

21 Lê Quý Đôn: *Categorised Discourse from the Palace Library* (1773)

Introduced and translated by Yasmin Koppen

Introduction

Lê Quý Đôn 黎貴惇 (1726–1784) was a statesman, a polymath, and the most outstanding Confucian scholar of the late Later Lê dynasty 後黎朝 (1428–1788), an era that saw the Vietnamese realm divided between the Trịnh and Nguyễn lords.

Born to a scholarly family in Thái Bình Province 太平省, Lê Quý Đôn passed the imperial examination at the age of 27. From 1760 to 1762, he served as the ruler's envoy to Qing China; on his return, he became the director of the Privy Council (Xu Mật viện 樞密院). There, he tried to fight corruption, but found no favour with his lord. Consequently, he opted to retire, until the next ruler summoned him back to serve as prime minister. When he was himself accused of corruption, Lê Quý Đôn was forced to once again retire, this time in disgrace. He continued to write poetry, organised multiple encyclopaedias, and authored an enormous number of works on ancient scriptures and the Confucian classics (including translations). As a result, he is thought of as the key synthesiser of cultural and scientific knowledge in the Later Lê era. Aside from this text – the *Vân Đài Loại Ngữ* – his most famous works are the thirty-volume history of the Later Lê dynasty – the *Đại Việt Thông Sử* 大越通史 – and the *Phủ Biên Tạp Lục* 撫邊雜錄, a geography of the frontier territories of the southern realm (Đàng Trong 塘中) after the Trịnh invasion of the area in 1774. In 1784, his death at the age of 58 caused a short armistice in the then ongoing struggle between the Trịnh lords and the Tây Sơn rebels, and he was granted posthumous titles (*shihao* 諡號) to restore his honour.

The proponents of Later Lê Neo-Confucianism viewed themselves as rational and humane; they were confident that the entire universe could be known through reason. The scholars of the northern realm (Đàng Ngoài 唐外), which directly bordered China, successfully convinced the rulers of the limitations of Buddhism and Daoism and – in accordance with their own worldview – that these competing traditions propagated superstitions. The Later Lê dynasty's adoption of Chinese institutional (Neo-)Confucianism led to a golden age for this tradition. Neo-Confucian scholars emphasised metaphysics with the intention of generating a logical ethical philosophy that would replace religious cultivation.

The *Vân Đài Loại Ngữ* is considered the masterpiece of Lê Quý Đôn's philosophical writing. It is a set of encyclopaedias in which he collects, comments on, and criticises

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Chinese and older Vietnamese texts on philosophy, science, literature, and naturalism, grouped together under nine headings. Of these, the first two pertain to theoretical and material cosmology.

Here, it is often claimed that Lê Quý Đôn strongly adhered to the thinking of the Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). However, his views are actually closer to that of the Yan-Li School (*Yan-Li xuepai* 顏李學派) founded by Yan Yuan 顏元 (1635–1704). Yan famously criticised Zhu Xi's views on the relationship between *Li* (VN: *Ly*) 理 “principle” and *Qi* (VN: *Khi*) 氣 “essence”, and Zhu's premise that Heaven had existed before anything else. Instead, Yan stated that the heavenly principle (that is, nature) could not exist without essence (that is, its substance). In the same way, Lê Quý Đôn's chapter “On *Ly* and *Khi*” introduces this dualist concept, reiterating Neo-Confucian metaphysics, and asserts that all existence is filled with essence in the sense of a material force. Thus, the principle *Ly* also has to be within the essence *Khi*, instead of being opposed to it.

This chapter addresses observations from natural science – mostly basic physics – presented in the guise of metaphysics, to explain environmental realities, such as the stillness of earth as a moving object, while the ‘moving’ sky is actually the motionless space within which earth exists). These were ideas he would have been familiar with, given his education and his diplomatic mission to the Chinese Qing court, which was the latest likely point that he came into contact with the writings of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688), whom he explicitly references. Lê Quý Đôn describes scientific truths in terms¹ that his contemporaries were familiar with, and in accordance with what was considered true in his era (e.g., that illness was caused by vapours) to make them easier to understand. This can be seen in the deeply contradictory nature of the last paragraphs translated here, which rapidly switch between asserting and rejecting the existence of the spiritual – a reflection of the epistemological constrictions of his time.

