Li Chih (1527–1602)

Li Chih, following in the footsteps of Wang Shou-jen, was one of the most individualistic thinkers of the Ming dynasty. A native of southern Fukien, Li won his degree of Provincial Graduate in 1552, but due to straitened circumstances did not participate in the metropolitan examination. After serving as an educational official in Honan for a while, he joined the faculty of the National University in Nanking and after a few years obtained a similar position in Peking. His subsequent appointments included junior positions in the Ministry of Rites in Peking and the Ministry of Justice in Nanking. In 1578 he assumed the post of prefect of Yao-an in the southwestern frontier province of Yunnan. During a three-year term of service there, just as during his previous assignments, Li had increasing difficulties getting along with his superiors and senior colleagues. In 1581 he resigned from his job and, at the age of fifty, decided to lead a commoner’s life. The decision was probably made from frustration with his ever-worsening relationship with the authorities or from the realization that, without the degree of Metropolitan Graduate, he could never expect to get any significant official appointment.

He earned a living by private tutoring, and in 1585 he sent his family back to Fukien and went to live alone by a small lake named Dragon Pool outside the city of Ma-ch’eng in Hu-kuang, where he gave lectures on philosophy and society that attracted an intellectual audience. He devoted himself to writing and took breaks making visits to friends in adjacent counties. He spent most of his time avidly reading not only Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist classics, but also novels and plays, which had generally been considered lowbrow literature. His marginal commentaries on the novel Water Margin (Shui-hu chuan) and the play The Western Chamber (Hsi-hsiang chi), revolutionary at the time, are still valuable for students of traditional Chinese fiction and drama today. During the last decade of the sixteenth century, Li made the acquaintance of the Yüan brothers, who visited him at Dragon Pool in 1593 and became his great admirers.

While Li Chih did cultivate a circle of admirers and friends among local officials,
who took turns inviting him over as a houseguest, he also became notorious to others for his nonconformist, unorthodox, and frequently iconoclastic behavior and speeches. Eventually this got him into trouble, and he was impeached and arrested in 1602. One day while in prison, he asked for a barber and found an opportunity to slash his throat with the latter’s razor. On being asked why he tried to kill himself, his last words were, “What more does an old man of seventy want?”

Li Chih enjoyed the relatively liberal cultural ambience of the late sixteenth century and became an eccentric in the convention of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove of the Chin dynasty. He was an anachronism in the sense that much of his thought, especially that related to the reexamination and reevaluation of Confucianism, was far ahead of that of his contemporaries, perhaps by some three centuries. His posthumous influence was limited due to continual censorship and prohibition of his works throughout the Manchu dynasty. Li did exercise considerable influence on late Ming literature, primarily by providing a source of inspiration for the Yüan brothers. His famous essay on the importance of a “child’s mind” provided the raison d’être for the emergence of a literary genre like the hsiao-p’in, which emphasized casualness, originality, and spontaneity. As our selections here show, Li also wrote vignettes with a subtle irony or biting satire that Chang Tai compared to “arrows” and “daggers.” Chung-tao, the youngest of the Yüan brothers, wrote a lively biography of Li Chih, which unfortunately is too lengthy to be included here.

Three Fools

Liu I, an outspoken person, was inclined to reprimand others. Li Pai-yao once told someone, “Although Liu I often reproved people, they didn’t hate him.” Aha! Someone like Pai-yao was indeed an understanding friend of Liu I’s! I also have a tendency to reprimand people, yet people have not hated me. Why? It’s because although I have a foul mouth, I am in fact warmhearted. Although my words are reviling, my intention is nevertheless good. I am warmhearted because I want people to improve themselves as quickly as possible. My intention is good because I always worry that people are not in a hurry to improve themselves. Therefore people who know me do not hate me.

However, although people in the world do not hate me, they do not befriend me either. There is only one guy who manages not only not to
hate me, but also to befriend me, and that’s Yang Ting-chien. Why is he able not to hate me and also befriend me? It’s because I love rank and wealth, so I also love those who seek rank and wealth. If one loves rank, one has to study. Ting-chien, however, won’t bring himself to study; therefore I reprove him. If one loves wealth, one has to save. Ting-chien cannot live within his income; therefore I reprove him. To reprove someone for not seeking rank and wealth—what is there to hate me for? On the other hand, there is indeed something about Ting-chien that deserves a scolding. When I was in dire straits at O-ch’eng, Ting-chien came to see me three or four times during the year, in spite of the summer heat and winter snow. There is something in his personal integrity that is above that of others. I know he is able to accomplish something—therefore, I constantly berate him. And yet there is no way that he can ever be changed, and I don’t know why. He doesn’t read. He’s not eager to learn. He doesn’t seek profit in the world. He doesn’t seek social success. He has integrity, but no lofty ambition. So he is a fool after all and is not worthy of discussion.

