explained that this book does not document those ‘elite’s that had participated several times in the officially held ‘Forum on the Dream of the Chinese and the building of a harmonious society’, and that had been successful in the new era of reform and innovation, but that this book documents those ‘common’ people who share the same dream but had struggled severely to realize their dreams. It thus represents a more realistic view on how the Chinese Dream is realized. (Dun 2008: 1-2)

<sup>438</sup> By ‘planting’ a Wish Tree the size of a large advertising board, on which people could paste their wishes written on paper leaves, in three different locations, Lemos (2012: 59-81) examined the worries and wishes of 1427 respondents of different ages in the area of Chongqing. His study revealed that health and healthcare (41,3 %), the family (32,8 %), and financial insecurity and unemployment (31,9 %) were the three main topics, followed by politics (both positively and negatively commentend on) (28,8 %), and ambition and social mobility (22,8 %).

wisdom of pretended muddledness still popular, both as a counterweight to feelings of powerlessness and frustration, and as a moral justification for one's own pretending to be muddled (e.g. Zhuge 2008).

In the exploratory survey, about five out of ten Chinese students – generally quite young – complain that the competition is too severe (*jingzheng jilie* 竞争激烈), especially in one's work and study, and that the pressure of life (*shenghuo yali* 生活压力) is extremely high, and that they need the 'art of being muddled' to be able to deal with life. As one survey respondent concludes,

From whatever point of view, *hutuxue* can serve as a good medicine for the alleviation of one's emotions. It makes us adopt a tolerant attitude towards the frustrations and setbacks of one's own committed small missteps and sufferings. All in all, let's adopt the *Nande hutu* attitude!<sup>439</sup> (Anon. (Survey) 2008)

Besides, social relationships including friendships have become more inconsistent (*shitai yanliang* 世态炎凉), and everyone is escaping (*dajia dou zai taobi* 大家都在逃避). More generally, society and people have become more unstable (*fuzao* 浮躁) and complex (*fuzha* 复杂), and the plurality and complexity of life in general are increasing (*shi tai fansuo* 事太繁琐). Some respondents mention the high speed of the developments (*fazhan tai kuai* 发展太快) in Chinese society, and belief that it is impossible to control everything, and that one should therefore not try to do so. Also mentioned is the notion of globalization (*shijie yitihua* 世界一体化), the belonging to 'a greater whole' than they were ever used to in history, which causes people to have feelings of powerlessness (*wu neng wei li* 无能为力) and insecurity about the future.

In the popular books and magazines, similar reasons for the saying's popularity are put forward. Some interviewees mentioned the idea that because people now like to be more smart, 'clear' and rational about everything, the downside to this is that the more rational and smart, the more unhappy one becomes. Consequently, people are increasingly pursuing happiness, and for this, return to a muddled state of mind in which things are not so clearly perceived.<sup>440</sup> One senior author, Sui Huo<sup>441</sup>, in particular

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<sup>439</sup> 糊涂学”从某个角度可以是人们一种缓解情绪的一剂良药.让我们可以对自己犯下的小过失或者经历的一些挫折采取一种宽容的态度, 毕竟难得糊涂吗.

<sup>440</sup> 因为人更喜欢人越来越聪明, 越来越不糊涂了, 越来越理性了. 越理性越不幸福. 所以人们追求幸福. As the discourse analysis revealed, a little bit of *hutu* and *mohu* is not only a vital attitude in social relationships, work, politics and so on, but also in some other domains of life such as the appreciation of art, literature, .... Some authors (Chen H. 2007, Wu H. 2007, Liu 1988) stress that in contemporary society, where everything is – often thanks to the high-technological evolution – analyzed and laid bare, there should, as in art, be some room left for subjective interpretation and a taste of muddledness. For instance, in a small essay

stresses that it is only when getting older, that he understood the true usefulness of a saying like *Nande hutu*. He recalls that when he was young, by the end of the year, on the eight day of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar, they ate *labazhou* 腊八粥, rice porridge with mixed nuts and dried food, representing a muddled or mixed-up state of mind. Traditionally, eating *labazhou* was conceived as auspicious: it would make one a bit *hutu* before starting the new year. At this period of the year, they accordingly sung a traditional folk song in which a *hutu* state of mind at the end of the year is recommended. The song also reflected the powerless state of mind of the poor people who did not even have meat for the soup, and therefore had to use a pig's tale. The author recalls that at that time, he did not realize that people need a little bit of vagueness and unclarity (*hutu*) in their lives. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), he was influenced by the so-called scientific thinking and destroying of the 'four Olds' (*Sijiu* 四旧: Old Custom, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas). At that time, it was no longer allowed to sing this kind of folk songs. Then, when he got older, he finally understood the secret of the *labazhou*: people need to be a bit of *hutu*, and being muddled promotes a spiritual realm that serves as a counterweight to the rationality and harsh reality of human life, as well as to the overwhelming technology that dominates life. In such a society people need to experience some taste of vagueness (*momo huhu* 模模糊糊), because 'the analytical 'precision to a hair' of the computer threatens the vagueness and suggestiveness of the fairy tale of our spiritual depth' (Sui 2007).

Drawn on the above reasons for its attractiveness and on what is discussed in the previous chapters, what these reasons have in common, is the relation with society, and more particularly, with the rapid changes in contemporary society: *Nande hutu* seems to fulfil basic needs in society. These needs are situated on three levels: the level of society itself (national level), the interpersonal level (family, kinship and institutional relationships), and the individual level. In these domains, there is a strong internal tension caused by the extraordinary fast and compressed modernization of Chinese society, a tension that is often described in terms of disturbed harmony:

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called *Nande hutu*, a secondary school student criticizes the way in which in art everything is analyzed and explained in detail. This student argues that in this rational, scientific world, we should at least leave some room for being *hutu* in enjoying art. The author mentions the US research that clarified the mystery of the Mona Lisa, but argues that this does not necessarily benefit the artistic pleasure one derives from looking at the Mona Lisa (Wu H. 2007).

<sup>441</sup> I conveniently assume the author is a man, as his style name has the character *huo* 火 (fire), but his gender ultimately is unclear. His age becomes clear from the life experiences he describes, such as being a student during the Cultural Revolution.

#### SOCIETY:

- inequality rich-poor
- complexity/plurality - order, balance
- inadequate social security system - need for social security
- technology/rational - spiritual
- clarity/analytical - vagueness
- instability - stability

#### INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS:

- moral degeneration - need for the security of sustained social morality and of traditional values
- changed nature of interpersonal relations: less comforting, less securing, less stable, less trustworthy, complex, ... - need for more social trust
- interpersonal conflicts - harmonious social relationships

#### INDIVIDUAL/SELF:

- reality - desires, ideals and ambitions
- competition - profit (business)
- pressure, tiring - carefree, relaxed
- financial, personal, insecurity - confidence in the future
- physical and mental unbalance - inner harmony / good health
- powerlessness - control

On all these levels, *Nande hutu* - if applied well - serves as a harmonizing regulator. That is to say, it adjusts and regulates (*tiaojie* 调节) existing imbalances and conflicts.

Based on the AsiaBarometer Surveys of 2006 and 2007, Guo Dingping and Shu Min (2009: 52) concluded that the (subjective) happiness of Chinese people is strongly determined by these three interrelated dimensions: personal life, interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*), and social well-being (which in the surveys is defined in relation to governance). Consequently, when these domains are in harmony, this ultimately will benefit the Chinese individual wellbeing. This also explains why issues of Chinese psychology are strongly determined by the social morality that underlies society and all interpersonal relations, and are consequently related to moral virtues such as self-cultivation, modesty, and self-effacement.<sup>442</sup> It is the interrelatedness of these psycho-

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<sup>442</sup> Until recently, questions of the individual psyche were never at stake in Chinese psychological theorizing, as is the case in Western psychology. The individual is always considered in relation to the whole, and in the

social functions of the saying which explain its high attractiveness in contemporary society.

These three levels, their interrelatedness and importance for the individual wellbeing can be visually conceptualized by applying them to the social network model of Fei Xiaotong, which depicts different networks extending from the centre, the individual who is the ultimate part (unit) of the whole. Consistent with the above explanations which indicate changes in society as one of the main reasons for the changes in the nature of social relations and in the individual psyche, I will thus start with the whole (i.e. society), to narrow the network down to the individual (see Figure 10). The model itself, and more particularly the concentric circles, represent the elasticity, contextuality and interrelatedness of the threefold basic functionality of the saying. The different circles and the according level of harmony in each of them invariably influence each other, but differently at different times on different places. This mutual influence on the three different levels is visualized with three different types of reciprocal arrows:

- 1) the beneficial effect individual harmony (micro level) has on the individual's social relationships (meso level) and the other way around,
- 2) the beneficial effect individual harmony (micro level) has on societal harmony (macro level) and the other way around, and
- 3) the beneficial effect harmony in interpersonal relationships (meso level) has on societal harmony (macro level) and the other way around.

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same way as Chinese morality is ultimately social morality, psychology in China is in one or another way always psycho-social, and not focused on the individual psyche. Therefore, indigenous Chinese psychology should rather be considered as a holistic psycho-social theory; it always examines one's psychological development in, and interaction with, a social environment.



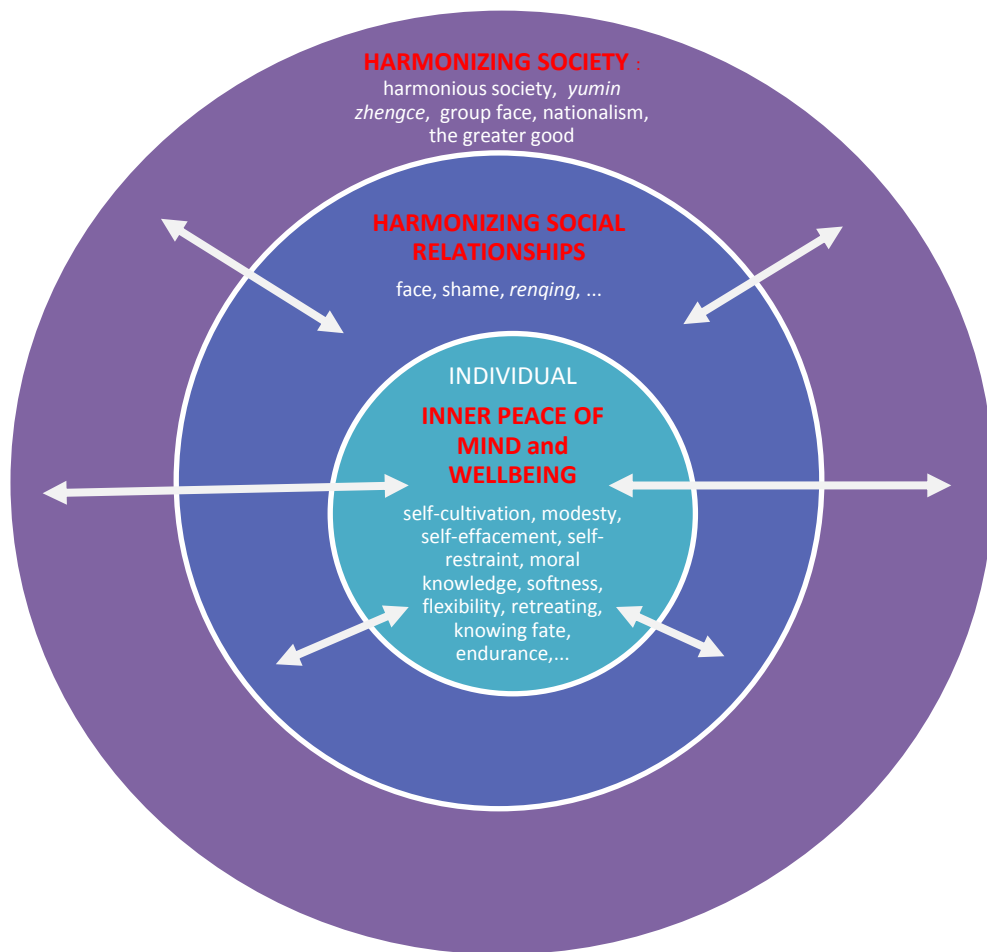


Figure 10 Primary psycho-social functions of *Nande hutu* based on Fei Xiaotong’s theory of the individual in society.

I will now explain this model in more depth by discussing each level in the model separately.

### 7.2.2 Harmonizing society

On the level of society, there is the increased complexity and plurality due to the rapid changes over the last two-three decades. These changes brought about more social and political instability, growing inequality of rich and poor, fierce competition, a huge gap between social ‘ideals’ and principles and reality, and a general impression of moral degeneration. Despite the improved living conditions and the increased wealth for a big part of the population, these new social realities have given rise to increasing feelings of angst, powerlessness, frustration, insecurity and indignation. As a consequence, if society becomes more harmonious, this will ultimately benefit its citizens, the Chinese individuals.

In the above chapters (especially in Chapter Five, section 5.4), I showed that *Nande hutu* indeed serves the harmonious society. Firstly, officials applying ‘the art of being muddled’ in their official position give the right example for establishing the harmonious society; they are upright, mild, flexible and tolerant in their relations with the people they serve, and at the same time strong and determined with regard to their social responsibilities. The notion of self-cultivation that is found in the wisdom of being muddled and its related sayings emphasize that when an official or leader, and by extension also the individual citizen, is in harmony with himself, and displays emotional serenity and equanimity, moderation, modesty and endurance, this will ultimately benefit his environment, and society at large, to which the saying ‘cultivate morality, bring order in the family, manage the country, and bring peace to the universe’ (*xiu shen qi jia zhi guo ping tianxia* 修身齐家治国平天下) testifies. Secondly, the domain of politics and official’s behavior shows that *Nande hutu* is – be it indirectly – promoted as a policy for creating more social stability, by encouraging individual citizens to deal with their problems in their own inner sphere. And thirdly, the national strategy of the ‘ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce* 愚民政策) is justified with one aim: preserving harmony in society (see in particular Chapter Five section 5.4 *Nande hutu* in politics: a particular case). As we also saw in the previous chapter (Chapter Six), this policy is not by all Chinese people so easily accepted; a minor but strong group of citizens openly vent their comments and criticism on this ‘ignorant masses’ policy.

Particularly interesting is the observation that it is not so much the wisdom of life of being muddled that contributes to the ‘harmonious society’. Perhaps more important is the public discourse and official propaganda itself, which discusses social phenomena like *Nande hutu* and similar sayings and virtues such as the virtue of self-effacement in favor of the nation in the context of the harmonious society, and which serves as a powerful governmental tool in establishing the harmonious society. Charles Hammond (2007: 253-254) states that:

China's rulers have long intentionally focused on the use of language to influence the feelings, thoughts, and actions of the people. Understanding the way state agents try to manipulate public discourse is important in understanding China.<sup>443</sup>

This certainly applies to contemporary China and the public discourse in the context of popular culture. Kulich and Zhang (2010: 250) argue that harmony (i.e. the harmonious society), perhaps the most important value animating Chinese culture, is currently being promoted in the Chinese mainland as the key traditional virtue for integrating

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<sup>443</sup> Hammond refers here to Schoenhals 1992: 2-6.

society and moderating the impact of modernization.<sup>444</sup> In this respect, also the nationalist and cultural revival propaganda in contemporary society not only politically aims at national legitimacy, but also advocates self-effacement, modesty, and endurance and other virtues related to muddledness, as traditional Confucian moral education to counter the moral degeneration. This, at long last, will be in favor of the nation (see also Chapter Two section 2.4.5 Communication and discourse).

### 7.2.3 Harmonizing interpersonal relations

Secondly, an important phenomenon equally related to the modernization and liberalization of society that causes mental ‘tiredness’, is the increasing complexity of interpersonal relations (*renji guanxi* 人际关系). The rapid changes in society radically altered both the nature of social relationships such as romantic, marital and family relationships which have become less securing and stable, and the availability of a close social network (see e.g. Chan, Ng & Hui 2010; Kleinman, Yan, Jun et al. 2011a). These changes in one’s social relationships made the necessity of a sound social network and trustworthy relationships even more existential.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many of the concrete contexts of applying ‘the art of being muddled’ and its associated wisdoms and virtues are discussed in terms of harmonizing interpersonal relations (*renji guanxi* 人际关系). As explained above, this domain, the domains of *zuoren* and *xiao shi* (see Chapter Six sections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2) are not only the domains in which ‘the art of being muddled’ is frequently used, but also the domains where its wisdom is morally accepted and even advocated, because it offers practical advice on how to maintain harmonious social relationships, especially in situations where conflicts arise.

As has been demonstrated at several occasions in previous chapters, in the social context of interpersonal relationships *Nande hutu* is directly associated with face<sup>445</sup>, modesty, and moderation. Consistent with the moral guidelines of *zuoren* as discussed above (see Chapter Six section 6.4.2.2), Smith (2010: 702-703) discerns face and modesty as two essential aspects to be successful in fostering harmonious social relationships.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> On the power of discourse and popular culture, see e.g. Strinati 2004: 226-233. Strinati discusses Foucault’s argumentation, by saying that public discourses are ‘particular ways of organizing knowledge in the context of serving specific types of power relationships’ (Strinati 2004: 227).

<sup>445</sup> For an explanation of face (*mianzi*) as a vital aspect of Chinese social relationships and its relation with vagueness and muddledness, see Chapter Two page 90.

<sup>446</sup> The two other essential aspects for harmonious social relationships were ‘communication style’ and ‘group honor’, see above note 423.

Other research points out that modesty and moderation are two social virtues that are purposely applied in the interest of achieving and maintaining interpersonal harmony (Ji, Lee & Guo 2010: 158-159).

Thus, by applying the wisdom of being muddled, which implies adhering to the rules of face-giving, being tolerant, modest, forgiving, indifferent to other people's weaknesses, and flexible, mild and undemanding towards others, *Nande hutu* contributes to cultivating and maintaining harmonious personal relations and a strong social network, and, in return, to the individual's psychological wellbeing. Moreover, harmonious personal relations also have a direct impact on one's health. Online writer Zheng Haifeng (2008) refers to scientific research to explain some interrelations of *Nande hutu*, social relationships and health :

[...] Secondly, people who do not pursue perfection, usually have a broad-minded, tolerant disposition; they can accept other people's opinion; they will not be overly prejudiced, which is extremely important for the immunity system. Thirdly, generally, in comparison with people who appear to be clever and clear in any given situation and time, people who are *hutu* maintain sound interpersonal relationships, which is also beneficial for their health.

