

Li Zhi's Relativism and Skepticism in the Multicultural Late Ming

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Abstract

This paper investigates the skeptical and relativistic strategies evident in the writings of the late Ming thinker Li Zhi (李贄; 1527-1602). I argue that although skepticism and relativism are discrete if not incompatible philosophical positions, Li employs both to combat what he perceives as the entrenched dogmatism of his contemporaries. Li's skepticism and relativism stem largely from his close encounters with a wide range of cultural "others" including the tribal peoples of Yunnan over whom he governed, Muslims in his own family, international merchants, and the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci. For Li, whose own family background and life experience was in so many ways multicultural, the plurality and irreconcilability of these various worldviews produced a leveling or nullifying effect: each particular dogma cancelled out the others until no proposition was exempt from relativistic scrutiny and skeptical doubt.

Keywords

Li Zhi, Late Ming intellectual history, skepticism, relativism, Jesuit,
Port of Quanzhou, Muslim traders, Yunnan

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In his major work, *Fen shu* (焚書 *A Book to Burn*), the late Ming intellectual Li Zhi (李贄) radically queries many of the entrenched hierarchies of his day: the privileged status of Confucianism over other ethical systems, the supposed superiority of officials to merchants, and the presumed greatness of Han culture in comparison with minority peoples' traditions. This paper begins by discussing two related, though incongruous, rhetorical strategies Li uses to attack these orthodoxies: skepticism and relativism.² After explaining what I understand by these two -isms and providing a few examples of each from Li's writings, I investigate the roots and expressions of this author's antipathy to dogma.

I locate the origins of Li Zhi's skeptical and relativistic thought in the growing influence of cultural "others" in late Ming China, peoples and ideas that diverged from the prevailing Confucian orthodoxy. During the sixteenth century, as foreign trade flourished in violation of the Ming dynasty's official ban,³ and as Catholic missionaries made their initial forays into China, a host of new products and modes of thought became available for Chinese consumption. The specifics of Li's biography—his childhood years spent in the international port city of Quanzhou, his family's Muslim merchant background, his three years as prefect⁴ of the remote Yao An Prefecture in Yunnan Province, his abiding interest in Buddhism, and finally his friendship with the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci—all offer windows on an individual not merely surrounded by but literally suffused with cultural otherness.

² It may seem unusual to apply the term "skepticism," most typically associated with the Western philosophers Pyrrho of Elis (3rd-4th century BC) and Sextus Empiricus (2nd century AD), to a Chinese author. Nevertheless, several scholars before me have applied this term to Li Zhi. See, for instance, K.C. Hsiao (蕭公權)'s "Li Chih: An Iconoclast of the Sixteenth Century"; Yan Lieshan (鄢烈山) and Zhu Jianguo (朱健國)'s *Li Zhi zhuan* (李贄傳 Biography of Li Zhi). See also He Zhaowu (何兆武)'s *An Intellectual History of China*: "Li Zhi set off an anti-dogmatic and sceptical [sic] upsurge against the Confucian tradition" (412). Additionally, William Theodore De Bary writes, "Li . . . was a skeptic from his youth" (189). Although these scholars have referred in passing to Li's skepticism, they have not, to my knowledge, seriously endeavored to define this term rigorously, uncover its philosophical underpinnings, or differentiate it from the equally strong strand of relativism that characterizes Li's writing. Additionally, scholars have related the Western concept of skepticism to Chinese philosophy for years. Two excellent examples are Lisa Raphals' "Skeptical Strategies in the Zhuangzi and the Theaetetus" and Jay L. Garfield's "Epoché and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West."

³ The ban was lifted during Li's lifetime, but not until 1567. The severe penalties for engaging in overseas trade—100 lashes with a heavy bamboo rod and confiscation of the entire cargo—"dissuaded almost no one living along the harbor-studded southeast coast from getting into the business of foreign trade" (Brook 695).

⁴ Charles O. Hucker explains that a prefect (知府 *zhifu*) held a significant amount of power and ruled over several districts (縣 *xian*). This position as a fourth-level official (四品 *sipin*) was the highest rank that Li attained in his career (158, 216).

This cultural multiplicity, I suggest, did not result in Li's consistent choice of one doctrine to follow, nor did it lead Li to combine these ideologies into a systematic whole. Rather, the cacophony of conflicting world-views seems to have threatened the very notion that any hegemonic ideology or stable set of values could be viable; it seems to have led Li to believe that the practices of each tradition were not necessarily correct or universal—each was just one method among others, one option among many. The plurality of views contending with one another created a kind of leveling or nullifying effect such that each dogma cancelled out the others and no one perspective was fully privileged: All propositions became open to relativistic scrutiny and skeptical doubt.

Relativism and Skepticism

For the purposes of this paper, I define relativism as the denial of absolutes. For the relativist there are no cardinal rules, no hierarchy placing one idea or ethical standard over another. All things must be evaluated circumstantially: what is better for Person A may be worse for Person B; what's prudent today may be foolhardy tomorrow. Thus relativism relies heavily on the particularity of individual situations and their differences from one another. Needless to say, the relativist argument is vulnerable to the attack that the one principle it does *not* relativize is the proposition that all things are relative. By not questioning this assertion, the relativist arguably falls into a self-contradiction.

The skeptic attempts to escape this self-contradiction. To do so, he counter-balances every assertion he makes with an opposing statement and often ends his arguments inconclusively with a question. His method is to lead readers to a serene state of equanimity in which all propositions are equally doubted and none wholeheartedly affirmed or denied. This inconclusiveness—or *epoché*, from the Greek root meaning to cease or suspend judgment—constitutes the skeptic's most characteristic philosophical move. Thus, skepticism can be differentiated from relativism in that while the relativist argues by affirming that "A is just as good as B," the skeptic puts forth one strong argument in favor of A, and then another, contradictory one in favor of B, only to conclude by asking "is A really any better than B?"