Although Sheng-yu has some intention to achieve the Tao, he is not one who can go directly after it. He often sticks to dead, hackneyed words. He regards the hard work of everyday life as shackles and considers indulgence in rank and wealth the key to peace, happiness, and comfort. Consequently he cannot stay free from misleading others as well as misleading himself.

Ting-chien has personal integrity, but is not smart enough. Sheng-yu is smarter, but has no personal integrity. Both are fools in the mountains. Now that I am already in the company of such fools, I have no choice but to take things as they are for the rest of my life. And yet I cannot help chiding and railing at them all the time. So Ting-chien is a fool, Sheng-yu is a fool, and I myself am just another fool. Are we not three fools together? I hereby have written this note on the Three Fools.

In Praise of Liu Hsieh

Once there was a “learner of the Tao” who wore high-soled clogs or large-sized shoes, long sleeves and a broad belt, the cap of “cardinal guides and constant virtues,” and the clothes of “human relationship.”¹ He gleaned one- or two-tenths of what had been written, stole three- or four-tenths of what had been said, and claimed to be a true disciple of Chung-ni [Confucius].²
One day he ran into Liu Hsieh. Now Liu Hsieh was a very smart scholar. When he saw the man, Liu ridiculed him: “You don’t really understand my elder brother Chung-ni.” Infuriated, the man stood up and said, “If Heaven had not given birth to Chung-ni, it would have been a long, dark night through a myriad ages.” Now who are you, and how dare you address him as Chung-ni and claim that he’s your elder brother?” Liu Hsieh replied, “No wonder all the sages before the time of Hsi-huang had to walk all day long holding paper flambeaux in their hands!” The man quietly took his leave.

Having heard about it, Mr. Li observed in approval, “What he said was brief and appropriate, terse and sapid, truly capable of clearing up all uncertainties and illuminating the world! From his words one may know what a man he is. Though an offhand bantering remark, the truth in it will remain unalterable for a hundred generations to come!”

A Lament for the Passing

If there is day, there is night. Similarly, if there is life, there is death. If something has passed away, it will never return. By the same token, if one has died, one cannot be alive again. All human beings want to live, but no one can live forever; all human beings mourn for what has passed away, but no one can stop it from passing away. Since one cannot live forever, one should give up the desire for immortal life. Since one cannot stop things from passing away, one should not mourn for what has passed away. I hereby make the following observation: Don’t mourn for the dead; only the living deserve to be mourned. Don’t mourn for what has passed away; better mourn for the living.

Inscription on a Portrait of Confucius

at the Iris Buddhist Shrine

Everyone regards Confucius as a great sage, so I, too, regard him as a great sage. Everyone regards Taoism and Buddhism as heresies, so I, too, regard them as heresies. It is not that everyone really knows who a great sage is and what a heresy is; it is only because everyone has heard so much of it from the instruction of his father and his teacher. It is not that his father
and his teacher really know who a great sage is and what a heresy is; it is only because they have heard so much of it from the teachings of previous Confucians. It is not that previous Confucians really knew who a great sage was and what a heresy was; it is only because Confucius himself had made observations on the issue. When he said, “I am not good enough to be a saint,” it was out of his modesty. When he said, “Attack heresies,” he was surely referring to Taoism and Buddhism.

Previous Confucians made their remarks on assumption, fathers and teachers echo and recite those remarks, and pupils simply listen to them as if they were blind and deaf themselves. When ten thousand people say something in one voice, it becomes irrefutable. When something has remained unchanged for a thousand years, a person doesn’t understand it by himself any more. He won’t quote, “I’m merely reciting his words.” Instead he’ll quote, “I already know the man.” He won’t quote, “Pretend to know what one doesn’t know.” Instead he’ll only quote, “I claim to know something when I do know it.” By now, even when a person does have eyes, he’ll have no use for them anymore.¹

Now who am I? How dare I claim to have eyes of my own? All I have to do is follow the general trend. Since I have followed the general trend in regarding Confucius as a sage and followed the general trend in worshipping him, therefore I will still follow the general trend in worshipping him here at the Iris Buddhist Shrine.²

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**Essay: On the Mind of a Child**

Towards the end of his commentary on The Western Chamber,¹ the Mountain Farmer of Dragon Cave² observed, “I hope those who understand me won’t think that I still have the mind of a child.” Now, the mind of a child is the true mind. If a child’s mind is to be dismissed, then the true mind is dismissed. The mind of a child, being the natural mind at its initial stage, is purely innocent and free from falseness. If the mind of a child is lost, the true mind is lost. If the true mind is lost, then the true person is lost. To be a person who is not true is to lose all origin.

