

The Conversion of Li Zhizao: an Inquiry into Reasons

*by Chen Mingsheng
translated by Norman Walling*

Li Zhizao (1565-1633), whose life straddled two dynasties, the Ming and the Qing, is considered as one of the three pillars of the early Catholic Church in China. Of the three, all of whom were scholar-officials converted by the Jesuit missionaries, Xu Guangqi (1562-1633) is perhaps the best known and Yang Tingyun (1557-1627),¹ the least. While our main concern here will be with Li Zhizao's conversion to Christianity, attention must also be paid to Xu and Yang's.

Fang Hao notes that there is much more historical data available on Xu Guangqi than on the other two. Primary sources abound, including the official Ming government annals, genealogical records, monographs and other personal writings, not to mention contemporary biographies in Chinese and Western languages. In addition, there is his tomb and a host of descendants who are happy and willing to provide us with further personal details about the life and times of their noted ancestor just for the asking. In contrast, material on Li and Yang is scanty and limited to a few notations in the local records of the period, a brief biography written shortly after their deaths, and some personal writings that have come down to us through various sources.²

Given the weight of documentaion in favour of Xu, it is easy to see why historians emphasize his role above the others in the early cultural exchanges between China and the West and between China and the Catholic Church of that period. Historians not only have at hand the *Complete Works of Xu Guangqi* and Wang Zhongmin's recent edition of the *Xu Guangqi Chronicles*, but also the Shanghai Classics Press version of *The Complete Translation of the Works of Xu Guangqi*.³ When it comes to Li Zhizao, however, historians must content themselves with the three traditional sources: Ruan Yuan's *Famous Men of History*, *Li Zhizao in Western Zhejiang* by Chen Yuan,

and recently, Fang Hao's *Studies on Li Zhizao*.⁴ Another important source was added in 1965 by the Student Press of Taiwan when it came out with a photo-copy of Li's *Primer on Astronomy* (1629)⁵ to commemorate the 400th anniversary of his birth.

Even though bibliographical materials have multiplied in recent years, we still know very little of Li's family origins. Fang Hao has unearthed an imperial document, an award given to Li's father by the Wan Li Emperor. It does not mention his father by name but praises him for "having fulfilled his duties with great satisfaction and being a model of personal rectitude". Fang has also come across another document which names the official in charge of the Imperial Calendar Bureau, Li Cbin, and adds that he is Li Zhizao's son.⁶ Li himself is on the list of successful candidates for the Imperial Rank of Jinshi published in 1598, where it also says that he came from Renhe County in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, and held a military post there.⁷ We find confirmation of the Li's family background in the journals of the Portuguese Jesu de Alvarez de Semedo (1585-1649) who lived with Li for several years in Hangzhou after 1621 and who says he came from a family with a military tradition. In his *History of the Great and Renowned Monarchy of China*, published in 1641, Alvarez again states Li's family tradition of imperial service, but adds the interesting note that Yang Tingyun was a family relation, as was another well-known convert of that time, Ignatius Hsia,⁸ who was then living in Nanjing. As we can find nothing about Li's family background, we must turn to the journals of the early Jesuit missionaries to find out what might have prompted his conversion to Christianity. At the same time, we must not neglect the work of more recent historians who have been researching the early Sino-Western cultural exchanges and thereby have contributed much to our general understanding of the prevailing conditions of the times.

The early Jesuit missionaries generally offer the following reasons for Li's conversion: first, his attraction to the Western sciences, especially geography, mathematics and astronomy; second, he believed in the truth of Catholic doctrine itself; third, he was influenced by Matteo Ricci's warm friendship and noble character .

What these missionaries tend to overlook is the prevailing intellectual climate of the last years of the Ming Dynasty. Li was also strongly under the influence of Confucian scholars of

that time who taught "interior virtue produces noble bearing and practical wisdom is brought about by prolonged study of the natural world." The missionaries failed to appreciate the fact that all three scholar-officials, Li, Yang and Xu came into the Church first and foremost as convinced Confucianists. However, both Fang Hao and Chen Yuan do accept the above three reasons given by the early missionaries as lying at the root of their conversion experience.