Despite these differences in technique and emphasis, skepticism and relativism are both effective strategies for keeping absolutism, orthodoxy, and dogmatism at bay. Confronted throughout his life by equally ossified though mutually incompatible orthodoxies of many kinds—the imperial examination

system, Ricci's Catholicism, and the religious beliefs of the tribal peoples over whom he governed in Yunnan, to name just a few—and unsure of how, based on what criteria, to establish a coherent belief system for himself, Li Zhi responded by adopting now a skeptical, now a relativistic stance.⁵

Li's Relativism

Li's relativism is perhaps best illustrated in a passage in which he compares Confucianism and Daoism to rice and millet. Drawing on what had already become a standard phrase in the Ming period, "Northerners eat wheat; Southerners eat rice,"⁶ he argues that these two religious-ethical systems are as commensurate as two types of grain; the choice of which one to follow (or to ingest) is a matter more of custom than of reasoned deliberation or absolute superiority. Although the tenets of each religious system differ as greatly from one another as do the flavor and nutritional content of rice and millet, in terms of their function—their ability to foster ethical maturation—the two systems are interchangeable. Li writes:

From the point of view of filling one's belly, one principle unites them. In the South, people think rice is delicious. In the North, people find millet tasty. The Northerners and Southerners have never envied one another on this score. But if you were to take two people, one from the North and one from the South, and make them change places and eat one another's food, they would not [go so far as to] completely throw away [what was presented to them]. As for the presence of the Dao in Confucianism and in Daoism, it is like rice in the South and millet in the North. If you have enough of one, then even if you don't particularly want the other, could you really throw it away? [No.] Why not? Because as far as filling the belly goes, both serve the purpose. And when one is really hungry, one has no choice. ("Ziyou jie Lao xu" [子由解老序 Preface on Ziyou Explaining Laozi] 103)⁷

⁵ As Lee Gongway (李恭蔚) remarks, Li habitually criticizes the status quo but rarely offers concrete proposals about how to make things better. (32).

⁶ 北人吃麥；南人吃米。

⁷ “食之於飽，一也。南人食稻而甘，北人食黍而甘，此一南一北者未始相羨也。然使兩人者易地而食焉，則又未始相棄也。道之於孔、老猶稻黍之於南北也，足於此者，雖無羨於彼，而顧可棄之哉！何也？至飽者各足，而真飢者無擇也。” All subsequent citations of this edition of *Fen shu* and *Xu fen shu* will be marked as *FS* and *XFS*. This and all subsequent translations from Li Zhi are my own.

In this passage, Li Zhi diverges sharply from Confucian orthodoxy by implying that there is no absolute hierarchy of one belief system over another: Daoism is as acceptable as is Confucianism. Which system one follows depends in large part on chance and on one's surroundings.⁸

Whereas the quotation about millet and rice emphasizes geographical variation, Li recognizes that habits and tastes vary not only in space but also in time.⁹ In an essay entitled "Guishen lun" (鬼神論 On Ghosts and Gods) Li criticizes the superstitions of his day and points to the fact that although his contemporaries, following Confucius,¹⁰ consider ghosts, gods, and other supernatural phenomena inauspicious, this attitude has not always prevailed. To illustrate this point he tells the story of Jiang Yuan (姜嫄), who became pregnant by treading on a mysterious giant footprint. The son she bore, Hou Ji (后稷), otherwise known as the famous Zhou Gong (周公), became the first ancestor of the Zhou dynasty, and a paragon of Confucian virtue. Li Zhi writes:

Hou Ji was the son of a ghost. And all of Zhou Gong's descendents were grandsons of ghosts. Zhou Gong not only did not consider it taboo to be the son of a ghost; in fact he thought of it as the acme of auspiciousness and luck! He sang praises to his ancestors [the ghosts] so that they might enjoy the sacrificial rites. . . . It was only people of later generations who made talking about ghosts taboo. Why? It's not

⁸ This passage may contain a covert nod to Confucius, who said "one principle unites my Way" (吾道一以貫之) (*Lunyu* [論語 Analects], IV:15). In this way, Li may be seen to make veiled reference to Confucius even as he unseats the hegemonic position of Confucianism. Another hidden parallel may be observed between Li Zhi's statements here and the assertion of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng (慧能), that as far as Buddha nature is concerned, there is neither North nor South (Price and Wong 68).

⁹ For instance, Li writes in "Da Geng Zhongcheng Luntan": "If one merely considers normal what one sees and hears on a daily basis, and considers peculiar what one rarely sees and hears, then the normal and the peculiar are two different things" (若祇以平日之所飡聞習見者為平常，而以其罕聞驟見者為怪異，則怪異平常便是兩事) (答耿中丞論談 "Reply to a Discussion with Vice Censor in Chief Geng" 22). Given the context of this letter, in which Li states "There is no[thing] 'ordinary and not unusual,' [just as there is] no[thing] 'unusual and not ordinary'" (無尋常而不奇怪，亦無奇怪而不尋常也), it is clear that Li believes that anyone who supposes the ordinary and the peculiar to be distinct in any absolute sense is in error. The phrases "what one sees and hears on a daily basis" (平日之所飡聞習見者) and "what one rarely sees and hears" (罕聞驟見者) emphasize the importance of time in forming people's notions of the usual and the unusual. A similar passage is found in "Da Geng Chutong" (答耿楚侗 "Reply to Geng Chutong" 46).

