

Book Review

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Rivi Handler-Spitz

Symptoms of an Unruly Age: Li Zhi and Cultures of Early Modernity.

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Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602) was an icon and iconoclast of the late Ming. An exceptional figure by any measure, he has come to represent his times. Rivi Handler-Spitz' new study manages to preserve such paradoxes as it explores them, thanks in no small part to the helpful perspective offered by the comparandum of early modern Europe, particularly—but not exclusively—Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) and his *Essays*. Without positing a direct causal mechanism, she finds in both writers, and many of their contemporaries, similarly, if differently, manifested attitudes toward representation and its interpretation. In both literature and socio-economic life, the tokens of meaning and value—words, coins, clothing, and more—floated away from where people expect them to be fixed. Writers like Li Zhi and Montaigne, attuned to these changes, did more than express these anxieties: they translated them into ways

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of reading and writing.

Handler-Spitz calls the attitude that runs through many of these writers' work "bluff," a rhetorical stance that presents less an assertion of truth than a problematic, even confrontational position. Rather than being persuaded by an argument, the reader is led (ideally) to think. When meanings and appearances are unstable and unreliable, an alternative to the rectification of names is to work with and from this instability, so that readers perceive and reflect on what the language they encounter is doing. A text full of bluff knowingly sabotages representation and in so doing reveals the inner workings of linguistic production and reception. For Handler-Spitz, an attitude of bluff runs through Li's *oeuvre*, but also through other products of the same period, including visual works such as images by Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1598-1652) that are self-portraits masquerading as sketches of historical figures (or vice versa). Recognizing bluff becomes a key to reading both Li Zhi's self-contradictory writings and his inconsistent behaviour.

The book is structured along a path from the abstraction of language, through the material world, and back to the question of how readers in Li Zhi's time and immediately afterward engaged with his writings.

The first chapter, "Transparent Language," explores the idealization of language as a potentially transparent medium that maintains a fixed, uniform, and correct relationship between reality and its representations. Both in Europe and in China the notion existed that in antiquity—be that the Garden of Eden or the time of the sage kings—language was a universal device that transparently communicated absolute standards; its subsequent history was one of decline and fragmentation. While this idealization could manifest itself as imitation in an attempt to reproduce perfect models, more subtle thinkers, Li Zhi among them, rather pursued the authenticity and sincerity they attributed to ancient uses of language and decried their contemporaries as inauthentic, even or especially when they reproduced the speech or writing of the paragons of the past. The following chapter, "The Rhetoric of Bluff," examines one of Li Zhi's most

effective tools for exposing such hypocrisy and attempting to sublate it. Bluff is particularly evident in Li Zhi's writing about himself, which Handler-Spitz reads closely as full of revealing self-contradictions that highlight, or even celebrate, the indeterminacies of both identity and expression. It rests uneasily with faith in the potential of language to restore a perfect order, not only in expression but across society, but in Li, Handler-Spitz finds both. Perhaps Li's bluff is a manifestation of confidence without optimism.

The following three chapters move in an arc through the realm of material things and their social significance. Chapter 3 focuses on Li's physical appearance and how he deployed elements of dress and grooming that were incompatible and confusing. Most famously, he shaved his head like a tonsured Buddhist monk but kept his beard and the dress of a retired scholar-official. This semiotic unbundling points to the intentionality with which Li cut his self-image and the rejection of authority that underlay it, but Handler-Spitz points out that it was also an act of outward display, a response to what, as Li saw it, appearances had become in his time. The parallel she draws between how Li wrote and how he looked makes a persuasive case that bluff is a rhetorical device that not only recurs across multiple domains but also creates links among them.