Before Matteo Ricci died in 1610, he had written *China Notes*. Nicolas Longobardo, his companion, brought it back to Rome and translated it from Italian into Latin, editing the Latin version for publication in 1615.⁹ The Latin version states that Li Zhizao by 1601 was already a high official in the Ministry of Public Works. Greatly impressed by Ricci's *Map of the World*, Li asked him to tutor him in geography, in return for which Li would be willing to help him with his new edition of the map in Chinese. Li also studied mathematics and astronomy under Ricci and translated several books on these subjects into Chinese. Thus did Ricci bait with Western learning the hook that would eventually catch the scholar-official Li.¹⁰ While Li was much attached to and influenced by Ricci's teaching, there were still aspects of the new religion he could not accept, namely Church teaching with regard to matrimonial monogamy. He put off his baptism for some time. But while he delayed his own baptism, he nevertheless encouraged his family and relatives to enter the Church. Many of them did so, among them two who served on the Imperial Examination Board.¹¹

Ricci's *China Notes* mentions that Li served for a time on the Imperial Examination Board of Fujian Province. He also served as an official in Shangdong, where he was removed from office after a routine government investigation found him guilty of negligence. He was faulted for a fondness for banqueting and mahjongg. After three years of disgrace, he was reinstated and appointed to Beijing, where in 1610 he was baptized by Ricci. Li was the last of Ricci's scholar-official converts.¹² There is no indication in Ricci's report of Li's removal from office that it came as a result of a power struggle within the government. On the contrary, Ricci has nothing but praise for the Chinese civil service and its officials. There can be no doubt that Li was a man of extraordinary talents, and the reason for his dismissal speaks perhaps more to a lack of proper comportment in the

conduct of an official during this brief period than more serious charges. In any case, Chinese records make no mention of the incident.

Another well-known Jesuit missionary of that time, G. Aleni (1582-1649), gives the following dramatic description of Li's baptism in his *History of the Great European Matteo Ricci*:

I saw that Li Zhizao had a long-standing relationship with Matteo Ricci. Li was captivated by Ricci's talents and depth of learning. He consulted Ricci on everything and felt that Ricci's words of advice spoke to his heart. Whenever he failed to follow the advice given, he would regret it afterwards. When Li suddenly fell ill in Beijing and had no family there to care for him, Ricci stayed by his bed-side day and night ministering to his needs. As his illness grew worse, Li decided to write his final will and testament. He asked Ricci to serve as its executor. When Ricci suggested Li make up his mind about entering the Church, Li immediately consented and asked for baptism. He also left a large sum of money to the Church in his will. By the grace of God and His goodness, Li was completely cured of his illness.

Aleni also records the following moving incident that took place at the time of Ricci's death.¹³

On the occasion of Ricci's death, Li Zhizao was determined to have an elaborate wooden coffin made for his body. There was no way our long and many arguments could dissuade him. The coffin maker, in the meantime, was anxious to begin work right away, as he feared the body would decompose rapidly. Li then told him to take his time and use all the skills at his command, adding: "Father Ricci's corpse will not decay but remain incorrupt for a long time." After two days the coffin was complete and Ricci was buried. Many officials came to mourn his death and all spoke highly in praise of him.¹⁴

Li had great trust in Ricci's talents and judgment, and he also had a deep affection for him as a friend. It was partly this bond of friendship that led him so readily to accept baptism when Ricci suggested it as he faced death on his sick bed. But this incident also shows us how Catholic teaching is capable of moving a person to make momentous decisions in times of grave crises. There is no need to speak further here of the influence of Ricci's character on his friend Li Zhizao. The words he spoke at the time of Ricci's death stand as a testimony of Li's

regard for his moral integrity: "His corpse will remain incorrupt for a long time."

We must also note at this point that an additional reason why Li came to accept Christianity so readily was because of his Confucian background. It was his dedication to Confucian principles that supported his initial commitment to stand for the government examinations and those same Confucian ideals that motivated him in his distinguished career as a scholar-official. Professor Douglas Lancashire writes of the Confucianism of Li's time:

After several centuries of evolution, Confucianism had already completely idealized its religious elements. Although it had its own metaphysics, its function was, however, limited to the political and ethical fields.¹⁵

Confucianists as well as Buddhists and Christians, find their religious roots in their earliest origins.

