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Guest Editor's Introduction

Abstract: In 1751, Zheng Banqiao wrote his famous calligraphy Nande hutu *(难得糊涂; "It's difficult to be muddled"). Inquiries into the calligraphy reveal different dimensions of the saying. Its most popular interpretation can be found in self-improvement books on "the art of being muddled" (*hutuxue*). What academic, official, and popular discourses on the saying have in common is their dialectical reasoning and frequent references to other popular related sayings, to quotes from the ancient classics, and to ancient heroes and historical figures. This issue will explore a few interpretations of the saying. Some prove to be critical with regard to the application of its underlying wisdom, while others focus on its philosophical (Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist), psychological, and/or sociocultural dimension. This issue will also shed light on its pragmatic interpretation as a popular strategy to navigate more positively through life.*

Any one engaging in Chinese culture will sooner or later come across the calligraphy *Nande hutu* (难得糊涂; "Being muddled is difficult") by Qing calligrapher Zheng Banqiao (1693–1765). The

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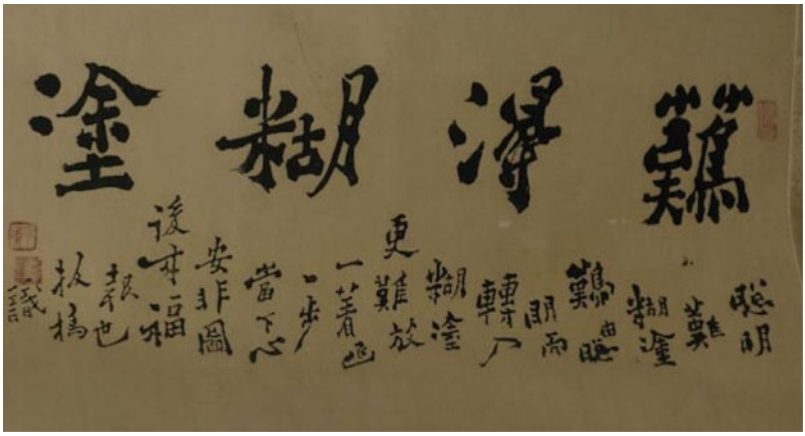
Figure 1. ***Nande hutu*** **(photo taken by author in Zheng Banqiao's old family house, Xinghua, 2009).**



calligraphy is sold as a print on vases, ink stones, T-shirts, and rubbings; there are popular songs, self-improvement books, theater plays, and television shows named after it; and there is even a brewery called the Nande hutu Liquor Company (*Nande hutu jiuye gongsi*), whose homepage consists of nothing but the four characters. The saying is even considered a "China Daily hot word."[1]

A possible literary encounter could be in Mo Yan's short story "Treasure Map" (*Cangbaotu;* 藏宝图). The story narrates how two friends bump into each other after many years have passed since one of them moved from the countryside to Beijing. One of the protagonists, the opportunist Make, who remained in the countryside, utters this peculiar quote—in the French translation, translated as "Not everyone who wants to be a fool can be so"[2]—to mock his old friend for having become a real "city guy." Over a bowl of dumplings, through a complex wordplay of different connotations of smartness and wisdom, he explains to his old friend how this difficult-to-obtain foolishness has absolutely nothing to do with the "minor smartness" (*xiao congming*) that townspeople now expose:

> You townspeople are only smart in a minor way; you are astute (*jingming*) but without smartness (*congming*); you are smart but not brilliant (*gaoming*); you are brilliant but without wisdom

> (*yingming*); you are wise but are not enlightened sages (*shengming*). Even the enlightened sages among you are not able to feign stupidity (*zhuang hutu*), whereas we who understand things all know how to feign stupidity. (Mo 2004, 95; author's translation from Chinese)

In search of a clear explanation of these four, strangely written characters, a vast web of various, often ambiguous, meanings surfaces. There seem to be as many interpretations as there are people discussing the calligraphy, and myths and folk stories surround this popular piece of art and its author. Naturally, this only increases its intriguing quality. What is meant by feigning stupidity? Why did the author write these four characters? In what way can a presumably "wise" philosophy of life that advocates "muddledness" be so attractive that it gave rise to popular self-improvement books on "the art of being muddled" (*hutuxue;* 糊涂学)? And why is "being muddled" so difficult in the first place? This introduction deals with these questions by addressing the origin of the calligraphy and its author, a few philosophical, sociohistorical, and psychological interpretations, and aspects of its ongoing popularity.[3] In doing so, it will shed light on what is perhaps "the most crucial part of Chinese culture that most non-Chinese people fail to grasp, and of which most Chinese are not conscious."[4]

Zheng Banqiao's *Nande hutu*

There are few reliable indications of how the content of Zheng Banqiao's calligraphy should be conceived, but getting to know its author and the circumstances of its creation proves a good start. Zheng Banqiao, a native of Xinghua, Jiangsu Province, was a Qing official for twelve years, but above all, he was an artist. Since the late 1990s, much research about his literature and especially about his art has been published. Much of him is known through his *Family Letters* (Zheng banqiao jiashu), which altogether can be considered as a book of moral education. The many anecdotes surrounding him are also very valuable; they portray him as both an eccentric and as a folk hero.