Lê Quý Đôn relates Western learning (that is, the scientific method) to Confucian principles and meaning making. He ascribes humans with the ability to imagine and comprehend all that is “above” (not visible, not touchable), and to observe all that is “below” (visible, touchable). When he makes an argument about people who doubt anything they have not previously perceived and includes a quote stating that such behavior stems from ignorance, he does not argue in favour of gods and spirits, but rather in favour of observation and experientiality. Even as he cites religious figures like Muhammad, he does not refer to the content of their belief, but to their human feats. He is aware that no human can know everything, hence he suggests to rely on the expertise of others. Although his reliance on the expertise of former worthies occasionally led to questionable conclusions (like in regard to Buddhist transmigration), he firmly places everything in existence within the realm of human understanding.

I For example, *khi* transformation and the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行).

Changes in the environment are conditioned by (natural) laws, humans are able to understand such changeability – and adapt to it. Changeability and adaption became core principles associated with secularism by contemporary religious studies scholars like Trương Văn Chung (b. 1948).

Lê Quý Đôn focused on a rationalist and empirical approach to the understanding of the natural world. And although collecting empirical knowledge through careful observation and its systematic classification certainly resembles materialist methods of inquiry, his worldview was still shaped by the Confucian framework of thought, in which some metaphysical concepts, such as Qi or the Mandate of Heaven, cannot be reduced to purely materialist explanations. Unlike many of his predecessors, however, he eschewed reducing the needs of the people to the moral guidance of the emperor. Instead, Lê Quý Đôn concentrated in his publications on a realpolitik approach that emphasized the material needs of the people for the further development of the state. Thus, Lê Quý Đôn was not the paragon of Vietnamese enlightenment: he put too much trust in the effects of man on the universe, taking the Confucian concept of *gan-ying* 感應 (that is, the correlative resonance between heaven and earth) to an extreme, and he had too strong an interest in balancing the values and contributions that Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism (the Three Teachings) had made to society. The great feat of Lê Quý Đôn was to wrest agency away from the gods, ancestors, and Heaven, and transfer it to humanity: “Fate is controlled by humans. It cannot control humans. The principle of the unity between Heaven and humanity is nothing more than this . . .” With this statement, he made man and Heaven equals and freed humanity from their subjection to transcendental plans and meddling. In Vietnam’s Later Lê era, when common life was so immersed in spirituality, this was a true innovation.

Bibliographical Information

The translation given here is based on the edition in:

Huang Junjie 黃俊傑 and Nguyễn Kim Sơn 阮金山, ed. *Vân Đài Loại Ngữ* 芸臺類語. Research on East Asian Civilizations – East Asian Confucianism Materials Series 叢書系列東亞文明研究—東亞儒學資料叢書 7. Taipei: National Taiwan University Publishing Center, 2011; 1.8b–28a.

Page numbers given in square brackets refer to this edition.

It is based on the original text in Classical Chinese in the National Library of Vietnam (Thư viện Quốc gia Việt Nam):

Lê Quý Đôn. *Vân Đài Loại Ngữ* 芸臺類語. s.l. 1773, Library register: R.118.

The most authentic and complete edition is found at the Hán Nôm Institute, register A.141. There are two mostly complete facsimiles VHv.1169/1–4; VHv.1807/1–2; and three additional fragments. In Japan, there is one complete edition dated to 1777.

There are multiple translations into Vietnamese, for example:

Trần Danh Lâm and Phạm Trọng Huyền. *Vân Đài Loại Ngữ*. Translated by Phạm Vũ và Lê Hiền. Hồ Chí Minh City: Huệ Quang, 1972.