Chapter 4 moves outward to the economic realm, linking instability in the value of money to fluctuations and anxieties about meaning elsewhere because "as a system of signs, money resonates analogically with other semiotic systems." (89) The European parallel is particularly strong here since writers in early modern Europe and the secondary literature about it frequently draw such analogies, and because socio-economic changes so clearly underlie many of the cultural developments that have been labeled "early modern." The latter is true of China as well, the former less so. In particular, while monetary metaphors were a longstanding commonplace of European writing about language and meaning, they were rare in the Chinese tradition. As a result, while Handler-Spitz can point to widespread anxieties about who has and lacks money in

the late Ming, and more fundamentally about the unstable value of currencies (which abounded, genuine and counterfeit, in both China and Europe), she finds almost no examples from Li's writings of a direct link between money and the semiotic. She acknowledges this absence, but pushes the "resonances" perhaps further than the sources can sustain. The cited examples of economic metaphors suggest that, like many of his peers, Li did not see coins as semiotically chargeable tokens but as objects with a normatively fixed value. For example, he hopes that "if one can pay one coin and truly receive one coin's worth of goods one will truly love ... and things will surely be different from the way they normally are [in such uncertain times]." (95; Handler-Spitz' interpolation) Like many conventional statecraft thinkers, Li assumed that coin had a set, normal value, inflation was a path of disorder, and fluctuations were to be resisted. One can imagine taking a different tack, based on an attitude of bluff: presenting an inconsistent mix of currencies, treating their value as arbitrary and prices as subject to personal whim, and pushing one's audience to reflect on how they used money and scrutinize every coin they encountered. Li Zhi does not seem to have done this with relation to money—perhaps because that was happening every day, in every market, for nearly everyone in the late Ming realm.

From the abstractly economic, Chapter 5 moves on to an important linkage between the material and the conceptual, the book as an intellectual and physical object. Here again the extensive secondary literature on both China and Europe serves Handler-Spitz well since book history has pushed us to consider the media through which we encounter texts and ideas as shaping what they are for us and for all historical actors. Li Zhi is an excellent case study. His works were printed in a multitude of editions, authorized and otherwise, they were later banned, and many works were printed under his name with little or no likelihood that he actually wrote them. And those works themselves reflect on how readers would interact with them, not least with his perlocutionary titles *A Book to Burn* and *A Book to Keep (Hidden)*. Handler-Spitz extracts from such elements of self-presentation a concern on Li's part with what readers would do

with his work, one shaped by the unstable and perplexing world of late Ming books. Since many of the books Ming readers had access to were defective or deceptive in that they represented a writer's work incompletely, inexactly, or not at all (as when books appeared with spurious attributions to big names like Li Zhi).

The final chapter addresses the reception of Li Zhi's writing in his own time and the decades afterward. In part, the analysis here is a way of assessing the extent to which Li's writing conveyed the ideas that they embodied. Many readers took offence at his words, to the point of wishing to ban his works and punish his person. Others, however, were taken with his works, read them avidly, printed them, wrote commentaries, and imitated or faked them. Li became a well-known figure who stood for original, rule-breaking ideas and interpretations. Some learned from his reading practices to apply them to other books, either in pirated works published under Li's name or in their own reading. The novelty of Li's ideas was apparent, and an inspiration, to his contemporaries and to later generations. Handler-Spitz is careful to seek out examples of readers who not only praise his ideas but use his techniques to read them. I would take issue with one reading of such a claim, however: the phrase used by an anonymous commentator *cong wu ci lun* 從無此論 does not mean that "this argument comes out of nowhere" (150-51) but rather "never has such an argument been made"—a strong claim for Li's novelty rather but not an "adversarial" reading dismissing his leaps of logic.

As a book, this production by the University of Washington Press is well-edited and easy to read, though it does have a few deficiencies. One is the absence of a list of figures despite the presence of several (not always clearly reproduced) images. A few small errors mar the index; for example, the entry for *Cangshu* (*A Book to Keep [Hidden]*) points erroneously to *Another Book to Burn* (*Xu fenshu*). And in the bibliography the title of Jean-François Billeter's *Li Zhi, le philosophe maudit*, has been changed to Wade-Giles Romanization.

Such quibbles aside, this is a valuable reading of Li Zhi as an early modern writer who still has much to say about language and identity in a time of uncertainty. It is a welcome part of a set of new works on Li Zhi with which Handler-Spitz is involved—a selected co-translation of *A Book to Burn* and *A Book to Keep (Hidden)* and a forthcoming collection of essays, cited here as *The Objectionable Li Zhi*. Together, these contributions will make Li Zhi a more accessible, if no less puzzling, figure for an English-speaking audience.