¹⁰ "The Master did not discuss anomalies, violence, chaos, or supernatural events." (子不語怪、力、亂、神) (*Lunyu* [Analects], VII: 21).

that they *wanted* to make ghosts and gods a taboo subject; they just didn't understand [the difference between] the worlds of the dead and the living. . . . ("Guishen lun" 85)¹¹

Li's point here is that there is no intrinsic reason why Confucians should deem ghosts and gods taboo when the foundational myth of the Zhou dynasty rested on the close genealogical tie between ghosts and human beings.¹² Otherwise put, our notion of what is taboo or auspicious is culturally conditioned and has little basis in immutable logic or reason.¹³ By comparing current beliefs with past beliefs, or the customs of one area to those of another, Li relativizes both points of view and arrives at the conclusion that neither deserves unwavering support.

Li's Skepticism

Li's skepticism is revealed as much in his irreverent attitude toward respected authorities as it is in the many self-contradictory assertions strewn throughout his works. Perhaps most strikingly, Li asserts that he both is and is not a Buddhist, and leaves the reader to ponder this contradiction. At the end of his career, having retired from his position as prefect in Yunnan and entered a Buddhist monastery, shaved the crown of his head but kept his long beard, and donned Buddhist garb but continued to eat meat, Li writes:

I am a Chan practitioner . . . I am a Buddhist, I'm in the ranks of the heretics. I'm the kind of person whom [Confucian] sages assiduously

¹¹ “后稷，鬼子也；周公而上，鬼孫也。周公非但不諱，且以爲至祥極瑞，歌詠於郊以享祀之……乃後世獨諱言鬼，何哉？非諱之，未嘗通於幽明之故……”

¹² Li Zhi is slyly pointing out the flaw in Confucius' logic, and the similar gap in that of his followers. If Confucius really revered Zhou culture as devoutly as he claimed to (See, for instance, *Lunyu* [Analects], III: 14: “The Zhou is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties. I follow the Zhou.” [周監於二代，郁郁乎文哉！吾從周]) (Trans. and modified from Lau 69), and if the founding ancestor of the Zhou dynasty was a ghost, why would Confucius have refused to speak of the supernatural?

¹³ Li's relativism is also displayed in an essay entitled “Kong Ming wei Houzhu xie Shen Han Guanzi liu tao” (孔明爲後主寫申韓管子六韜 Kong Ming Wrote Six Strategies of Shenzi, Han Feizi, and Guanzi for Houzhu), in which he states “there is no absolutely good or bad medicine. What's important is that the medicine corresponds to the disease. As for a flawlessly excellent medicine, if it does not match the disease, what use is it?” (藥無高下，要在對病。萬全良藥，與病不對，亦何補哉？) (211). Here as elsewhere, Li argues that things take on value situationally; value does not inhere in things as such.

steer clear of. For this reason, it's been a long time since I've dared lightly to seek guidance from followers of Confucius. ("Da Li Ruzhen" [答李如真 Reply to Li Ruzhen] 246)¹⁴

This statement is corroborated in a further remark: "From this day (on which I have not yet attained nirvana) onwards, I will only read Buddhist books. I will not again give any thought to Confucian books" ("Da Jiao Yiyuan" [答焦漪園 Reply to Jiao Yiyuan] 7).¹⁵

Yet elsewhere in his writings, Li flatly contradicts these assertions. He states: "Although I shaved my hair and became a monk, I am actually a Confucian"¹⁶ (*Chutan ji* [初潭集 Upon Arrival at the Lake] 1). And several times in his essays and letters he refers to the Confucians as "we" and "us" (吾儒 *wu ru*).¹⁷ When a Buddhist friend urges Li to give up his carnivorous habits he objects, "[but] I'm old, and what's more, I'm a Confucian!" ("Shu Xiao Xiu shoujuan hou" [書小修手卷後 After Having Written a Hand Scroll for Yuan Zhongdao] 65).¹⁸ These contradictory claims point to Li's refusal to accept a monolithic identity; they highlight his tendency to shuttle back and forth, to oscillate among various options but commit to none.

Not only do these contradictions showcase Li's own skeptical attitude toward each point of view—his readiness to re-evaluate it at any moment—but they also produce skepticism in the reader. For, assailed by so many irreconcilable statements, we as readers are forced to question the validity of each one. This rhetorical strategy compels readers to refrain from whole-heartedly accepting any opinion Li Zhi voices. Indeed, the abundance of contradictory ideas presented in the text reproduces the multiplicity of ideologies Li encountered in his life. In this way, the text mirrors the social and cultural pluralism of Li Zhi's experience. What's more, Li not only manifests and engenders skeptical doubt but also commends it, saying "a scholar's only fear is that he cannot doubt. He who doubts cannot fail to have a breakthrough" ("Da Seng Xinru" [答僧心如 Reply to Xinru the Monk] 44).¹⁹

¹⁴ "弟禪學也……弟學佛人也，異端者流，聖門之所深避。弟是以於孔氏之徒不敢輕易請教者，非一日矣。"

¹⁵ "從此未涅槃之日，皆以閱藏為事，不復以儒書為意也。"

¹⁶ "雖落髮為僧，而實儒也。"

¹⁷ See, for instance, "Fu Zhounan Shi" (復周南士 13) and "Song Zheng Dayao Xu" (送鄭大姚序 106).

¹⁸ "我老，又信儒教。"

¹⁹ "學者但恨不能疑耳，疑即無有不破者。" Li's endorsement of doubt is corroborated by his student and friend Yuan Zhongdao (袁中道), who reports a conversation in which Li said in

The remainder of this paper probes the multicultural environment in which Li thrived. Although I discuss at length Li's biographical particularities, the exact details of his life are inessential. Whether Li's family was Muslim or Christian or Hindu is not of particular import. For my purposes, what is essential is rather that his family came from a *minority religion*, and that, for this reason, the idea of religious diversity—the discrepancy between his family's faith and that of the dominant culture—was present in him from earliest childhood. In other words, I do not seek to trace the residue in Li's literary output of specific life experiences involving cultural others.²⁰ Rather, I wish to extrapolate from these experiences with cultural others, and to suggest that they may have prodded Li to think about a host of issues from skeptical and relativistic perspectives.