Better known under his style name Zheng Xie, Zheng Banqiao's fame is due in part to his highest official degree (*jinshi*) and to his artistic recognition as an accomplished poet, painter,

and calligrapher. However, his eccentricity and his popularity up to the present day[5] are certainly also based on his character and personal qualities. In his young years, he cultivated a bohemian lifestyle, unrestrained and quite eccentric. Despite his preference for an artist's way of life, after the death of his father, he managed to attain the highest possible degree in the imperial examinations and became an official to support his family. Although the Confucian ideal was to serve the people and provide a good (moral) example, at that time, officialdom was probably the most corrupt of all layers of society. In this context, Zheng Banqiao is generally known as an outright, courageous defender of the poor and weak against the rich and powerful, including his own colleagues and superiors. Inevitably, this idealism often left him utterly disillusioned about officialdom. After having encountered much opposition from his superiors against the methods he used to relieve the suffering of the populace during a catastrophic famine in his county in Shandong (he ordered to open up the imperial grain storage), he retired to write and paint in Yangzhou rather than to compromise his integrity. Later, about a hundred years after his lifetime, he became known as one of the so-called Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou (*Yangzhou ba guai*).[6]

The Calligraphy *Nande hutu* and Its Postscript

As for the calligraphy, a few (folk) stories tell about the precise moment of its creation, but given the unreliability of these sources, there are better ways to investigate its meaning. Most valuable in this respect is the postscript that Zheng Banqiao himself wrote to the four-character phrase in 1751, stating the following: "Being smart is difficult; being muddled is difficult. To start out being smart and turn muddled is even more difficult. Let go for once! Step back for once! If you want to have present peace of mind, it is not by anticipating 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).

What especially attracts attention in the postscript is the positive connotation of "muddledness." Muddledness is presented as something to obtain, as a virtue, as a moral or philosophical ideal; it is viewed as difficult to obtain but more desirable than being smart.

This paradox of wisdom as nonwisdom is a recurrent theme in ancient Chinese philosophy and can best be explained by analyzing the postscript phrase by phrase.

The Dialectics of Being Smart and Muddled: "Being Smart Is Difficult; Being Muddled Is Difficult. To Start Out Being Smart and Turn Muddled Is Even More Difficult."

When reading the first part of the postscript, the most striking observation is the word play and the paradoxical use of smart (*congming*)[7] and muddled (*hutu*). Pohl (2007, 275) comments on the saying by stating that although it is generally considered to be hard-to-attain perspicacity because the masses are considered to belong to the "naïve" and stupid people, the saying turns the generally accepted order upside down: not intelligence but "stupidity" is difficult to attain.

The use of the juxtaposition of two opposing concepts is quite common in Daoist rhetoric and philosophy, and in Chinese discourse in general.[8] It is a direct result of the characteristically Chinese dialectical way of thinking and cosmological worldview, and reflects the fundamentals of *yin-yang* philosophy, that is, the interaction between *yin* and *yang* as two complementary qualities that constantly blend into each other.

Applied to smart and muddled, Lin Yutang (2005 [1942], 1) made the point in his article "The Wisdom of the Chinese People" (*Zhongguoren zhi congming*):

> In China, wisdom and muddledness were one of the same complex, and when talking about using smartness, there is no other application than pretending to be muddled. It is namely the wisdom of obliterating wisdom with wisdom. The discussion of the syncretism of smartness and muddledness is precisely the discussion of the highest smartness.

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 being (*wei;* 为) is ultimately the same as not being (*bu wei;* 不为), they adopt this particular attitude about smartness and muddledness.

One of Zheng Banqiao's near contemporaries who was familiar with the historical and cultural background and societal context, the calligrapher Qian Yong (1759–1844), lucidly explained in one of his writings what Zheng Banqiao must have meant by writing *Nande hutu:*

> Zheng Banqiao once wrote a four-character motto called *Nande hutu,* precisely the words of an extremely 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 while at the same time preserving one's integrity, a smart person needs a bit of *hutu* in being smart. Those who are blindly smart cause trouble for themselves and will certainly attract resentment and blame. On the contrary, a person better makes smart use of being muddled. (Liu and Huang 2005, 14)

