

The Life of Mr. Chabuduo (Mr. "Close-Enough")

By Hu Shih

Do you know who the most famous person in China is? Just mention his name and everybody will recognize it. His last name is "Cha" (差) and his first name is "Bu-Duo" (不多). Every province, county, and village has someone named after him. It is certain that you have seen him - and you have undoubtedly heard others talk about him. Each day, Mr. Chabuduo's name is uttered by countless people to the extent that he has come to represent the entire population of China.

Mr. Chabuduo's appearance resembles yours and mine. He has two eyes - but does not see things very clearly. He has two ears - but they don't listen very well. He has a nose and a mouth, but does not distinguish much between different smells and tastes. His head isn't particularly small - however - his memory isn't very good.

He would often say, "Things only have to be done 'chabuduo' (meaning 'more-or-less' or 'close enough') to be good. After all, what sense does it make to be a perfectionist and waste the time and effort necessary to have things absolutely correct all the time?"

When he was a small child, his mother sent him out to buy some brown sugar. He came back with white sugar. His mother scolded him - but the young Mr. Chabuduo simply shook his head and said, "Brown sugar - white sugar! Are they not both just about the same?"

Once, while attending school, a teacher asked him which province was located on the western border of Hebei. He answered by saying it was Shaanxi (陕西.) "Wrong!" the teacher corrected him. "It is Shanxi (山西) not Shaanxi (陕西)." At this, Mr. Chabuduo remarked, "Well aren't Shanxi and Shaanxi just about the same?"

Afterwards, he worked in a bank. While capable of both writing and doing math - he was never very careful. Often, he turned the character "十" (10) into "千" (1000), and would write the character for 1000 (千) as the character for 10 (+). This infuriated the bank manager who would routinely reprimand him. Mr. Chabuduo's response to these incidents was always to reply with a smirking sort of countenance that the number for 1,000 "千" differed from the number for 10 "十" by only one simple stroke of the pen - wasn't that close enough?

One day, in order to take care of an urgent affair he wanted to go by train to Shanghai. He casually strolled to the station arriving 2 minutes late. The train, being on schedule, had already left. He stared blankly at the distant trail of smoke left by the departing train and shook his head. "I guess I'll just go tomorrow," he said. "After all, going tomorrow is just about the same as going today. But these people who run the trains are entirely too serious about keeping to their schedule. After all, isn't 8:32 just about the same as 8:30?" As he spoke he slowly began to return home. He truly could not understand why the train couldn't wait just two minutes for him.

Finally, the time came when Mr. Chabuduo suddenly became very sick. He hurriedly asked his family to go get Dr. Wong (汪) who lived on East Street. A family member ran off for a short while looking for this Dr. Wong, but got confused in the excitement and ended up on West Street where he happened to find Dr. Wong (王) the veterinarian. Since, after all, the doctor's name was "Wong" and it was necessary to find somebody with a medical

background back to deal with this emergency, Dr. Wong the veterinarian was persuaded to make a house call at the Chabuduo residence. Mr. Chabuduo – who was now so ill that he could not get out of bed – knew that his family had fetched the wrong Dr. Wong. Nevertheless, since his condition had become so desperate, his pain so great, and his heart so anxious for relief, Chabuduo said to himself, "Luckily this Dr. Wong (王) the veterinarian is "chabuduo" the same as Dr. Wong (汪) the M.D. – I might as well let him take a look at me." At this point, Dr. Wong the veterinarian, knowing that there was little time left to try anything else, approached the bed and attempted to cure his patient with the same methods used to treat sick cattle. In less than an hour, Mr. Chabuduo was dead.

As Mr. Chabuduo was dying, he uttered in an uneven breath, "The living and the dead are cha.....cha.....buduo – just about the same – and as long as everything is cha.....cha.....buduo, then things will be fine. Why.....be.....too serious?" After these final words, he took his last gasp of air.

After his death, people began to praise Mr. Chabuduo for his outlook on life and his capability of reasoning with himself despite the circumstances. It was declared that the equanimity that he displayed in the face of death was due to his not being overly conscientious nor hung up on details such as balancing books and settling accounts. Because he never made a fuss about things being exactly right, he was considered a model of morality and virtue. Upon his death, Mr. Chabuduo was regarded as a saint and became known to all by a Buddhist title naming him the "Great Master of Flexibility" (圆通大师).

With each passing day, Mr. Chabuduo's reputation continues to spread far and wide. Countless people study his example with the result that everyone is now becoming a "Mr. Chabuduo." This is the reason why China is quickly being transformed into a country that the rest of the world will soon call "the Nation of Laziness."

(Tr. RS Bond)

Notes:

1. Depending on its context, 差不多 "Chabuduo" can be translated as "close-enough, almost, just about, approximately, etc." Literally, it means, "Difference not much."

2. Dr. Hu Shih was a philosopher and eminent man of letters who served as the Chinese ambassador to the United States from 1938 to 1942 and later became the chancellor of Peking University. Upset with the "close-enough-for-government-work" mentality of many civil servants and students whose poor performance was becoming an embarrassment to a modernizing China, Hu Shih penned this essay in 1924 as a protest to their attitude and a warning of the consequences of adopting mediocrity as an institutional ideal. During the communist takeover of Mainland China, Hu Shih moved to Taiwan where he continued his literary and academic career. He died on February 24, 1962 at the age of 71 and is recognized as one of the most influential contributors to modern Chinese literature.