Let us now turn to the writings of Alvarez de Semedo, who has much to tell us of Li Zhizao in his *History of the Great and Renowned Monarchy of China*.¹⁶ The first section of the last chapter of Alvarez de Semedo's *History* is entitled "The Life and Death of the Jinshi Scholar Li Zhizao". Here we find a selection of events from Li's life narrated with great enthusiasm and attention to detail. This section includes the story of Li's conversion to Christianity and, subsequently, how he used his influence as a government official in support of the Catholic missionaries. While he covers much of the same ground as Ricci's *China Notes and Collected Writings*, Alvarez de Semedo's version provides us with much more personal information.

Alvarez de Semedo notes in his brief biography how the Jesuit missionaries in their yearly written reports to their superior general in Rome always spoke highly of Li and his constant efforts to help to establish the Catholic Church in China. His personal example was an important factor in drawing several other Chinese scholar-officials to the Church, among them his own relative Yang Tingyun.

The origins of Li's conversion to Christianity can be traced back to the publication in Chinese of Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*. While reading this book, Li felt he was confronting for the first time certain fundamental and definitive

truths. What impressed him most about Catholic teaching was the balance it maintained between the mystical and the moral orders.¹⁷ Alvarez de Semedo insists that Li was a life-long enemy of superstition and idolatry in all its forms. Those who worshipped idols be they derived from Taoism, Buddhism or animism, were in Li's eyes suffering from self-delusion or just plain ignorance. He firmly believed that anyone who brought an open mind to the teachings and doctrines of Catholicism would naturally come to accept them. Not to would betray a definite lack of capacity for learning. He frequently asked the Jesuits to increase their output of translations of scientific and religious books into Chinese as a means of converting the Chinese scholars to the Catholic faith. Whenever the missionaries met with obstacles and even official persecution, both Li and Yang did all they could to intercede for them and protect them. In this they were motivated by the conviction that they were equal shareholders in the same faith. This same conviction is seen in Li's letter to the Portuguese Vice-provincial of the Jesuits, Mungnez Mascarengnas, urging him to send more missionaries to help in the conversion of China.¹⁸ And it was Li himself who petitioned the Emperor to allow the Jesuits to return from exile in Macau. Here, he was motivated in part perhaps by a desire to gain Portuguese help against Manchu military incursions across the northern Chinese border, but he was also sincere in his desire that the Jesuits return to China and to their translation of religious and scientific studies.

Alvarez de Semedo notes that at the time of his writing the number of books the Jesuits had already translated into Chinese was over 50. Few of these were to escape the careful editing of Li, who was also actively involved in translating, composing prefaces and appendices, and re-editing second or third editions. All this underlines the central role Li played in the introduction of new Western learning and Christian teaching into China during that time. It may be said that he contributed much more to this movement than anyone else who lived during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. And Li's *The Elements of Astronomy* (1629) is considered by many, including Fang Hao, to be a scientific classic deserving of lasting acclaim.¹⁹

While Alvarez de Semedo makes no specific mention of Li's loyalty and devotion to the Ming, we do know that he was second to none in the love he had for his country. He saw no

conflict between his patriotism and his eagerness to learn the new knowledge brought by the missionaries. Both Xu Guangqi and Li Zhizao were active promoters of Western knowledge and Catholicism during this early period in much the same way that the leaders of the May 4th movement promoted Western science and democracy 300 years later. In this we might say Li and Xu were men ahead of their time, and, indeed, along with Yang Tingyun, were precursors of modern Chinese culture.²⁰ Li is to be admired for his indefatigable pursuit of knowledge. Alvarez de Semedo tells us he was never seen without a book in his hand, even in his declining years when almost blind from near-sightedness, he could read only with great difficulty and pain.

There has been a revival of interest among scholars and researchers in these three founding fathers of Chinese Catholicism. In recent years a number of studies have focused on their part in the early cultural exchanges between China and the West. Although opinions on what motivated them to convert to Christianity are as numerous as the scholars themselves, it may be of some value to the reader to refer briefly to some of them here.