Hence, smartness and muddledness are complementary; they both belong to the realm of real wisdom. On the one hand, it is often understood that people who are really smart and intelligent are generally considered to have understood the ways of the world. However, this quality does not make them any happier, nor does it provide a secure, comforting life. Since such people are also aware of the limitations of humankind and are often unable to counterbalance these limitations, they become even more vulnerable. In addition, especially for an upright official in a corrupt environment such as Zheng Banqiao, who had a clear, idealistic view on life and was ambitious about serving the people, being "smart" was difficult, disappointing, and painful (*congming nan*). On the other hand, "muddling through life" is, in itself, not difficult. However, for a truthful, idealistic, and stubborn person such as Zheng Banqiao, this attitude was not an option, let alone turning a blind eye and pretending to be ignorant about situations that went against his ideals and convictions. For such a morally upright person, being muddled is also very difficult (*hutu nan*). What is even more difficult is to turn from a smart person into a "muddled" person (*you congming er zhuanru hutu geng nan*). Zheng Banqiao indeed was able to oppose the corrupt elements of officialdom, but at the same time, was not willing to ignore his conscience, nor did he manage to stay in office and take a detached, *hutu* approach in the matter. For him, being smart

required a kind of wisdom and inner strength that would allow for sufficient muddledness to survive in society rather than merely adopting a blind muddledness at the expense of a certain level of smartness.

Philosophically, such a perception of wise muddledness and muddled wisdom most prominently originates from Daoist thinking, not only formally (paradox), but also content-wise. Zheng Banqiao himself, as a scholar-official, was deeply immersed in the Three Teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. As many of his poems and writings show, throughout his life he was particularly attracted to the Daoist ideal of a free and light-hearted, "easy wandering" life. His artistic expression of a difficult-to-obtain muddledness without doubt echoes this predilection.[9]

In particular, the core influence of *Nande hutu* primarily comes from Lao Zi's and Zhuang Zi's suggestions for a particular state of mind and way of living. As early as in the *Zhuangzi,* Yanhui explains to Zhongni (Confucius) the practice of "sitting in oblivion" (*zuowang;* 坐忘), the last and highest stage of illumination: to practice *zuowang,* even smartness (*congming*) is to be discarded. 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 interpretation for meditation. As a way to understanding, Zhuang Zi links the idea of *zuowang* to the process of "to forget how to" (to undo learning) that the *Laozi* put forward.

It should come as no surprise that in the academic and popular discourses on *Nande hutu,* a similar paradox is used to explain its meaning: "The highest wisdom looks like foolishness" (大智若愚). This saying is generally attributed to Song poet Su Dongpo (苏东坡; 1073–1101),[10] but it originated from a variant in Lao Zi's *Daodejing* (chap. 45): "The most straight seems to be crooked, the greatest skill seems to be clumsy" (大直若屈，大巧若拙). The Daoist ideal of wisdom as nonwisdom is particularly present in the *Zhuangzi*. In different passages (cf. above on *zuowang* and Inner Chapters 2 and 3), Zhuang Zi refers to the uselessness of knowledge to become an "arrived person" (至人), or the ultimate Daoist sage. Only he who lives in accordance with the *dao,* which by nature is constantly changing, and not in accordance with

merely conventional and certainly not absolute truths and knowledge, is a true sage.

In this issue, Wang Zisong (1993), reflects on the absence of analytical knowledge claims by making an association with Socrates' opinion on wisdom and truth (see below). With the quote "I know what I do not know," Socrates intended to say that the only real wisdom is knowing that you know nothing (in reality). 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 "the highest wisdom looks like foolishness" embodies the Daoist ideal of the sage fool. The sage is the person who manages to banish all nonauthentic knowledge based on distinctions, living in accordance with nature, which makes him free of conventions and social morality; he thus often looks and acts like a fool. These interpretations are also reminiscent of Zhuang Zi's story of Lord Hundun, who embodies the perfectly happy, 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]).[11] The ideal state of *hundun* (混沌)—chaos, vagueness, and indistinctness—requires transcending the senses and abandoning cultivation and unnatural intellectual and moral education. This spontaneous, unburdened state of mind is also symbolized in the first chapter of the Inner Chapters in the *Zhuangzi,* "Wandering Carefree and at Ease" (*Xiaoyao you;* 逍遥游), a metaphor for the state of mind of the illuminated person. 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). This will then automatically bring about a carefree life in harmony with nature.

With regard to the frequent association of "foolishnes" with *hutu* in *Nande hutu,* it is important to note that *yu* (愚) as in *da*

zhi ruo yu, although sometimes translated as "ignorance" in the sense of simplicity and naïvety, can certainly not be compared with the *yu* of a child, nor of "common people." Feng Youlan (1997, 103) clarifies this as follows:

> 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.

