The Chinese Strategy of Transcendence

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1. Introduction

Distinctive lexical categories often reflect cultural values. This is not to argue in favor of Whorfian linguistic determinism, but rather that merely by learning and using a language, one perpetuates the thinking inherent in the given tongue (Doob 1988: 54). Language serves to transmit traditional culture, and words with special, culturally specific meanings reflect and encourage ways of thinking characteristic of a society. Since such expressions reveal widely-held concepts among native speakers of the language, analysis of such words can lead to significant insights about the culture (Wierzbicka 1997: 5-21). The fact that Chinese lexicalizes particular ideas—and that English does not—certainly suggests that such ideas are important to the Chinese (Huang 1987). Moreover, China's rulers have long intentionally focussed on the use of language to influence the feelings, thoughts, and actions of the people. Understanding the way state agents try to manipulate public discourse is important in understanding China (Schoenhals 1992: 2-6).

Sources of angst in Chinese society, ranging from concerns about the environment, to political stability and the ongoing economic reforms have persisted into the late 1990's and early 2000's (Barmé 1999: 115). While official policy often discouraged directly addressing these anxieties in public forums, several articles printed in various official newspapers, many of them subsequently reprinted by the People's Daily, offer advice on dealing with stress or frustration. Self-transcendence is a characteristically Chinese method that many of these articles advocate. Self-transcendence, which one could define as expanding one's boundaries of the self to take on broader life perspectives to help one make one's life more meaningful, has religious, philosophical, and psychological dimensions (Blass 1996, Coward 1996, and Westphal 1992). Chinese philosophy, the historical interactions between the people and their rulers, and even their language have all worked to make the strategy of transcendence a particularly appealing one to the Chinese.

The Chinese have long been fond of maxims, aphorisms, and historical allusions. People still use expressions from classical Chinese, partly because they have prestige (Chen Ping 1999: 79-90). The idea that elements of the political elite believe that aphorisms are founts of wisdom is found on the "Medicine and Health" page of the "News and Information Center" website of the Beijing Pinggu District People's Government, which has posted the online article "Aphorisms—Shields to Protect Your Mind". One of the more positive sayings cited in the article is "A fall into the pit, a gain in your wit" (chi yi qian, zhang yi zhi 吃一堑，長一智) (Anon 2 n.d.). The fact that this particular aphorism appears in Mao Zedong's famous—and widely studied—essay "On Practice" attests to the anonymous author's serious purpose (Mao 1937b: 273), and indeed on the surface it appears to simply refer to learning from one's mistakes.

2. Being philosophical

However, other sayings from the same article focus on a more detached, philosophical point of view. To rationalize disappointment, it suggests a hopeful attitude characterized by the phrase "lose it in the morning; find it in the evening" (shi zhi dong yu, shou zhi shu yu 失之東隅，收之桑榆). Literally, this means "lose it in the eastern corner (where the sun shines in the morning); "find it by the mulberry and elm" (a poetic trope for evening). Although the dynastic history biography of Feng Yi 馮異, a general in
the Later Han Dynasty who lived nearly two millennia ago attributes this expression to him (Fan 398-445: 646), the phase is still current, and used to suggest something like "The darkest hour is that before the dawn".

Similarly, to cope with amatory troubles, the same article suggests the line "the willow is dark and the flowers are bright" (liu an hua ming 柳暗花明) (Anon n.d. 1). The Chinese phrase originates in a couplet from the poem "Traveling to Mountain West Village" by the Song poet Lu You (陸游; 1125-1210): "Range upon range of mountains and river after river—I wonder if there is any road; the willow is dark and the flowers are bright—another village". In the original context, the poet's fatigue at his seemingly endless travels in the mountains is dispelled when he sees a sign of human habitation: the brightly colored flowers blooming against the background of the willow trees (Lu 1931: 50). One may use this poetic allusion with its image of cheerful flowers to distance oneself from one's troubles.

Among the methods that college students adopt to deal with stress are "pretended muddle-headedness" (nande htu 難得糊塗) and "suffering a loss is good fortune" (chikui shi fu 吃虧是福) (Yue 1993: 67). Both are phrases attributed to the multitalented poet-calligrapher Zheng Xie (鄭燮; 1693-1765), a scholar-official who first adopted the attitude "pretended muddle-headedness" in response to government incompetence, and later wrote it out with "suffering a loss is good fortune" as calligraphic specimens (Zheng 1981). Because doing what is right is so difficult, "pretended muddle-headedness" is the preferred course. On the other hand, while "suffering a loss is good fortune" might seem to be another way to speak of learning from one's mistakes, people generally use it to suggest something more passive.