Fourthly, people who do not haggle over every ounce are relatively easily successful in their love and family life, and a happy marriage is the fundament of health.<sup>447</sup>

#### 7.2.4 Inner peace of mind

As is demonstrated in the discourse on *Nande hutu*, human life by nature, and the huge transformation of Chinese society in the reform era in specific, confronts people with undesired and difficult to deal with situations and feelings. Especially during the last two-three decades, Chinese society has become more complex, less comforting and in a way also more demanding with regard to the individual: many old values seem to be undermined before new values have fully developed, and regulations have not kept up with the new social realities, in such a way that it is hard for the individual to deal with this new social environment (e.g. Bond 1992, 2010; Guo & Shu 2009; Kulich & Zhang 2010; Kwong 1994; Zi 1987). These rapid changes and 'disturbed harmony' in society and in social relationships also strongly affect one's personal inner harmony, and create more

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<sup>447</sup> 2. 不严格追求完善的人, 通常胸襟比较开阔, 易接受别人的意见, 不会过于偏激, 这对预防身心疾患是很重要的。3. “糊涂”的人比起事事处处精明的人, 一般人际关系较佳, 这有益于健康。4. 不斤斤计较的人在婚姻、家庭方面较易获得成功, 而美满的婚姻是健康的基础。

inner struggles and conflicts and feelings of powerlessness (*wunai* 无奈), insecurity, angst and general psychological pressure; the individual is out of balance, and the quest for happiness has become the meaning first and foremost in his life. Throughout the research, 'the art of being muddled' is shown to be especially useful as a method to adjust one's mental state (*tiaojie xinli zhuangtai* 调节心理状态) in order to obtain psychological balance (*xinli pingheng* 心理平衡).

This is especially the case for the elderly, such as those born in the 1940s and 1950s (now aged in between sixty and seventy). Born in a politically difficult period of Chinese society – the beginning years of the Communist Party rule, after years of civil war between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party - they bitterly experienced the disasters of the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1960), the devastating famine (1960-1961) that followed, and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). By contrast, as from the economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping on (early 1980s), they were confronted with a previously unknown freedom to manage their lives. At the same time, the lost financial and social security of the iron rice-bowl (*tie fanwan* 铁饭碗) culture from the work-unit (*danwei* 单位), in which every single aspect of life – from health care, food, a residence, and care for the children, to guaranteed retirement care - was taken care of in exchange for unconditional loyalty to the Party, gradually imposed a huge responsibility and burden on the elderly (e.g. Lemos 2012: 170-183). In contemporary China, the retired population lost much support from the nucleus family due to the one-child policy and the huge commuting distances (or, in view of the distance, rather migrations) their children often undertake to engage in the best-paid job. Besides, especially in the cities, elder people's social life has drastically changed with the imposed move from small neighborhoods (such as in the Beijing *hutongs*) with a vibrant and extensive street life and neighborhood network and activities, to individual living in blocks at the outskirts of the city. In addition, the technological revolution made (and makes) it even more difficult for the elderly to keep up with society.

The middle-aged people (aged 25-30 to 60), which could be considered the economically active population, suffer from a similar pressure, but in their case, it is a pressure that results from the severe competition in society and the sole responsibility for their own lives and the lives of their family. Also the threatening social insecurity and problems in society (public safety, political and economical instability, social inequality, environmental problems, lack of a sound social security system) often leave them with a bitter feeling of survival rather than enjoyment of life.<sup>448</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>448</sup> For instance, the AsiaBarometer 2006 Survey revealed that with regard to the social welfare system in particular, almost half of the respondents (48,1 %) feel unhappy with the current provisions. Of the 16 issues

previously unknown ‘personal freedom’ to pursue their dreams that results from the growing individualization and the economic liberalization does not make life easier.

Young people, and especially students, complain mostly about having to deal with educational pressure and anxiety, to which ‘the art of being muddled’ and the related wisdoms of life, are a sound antidote. Research on coping strategies among Chinese students confirms the popularity of attitudes such as forbearance, self-control, Ah Q-ism, take-it-easy, and let-it-happen approaches, which suggests that the use of these ‘internal’ strategies fosters ‘a sense of enlightened awareness of the dynamics of conflicts in this mundane world and that attainment of inner harmony “*he*” constitutes the cultural protocol for coping with stress in Chinese society (Yue X. 1994: 65)<sup>449</sup>

What these three different age groups have in common, is the belief that things in life do not always turn out the preferred course and that one has to deal with many things one either would prefer to turn a blind eye on, or would prefer to see more balanced. In these situations, ‘the art of being muddled’ and its related wisdoms of life not only have a balancing power, but also teach the individual to face life more positively so that life becomes less tiring, more relaxed, and more harmonious. At the same time, they fulfil the need for a spiritual equilibrium (*xinling pingheng* 心灵平衡) that gives meaning to life.

Zheng Banqiao indeed indicated that, if used properly, one of the main functions of the wisdom of life of being *hutu* is to nourish inner peace of mind. Peace of mind is – at least in China – equivalent to a feeling of sustained harmony in one’s life, even when many things simultaneously take a bad turn. If one in any given circumstance can put things in perspectives and obtain greater inner peace of mind through pretended muddledness, this will result in better mental health. Therefore, the wisdom of *Nande hutu* is what Qin Ning (2002) calls ‘an effective prescription for mental health’ (*xinli baojian liangfang* 心理保健良方).

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investigated, including marriage, family life, job, standard of living, the social welfare system was evaluated the worst (Guo & Shu 2009: 43).

<sup>449</sup> In Yue Xiaodong’s research, forty 18–22 year old students in Beijing were interviewed about their most commonly used coping strategies. The significance of these coping strategies was explored in relation to the Confucian ethics of self-cultivation and to the Daoist self-transcendence, as well as in relation to contemporary theories about stress and coping. See Yue X. 1994; 2001.

### 7.3 Harmonizing strategies

As shown above, the attractiveness of *Nande hutu* lies in its regulating and harmonizing function for imbalances created by the changing society on different levels of society and in different domains of daily life, but also as an inherent part of life. On the individual level, the wisdoms, virtues and behavior advocated in the saying can be perceived as an amalgamate of coping patterns or as coping strategies, i.e. ‘efforts to solve personal and interpersonal problems, and different ways of dealing with all kinds of stressors such as conflicts, grief, frustrations, setbacks, angst, and insecurity’ (e.g. Brehm, Kassin & Fein 2005: 531-541). But how exactly is this harmonizing function effected? What psychological coping patterns underlie the wisdom of pretended muddledness?

An author with pseudonym Youjian Xiangcao 又见香草 (2001) described the usefulness of pretended muddledness as a coping strategy as follows:

Pretending not to understand problems that are ‘inconvenient’ to answer, pretending to be ignorant about questions that are harmful for oneself, using the rational *hututu* to head of a danger, and using the ‘smart’ *hututu* to calm down conflicts that might possibly rise. In a sense, this can remove a lot of psychological pressure, it can transform weapons of war into beautiful silk, and antagonism into friendship.<sup>450</sup>

From this quote, we can discern a few concrete coping strategies of ‘pretended muddledness’ and its related wisdoms of life: conflict avoidance, emotional self-control, rationalization and self-consolation. These functions are in one way or another all articulated in the different *Nande hutu* discourses, and contribute to the overall harmonizing function of ‘the art of being muddled’ (see above 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5). In the following, each of these different functions will be discussed. In addition, in accordance with the moral dilemma of an active and passive interpretation of *Nande hutu* in the previous chapter, this chapter will also address the seeming paradox between passive (*hututu*) and active (*congming*) coping as an ambiguous characteristic of ‘the art of being muddled’ (section 7.3.5). Applying these coping strategies and the paradox of active and

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<sup>450</sup> 对不便回答的问题可佯作不懂,对危害自身的询问假作不知,以理智的“糊涂”化险为夷,以聪明的“糊涂”平息可能发生的矛盾.这在某种意义上说,可以解除许多心理压力,化干戈为玉帛,化对立为友情. (Youjian 2001). This article is - at least partly - copied many times by other authors (e.g. Qin 2002 and Li D. 2007).

passive coping to the previous models based on the theory of Fei Xiaotong gives the following figure:

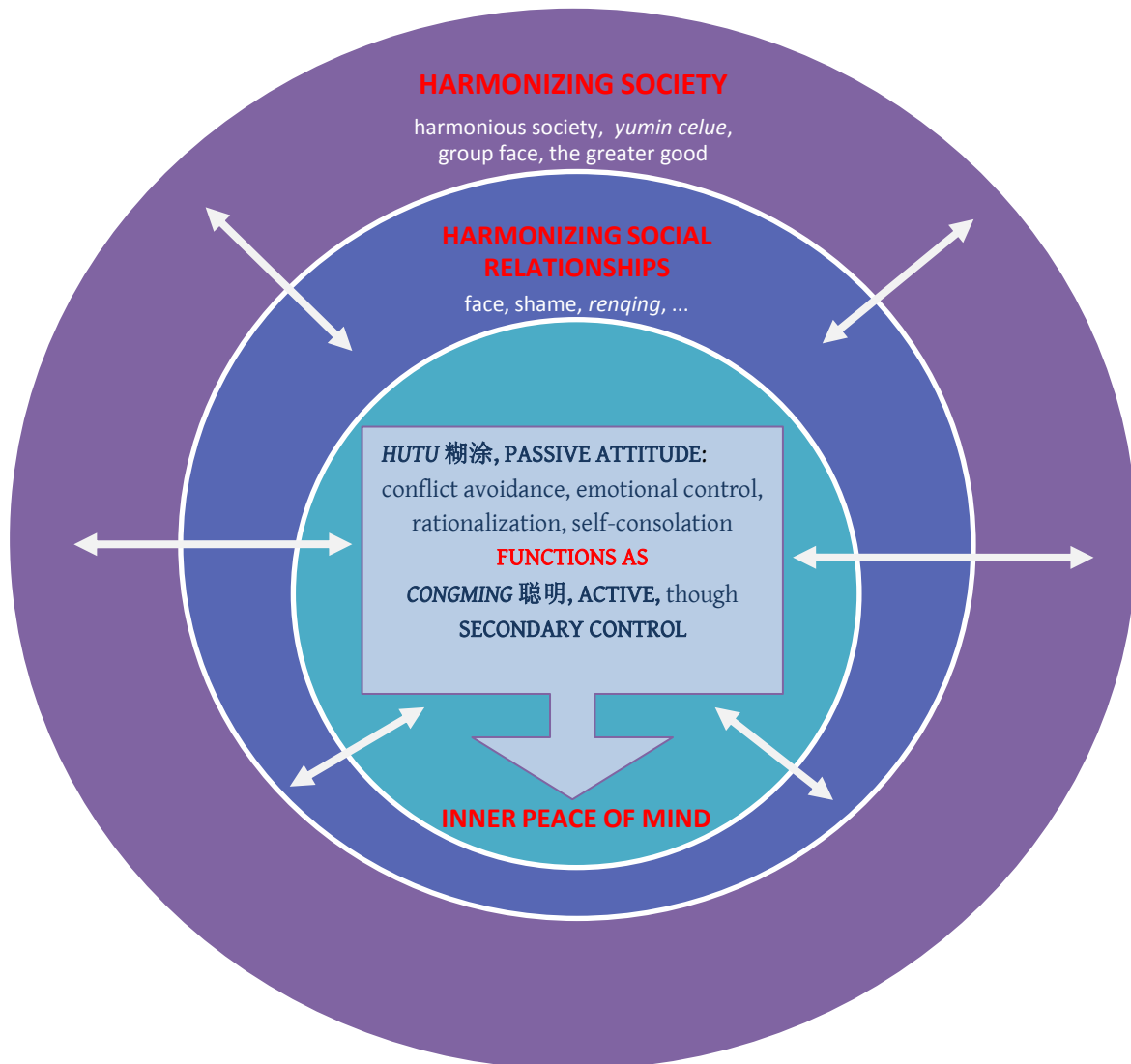


Figure 11 Individual coping strategies that underlie *Nande hutu* based on Fei Xiaotong's theory of the individual in society.

### 7.3.1 Conflict avoidance

In the various discourses on *Nande hutu*, conflict avoidance (*taobi* 逃避 / *duobi* 躲避 *maodun* 矛盾 / *chongtu* 冲突) is put forward as one of the main aims of being muddled. For many, especially the phrases 'letting go' (*fang yi zhao*) and 'taking a step back' (*tui yi bu*) that appear in the postscript of the saying, but also pretending not to know or see, lowering one's standards and expectations toward others and expectations in life, and



tolerance, moderation, and modesty in the first place are perceived as strategies to avoid conflicts.

Conflict avoidance is a coping strategy often found in collectivist cultures where social cohesion and in-group harmony are highly valued. Chinese people believe that the initiation of any kind of dispute is an invitation to chaos. Therefore, in managing conflicts they will avoid direct confrontation if possible, or arrange the conflict indirectly if necessary. (e.g. Bond 1992, 2008 [1986]; Cheng, Lo & Chio 2010; Hofstede 2008; Hwang & Han 2010; Lin, Tseng & Yeh 1995).<sup>451</sup> If applied well, pretended muddledness as a strategy to avoid conflicts contributes to harmony on whatever level. Or as a survey respondent clearly remarked:

In life, many things can be avoided by pretending to be *hutu*. Pretended muddledness can make people live in harmony, and it can avoid unnecessary conflicts.<sup>452</sup> (Anon. (Survey) 2008)

A fine example in relation to *Nande hutu* is the example of the elderly. In Anna Boermel's research about strategies of the elderly to deal with the challenges of living in an era of rapid change, *Nande hutu* as a way of 'conflict avoidance by retreat' came out as one of the three main strategies.<sup>453</sup> Some of her informants explained they took the phrase to mean to avoid conflict with one's superior. The underlying assumption is that insisting on one's point of view in the face of likely discord with the person wielding more power is anyway futile.

With regard to the situation of the elderly of whom many have become embittered and grieved, Boermel further suggests a particular, historically situated use of *Nande hutu* that is less found among the middle-aged and younger people:

Conflict avoidance by retreat in old age may well be a strategy to which older people elsewhere also resort, in its particular form in reform-era China it cannot be understood without reference to China's recent history. The strategy's core features of caution and pretence suggests a direct, if rarely articulated link

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<sup>451</sup> Conflict avoidance, together with harmony-orientedness as predominantly Asian attitudes, are often put in contrast to the more Western, aggressive, solution- and conflict-oriented cultures. It should be made clear that this contrast is in no way absolute; many individual and regional differences exist. See e.g. Bond 2008 [1986], Hofstede 2008.

<sup>452</sup> 生活中装装糊涂能避免很多事情，使人与人之间能和睦相处，避免不必要的冲突。What is stressed here is the briefness of the act of pretending, by reduplicating the verb (*zhuang zhuang*). It is not a continuous state of mind.

<sup>453</sup> The two other strategies that resulted from her analysis were 'maintenance of values' and 'self-organized activities' (Boermel 2006: 407-412).

between painful experiences in the past and the effort to maintain a calm, pain-free disposition in the present. (Boermel 2006: 408)

*Nande hutu* is for many older people a way to alienate themselves from former severe sufferings and the trauma inherited from the Cultural Revolution. Ignoring these pains and terrifying memories is just one way to deal with their trauma.<sup>454</sup>

However, as became clear from the analysis (Chapter Five, see especially the examples of marriage life and among students), conflict avoidance and compromise in order to avoid conflicts is gradually becoming less eagerly accepted by younger and middle-aged people. In some popular discourses, they are encouraged to actively take a grip on their lives (e.g. the books on overcoming one's fate) instead of being accommodating. In addition, the recostly increasing interest in and the mushrooming of books, radio and TV programs that offer psychological counseling (cf also the emergence of the *xinli jiaoyu* 心理教育 among students, see above note 365) gives people new perspectives on ways of coping that often contradict conflict avoidance. The awareness of conflict avoidance as a psychological coping strategy has also entered the public discourse, where it is discussed in 'popular' magazine such as *Psychologies* (*xinli yuekan* 心理月刊).<sup>455</sup> For instance, in an article in the column 'Self-Development' about 'Five ways to make your job pleasant', the fifth way of making your job pleasant discusses the issue of 'showing your inner conflicts' (*waihua neixin de chongtu* 外化内心的冲突). The author starts with the statement that a lot of people think conflicts are risky and foolish, but that according to an international 'job coacher' (*zhiye guihuashi* 职业规划师) this is because in eastern cultures, a lot of norms encourage people not to give offense or displease someone. But, as the author continues, in reality, we would better learn how to express 'outer and inner consistency' (*neiwai yizhixing* 内外一致性) (Liu 2008: 153).

In view of these upcoming public opinions that challenge deep traditional values, the question rises to what extent modern values and the Western, more 'aggressive' conflict-oriented values will influence the characteristically Chinese way of coping in the long run. Certainly, when there is nothing to lose or to uphold left, such as for rural communities whose farmland is confiscated and redeveloped at vast profit, or for people who lose their home without any adequate compensation, or for those who become unemployed without any social security, people or groups of people gradually lose their

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<sup>454</sup> For more on the psychology of alienating pains and the psychopathology of the political trauma of the Cultural Revolution, see e.g. Kleinman & Kleinman 1995 and Kleinman, Yan, Jun, et al. 2011a.

<sup>455</sup> *Xinli yuekan* 心理月刊 (*Psychologies*), a famous popular magazine with roots in France, is widely available in China. In this magazine, part of the articles are copied from the original French edition, while another part is adapted to and supplemented with information for a Chinese readers public.

fear of protesting and start to resist publicly, to which increasing local protests testify (Lemos 2012: 233-251).<sup>456</sup>

### 7.3.2 Emotional control

Another major psychological function of ‘the art of being muddled’ is emotional self-control (*hanyang* 涵养). Many philosophical ideals and wisdoms of life (proverbs) discussed in Chapter Four profoundly testify to this attitude: going along with the right opportunity, being content with whatever comes, knowing fate and accepting it, tolerance and forbearance, and being flexible and ‘soft’, all emphasize the idea that one should in the first place manage one’s inner emotions to be able to deal with whatever comes up. Popular author Jian Kun (2004: 1-32) dedicates a chapter called *Qingshang hutu* 情商糊涂 (*Emotional intelligence and hutu*) on emotional regulation as a successful function of applying the wisdom of being muddled (see his chapter called *Qingshang hutu* 情商糊涂).

Emotion control is also presumed to have an influence on the final outcome of an event or experience. As one survey respondent declared, ‘sometimes, different outcomes created by many situations, all evolved from different emotions’ (Anon. (Survey) 2008)<sup>457</sup>. By controlling one’s emotions, one diminishes stress and psychological pressure (*xinli jianya* 心理减压) and, in this way, also influences the potentially negative result of an issue (e.g. Zhang Y. 1996). Nonetheless, this does not mean that one experiences direct personal control over the environment or one’s health (Cheng, Lo & Chio 2010: 402); it is all a matter of how one mentally, on the inside, deals with and controls a situation.

Both conflict avoidance and emotional regulation are vital aspects of the philosophy of the *Zhongyong*, which essentially aims at psychological equilibrium and harmony. Emotional regulation is a way to minimize the risk of conflict with others, in that it urges one to alter one’s thoughts and behavior instead of provoking conflict by them (Cheng, Lo & Chio 2010: 402). However, this not only concerns the individual level. Since the experience and expression of extreme emotions are believed to disrupt psychological well-being as well as social harmony, it is believed that emotion

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<sup>456</sup> An example of such protests are the 77 applications to protest against the confiscation actions during the Olympics. However, of these, 74 were withdrawn, two were suspended, and one was vetoed as contrary to the laws of China. (Lemos 2012: 236).