This perfectly conveys the meaning of *hutu* in *Nande hutu:* the ideal *hutu* is a kind of muddledness that transcends smartness. As an emotional, intellectual, and rational quality related to self-cultivation (*xiuyang;* 修养) and experience, it is indeed very different from childhood innocence.[12] How this higher state of mind called *hutu* can be attained is suggested in the second part of Zheng's postscript.

The Road to Muddledness: "Let Go for Once! Step Back for Once!"

The phrase "Let go for once, step back for once" adopts slightly varying interpretations in different contexts. For example, this phrasing can refer to a tactic used in chess, as well as in martial arts, where "taking a step back" can give the opponent the impression that the aggressor is weak, and even confused, in order to make him attack. Only then can you use your opponent's own power against him. This idea is also prominent in *The Art of War* (Sunzi bingfa; 孙子兵法), attributed to philosopher and strategist Sun Zi,[13] and in many games and martial arts styles. Still, the core meaning remains unchanged: taking distance in a matter, not taking control but lettings things (temporarily) take their own course is often for the best. It is with this tactic that Zheng Banqiao indicated a way of achieving the ultimate muddled state of mind. Once again, this strategy represents a common Daoist rationale. Living according to the *dao* consists of letting go of human endeavors and burdens embodied in worldly ambitions such as fame and fortune, passions, and all kinds of mental and emotional fixations of the moment.

However, this does not mean shying away from conflicts or challenges, or avoiding discussions about right and wrong. The road to real muddledness is not 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. *Hutu* represents a state of mind not exclusively attainable by recluses and real fools. Here, the saying *da yin yin yu shi* (大隐隐于市) often comes into play in the different discourses on the saying. The saying could be translated as "Real retreat is retreat to the marketplace" or "in the middle of town." This expression explains that taking a step back does not necessarily involve 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 within the mundane world, by not becoming completely absorbed by it. 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 often recurring in the many discourses on *Nande hutu* such as self-cultivation (*xiuyang*), innate moral knowledge (*liangzhi;* 良知), and knowing fate (*zhi tianming;* 知天命) tend to be rooted in life's experiences, always in relation to others within society. As such, these characteristics of wisdom in one way or another relate to age and personal growth; only continuous and conscious involvement in life and moral cultivation can lead to true peace of mind. According to Lin Yutang, it is exactly this "Great Recluse" who does not avoid everyday life in all its aspects that embodies the possibility of the merging of Confucianism and Daoism: he manages to adopt a carefree, *hutu* state of mind (Daoist) while still being socially responsible and engaging (Confucian) (Lin 2007, 108–109).

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 while keeping peace of mind was Tao Yuanming (陶渊明; 317–420). Tao Yuanming is also the historical figure with whom Zheng Banqiao is often associated. Already at a very young age, Tao Yuanming 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. He went to live the plain, humble life of a farmer together with his wife, in harmony with himself and his surroundings, in communion with the poor, enjoying good wine and the beauty of nature and poetry. According to Lin Yutang, he may be regarded by some as an escapist, but he clearly was not. What he tried to escape was politics rather than the pleasures and worries of life itself (Lin 2007, 117–118).[14]

As many of the allusions to him in his writings show, Zheng Banqiao greatly admired Tao Yuanming. In the same way, he 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. Moreover, Zheng Banqiao never aimed 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.

"Present Peace of Mind Is Not by Anticipating Future Rewards"

The last sentence of the postscript provides insight into the state of mind that comes along with retreating and taking a step back in the practice of being *hutu:* peace of mind. As the sentence states, peace of mind can only be attained when one does not anticipate desired consequences of one's deeds. That is to say, when one does not calculate or act with a conscious or unconscious focus on a certain aim, inner peace will not be in reach. Even with the best, most honorable and lofty intentions, as was the case for Zheng Banqiao, ultimately, there will not be real inner calmness. A wise person acting in a muddled way does so in a state of mind of "knowing fate" and fully understanding the ways of the world. He will use this wisdom without regard to personal gain or intentional outcomes. As a result, he cannot be emotionally or mentally affected by his actions, and successfully finds peace of mind. The following passage of the *Zhuangzi* (chap. 6) echoes this particular condition: "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." Again, the Daoist ideal of the sage fool comes

to mind. The positive effect of "foolishness" that results from transcending knowledge is very powerful; it allows the sage to be emotionally indifferent and unconcerned with prior knowledge or rational judgments. Consequently, he can enjoy absolute happiness, free of worry and anxiety. In the discussion of the practice of being muddled as associated with the Daoist "sitting in oblivion," Jordan Paper (2004, 26) appropriately comments on this absence of planning by saying, "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." Obviously, this describes a momentary state of mind, present only during the time of *zuowang*.