An author using the pseudonym Xiaozhou also suggests using "muddle-headedness" (htu 糊塗) to maintain good health (yangsheng 養生) (Xiaozhou 2002). Note that yangsheng, the phrase that in this context means to nurture or maintain life originally has a Taoist meaning; it is used in one of the chapter titles of Zhuangzi. The author further explains that "muddle-headedness" consists of having a broad outlook (kaikuo 開闊). The author goes on to promote clarity in major affairs, and muddle-headedness in minor affairs (dashi qingchu, xiaoshi htu 大事清楚，小事糊塗). The existence of books such as Htu xue (The Art of Playing Dumb; Li 1997) attests to the continuing popularity of this tactic.

Similarly, Song Guolin presents ten mostly active tactics for dealing with setbacks or frustrations, the last of which is more passive, suggesting that it is a last resort (Song 2000). The final tactic involves what Song defines as using humor: "When you encounter frustrations, there's no harm in adopting Ah Q's method of moral victory, for example 'suffering a loss is good fortune' chikui shi fu, 'suffering an unexpected financial losses forestalls calamities' (po cai mian zai 破財免災), 'you win some, you lose some' (you shi you de 有失有得), and so on, in order to adjust your psychological imbalance. Or perhaps use 'pretended muddle-headedness' nande htu, viewing your setback calmly and coolly, and use humor to adjust your attitude." Keeping a sense of perspective and a sense of humor are useful to rationalize one's frustrations.

According to an article originally from a humor magazine, entitled "Certain Reasons We Use to Comfort Ourselves", "Those who suffer a loss say 'suffering a loss is good fortune'; those who lose something say, 'suffering an unexpected financial losses
forestalls calamities"; those who are disappointed in their work recall the saying "the old man of the passes lost a horse: how does one know it won't bring good luck? (sai weng shi ma; weibi fei fu 塞翁失馬未必非福). Despite the humorous context, the author explains there is nothing wrong with the way the Chinese use such reasoning to comfort themselves and to give themselves the flexibility to deal with setbacks and avoid stress by not "obsessing about things" (zu an n iu jiao jian 鑽牛角尖) (Anon 2001c). "Obsessing about things", literally "drill into the point of a bull's horn", has connotations of cornering oneself mentally.

Some of these phrases smack of "every cloud has a silver lining," but in fact go well beyond that, and are influenced by the philosophy of yin-yang dialectics, where conditions reaching one extreme ultimately revert to its opposite. Variants of "Suffering a loss is good fortune" date at least as far back as the seventeenth century (p o cai tuo fu 破財脫禍) (Pu 2000). The famous saying "the old man of the passes lost a horse" refers to a much earlier story from a Han dynasty text that shows how fortunate and misfortune are linked. The anecdote tells of the old man whose horse runs off; rather than grieve, he says that it may in fact be good luck. When the horse returns accompanied by several wild horses, he responds to congratulations by saying it may be bad luck. When his son's leg is crippled after he rides the horses, the old man says it may be good luck; sure enough, the injury spares his son from the draft to fight the neighboring "barbarians" (Huainanzi d. 122. B.C.: 18:6a-b). Many articles in the official press cite such phrases as a means to dealing with situations that run counter to one's wishes.

Occasionally the alternative to to "obsessing about things" may be simply to yield. In one usage example of the definition for zu an n iu jiao jian, the speaker's advice is suanle 算了一一"never mind", or "leave it at that" instead of "obsessing about things". There are a number of such expressions with the connotation of "putting up with" a situation that is not the preferred one. Bale 罷了, a similar expression, is defined in terms of suanle and further glossed as stopping and not insisting on forcing the situation (Mandarin Dictionary, s. v.). In contrast to English, the Chinese language suggests this is not quite so passive. The resultative verb expression xiangkai 想開, or its potential resultative verbal form xiangde kai 想得開, is the contrary of "obsessing about things", and has a positive connotation of making an active mental effort to open one's mind and be philosophical, and in fact Chinese dictionaries use xiangkai and "obsessing about things" in opposition to each other in their respective definitions. While DeFrancis' ABC Chinese-English Dictionary renders xiangde kai as "take philosophically" and its negated form xiang bu kai 想不開 as "take to heart" or "look on the dark side", it renders xiangkai as "be resigned to misfortune", suggesting this lexicographer views this as a negative approach (DeFrancis 1996). Yet generally speaking, the Chinese tend to view this more positively.