<sup>457</sup> 往往很多事情产生的不同结果，都是由于不同的情绪而演变过来的。

moderation and control (*kongzhi ziji de qingxu* 控制自己的情绪) are beneficial not only to the individual, but also for society. Consequently, Chinese children are socialized to control impulse at a young age (Ji, Lee & Guo 2010: 159).

### 7.3.3 Rationalization (thought control)

In daily life, many people do not manage to effectively control their emotions and moods, and for them, reaching the emotional serenity that results from a *hutu* state of mind is really difficult (*nande*). Another tactic to reach this state of mind, is controlling one's thoughts, namely by rationalizing unfortunate events. Expressions such as *xiangdekai* 'taking things philosophically', 'putting things in perspective', and the popular proverbs that emphasize contentment such as 'Knowing contentment brings happiness' (*zhi zu chang le* 知足常乐) and an optimistic approach to hardship (*ku* 苦) such as 'Suffering brings good fortune' (*chi kui shi fu* 吃亏是福), and 'A loss may turn out to be a gain' (*sai weng shi ma* 塞翁失马), all urge one to use the 'rational *hutu*' to accommodate misfortune. As a survey respondent laconically commented,

if you can understand life in all its aspects from a positive point of view, only this will make it possible for you to rise from the slurry without being contaminated by it. (Anon. (Survey) 2008)<sup>458</sup>

It should be clear that rationalising frustrations, grief, angst, and feelings of powerlessness, at the same time downplays one's personal emotions, needs and ambitions. As such, it serves as a self-defence mechanism in itself; through turning to the traditional wisdoms that encourage one to accept things as they are and make the best out of it, personal needs and desires are put into the background. As a result, one becomes more resilient.

These combined strategies – emotional control and thought control – are strongly interrelated: rationalizing unfortunate events and positive thinking have a beneficial effect on the emotions, and if one's emotions are balanced, one's thoughts are more lighthearted too. This comprehensive (holistic) view on the psychology of coping reflects the traditional conviction that body and mind cannot be separated, and that their dynamics is of major importance for one's wellbeing. In the discourse on *Nande hutu*, the saying 'When the mind is calm, the body will be at peace' (*xin jing ze ti an* 心静)

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<sup>458</sup>你可以从积极的一面去理解，这样才会使自己出淤泥而不染。

则体安) is often mentioned to highlight the relevance of a harmonious mind-body relation, especially in old age (Chu 2005; Li D. 2007; Qin N. 2002; Xue 1994; Ying 2004).

### 7.3.4 Self-consolation

Rationalization of unfortunate events and gains and losses also serves as a way of self-consolation (e.g. Anon. (Survey) 2008; Gao 2011), one of the psychological functions attributed to *Nande hutu*. As we saw in Chapter Three, some scholarly interpretations explain that the calligraphy was written by Zheng Banqiao as a way of self-consolation in the autocratic system, where directly venting one's true opinion and resentment could cause one's death. This by extension applied to all men of letters (*wenren* 文人) and 'smart people' in feudal society (see above Chapter Three section 3.3.3.2 Passive and negative interpretation). Nonetheless, many sources argue that self-consolation remains a vital function of the saying in contemporary society, both for the more outspoken critical population such as intellectuals and artists, and for 'common people' (e.g. Anon. 2009; Anon. (Survey) 2008; Fu & Qi 2008; Gao 2011; Hu 2008; Sophie 2008).

Self-consolation is mostly useful when one cannot realize one's ideals or ambitions (anymore), either due to one's own limitations, or due to the limitations of society or one's social position. For instance, people of older age often are not or no longer able to pro-actively change their life conditions for the better due to physical shortcomings, financial insecurity or a lack of (political) influence, so they need to close an eye once in a while towards that which does not meet their hopes, desires and ambitions (e.g. Chen S. 2004; Sui 2007). The feeling of being lost in the modern world and using *hutu* to console oneself, is by some elderly articulated by saying that it is a *mohu* (difficult to understand completely) world for them, and one should use the technique of *mohu* against *mohu*, otherwise one becomes crazy. Here, the comparison with the impressionist painting (see Chapter Two page 63) comes back into play. If one approaches an impressionist painting with an analysing eye in search for details, clearly distinct lines, shapes and boundaries, then one will forever be disappointed in its artistic quality. By the same token, since life is impossible to completely grasp and control with clear reasoning and detailed analyzing, it is better to adopt a little *hutu*-ness in one's attitude towards life instead of becoming disappointed, embittered and distressed (Cui 2008).

The need for comfort through pretended muddledness is consistent with research by Anna Boermel on the elderly in Beijing. As she explains, for many of the elderly, the popularity of phrases like *Nande hutu* and 'being lighthearted' (*xiaosa yidian* 潇洒一点)

reveals the desire on the part of a number of older people to create a buffer zone between themselves and wider society, that is, younger and middle-aged people.

This distance, they argue, allows them to feel more secure, to suffer less pain and be happier. (Boermel 2006: 408)

As Anna Boermel further explains, for the elderly, a *hutu* attitude makes them feel comforted and learns them to silently gain pleasure from the knowledge that one is doing right without being able to do something about unwanted limitations and conflict situations. In this respect, sometimes the well-known saying *Eloquence is silver, silence is gold* (*xiongbian shi yin, chenmo shi jin* 雄辯是銀，沉默是金) is mentioned (e.g. Qin N. 2002; Xue 1994; Zhao & Meng 2007). What is meant is that when other people are seething and you stay silent, show some reservation, and are open-minded, this attitude is more mature and can ultimately be more comforting than venting your opinion.

The same holds true for the younger sources. They report strong feelings of disappointment and stress in confrontations with the limitations, pressure and realities of daily life. A few examples were discussed in the section on students, where the pressure to ‘achieve’ and be successful causes much psychological distress. One young blogger wrote an article explicitly entitled *Nande hutu as a way of self-consolation* in which she tries to find some consolation for amatory problems (*Nande hutu de ziwo anwei* 難得糊塗的自我安慰) (Anon. 2009). Young people in particular experience feelings of disappointment and powerlessness when they are gradually confronted with the harsh reality of ‘adult life’, starting with finding a job on the competitive job-market. As a survey respondent self-reflectively replied,

Only in society an individual can assimilate himself, a lot of people are straight and full of ideals when they are young, but once they start to fully and actively integrate in society, they gradually discover reality is not so ‘perfect’ as they imagined it to be, so they gradually adopt that kind of ‘*hutuxue*’ as a way of dealing with the world.<sup>459</sup>

Also middle-aged people, who feel heavily burdened by their social and professional responsibilities, discuss *Nande hutu* as a ‘comforting wisdom’. Those struggling to advance themselves in the competitive and complex society find much comfort in a saying like *Nande hutu*. Moreover, by letting go and turning a blind eye on an issue, *Nande hutu* implies that one can turn to other, more rewarding and potentially successful issues or activities. As such, one can divert one’s attention away from the problem and be – be it temporarily – relieved and make the best out of the problem, even though the issue at stake is not readily ‘solvable’. Such an attitude is also reflected

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<sup>459</sup>只有社会才能同化个人，很多人在年轻的时候都正直、有理想，一旦真正融入社会，慢慢发现现实不是想象的完美，逐渐地把这种“糊涂学”当成了处世之道。

in aforementioned (Chapter Four) sayings such as *chi kui shi fu* 吃亏是福 and *sui yu er an* 随遇而安. In this respect, some sources raised the issue of the earthquake in Sichuan in May 2008. They argued that many people lost their children, parents, partner, but instead of mourning and wondering how this could possibly happen to them, they did not try to analyse the situation or try to see things clear. Instead, they kept themselves busy by saving and helping others, which had a therapeutic and consolatory effect, and contributed to the psychological equilibrium of those that suffered the losses.<sup>460</sup>

### 7.3.5 Psychological dilemma: active versus passive coping

The critical moral arguments with regard to a passive and evasive instead of an active and engaging use of the ‘art of being muddled’ also resonate in the psycho-social discussion. Here, the discussion questions whether the coping strategies embodied in the saying (conflict avoidance, rationalization of hardship and unfortunate events, emotional self-restraint, self-consolation) are active or passive coping patterns. These strategies and attitudes at first glance seem to express a resigning, conservative and passive attitude, in which the individual represses his negative feelings in favor of overall harmony (self-effacement), and any form of control seems absent. However, as discussed at some points in Chapters Four and Five, the passive, resigning nature of such coping strategies and attitudes is not always clear-cut.

In the first place, the assumed passive quality of many of these coping strategies only reflects a Western point of view, which is solution-oriented and conflict-oriented, with a strong emphasis on psychological agency. In Chinese thinking on health, it is assumed that one should manage emotional distress by changing one’s inner thoughts and desires, instead of by making changes in the environment. But this is not a passive process. Cheng et al. (2010: 403) call this particular way of coping ‘emotion-focused coping’.<sup>461</sup> As they explain,

cultural differences in the effectiveness of avoidant or emotion-focused coping may be attributed to its specific meaning that varies across cultures. For the

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<sup>460</sup> The earthquake left more than 90,000 persons dead and missing, and over 5 million people homeless. For more on the importance of the earthquake from a moral and psycho-social perspective, see e.g. Kleinman, Yan, Jun, et al. 2011a; Lemos 2012.

<sup>461</sup> ‘Emotion-focused coping’ is quite common in social psychology, where it is often discussed in relation to other kinds of coping, ‘problem-focused coping’ and ‘proactive coping’ (see e.g. Brehm, Kassin & Fein 2005: 531-541). Obviously, among Chinese, there are many individual differences in practicing emotion-focused coping (e.g. Cheng, Lo & Chio 2010: 402-404).

Chinese, deployment of avoidant or emotion-focused coping may not necessarily reflect passivity, as suggested in Western literature.

This idea, as they further explain, is consistent with the notion proposed by Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder (1982) who in their comparative research on control strategies suggest two ways for individuals to seek control, namely primary and secondary control. The following definitions are put forward. Primary control, which they consider as a concept of social or self-orientation, is

a process whereby people attempt to gain control by influencing existing realities, often by means of acts involving personal agency, dominance, or even aggression. When control is sought by means of alternative paths, which is labelled 'secondary control', individuals attempt to align themselves with existing realities, leaving them unchanged but exerting control over the psychological impact that those realities induce. (Bond 2008 [1986]: 102)

In this definition, primary control refers to 'efforts made in an attempt to change external or environmental factors to fit one's needs and expectations', whereas secondary control, refers to 'attempts to change one's thoughts or behavior to fit the environment' (Cheng, Lo & Chio 2010: 403). The practice of 'the art of being muddled' clearly is an example of secondary control, which is expressed in attitudes such as taking a step back, knowing contentment, pretended foolishness, and in strategies such as conflict avoidance, emotional self-restraint and rationalization, all 'wisdoms' that teach one to know when and where to pro-actively take control and try to alter things for the best, and when not to worry and to accept things as they come. In a sense, they all are - conscious or unconscious - controlling strategies to 'fit the environment', that is to say, in Chinese terms, to make the environment more harmonious (or, as we will see further, more responding to one's need for self-advancement and self-enrichment). However passive these strategies and wisdoms of life may seem, in the Chinese mindset, they are regarded as mature, wise, and morally appropriate ways of taking control. They suggest a high level of emotional and social intelligence. Although the conflict is not solved, or the reason for grief or insecurity remains, the disturbing situation in any case did not escalate to the point that (inner, interpersonal or national) harmony was disturbed, which is the first and foremost concern in any given situation.

From the above point of view, these particular coping attitudes contain an enormous strength and resilience, especially in situations where one indeed is powerless. Such an attitude on the one hand avoids negative emotions and thoughts to escalate and to disturb harmony, and on the other hand gives room and openness for a situation to develop in an appropriate direction. This flexibility in dealing with life probably constitutes the most powerful function of the saying *Nande hutu*: it reflects a flexibility



to face a situation according to the needs of the situation, and not according to the needs of the person.<sup>462</sup>

Secondly, it is important to keep in mind that many of these psychological and social functions are instead of as coping strategies also considered as individual moral virtues or spiritual ideals. They represent strategies – a noun that intrinsically expresses some kind of active engagement – to improve one’s mental and physical health and even material conditions, to strengthen one’s social life, and to contribute to a harmonious society. In fact, traditional wisdoms that promote the acceptance and unavoidability of both fortunate and unfortunate life events, typically are aspects of moral self-cultivation, or rather, to use the modern terms for it, ‘self-improvement’. As a kind of moral self-cultivation, ‘the art of being muddled’ is perceived as an active and mature way of dealing with stressors and stressful experiences. In addition, as argued before, the aforementioned strategies, virtues and ‘wisdoms’ reflect the conviction that unfortunate events provide opportunities for personal growth if they are handled well. Even more so, according to some popular authors, through ‘the art of being muddled’, one will gain more mental freedom. However popular the interpretation, we are back at the active scholarly and rather philosophical interpretation of the saying in relation to Zheng Banqiao as discussed in Chapter Three: *Nande hutu*, by virtue of its status as a way of self-cultivation deeply concerned with social morality, carries the promise of increasing moral virtue, psychological wellbeing, and wisdom. This can hardly be conceived as a passive state (see Chapter Three section 3.3.3.1 Active and positive interpretation).

Thirdly, on many occasions, despite the strong tendency to a ‘resigning-to-fate’ attitude, Chinese people do believe that there is a possibility to at least to some extent influence the ‘environment’. Rance Lee (1995: 45) calls this particular way of dealing with fate fatalistic voluntarism. According to him, this fatalistic voluntarism in Chinese has three basic elements. 1) People are achievement oriented, 2) in the course of struggling for success, they do not deny the influence of fate or other mystical forces, but 3) they also attach great importance to subjective will and human efforts. The different practices of fate management as described above (see page 185) all testify to this particular attitude.

To conclude, successful coping patterns such as pretended muddledness might look like passive attitudes, but from a Chinese point of view, they are not perceived as such. On the one hand, they reflect a proactive dealing with stressors strongly rooted in a

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<sup>462</sup> For more on the presumed passive way of coping expressed in notions such as ‘perceived control’ and the relation with psychological wellbeing from a cultural point of view, see Cheng, Lo and Chio 2010.

profound understanding of and a strong identification with the natural law of constant change (Daoism). On the other hand, by virtue of individual self-cultivation, they greatly and actively contribute to achieving harmony on different levels. They even offer opportunities for active personal growth (Confucianism). One striking expression of secondary control and emotion-focused coping can be found in another important function of *Nande hutu* put forward mainly by the elderly, that is, the harmonization of mind and body.

## 7.4 The elderly: harmonizing mind-body (*yangshengfa*)

In view of the above insights into the psycho-social harmonizing function of *Nande hutu* and the emotion-focused coping strategies that it embodies, it is not surprising that *Nande hutu* is particularly attractive as a *yangshengfa* 养生法, a method for ‘nourishing life’ that in the long run ensures a long, healthy and happy life. This is especially the case for the elderly.

The issue of ‘nourishing life’ (*yangsheng* 养生) is extremely important in the Daoist canon. In particular Chapter three of the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, *Yangshengzhu* 养生主, ‘The essentials of nourishing life’, deals entirely with the notion of *yangsheng*. Clearly, *yangsheng* does not only refer to nourishing the physical body, but, in its broadest and most essential sense, it means to feed one’s nature, that is, to maintain and develop the totality of one’s life potential (Jullien 2007: 14).<sup>463</sup> Or to use another expression, nourishing life is to ‘conserve strength and store up energy’ (*yang jing xu rui* 养精蓄锐). More literally, this expression means to nourish one’s essence (or quintessence, *jing* 精), by preserving (storing) its cutting edge (*xu rui* 蓄锐). As François Jullien (2007: 14) explains,

Not only must we replenish our strength even as we expend it, but we must also perfect our abilities by cleansing our physical existence of impurities, we must hone our edge while also maintaining ‘our form’ (though the ‘form’ in question refers to more than just the shape of our bodies).

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<sup>463</sup> For more on the importance of ‘the body’ in early Daoism, see e.g. de Bruyn 2009, Jullien 2007, Kohn 2006, Michael 2005, Moeller 2006a.

Nourishing life, which is the prerequisite for a long and healthy life, ideally is a very economic process. This process does not only include to add energy and essence (*jing* 精) as much as possible, but also to preserve them as much as possible by eliminating or avoiding everything that contributes to the diminishing of the vital energy and essence in the process of life, or, more concretely, in the process of ageing.

The use of *yangshengfa* in the contemporary discourse on *Nande hutu* equally should not come as a surprise. The characters *yangsheng* 养生 are abundantly present in the street scenes in China and in any kind of popular reading related to health. They seem to have more or less become equivalent to the - in the West so important - cult of 'wellness'.<sup>464</sup> In fact, this indeed comes close the comprehensive meaning of *yangsheng* encompassing both emotional and physical wellbeing.<sup>465</sup> Chinese people indeed do not take health for granted, but believe it to be achieved through good care.

Not unexpectedly, the link of *Nande hutu* with health is a dominant element in the discourse by and meant for older people, especially where mental health as a result of a *hutu* attitude is discussed as a prerequisite for physical health.<sup>466</sup> These sources include blogs and articles written by elder people and for the elderly, often published in magazines either targeted at the elderly such as *Laonian jiankang* 老年健康 ('Health and the elderly', *Yishou yangsheng* 益寿养生 ('Beneficial for longevity and preserving health'), *Laonianren* 老年人 ('The Elderly'), or in more general magazines and blogs on health with a special focus or column for the elderly (e.g. *Xinli yu jiankang* 心理与健康 'Psychology and health', *Yiyao yu baojian* 医药与保健 'Medicine and health care', *Xiandai jiankangren* 现代健康人 'Healthy people today'). In these discourses, *Nande hutu* is described as a miracle drug for longevity (*changshou texiaoyao* 长寿特效药 (Qin 2006), or as 'the God of longevity' (*Nande hutu zuo shouxing* 难得糊涂做寿星 (Chu 2005) and almost always referred to as a *yangshengfa* 养生法 (e.g. Li D. 2007; Qin 2006; Qin N. 2002; Xiao 2002; Xue 1994). Some of the informants of Anna Boermel, whose research is based on extensive in-depth interviews with elderly people as well as on an abundance of original letters elderly people wrote her about their condition and opinion on the situation of

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<sup>464</sup> I thank my promotor Bart Dessen for this striking comparison. He observed that even the famous popular massage centres use *yangsheng* 养生 in their logo and advertising sign, in a similar way as the magic word 'wellness' is frequently adopted and applied.

<sup>465</sup> Apart from preserving one's health, *yangsheng*, and especially the compound *yangshengfa* 养生法, can also mean 'regimen', always related to improving one's health (such as in *duanlian yangsheng* 锻炼养生, 'exercise or workout regimen' or *jiankang de yangsheng* 健康的养生 'health regimen').

