

'The art of being muddled' and mental health practices in contemporary China: a philosophical-anthropological analysis of popular mental health education

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1. *Nande hutu* and the 'Art of being muddled'

My former research project (PhD dissertation, on *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂 and 'The art of being muddled') dealt with Zheng Banqiao's (1693-1765) calligraphy *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂 ('It's difficult to be muddled') and its present popularity and attractiveness in contemporary Chinese society. The full saying is accompanied by a post-script that translates as follows:

'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, and take a step back. Present peace of mind consists of not planning for future rewards.' (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)。

The aim of this research was, through a semantic and etymological analysis, and through an analysis of the academic, popular and official discourse on the calligraphy and of its use, to unravel the traditional philosophical, socio-historical and psychological dimensions of this calligraphy/saying². At the same time, this research became an analysis of how the Chinese pragmatic mind integrated the high wisdom of this more than two hundred fifty years old calligraphy in the rapidly changing social environment of growing individualism, capitalism and globalisation. The results of this analysis also shed light on what the popular saying tells us about society and societal changes as experienced by Chinese citizens on different levels

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² This interdisciplinary research project covered different disciplines including philosophical, historical and socio-psychological inquiry. As such, the research was based on different methods such as textual analysis and literature study (as for the philosophical analysis and the part on the author Zheng Banqiao and the socio-historical context), and thematic analysis of the academic, popular and official discourse on the saying and of its societal derivatives in contemporary Chinese society. The sources for the thematic analysis were articles by Chinese academics, an explorative questionnaire among Chinese students in Belgium, semi-structured interviews with different Chinese from different social status, web-articles and blog-discussions, all kinds of articles from different popular, official and academic magazines, and popular books on 'The art of being muddled' *Hutuxue* 糊涂学。

(politics, economy, private, professional and social life), and on how they deal with these changes.

Several conclusions were drawn from this research project, of which I will here address a few.³

1.1 Philosophical and societal background

A semantic analysis of the compound *hutu* 糊涂 reveals a variety of mostly positive connotations of *hutu* meaning vagueness (*mohu* 模糊) and muddledness as symbols of creative undifferentiation and chaos (cf. Zhuangzi's Lord Hundun 混沌), meaning vitality and longevity (*hulu* 葫芦), and even meaning protection from evil (Hu Shen 胡神).

Many of these 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.

In addition, 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 and even ignorant 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 (indirect) communication.

³ This main outline is based upon the conclusions and summary reflections of my doctoral dissertation on *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂.

Vagueness, suggestiveness and even pretended 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.

1.2 Socio-historical background and its author

The investigation into the background of the calligraphy *Nande hutu* revealed that it was no coincidence that the saying was written by the upright but eccentric and individualistic scholar-official Zheng Banqiao 郑板桥 (1693–1765). 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* 进士 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 also found an expression in the saying *Nande hutu* 难得糊涂: it is difficult to become 'muddled' again.

Against this socio-historical and Zheng Banqiao's personal background, Chinese academics mainly describe *Nande hutu* as a detached inner state of mind 心里境界 that is strongly rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy, but also into the traditional structure of the Confucian society (e.g. Lei 2008; Li 2005; Liu & Huang 2005).

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 *hut*u is not foolishness and stupidity, nor is it related to the ignorance and

naivety of a child. This *hutu* state of mind 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 wise person thus might look 'foolish', and has the wisdom to let go and take a step back whenever appropriate. This is often expressed in the associated saying 'The highest wisdom looks like foolishness' 大智若愚, which in the different discourses on the saying is frequently used to explain the meaning of *Nande hutu*. Thus, from a philosophical point of view, *Nande hutu* can be explained as 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, the discussions make clear that the spiritual illumination 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* 难得. Also related to the specific structure of society, is the intriguing doublesidedness of Zheng Banqiao's wisdom of being muddled. 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. In this respect, it is generally agreed upon that the high philosophical interpretation of the saying has lost much of its active and engaging nature during the process of its popularization.

1.3 Contemporary interpretations

In contemporary Chinese society, the saying is surrounded by a web of different meanings and interpretations. *Nande hutu* should in fact be considered as an umbrella expression for many related expressions, virtues and wisdoms of life that are - however popularized they all seem to be - in the same way as *Nande hutu* rooted in ancient philosophy. A *hututu* attitude 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 – and indeed difficult to obtain - wisdom of hiding one’s wisdom.