A Chinese psychotherapist who contrasts Confucian and Taoist coping mechanisms categorizes suanle and xiangkai as Taoist coping mechanisms, but also classifies under this rubric the phrase "If there's wine this morning, get drunk this morning" (j i n zhao you jiu jin zhao zui 今朝有酒今朝醉) (Li n. d.). The line is from "Diverting Myself", a poem attributed to Luo Yin (羅隱; 833-909) (Luo Tang Dynasty: 7545). The fact that the psychotherapist uses this phrase to characterize a Taoist distancing oneself from one's troubles in contrast to more socially responsible Confucian
behaviors suggests a negative connotation of self-indulgence. Similarly, citations from the official press generally use this phrase to characterize irresponsibly failing to concern oneself about one's future (Xiao Guang 2001).

An article contending that anger is bad for one's health argues that in taking care of one's health, one should strive to avoid anger, making one's thinking more open (kailang 開朗), and one's feelings more open (kaikuo 開闊). In all matters, one should think from a farther perspective (xiangdeyuandian 想得遠點), think things through more (xiangdetongdian 想得通點), take a wider perspective (xiangdekaidian 想得開點), instead of obsessing over minutiae. One should be more tolerant: when one can yield, then there is no harm in yielding; "taking a step back" (tui yibu 退一步) is not cowardice, on the contrary it might be a good plan to solve the conflict and dispell the clouds, showing "the boundless sea and sky" (haikuo tiankong 海闊天空) (Huanan 2000). "Take a step back; the sea and sky are boundless" is a variation from the last couplet of a Tang dynasty poem by one Liu Yao 劉瑤 (n. d.): "The green luan bird silently flies off to the west; the seas are wide and heaven is high—who knows where" (Liu Tang Dynasty: 9014). Although in the original context of a parting poem, it merely suggests the poet's sorrow, the phrase is now generally used to encourage people to take a broader perspective, probably because the kuo is the same as the kuo in kaikuo with its positive connotations of openness and broadmindedness.

One of several contributions to a discussion about conflicts with work agrees with this philosophical attitude, arguing: "We should have the attitude of 'A lack of forbearance in small matters upsets great plans' (xiao bu ren ze luan da mou 小不忍則亂大謀) and stop thinking about how unfortunate we are; if you feel it is unjust, then think of the saying 'the old man of the passes lost a horse: how does one know it won't bring good luck?'. Don't all bosses like workers who think their work is important?' (Wang Yan 2000); another writer argues that the Chinese have always been particular about this idea of "A lack of forbearance in small matters upsets great plans" (Anon 2001a). Although this anonymous writer does not specify it, the citation is originally from Confucius (551-479 B. C.: 140).

In "Ten Secrets for Maintaining One's Psychological Balance", an anonymous People's Daily article, the methods cited all tend towards the passive. The last of them, "He who knows contentment is always happy" (zhi zu chang le 知足常樂), is of particular interest. The author writes: "Whether it is glory and shame, or gains and losses, they are always independent of the individual's will; to remain unmoved by glory or shame, not seeking fame or fortune, and thereby achieving psychological equilibrium, is the greatest happiness" (Anon 2002). The author's suggestion is to maintain one's equanimity by avoiding what are by implication vain pursuits.

Although modern writers still use the phrase, "He who knows contentment is always happy" is a widely cited phrase with a long history. The ideal of "knowing contentment" (zhi zu 知足) and the related one of "knowing where to stop" (zhi zhi 知止) are generally associated with Taoism, and indeed Laozi speaks of this kind of "knowing" several times, most notably "If one knows contentment one will avoid disgrace; if one knows when to stop, one will avoid danger and can long endure" (Laozi, Sixth Century B. C.: 52). Similarly, he writes, "No crime is greater than the desire for gain; therefore the contentment of knowing contentment is the eternal contentment" (Laozi, Sixth Century

However, it would be wrong to assume that the concept is solely a Taoist one, as the phrase "knowing where to stop" also appears in the "Great Learning" chapter of the *Book of Rites*, but better known as one of the Four Books the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi (朱熹; 1130-1200) later selected and annotated; these were texts that virtually every educated person had to read. Taken in the original context, such stopping is merely the prelude to deliberation and taking action (*Book of Rites* Fourth Century B.C.: 983; Zhu 1130-1200: 1a).