An excerpt in English can be found in:

Liam C. Kelley, trans. *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition*, edited by George Dutton, Jayne S. Werner and John K. Whitmore. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012; 170–74.

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Everything between Heaven and Earth is Essence (*khi*). Principle (*ly*) is that which is said to actually exist, it is not that which does not exist. Principles do not take on [p. 8a/8b] specific shapes, instead they manifest in the Essence. This means that they are *within* the Essence. Regarding Yin and Yang (*âm* 陰 and *dương* 陽), odd and even numbers, knowledge and conduct, form and function – these may be called pairs, but that does not apply to Principle and Essence.

The Great Ultimate (*taiji*, VN: *thái cực* 太極) is the whole. Primordial Vitality (*hunyuan*, VN: *hỗn nguyên* 混元) is the whole Essence.^I The whole spawned the two, the two spawned the four^{II} and from that spawned the ten thousand things, this is the wholeness of the Great Ultimate. The number of Đại Diên 大衍 is fifty,^{III} but one [stalk] is not used because it represents the Great Ultimate. If it did not exist, then why do so? Its opening and closing designates change, its endless coming and going designates passage. When it closes, there is nothing, when it opens, there is existence. When it leaves, there is nothing, when it comes, there is existence. Existence and non-existence alternately comply with the wholeness of humans and things. From ancient times to the present, it has never been different. From this it is clear that within the void, emptiness and nothingness, Vitality has such Principle.

Can existence be spawned from nothingness?

Heaven belongs to *Yang* and Earth belongs to *Yin*. *Yang* takes charge of movement, *Yin* takes charge of quiescence, this is called division. The function of Heaven [p. 8b/9a] is always movement, but its Substance (*ti*, VN: *thể* 體) is also never not still. The Substance of earth is always still, but its function is never not moving.^{IV} If heaven was not still, why would the four directions be stable and the sun, moon and the stars

I YK: These are metaphysical concepts relating to the abstraction of three stages of natural creation from the void, over emptiness, to nothingness, from which all that exists has come.

II YK: This is a reference to Yin and Yang and the Four (Cardinal) Directions, so an abstraction of the principles of life and the creation of space as a condition for the existence of lifeforms.

III YK: This refers to the ancient Chinese yarrowstalk divination.

IV YK: This sentence refers to the Neo-Confucian philosophical pair of Substance and Function (*dụng* 用). The Function describes the activity or stimulus response of the associated Substance and is commonly used to describe the two truths of a non-dual process: the Substance being the abstract poten-

stay attached to it? If earth was motionless, it would just be a lump-like object and life would practically cease! Heaven's form [thus] moves but its Essence is motionless, while the earth's form is still, but its Essence is moving . . .

[. . . p. 9b/10a]

Under the heaven and on top of the earth are all the winds and vapours. If in the vicinity of a person there appears to be no wind, it may actually be obstructed by all kinds of objects, or vital energies may actually be dispersing it. In somewhat high places, there are strong winds. In the highest heights, the wind will be the strongest, as well as hard and dry. Furthermore, if one digs up the ground at the foot of a mountain, going down about ten feet, initially the earth dug out of the ground will be soft and moist, but afterwards it will become [hard as] stone. Is it not the case that it hardens due to being exposed to the wind? When a child is still in the mother's belly, it is merely a lump of blood and placenta, once it is born, it becomes firm – this is the same Principle.

The Essence of Heaven descends and the Essence of earth ascends continuously. The Essences of Heaven and earth are the vital energy of everything, wind and vapours circulate among them at any time and there is no time of movement where it is like that or a time of stillness where it is not like that. [. . . p. 10a/10b]^V

[. . . p. 14a . . .]