Nicholas Standaert in *Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China* says that Yang Tingyun was influenced greatly by the spirit of syncretism which prevailed in intellectual circles at the close of the Ming Dynasty. Yang "in his early years believed that a synthesis could be made between Buddhism and Confucianism. Later on he believed that the same kind of synthesis was possible with Confucian and Christian thought." We can say that Yang's conversion in large part was a result of Ricci's ability to demonstrate the compatibility of Catholicism with Confucian concepts.²¹ Years later when the Jesuits abandoned his policy of adaptation, we find few new converts among the Chinese scholar-officials. The French scholar J. Gernet states that after 1630 Catholicism held little interest for Chinese intellectuals, and Catholic and Confucian thought became more and more alienated from each other. Standaert disputes these findings of Gernet. Obviously the question needs further investigation and study before the matter can be resolved.²²

The German scholar Monika Ubelhor attributes Xu Guangqi's conversion in no small part to his Confucian background, particularly to the consistent Confucian insistence on personal virtue as the essential quality for leadership in

society.²³ Xu's conversion to Catholicism only enhanced his efforts to live out his life according to Confucian principles and his Christian faith helped him in no small measure to achieve his ideal of becoming a loyal scholar official. Much can be said for this opinion. Xu wrote in his *Essays on Logic* in 1616:

The practice of virtue must be promoted so that the Confucian doctrine of serving Heaven may be able to bring great benefits to our country and further advance the teachings of the Sage. Only in this way will Confucian principles be rightly understood and practiced.²⁴

Professor Willard J. Peterson of Princeton University, speaking at a Loyola University of Chicago's seminar celebrating Matteo Ricci's 400 Anniversary, had this to say about Yang, Li and Xu's conversion: "They discovered in the Catholic Church an ethical teaching that had extrinsic and universal value."²⁵ Obviously, Peterson's conclusion is based purely on reason, but given the world of human secular experience, we can see it does have a certain validity.

Australia's La Trobe University Professor, Paul A. Rule, contends that it was Matteo Ricci's explanations of Confucian teaching in light of Christianity that led to the conversion of all three scholar-officials. In his recently published *Confucius*, Rule argues that they came to believe that Catholicism could be an important ingredient in their efforts to restore traditional Confucianism to its pristine form and thus bring about needed moral reform during the waning years of the Ming Dynasty. Rule's observations are quite pertinent and worthy of attention.²⁶

What conclusions can be drawn from the above? I myself am of the opinion that any attempt to reduce the complexity of human, social and historical affairs to one or two elements is destined to fail, precisely because such explanations are bound to be incomplete.²⁷ Applying this principle to the conversion of Li Zhizao, it might be more prudent to advance a number of contributing factors rather than one specific theory. The following seem to me to be the key elements in Li's conversion:

1. Li's curiosity aroused by the new scientific knowledge which Ricci and his companions had brought to China from Europe;
2. Ricci's outstanding moral character and warm friend-

ship held a great attraction for Li and exerted a strong influence on his decision;

3. The prevailing syncretism of the times and Li's conviction that Catholicism offered new hope to contemporary Confucianism, correcting its deficiencies and returning it to its original purity;

4. Li was spurred on by the hope that the incursions of the Manchu armies across the northern border might be met by methods of Western technology and other resources and thereby resolve the crisis in China's favour.

It was the above reasons as well as Li's own personal choices that motivated him and led him to ask for baptism into the Catholic Church. These same reasons also enabled him to stand fast in the face of social criticism and political pressure, even to the point of risking personal danger when he came to the defense of the Jesuit missionaries during the times of persecution. The story of Li's conversion and the Jesuit missionaries' high regard for him are part of the history of the earliest Sino-Western cultural exchanges. As such, they play a key role in our broader understanding of those times. Li and the story of his conversion to Christianity deserve a page in the annals of a history that should not be misplaced nor forgotten.

Notes

NB: The author in preparing this paper owes a debt of gratitude to the following scholars: Loyola University's Professor Dai Wenbo who offered invaluable comments and historical documentation; Harvard's Professor Wu Wenjin and Taiwan University's Professor Gu Weiying who respectively offered rare historical documentation.