With this in mind, the word "present" (*dangxia*) accompanying "peace of mind" (*xin an*) in Zheng Banqiao's original phrasing should not be ignored. It indicates the temporary quality of the peace of mind resulting from practicing muddledness. There is no guarantee for eternal inner peace, nor is the aim to constantly be in a muddled state of mind; rather, being muddled provides, to use the words of Li Shaolong, a "mental rest" (Li 2005, 72).

Growing Popularity

In the course of its spread to all layers of society, *Nande hutu* not only has become particularly popularized in the sense of accessible for a broad public, but also popular in the sense of beloved and favored. Historically, it seems that the calligraphy became publicly known and famous soon after Zheng Banqiao wrote it. This assumption is supported by his contemporary Qian Yong's comment on *Nande hutu* (see above). Furthermore, the existence of different seals might indicate that the calligraphy became popular soon after its public showing. With regard to later literary sources, one of the most notable is probably the critical article titled "Nande hutu" by Lu Xun in 1933 (see also below).[15] During the Mao era, hardly any written sources are traceable. In contrast, since the reform era under Deng Xiaoping, the calligraphy seems to have gained increasing popularity. Ample articles of the 1980s and 1990s testify to its popularity in academic, official, and popular sources. Writings on the saying now came from different levels of society, ranging from opinion papers, essays, academic

articles, magazine articles, Party propaganda, and still later, Web articles and blogs. These sources adopt various approaches to explaining *Nande hutu,* with many different foci and a variety of interpretations and usefulness claims.

With regard to academic sources, in line with the prevailing dialectical rhetoric, a common analysis focuses on the duality of the calligraphy. Such is the case, for instance, for author Li Qiao (1986). In his essay "The 'Being Muddled Is Difficult' of Zheng Banqiao" the first article translated in this issue, he elaborates on the active and enterprising (*jiji*), and the passive, "muddling through" (*xiaoji*) interpretation reflecting Zheng Banqiao's life experience. It is particularly representative of the many articles on *Nande hutu* dating from the 1980s that deal with the various passive applications of the saying such as self-consolation, and with the negative consequences of a wrong, irresponsible use of its wisdom. During this period following the economic reforms, sources dealing with *Nande hutu* were especially critical of shrewd officials and businessmen, but intellectuals were not free from criticism either. They would adopt the wisdom of *Nande hutu* as a passive "philosophy of the opportunist." Li Qiao argues that it is important to study both the active and passive dimensions of Zheng Banqiao's wisdom of life to be able to deal with contemporary and future society without making the same mistakes as their predecessors. This trend of a dialectical approach to analyze the saying continues to exist up until today (e.g., Yang 2014), and is often adopted by nonacademics.

Other academics focus on the sociohistorical context of Zheng Banqiao, and how later developments shaped the understanding of the saying. In the second article, "The 'Being Muddled Is Difficult' Thought in Traditional Chinese Culture" (2005), Li Shaolong defines *Nande hutu* as the special feature in the mode of thinking and surviving in Chinese culture. In particular, he analyzes the before-mentioned negative and passive dimension of *Nande hutu* as a result of feudal society, namely, as a strategy of (mental) survival, and relates this to the three pillars of society: the bureaucracy, the family structure on which society is based, and the hierarchical structure of society. In the context of this harsh Confucian society, he zooms in on the position of the so-called literati. Although the Yongzheng (1723–1735) and

Qianlong (1735–1796) periods in the Qing dynasty are considered 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.[16] Obviously, this did not stimulate a free and open atmosphere for literati-officials, and many of them kept quiet for the sake of self-preservation. Such an attitude applied even more to all those literati serving as officials, as was the case with Zheng Banqiao. According to Li, 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 criticism of sensitive issues, thus risking loss of one's social status. As such, being *hutu* not only served as self-consolation, but also as a self-imposed strategy for self-preservation.

In the official discourse on the saying from the 1980s on, critical observations have also been prevailing. Officials in official Party magazines, as well as common people writing about officialdom in popular magazines, argue that Zheng Banqiao's saying is abused as a "feigned ignorance" for the wrong purposes such as self-enrichment to the harm of others and society. According to these sources, *Nande hutu* serves as an ironic (justification) motto for local officials who gradually enjoyed more freedom of decision, and in this respect, also the freedom to "become rich," and who gave free rein to their power to do so. The late 1980s and 1990s are indeed known for excessive corruption. 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 massacre, and at the same time, the economic reforms and openness, caused the atmosphere to be heavily politically charged. However, it also caused the masses to be eager for opportunities and selfish support. As a consequence, this period also gave rise to many modern and traditional "handbooks" on strategies for surviving in chaotic times, as a part of what Geremie Barmé (1999, 138) appropriately calls "crisis publishing."[17]

Until today, in the present popular discourse on the saying, corruption among officials by turning a blind eye on briberies and pretending to be ignorant is put forward as the most negative, unethical application of the wisdom of pretended muddledness. Bribery and corruption are indeed clear examples of how the

rules for applying the art of being muddled are not respected. As previously discussed, these rules indicate that beneficial muddledness should start from real smartness and wisdom, and should result in inner and social harmony instead of in negative self-advancement.