Another modern article on "Enjoying a Happy Life" similarly uses the phrase "He who knows contentment is always happy" to explain that one of the secrets to a happy life is to curb one's desires. This writer additionally quotes Laozi in explanation: "There is no greater disaster than not knowing contentment" (*Laozi*, Sixth Century B.C.: 54). The author also cites another expression: "It often happens that seven or eight times out of ten, things don't go as one wishes" (*buruyi shi chang ba jiu* 不如意事常八九) (He 2002). The Chinese have cited this phrase over the centuries in different forms since its original appearance in a slightly different form in the dynastic history biography of Yang Hu (羊祜; 221-278), a general who utters the phrase when his ruler rejects his advice. In the original, it was only seven or eight times out of ten that were expected to run counter to one's wishes (Fang 578-648: 1019). This shrinkage of the proportion of occasions upon which one's desires are fulfilled shows that the Chinese have taken to heart the belief that one hardly ever gets what one wants; the implication is that one may as well accept the unwished-for situation, as this is the normal state of affairs.

The anonymous writer of another item about dealing with setbacks in turn cites a group of sayings attributed to Wang Fuzhi (王夫之; 1619-1692), a Qing dynasty philosopher. These include both "It often happens that seven or eight times out of ten, things don't go as one wishes" and another philosophical expression, "Face disappointment calmly" (*shiyi tairan* 失意泰然) (Anon 2000a). "Face disappointment happily" also appears in expanded form in as "Greet success with equanimity; face disappointment calmly" (*deyi danran, shiyi tairan* 得意淡然，失意泰然). Although not many articles use this expression, there is a significant exception: Qiu Bojun, a successful software developer who sees himself as a rival of Bill Gates, cites this latter phrase as his personal philosophy (Anon 2002a). The fact that official writings on psychological health treat the expression seriously means that many people do.

Similarly, an article titled "Peaceful Coexistence with Disease" not only advises adopting a *daguan* 達觀 attitude suggestive of Taoism as well as reminding the reader that "It often happens that seven or eight times out of ten, things don't go as one wishes", but also advises "being contented whatever one's situation" (*suì yu ěr ān* 隨遇而安). As the writer tells us, this latter phrase can be found in *The Roots of Wisdom* (Cai gen tan 萬根談; Xue 2003), a collection of philosophical aphorisms by the Ming writer Hong Yingming (洪應明; fl. 1596), a book that enjoyed revived popularity beginning in the 1990's as a text to help deal with the stress caused by the economic reform, with the blessing of the Communist Party (Barmé 1999: 140-141). Yet the usage of the phrase "being contented whatever one's situation" has a flavor of desperation, whether it is describing a strategy adopted by people at the mercy of disease, or by a nearly extinct
Chinese river dolphin held in captivity for seventeen years, (Anon 2002b), by Zhang Xueliang (張學良), the general subjected to decades-long house arrest (Dong 2001), or as a sign of depression (Anon 2003).

Similarly, various writers have expressed uneasiness over the phrase "knowing contentment". Just as the Legalist Han Fei advocated knowing sufficiency solely in terms of loyalty to the state (Han Fei d. 233) a couple of contemporary authors are also wary. Xiang Jianjun advocates "overcoming the mental laziness of 'He who knows contentment is always happy'" (Xiang 2002). Yuan Haolong admits that 'He who knows contentment is always happy' is beneficial to one's health, but he also argues in favor of being dissatisfied in order to be spurred on to self-improvement (Yuan 2002). Excessive satisfaction may lead to too much passivity.

3. Knowing Fate

Other phenomena that are sometimes also blamed for excessive passivity are the beliefs in fate or destiny (ming 命 or mingyun 命運) and Heaven (tian 天, laotianye 老天爺). The Chinese concept of ming is similar to the kinds of subjective explanations Anglophones use: either fate, with a negative connotation of doom, or destiny, with a positive connotation of good fortune, or some combination of both (Doob 1988: 5-7). Even if some Chinese might view fate as a hostile conspirator persecuting them with bad luck that will turn their best efforts into an exercise in futility, and leading them to a passive, fatalistic attitude (Rescher 1995: 103), generally they use the notion of fate to explain what has already happened.

The knowing or understanding of "knowing contentment" is similar to zhi ming (知命), literally "knowing one's fate", but by implication, understanding it. Confucius himself refers to this idea. In the course of describing his intellectual and moral development, he writes, "At fifty, I knew Heaven's fate" (Confucius 551-479 B. C.: 16). The expression survives as a literary circumlocution for fifty years of age. This is not to say that the sage felt smug about what he had been destined to accomplish: on the contrary, The Analects suggests that Confucius was frustrated at his failure to win much recognition (Confucius 551-479 B. C.: 8). The fact that it was not until this relatively advanced age that he felt able to know his fate suggests the high degree of difficulty involved in so doing. Yet it is easy to exaggerate the negative aspect. The early Chinese philosophers believed that by understanding fate, one could manage to live with it (Raphals 2002: 210), and in later times one reads of people "exorcising" their fate (Hammond 1992-93).