Clearly the aforementioned variety of ‘popular’ meanings, interpretations and related wisdoms of this popular wisdom of life are at the same time a result of and contribute to its accessibility to all kinds of people. People from all walks of life are attracted to it, and the existence of popular books on *Hutuxue* 糊涂学, ‘the art of being muddled’, which are referenced as ‘popular literature’ 通俗读物, testifies of its popularization.

1.4 Application of a popular saying

Moreover, the umbrella saying *Nande hutu* and its related wisdoms are not just popular and commercialized, but have also adopted a broadly applicable and pragmatic interpretation. The wisdom of being muddled is presented 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 pragmatically applies the wisdom of being muddled according to one’s current living situation and issues of the day. Whether it is by young people, middle-aged people or the elderly, the wisdom of being muddled serves as a way of nourishing mental and physical health.

1.5 Moral guidelines for 'pretended muddledness'

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 however, not unconditional. Already in earlier times, critical authors such as Lu Xun (1933) 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 also criticized as part of the national 'policy of the ignorant masses' 愚民政策, 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.

In order to avoid the misuse of the wisdom of being muddled, some moral guidelines for the individual should be observed: separating major matters 大事 from minor matters 小事, distinguishing between matters of social conduct 做人 and handling affairs 做事, 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 evidently is a work in progress, and largely depends on the experience, age, moral wisdom and level of self-cultivation of the individual.

1.6 Pretended muddledness as a coping strategy

The attractiveness of the saying in contemporary society can be explained through its threefold functionality. Firstly, ‘the art of being muddled’ serves as a harmonizing force, as a counterbalance for chaos, insecurity 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 养生法 and obtain longevity. Thirdly, ‘the art of being muddled’ is promoted – or rather marketed in popular media - as a smart strategy for self-advancement, self-achievement and self-enrichment, and for obtaining individual and even spiritual freedom. This last function is obviously mainly attractive to the middle-aged population. On the condition that ‘the art of being muddled’ is applied in a morally proper way, these functions naturally 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.

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' 放一着退一步 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 nevertheless should be used actively (consciously) and smartly. And although the saying has lost some of its deep philosophical and lofty nature, under these conditions, by bringing about great flexibility and resilience, this popular philosophy of life contributes to more individual, interpersonal and societal harmony, and ultimately to social integration and mental survival.

2. Mental health practices among Chinese adolescents: a philosophical-anthropological analysis of health education aimed at Chinese youth

2.2 Research context: the emergence of popular health education and health activism

The observation that traditional wisdoms of life are re-interpreted and adapted to the new environment to serve as a coping strategy and even as a way of 'nourishing life' (see above), brings other questions to the fore.

Indeed, the last three decades of liberalization, modernization and opening up to the world, alongside massive unemployment, the changing nature of social networks and the perceived moral degeneration resulting from this, has brought about a so-called mental health crisis in Chinese society: feelings of angst, insecurity, and powerlessness increasingly lead to depression, suicides, and severe mental and physical health problems (e.g. Kleinman 2011; Lemos 2012; Lin, Tseng, & Yeh 1995; Wu 2011). Young Chinese – products of the modernization process *par excellence* – do not escape this alarming trend. They are forced to deal with a highly competitive environment, huge scholarly pressure, and a discordant family situation. Often brought up as a

highly educated, single child without any prospect of a satisfying job, they are burdened with the responsibility of taking – at least financially- care of their parents and grandparents. As a result, there is - apart from official therapeutic counseling channels - a growing market of popular health education focusing on self-health. Self-help books, TV, radio and online counseling programs dealing with mental wellbeing have become extremely popular, particularly among young urban residents (Farquhar 2001; Farquhar & Zhang 2012; Kleinman Arthur et.al. 2011).

This newly emerged type of mental health education 心理教育 is undoubtedly an exponent of the modernization, individualization and liberalization of Chinese society, and suggests a growing awareness, interest in and responsibility for one's own life and wellbeing. Still, no matter how modern and individualistic these mental health advices may seem to suit the everyday life of young Chinese, Chinese mental health education and its ways towards happiness manifest unique Chinese features.