These things can prove that heaven and humans are the same thing.^{VI}

[. . . p. 16b/17a]

When someone is asleep and you call out to them, they will wake up – this is the Essence summoning their spirit (shen, VN: *thần* 神). While asleep and dreaming, one can talk, move, become happy or angry, and after waking up, one might remember all of that, this is the spirit stirring its Essence. The spirit essence of humans is commonly like this, but the spirit essences of heaven and earth, extending all the way from the past to the present, circulating unceasingly, are unfathomable! Since antiquity the virtuous have said: Heaven knows, earth knows.

tial and the Function its manifestation. The abstract potential of the Substance is impermanent, but the Function is momentarily real.

V YK: The following pages 11a–15a treat natural phenomena like storms and the climate, but also astrology. Pages 12a–13b treat the influences that climate and geography have on the development of people or how the weather affects moods, although integrated into the system of Yin and Yang.

VI YK: Pages 14b–15a contain long quotations of mostly Chinese authors about the natural creation and expansion of the earth as they imagined it in their time. For example, there is a mathematical approximation of what the growth of the mythical first human Pangu 盤古 could have meant for the formation of land mass. Pages 15a–16a refer to ancient Chinese medical material like the *Huangdi Neijing Suwen* 黃帝內經素問 (~3rd century CE), treat the influence of the weather on the symptoms of diseases, and the author questions if disease is unfathomable or directed by Yin and Yang, the five phases of circulation and the six climatic influences. On page 16a–b, he returns to astronomy and meteorology.

The human mind is immense. Above, it can measure heaven and earth; in between, it can speculate on spirits and deities; below, it can examine the ten thousand things. The marvel of signs and numbers is dispersed among the form and essence. It comes into being from where it was not, and from where it is, it enters into where it is not.

Amid darkness declining into profound clarity, there is nothing but the Way. Only with the proper mind can one become aware of it. After becoming aware of the Way, one can recognise subtleties, after recognising subtleties, one can completely fathom the functions, after completely fathoming the functions, it is possible to attain authority. Consequently, fate is controlled by humans, [p. 17a/17b] it cannot control humans. The principle of the unity between Heaven and humanity is nothing more than this.^{VII}

[. . . p. 20a/20b . . .]

They did not know that all of this had simply been written by a fortune teller from the capital who had bought people's birth dates and profiles. By collecting them in advance, people could look themselves up to marvel at the results. The only thing true is that such vulgar literature has never been able to fully predict a person's wealth or poverty, longevity or premature death.^{VIII}

[. . . p. 23a/23b . . .]

[If] everyone's appearance, behaviour, actions and also everything one will possess and all career prospects are all predetermined, then there is nobody who achieves anything of their own accord.^{IX}

[. . . p. 23b/24a . . .]

Knowledgeable persons were aware of the past, they understood what events were to come and wrote it all down in books. To let later generations know about this, there must have been many unexpectedly accurate guesses among them. However, when speaking of the rulers of people, then one ought to maintain common sense, be cautious with common norms, and just not speak of auspicious signs and number divination, because that would feed into deceiving customs! Therefore, the Marquess Li

VII YK: Lê Quý Đôn quotes extensively from the *Classic of Changes* [the *Yijing* 易經], an ancient Chinese oracle book relevant for both Confucian and Daoist thinking. He also quotes Zhu Xi on the oneness of *Khi* between Heaven and humans. On page 19a–20b, he evaluates the traditions of fortune telling and ancestor worship and severely criticises the practice of using (fake) secret prediction books. He continues on a specific prediction book.

VIII YK: On pages 21a–22b, Lê Quý Đôn continues to investigate the history of predestination. Although he is not sure whether destiny exists or not, he claims that the knowledgeable people speak of destiny with laughter, while ordinary people are constantly seeking benefits and if they suffer in their pursuit, they blame fate because they do not sufficiently reflect upon themselves. He also points out how predictions of fate in history have been manipulated and contradicted. Up until page 23b, he gives several examples for tales about omens from Chinese and Vietnamese history. This leads him to the impression that if everything is predetermined, people are not free.

IX YK: He continues to quote the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) on how important destinies could be predictable through omens in nature. However, that leads him to conclude that this is actually due to the intelligence of mankind.

of Ye^X said: “Other people can all talk about the Mandate of Heaven,^{XI} but rulers and ministers should not talk about it,” this is the reason for that.