"Knowing one's fate" came to be used in the sense of understanding that the changes of the natural world were determined by Heaven's mandate. The phrase also appears in a book of aphorisms for children written in the Ming dynasty, and sometimes still marketed as such in Taiwan: "Only the Confucian gentleman can be at peace in poverty; or does the enlightened person know his fate" (wei junzi an pin; daren zhi ming 惟君子安貧，達人知命) (Cheng 1966: 3:43). Even though later Confucians interpreted "knowing one's fate" in many other ways, (Chen Ning 1999), it is in this sense of an unchangeable fate that people can blame for events they cannot control that they continue to use the phrase.

The enlightened person who knows his fate possesses a worldview explained by another related expression. Daguan, a word using the character da 達, signifies maintaining a detached, philosophical point of view. While Zhuangzi never actually uses
this expression, the "Perfect Happiness" (zhì le 至樂;—cf. zhī zuō chāng le) chapter of Zhuangzi expresses this attitude not just of detachment, but of seeing beyond worldly worries. Note this chapter includes the incident where Zhuangzi violates the rules of propriety at his wife's death, banging on a tub while singing, instead of properly mourning. Zhuangzi explains himself by saying to behave otherwise would betray a lack of understanding about fate (Zhuangzi, Fourth Century B. C.: 612). In fact, even today, one of the most commonly used expressions to express one's condolences is jie ai shun bian 節哀順變, which literally advises the mourners to restrain their grief and accept the inevitable change. The phrase is found in the Book of Rites chapter on mourning (Fourth century B. C.: 167). Although the sentiment is certainly Taoist, and this text was compiled sometime around Zhuangzi was, the Rites is in fact one of the thirteen Confucian classics, so the sentiment is as Confucian as it is Taoist.

In an essay which briefly describes his thinking at sixty, seventy, and eighty (alluding to Confucius' knowing fate at fifty), Lai Xinxia goes on to cite the phrase "the enlightened person knows his fate" daren zhì míng, insisting that that the key to human happiness comes from "understanding" rather than long life. He advocates adopting a philosophical outlook, meeting setbacks with equanimity, even if it smacks too much of the "Ah Q mentality" (Lai 2002a).

Ah Q, the main character in Lu Xun's story "The True Story of Ah Q", is a weakling who rationalizes the humiliations he repeatedly suffers by claiming "moral victory". Probably the most famous fictional character in all of modern Chinese literature, he is a satirical representation of the Chinese individually or collectively, as a weakling bullied by the powerful, able to maintain his self-respect only by adopting rationalization as a defense mechanism (Lu Xun 1881-1936). The Chinese generally dismiss such insistence on "moral victory" as a cowardly method of coping. In fact, Lai Xinxia later revisits this question himself, dismissively defining the "Ah Q mentality" as cowardly, and a failure to face reality, characterized by vainly and pridefully insisting on one's moral victory in the face of defeat. He contrasts this with the attitude summed up by the phrase "the enlightened person knows his fate" as one where one frees oneself from the worries of the world (Lai 2002b).

A variation of the phrase, "rejoice in Heaven and know one's fate" (樂天知命), was originally found in the Book of Changes, generally considered a Confucian text, but is also found in the Liezi, a Taoist text. Although the Liezi mocks the Confucians for not being sufficiently above it all, it acknowledges that Confucians blamed unhappy events on fate, and would strive to "rejoice in Heaven and know one's fate" (Liezi Fifth Century B. C.: 39).

However, the leadership takes particular exception to this expression. A standard dictionary explains this expression, "People who believe in predestination believe that everything is allotted by fate, so they stay in their place, without any worries (Dictionary Editing Office 1996, s.v.). Similarly, the People's Daily rarely uses this expression in a purely positive way. Those it describes as "rejoicing in Heaven and knowing one's fate" include the masses (Lin 2002), elderly Taiwanese (Wu 2001), Rukai Aborigines (Anon 2001), Moslems in Xinjiang province (Zhang 2001), Kazakh shepherds (Sun Yongjun 2000), and the fictional movie character Forrest Gump (Anon 2000). What all of these seem to have in common is that from the standpoint of the writers, they are to one degree or another naïve or ignorant and require the guidance of superior intellects. The authors
otherwise avoid this expression, even in articles that propose methods of coping with unpleasant situations. The fact that the writers generally shun this expression, but then use it to characterize this group condescendingly (if affectionately) betrays their feeling that the phrase has come to possess a negative connotation. Presumably "rejoicing" in whatever happens seems too naïve to them.