Factors Contributing to and Displaying Li Zhi's Skepticism

The International Port of Quanzhou

Ever since the ninth century, Li Zhi's hometown of Quanzhou in Fujian province had been a major center of international commerce (Lin, *Fujian dui wai jiaoliu shi* 39). As one scholar notes, "[b]ooming overseas trade made Quanzhou one of the most prosperous trade cities in the medieval world" (Cheng 75). This description tallies with the account of Marco Polo, who visited Quanzhou in 1292. His diary describes it as "one of the two greatest harbours in the world for the amount of its trade" (Polo 264). Although by the time Li Zhi was born Quanzhou had ceded its position as South China's pre-eminent seaport, the city remained an active center of trade. The Portuguese merchant Galeote Pereira, visiting Quanzhou in the mid-sixteenth century, noted the city's wide streets, impressive architecture, and bustling population (Boxer 7-9).²¹ Growing up in such a metropolitan environment, Li doubtless witnessed a wide variety of customs.

Shu Yue Gong ce: "Doubt is the treasure of those who study the Way; the greater the doubt, the greater the enlightenment!" (夫疑爲學道者之寶，疑大則悟亦大) (書月公冊 61). Interestingly, like the Greek and Roman skeptics, Li does not rule out the possibility that questions may have answers, and that one may have a "breakthrough" which would enable him to discover these answers.

²⁰ To undertake such a task would be fruitless, since Li's writings as rarely mention the tribal peoples of Yunnan as they do Ricci's Catholicism or his family's Islam.

²¹ For a partial Chinese translation of Pereira's account see Lin Jinshui (林金水) 113. On Quanzhou's economy during this period, see Xu Xiaowang (徐曉望) 234-80.

The Islamic Connection

Quanzhou's flourishing international trade attracted large numbers of foreigners, and as early as the Tang dynasty the city became known as a place where Christians, Muslims, and Manichees co-existed alongside Buddhists, Daoists, and devotees of local religions.²² Li Zhi was personally involved in this culture of diversity inasmuch as his parents, wife, and several generations of ancestors practiced Islam (Ye 79-84).

Li's seventh-generation ancestor, Li Nu (李鷲), a Han Chinese in the employ of the central government, had been sent on business to Ormuz (in present-day Iran).²³ This ancestor had met and married a Muslim woman and, being detained abroad for many years, converted to her religion (Yan 4). The Muslim faith was then preserved in Li's family until at least the generation of Li's father (Billeter 24). Whether Li himself received any religious education in Islam is unknown. His writings mention nothing on this topic. Yet it is possible that even if he had learned to chant Koranic verses as a boy, he may not have deemed this fact relevant and thus worthy of inclusion in his essays.²⁴

It has become virtually a cliché in Mainland Chinese scholarship that “sprouts of capitalism” (資本主義的萌芽) became visible in China beginning in the late 16th century. Regardless of whether South China's economic system really did possess elements of capitalism during this period, it undoubtedly became more specialized and commercialized than it had previously been. For a discussion of this topic, see, among other sources, Brook's *Culture and Economy: The Shaping of Capitalism in Eastern Asia* (Especially chapter one).

²² See Lin Jinshui (林金水) 83 and Wu Youxiong (吳幼雄) 306.

²³ Li Nu (李鷲) was also known by the name of Lin Nu (林鷲). When he and his foreign wife returned to China, they were scorned and shunned by the rest of the Li family and forced to change their surname from Li to Lin. The name Lin remained in the Li/Lin family for generations. Indeed, Li Zhi was born as Lin Zaizhi (林載贄) and only later changed his name to that by which we know him today. Wu Wenliang (吳文良) and Wu Youxiong (吳幼雄) 4.

²⁴ Despite Li's silence on the topic of Islam, some scholars have traced Li's desire for a simple burial to Islamic funerary tradition. See for instance Hou Wailu (侯外廬) 1031. Li's instructions on the simple manner in which he hoped to be buried are outlined in “Li Zhuowu Xiansheng yi yan” (李卓吾先生遺言 Li Zhuowu's Last Will and Testament 96). Cheng Peikai has even attempted to draw a connection between Li's obsession with cleanliness—expressed in his excessive love of sweeping the ground and his mania for showering—and the strict Islamic rules regarding hygiene. Cheng cites Yuan Zhongdao (袁中道)'s description of Li in “Li Wenling zhuan”: “He had an obsession with cleanliness. . . . By nature, he loved to sweep the ground. This he did so frequently that there were never enough brooms even though many people were tying them. His clothing was washed frequently, extremely shiny and clean. He loved to wash his face and body so much that he seemed to have an obsession with water” (癖潔……性愛掃地，數人

Regardless of the specifics of Li's religious education, the fact that he grew up as a member of a minority community quite possibly influenced his feelings about religion in general, and contributed to his sense that no one faith or ethical path could possibly have a monopoly on the truth. As the literary scholar Cheng Peikai (鄭培凱) writes, "[since] Islam was a minority religion and culture in China . . . it was quite natural for Muslims to develop a skeptical and pragmatic way of thinking" (Cheng 95).

Li Zhi's Family's Involvement in Trade

Unlike the Yuan dynasty, which had welcomed trade with foreign countries, the Ming instituted a series of trade bans under which foreigners were permitted to conduct trade with China only through the narrow official channels of the tribute system. Several of Li's ancestors worked within this system. For instance, his great great grandfather Lin Gonghui (林恭惠), a Chinese-Japanese translator, sailed as far as Okinawa on one of his missions (Ye 81). One can only imagine the marvelous tales of adventure told in the family about this Japanese-speaking, Islam-practicing ancestor.

