Mieke Matthyssen: Ignorance is Bliss—The Chinese Art of Not Knowing

Reviewed by Zhipeng GAO*


Scholars love knowledge, the bread and butter of their profession. The very term “philosophy” has an etymological root in Greek, *philein sophia*, meaning lover of wisdom. As illustrated in Plato’s cave allegory, knowledge is what dispels ignorance and enables us to recognize reality. In the world of scholarship where the acquisition of knowledge is the Holy Grail, who would have thought of taking “ignorance” as a valuable object warranting analysis? Well, Dr. Mieke Matthyssen did, and for compelling reasons.

Matthyssen’s monograph has an intriguing title: *Ignorance is Bliss: The Chinese Art of Not Knowing*. The art of not knowing is encapsulated in a pithy Chinese expression: *Nande hutu* (难得糊涂), which literally translates to “Hard to attain muddleheadedness”. In practice, *Nande hutu* entails deliberate performance of not knowing, or “playing dumb”, for one to cope with challenging circumstances. For example, a government official might pretend not to see corruption so as to keep a distance from it. More than a survival strategy, *Nande hutu* also allows one to maintain moral integrity or even achieve spiritual transcendence. As simple as the notion of *Nande hutu* might appear to be, it requires steadfast self-cultivation in the long run and skilful self-control during social interactions. For all these reasons, *Nande hutu* became a maxim that for centuries inspired Chinese individuals from varied walks of life.

Capturing the sheer complexity of *Nande hutu*, Matthyssen treats it as the entrance into a labyrinth of Chinese philosophy, politics, social relations, and a cultural history spanning from ancient times to today. Appropriate to the scope of her study, Matthyssen applies multidisciplinary methods—including extensive fieldwork, interviews, observation and biography—to collect data. Using these methods, Matthyssen strategically approaches her massive database to juxtapose

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intellectual and social history. On the one hand, she uses classical literary, philosophical and artistic products to establish the core of Chinese culture. On the other, she takes a contextualized, grassroots approach to source data from contemporary bookstores, magazines and online blogs. She also interviewed participants from different sectors of the Chinese society, ranging from students and teachers, blue- and white-collar workers, to academics, businesspersons and officials. The resulting data give us a glimpse into the lived reality of the Chinese today.

In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion, Matthyssen’s monograph is divided into two parts. The first part addresses Nande hutu in ancient China. According to Matthyssen, Chinese epistemology displayed a tendency towards ambiguity, suggestiveness and vagueness in dealing with knowledge. The action of knowing entails creative, holistic interpretation that is sensitive to the context. Against this backdrop, the ancient Chinese consider the state of hutu to complement knowledge in achieving dialectic unity. For example, the Daoist ideal of the sage fool is considered to have the capacity of transcending conventional knowledge and customs. This forms a sharp contrast with Western epistemology, which values clarity and logic as key qualities of truth.

Next, Matthyssen hastens to add that Chinese philosophy was not merely guided by lofty intellectual ideals, as it was as much informed by pragmatic concerns, such as how to maintain order in society. This is where social epistemology enters the picture. Given the rigid hierarchy and corrupt bureaucracy of Chinese feudal society, it was very difficult—if not fatal—for morally upright government officials to be outspoken. This is illustrated by the story of Zheng Banqiao (1693–1765). Zheng was a scholar-artist who made his way into the officialdom but eventually quit out of indignation over widespread corruption. In reflecting on his withdrawal from a promising political career, Zheng wrote the celebrated calligraphy on Nande hutu: “Being smart is difficult, being muddleheaded is also difficult. But it is even more difficult to turn from being smart into a muddlehead again. Let go for once! Take a step back! Present peace of mind attained, no need to hope for future rewards.” According to Matthyssen, Zheng’s explication of hutu as a practical wisdom not only harked back to the stories of the Jin-Song poet Tao Yuanming 陶渊 明 (365–427) and Song poet Su Dongpo 苏东坡 (1073–1101), but also inspired modern thinkers such as Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936). This leads to the second part of the monograph.

In the second part of the monograph, Matthyssen traces the continued application of the art of not knowing in contemporary China. After the communist movement ended in the 1970s, Chinese society still retained many of its old problems: bureaucracy, corruption, and authoritarianism. The effect of these political...
problems extends to academia, business and personal lives alike. Against this backdrop, a self-help culture rose, marketing *hutuxue* (the art of being muddle-headed) as a best-selling topic. Handbooks, popular magazines and TV series popularize a wide range of ideas under the umbrella of *hutuxue* to help individuals facing various challenges. Ancient thoughts are rehashed to solve modern problems. For example, it is a common practice for one to play dumb and ignore the frustrations in life in order to maintain one’s mental health. Another example would be the deliberate ignorance of problems in interpersonal relations in order to avoid conflict.

However, in spite of many of its proven benefits, *Nande hutu* as a multifaceted practice has indeterminate—and perhaps paradoxical—implications. For example, *Nande hutu* enables spiritual transcendence as well as self-serving behaviour. Due to its flexibility, *Nande hutu* could be co-opted to promote problematic causes. In the early 20th century, thinkers such as Lu Xun had warned against the potential abuse of *Nande hutu* as a form of evasive, opportunist manoeuvring towards self-advancement at the expense of societal well-being. According to Matthyssen, the contemporary *hutuxue* tacitly promotes two agendas of the nation-state. First, *hutuxue*’s frequent reference to Chinese cultural heritage reinforces nationalist sentiments. Second, under the Chinese government’s oppressive practices in the name of maintaining a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), the idea of *Nande hutu* is now used to pacify marginalized individuals who could otherwise channel their discontent toward protests. Amid China’s propaganda campaign, the practice of not knowing reminds one of “agnotology”, a nascent area in the Western sociology of knowledge that studies deliberate, culturally induced ignorance or doubt in the post-truth era. In light of all these troubling signs, according to Matthyssen, appropriate *Nande hutu* cannot be achieved without critical self-reflection and assessment of one’s circumstances. Finally, Matthyssen’s book concludes with a hidden gem, a postscript by Louise Sundararajan that thematizes the philosophical and social issues underlying *hutu*.

To sum up, Matthyssen’s *Ignorance is Bliss: The Chinese Art of Not Knowing* addresses *Nande hutu*, a pithy idea that powerfully penetrates Chinese culture, politics and society from ancient times till today. Matthyssen’s treatment of the topic is supported by a massive database and strategic analysis. Meanwhile, her writing is as lucid as it is elegant, creating a highly engaging reader experience, one that makes the three-hundred plus pages flow easily. Overall, Matthyssen’s monograph promises to make significant contribution to scholarship related to China, and I recommend it with great enthusiasm.