Previous ethnographic research on common mental health practices in the lives of ordinary people reveal how deeply rooted in traditional Chinese medicine and philosophy these practices are (e.g. Bond 2010; Cheng, Lo, & Chio 2010; Scheid 2002; Zhang 2007). My own doctoral research on 'The art of being muddled' and the saying *Nande hutu* as a popular philosophy of life, showed that official self-help media promotes attitudes such as retreating, 'knowing fate' 知天命, tolerance 忍, compromise and enduring hardship 吃苦 in conflict and other unfortunate situations, and seem to encourage individuals to passively and internally deal with their problems. Such traditionally Chinese mental health strategies are generally considered to be rather passive, and the typically Chinese mental health agent is perceived as a passive, resilient, compromising and silent copier with life.

In the literature, a conception of agency attempts to describe the psychological processes that enable individuals to affect in their own right the flow of events in which they are engaged (Jenkins 2008: 178-179). Originating in Western social sciences, psychological agency becomes particularly controversial in studies of non-Western cultures that do not place equal emphasis on the values that underlie agency such as personal freedom and autonomy. Even more, in itself, such notions and the concepts and methods to investigate them (e.g. locus of control) are

mostly Western constructs, and may not capture important control, freedom and autonomy related beliefs held by Chinese people (Hwang 2012; Smith 2010). Consequently, aspects of psychological agency should be carefully interpreted in the specific cultural and social context of Chinese society and philosophy. Or, as Roger Frie (2008: 223-224) suggests, from a cultural or multicultural perspective in psychology, individual behavior is not defined in isolation, but in terms of the cultural positions that a person occupies. Therefore, he proposes a view of agency that is contextually situated within the physical (i.e., the body), the social, and the cultural person.

Indeed, although in the West often perceived as passive, resigning and conflict-avoidant, traditional coping strategies such as emotion control, rationalization, retreat and self-effacement at their core display characteristically Chinese proactive and self-regulating qualities that reflect a strong belief in the power to effect changes, although not always through direct action. This with regard to mental health agency at first glance contradictory nature of many of the popular psychological counselling advices can only be explained by examining their traditional medical and philosophical (Daoist, Confucian) origin. The Chinese medical and moral-philosophical traditions emphasize a strong responsibility and capacity for one's wellbeing (e.g. self-adjustment or self-transformation *xiuyang* 修养, self-healing), from a holistic, psycho-social perspective (e.g. nourishing life 养生, as well as nourishing a harmonious relation with the social environment). These health traditions are still – or should we say again - very appealing for the vulnerable young generation, whose mental health will be decisive for a sound future development of Chinese society.

2.3 Aims of the research project

This interdisciplinary research project aims, through analysis of popular sources of mental health education aimed at adolescents combined with interviews, to lay bare popular practices of self-health and health activism of Chinese youth in coping with everyday life problems. It will investigate whether or not young people feel in 'control' of their mental health, to what extent they take action to stay mentally healthy, and by doing so, to what extent they rely on ancient

medical-philosophical health strategies. The research will specifically examine the following questions:

- 1) why it is believed that these practices are efficient and what arguments are used to justify this,
- 2) which values and convictions about mental and physical health are reflected in the advised practices,
- 3) how these practices, values and assumptions relate to ancient Chinese philosophy, cosmology and medicine,
- 4) how these self-health strategies reflect of a socio-cultural practice that is exemplary of how the (Western) notion of mental health agency should be perceived in indigenous Chinese psychology, both in its ancient philosophical and medical origin, and in its most contemporary interpretation.
- 5) how these self-health strategies relate to aspects of the (Western) notion of psychological agency, and which nuances in, or discordances with, the Chinese context can be discerned.

As such, this research will critically investigate the specific cultural meaning and interpretation the above-mentioned agency-related notions adopt in not only a traditional Chinese philosophical and medical context, but also - through re-interpretation and modernization - in a contemporary setting, that is, the everyday lives of Chinese youth.