<sup>466</sup> Still, the association with health in general is not completely absent in the discourse for and by younger people and the middle-aged. For instance, popular author Jian Kun (2004: 63-92) dedicates a complete chapter on the issue of health and *hutu*-ness.

the elderly in Beijing, explain that *Nande hutu* would mean the opposite of 'to be under a lot of pressure', but that getting stressed about things one cannot change, such as past grievances with colleagues, fall-outs with friends and recalcitrant neighbors, causes more harm than good to oneself. As one of her informants explained, he often berated his friends for letting conflicts with their children and other worries get too close to them; it would, he insisted, most certainly not be beneficial to their health. (Boermel 2006: 408)

In the *Nande hutu* discourse, many authors emphasize the idea that one cannot avoid getting older, but because some of the vital functions of older people are declining (memory, speed of reaction, judgment capacity, having things under control, ...), it is therefore becoming harder to adapt to society in the process of getting older. This condition can make older people become angry, self-indulgent, stubborn, suspicious and jealous (*caji* 猜忌), and plaintive and reluctant to accept new things. All this might influence the health of the elderly to the extent of producing abnormal psychological patterns (*biantai xinli* 变态心理) such as mental disorder (*jingshenbing* 精神病), depression and suicidal behavior. (Anon. 2006c; Chen S. 2004; Lin Z. 2005; Zhan 2003). Others go as far as to say that a *hutu* approach to life can even be beneficial in the struggle with cancer (Liu & Huang 2005; Qin 2006; Zhan 2003).

These argumentations are sometimes - without however mentioning any kind of verifiable research - reinforced by referring to 'specialists' such as psychologists (*xinli xuejia* 心理学家) that showed the benefits of being less worried and more relaxed (Anon. 2006c; Chen S. 2004; Zhan 2003). For instance, according to Chen Shutang (2004), this kind of specialized research has shown that when people stay a long time in periods of worry and stress, this will not only fasten the process of growing older, it also worsens heart diseases, high blood pressure, liver and kidney diseases, nerve diseases (mental disorder or psychosis, *jingshenbing* 精神病), and other diseases. A *hutu*, detached attitude can make the worry disappear, and can release the pressure and thus make you more lively and relaxed which can avoid attacks of illnesses.

Therefore, older people should all learn to sometimes turn a blind eye to stressful issues and pretend not to care, to be tolerant and keep up with things, to take things as they come (*sui yu er an* 随遇而安) and to know contentment (*zhi zu chang le* 知足常乐), in order to stay unperturbed (*lengjing* 冷静) when confronted with changes and conflicts (Anon. 2006c; Chen S. 2004; Lin Z. 2005; Zhan 2003).

Thus, in the discourse by and for the elderly, *Nande hutu* is presented as an attractive strategy for preserving life, as a *yangshengfa*. That is to say, by maintaining a calm, carefree and lighthearted disposition in life under all circumstances, one harmonizes the relation mind-body, which is beneficial for keeping good mental and thus physical health. As a result, a longer and happier life is in reach. A nice quotation summarizes the

view of most authors on the wisdom of being *hutu* in accordance with traditional Chinese medicine well:

[Traditional Chinese medicine says, that] in nourishing life, a wise person should at all times be happy and adapt to cold and heat, calmly deal with happy events and with anger, economize *yin* and *yang*, and harmonize hardness and softness. (Xue 1994)<sup>467</sup>

This ideal of bodily and mental preservation that results from the methods for nourishing life takes us back to the very beginning of this study (Part One). Bodily preservation is reminiscent of the semantic association of *hutu* with Lord Hundun and with the Daoist preoccupation with longevity (Chapter Two). Mental health, or inner peace of mind, is what Zheng Banqiao expressed as ultimate aim in the postscript of the calligraphy (Chapter Three).

Adding *yangshengfa* to the aforementioned functions of *Nande hutu*, the model thus becomes as follows:

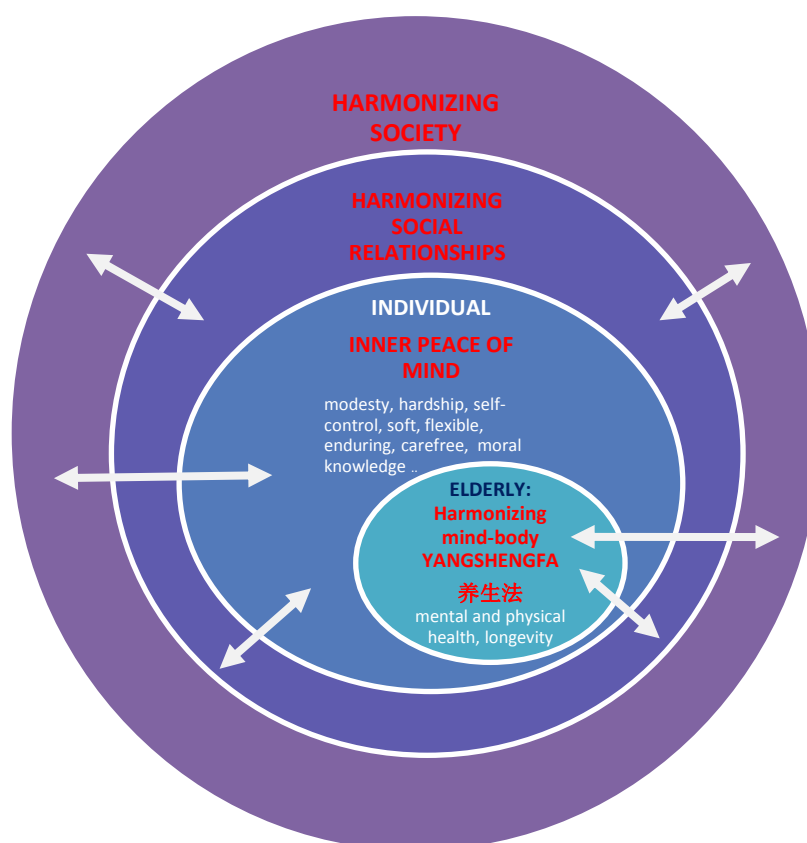


Figure 12 *Nande hutu*'s harmonizing functions including *yangshengfa* based on Fei Xiaotong's model of the individual in society.

<sup>467</sup> 智者之养生，必须四时乐而适寒暑，和喜怒而安居处，节阴阳而调刚柔。

As the function of nourishing life (*yangshengfa*) is ultimately an individual matter, the group of the elderly is placed within the circle of the individual, to indicate that they form a special group within the sphere of individuals.

## 7.5 Strategy for personal ‘success’ and ‘inner freedom’

‘The art of being muddled’ is not only presented as practical advice on how to achieve harmony in different domains of life and become healthier. Another function that explains the attractiveness of *Nande hutu* surfaced in the analysis, namely as a way to advance oneself in society, as a tool for self-achievement and self-enrichment, and for gaining more personal and inner freedom. This aspect of its attractiveness is in the different discourses not as frequently put forward as the more general ‘harmonizing’ function, but is nevertheless distinctly articulated.

As reflected mostly in the easy-to-read books on *Nande hutu*, as well as in related books such as *The path of the Zhongyong* (*Zhongyong zhi dao* 中庸之道) on the popular book market, the wisdom of *Nande hutu* also fulfills the need of commoners to advance themselves in society and become ‘successful’. Many of these books promote *Nande hutu* as a strategy to obtain ‘personal success’, success that is most directly expressed in the context of one’s professional life and personal ambitions. For instance, when discussing ‘the art of being muddled’ in the business sector, *Nande hutu* and its related proverbs are presented as a smart negotiating technique and as a way to deal with the growing competition in business, but evenly as a tool for being a good manager, and as a wisdom that rationalizes the hardship one has to undergo before ‘being successful’. Popular author Sun He (2009: II) literally summarizes his book *Nande hutu de rensheng zhexue* 难得糊涂的人生哲学 (*The philosophy of life of Nande hutu*) as follows:

[This book] is a strategy for human behavior in society; it sums up a means for wielding power and controlling people; a stratagem for digging deep to subdue the enemy and get the upper hand; it advises a clever method for successfully

getting things done; it clarifies the rules of the art of persuasion; it is the key direction for dealing with an emergency in face of danger.<sup>468</sup>

Thus, the success that is purchased can be very material in terms of, for instance, more profit in one's company or a higher social position and accordingly more power and a higher salary.

In other contexts, the success can be situated in the domain of interpersonal relations, personal and family life, or spiritual achievements, and often as a combination of all the above. In the introduction of *Hutuxue: Nande hutu yu chenggong zhi dao* 糊涂学: 难得糊涂与成功之道 (*The art of being muddled': Nande hutu and the road to success*), in which the author, among other topics, discusses the use of *Nande hutu* for 'realizing one's goals' in business contexts, he nevertheless introduces his book as a means to profound spiritual experiences:

Applying *hutu* is a great momentum in one's work, choosing to be *hutu* is a must in life. 'The art of being muddled' is great wisdom. This wisdom gives you an inner freedom of mind, which you should use to freshly examine the world and life, to be outmost serene. [...] If you are equipped with 'the art of being muddled', you can feel that 'Heaven is inside, and humans are on the outside', you can feel the harmonization of Heaven and man, and freedom of mind. You will obtain a liberation you never had before. Thanks to this freedom of mind, you will never again be tired out by material things, or be seduced by fame, or misled by appearances. Only then, you will have the opportunity to have sudden insight<sup>469</sup>, to completely penetrate human life, and to transcend life and human conditions.<sup>470</sup> (Jin 2006)

The author of this book not only associates 'the art of being muddled' with success, but also with philosophical notions such as the spiritual ideal of human enlightenment, complete detachment and harmonization of men and heaven (*tian re he yi* 天人合一)<sup>471</sup>. In addition, he introduces another element in the contemporary *Nande hutu* discourse: inner freedom. That is to say, 'the art of being muddled' is promised to endow one with

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<sup>468</sup> [...] 处世为人之策略，概括掌权驭人之手段，深掘克敌制胜之谋略，点拨成功办事之妙法，昭示说服艺术之规律，指点临危应变之诀窍。

<sup>469</sup> Or sudden enlightenment, a flash of realization. *Dunwu* 顿悟 is often used in a *Ch'an* Buddhist context.

<sup>470</sup> 运用糊涂是工作之大气，取舍糊涂是生活之必须。糊涂学，大智慧。这个智慧就是给你一颗自由的心，用这颗自由的心去重新审视世界和人生，宁静以致远，[...] 具备了它，你就会感到“天在内，人在外”，天人合一，心灵自由，获得一种从未有的解放。凭借之颗自由的心，你再不会为物所累，为名所诱，为色所惑。你才会有机会顿悟，参透人生，超越生命。

<sup>471</sup> On *tian re he yi* 天人合一, see page 53.

a new sense of freedom, a freedom of mind (*xinling ziyou* 心灵自由), a feeling of 'liberation' (*jiefang* 解放). This notion re-appears in many sources, such as in Yan Bo's *Xiao hutu da zhihui* 小糊涂大智慧 (*Minor muddledness, major wisdom*) and in the survey. The freedom of mind that results from a *hutu* attitude is described as a liberation of the mind, a liberation from worries, mental attachments and restraints. This freedom might not be visible from the outside, but nevertheless strongly influences one's wellbeing. Knowing that one does not always have to be clear about all things, knowing when to distinguish trifles from important things and act accordingly, and not taking a standpoint on each and every matter, but keep the mind free and detached, effectively makes life more relaxed and easy to endure. At the same time, as a result of this increased freedom of mind, the notion of independent thinking and self-reliance is stressed. A survey respondent explained that *Nande hutu* 'makes people more tolerant, makes them live their life in more freedom and more according to their own opinions' (Anon. (Survey) 2008).<sup>472</sup>

This increased spirituality and freedom of mind are reminiscent of the aforementioned, very meaningful interpretations of *Nande hutu* as being unrestrained and carefree, and of taking things philosophically (*xiangdekai* 想得开), and as such also reminiscent of the Daoist ideal of complete detachment, a state of mind in which there are no restraints or moral conventions, no absolute ground of meaning, and no mental boundaries (see Chapter Four section 4.3.1 Being natural, unrestrained and carefree).

Whatever achievement (material or spiritual success, inner freedom) is highlighted in these discourses, they emphasize that by practicing 'the art of being muddled' one takes up an active role in advancing oneself in society, and in taking up responsibility for one's life. Someone adept at 'the art of being muddled' is presented as an active agent of his own life, and as a controller of his own success. Other books stress that, by learning 'the art of being muddled', one can actively overcome one's personal fate (*mingyun*). A nice example is the – above (page 186) already mentioned – quote on the back cover of the book *Nande hutu: you 'congming' bian 'hutu' de rensheng da zhihui* 难得糊涂: 由'聪明'变'糊涂'的人生大智慧 (*Nande hutu: the great wisdom of life of changing from smartness into muddledness*) that 'success and defeat is human-made' (*chengbai zi zai ren wei* 成败自在人为) (Yue 2007).

With regard to the attractiveness of *Nande hutu* as an active way to success, a few aspects are important to draw attention on. Firstly, this particularly 'instrumental' presentation of *Nande hutu* mostly occurs in the popular reading such as the books on *hutuxue* and magazines on business or business management, much less in the

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<sup>472</sup>使人们更宽容, 生活得更自由, 更有自己的想法.



interviews and in the survey, and never in scholarly discourses on *Nande hutu*. Whenever discussed as ‘tool’ for personal success and freedom, the topics generally concern concrete, personal situations such as one’s professional situation or social status. In this respect, *Nande hutu* seems to meet needs and values typical of a modern, individualized society, such as wealth, high educational and professional aspirations, high achievement motivation, and personal freedom and independent thinking (see e.g. Kleinman & Kleinman 1995; Kulich & Zhang 2010; Lemos 2012; Yu W. 1997).<sup>473</sup>

However, on a deeper level, personal wealth and social status should not be considered as a materialist result of the capitalist orientation and individualization of Chinese society only. As a security surrogate, being wealthy compensates for feelings of insecurity, incompetence, and previous poverty. It is equivalent to social status and face, and in the reality of daily life it guarantees a safe residence, a decent health insurance, and the means to well take care of one’s parents in their old age and to give one’s children a good education in order to become successful on the competitive labor market. As such, individual advancement in society – whether materially or socially – extends to the family, and is representative for the quest for both personal and family happiness, fortune and security that is so characteristic of modern Chinese society (Kleinman, Yan, Jun et al. 2011b: 15).

Secondly, in its function as a tool for being successful, ‘the art of being muddled’ is simultaneously put forward as a spiritual quality, as a social virtue, and as high wisdom of life. This implies that self-achievement and even self-enrichment is somehow always imbedded in or complemented with the other functions of the saying as a harmonizing force and as a personal strategy to attain inner peace of mind in particular. As Arthur Kleinman (2011: 268) writes: ‘The quest for inner happiness goes side by side with the quest for material gain and social entitlement’.

Thirdly, it should not surprise us that this ‘modern’ function of the wisdom of being muddled as a strategy towards success, self-reliance and freedom of mind is mostly discussed in the discourses by and aimed at the younger and middle-aged, often economically active (in business, economics, leadership positions) generations. They are from a young age exposed to modern values such as self-enrichment, self-development, individualism and freedom. They are part of that group of society for which the common sense of tolerance and endurance is giving way to the idea that things as they are can be improved and altered (Kleinman 2011: 266). For them, the attractiveness of

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<sup>473</sup> See e.g. the seventeen characteristic traits that apply in modern societies listed by Yang Kuo-shu, quoted in Bond (1992: 112), which include a sense of personal efficacy (anti-fatalism), high achievement motivation, independence or self-reliance, and a future orientation. In more recent research (see note 438) Lemos (2012: 98) found that the three main ambitions were to be secure and happy, to become a middle-class professional, and to have more money.

*Nande hutu* lies in the promise of change. The older generation is, as discussed above, more concerned about their health and coping with the past. Besides, the strong conditioning by their past experiences makes it particularly difficult to accept the possibility of individual agency.

When applying the theory of the concentric circles to the five functions that explain the attractiveness of *Nande hutu* in contemporary society, this gives the following figure:

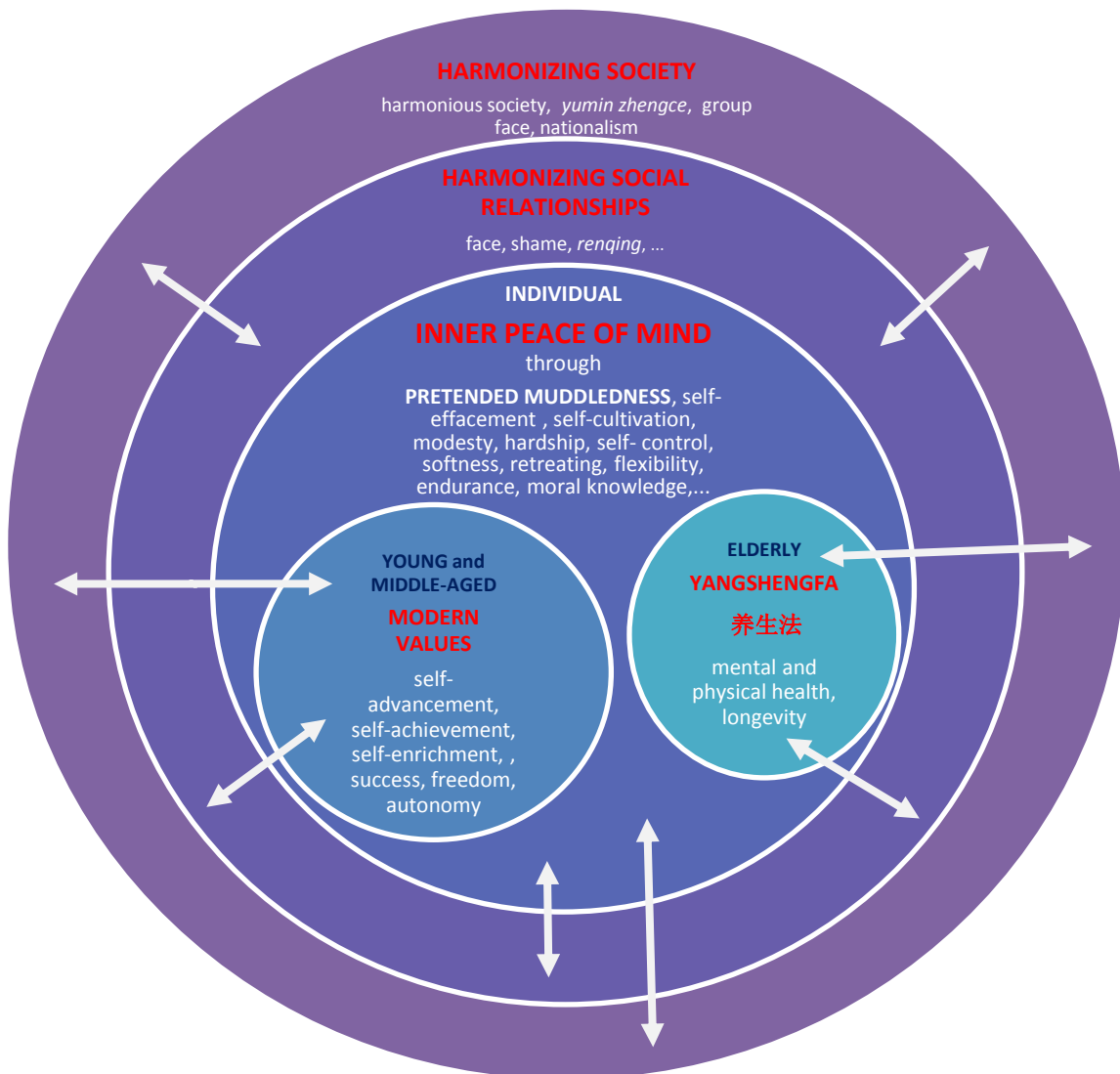


Figure 13 Different functions of *Nande hutu* in contemporary society based on Fei Xiaotong's model of the individual in society.

