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RIVI HANDLER-SPITZ, PAULINE C. LEE,
AND HAUN SAUSSY

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"EXPLANATION OF THE CHILDLIKE HEART-MIND" 童心說 "TONGXIN SHUO"

Closely related to "On Miscellaneous Matters," this is Li Zhi's most famous essay, written around 1592.¹ "Explanation of the Childlike Heart-Mind" is at the same time an aesthetic and an ethics, centered on the idea of genuineness. Taking the opposite tack from the sophistication sought by most of his contemporaries, Li praises what is unpremeditated, simple, and authentic and thereby sets a cardinal value for writers and critics of the following century. Pushing on, as always, from paradox to provocation, he asks, "What need do I have of the Six Classics, Confucius and Mencius?" and closes with a paraphrase of the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, seeking to have a word with the kind of person who has forgotten all words. We offer two translations: one more meticulously annotated, one (the next chapter) in a freer style. (HS)



In the concluding remarks to his preface for *The Story of the Western Wing*,² the Mountain Farmer of Dragon Cave stated, "It is acceptable that those who know may not say that I still possess a childlike heart-mind."

1. FS, j. 3, in *LZQZ* 1:276-79. For published translations of Li's essay, see Owen, *Anthology*, 808-11; Ye, *Vignettes*, 26-28; Billeter, *Li Zhi*, 250-58; and Mizoguchi, "Funsho," 341-43. The locus classicus for the term "childlike heart-mind" (童心, *tongxin*) is the *Zuo*zhuan. Speaking of the nineteen-year-old Zhao, presumptive heir to the throne, the narrator laments: "He still had a childlike heart-mind, and from this the gentlemen knew he would not come to a good end" (Xian, year 31; translation adapted from Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 5:564).
2. The thirteenth-century Yuan drama *The Story of the Western Wing* was widely performed and read in the sixteenth century. In this drama a scholar and maiden overcome traditional obstacles as their passion and illicit romance transform into a celebrated marriage. The play differs from the source text, "Yinying's Story," by Yuan Zhen, in which the illicit romance turns to tragedy as the man abandons the maiden.
3. According to Zhang Jianye, the Mountain Farmer of Dragon Cave refers to Li Zhi's close friend Jiao Hong, who in his own writings cites a 1582 anonymous commentary on *The Story of the Western Wing* and adds the signature "Mountain Farmer of Dragon Cave." The

The childlike heart-mind is the genuine heart-mind. If one considers the childlike heart-mind unacceptable, then he considers the genuine heart-mind unacceptable. As for the childlike heart-mind, free from all falsehood and entirely genuine, it is the original mind⁴ at the very beginning of the first thought. If one loses one's childlike heart-mind, one loses the genuine heart-mind. Losing the genuine mind is losing the genuine self. A person who is not genuine will never regain that with which he began.

A child is the beginning of a person; the childlike heart-mind is the beginning of the mind. How can the beginning of the mind be lost? But then, how can the childlike heart-mind suddenly be lost? From the beginning, sounds and sights enter through our ears and eyes. When one allows them to dominate what is within oneself, then the childlike heart-mind is lost. As one grows older, one hears and sees the "Principles of the Way" [i.e., moral teachings]. When one allows these to dominate what is within oneself, then the childlike heart-mind is lost. As one grows older, the "Principles of the Way" that one hears and sees increase day by day; what one knows and senses thus also increases daily. In time one comes to believe it is desirable to covet a good reputation and one endeavors to enhance one's reputation; one's childlike heart-mind is then lost. One believes that a bad reputation is to be disdained and endeavors to conceal such a reputation; one's childlike heart-mind is then lost.

The "Principles of the Way" that one hears and sees all come from extensive study of books and familiarity with moral principles. Could it be that the sages of antiquity did not study books? But even if they did not study books, their childlike heart-mind was secure and at ease; when they did study extensively, they simply protected their childlike heart-minds from being lost. They are unlike those scholars of today for whom the more they read books and become familiar with moral principles, the more they obstruct their childlike heart-mind. Now, if by reading extensively and familiarizing themselves with moral principles scholars in fact block their childlike heart-minds, why would the sages have written books and established teachings that would hinder these scholars? Once the childlike heart-mind

preface to the 1582 commentary concludes, "Having leisure in my humble home, I casually punctuate *The Story of the Western Wing* . . . Alone, I hold the text and chant its verses on windy and rainy days or beautiful moonlit nights. I while away the time and break the strains of poverty and sadness. It is acceptable that those who know may not say that I still possess a childlike heart-mind." The translation is adapted from Cheang, "Li Chih," 272. For a reproduction of the preface, see Mizoguchi, "Min matsui," 189.