Not surprisingly for an officially atheistic country, the popular dictionaries also condemn the ideas of Heaven and fate itself as superstitious (Guo 2000, s.v.; Dictionary Editing Office 1996, s.v). Occasionally the official press also shows that it does not accept the idea of fate. In the title of "Knowing 'Heaven's Fate' at Fifty", an article about the fiftieth birthday of the People's Republic of China, the author is at pains to mitigate the original meaning of "Heaven's fate" by enclosing it in quotes. Moreover, even after citing Zhu Xi's gloss on "Heaven's fate", the author insists that in modern speech, the entire phrase means nothing more than a deep understanding of the processes governing the changes of human life and the development of society (Mi 1999). Another article dismisses the belief in fate while supporting the use of the word. When someone tells the author's friend that his destiny is not good, he replies that although he doesn't believe that everything is "decreed by fate" (mingzhong zhuding 命中注定), he "resigns himself to fate" (remming 認命). To him, even if this expression when taken literally signifies a belief in fate, it does not mean that he believes in fate, but simply faces reality with equanimity (Li 2002).

In fact, much writing in the official press sanctions the wide use of such expressions, perhaps because for many Chinese, these expressions are apparently simply epithets with none of their original supernatural aura. While many writers refer to a just (or unjust) Heaven presiding over human destiny, it seems to be in a jocular, offhand manner. Thus an article about dealing with one's troubles uses an expression that literally means "do one's best, then listen to Heaven's fate" (jin ren shi, ting tian ming 盡人事，聽天命), but in practice is used to mean nothing more than to do one's best and then try not to worry about it. (Anon n. d., 2). At the same time, one occasionally reads of those who adopt what seems a fatalistic attitude towards what has happened, using expressions such as "If it's yours, you won't be able to hide from it; if it's not yours, no matter how you seek it, you'll never get it" (gai shi nide, duo ye duobuguo, bugai shi nide, qiu ye qubulai 該是你的，躲也躲不過，不該是你的，求也求不來). Yet significantly, the articles advising how to deal with stress avoid this expression.

4. Muddling through

It makes sense that the leadership is suspicious of some of these phrases, for if one takes things philosophically to the degree that the Taoists suggest, very little indeed matters. The official press continues to reprint writing by towering figures of the twentieth century attacking the slack work ethic that such thinking may encourage. Mao Zedong labelled half-hearted work as a pernicious type of liberalism, which he characterized as "working perfunctorily" (fiyan liao shi 敷衍了事) and "muddling along" (de guo qie guo 得過且過) and the tendency depicted by the phrase "So long as one remains a monk, one goes on tolling the bell" (zuo yitian heshang zhuang yitian zhong 做一天和尚撞一天鐘) (Mao 1937a: 348). The monk symbolizes someone who has no major responsibilities; all he has to do is to go through the motions of carrying out a task that has become meaningless.
In a later article attacking "bureaucratism", Zhou Enlai echoes this stance against slapdash work, criticizing those who are perfunctory (fuyan 敷衍) and "muddle through just for the sake of eating" (hun fan chi 混飯吃), as well as those who are confused (huhututu 糊糊糊涂) or "muddle along" (de guo qie guo) (Zhou 1980, p. 421). "Muddle through just for the sake of eating" suggests at best working merely to support oneself, often with the further connotation of not working conscientiously or properly. Both meanings are found in the famous novel Dream of the Red Chamber (Cao Xueqin, ca. 1717-1763: 172, 1298).

In fact, the confusion (huhututu) that Zhou criticizes is an element involved in the "pretended muddle-headedness" (nande hutu) that writers before and since have advocated, and owes something from the association of confusion with naturalness as does the related expression mamahuhu 马马虎虎 "careless, sloppy". (This phrase is can be written written several different ways; the character hu 糊 may be written the same as the character in hutu). For example, a doctor identified as an authority on hypertension presents a number of techniques for men to avoid stress and thereby enjoy a long life. Not only does he advise the course of "He who knows contentment is always happy", he also suggests that one should be more hutu, and more xiaosa 瀟洒 "natural and unrestrained" (Chen 2002).