A child is the beginning of a person. The mind of a child is the beginning of a mind. How can one afford to lose the beginning of a mind? Now, how does one suddenly lose the mind of a child? It is because at the beginning
stage, some information enters the mind through the ears and the eyes; when it is allowed to dominate inside, the mind of a child is lost. As one grows up, some reasoning enters the mind from the information, and when it is allowed to dominate inside, the mind of a child is lost. By and by, with the daily increase in reasoning and information, one knows and feels more each day. When one knows that a good reputation is something desirable, and when one tries one’s best to attain that, the mind of a child is lost. When one knows that a bad reputation is something undesirable, and when one tries one’s best to avoid it, the mind of a child is lost. Now, all reasoning and information comes from extensive reading and moral reasoning, and who among the ancient sages didn’t read? But, even when they didn’t read, they would still keep their mind of a child, and even when they did read a lot, they would protect and preserve their mind of a child, unlike scholars today, who have blocked up their child’s mind with extensive reading and moral reasoning. Since our scholars have blocked up their child’s mind with extensive reading and moral reasoning, then why did the sages expound their ideas in writing, thus keeping our scholars benighted? Once the mind of a child is blocked up, when they say something, what they say is insincere. When they do something in their administrative affairs, what they do becomes groundless. And when they write something, what they write makes no sense. It has no depth, no grace, no substance, and no illumination. Not a single word of virtue may be found therein. Why is it so? It is only because the mind of a child has been blocked up, and information and reasoning that come from outside have taken its place inside.

Now, when information and reasoning dominate the mind, then when one speaks, it is from that information and reasoning, not from the mind of a child itself. Even when the saying is artful, what’s the good to me? Isn’t it a false person saying false words, doing false things, and writing false compositions? When a person is false, then everything he does is false. Accordingly, if one says false words to false people, they will be pleased; if one talks about false things to false people, they will be pleased; if one discusses false compositions with false people, they will be pleased. If everything one does is false, then everyone one talks to is pleased. When the entire theater is false, how can a short person make any distinction? Hence, although the very best of writings do exist in the world, there must have been much that sank into oblivion among short people, never to be read by later generations! Why? It is because all the world’s very best writings originate from the mind of a child. If the mind of a child is always
preserved, then all that information and reasoning will never take its place, and there will be great literature in every age, from every person, and in every creative and original form and style. In the case of poetry, why must it be like *The Old Poems* [Ku shih] and *The Anthology* [Wen hsüan]? In the case of prose, why must it be like the pre-Ch’in? So it was passed down to the Six Dynasties, and it changed into the new forms; then it changed successively into the romance [ch’uan-ch’i], the promptbook [yüan-pen], the miscellaneous play [tsa-chü], *The Western Chamber* and *Water Margin*, and the examination essays of today. Past or present, as long as it is a great sage talking about the “way of the sages,” it is excellent writing, and one should not judge by priority in temporal order. From this, I have therefore come to the conclusion that all that comes from the mind of a child is excellent writing by itself. Why should one talk about the Six Classics, *The Analects*, and *Mencius* only?

With respect to the Six Classics, *The Analects*, and *Mencius*, they were either overestimated by official historians or praised excessively by officials—or by those pedantic disciples or ignorant pupils, recalling what their teachers had said. Sometimes they got the beginning but lost the conclusion. Sometimes they remembered the later part but missed the earlier sayings. Or they just put down whatever they perceived. Latecomers didn’t know the truth, so they regarded those [words] as having come out of the mouths of the sages themselves and decided to canonize them as classics. Who ever realized that many were not the sayings of the sages themselves? Even if they were indeed from the sages themselves, they were meant for specific occasions, nothing more than making offhand prescriptions and passing out medicine according to the illness, so as to rescue those ignorant pupils and pedantic disciples. It was difficult to cure the illness of falsehood with set prescriptions. How could it be regarded as the ultimate truth, which applies to all ages? Therefore the Six Classics, *The Analects*, and *Mencius* have become a pretext for those “learners of the Tao” and a haven for all hypocrites, and should never be considered as equal to expressions of the mind of a child. Alas! How can I ever have a chance to discuss writings with a truly great sage who has not lost his mind of a child?