In this model, the three different individual functions of *Nande hutu*, promoting inner peace of mind, nourishing life, and advancing oneself in society, are at the centre of the surrounding social networks. The reciprocal arrows among the different levels – individual, interpersonal and societal – indicate a positive influence in both directions. It goes without saying that this influence is only positive (i.e. contributing to more

harmony) when ‘the art of being muddled’ is applied according to the moral guidelines discussed above (see Chapter Six section 6.4). For instance, if individuals generate more wealth for themselves and their family at the expense of many others, this will ultimately also harm the harmonious society and social stability. Illustrative of this is the strongly criticized corruption in society.

## 7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I put forward some answers on the questions why ‘the art of being muddled’ is adopted by and attractive for many, what this wisdom of life aims at, how ‘pretended muddledness’ concretely contributes to this, and in what respect this is characteristically Chinese.

One common outcome surfaces: the wisdom of life represented in *Nande hutu* functions as a strategy to fulfil needs on different levels of society: the need to personally cope with life and society in all its complexity and diversity, the need for sustained harmony in interpersonal relations and in society at large, and the need to advance oneself in society and gain more personal freedom. The attractiveness of *Nande hutu* can thus be attributed to its harmonizing function in dealing with life in general, and more in particular, with the rapid and disorienting changes of the past decades, and the impact these changes had on three levels: the individual level, the interpersonal level, and the national or societal level. Especially the older Chinese, who have lived through the transition to communism, the turn into radical revolutionary Marxism, later still the pivot to market socialism, and now the current transition to a confusing mixture of global liberalization and local authoritarianism, feel insecure and no longer at ease with the world around them.

On the individual level, the concrete function and usefulness of ‘the art of being muddled’ is explained from a psycho-social perspective, and discusses three domains. A first perspective deals with the different coping or harmonizing strategies *Nande hutu* embodies: conflict avoidance, emotional control, rationalization (thought control) and self-consolation. Ultimately, these coping strategies contribute to more inner peace of mind, exactly what Zheng Banqiao emphasized by writing the postscript. They are part of the important quest for happiness (fortune and a good, secure life) in contemporary society. These coping strategies, however passive they may seem to be, are not evaluated as such in Chinese culture. They should rather be considered as a level of personally ‘perceived control’ (Cheng, Lo & Chio 2010: 399). The emphasis on thought

and emotion control intrinsically reflect that one does take control of one's life; not in terms of controlling the outer conditions and environment and taking concrete action to change them, but in terms of taking responsibility for how one deals with these conditions and with what life has to offer to each and everyone.

The emotion-focused coping pattern is strongly reflected in another function of *Nande hutu*, namely as a *yangshengfa*, a way to 'nourish life', to balance the relation mind-body, and to attain a healthy and happy old age. This function of *Nande hutu* is especially popular with the elderly, whose needs are situated in the domain of mental and physical health.

The active function of *Nande hutu* is in a particularly modern, individualized and instrumental way articulated in the popular books on 'the art of being muddled' as a strategy for being successful, gaining more freedom of mind and becoming wealthy. In this function, *Nande hutu* serves the modern individual's growing need for professional and material achievement. This function is mainly attractive for the young and the middle-aged, who grew up with increasingly modern values and ambitions.

Thus, there are some slight but meaningful differences in the functionality of the wisdom of pretended muddledness according to age-groups: the young people turn to its wisdom in the context of studying and the accompanying pressure from parents as the sole child, the competition of the *gaokao* 'system', and in their relationships with fellow students, teachers and parents. The economically active population (aged 25-30 to 60) stresses the pragmatic use of *Nande hutu* in different domains of life, such as business, work, family life, financial situation, and marriage. This use can be either for obtaining success in one of the above mentioned domains (the main focus-point in their particular stage of life) such as earning money and supporting the family, or for finding inner peace in the ongoing rat-race. The older, often retired generation adds a new element to this; they above all associate the saying with balancing mental and physical health (*yangshengfa*) and attaining a healthy, carefree and long old age.

However, the different functions of *Nande hutu* according to age groups are not absolute: all 'end-users' use the saying in their balancing function, young people and middle-aged people are also concerned with their health, and even some of the elderly might be pre-occupied with becoming rich. The difference in prioritized functionality only reflects the main concerns at stake at a particular stage of life of these different age groups. It is exactly this multilayered functionality of the saying that highly contributes to its popular status and overall attractiveness.

Moreover, these concrete aims of applying the wisdom of being muddled – inner, interpersonal, and national harmony, being successful and 'free', and 'nourishing life' – in many cases reinforce each other and sometimes overlap. For example, having harmonious social relationships eventually also is beneficial to one's health, and fulfilment of the seemingly selfish needs such as being successful might also benefit the

family in terms of more financial security, more inner peace of mind of the individual members and thus more overall harmony.

This observation is reinforced by the fact that ‘the art of being muddled’ is simultaneously put forward as a spiritual quality, as a social virtue, as a harmonizing force, as a high wisdom of life, as a remedy for a healthy and long life, and as a strategy to be successful, wealthy, powerful, and free. As it shows, materialistic and individualist needs and high philosophical, spiritual and traditional social needs are complementary in contemporary society. This testifies to the phenomenon that in daily life, Chinese people perceive no conflict between traditional cultural and modern elements in their lives, as long as they do not replace the core Chinese qualities of harmony, sound interpersonal relations and moderation (e.g. Bond 1992: 108-116). *Nande hutu* simply serves the quest for happiness, which in contemporary society is a mixture of seemingly contradictory needs, desires and ambitions.<sup>474</sup>

Thus, the attractiveness of *Nande hutu* in terms of its usefulness in society on different levels and for different social groups incorporates both traditional elements and elements of modern society. The traditional elements in the saying can be found in respectively the Confucian search for collective harmony, moderation and order and its according patterns of behavior, and in the Daoist inner way of dealing with life, its emphasis on emotional and rational detachment, and on the balance between mind and body.

Obviously, these concluding observations altogether can be situated in the broader discussion on the modernization of Chinese society. In this society, all Chinese share the same ‘Chinese Dream’ of a modern, wealthy society, without losing traditional values such as the emphasis on interpersonal relations, on harmony, on the family and on social morality, while at the same time actively grasping opportunities for individual wealth, personal achievement and freedom of mind. This however, does not mean the modernization process is smooth and without obstacles.<sup>475</sup> It is in the first place a question of finding the right balance between these modern and traditional beliefs and values.

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<sup>474</sup> Cf also Stewart, Lee & Tao 2010: 375: ‘The craving for personal success and advancement has to be balanced with interpersonal harmony and ‘proper’ righteous behaviors’ in order to maintain fulfillment and mental wellbeing.

<sup>475</sup> Parallel with the liberalization of the economy, the modernization process has also been, and still is, debated among Chinese intellectuals. See e.g. the discussion on the relationship of Chinese traditional culture to the modernization (and seeming Westernization) of China by Zi Zhongyun (1987), in which the positive and negative standpoints with regard to the conflict of modernization against tradition are examined. See also note 126.



## General conclusions

*Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone. The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials.*  
(Lin Yutang)

The calligraphy/saying *Nande hutu* and its contemporary derivative, ‘the art of being muddled’ (*hutuxue*), are undeniably popular phenomena in contemporary society. This research has mapped out the different meaning(s) of this traditional philosophy of life, and has described and explicated how it is interpreted, experienced, practiced and evaluated in contemporary society. Part One investigated the traditional background of *hutu* and *Nande hutu*, and Part Two analyzed the different discourses on the saying in contemporary society.

It should come as no surprise that an analysis of an inherently vague and muddled topic such as *hutu*-ness and *Nande hutu* exposes an enormous variety of interconnected meanings and interpretations. This research took me from ancient Chinese (Daoist) cosmology, feudal society and Qing scholars, to *laba* porridge, official censorship, marital problems and adultery, to sage fools and pretending fools, and far beyond all this, which not only testifies to the ambiguity and vagueness of the concept of *hutu*, but also to its omnipresence in Chinese culture and society. Consequently, the findings cover various often overlapping philosophical, psycho-social, and moral dimensions, which rarely contain absolute points of view, and whose generality should always be nuanced<sup>476</sup>.

Before turning to some summary reflections and discussion points, it is useful to recapitulate the conclusions of the analysis in the different chapters.

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<sup>476</sup> Cf Hall and Ames (1995: 278): ‘The danger of overstatement cannot be overstated’.

## ***Hutu, Nande hutu* and their traditional background**

In Chapter Two, the traditional background of the notion of *hutu* was investigated. Some early occurrences of *hutu* demonstrated that the compound was commonly in use by the Qing dynasty, and revealed a few slightly different meanings of *hutu*. Additionally, from the etymological analysis, a variety of meanings of *hutu* such as ‘not clear’, ‘blurred’, ‘confused’, ‘muddleheaded’, and ‘ambiguous’ surfaced. In addition, the expression ‘pretending to be muddled’ (*zhuang hutu*) was introduced which would prove to be important for the later interpretation of *Nande hutu*. The semantic analysis revealed a variety of mostly positive connotations of *hutu* meaning vagueness (*mohu*) and muddledness as symbols of creative undifferentiation and chaos (cf. Lord Hundun), meaning vitality and longevity (*hulu*), and even meaning protection from evil (Hu Shen).

Many of the important associations of *hutu* closely relate to the methodologies and themes of ancient Chinese philosophy. The fundamental characteristics of ancient Chinese philosophy such as the art of contextualization, dialectical and holistic thinking, and in particular the absence of absolute distinctions or a universal truth, have led to a strong predilection for vagueness and suggestiveness. Muddledness is a mode of thinking that goes beyond analytical, logical, and clear-cut reasoning, which in the Chinese mindset is considered to be too limiting and restrictive for dealing with reality. Especially Daoism, with its profound rejection of absolute knowledge claims, and its preference for non-wisdom that is embodied by the sage fool, advocates a ‘chaotified’ state of mind to ensure happiness and longevity.

The mental and intellectual predilection for vagueness, indistinctness and muddledness also resonates at the psycho-social and moral level. This phenomenon is not only attributed to the typical hierarchic and network-based structure of Confucian society, but also to the autocratic but nevertheless harmony-oriented system that generated virtues and attitudes in line with a muddled attitude. Modesty, self-concealment, self-effacement, concern for face, and indirectness in communication are only a few of these preferred attitudes, and are most clearly shown in aspects of everyday behavior such as social morality, interpersonal relationships and communication.

Thus, this introductory chapter shed light on how the motifs of vagueness, indistinctness and muddledness constitute essential characteristics of both the methodology and the content of ancient Chinese philosophy. Vagueness, suggestiveness and even ignorance have profoundly conditioned the Chinese psyche, in such a way that they have become a vital part of Chinese thinking and everyday behavior. Foolishness or ‘*la folie absolue*’ as a philosophical ideal and as a social virtue, have become a culturally conditioned state of mind, regardless of which period in history, and transcending social class or age group.



The investigation into the background of the calligraphy *Nande hutu* (Chapter Three, first section) revealed that it was no coincidence that the saying was written by the upright but eccentric and individualistic scholar-official Zheng Banqiao. In his early life, Zheng Banqiao endured a lot of misery, poverty and bereavement. However, he climbed the social ladder through the imperial examination system, obtaining the *jinshi* degree, and became a county magistrate. In this period as an official, he fully dedicated himself to 'serving the people'. However, the widespread corruption and the lack of accountability in officialdom, devalued, in his opinion, the position of scholar-officials who were supposed to function as father-mother official in society, which left Zheng disillusioned, disappointed and angry. His painful confrontation with the corruption and inequality in society, his personal life experiences, and the various philosophical influences he underwent in his life as a Confucian scholar and through his dealings with Daoist masters and Buddhist monks, certainly contributed to his increasing resentment and disappointment. Eventually, these feelings found an expression in the saying *Nande hutu*: it is difficult to become 'muddled' again. The story of the *hutu laoren* who was once an accomplished scholar but now lived harmoniously as a recluse far away from officialdom – whether or not it is true – also favors this interpretation.

Against this socio-historical and Zheng Banqiao's personal background, the academic discourse (Chapter Three, second part) discusses *Nande hutu* as a detached inner state of mind (*jingjie*) that is strongly rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy. One of the most essential aspects of the wisdom of *Nande hutu* articulated in the postscript to the saying, is that it expresses an enlightened muddledness, and, in its ideal state, a muddledness that goes beyond smartness, that results in inner peace of mind. In other words, Zheng Banqiao's *hutu* is not foolishness and stupidity, nor is it related to the ignorance and naivety of a child. Zheng's *hutu* state departs from wisdom and smartness, and integrates – or rather internalizes – a complete understanding of and identification with life and the principle of constant change. This complete insight into the nature of life causes a *hutu* person not to be swept away by strong emotions, and not to be pre-occupied with knowledge claims and issues belonging to the sphere of 'common' smartness and intelligence, nor with one's outer appearance. Such a person thus might look 'foolish' (*da zhi ruo yu*), and has the wisdom to let go and take a step back whenever appropriate. Thus, from the analysis, *Nande hutu* appeared to be a high spiritual ideal closely related to a detached, transcendent state of mind for which the Daoist sage fool and Lord Hundun are exemplary. On the other hand, Zheng Banqiao's saying bears associations with the Confucian moral virtues of integrity and social engagement, and with the notion of self-cultivation of which Zheng Banqiao serves as the model example. Whatever the philosophical connotation, this discussion has made clear that the spiritual illumination (*ming*) and self-transcendence that is embodied in the saying is out of reach for the majority of the population; it is indeed very difficult to attain (*Nande*).

Further in Chapter Three, the doublesidedness of the wisdom of being muddled was put forward. On the one hand, *Nande hutu* is an expression of Zheng Banqiao's integrity, social engagement and high level of moral cultivation. On the other hand, *Nande hutu* expresses a resentment against and criticism of the devaluation of the role of scholar-officials at the time, and more in general of the structure of society and the inequality it creates. In this context, *Nande hutu* embodies a survival strategy for those who wish to escape the hardships of life and of that particular kind of society. It becomes a strategy for self-preservation in a highly hierarchic, autocratic society, a strategy in which one adopts a passive, evasive attitude towards unfortunate events, undesirable circumstances, and negative feelings.

It is with this negative note that Part One concludes. Many of the academics who have investigated the saying agree that the high philosophical interpretation has lost most of its active and engaging nature during the process of its popularization.

### **'The art of being muddled' in contemporary society**

The contemporary interpretations of the saying (Chapter Four) have to a great extent transformed the lofty, difficult to attain spiritual ideal of being muddled into the popular 'art of being muddled', pretending to be muddled (*zhuang hutu*) and feigning ignorance, stupidity and foolishness, in, or with regard to, an uncomfortable or an unfortunate situation.

However, as the different interpretations show, *Nande hutu* should in fact be considered as an umbrella expression for many related expressions, virtues and wisdoms of life that are in the same way as *Nande hutu* rooted in ancient philosophy. *Nande hutu* covers the broad, typically Chinese notion of muddledness and the many virtues and attitudes such as modesty, self-concealment, self-cultivation, knowing fate, not contending, detachment and compromise, being carefree and unrestrained, and concern for social norms that are related to this motif. The wisdom of *Nande hutu* is thus not only a theoretical philosophy of life, but also an attitude towards life, a competence, a skill, and even – often unconsciously – a way of understanding and communicating. It is in fact the revered wisdom of hiding one's wisdom, which is certainly difficult to achieve.

In Chapter Five, the popularity, commercialization and popular application of the saying was mapped out. The aforementioned variety of 'popular' meanings, interpretations and related wisdoms make the saying accessible to all kinds of people. People from all walks of life are attracted to it, and publications and discussions about the saying are – apart from the purely academic research on the saying – found in public fora such as the internet and popular magazines aimed at and written by the youth, the middle-aged and the elderly. One important example of this popularization is the

existence of popular books on *hutuxue*, 'the art of being muddled', which are labeled 'popular reading'.

Moreover, the umbrella saying *Nande hutu* and its related wisdoms are not just popular and commercialized, but have also adopted a widely accessible and pragmatic interpretation. The wisdom of being muddled is presented and marketed as a practical advice on how to adjust one's inner balance, how to manage one's interpersonal relationships in whatever situation, and how to advance oneself in life, in order to become more 'peaceful'. In addition, it can serve as a strategy for the harmonious society by educating the people to be content and modest citizens, and the officials to be honest and in tune with the people they serve. It would seem that everyone applies the wisdom of being muddled pragmatically according to one's current living situation and issues of the day. In this respect, young people, often students, tend to emphasize its usefulness in relationships with their parents, friends, roommates, fellow students. They associate *Nande hutu* with an easy-going, relaxed and comforting approach to life. The middle-aged, economically active population stresses the usefulness of the saying in their professional life (such as in business, in leadership positions, with colleagues and superiors, ...) and in their family life. The elderly are less concerned with managing their professional and marital relationships, and focus on the wisdom of being muddled as a way of nourishing their mental and physical health.

The popular discourse on the saying also revealed some nuances in the use of the wisdom between the sexes. Men tend to apply the wisdom of being muddled in professional situations and public appearance, and especially in politics and all situations in which issues of face dominate. Women tend to expose more 'muddling' (modest, compromising, self-effacing) behavior in their intimate relations with their partners and their family.

Another outcome of the analysis in Chapter Five was the occurrence of 'exceptional' domains, that is, situations and environments in which there is less tendency to behave modestly, to conceal oneself or to pretend to be muddled. These situations are contact with close friends, with foreigners, and in online anonymous exchange. Clearly, this is especially the case for the younger and – to a lesser extent – the middle-aged generation, who have been influenced by modernization and individualization and as such experiment with or have knowledge of a more Western approach to relationships.

Applying the popular strategy of pretended muddledness for one's own happiness, in one's interpersonal relationships, and even as a tool for the harmonious society is not unconditional (Chapter Six). Already in earlier times, critical authors such as Lu Xun warned against a wrong interpretation of the saying as an acclaimed cultural virtue and as a passive or selfish attitude, and also stressed its negative relationship with the autocratic society. In contemporary society, critical sources comment on a wrong interpretation and use of 'the art of being muddled', while others give 'moral guidelines'

to ensure the positive and engaging aspect of the wisdom of being muddled does not get lost.

The strongest criticism regards the use of the saying as an excuse to passively ‘muddle through life’, not take things seriously, and evade one’s social responsibilities. A degree worse, is feigning ignorance for one’s own benefit at the expense of others. This is much discussed in the context of official corruption and bribery. These negative practices and attitudes might be the result of ages of cultural conditioning, in which ancient Chinese philosophy, the traditional structure of society (hierarchy, bureaucracy and patriarchy) and even Chinese patterns of thinking have all worked to make the motif of muddledness particularly appealing to the Chinese. Nevertheless, these critical voices urge people not to involve themselves in a wrong application of the ‘virtue’ of being muddled, and to use their intelligence not to let *Nande hutu* degenerate into a slick and easy way of self-protection, self-enrichment, and self-empowerment. At the macro level, the saying is criticized as part of the national ‘policy of the ignorant masses’ (*yumin zhengce*), in which the masses are kept ignorant by means of extensive nationally controlled censorship, withholding of information, and false public testimonies, all political strategies belonging to an autocratic system.