As the tribute system declined in the late Ming the family fortunes fell, and by the time Li Zhi was born in 1527, in the business district of Quanzhou, the family was so impoverished that for fifty years it could not even afford the burial expenses of Li's great grandparents (Yan 5). Under these circumstances the family looked to the brilliant Li Zhi, whose talent for writing won him recognition at an early age. Li recounts how his father's friends praised an essay he wrote and predicted that his literary gifts would help his family regain its fortune and prestige (卓吾論略滇中作 "Zhuowu lunlue Dianzhong zuo" 78). Needless to say, Li's relatives encouraged him in his studies and, at the age of thirty, Li became the first member of his family ever to pass the provincial examination.

Despite the fact that Li Zhi crossed the class divide and enjoyed an official career spanning thirty years, his merchant roots still show through in his writings, a point noted by many scholars.²⁵ Not only does Li demonstrate excruciatingly detailed knowledge of the wholesale grain exchange,²⁶ but he also questions why

縛帶不給。衿裙澆洗，極其鮮潔，拭面拂身，有同水淫) (李溫陵傳 Biography of Li Wenling 11-12).

²⁵ For instance, see Sun Danhong (孫丹虹) 39-40.

²⁶ This letter contains a very detailed description of how grain is bought and sold at port.

society as a whole—and Confucians in particular—look down upon merchants. “As for merchants,” Li opines in an oft-quoted passage,

what is it about them that makes people detest them? They carry many tens of thousands of products and come through wind, waves, and many dangers. They are humiliated at the customs house and slandered in the marketplace. Their hardships and diligence come in ten thousand varieties . . . [how] could they proudly sit above officials [and pretend to be superior to them]? (又與焦弱侯 “You yu Jiao Ruohou” 45)²⁷

In this passage Li makes the relativistic move of querying the dominant values in his society. When he asks rhetorically why government officials detest merchants, he is evaluating the two professions *in relation to* one another. This comparison emphasizes the commensurability between the two professions and levels out the hierarchy established by traditional values. Yet there is also a skeptical flavor to these remarks. If skepticism is defined by *epoché* or inconclusiveness, it is worth remarking that Li's comments on merchants not only begin but also end with a question. Although the final question (“[How] could merchants proudly sit above officials [and pretend to be superior to them]?”) seems to be rhetorical, i.e. although its answer is implied, it is significant that Li does not actually provide it. Rather, by allowing these remarks to end with what is formally a question, he opens up a space for the reader to consider the answer for himself. Li's refusal to come down strongly either in favor of merchants or against them may be linked to his own ambiguous position straddling the merchant and official classes.²⁸

²⁷ “且商賈亦何可鄙之有? 依數萬之貨, 經風濤之險, 受辱於關吏, 忍詬於市場, 幸動萬狀……安能傲然而坐於公卿大夫之上哉?” The final question is admittedly odd. After all, what merchant would dare to consider himself superior to an official, at least in Ming dynasty China? Yet as becomes evident in the remainder of the letter, Li is actually distinguishing among three classes of people, not just two: the Confucians, the merchants, and the kinds of people who act like merchants but call themselves Confucian-style hermits (名爲山人而心同商賈). By stating that no real merchant would dare to place himself above a Confucian, as these self-styled Confucian “hermits” do, Li emphasizes that real merchants know their place in society; their behavior and words accord. For this reason, Li prefers them to the people who *say* one thing and *do* another. For Li, this third category marks the lowest of the low.

²⁸ An instance of a similar rhetorical move in Li's writing is found in his letter to Tao Shikui (陶石簣) on the subject of naming. Here Li points out the different appellations by which people are known: milk names (乳名 *ruming*), proper names (名 *ming*), style names (字 *zi*), and nicknames (別號 *biehao*). Why, Li asks, echoing Laozi, are some names used on some occasions

Li as Prefect of Yao An

In 1577, Li Zhi was promoted to the position of prefect in Yunnan province. Located on China's Southwest border, this area was inhabited primarily by minority peoples, especially of the Hui (回) and Yi (彝) ethnicities. Both socially and economically the region was extremely depressed, and had been the site of continual social unrest for more than a hundred years. That power was shared unequally between ethnic Han officials (called 流官 *liuguan*), sent from the capital, and local, tribal officials (known as 土官 *tuguan*), did not help. The friction between these two classes was palpable: the lower-level Han officials, fearing their superiors on the provincial level, exploited and suppressed the *tuguan* as well as the general population, and the *tuguan* in turn responded by fomenting or at least insufficiently thwarting uprisings. These rebellions inevitably led to harsh crackdowns and reprisals on the part of the *liuguan*.

When Li assumed his post, tensions were running high. As prefect, he had to mediate between the opposing objectives of various groups. His ability to evaluate the relative benefits of each point of view and refrain from monolithically implementing any one agenda enabled him to negotiate these treacherous waters successfully. He tried to learn about indigenous beliefs, and to enforce Ming laws leniently and in ways that were culturally palatable to the population. For instance, when a series of devastating fires broke out, the locals superstitiously attributed them to their failure to propitiate the fire god. To placate this angry god, they planned to hold large bonfires in his honor. Ming officials feared that these bonfires might spread, creating further damage and destruction. Although Li did not believe that the initial conflagrations had been caused by a vengeful god (as the locals claimed), he chose to respect local custom and permit the bonfires to take place. But he set aside designated areas far from human habitation so as to prevent further devastation. This compromise solution bowed to local tradition while simultaneously assuring public safety (Sun Guansheng [孫官生] 61). Measures such

while others are reserved for other occasions: “Why do we have many names; why do we differentiate between names that can be spoken and names that cannot be spoken?” (胡爲乎而有許多名，又胡爲乎而有可名而不可名之別也?) Comparing the different monikers to one another is a relativistic strategy; leaving his questions unanswered at the end of the essay displays Li's skepticism (與陶石簣 “Yu Tao Shikui” 47). In Laozi's *Daodejing* 1 the “constant name” (常名 *chang ming*) cannot be “named” (名 *ming*), and in *Daodejing* 25 there is a “nameless thing” which belongs to a class of things called “big” or “great” (大 *da*), and which we can only “style” (字 *zi*) the Dao (道).

as this won Li support and admiration, and his retirement caused his constituents dismay. One contemporary report describes the scene: “scholars and commoners climbed onto the axles of his carriage and lay down in the road; his vehicle could not move forward.”²⁹ The people also erected a shrine in his honor, and built a statue to commemorate his tenure as prefect.

