**‘Nande hutu 难得糊涂’ and ‘the art of being muddled’**

My research deals with Zheng Banqiao’s (1693-1765) calligraphy *Nande hutu*难得糊涂 (‘It’s difficult to be muddled’) and its present popularity, including the popular ‘study’ that has been made of the concept *hutu* 糊涂in present-day Chinese society, the so-called *hutuxue* 糊涂学 (‘the art of being/pretending to be muddled’). Nowadays the calligraphy is obviously perceived in different ways by different people of different ages and social status.

The aim of this research is, through the analysis of the academic, popular and official discourse on the calligraphy and of its use, to unravel the traditional philosophical, sociological and psychological dimensions represented in the calligraphy. Besides, we will analyse how the typical 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 will also shed light on what the popular saying tells us about society and societal changes as experienced by Chinese citizens on different levels (job, politics, economy, private and social life), and on how they deal with these changes.

The concept of abandoning knowledge or at least not showing off with one’s knowledge is not new in Chinese philosophical tradition; it is a main issue in Zhuangzi’s and Laozi’s work as a spiritual ideal (cf the story of the Lord Hundun in the Zhuangzi and the many reference to wisdom as non-wisdom), and it is also present in the Confucian idea of modesty and knowing one’s position, with as main aim maintaining harmony. Besides, muddledness and vagueness is a vital characteristic of Chinese society reflected in many socio-cultural domains such as (social) morality, interpersonal relations and communication.

Scholar-official Zheng Banqiao, undoubtedly influenced by these ancient philosophical ideals, but obviously also disillusioned about his ambition to genuinely ‘serve the people’ as an official, is said to have written this philosophy of life in a spirit of complaint about corrupt officialdom. In contemporary China, the high wisdom and criticism expressed in the saying appear to be adapted to the new context of growing individualism and capitalism. As such, the wisdom behind the saying, also lost some of its profound critical and philosophical meaning. For instance, the Chinese popular reading market shows us a great deal of books about ‘the art of being muddled’ (*hutuxue*  糊涂学). These books tell us how pretending not to know or see (pretending to be *hutu)* can be used in different domains of daily life: *hutu* in social relations, *hutu* in marriage life, *hutu* and human resources, *hutu* and finance, *hutu* and economy/business, *hutu* and emotional intelligence, *hutu* and morality, *hutu* in officialdom and leadership positions etc. These books and many other popular writings as found in web-blogs and articles in popular magazines often represent *hutu* as a concrete guide to success and wellbeing, with being - or pretending to be - muddled or ignorant as a popular philosophy of life.

Having become even more popular over the last ten-twenty years, the saying also embodies the typical Chinese ‘psychology of transcendence’ to deal with conflicts and feelings of powerlessness. This may partly explain its popularity in contemporary complex society, namely as a way to stay mentally healthy. In this respect, some people even suggest the philosophy of life behind the saying is – be it indirectly – used by officials to promote the ‘harmonious society’ in discouraging the people to directly address sources of anxiety and discontent. Besides, since being *hutu* presents an attitude towards life as well as a somehow pragmatic guidance to conduct oneself in society and act, or rather non-act, in different situations, it also represents a moral code. Here again, several links can be drawn to Daoist and Confucian values such as wisdom as foolishness, harmony, modesty, moral conscience and self-cultivation.

These philosophical, psychological and moral dimensions of the saying are all examples of the different purposes the ‘practical wisdom’ behind the saying serves in contemporary society.

**Methods and sources**

The project covers different disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and psychology. As such, the research is based on different methods such as textual analysis and literature study (introduction, philosophical background, and a discussion of the author Zheng Banqiao and the socio-historical context he lived in), and thematic analysis of the academic, popular and official discourse on the saying and of its societal derivatives in contemporary Chinese society.

The different sources for the discourse analysis are articles by Chinese academics, an explorative questionnaire among Chinese students in Belgium, semi-structured interviews with people from different walks of life (academics, businessmen and – women, taxi-drivers, officials, artists, …), web-articles and blog-discussions, all kinds of articles from different popular, official and academic magazines often aimed at a specific reading public (the elderly, business world, students, …), and popular books about ‘the art of being muddled’ (*hutuxue*).