At the centre of this criticism lies a moral dilemma: the tension between the passive and the active aspect of the practice of being muddled. There is indeed a thin line between retreating and pretending to be muddled, and ‘smartly’ taking action. To solve this dilemma, two important criteria were put forward: the choice to act or not act, and the possible harm to others or society of the actions or inactions. If feigned ignorance and muddledness is self-imposed - even if negatively motivated for self-preservation or enhancement - and this choice for a passive response does not harm oneself, others or society, than there is no reason why this muddledness (even pretended) and passive resignation in one’s life should not be allowed. Nevertheless, when and how the transition from a passive into an active state, and from a muddled into a ‘smart’ state takes place, remains up to the individual practitioner.

In order to avoid the misuse of the wisdom of being muddled, some moral guidelines for the individual were suggested: separating major (*da shi*) from minor matters (*xiao shi*), distinguishing between matters of social conduct (*zuoren*) and handling affairs (*zuoshi*), and cultivating one’s moral conscience and standards, are a few of these guidelines. Indeed, to be morally accepted, *Nande hutu* does not necessarily have to be practiced in a way consistent with the high spiritual ideal of the moral fool. As long as ‘pretended muddledness’ is ‘smartly’ applied, that is to say, as an active, engaging and fully conscious (self-imposed) practice, and not at the expense of the wellbeing of others or social stability, and ideally for the benefit of the greater good, it is an integral and even vital part of Chinese social morality. This condition of ‘smartness’ depends on the accumulated experience, age, and moral wisdom of the individual, and is as such never absolute, but always specific and subjective.

These critical and reflective discursive elements constitute the moral dimension of the saying: ‘the art of being muddled’ as an – often conditional - social virtue, strongly linked to moral self-cultivation and moral wisdom.

With regard to its attractiveness in contemporary society, the different discourses on *Nande hutu* revealed a threefold explanation (Chapter Seven). Firstly, ‘the art of being muddled’ serves as a harmonizing force, as a counterbalance for chaos and instability. Its wisdom promotes inner peace of mind (at the individual level), secures social relationships (at the interpersonal level), and assures social stability (at the societal level). Secondly, ‘the art of being muddled’ serves especially the elderly in their quest for physical and mental health, in which *Nande hutu* functions as a way to nourish life (*yangshengfa*). Thirdly, ‘the art of being muddled’ is promoted – or rather marketed - as a smart strategy for self-advancement, self-achievement and self-enrichment, and for obtaining individual and spiritual freedom. This last function is mainly applied by the middle-aged population. On the condition that ‘the art of being muddled’ is applied in a morally proper way, from a holistic point of view these functions positively influence each other. For instance, as part of several greater wholes, a harmonious, balanced, content and healthy individual generally also maintains sound social relationships, and benefits the harmonious society. As such, these functions make up the psycho-social dimension of the saying.

On the personal level, *Nande hutu* is the expression of a typically Chinese coping strategy, which enables the individual to cope more positively with life and the increasing modernization, complexity and plurality of society. Specifically, these coping mechanisms which embody the wisdom of being muddled consist of conflict-avoidance, emotional control, rationalization and self-consolation.

Although these strategies seem to advocate rather passive, evasive ways of behavior, in the Chinese psyche, they nevertheless function as smart and active ways of maintaining a harmonious relation with oneself, one’s social environment and with society. For instance, ‘letting go and retreating’ (*fang yi zhao, tui yi bu*) is done with the hope for improvement, and should not be considered as pure abandonment or evasiveness. Rather on the contrary, situations in which one would prefer to adopt a muddled attitude offer an opportunity to cultivate one’s mental strength. Another explanation for this seeming paradox is to consider that in the Chinese mind, controlling the environment is less likely to be successful than controlling one’s emotions and thoughts (i.e. the notion of ‘secondary control’).

Altogether, the deep philosophical foundations of *Nande hutu* suggest a passive philosophy of life that should be used actively (consciously) and smartly. Only under these conditions, by bringing about great flexibility and resilience, will this popular philosophy of life contribute to more individual, interpersonal and societal harmony, and ultimately to social integration and mental survival.

Thus, in contemporary society, the popular saying *Nande hutu* has taken on a pragmatic interpretation, namely as a 'strategy' for obtaining and maintaining mental (e.g. having a sound marriage and satisfying interpersonal relations), material (e.g. being successful in business, in policy making etc.), and physical (e.g. good health) wellbeing. In this respect, with the exception of the personal success-oriented interpretations and functions and the abuse of the saying purely for one's own benefit and to the harm of others, the popularization and modernization has not - as I initially wrongly assumed - made the saying more 'superficial'. The saying clearly has lost some of its deep philosophical and lofty nature, but its wisdom effectively works on whatever level as a strategy to cope with life and social relationships.

## Summary reflections and discussion

### Dialectical and holistic thinking in terms of change

The traditional dialectical and holistic mode of thinking that is described in Chapter Two is clearly present in the different discourses on the saying, both on the formal level and on the content level.

On the formal level, most discursive elements develop around dialectical relations, of which the first and foremost is that of smartness and muddledness as emphasized in the postscript of the saying: muddledness that transcends smartness. The dynamics of dialectical thinking is also illustrated by dichotomies such as fake and real muddledness (*zhuang/jia* and *zhen hutu*), minor and major smartness and minor and major muddledness (*xiao/da congming* and *xiao/da hutu*), minor and major matters (*xiao and da shi*), social conduct (*zuoren*) and handling affairs (*zuoshi*), and the relation between *zhi* (wisdom) and *yu* (foolishness) as in the saying *da zhi ruo yu*.

On the content level, many of the discursive elements are permeated with the acceptance of constant change and the dynamics of dialectical relations as a natural principle. This is for instance reflected in the inherent doublesidedness of the saying, in its passive and active component. Other examples of this dialectical approach to life are those sayings that deal with the dialectics and complementarity of smartness and muddledness such as *Da zhi ruo yu*, *Congming fan bei congming wu*, *Congming yi shi hutu yi shi*, *Shui zhi qing ze wu yu*, and those sayings that reflect on the unavoidability of the alternation of fortune and misfortune such as 'knowing fate' (*zhi tianming*), and the saying 'A loss may turn out to be a gain' (*sai weng shi ma*). These sayings underline the conviction that extreme situations are always temporary, which at its core can be a reassuring and comforting thought. In addition, the dialectical rhetoric expresses more strongly the undesirability of extremes. The wish for moderation is most clearly articulated in the dichotomy 'smartness' and 'muddledness': too much smartness

without some muddledness, and muddledness without starting out smart, will ultimately be harmful for the individual, his social network, and society. They should be present in one person in a harmonious complementary relation.

The great resilience and flexibility that results from the dialectical and holistic worldview makes the Chinese resistant to psychological stressors in times of major and rapid changes. Changes are ultimately considered as natural and unavoidable, and one day or another a new balance will appear, so why worry or get emotionally or rationally attached. Fleetingness will always take over, for the good or for the bad.

### **Merging of popular and intellectual elements and of the ‘three teachings’**

Another important observation is the ease with which rigid, intellectual, philosophical (*ya*) and popular, common, folk (*su*) elements harmoniously merge in the contemporary discourse. Especially the different interpretations of the saying in contemporary society (Chapter Four) combine many commonplace and more philosophical elements, and all these interpretations are evenly valuable and ‘true’. Moreover, it is exactly this mixed intellectual and popular content that makes the saying accessible to people from all walks of life. The broadness of interpretations and the wide range of uses and contexts, from a high spiritual ideal to a common coping strategy, or as a ‘strategy’ to advance oneself in society and become successful in whatever desired domain, are important contributors to its popularity and attractiveness.

Also remarkable, is the amalgam of Confucian, Daoist and even Buddhist elements in both the academic explanations and the contemporary discourses on the saying, as well as in the application of the wisdom of *Nande hutu*. Although in its most philosophical meaning the saying is undeniably rooted in Daoist thought, in the contemporary discourse Daoist and Confucian elements are freely mixed to signify a comprehensive philosophy of life. This phenomenon was at various occasions referred to and explained with the phenomenon of the *san jiao he yi*, ‘the unity of the three teachings’. In the first place, it was discussed in the academic discourse as the threefold philosophical influence Zheng Banqiao underwent to better understand his often contradictory behavior and life choices and to relate this to the calligraphy *Nande hutu*. Secondly, I advanced the notion to explain the melting pot of mainly Daoist and Confucian elements in the contemporary (theoretical) interpretations and the discussions on the practical value of the saying.

The psycho-social explanation for this is the fact that the *san jiao he yi* is not only a philosophical reality, but has since long provided a mental framework to put life experiences into perspective, and as such serves the Chinese mind a pragmatic solution for dealing with all kinds of life issues such as difficult emotions, unfortunate events and interpersonal relationships. In practice, this generally means that when things go well and one’s ambitions are fulfilled, one inclines to Confucianism for mental support and

confirmation, whereas in times of disappointment and hardship, one resorts to Daoism (or Buddhism).

Philosophically, the explanation for this double inclination lies in the fundamentally different rationales of the two teachings. At its core, Daoism is pre-occupied with 'ultimate happiness' (*zhi le* 至乐), individual wellbeing, and mental and physical health; its philosophy of self-transcendence promotes a sense of inner tranquility. It should come as no surprise that downplaying one's desire for success and achievement, stressing the importance of following one's natural disposition and the nature of the universe, revealing the cyclical swing between extreme poles, and valuing the unorthodox way of coping by using softness against hardness, make especially the Daoist philosophy extremely appealing for improving one's mental health (Tseng, Chang & Nishizono 2005: 149). The same is true for Confucianism with its emphasis on establishing inner and social harmony, on empathy toward others, on the active notion of (moral) self-cultivation and the belief in a person's inherent potential for well-being, and on the notion of impulse control and moderateness in the *Zhongyong*. As illustrated in Chapter Seven, the mixture of traditional Daoist and Confucian aspects of *Nande hutu* and its related wisdoms of life confirm this assumption: in contributing to a detached state of mind', as well as to social and societal harmony, they serve the Chinese individual as powerful coping strategies, and help him to give meaning to his life.

In view of the above reflections (the merging of popular and philosophical discursive elements and of the three – and in this context rather two – philosophical teachings), it seems crucial to me that, for a complete understanding of the philosophy of life that *Nande hutu* advocates, it is not the division in different philosophical schools or the division between popular and academic that make sense. Instead, the totality of the different philosophical and more popular interpretations should be considered. Moreover, I submit that it is exactly this pragmatism and ease with which Chinese people simultaneously integrate both Daoist and Confucian elements and identify with both the more philosophical and lofty, and the popular interpretations of *Nande hutu*, that is symbolic for the way Chinese people in general navigate through life; that is, by accepting whatever comes their way, face whatever difficulties and make the best of the situation. This psychological quality constitutes one aspect of the great inner strength and resilience that is so typically Chinese.

### **Modernization and the changing/changed society**

Another outcome of the analysis was the several elements in the different contemporary discourses on *Nande hutu* that reflect its importance as a modern phenomenon.

First of all, the analysis of the contemporary discourse reveals the emergence of modern values, such as individualism, self-achievement, self-reliance, the need for



personal freedom, and critical reflection. This is for instance reflected in the use and promotion of *Nande hutu* as a strategy for self-enrichment, self-achievement, and self-development.

Also the increased reflection about one's personal happiness and how to realize it, involves a sense of and realization of personal power to actively deal with one's own problems. This observation is reinforced by the emergence of popular books on for instance 'changing one's destiny' (*gaibian mingyun*), which offer a counterweight to popular sayings such as 'knowing (and accepting) fate', and in some sense actively promote more individual agency. The critical voices discussed in Chapter Six are also illustrative of more self-reflection and reflection on society. Modernity makes people eager to get a grip on their life, not only by the aforementioned culturally conditioned 'secondary control', but also with clear, straightforward, and self-motivated (conscious) action. It seems in contemporary society not only social control, but also personal control has become an increasingly important priority.

At the same time, despite the modernization, as discussed above, the discourse is filled with traditional elements such as concern for face, social morality and harmony, traditional philosophical ideals and even traditional terminology. It is a melting pot of traditional influences that are rephrased, re-interpreted and made functional, but have lost nothing of their value and importance. Many of these traditional values are not only part of the daily concerns and practices of common people, but are also publicly promoted in different official media such as popular magazines and books, radio-programs and TV programs, and even in psychological counseling in schools such as the *xinli jiaoyu* in educational institutes. The popularity of these traditional values can be attributed to – as many of the informants raised – the disorienting changes and the absence of firmly established 'new' values in contemporary Chinese society, which make people vulnerable and insecure. The complexity, freedom, previously unknown and even forbidden 'capitalist' values, individualization, and changes in interpersonal relationships that modernization brings about, causes a clash with the traditional values, and a sense of chaos, conflict, and disorder. In this respect, the traditional wisdom of *Nande hutu* is actually a strategy for re-balancing: in its contemporary multi-layered interpretation, it underpins both traditional and modern values, and offers practical advice on how to deal with the complexity of modern life without losing traditional values. Thus, although people may modify tradition to suit the requirements of modern – changed and still changing – life, it is exactly the incorporation of both traditional wisdom and modern aspects that ensures that the individual does not feel lost in modernity without any connection to tradition.

In view of this, the interpretation, practice and functionality of the ancient wisdom of *Nande hutu* in contemporary society seem to provide a perfect example of how the characteristically Chinese modernization process takes shape against the background of modern society. Moreover, it is no overstatement to say that whatever the individual

interpretation of the saying *Nande hutu* may be, and how ever popular and popularized it may be, the major reason for its popularity can be found at the core of the social dynamics of a transforming society. Regardless of how conscious or unconscious the philosophy of life behind it is, 'the art of being muddled' provides a comforting and yet very familiar method for finding balance in whatever field of life, and according to the individual needs at stake in the particular situation and environment: one's marital, family, social, inner and professional life, and one's mental and physical health.

## Final remarks

As an exploratory research, there have been many issues uncovered that deserve a more in depth investigation. One interesting phenomenon in contemporary society in particular is the abundance of self-improvement books on the popular book market. On the surface, 'self-improvement' seems to be the modern equivalent of the Confucian notion of 'self-cultivation'. This phenomenon in itself deserves a separate case-study.

In addition, this research only touches briefly on the official promotion of these self-improvement books which deal with the same philosophical roots as *Nande hutu* does, and as such promote the same wisdom of the foolish and passive. It is very likely that the official promotion of passivity, self-effacement, and internally dealing with feelings of angst and insecurity which suit the purposes of the harmonious society so well, will continue for a long time. However, this research also showed examples of the growing resistance against the traditional virtue of passive muddledness, ignorance and fatalism, especially in relation to changes in society. Some indications of change towards more active responses to life's ups and downs came to light, especially amongst the younger generation. Furthermore, in the similar range of the popular self-improvement books, also books that, for instance, encourage one to change one's destiny, as well as similar weblog-discussions emerge. As Lemos (2012: 233) argues,

The myth of infinite inscrutable Chinese fatalism is challenged by the spread of social problems like mental illness, drugs, prostitution and suicide. Stoical acceptance by Chinese people of political authoritarianism is another fallacy. People do not accept everything that happens in the name of reform as being for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Even the government recognizes that mass protest and social unrest is a major problem threatening social stability. Depression and suicides are increasing, which might indicate that the existing coping strategies expressed in sayings like *Nande hutu* either are not efficient anymore, or that they are not implemented (enough) anymore. This would thus also be an indication that the seemingly harmonious mixture of traditional and modern values is not as harmonious as we might assume or it once was.

In view of this, some questions arise: How long will the traditional content of such self-improvement books remain popular, and whether or not and how gradually will their content change? How long will people be 'content' with looking for inner contentment and prioritize interpersonal and societal harmony? In other words, how long will the smooth co-existence of traditional coping strategies rooted in moral and social values with the active pursuit of modern ambitions be satisfying for young, modern Chinese citizens?

Much research has already been conducted on characteristically Chinese popular coping strategies, but not yet on how these tend to change in the context of modernization and globalization. Comparison and content analysis of popular self-improvement books, popular books on (social) psychology and related official media would certainly reveal much about the direction in which the Chinese psyche is headed. In this respect, the emergence of new coping styles, such as pro-active coping, religious coping, social support seeking and communal coping, especially among the younger generation, need more in depth investigation.

Other aspects that strongly relate to the above mentioned culturally conditioned strategies of resilience and fatalism and active and passive coping, are the notions of social, moral and individual agency. The above analysis gave some indication of how personal control is gaining importance over social control, and about how the need for more personal autonomy is increasing, but how exactly and to what extent this takes shape in modern society constitutes an interesting domain for future research.

To conclude, the search for the meaning and interpretation of a saying as popular and well-known as *Nande hutu*, has lead to a web of meanings that on the outside might seem to go beyond the initial purpose of this research. However, what I have done is merely observe and take notice of the discursive elements the different sources offered, and make a comprehensive analysis of their totality. Although at times I found myself in a rather bemuddled or confused state of mind, I nevertheless hope this study has brought some clarity to this muddled and ambiguous topic, and has clarified at least some aspects of *hutu*-ism as a Chinese phenomenon, and of the 'culture of muddledness' (*hutu wenhua*) so prevalent in Chinese society. More generally, I hope this dissertation will contribute to an increased understanding by both Western and Chinese people of what my Chinese colleague in the introduction of this research called 'the crucial part of Chinese culture that most non-Chinese people fail to grasp, and most Chinese are not conscious of'. That is, how vagueness, suggestiveness and the phenomenon of 'pretended muddledness' have shaped, and continues to shape, the Chinese psyche and behavior.