1. Fang Hao, *Famous Men in Chinese Catholic History*, The Catholic Truth Society, Hong Kong, 1967-73, Bk 1, pp. 99,112,135.
2. Fang Hao, *Studies on Li Zhizao*, The Taiwan Commercial Press, Taipei, 1966, pp. 5-7.
3. Wang Zhongmin, *Xu Guangqi Collection*, 2 volumes, Chinese Press, Beijing, 1963; Liang Jiamin, *Xu Guangqi Chronicles*, Shanghai Classics Press, Shanghai, 1981; *Xu Guangqi: Complete Translation*, 20 volumes, Shanghai Classics Press, Shanghai, 1983.
4. Ruan Yuan, *Famous Men of History*, Vol. 32, Sec. 4; Chen Yuan, *Li Zhizao in Western Zhejiang during the Ming, Debates and Discussions: Posthumous Writings; Li Zhizao and I: Memories*, The Ming Jing Shi Publications, Vol. 483-94; Li Rihua, *Varied Writings; Selected Writings of Li Zhizao*, see Fang Hao *Studies on Li Zhizao*, p. 52.
5. Li Zhizao, *Primer on Astronomy*, 6 volumes, Student Press, Taipei, 1965.
6. *Study on Li Zhizao*, p. 6.

7. *The Jinshi Candidate List for the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, The Huawen Press, Taipei, 1969, p. 1073.
 8. Semedo, Alvarez de, *The History of the Great and Renowned Monarchy of China*, London, 1655, p. 212. Further references to this work will be simply entitled: Semedo, *History of China*.
 9. Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583-1610* translated by Louis J. Gallagher, S.J., Random House, 1953, pp. xi-xv, xvii-xviii. Chinese version *Matteo Ricci China Notes*, 2 vol., compiled by He Gaozhai, Wang Zunzhong, Li Shenyi, He Zhaowu, The China Press, Beijing, 1983.
 10. Ricci, *China*, p. 398.
 11. op. cit., pp. 537-38.
 12. op. cit., pp. 454, 564, 567.
 13. *Collected Writings of the Westerner Matteo Ricci*, Shangzhiguan Translation Academy, Beijing, 1947, p. 19.
 14. op. cit., p. 20.
 15. Lancashire, Douglas, "Anti-Christian Polemics in Seventeenth Century China," *Church History*, Vol. 38., No. 2, June, 1969, p. 241.
 16. Semedo, *History of China*, p. 239. Part II, Chapter 13 heading: "The Life and Death of Doctor Leo (Li): and the Conclusion of this History."
 17. op. cit., p. 240.
 18. op. cit., pp. 242-43.
 19. op. cit., pp. 244-5; Fang Hao, *Study on Li Zhizao*, p. 131.
 20. See Min-sun Chen, "Hsü Kuangchi (1562-1633) and His Image of the West" in *Asia and the West: Encounters and Exchanges from the Age of Explorations (Essays in Honor of Donald F. Lach)*, ed. by Cyniac K. Pullapilly and Edwin J. Van Kley, Cross Culture Publications, Notre Dame, Ind., 1986, pp. 27-28, 36-40.
 21. Standaert, Nicholas., *Yang Tingyun: Confucian and Christian in Late Ming China*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1988, pp. 262-68. There is a Chinese translation of this book published by the Holy Spirit Study Centre, (Hong Kong, 1987).
 22. op. cit., p. 268. Paul A. Rule, cf. notes 24 and 27.
 23. See Paul A. Rule. Rule, Paul A., *K'ung-tzu or Confucius: the Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986, pp. 64, 257.
 24. Wang Zhongmin, *Writings of Xu Guangqi*, Vol. II, p. 432.
 25. Peterson, Willard J., "Why did They Become Christians? Yang Tingyun, Li Chih-tsao, and Hsü Kuang-chi", in Ronan, Charles E. and Oh, Bonnie B.C., *East Meets West: The Jesuits in China, 1582-1773*, Loyola University Press, Chicago, 1988, p. 147.
 26. Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius*, pp. 58-69.
 27. See, Gottschalk, Louis, *Understanding History*, 2nd ed., Alfred A. Knopf, 1969, pp. 221-62.
-