Li's tolerant style of governance was of course born of his openness, flexibility, and non-doctrinaire attitude. While his response to the fires may not demonstrate his skepticism *per se*, it does display his ability to evaluate the relative merits of different courses of action and to steer clear of the polarizing ideologies that had long generated violence in this border region. A telling proof of the effectiveness of Li's compromises is that when, during his time in office, an armed rebellion broke out in a neighboring prefecture, Yao An remained calm (Sun Guansheng 61). Thus Li's actions as prefect corroborate the relativistic philosophical stance he so often adopted in his writings.

Buddhist Influences

Although the spark of Li Zhi's interest in Buddhism was first kindled a decade earlier, when he served as an official at the Bureau of Rites in Nanjing, his enthusiasm for this religious tradition deepened during his years in Yunnan. While in Yao An, Li Zhi eagerly befriended monks, studied *sūtras*, and frequently visited monasteries—sometimes even, reportedly, to conduct official business in these unlikely locales (Sun Guansheng 112). Upon retirement from officialdom, he took up residence in a monastery and began referring to himself by Buddhist appellations including “monk” (和尚 *heshang*). That Li Zhi, born a Muslim and trained as a Confucian, should have developed a strong interest in Buddhism at all, let alone nurtured this passion through intense study, demonstrates his growing ability to look beyond the narrow confines of Confucian orthodoxy and adopt a more pluralistic worldview.

In Chan Buddhism, arguably the Buddhist tradition with which he was most closely affiliated,³⁰ Li Zhi found a philosophy that privileged precisely these non-dogmatic values. Chan teaching displays relativism by asserting that there is no single best method for attaining enlightenment: routine tasks like sweeping or cooking may prove as effective as time-honored methods such as reading *sūtras* or

²⁹ “士民攀轅臥道，車不能發。” The original text comes from Sun Guansheng 70.

³⁰ The other was Pure Land, but in the late Ming the divisions between sects were not drawn with great precision or clarity.

reciting the name of the Buddha. This philosophy relativizes all activities and levels out the hierarchy between the sacred and the profane. Li Zhi's endorsement of these values is reflected in his oft-repeated assertion that "wearing clothes and eating food are the principles structuring human relations" ("Da Deng Shiyang" [答鄧石陽 Reply to Deng Shiyang] 4).³¹ This radical relativism further manifests itself in the Chan obliteration of social distinctions, illustrated in Li Zhi's refusal to rank Confucian officials above merchants, and in the doctrine that all human beings equally possess Buddha nature, another concept Li Zhi frequently repeats.³²

But Buddhist thought is not entirely relativistic; it also inclines toward skepticism. As Jay Garfield has argued, the Buddhist concept of the three truths closely resembles the skeptical goal of *epoché*, or what Garfield calls "positionlessness" (Garfield 287). Garfield explains the three truths as (1) the assertion of a position, (2) the negation of that position, and (3) the paradoxical combination of or balance between these two views. The third step, which Garfield refers to as the "skeptical solution," is predicated on pointing out and overcoming the limitations of adopting any position. Li Zhi was well acquainted with this type of skeptical strategy since it appears numerous times in the *Diamond Sūtra*, a text which he knew intimately and commented on. The *Diamond Sūtra* contains many statements that follow the pattern "X is not X and so it is called X." This three-part grammatical structure, composed of an assertion, a negation, and a paradox, perfectly exemplifies the skeptical argument of the three truths.

Although at times Li Zhi adopts this tri-partite rhetorical format, his writings more often stop short of illustrating the third and final step. That is, he tends to express viewpoints starkly at odds with one another (steps one and two) but refrains from supplying the culminating paradox. Instead he entrusts to readers the task of completing the third step. To assist them he displays a startling array of incompatible positions, both affirmations and denials. For example, as seen above he claims both to be and not to be a Buddhist. But how to understand this and other contradictions is up to the reader. Like the raft alluded to in the *Diamond Sūtra*, which ferries people across the river and then is cast aside, these contradictions

³¹ "穿衣吃飯，即是人倫物理。"

³² For instance, echoing the fourth century monk Seng Zhao (僧肇), he writes in "Nian fo da wen": "Heaven, earth, and I all spring from the same root; who could possibly surpass me? The ten thousand things and I all form one body; who could not measure up to me?" (天地與我同根，誰是勝我者，萬物與我為一體，又誰是不如我者) (念佛答問 "Reply to Questions on Reciting the Name of the Buddha" 128).

provide a means by which the astute reader may overcome his attachment to any particular position and attain skeptical "release."³³

Due to his abiding fascination with Buddhism, combined with this philosophy's close connections to relativism and skepticism, some scholars have argued that Buddhist teaching undergirds and motivates Li Zhi's thought.³⁴ While Buddhism undeniably influenced him greatly, I would maintain that it was by no means the unique source of his skepticism and relativism. As the above examples have shown, these lines of thought were nurtured in part by experiences that predated even his initial exposure to Buddhism. Thus while Buddhist philosophy surely strengthened the relativistic and skeptical dimensions of Li Zhi's thought, it cannot be credited as the single force shaping his views. Indeed I would argue, based on his explicitly-worded rejections of Buddhism cited above and on the strong Confucian flavor of many of his works, that far from toeing the Buddhist ideological line, Li Zhi regarded even Buddhism from a skeptical standpoint and placed it in relation to other ethical and metaphysical systems.