# Addenda



## Addendum 1: OVERVIEW INTERVIEWS

NAME	DATE	OCCUPATION / FUNCTION	AGE	PLACE
<b>CUI Li</b> 崔莉 mrs.	26 September 2008	Professor/Dean of the International School of Liaoning University (now Party Secretary) 辽宁大学-汉语国际教育学院	53	Shenyang
<b>DAI Bing</b> mr.	19 May 2008	Accountant in Shenyang Normal University 沈阳师范大学	29	Shenyang
<b>FU</b> mr. and <b>QI</b> mrs.	28 May 2008	General manager / administrative assistant in a leading function at a multinational	43 / 31	Beijing
<b>HAN Shengwang</b> mrs.	29 September 2008	Professor of sociology at Beijing University 北京大学	60	Beijing
<b>HU Sheng</b> 胡胜 (mr.) For the interview transcript, see Addendum two.	26 September 2008	Dean of the School of Literature of Liaoning University 辽宁大学文学院; teaches mainly Ming and Qing literature	39	Shenyang
<b>HUANG Ayi</b> mrs.	29 May 2008	Ayi 阿姨 at a friend's house	32	Beijing
<b>LI Fei</b> ms.	15 September 2008	Beauty editor at InStyle (magazine)	29	Shanghai
<b>OUYANG</b> mr.	18 September 2008	Artist - sculptor	40	Beijing
<b>QI Kuiyan</b> ms.	1 December 2008	PhD student - research on some neuro-linguistic aspect of ethics	37	Ghent (Belgium)

<b>Sophie</b> (ms.)	22 May 2008	Administrative assistant in a small foreign company	24	Shanghai
<b>TAO Tao</b> mr.	30 September 2008	General manager in a foreign-owned company	50	Beijing
<b>TSUI</b> mrs.	16 September 2008	International Business Developer for the China region at an international company	x	Beijing
<b>WANG Tangjia</b> 汪堂家 mr.	23 May 2008	Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, School of Philosophy, Fudan University 复旦大学	46	Shanghai
<b>YANG Jie</b> mrs.	22 September 2008	Teacher at the International School of Liaoning University 辽宁大学	50	Shenyang
<b>YE</b> mrs.	17 September 2008	Senior Sales Manager at an International Travel Agency	50	Beijing
<b>ZHANG Da</b> mr.	1 October 2008	Artist- fashion designer		Shanghai
<b>ZHANG Jiacheng</b> 张家成 mr.	5 November 2008	Assistant Professor at the Philosophy Department of Zhejiang University 浙江大学 - 人文学院哲学系	43	Ghent (Belgium)
<b>ZHANG Lie</b> mrs.	28 September 2008	Teacher at a small private university (major: Classical Chinese)	42	Beijing
<b>ZHANG Wanning</b> mr.	20 May 2008	Vice-director of Shenyang Development and Reform Commission 发展和改革委员会	39	Shenyang
<b>ZHANG Yang</b> ms.	23 September 2008	Employee at the International Relations Office – Liaoning University 辽宁大学	25	Shenyang



<b>ZHOU Mai</b> 周迈 mr.	26 May 2008	Assistant Professor of Western philosophy and Marxism at Beijing Capital University of Economics and Business 首都经济贸易大学	39	Beijing
<b>ZHUGE Yibing</b> 诸葛忆兵 mr.	19 September 2008	Professor at the School of Chinese Classics at Renmin University 人民大学 - 国学院	49	Beijing



## Addendum 2: SAMPLE INTERVIEW : professor HU Sheng

**Name:** Professor Hu Sheng 胡胜

**Age:** 39

**Date:** 26 September 2008

**Place:** Liaoning University, his office

**Position:** Dean of the School of Literature, teaches mainly Ming and Qing literature

胡教授，简称“胡”；

马米歌，简称“马”。

马：胡教授，您刚才已经开始说的，很有意思的，关于“糊涂学”的这个现象。

胡：“糊涂学”，我不知道站在你的文化角度怎么看，因为我们中国人特别讲究人际关系，所以包括儒家学说里的“仁”，就是孔子的“仁爱”的“仁”。其实，人与人，如“众”，三个人，中国字里面，特别讲究。不说中国字，中国文化，特别讲究人际关系，“和”嘛，“和为本”，讲究人与人之间怎么相处。另外，中国人讲究儒家文化的“中庸”，“中和”，艺术上讲究“中和之美”，就是“乐而不淫，哀而不伤。”不过分，保持一个比较好的恰到好处的那个“度”，不要“过”。中文中的“淫”，其实是过分的意思，中国人要求不能过分，中国人跟西方人的文化差异在于：西方人擅于表现自己，表现自我；中国人更讲究内敛，就是很多东西不用去说，不要过分，如果那样就给人感觉显得很张扬，很猖狂。猖狂，两个字都有“犛”，和动物“狗”有关，这是过分的，所以中国人一般都是比较内敛的，也有更加平和的一种“中和”的一种人生态度，就是“不过”，在这种思想之下呢，慢慢形成了一种民族文化心理，做什么事都……我们中国有许多俗语：“出头的椽子先烂”、“枪打出头鸟”，听过吧？感觉这两个俗语有两个层面，前面的“中和”、“中庸”这是一个“雅”的层面，而这个属于“俗”的层面，从“雅”、“俗”两个层面可以感受到中国传统文化的一种传统力量。在这之下，“难得糊涂”介于这二者之间，“雅”文化可以接受它，因为它符合了“中庸”之道，表达了一种“中和”、“内敛”；“俗”文化这种“枪打出头鸟”人不能太出头，稍微往后一点，你有十分的力量，你有十分的优势，你只说八分，留点余地，比方说像奥运会，我能够拿金牌，我就说“我尽量努力”，不是像国外人说“这块金牌是我的”，我们中国人很少会这么说，但是可能会说“往最好的方向发展”，达到最好的效果，这样说，表现出这样的一种文化传统，然后产生“难得糊涂”，而“难得糊涂”在郑板桥的年代，对他来说，是一种人生态度，这种人生态度体现

出一种人生况味，这是一种无奈。因为人际关系，包括日常人际关系，还包括官场人际关系。尤其在官场中，人际关系错综复杂，所以中国历史上还有陶渊明就说“误落尘网中，一去三十年。”。他认为，尘俗，或者说人际关系如果是一张网，它把人包罗住、羁绊住，无法超脱，无法摆脱，于是就挂冠，把乌纱帽和官印挂在房梁上，就跑掉了。他就感觉自己像一只鸟一样。

马：他（陶渊明）就是这么做的？

胡：是，他是这么做的。然后就回到家里去了。

马：郑板桥也是。

胡：是的，郑板桥也是，他这就是一种在官场里的一种“隐”，中国有句话叫“大隐隐于市”，这个“市”用你的话就是“Market”，你可以把它翻译成市场，就是很热闹的地方。真正的隐者，“大隐”，最高境界，在最热闹的地方，作为自己修身养性的一个场所，一个特定的一个场地，所以像“难得糊涂”其实是一个座右铭，是他人生况味的一种体验，尝遍了或者看透了世态炎凉，看透了周围人际关系的这种复杂，就想糊涂一点。

马：为什么？

胡：因为有很多官场的倾轧，就是互相折磨，人与人之间互相尔虞我诈，就是人与人之间互相攻击，人与人之间互相整人，“我整你”，尤其东北方言，就是整人。

马：什么意思？

胡：就是互相折磨。比方说，你有一个机会，你可以做到院长，我说不行，我不能让你做到，我一定让你倒霉，让你垮掉，就好比美国股市一样，一下崩盘了，我一定让你崩盘，而你是那个首席的官员，这样你就倒霉了，大家看你倒霉，感觉特别好。就是不希望你特别好，而且所有人都不希望别人更好。

马：跟嫉妒有关系。

胡：哎，对，有关系。就是人性最卑微那一面，官场里面最典型。所以说有“厚黑学”、“糊涂学”，其实是装糊涂，“难得糊涂”其实是装糊涂，不是真糊涂。他并没有真正糊涂，他心里很明白，但他不说。用中国话说，不肯说，不能说。

马：不能说，那为什么呢？

胡：就因为这种强大的这种人生况味，人生境况，境遇，他无法说，说的话得罪人，会得罪很多人，得罪朋友，得罪上级。我不知道西方上下级的关系是不是比较简单的一种关系。就是说，他是伪装，不是真糊涂，整个这个“难得糊涂”表现得就是一种假的，不是真糊涂，是假糊涂，他心里特别明白，“clear”，很懂，但是他又装作不懂，给所有人一种感觉：他糊涂，他什么都不知道，

马：恩，结果呢？

胡：结果其实他什么都知道。这是一种“韬晦”，“韬光养晦”，中国的每一个成语里面，都是一段故事，都有传统文化在里边。韬光养晦，就像明珠，或者古代的灯可以发出很亮的光线，但是可以把光线引开，或者我们给它做一个罩，就像在台灯上，把光线回旋；明珠可以放光，可以给它做一个罩，让它的光线柔和一点。中国话中有一个词语叫“锋芒毕露”，表现得很抢眼，不能，这样一来，攻击的人就少，它可以形成一种自我保护。自己保护自己，所以这种韬晦是伪装，是一种保护，跟变色龙的变色一样，以此作为一种“明哲保身”，一种人生态度，一种人生的生存方式，很艰难。如果他那样一直不糊涂，什么事情都知道，别人会说他太聪明了，会有防范之心，会防备他。

马：就是什么事情都……

胡：比如你会想，我不告诉他，戒备心理，他那么厉害，他什么都懂，我不能告诉他，告诉他，告诉他他会写出很好的一篇文章，我不告诉他，这就是防范，防备，戒备，这就是防范。别人都说他太聪明了，我一说话他什么都懂，那我不告诉他，所以他在一种稍微一种内敛的弱势的一种姿态出现，比如他糊涂，什么不知道，每天就在那喝茶，每天画画，画竹子，画兰花……他为什么不糊涂，他画的那些内容在中国传统文化中都是高洁的象征，兰花、菊花、竹子……其实都是操守人格的象征，尤其是竹子。

马：对、对、对。

胡：他的人生态度，和他笔下表现的事物，这二者和在一起，就表明他要保持个人独立人格，他只是笔下表现，通过他的画表现出来，他用这个去定位人生，去追寻什么，把自己的操守变得更加柔和一点，要不然锋芒毕露，别人受不了他。但是他做官其实还是一样。

马：我个人认为，难得糊涂，其实对她来说更难得，因为他不愿意糊涂，

胡：对，他不愿意糊涂，不糊涂，但他不得不糊涂。

马：但“难得糊涂”在现代社会的意义，跟原来的意义已经没有关系。

胡：但是是一样的，现在很多人这么说，是一种自我标榜。

马：但是容易装糊涂。

胡：装糊涂不容易。

马：应该说不容易。

胡：到现在，其实是……我们中国人，喜欢给自己立一些座右铭。座右铭，就是放在座位的右边，给自己放一段名人名言，格言，作为给自己人生起警示作用的。而现代人说的“难得糊涂”呢，可以说是有多个层面的，是标榜。尤其现代人，讲究显得有个性，其实，这就是80后，90后，包括我们中国年轻人，跟我们传统的东西就不太一样，他们很张扬，如果这些人再说难得糊涂，那么就是一种自我标榜了。就是我们中国话中的“有点装”，装模作样，就是给人看，我有个性，我跟别人不一样，这是一种比较浅薄，比较浅层次的；还有一种

，所谓的难得糊涂，就是像郑板桥那种的人生况味的一种体验了，这些人可能是人生有一定的阅历了，有一定的人生经历，也经历了许多人生的起落、沉浮，人生有很多变数，经过艰难，有过成功，有过失败，然后他来告诫自己，或者说提醒自己，难得糊涂，有很多时候，有些事，还是不说的好，不要把它“挑破”，公开了，如果一旦公开了，所有人都不舒服。就像西方文化中有一个叫“善意的谎言”，为了让大家都舒服，为了让另外一个人好受，他就撒一个小谎，其实这跟“难得糊涂”是一样的。

马：对、对。

胡：就是说，有很多你知我知，我们都心知肚明，但是我们都不说，我们都装糊涂，我们都装做不知道，我们就不会觉得尴尬，就是这个意思。还有一种“难得糊涂”，就是介于刚才说的两种“难得糊涂”状态二者之间的，一种情趣，追求一种人生格调，是追求的，他所追求的一种境界。第二种状态是经历过的，过去时，而现在说的这种是将来时，我要追求这样的一种人生境界，这种人生境界是我人生的一种目标，我这样做是提升我自身修养，改变自己，是一种有好处的，所以归根到最后，还是回到我们传统上来，就是在这“雅”、“俗”之间，这样的一句俗语，一句格言，成为中国文化“雅”、“俗”之间，或者中国传统文化一种最直观的一个表述。你看看这几个层面，可不可以？

马：可以。

胡：就是这个东西，回到传统，在传统文化里面挖掘，中国儒家这种中庸之道，从这来的。像郑板桥，从他的人生一种体验，而到现代人这儿，又有多种多层面的，最后都回到传统文化，这样就有深度了，否则你光写现代的各种现象的一种罗列，包括励志也好，或者人生的奋斗目标、格言，或者人生境界的追求，最终都回到这上来，你从传统上去阐述这个，容易阐述透彻。

马：但是好像现在“难得糊涂”是一种手段吧，是一种成功的工具，您这种观点就不是吧？

胡：刚才我们不是说了吗？郑板桥他还是人生态度，人生况味的一种体现。

马：不算是一种成功的工具吗？

胡：但现在我们说了，一种是追求，一种境界；还有一种就是自我标榜，这种成分就更多多一些，这种标榜的想法，是想把“难得糊涂”作为一种工具，然而未必能成功。大家都明白，都知道他在装模作样。所以，这两种人生境界其实有利，可以使人际关系更加和谐，达到“中、和”的效果，也符合中国传统文化背景，人与人之间关系要和谐，例如我们现在提倡的“和谐社会”，还有北京奥运会开幕式中的“和”字，一种“中、和”之美，一种和谐，一种境界。弊端也有，如果稍微把握不住，人就会变得很虚伪，很油滑。所以这两种境界怎样进行度的把握，做到恰到好处。

马：嗯，对，恰到好处。

胡：怎样恰到好处，既不过，又使自己很平和，朋友关系也特别好，避免使自己变得虚伪，这样是最好的。所以从几个角度看，必须回到中国传统上来，因为“难得糊涂”是中国传统文化的一部分，它表现的是一种做人的境界，做人的一种追求，所以还得回到传统文化。所以你对中国传统文化感兴趣，就多关注，你会得到许多启发。包括每一个成语都是一个小故事，每一个故事后面都有民族文化的一种积淀。包括很多汉字，你把字拆开来看，你会有不一样的感觉。你会发现汉字，包括象形、会意，很多字你拆开看，就会发现有许多内容，因为汉字属于方块文字，而你们的语言属于拼音文字，不一样，而我们的每一个汉字里面都有丰富多彩的内容，就比方最简单的“日”字，表示太阳，其实就是一个圈，中间一个太阳黑子，就是象形，一看就懂了。再比如“美”字，可以拆成：上面一只“羊”，下面是“火”，表示“羊”在“火”上烤着吃好吃；还可以拆开为：“羊”“大”为“美”，羊肥了好吃；还有人把“美”字拆开为“人”“羊”为“美”，就与传统文化有关了，狩猎的时候，人戴着面具，人戴着羊的面具，在火边跳舞，庆祝丰收，这也是一种美。所以每一种拆字方式都包含着中国传统文化因素。所以，要想研究中国文化，最好把注意力转向中国传统文化这方面，多谈传统，然后再向现代文化引申。

马：对，现代文化产生了许多变化。

胡：然后你会发现论文层次感就会出现。但是无论怎么变化，中国传统文化其实是不变的，尽管有进步。中国文化其实有一种强大的向心力。西方的东西到我们这之后我们都会把它变成有中国特色的，我们中国传统文化会把它磨合成更加符合我们传统文化的内容。

马：中国文化是一种实用主义的文化。

胡：就好比中国文化是一辆车，外来文化是一个车厢，车头是我们自己的，我们自己的传统文化，我们可以把外来文化带到我们的轨道上来，按我们的轨道前进，就会达到预期的效果，我们往哪里去，何去何从，按我们的意愿来，而不是跟西方走。所以我们传统文化的凝聚力非常强大。

马：但是因为现在的社会变化程度非常大，速度非常快，您不认为会影响到中国传统文化吗？

胡：有影响，有冲击。我们社会现在强调经济是第一位的，因为以前比较落后，现在要优先发展经济，所以对传统文化各个方面有的时候感觉有一些背离，甚至是有些东西都被扔掉了。但是，当经济发展到一定程度之后，人们往回看，就像西方，包括一些传统的东西，包括一些古迹啊，包括传统文化，都保护得特别好。而我们现在才开始意识到，光发展经济，包括我们现在都不避讳的存在的一些问题，例如食品安全问题等，还有许多背离、破坏中国传统文化的一些现象，包括中国以前“文化大革命”期间对传统文化很大程度的破坏，今天我们去修复，或者我们回归传统文化，但这些年也有，这些现象表明，我们在回

归传统文化。不知道你对中国戏曲有没有了解，都是一样的，在回归。中国戏曲也讲究“中、和”之美，舞台上的表现程度也尽量不过分，比如哭，都是假哭，一声代表哭的唱音就代表哭了，演员不会哭出眼泪，哭出眼泪就会被批评了，不能哭出眼泪。因为一旦哭出眼泪，脸上的演出化妆就会“花”了，就是被破坏了，你想一个演员抹的粉，抹的腮红，如果流下眼泪，就难看了。而且，一旦哭了之后，嗓音就不再好听了，所以中国戏曲也讲究一种“中、和”之美。梅兰芳您知道吧，中国戏曲大师，他的境界就达到了一种“中、和”之美。所以中国的传统文化都是一样的，现在可以发现，国家逐渐在拨许多款在恢复传统文化，包括“昆曲”被联合国认定为人类非物质文化遗产。这些内容都是可以追溯到中国传统文化中来。我们在一定时期确实远离了传统文化，但是当经济发展到一定程度之后，马上回来重找，而重新对文化进行一种认识。所以中国人有时候，被西方，包括欧洲，指责人权的问题，其实我们的传统的东西太厚重了，就像蜗牛背上背着的房子在走路一样，太厚摆脱不掉了，这个壳了。传统文化，也是有利有弊，我们传统文化内容很多，我们有着悠久的历史，我们可以回头看的留给我们的东西有很多。例如美国，它没有悠久的历史，所以它进步就快，而我们就像蜗牛背着房子，它肯定要慢，所以就是各有利弊吧。我们的传统文化过于强大了，留给了我们很多丰富的历史文化遗产，但是某种意义上阻碍了我们前进的步伐，但是它又让我们一直走下去，因为它还给我们很多力量，我们从中汲取很多养分，这个道理是一样的。一方面，中国传统文化很厚重，有很多内容，可以让你学习；另一方面，它也很沉重，因为它可以让你前进的步伐很缓慢。所以中国文化相比起来，就特别保守，包括西方，以美国为代表，经常指责中国的人权状况，其实不是这样，中国有一个过程，但美国就发展得特别快，它没有传统，它没有许多传统文化，你可以说它是多元化，但是多元化以外的是没有更多的文化，所以世界各地的人融合到一起，它很容易。比如我们说美国的三权分立，很快。在中国就很难，因为中国是一个传统的集权国家，要打破这个很难。这个因素很关键，这个需要时间，我们也在努力，我们也在做，但不可能一蹴而就，一下就完成，这也是一种体现。就是说，从这个方面可以折射出传统文化的向心力。