One special period was the 300th anniversary of Zheng Banqiao in 1993. Around this time, the saying occurred even more frequently in public life and a television serial on Zheng Banqiao's official service was broadcast. By then, *Nande hutu* had become a "national quintessence" (*guocui;* 国粹) (Su 2006, 19). However, not all of the cultural products related to *Nande hutu* addressed the actual meaning of the saying, let alone its author. Often, the saying was (and continues to be) used only to have a catchy title for an article, theater play, or popular song, whereas the content vaguely referred to some situation where people keep silent or pretend to be ignorant or unclear about a matter. On other occasions, its commonness was used as a pretext to address more delicate issues. An example of this ambiguous use is presented in the third essay, by Wang Zisong (1993), "'Being Muddled Is Difficult' Is Not Needed: An Analytic Discussion Starting from Aristotle." This essay sets out with a reflection on the benefits and disadvantages of the typical Western (Aristotelean) analytic and the Chinese synthetic way of (philosophical) reasoning. On the one hand, in light of increasing globalization, the author argues for a synthesis of the two, to learn from each other. Nevertheless, near the end of the essay, he questions the popularity of the saying when reflecting the muddled, passive, cowardly, or even vicious attitude of those people who wrongly use the wisdom of *Nande hutu* to console themselves or justify their (non-)actions. According to him, this is an attitude representative of a Chinese way of thinking that he does not support. By denouncing blindly (and not smartly) muddled leaders as not exemplary for sound future leadership, he might well be representing the common opinion of that period that was critical of corrupt (local) leaders.

Contemporary Discourse: "The Art of Being Muddled"

Nowadays, the saying is widespread and highly commercialized, even among overseas Chinese, to which a growing amount of

literary products, popular artifacts, and other commercialized products testify. Closely related to the commercialization of the saying is the popularization in terms of its accessibility for a large, nonelitist group of readers. The best example of this is the frequent use in popular magazines specializing in women's issues, health, business, politics, and education, aimed either at a young, middle-aged, or elderly public. Even more illustrative for this popularization, is the appearance of books on *hutuxue* (糊涂学), or "the art of being muddled," as early as the 1990s. Such books were continuously reprinted and new books on the wisdom of foolishness keep appearing.

As many of the titles indicate, these books are not difficult to read. They are most often classified as "popular reading," but also as "philosophy of life," "social and moral education," and "the psychology of being successful." All can be found in the "self-improvement" section next to other books with the suffix *-xue* (learning, study, art) and more scientific books such as psychology and sociology. In these books, "the art of being muddled" is presented as an ancient philosophy of life that gives advice on how to become successful in different aspects of life. Jian Kun's new edition of "*The Art of Being Muddled": Sixty-four Lessons on the Wisdom of Conducting Oneself in Society. The "Eight Treasures Porridge" for Joyful Feelings and Spiritual Cultivation* (Hutuxue: Zhihui chushi liushisi ke. Yiqing yangxing "Babaozhou") (2004) offers an interesting example of using old wisdom in a new setting. With a closer look, we see that the author proposes sixty-four lessons in being *hutu* in eight fields of life such as love, marriage, business, finance, and morality, of which each chapter—or in his words, "classic of major muddledness"—is in turn divided into eight lessons. This witty association with the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* (Yijing) is exemplary for the promotion and perception of *Nande hutu* as ancient, traditional wisdom. Another association of "eight (*ba*) times eight," according to the Chinese auspicious use of homonyms for good luck, could be with "enrichment" (*fa*). Such a presentation of the book makes it accessible and attractive to all kinds of people, not only for an intellectual elite.

What these contemporary sources—academic, official, popular—have in common is the use of a few typically Chinese rhetorical

characteristics to explain the various nuances and interpretations of the saying. At the same time, these characteristics serve the so-called new cultural revolution that is so prominent in contemporary society and are hard to avoid if an author wants to be taken seriously—and be read—among a broad public in China. First of all, the discourses are filled with frequent associations and references to historical figures, such as Tao Yuanming (see above), Zhuge Liang (181–234, strategist during the Three Kingdom Period), Cao Cao (155–220, warlord during the late Han) and Yang Xiu (175–219, his advisor), Lü Duan (935–1000, prime minister during the Song dynasty), Zhang Xueliang (1901–2001, warlord during the Warlord era), and even Mao Zedong. This phenomenon strongly draws on the idea of the model example of historical figures and events in the past, and illustrates the importance of historical awareness as a means to learn from the past. In the fourth article, "Dialectical Interpretation of the So-Called 'It's Difficult to Be Muddled' by Zheng Banqiao," author Lei Legeng (2008) again gives a "dialectical reading" (active vs. passive) of the saying to enhance a deep understanding of its meaning. His real emphasis, however, is on the practical, realistic dimension of its philosophy of life and goes deeper into several concrete domains of applications. His arguments in favor of this practical use of *Nande hutu* are supported by ample illustrations of historical figures and events.