To this end, an analysis of different sources of mental health education aimed at and given by adolescents will be combined to complement written accounts and documents and public media with everyday life examples.⁴

2.4 Relevance

Much research has already been conducted on Chinese adolescents' coping strategies and mental health, often from an East-West comparative, cross-cultural perspective (e.g. Bond 1992,

⁴ As this is an interdisciplinary study, the methods applied include ancient texts analysis, combined with content analysis of different popular media sources aimed at mental health among Chinese youth, and interviews with a sample group of adolescents. These sources are carefully selected popular (contrary to therapeutic) media sources on mental health education and psychological counselling aimed at Chinese youth, such as internet writings, popular literature, radio and TV shows aimed at the youth and dealing with mental health. For more information on the methodology of the research, please contact the author.

2008 [1986] 2010; Chan 1998; Cheng et al. 2010; Shek 1997; Yue 2001). Such inquiries mainly adopt a quantitative psychological approach, and are based upon theoretical psychological notions and methods that are rooted in Western psychology (e.g. Western psychopathology).⁵ How everyday life coping strategies are constructed and evaluated by ordinary young people, and how the interaction of Chinese indigenous with 'modern' Western psychological realities in this context should be understood, remains, until now, largely unclear.⁶

On the other hand, there is a growing interest in and pre-occupation with indigenous Chinese psychology (e.g. Dong & Li 2003; Hwang 2012; Wang & Zheng 2008; Yan 1998). The foundations of indigenous Chinese psychology should be found in the ancient (Confucian and Daoist) Classics, including works on Chinese medicine such as the *Huangdi Neijing* 黄帝内经 in so far as they deal with affect and emotions. Nevertheless, the advices herein have now been retooled to the reality of contemporary daily life. Therefore, research into indigenous psychology is ultimately multidisciplinary, including methods of classical sinology such as ancient text analysis, as well as anthropological and psychological methods. Especially the contemporary usefulness of indigenous Chinese psychology is most clearly expressed in the daily life health rituals of common people - and in this study, of Chinese youth - and in their daily actions with regard to health. For such inquiries, methods of cultural anthropology are most appropriate.

This research will not only shed light on how aspects of traditional Chinese mind-body health are lived and evaluated in contemporary society, but also how they reflect characteristically Chinese ways for self-health and self-healing, and how they should be understood both in their ancient philosophical and medical tradition, and in their most contemporary interpretation.

⁵ An example is the pre-occupation of many – both Chinese and Western - psychologists with psycho-analysis, its popularity in China and how this therapy can be successfully incorporated in psycho-therapy in China. Other researchers engage in East-West comparative psychological-philosophical research. For instance, Christopher Bollas' (2013) *China on the Mind*, is a freely associated comparison between Western psycho-analysts and Eastern philosophers.

⁶ It should be pointed out here, that in the therapeutic field, the merging of Western psycho-therapies with indigenous Chinese elements has already taken a start in China. For instance, Daoist cognitive psychotherapy began to emerge 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 'detached psychotherapy' 超脱心理治疗. See e.g. Tseng, Chang and Nishizono 2005: 152-155. 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.

This study will thus enhance the understanding of how the medical-philosophical traditions underlying Chinese popular psychology continue to shape Chinese youth's everyday life self-care with regard to mental health. Such an inquiry will significantly contribute to the emerging medical-anthropological preoccupation with on the one hand self-care and health agency/autonomy, and on the other hand with the modernization and popularization of traditional health care practices and ancient wisdoms of life.

From a larger perspective, the study of how traditional Chinese mind-body health is lived and practiced by young Chinese, can broaden and enrich the knowledge of practitioners, trainers, and anyone in the field working with young Chinese and youth in general.

Ultimately, this study will also contribute to research on the quest for happiness in the growing fields of positive and indigenous (Chinese) psychology.

3. Research stay at the Academy of Social Sciences 社科院 (July 2014)

This research project was in its initial phase during my stay at the CASS when attending the Visiting Program for Young Sinologists jointly organized by the Ministry of Culture and the Academy of Social Sciences (July 2014). Today, it is still a work in progress, and so far no final results can be presented. Nevertheless, during my stay at CASS, a few important observations came to light that strengthened the premises of this research on Chinese mental health agency.