4. The locus classicus for "original mind" (*benxin* 本心) is Mencius 6A10. Mencius is known for his view that human nature tends toward good.

has been obstructed, one loses the ability to put into words one's innermost feelings, one's efforts to participate in government prove unsuccessful, and one's written compositions fail to express the truth. When beauty does not emanate from within and when brightness is not born from true sincerity,⁵ any attempt at uttering words that express virtue will fail.⁶ Why should this be so? Because when the childlike heart-mind is obstructed, then the Principles of the Way, which come from outside the self, become one's heart and mind.

Since the heart-mind is made up of what one sees and hears and Principles of the Way, what is spoken then are words that derive entirely from what one has seen and heard and from the Principles of the Way; one's words do not flow directly from the childlike heart-mind. Though these words may be artful, what do they have to do with oneself? How could such a situation lead to anything other than phony people speaking phony words, performing phony actions, and producing phony writings? Once a person is a phony, everything he does is phony. As a consequence, if one speaks phony words to a phony person, the phony person is pleased; if one talks about phony matters with a phony person, the phony person is pleased; if one discusses phony literature with a phony person, the phony person is pleased. When everything is phony, everyone is pleased. And when the entire theater is filled with phonies, how can a short person in the audience discriminate between real and fake?

So even the most exquisite writing in the world can be buried by phony people and never even seen by later generations. Is this all that rare? Why does this happen? All the most exquisite literature in the world flows directly from the childlike heart-mind. As long as the childlike heart-mind is preserved, the Principles of the Way will not be endlessly perverted, what one hears and sees will have no authority, no period will lack great literature, no person will lack literary talent, and not a single pattern, genre, or word will fail to be genuine! Why must verse necessarily conform to aesthetic standards from antiquity or from the *Selections of Refined Literature*? Why must prose necessarily resemble models written

in the pre-Qin period? Writing evolved through the ages; it developed into the literature of the Six Dynasties, then changed and became the new regulated verse of the Tang, then transformed into fantastic tales⁹ and play scripts,¹⁰ which developed into Yuan comedies, and those in turn evolved into *The Story of the Western Wing* and *The Water Margin*;¹¹ now they have become the eight-legged essays¹² of today; in each case, the transformation produced the most sublime writings of the age, which can never be understood through a discussion of historical contexts, precedents, or influences. And so, I am moved all the more by writings that immediately flow from the childlike heart-mind. Why speak of the Six Classics? Why speak of the *Analects* or the *Mencius*?

As for the Six Classics, the *Analects*, and the *Mencius*, if they are not words of overdone reverence from official historians, they are phrases of bloated praise from loyal subjects. If not one or the other, then they are what misguided followers and dim-witted disciples wrote down of what they recalled their teacher had said. What they wrote had a beginning but was missing an ending; or the followers remembered the conclusion but forgot the introduction. These disciples put down in writing whatever they happened to see. Later scholars did not scrutinize these writings. They simply declared that these words came directly from the mouths of sages and decided to establish them as great classics. Who knows whether more than half these writings are not words from the mouths of sages?

Even if these words are those of the sages, still, they were uttered in response to a specific situation. This is much like the case of prescribing a medication for a particular illness, applying a specific remedy depending on the circumstances in order to cure this dim-witted disciple or that misguided follower. The medicine prescribed depends on the illness; surely there is no fixed and unchanging prescription. Given this, how could we hastily accept these writings as the perfected doctrine for endless generations? And so, the Six Classics, the *Analects*, and the *Mencius* have become nothing more than a crib sheet for those belonging to the School

5. See *Mencius* 7B25.

6. See *Analects* 14.5.

7. See Zhuzi yuqi 朱子語類 [The classified conversations of Master Zhu], 27, for reference to a short person in the theater who cannot see the stage and instead of judging for himself takes his cues to laugh when others around him do so.

8. Wenxian 文選 [Selections of refined literature], compiled by Crown Prince Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), of the Liang dynasty, is one of the most influential literary anthologies in Chinese history. With the rise of new verse forms in the seventh century, it began to appear archaic.

9. The genre known as fantastic tales (*chuangqi* 傳奇) emerged in the late Tang period. The genre known as theater scripts (*yuanben* 院本) emerged during the early Yuan period.

11. *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (translated variously as *The Water Margin*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, and *All Men Are Brothers*) is an anonymous novel from the Ming period, generally considered one of the four masterpieces of Chinese fiction. A famous commentary to this work is attributed to Li Zhi. For Li's views on the novel, see pp. 125–28.