While the expression xiaosa generally has positive connotations, a writer who acknowledges that the Chinese people put great emphasis on this "natural and unrestrained" character finds a flaw in such behavior. While noting that those who are "natural and unrestrained" about everything are "able to be philosophical" (xiangdekai), the author also argues that those who are able to cultivate this "natural and unrestrained" character inevitably are more able to "muddle through the world" hunshi 混世; worse, he claims that those who are most "natural and unrestrained" are the most adept at deception (Wang 2000).

However, a certain amount of deception is inevitable in society if one wishes to maintain harmony. This is particularly true of the Chinese. One consequence of the importance of maintaining group harmony in Chinese society has meant that "face" (mianzi 面子) has long been extremely important; protecting the face of others often supersedes truthfulness. For example, the Chinese generally see outright rejections as offensive, so instead of boldly refusing a request, they will often have recourse to ambivalent, prevaricating responses: "it's inconvenient" (bu fangbian; 不方便), "there are some difficulties" (youxie kunnan; 有些困难), "we'll try studying it" (yanjiu yanjiu; 研究研究) "we'll try to consider it" (kaolü kaolü; 考慮考慮) (Kao 1998: 59-65). Note the reduplication of expressions such as yanjiu and kaolü; in verbs such reduplication may convey brevity or informality and may also be used to make requests more polite (Tian 1991:100), but given the connotation of brevity or informality, such repetition also suggests a certain degree of "muddling along".

Indeed, Chinese has many expressions that describe the strategies that Mao and Zhou criticize. Some such expressions tend to have more negative connotations, including tangse 搪塞 or yingfu 應付, "to do something perfunctorily"; zhiwu 支吾, to prevaricate (often described in terms of tangse, "perfunctorily"). In fact, one could these expressions to describe someone's prevaricating response to a request. However, significantly, one may also use several such expressions to urge people to try to continue
the good fight, including *mianqiang* 強, "reluctantly force oneself to"; *mei banfa* 没辦法, or *wu ke nai he* 無可奈何, "there's no other way but to"; *couhe* 湊合 or *jiangjiu* 將就 "put up with something inferior to what is desired". While *chabuduo* 差不多 literally means "almost" one may also use it to mean "just about right", or even "that's good enough". Even *hai* 還, which on the face of it means "still" or "yet", may be used in the sense of *mianqiang* or "reluctantly force oneself to" (Lü 1999: 253).

*Gouqie* 荀且 is another similar expression, with largely negative connotations. It is defined as 1) only caring about the present moment, or *de guo qie guo*, 2) not following propriety, 3) casual, or *fuyan*, 4) *mianqiang*, or 5) improper male-female relations (Luo 1986-94, s.v.). Luo Zhitian complains that just as a Beijing University student predicted in 1919, Chinese social morality is deteriorating, and perfunctory (*gouqie*) behavior is spreading throughout the country (Luo 2000). Li Yifei, named by *Fortune* magazine as one of the fifty most powerful women in business in 2001, argues that she has never been lazy, declaring that people who are perfunctory (*gouqie*) about small matters are also perfunctory about major affairs (Zhong 2001). For the newspaper to reprint such an article suggests the state hopes to motivate the people to be more careful. In addition to perfunctory or negligent behavior, *gouqie* suggests resignation to one's circumstances while sacrificing one's principles. On the other hand, many words that connote conscientious are defined as not *gouqie*.

We cannot simply blame Socialism's lack of material incentives for such lackadaisical behavior. Like the Communist leadership, Confucians have seen such attitudes as problematical for ages. Arthur Waley explains *gou* 荀 as actions that one accomplishes "after a fashion," "in a hugger-mugger way," "in a 'hit-or-miss' offhand fashion, when everything is left to chance," rather than carefully, according to the proper ritual that was so important to Confucians. The Confucians viewed such temporary success, secured through irregular means, as attained dishonestly. (Waley 1938: 66-67, 248). Significantly, the Confucians put great emphasis on the sincerity of the person who performs the ritual (Cua 2002), but as we have seen, sometimes the social concern for the face of others involves some dishonesty.

Waley argues that the word "steal" *tou* 偷 is associated with this kind of attitude, and indeed a number of expressions associate the two words. *Gouqie tousheng* 荀且偷生 suggests dragging out an ignoble existence (Beijing Foreign Languages University 1995, s.v.), living on just for the sake of remaining alive (Lin 1972, s.v.), and is also defined in terms of "muddling along" (*de guo qie guo*) or "reluctantly forcing oneself (*mianqiang*) to keep on living" (Mandarin Dictionary, s.v.). *Gouqie touan* 荀且偷安 is defined as "seeking ease and comfort at the expense of principles" (Wu 1999, s.v.).