马：哦。

胡：强大的力量。所以我觉得，逃不出传统文化。

马：您认为“难得糊涂”主要是受儒家思想的影响吗？

胡：主要是受儒家的思想的影响。

马：那有没有受道家思想的影响呢？

胡：我认为它不算道家的思想。因为道家思想不用让人“糊涂”，一切都抛开了，就连这种事都不要了。



- 马：当“难得糊涂”还是装糊涂的时候，比如说有一个，谈到一个问题，装糊涂，意思就是什么都不做，这不是跟道家“无为”思想有关系么？
- 胡：道家追求真正的“无为”，另外呢，你说的也有道理，有什么道理呢，中国人往往都是内“儒”外“道”，或者外“佛”内“儒”，就是骨子里，就是内心，内在的，是一种儒家思想，外在的，是一种道家的思想，所以我认为你说的也有道理。什么时候用内，什么时候用外呢？儒家讲究“修身”“齐家”“治国”“平天下”，这个“国”，指的是诸侯国，而“天下”，是指“天下一统”的天下。这是儒家的追求。但是当这种诉求不能得到满足的时候，会有挫折，会用道家思想来消解因为儒家思想而引发的悲剧意识，悲剧情怀。
- 马：就是很无奈的心情。
- 胡：对，人生会有很多无奈，否则的话人会被逼疯的啊，所以人要到找到宣泄的出路，怎样要把自己的不满，不舒服，就像是排毒一样，用道家思想来作为一种安慰。作为一种慰藉。你刚才说到“难得糊涂”有没有受道家思想的影响，有一点这方面的意思，但是不明显。
- 马：哦，不明显。
- 胡：对，有一点糊弄自己，安慰自己：唉，难得糊涂。从某种意义上讲，可以这么理解，但是不是很重要的方面。因为在“难得糊涂”思想中，主要还是儒家思想在主导，它不是受道家思想影响很深。可能跟道家思想沾一点边儿。因为道家思想主张“什么都不要了”，是“无为”。干脆就不用去努力，放弃努力，干脆就不用想了。
- 马：难道“难得糊涂”不是放弃吗？
- 胡：不是放弃，它都是隐含的追求，不是放弃。装糊涂不是不解决问题，而是用这样的一种方法去解决问题，用这样一种糊涂的方法去解决问题，“退一步海阔天空”。
- 马：对，这又是一个问题，在“难得糊涂”字幅下，郑板桥写了一行款跋：“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”。到底是什么意思呢？
- 胡：“当下心安”，就是在事情发生的那个时候，就是正在进行的时候，求得心理的平衡，我做得很对，不去争，不是为了后来别人去报答他。为了只是此时此刻内心的平静。
- 马：不要考虑到后来的结果。
- 胡：对，我不去考虑后来的结果，我帮你做了什么，你帮我做了什么，我会给你很多东西，很多好处，不去考虑这些。所以我说“难得糊涂”是一种人生境界，一种是人格标榜，一种是真正的过来人，还有一种是人格追求。当时的一种心安，我做了一些事情，例如：我觉得给你讲述，我觉得挺好，作为我们交流，就完了，我没有别的想法，我不为了以后怎么样，就是这个意思。

马：有一个人，他说，“放一着，退一步，”这个跟下棋也有关系吧？

胡：可以是作为一种棋语，但是无所谓，在这个句子里面，就是“放”、“退”，都是一种人生的姿态。

马：“放一着”不是放弃的意思吧？

胡：不是“放弃”，而是“让”，“退让的意思”。再就是“以退为进”，为了更好地前进，有时候曲折前行。为达到更好的追求，可以“以退为进”。

马：您认为郑板桥是这个意思吗？

胡：对，是以退为进。

马：所以就先退回去。

胡：对，这种进，不一定非要获得什么结果，可以是获得一种境界。

马：他自己不一定心安。我怎么知道什么时候要退一步啊？

胡：这就是我刚才说的“度”的把握，在最合适的时间、地点、人物，用最合适的方式，获得最合适的一种结果。

马：所以还是看情况。

胡：我刚才说了“中庸”的“度”，有一个“度”的把握，怎样能够达到“中、和”。

马：我看过一些关于糊涂学的书，这些书大概都是一种通俗的读物。

胡：有些书就是写着玩儿的，我们现在的出版，很滥，有很多垃圾读物，就是为了赚钱，时髦。

马：对，好像“难得糊涂”现在有些商业化了吧。

胡：就是为了赚钱，做一种。有很多条幅，做出来，卖书法的商品，到处都有。

马：那您认为他们说的不是……

胡：这句话是好话，但是已经被“俗”化了，弄得俗气，过于俗气，庸俗化了，变成了庸俗的人生哲学。

马：您是说现在的糊涂学的书都是庸俗化了？

胡：对。已经不一样了，就是说，已经完全庸俗化了。

马：为什么是这样呢？

胡：商业化。

马：还是跟经济有关系。

胡：对。

马：一般的观点都是小事糊涂，大事不糊涂，我的问题是：什么是小事，什么是大事呢？什么时候装糊涂是可以的，什么时候最好不装糊涂。这是谁来决定呢？

胡：自己定。人生的境界不一样。

马：那没有一个标准吗？

胡：没有精确的标准。看你的人生境界在哪个位置，在哪个度上，就像坐标一样，你在哪个位置，你能做到哪，每个人都不一样，因为每个人的人生境遇是不一

样的。比方说，小学生，你让他糊涂，能糊涂到哪去，充其量是跟老师装糊涂，不做作业。每个人都不一样，追求都不一样，每个人的人生境遇都不一样。标准是活的，不是固定不变的。

马：我始终认为可能我是西方人，最重要的还是要遵循不变的道德标准。

胡：中国人也有自己的标准，东西方还是不一样。中国人大部分人也还是一样的，在原则方面是不让步的，有自己的底线。就是有一个限度，过了这个限度，就不允许了，就不装糊涂了。之前可以留一点余地，可以让步，到了最后，就不行了。

马：所以“难得糊涂”应用到什么方位，还是跟每个人的性格有关系的。

胡：都是一样的，不是万能的。它不可能作为一个标志，什么都能解决，解决不了的。只能是做事的一种方式，你追求的一种境界，但它不是万能的。

马：另外，关于糊涂学的书，他们都说，在经济方面，难得糊涂；婚姻方面，难得糊涂；工作方面，难得糊涂。

胡：那不可能。以婚姻为例，如果两个人的人生观、道德观、价值观所有都不一样的时候，没法相容的，不能糊涂；有些小事，小毛病如不爱卫生等这些可以容忍。但是在是否爱国，是否尊敬老人、尊敬师长方面就不能糊涂了，这些涉及一个人的本质问题了。所以，还是，到根本问题的时候，就是无法调和的矛盾了，就无法再装糊涂了。你也别想着可以装，甚至可以转变。包括中西合璧式的婚姻，有许多人到最后无法融合了，其实是根本的分歧，许多的东西无法调和。小事儿或者习惯可以慢慢改变，互相适应，但是中西方文化差异就很麻烦，而且这个融和很难。东方人的人生观或人生态度，是典型的表现，跟西方人不一样。

马：您认为“难得糊涂”有可能是被西方学家或者艺术家提出么？

胡：不可能，我感觉西方更加追求一种更加精密，更加有板有眼式的学说。而我们这种“中庸”哲学是说一种比较含糊的，一种模糊的回答，到了一种境界，我可以有一个空间，像弹簧一样有伸缩空间。

马：为什么是这样？

胡：还是中国传统文化。就是中国的生存之道，习惯了。跟西方不一样，所以这种差异……

马：东方人跟我们的传统是非界定有差异。

胡：还是要回到儒家思想传统里去。

马：西方哲学不怎么重视人际关系，更多地是关注个人的。

胡：中国的更多是宗法式的家族社会决定的，血缘关系，更多是血缘关系结成的群体，所以中国人更注重人际关系，在儒家思想表现为一种“仁”“和”；而西方更注重个体。我们是群体之间要有一个人与人之间的平和的关系，所以中国人特别讲究人际关系。而西方的文化，比如那些神，往往都是独立的个体。而

我们的文化就不一样，比如女娲造人，就造了一大批人。还是以我们的那种血缘为中心的，血缘为纽带的，村落，市镇，都是有血缘关系的，现在还有这种家族式的村落，中国南方还有，这个家族里，都姓胡，或者都姓文，这一个村子，或一个镇子，都是一大家族的，都有错综复杂的人际关系，很微妙，我们最初整个社会的建立有关。回到我们整个社会的文化层面上，跟西方文化差异就在这儿。所以西方人不可能提出“难得糊涂”这一观点。

马：那您认为你用“难得糊涂”这个生活态度或者生活哲学，南方人和北方人会有区别么？

胡：南北方文化从传统上来看，也是一样，还是有差异。南方更柔和一些，北方更直接一些。但是在“难得糊涂”这点上体现不出来。只能说是南北方地域差异形成这种人的性格差异，但是这是一种人生境界，在南北方体现不出来。

马：您认为你用“难得糊涂”这个生活态度或者生活哲学，在男女之间有什么不同的？

胡：这也一样。

马：也不会有区别？可能男的会更倾向于引用“难得糊涂”。

胡：那就上升到女权主义那个层面去了，就是男女之间的不平等。其实一样，但是女性使用的会少一些。因为除非是女强人，取得很高成就，什么都不顾，这样可能会有可能。但如果是正常生活状态的妇女，很少会说到这个观点。因为我们一直是以男权社会，以男性为中心的。

马：将来可能会有变化么？

胡：女性这么表述，相对来说很少。因为我们的思想都是以男性为中心，都是一样的。

马：胡教授，感谢您。

Addendum 3: OVERVIEW CONSULTED POPULAR BOOKS on *hutuxue* and *Nande hutu*

**CHEN Liang** 陈良 (2007)

*Hutu zhong de rensheng zhexue* 糊涂中的人生哲学

(The wisdom of life in being *hutu*)

(Beijing: Xiyuan chubanshe 西苑出版社)



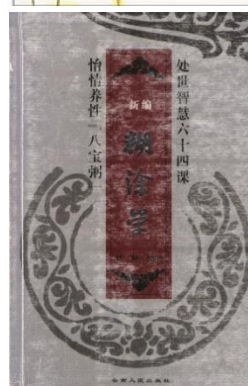
**JIAN Kun** 建坤 (2004)

*Xinbian hutuxue: zhihui chushi liushisi ke. Yiqing*

*yangxing 'Babaozhou'* 新编糊涂学. 智慧处世六十四课. 怡情养性 '八宝粥'

(Newly edited 'The art of being muddled': 64 lessons on the wisdom of conducting oneself in society. The 'Eight treasures porridge' for joyful feelings and spiritual cultivation)

(Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe 云南人民出版社)



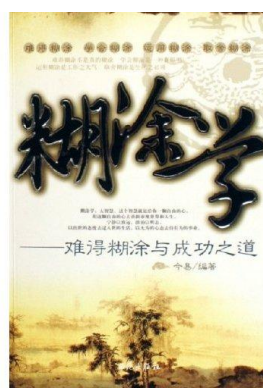
**JIN Yi** 今易 (2006)

*Hutuxue: Nande hutu yu chenggong zhi dao* 糊涂学:

难得糊涂与成功之道 ('The art of being muddled':

*Nande hutu and the road to success*)

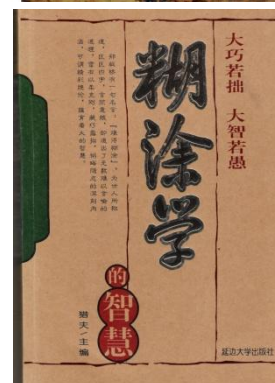
(Beijing: Xiyuan chubanshe 西苑出版社)



**LIE Fu** 猎夫 (2005)

*Hutuxue de zhihui* 糊涂学的智慧 (The wisdom of 'the art of being muddled')

(Jilin: Yanbian daxue chubanshe 延边大学出版社)



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**MING De** 明德 (Ed.) (2008)

*You yi zhong celüe jiao hutu* 有一种策略叫糊涂

(There is a strategy called 'muddledness')

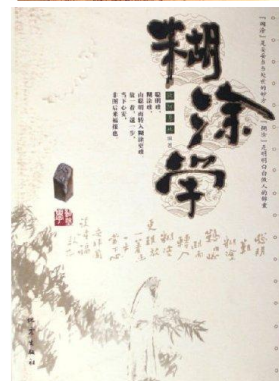
(Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe 中国电影出版社)



**OUYANG Xiulin** 欧阳秀林 (2006)

*Hutuxue* 糊涂学 ("The art of being muddled")

(Beijing: Dizhen chubanshe 地震出版社)



**QING Yue** 清月 (2008)

*Nande hutu de chushi zhihui* 难得糊涂的处世智慧

(*Nande hutu: the wisdom of how to conduct oneself in society*)

(Haikou: Nanhai chubanshe 南海出版社)



**SHI Yuan** 石源 (2009)

*Hutu zuoren, congming zuoshi* 糊涂做人聪明做事

(Muddled in upright conduct, smart in handling affairs)

(Beijing: Dangdai shijie chubanshe 当代世界出版社)



**SI Zhe** 思哲 (2007)

*Hutu zuoren de zhexue* 糊涂做人的哲学 (The wisdom of muddledness in upright behavior)  
(Beijing: Zhongguo zhigong chubanshe 中国致公出版社)



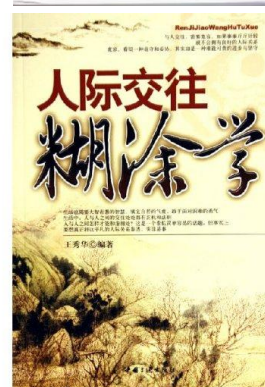
**SUN He** 孙和 (2009)

*Nande hutu de rensheng zhexue* 难得糊涂的人生哲学 (The philosophy of life of Nande hutu)  
(Beijing: Dizhen chubanshe 地震出版社)



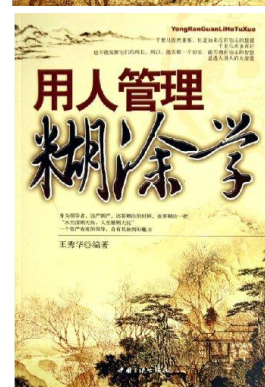
**WANG Xiuhua** 王秀华 (2005)

*Renji jiaowang hutuxue* 人际交往糊涂学 (Interpersonal relationships and The art of being muddled)  
(Beijing: Zhongguo sanxia chubanshe 中国三峡出版社)



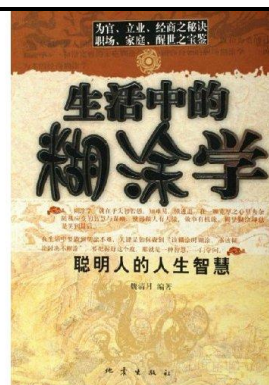
**WANG Xiuhua** 王秀华 (2005)

*Yong ren guanli hutuxue* 用人管理糊涂学 ('The art of being muddled' in people's management)  
(Beijing: Zhongguo sanxia chubanshe 中国三峡出版社)





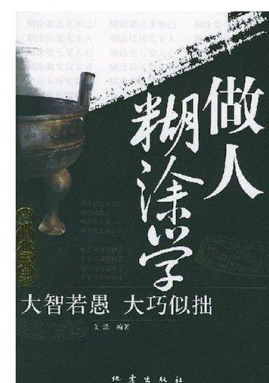
**WEI Qingyue** 魏清月 (2006)  
*Shenghuo zhong de hutuxue. Congmingren de rensheng zhihui* 生活中的糊涂学. 聪明人的人生智慧 ('The art of being muddled' in life. The philosophy of life of smart people)  
(Beijing: Dizhen chubanshe 地震出版社)



**WEN Jie** 文浩 (2004a)  
*Jingshang hutuxue: zhihui jinnang* 经商糊涂学:智慧锦囊 ('The art of being muddled' in business: a brocade purse of wisdom)  
(Beijing: Dizhen chubanshe 地震出版社)



**WEN Jie** 文浩 (2004b)  
*Zuoren hutuxue* 做人糊涂学 ('The art of being muddled' in upright behavior)  
(Beijing: Dizhen chubanshe 地震出版社)



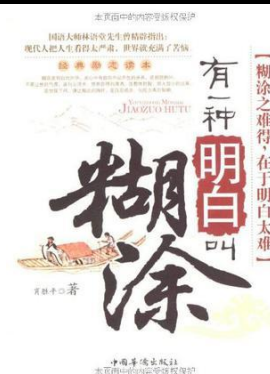
**WU Xuegang** 吴学刚 (2007)  
*Zuoren de hutu zhehui* 做人的糊涂哲学 (The muddled wisdom of upright behavior)  
(Beijing: Zhongguo shangye chubanshe 中国商业出版社)





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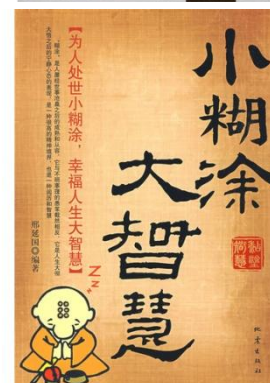
**XIAO Shengping** 肖胜平 (2008)  
*You yi zhong mingbai jiao hutu* 有一种明白叫糊涂  
(There is a smartness called *hutu*)  
(Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe 中国华侨出版社)



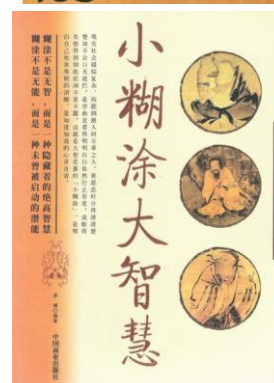
**XIE Zhiqiang** 谢志强 (2009)  
*Hutuxue de zhihui* 糊涂学的智慧 (The wisdom of being muddled)  
(Beijing: Yunfang chubanshe 远方出版社)



**XING Yanguo** 邢延国 (2009)  
*Xiao hutu da zhihui* 小糊涂大智慧 (Minor muddledness, major wisdom)  
(Beijing: Dizhen chubanshe 地震出版社)



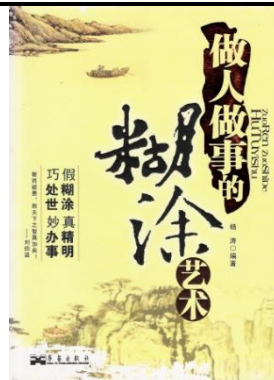
**YAN Bo** 彦博 (2006)  
*Xiao hutu da zhihui* 小糊涂大智慧 (Minor muddledness, major wisdom)  
(Beijing: Zhongguo shangye chubanshe 中国商业出版社)



**YANG Tao** 杨涛 (2007)

*Zuoren zuoshi de hutu yishu* 做人做事的糊涂艺术  
(“The art of being muddled” in upright behavior and  
in handling affairs)

(Beijing: Huayi chubanshe 华艺出版社)



**YE Feng** 叶枫 (2007)

*Yu dao* 愚道 (The way of the fool)

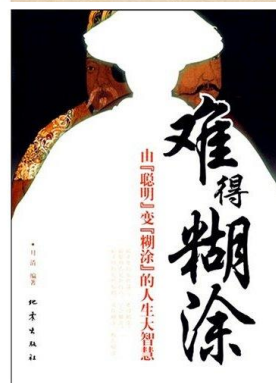
(Beijing: Zhongguo fangzhi chubanshe 中国纺织出版社)



**YUE Qing** 月清 (2007)

*Nande hutu: you 'congming' bian 'hutu' de rensheng da zhihui* 难得糊涂: 由“聪明”变“糊涂”的人生大智慧.  
(*Nande hutu: the great wisdom of life of changing  
from smartness into muddledness*)

(Beijing: Dizhen chubanshe 地震出版社)



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