A second characteristic is the dialectical use of opposite pairs. Several dichotomies are put forward to give insight into what is meant by smartness and muddledness, and its related wisdoms of life. Zheng Banqiao's calligraphy directly reflects this dialectic by putting *congming* in juxtaposition with *hutu*. Then, within this juxtaposition, two other juxtapositions frequently recur: the dichotomy of real and fake muddledness (*zhen/jia hutu*), and of minor and major smartness/muddledness (*xiao/da congming/hutu*) (cf. Mo Yan's quote at the beginning of the preface). Some popular books go as far as to use it as a title, such as *Minor Muddledness, Major Wisdom* (Xiao hutu da zhihui; 小糊涂 大智慧) by Xing Yanguo (2009, Beijing: Dizhen chubanshe), and by Yan Bo (2006, Beijing: Zhongguo shangye chubanshe). Another example is the before-mentioned dialectical reading of *Nande hutu* in terms of its positive (active) and negative (passive) components (e.g., Lei 2008; Li 1986, 2005).

A third characteristic is the frequent reference to philosophical concepts and phrases that are well established in Chinese culture, as well as to other popular proverbs and aphorisms that express a similar wisdom of life, often—like *Nande hutu*—with a philosophical, or at least literary, background. A few examples are the sayings "Suffering brings good fortune" (*chi kui shi fu*),[18] the earlier discussed "Great wisdom looks like foolishness," "Knowing fate" (*zhi tianming*), "Knowing contentment brings happiness" (*zhi zu chang le*), "Overcoming hardness with softness" (*yi rou ke gang*), and "Being flexible on the outside, but determinate inside" (*wai yuan nei fang*), and notions such as endurance (*ren*) and moderation (*du* or *Zhongyong*). These concepts, phrases, and proverbs are vital for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of *Nande hutu,* and altogether articulate the overall wisdom of *Nande hutu* well. They reflect the common beliefs and opinions rooted in philosophical tradition with regard to being foolish, wise, intelligent, and muddled that were passed on throughout Chinese history, and the general dynamics that "pretended muddledness" brings forth. Appearing in literary, academic, official, and popular sources, they not only convey intellectual opinions, but convictions deeply rooted in the Chinese mind that are widely understandable.

These convictions all build on the importance of taking a background position, of considering things with an open mind (*xiang de kai*), and of knowing when to pretend ignorance, take a step back and let go, and when not to take a more active approach, especially when dealing with unfortunate events and conflicts. In this respect, these related wisdoms of life not only explain how *Nande hutu* is interpreted by the Chinese in contemporary society, but at the same time, give practical advice on how to attain the peace of mind at which *Nande hutu* aims. As a result, the ideals of equanimity, endurance, tolerance, flexibility, and mildness promoted in *Nande hutu* equip the Chinese with an extraordinary resilience in all fields of life. Most prominently, it does so in the sphere of human conduct (*zuoren;* 做人), where interpersonal relations (*renji guanxi*) stipulate the right behavior, and all behavior is aimed at maintaining or restoring harmony.[19]

A fine example of this practical advice can be found in the fifth and last article of this issue taken from the popular self-improvement book by Yang Tao, *The Art of Being Muddled in Social*

Conduct and in Handling Affairs (做人做事的糊涂艺术; 2007 ["Chapter 6: Living: The Rules of Being Muddled to Be Carefree and Enjoy Life"]). Yang Tao addresses the subject in nine chapters representative of the different domains of *zuoren:* personal behavior, social conduct, workplace, social relationships, handling affairs, everyday life, mental state of mind, business, and officialdom. This issue deals with a partial translation of the chapter on applying the art of being muddled in daily life by highlighting "the rules of being muddled to be carefree and enjoy life." These rules include not harboring resentment, being internally sharp and externally simple, overcoming hardness with softness, and not being clever at all times. Throughout the book, *Nande hutu* is represented as an efficient, harmony-oriented philosophy of life and coping strategy applicable in all domains of life, but in particular, in social interactions and one's mind-set about them. The book is representative of the abundance of popularized wisdoms of life related to *Nande hutu,* which all present a useful tool for navigating more positively through life and staying mentally and physically healthy, and for harmonizing social relationships, and ultimately, society as well. It is exactly this function as a widely recognizable, useful coping strategy deeply immersed in Chinese culture and society, and as a social and societal harmonizer, that explains its present popularity.