12. The highly structured eight-legged essay form was prescribed as the standard for examination answers from the mid-fifteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century.

of Principle, a fountainhead for phonies. It would be utterly impossible to describe such writings with the label of "childlike heart-mind."
Oh! Wherever can I find a genuine great sage who has not yet lost his childlike heart-mind and have a word with him about writing?¹³

TRANSLATED BY PAULINE C. LEE
AND RIVI HANDLER-SPITZ

"ON THE CHILDLIKE MIND"

童心說

"TONGXIN SHUO"

As an experiment and an invitation to imagine a different way of translating Li Zhi, we offer a second, freer-style version of "Tongxin shuo." (HS)



"... and, despite the freshness and simplicity of the work itself, I hope that the reader will not suspect the editor of simple-mindedness."—that's how the Denizen of Dragon Cave closes his preface to *The Story of the Western Wing*.

But simplicity is nothing other than authenticity. Someone who is afraid of being taken for a simpleton is afraid of truthfulness. A simple mind is pure of artifice; it is the mind of our first thought. When simplicity goes, authenticity goes; when the mind has lost its authenticity, the authentic person vanishes with it. When we lose our authenticity, nothing is left to set us straight again.

We begin as children, in simplicity. The child's mind is the beginning mind, the mind everyone has necessarily shared. But somehow this mind is lost: how indeed? It must be that impressions and sensations, crowding in through the ears and eyes, come to dominate the inner life and suppress the original mind. Then words and ideas learned from without come to dominate, suppressing the original mind. These external influences multiply with time. Eventually we become aware of the beauty of a good name and desire to acquire it; the ugliness of bad repute, likewise, we strive to avoid, and the simple mind is lost.

And then through reading we take in more words, ideas, impressions, and sensations. Can it be that the sages of old refused to read books [and thus preserved their simplicity of action]? But whether or not they were reading books, they maintained their childlike simplicity and did not let it stray. In this they were unlike the scholars of today who pile up terms and

13. Li Zhi plays on a sentence from Zhuangzi, ch. 26; Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 302.

concepts from books in an effort to quash the original mind. Given their use of book learning and verbiage to subdue the original mind, what sage can hope to use writing or speech to suppress these scholars' misguided action? Once the original mind has been vanquished, its expression in language can only be indirect and superficial; its action in governing will be without deep roots, its writing style will be weak. You will see none of that "strength and clarity," the "flashes of genius," the "weighty word craft" [that the ancients prized]. So what then? Once the original mind has been lost, only impressions, words, and concepts are available to fill the gap.

Once impressions, words, and concepts replace the missing mind, speech will be drawn from these impressions, words and concepts alone—nothing like the simple mind uttering its direct speech. Sophisticated words, perhaps, but what do they offer us? What will result but artificial language and artificial deeds, artificial speech spoken by artificial people? When the person has become artificial, everything else is artificial too. Then make artificial speeches for artificial people; these artificial people will find everything to their taste. Perform artificial deeds for artificial people; they will be delighted. Write artificial essays for artificial audiences; they will applaud you. Nothing but artifice, and nothing but approval; but can anyone see beyond the false stage set? Even if somewhere someone writes a masterpiece that goes straight to the point of things, it will be buried in artifice and denied to posterity—is this not a pity? What then? For every masterpiece of writing flows from simplicity of mind. Where the childlike mind prevails, no ideas or words can have currency, no outer impressions can take its place; with the childlike mind, no time and no individual will be devoid of artistry, indeed no type or style of writing will be unartistic. Poetry need not be sought in the ancient *Classic of Poetry* and *Anthology*; prose need not be modeled on the age before the empire arose. The artistic mind broke out in the Six Dynasties to create recent-style verse form; it broke out again in Tang tales of the fantastic; again in the Yuan to make libretti and *zaju* opera; again in our time to make *The Story of the Western Wing* and *Outlaws of the Marsh* and the masters of the essay form. What I respond to is the direct expression of those who have retained the childlike mind. What need do I have of the Six Classics, Confucius, and Mencius?

As for the Six Classics, Confucius, and Mencius, where they are not exaggeration, they are flattery, or the inaccurate notes of muddleheaded students who tried to set down in books what they could not remember themselves. Subsequent scholars, purblind, mistook them for the actual words of the sages and elevated them to the rank of classics, despite their

ramshackle composition. Or where the actual words of a sage are recorded, how are we to know whether the words refer only to some specific occasion or are addressed to the failings of this or that ignorant disciple, like a medicine prescribed for one disease but useless to cure another? Such occasional prescriptions can hardly be handed down as the timeless wisdom of the ages. And yet the philosophers of our time talk of nothing but the Six Classics, Confucius, and Mencius, that limitless resource of hypocrites. Nothing could be farther from the direct language of the childlike original mind, you see! Oh, where can I find a genuine sage who has not lost his childlike mind, so that I can exchange a word with him?

TRANSLATED BY HAUN SAUSSY