Firstly, although the self-improvement books 励志经典 on 'the art of being muddled' and the foolish sage are now almost hard to find in bookshops, a new type of books is now filling many of the shelves in local bookstores: popular books on nourishing life and maintaining health 养生保健. The traditional practice of nourishing life is not only part of therapies applied by traditional Chinese doctors, but – and maybe even more pronounced – also part of people's everyday life. That is to say, *yangsheng* practices are more easily incorporated into one's life than biomedical care.

Generally, the practice of *yangsheng* should be understood as comprising five sections (e.g. Kohn 2008: 204): 1) regulating the emotions 2) environment (e.g. adapting to the seasons), daily life, and clothing, 3) dietary practices 4) sexual life and 5) movement therapies (e.g. *taijiquan* 太极拳 and *qigong* 气功 exercises). For this research project, the emphasis lies on the first section,

regulating the emotions. Nevertheless, the practice of *yangsheng* should be understood as an all-encompassing effort that includes housing, daily routine, diet, breathing, movement and sexual relations. As such, these five components all work together to come to a desired result: general wellbeing and longevity. None of them can be investigated separate from their broader context, that is, the other four sections.

Popular health strategies belonging to the *yangsheng* practices were until quite recently often orally transferred by (grand)parents to their children in the form of common sense about seasonally appropriate eating and dressing to prevent colds and others diseases, sleeping enough, smoothening menstruation for women, and so on. Apparently, now the need to make this comprehensive knowledge of the medical classics at all times and widely accessible to a large reader's public, is strong enough to fill a considerable segment in the popular book market. What is especially interesting is that the philosophical, medical or historical affiliation is not what makes these practices so appealing and trustworthy for the practitioner. It is their practical use that makes them worth trying. Moreover, what makes these practices also reliable, is again not their theoretical, historical or ideological background, but personal experience, whether from the practitioner himself, or from some third person in his social network. What once worked successfully for oneself or someone else, has proven its reliability.

Clearly, what these books all have in common, is that they emphasize the importance of a person's health intelligence 健商, by offering the possibility – at least in the ideal situation - of staying away from often expensive doctors, laboratory tests, or drugs. Consider the phrase 'It is better to consult with yourself than with a doctor 求医不如求己'⁷ on the cover of one of these books on *yangsheng*.

Other relatively new psychology-related topics of the typical self-improvement books are among others 'the wisdom of letting go' 舍与得, or rather, the wisdom of being willing to part with things that don't run smoothly or are out of reach, and books on mental health education 心理健康教育 for primary, secondary and high school students.

⁷ See the volumes by Zhongli Baren 中里巴人 (2012, Nanchang 南昌, Jiangxi kexue jishu chubanshe 江西科学技术出版社).

All such self-improvement or self-help books deal with some kind of philosophy of life that is mostly rooted in ancient traditions and the traditional classics. These book trends, alongside similar programs on TV and radio and even podcasts, demonstrate the societal emphasis on and concern for mental and physical health education, by giving every individual all the tools he/she needs to prevent illness and to take responsibility for his/her own wellbeing.

At this moment, different sources of popular mental health education such as online counselling fora, TV programs on mental health and podcasts or blogs dealing with mental problems, are further investigated.

Another very important observation, was the acknowledging by Chinese scholars in philosophy (such as the dean of the CASS- Philosophy Department professor Zhang Zhiqiang 张志强, professor Chen Jing 陈静 and professor Chen Xia 陈霞) of the need to not only study and teach the ancient philosophical traditions, but also to understand how these traditions and their underlying ideologies and assumptions are understood and lived by the Chinese people today. There is a strong interest of Chinese scholars in grassroots phenomena and the practice and awareness of common Chinese, and in investigating the usefulness, practice and 'transformation' of ancient Chinese philosophy and wisdom in contemporary society, both in China and globally. One example is the research by professor Chen Xia on Daoism and sustainable development and ecology. In many cases, such phenomena can only be investigated through interdisciplinary research.

In addition - and at the same time serving another example of this relatively new research direction - there is a growing group of Chinese researchers combining Daoist and Confucian philosophy, traditional Chinese medicine 中医, indigenous psychology 本土心理学 or comparative (cross-cultural) psychology 跨文化心理学, and medical anthropology.

All this strongly supported me in my own investigation of aspects of indigenous Chinese psychology, and strengthened the conviction that more scholarly cooperation across different expertise and research fields is needed.

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