Conclusion

Different interpretations of the wisdom of *Nande hutu* reveal both a positive, engaging component, and a negative, passive component. In the philosophical interpretation, the real meaning of the saying lies in the spiritual ideal of the sage fool, in following one's natural flow, and returning to human essence through self-cultivation. This kind of wise muddledness indicates a level of emotional and intellectual detachment without social disengagement. In this respect, *Nande hutu* should be considered a lighthearted state of emotional equanimity and intellectual indifference, focused on inner balance, especially when feeling powerless or when in a conflict situation.

From a sociohistorical point of view, Zheng Banqiao's *Nande hutu* 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, feigned muddledness constitutes an indispensable element of Chinese society, as a means of self-consolation and self-preservation. This was the case during feudal society, and still is now.

Psychologically, the art of being muddled has become a useful wisdom of life accessible to people of all walks of life. Some authors tend to see only the negative interpretation of feigning stupidity prevailing, and argue that the wisdom of the saying over time has developed into a merely passive, evasive strategy, in its worse form for selfish ambitions and without any social engagement. Whereas this undoubtedly is true to a great extent, the ancient ideal of the sage fool, where it functions as a wise coping strategy, not only serves personal and interpersonal harmony, but indirectly, the harmonious society as well. It is a perfect example of the revival and practical adaptation of traditional wisdom to the complexity of modern society.

Notes

1. See http://zn8398.com/zn_article/Html/?49245.html.
2. The novel was presumably written in 1999; no English translation of it exists so far. The rendering for *Nande hutu* in the French translation was "N'est pas imbécile qui veut" (Mo 2004). In English renderings of the saying such as in Chinese-English dictionaries, the saying is sometimes translated as "Where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise."
3. This introduction is based on parts of my Ph.D. dissertation, "*Nande hutu* and 'the Art of Being Muddled,'" Ghent University, Ghent (Belgium), 2012.
4. This phrasing was communicated to me by a Chinese colleague, but the idea of the "culture of vagueness and ambiguity" (*mohu wenhua*) that is difficult for non-Chinese to comprehend while being an often unconscious part of the cultural framework for Chinese people, was often repeated in other words.
5. Around 1990, a Chinese television serial about the life of Zheng Banqiao became very popular. There are comic books about him, and in 1983, the Xinghua Zheng Banqiao Memorial Hall (Museum) was established in Xinghua. Also in 1983, his former home in Xinghua was restored and is now a tourist venue.
6. For a complete (English) biography of Zheng Banqiao and his artistic work, see Pohl 1990.
7. *Congming*, with its meaning of "acute hearing" (*cong*) and "sight" (*ming*) literally emphasizes cleverness, intelligence, and wisdom even more. It denotes a state of mind that has to do not only 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*..

8. For the use of paradoxes in Daoist thinking, see, for example, Hansen 1992, 222–227.

9. See, for example, Zheng Banqiao's *Daoqing shi shou* (道情十首; Ten Songs with Daoist Sentiments), which express exaltation and idealization of the simple life, as well as aversion to officialdom. These songs date from before his service as an official, but he remained strongly inclined to the Daoist (and Buddhist) ideal way of living. For an analysis of the different philosophical influences in his life and writings, see Matthyssen 2013, Zheng 2007, and Wei 2008.

10. 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).

11. This story in the Inner Chapters (chap. 7) of the *Zhuangzi* reports what happens to the mythological Emperor of the Center called Hundun (混沌), who gets "plastic surgery" by two well-meaning but (literally) boring guests. The passage reads as follows:

> 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]. From time to time, Shu and Hu 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. (Watson 2003, 95).

12. See also the quote in the *Lunyu* (Analects 5.21), 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.'"

13. *The Art of War*, an influential ancient Chinese book on military strategy, is attributed to Sun Zi (544–496 B≻.C.). It has become very popular recently both in Asia and in the West, in many different domains, including business and politics.

14. 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 2007, 111–118.

15. This essay appeared in Lu Xun's collection of small essays *Zhun feng yue tan* (难风月谈), dating from 1933. *Fengyuetan* is sometimes translated as "semi-frivolous talks." In this period, Lu Xun's essays tackled serious contemporary issues by means of frivolous talk using suggestive language.

He meant to challenge the conventional beliefs by suggesting that he, as a layman, is not competent to talk about literature or social issues.

16. The book inquisition took place under the Qianlong emperor during the 1770s. Despite 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).

17. 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.

18. This saying, also by Zheng Banqiao, is often displayed and sold together with *Nande hutu*.

19. This sphere is in contrast to the sphere of handling affairs (*zuoshi;* 做事), where one should be conscientious (*renzhen*) about one's tasks and responsibilities. The opposition *zuoren* and *zuoshi* is one approach people resort to when dealing with the ethics of the "art of being muddled."

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