Li Zhi's Encounters with Matteo Ricci

Since the episodes we are about to relate occurred in 1599 and 1600, just a few years prior to Li Zhi's death, they played little part in forming his philosophical outlook or influencing the tenor of his writings. Yet the interactions between Li Zhi and the celebrated Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci clearly exhibit this Chinese thinker's skepticism and relativism in at least two ways. First, they show his willingness to view the religious traditions more familiar to him—Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and even Islam—with sufficient skepticism that he was able to engage Ricci in serious discussion and debate; that is, he did not dismiss Ricci's message out of hand. Second, they manifest Li's equally wary attitude toward the Catholic orthodoxy Ricci preached. Thus, as with Li Zhi's governance in Yao An, his encounters with Ricci illustrate the extent to which he carried his skepticism beyond the printed pages of his books and enacted it in his interactions with others.

³³ Such radical "openness" with the ultimate goal of a kind of negative release is also clear in the tetralemma of classical Indian Buddhism. For instance, the "Aggivaṅgagotta Sutta" disavows "that after death a Tathāgata exists . . . that after death a Tathāgata does not exist . . . that after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist [and] . . . that after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist" (Ñāṇamoli 591-92).

³⁴ Indeed, some scholars have argued that Buddhism was the ideology underpinning Li Zhi's writings. See, for instance, Su Langang (蘇蘭岡) 98.

Upon first meeting Li Zhi, Ricci was so enchanted that he visited him later that year and again the following year in Jining, Shandong (Yan 278). There, according to Ricci's journal, "[Ricci] spent the whole day [at Li's accommodations] and was treated with such goodwill that he felt as if he might be at home in Europe . . . rather than at the end of the world in the midst of pagans!"³⁵ Such was the hospitality with which Li Zhi treated Ricci. For his part, Li expressed equal admiration for Ricci and wrote of him:

There is hardly a Chinese book he hasn't read . . . he can speak our country's language fluently, write Chinese characters, and perform Chinese rituals: he's a first-rate human being. On the inside he is extremely clever, and on the outside he's very down to earth . . . of all the people I know, none compares to him. ("Yu youren shu" [與友人書 Reply to a Friend] 33)³⁶

As an expression of their friendship, the two men exchanged literary gifts: Li Zhi gave Ricci two poems, one of which, "Zeng Li Xitai" (贈利西泰 Presented to Li Xitai), is preserved in *Fen shu* (焚書 A Book to Burn).³⁷ And in response, Ricci bestowed on Li a copy of his newly-published *Jiao you lun* (交友論 On Friendship),

³⁵ Translation mine, based on Louis Gallagher's (358). My sincere thanks to Lisa Marie Mignone for her help in verifying these and other translations from the Italian. "*lo tenne là . . . tutto il giorno con tanta amorevolezza, che parve al Padre non stare nel fine del mondo e nel mezzo della gentilità, ma in Europa*" (105).

³⁶ "我國書籍無不讀……盡能言我此間之言，作此間之文字，行此間之儀禮，是一極標致人也。中極玲瓏，外極樸實……我所見人未有其比。"

³⁷ Li Xitai was a Chinese name by which Matteo Ricci was known (*FS* 240). The exchange of literary gifts is recorded in Ricci's journal: "[Li Zhi] gave Father [Ricci] two fans on which he had composed, by his own hand, two very beautiful sonnets which were transcribed by many people and included in the collection of similar cards that Ricci was making. This was a custom in China: to show thanks to someone, [the Chinese] send verses to him, verses written in his praise. These epigrams written in honor of Father Matthew and his companions would have made a volume thicker than Virgil, if they had been collected altogether, as the Chinese do, and saved as a precious possession" (*Diede in doi ventagli al Padre, scritte di sua mano, doi sonetti molto belli, che furno poi trascritti da molti, et egli anco stampò nel libro de'suoi sonetti. È questo un costume della Cina che, per far favore a qualche persona, gli mandano versi, fatti in sua lode. Di questi hebbe tanti il P. Matteo et altri Padri che, se gli avessero posti insieme, come fanno i Cinesi, per conservarli come cosa pretiosa, avrebbono fatto un libro maggiore che Virgilio*) (Ricci 68-69). Translation modified from Gallagher 334-35. For a detailed analysis of Li's existing poem to Ricci, see Otto Franke. *Li Tschì und Matteo Ricci*. For further information on Li Zhi's friendship with Ricci, see also Henri Bernard's *Père Matthieu Ricci et la société de son temps (1552-1610)*.

which Li copied and circulated widely among his friends at Longtan, where he lived.³⁸

Although some scholars have supported Ricci's contention that Li Zhi "believed . . . the Christian law was the only true way of life,"³⁹ this conclusion seems to me unwarranted. Rather, I would maintain that Li's own writing on these events reveals a characteristically skeptical stance. In a letter describing Ricci to a friend Li states:

³⁸ For instance, Jiao Hong's (焦竑) "Da Jin Boxiang wen" (答金伯祥問 Reply to Questions Posed by Jin Boxiang) in *Jiao Danyuan ji* (焦澹園集 Jiao Danyuan's Anthology) mentions Ricci's statement, initially a borrowing from Cicero, that "a friend is another myself" (Lin Haiquan [林海權] 362).

³⁹ Gallagher's addition of the word "only" in his translation of this passage of Ricci's journal is misleading. The passage reads: "Father [Ricci] held many discussions on matters of law, and he spoke so well that Li Zhi did not wish to dispute or contradict anything that the Father [said], thus [Li Zhi] indicated that our law was true" (*Il Padre . . . disputorno molto delle cose della legge, sebene il Liciou [Li Zhi] non volse disputare nè contraddire niete al Padre, anzi diceva che la nostra legge era vera*) (Ricci 68; translation mine). Although Gallagher translates "*cose della legge*" as "Christian law," Ricci's journal does not specify whether the legal matters under discussion were religious or secular.