One reason such behavior keeps relentlessly appearing is that it is implicit in the language. *Hun*, commonly written in two different ways (混 or 混) is used in a number of expressions with the same connotation of not working conscientiously, muddling through or drifting along or even fooling around; it often describes the attitude that Zhou decried. While admittedly some of these expressions may be used to humbly belittle one's own actions, this is because their fundamental meaning is to criticize such behavior. Such meanings are derived from its meaning of confusion. A related expression, *hundun* 混沌 or *hunlun* 混渾, describes the undifferentiated chaos that existed at the beginning of time according to early Chinese cosmology (*Liezi* Fifth Century B.C.: 2). Centuries later,
hunran tianchēng 渣然天成 was used to describe natural simplicity, firmly intertwining the concepts of confused simplicity and naturalness. Hence even as the authorities inveigh against such attitudes, they are attacking something that has the flavor of "naturalness" about it.

Yue (1993) cites the expression "treat big problems as small problems and small problems as non-problems" (da shī huà xiǎo shì, xiǎo shì huà liào 大事化小，小事化了) to describe how students cope with stress. In the eighteenth century, a variant of the expression appears in the opening lines of chapter 62 of Dream of the Red Chamber, where one of the maids comforts her mistress over a problem in the household, saying, "For big problems to become small problems and small problems to become non-problems is what happens in flourishing families" (Cao Xueqin, ca. 1717-1763: 953).

However, in the official press, the phrase now generally has negative connotations. On the one hand, it often has the negative connotation of officials sweeping their misconduct under the rug (Tian 2002). On an individual level, it often suggests making light of one's problems as an unhappy last resort. Han Che argues that the expression reflects a negative Chinese cultural characteristic, the reasons for which are historical: having lived for so long under autocracies whose officials have rarely offered support or solutions, the Chinese people have become accustomed to gloss over the problems they run into, and "treating big problems as small problems and small problems as non-problems" has gradually become the principle for handling situations for most of our compatriots, and has even been distilled into a kind of national cultural psychology" (Han 2001).

The author of another article agrees that "the Chinese have always been good at forbearance (rén 仁); in ancient times they said 'A lack of forbearance in small matters upsets great plans', now people advise each other with the phrase, 'Take a step back; the sea and sky are boundless'; if you can forbear, then forbear; if can yield, then yield." However, this modern author actually only cites this traditional passive approach to condemn it, urging people to stand up for what is right to help develop laws and the protection of rights (Anon 2001b).

5. Conclusion

For millennia, circumstances have discouraged active responses to problems. As hard as the state tries to manipulate the people's discourse, they find their efforts subverted. Chinese philosophy, the historical interactions between the people and their rulers, and even the Chinese language have all worked to make the strategy of transcendence an appealing one.

A consequence of the Confucian insistence on the overweening importance of ritual is that it has unintentionally often resulted in encouraging perfunctory behavior. In Chinese society, Confucian mores enmesh each individual in a web of relationships and interdependencies, which means individuals are less able to assert themselves (Young 1994: 41). Unlike Westerners, who tend to see the individual's centrality and sovereignty as essential, the Chinese stress humility rather than sovereignty as well as relational and collective identities. Moreover, the Confucians emphasize impulse control, which involves submerging the individual will (Ho 1995). The desire to maintain group harmony perforce involves "muddling along".

On the other hand, the emotional serenity that characterizes self-transcendence is sought both by Buddhists and Taoists (Ho 1995; Huang 1999: 17). As the Taoist
philosopher Zhuangzi argues, the "perfect man" (zhiren 至人) has no self (Zhuangzi, Fourth century B.C.: 14). Even at a grammatical level, Chinese does not possess the Western dichotomy between the subject and object, reflected in the nominative "I" and the accusative "me".

Over the centuries, the various Chinese regimes have viewed the law as a tool for keeping the people in line by maintaining public order and protecting the state, rather than a means of adjudicating disagreements between members of society, much less protecting the rights of the individual. Standing up against injustice, perpetrated by other members of society or by the government itself has often been extremely risky. This has been true under the imperial rule, under the Nationalist government that replaced it, or under the Communist government that in turn overthrew it.

Thus while one can utilize self-transcendence to overcome one's own worries, one can also use the perfunctory, prevaricating attitude to transcend the obligations imposed by society or the political rulers. As one of the characters in Zhang Yimou's Raise the Red Lantern says of life, "It's all play-acting. If you act well, you can fool other people; if you do it badly, you can only fool yourself, and when you can't even fool yourself, you can just fool the ghosts" (Zhang 1991). This is the essence of the strategy of transcendence.

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