Relying on a different passage in the journal, the modern scholar Wu Youxiong (吳幼雄) concludes—perhaps a bit hastily—that Ricci's discussions with Li Zhi centered primarily on non-religious subjects such as geography and mathematics rather than on Christian doctrine. This assertion contrasts with previous scholarship, which uncritically accepted the journal's assertion that Li Zhi acknowledged the Christian law as "true" (Bernard 378). For my purposes it is perhaps not essential to know whether the law under discussion was Christian or secular; the more important question is whether Li Zhi's silence during Ricci's discussion of the law really indicated full acceptance of Ricci's words. Does silence necessarily imply assent? One could easily imagine other scenarios: perhaps Li Zhi disagreed with what Ricci said but respectfully refrained from saying so.

In exploring these possibilities, Yan Lieshan's biography of Li Zhi provides an apt analogy. He astutely compares Li Zhi's silently listening to Ricci's discourse to his experience twenty years earlier in Nanjing, listening to lectures on the teachings of Wang Yangming (王陽明) (Yan 278). If we place Yan's observation in the context of a contemporary account of Li Zhi's behavior at the Nanjing lectures, we may gain some insight into the meaning of his later silence in Ricci's presence. Yuan Zhongdao records a conversation between Jiao Hong and an unnamed friend of Li Zhi. In this account, the unnamed friend describes Li Zhi's attendance at the Nanjing lectures thus: "During the meetings, [Li Zhi] remained silent and spoke not a word; he sat deeply absorbed in thought. He remained thus for several years . . . but at all times he remained in doubt" (每聚會之中，沈思而已。如此數年……然亦時時有疑). This testimony raises major questions about whether Ricci's journal is justified in interpreting Li Zhi's silence as acceptance of Christian or any other European law ("You jushi lu" [游居柿錄 Record of Stopping by a Persimmon Grove on My Journey] 65).

I don't understand why he came here. I've met with him three times, and I just don't understand what he came here to do. I suspect he may want to replace [the teachings of] the Duke of Zhou and Confucius with what he has learned. But that would be very foolish. I fear that couldn't be his purpose! ("Yu youren shu" 33)⁴⁰

Despite Li's profound respect and admiration for Ricci, he ends this letter on a tone of suspicion and distance.⁴¹ Unlike their mutual friend Liu Dongxing (劉東星), who according to Ricci's journal told Ricci, "I want to go to Heaven like you," Li Zhi expressed no such aspiration (Gallagher 357). Although he welcomed Ricci hospitably and eagerly engaged him in discussions that purportedly lasted all day, it seems clear that Li Zhi's by then long-entrenched skeptical habits prevented him from swearing allegiance to Ricci's religious creed.

I surmise that part of Ricci's appeal to Li was the hybrid identity Ricci embodied as a Westerner in Confucian dress. By the time the two met, Li had abandoned his official post, shaved his head, and donned the garb of a Buddhist monk, all the while retaining his long beard. Meanwhile Ricci, who upon first arriving in China had dressed in Buddhist attire, subsequently cloaked himself in Confucian robes. The image of the two men—whose surnames are nearly homophonous in Chinese (利 Li and 李 Li)—conversing amicably together is quite striking: one an Italian Catholic in Confucian attire, the other a Chinese government official in Buddhist dress. Could the parallels between these two unusually-outfitted figures have failed to impress themselves on Li?

Conclusion

The vagaries of Li Zhi's biography—his Islamic heritage, his family's deep involvement with trade in the sophisticated and multicultural metropolis of Quanzhou, his interactions with native peoples on China's southwestern border, his traditional Confucian background as a Chinese government official, and his fascination with Buddhism—all contributed to produce the skeptical and relativistic postures so ubiquitously present in his writings and so clearly manifested in his

⁴⁰ “但不知到此何爲，我已經三度相會，畢竟不知到此何幹也。意其欲以所學易吾周、孔之學，則又太愚，恐非爾。”

⁴¹ William Theodore de Bary writes in "Individualism and Humanitarianism," "[Li Zhi] was baffled by Ricci's motive in coming all the way to China from his homeland. The thought that Ricci might have something to offer China which she did not already possess in Confucianism was too foolish to be considered seriously" (222).

attitudes toward Matteo Ricci and others. Confronted throughout his life with such a wide array of discrepant doctrines, Li Zhi refrained from monolithically cleaving to any one of them or blending them together into a seamless and syncretic whole. Rather, in his life as well as in his writings, he picked and culled selectively, pitting aspects of one dogma against facets of another, yet never decisively declaring himself the disciple of any. Thus the iconoclastic tendencies so frequently cited in studies on Li Zhi may be seen to stem from his skeptical and relativistic attitudes toward all creeds, ideas, beliefs and opinions.

In doubting orthodoxies of every kind, Li Zhi employed whatever strategies were readily at hand. The fact that skepticism and relativism are themselves philosophically incompatible bothered him not at all, for he was as loathe to ascribe fully to one of these beliefs or philosophical positions as he was to submit to any religious or ethical dogma. But the contradictions occasioned by this motley combination of strategies present readers with an unusual paradox: viewed from one angle, the inconsistencies in Li's books perform the destructive work of dismantling and undermining the orthodoxies of their day; yet regarded from a different vantage point, these contradictions, like the shimmering tesserae of a mosaic, recombine to produce a new and dazzling image. These two interpretations of the meaning of Li Zhi's texts—one destructive, the other constructive—may seem hopelessly incompatible. Yet they may perhaps be joined by a skeptical third step: just as a mosaicist puzzles together tiny colored shards of shattered pots and urns, juxtaposing them in elaborate patterns according to his will, may we not view Li Zhi as reconfiguring—skeptically and relativistically—ideological scraps and fragments gleaned from the wide diversity of his experience?

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