Within the realm, there is only one principle: people believe what they have often seen, and consequently doubt what they have not seen. Dai Kaizhi 戴凱之 of the Jin dynasty 晉朝 [265–420 CE] stated in his *Bamboo Manual* (*Zhupu* 竹譜) that “Heaven and earth are limitless and the number of the common people is immeasurable. What the people see and hear is the basis for the norms they can fathom, this is what they know, but how could this be sufficient? If the eyes and ears do not know of something, then it is said to not exist – would not that be ignorant?”

Yan Zhitui 顏之推 [531–591 CE] of the Qi dynasty 齊朝 [550–577 CE] stated in his *Family Instructions* (*Yanshi Jiaxun* 顏氏家訓): “Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty did not [. . . p. 24a/24b] believe that there was a glue for bow strings, Emperor Wencheng of the Wei dynasty did not believe in fire-resistant clothing, and when the Hu^{XII} people saw silk, they did not believe it was produced by insects that eat tree leaves and spit out silk. In former times in Jiangnan, they did not believe that there were tents that could hold one thousand people, and as for Hebei, they did not believe there were boats that could hold twenty thousand bushels (of commodities), all of this has been verified.” From this we can go on to say that from seeing alone one cannot know everything!

In my opinion, the sky above and the domains below have shapes and forms that may initially be bewildering and innumerable. If one ponders about them, this will just waste a lot of mental energy. If one tries to handle [them all] with words, it will be of no avail and just exhaust the lips and tongue. So, what to do if we generally hit the wall in our current attainment in learning, because the learning of the exemplary persons^{XIII} merely adheres to norms?

In former times, people said that sages came from the southern, northern, eastern and western seas whose mindsets were the same and whose principle was the same. The Muslim Mac Duc Na [that is, Muhammad] established his realm as a king during the first year of the Sui dynasty’s Kaihuang era [589–600 CE]. He created a calendar system and [p. 24b/25a] compiled a book about his investigations of astronomical phenomena. During the Ming Wanli era [1573–1619], Loi Ma Dan [Matteo Ricci], Nam Hoai

X YK: This is Li Bi 李泌 (722–789), a Daoist and gifted politician from the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) who gained fame through his immense influence as a personal advisor to four emperors and calming dangerous political turmoil multiple times.

XI YK: The Mandate of Heaven has been the main legitimizing instrument of the Chinese Empire since the Zhou dynasty (1045–711/256 BCE). It styles the emperor as the Son of Heaven, the only one able to speak Heaven’s will. If an emperor loses the Mandate of Heaven, wars and disasters ensue, giving a new man with the Mandate of Heaven the opportunity to ascend the throne.

XII YK: An old pejorative term referring to people from Central Asia or even South Asia.

XIII YK: *quán tǐ* 君子 is a Confucian term, describing someone with a high level of self-cultivation and not necessarily a nobleman, since Confucian learning was theoretically open to everyone.

Nhan [Ferdinand Verbiest], Ngai Nho Luoc [Giulio Aleni],^{xiv} and others from the Western Ocean Kingdom of Europe, entered China to talk endlessly about the boundless obscurity of heaven and earth, the establishment of calendar systems, and about many more things that the earlier Confucian scholars had not yet discovered. Although their language and script were different, they thoroughly understood [Confucian] means and principles^{xv} with their heart and minds. How was the ability and insight of their learning different from that within the Middle Kingdom?

The immortals [that is, Daoists, 仙家] talk about cultivating the body, Buddhists talk about cultivating the spirit. This is done by providing both the body and spirit with Essence. If Essence is gathered then the Way is achieved, if Essence is scattered, the Way cannot be achieved! Take the sun and moon as an example, the Daoists are like their body, the Buddhists are like their image. The body that moves in the sky may not necessarily be non-existent – the image that dissolves in the water is not necessarily non-existent. . . .^{xvi}

[. . . p. 25a/25b . . .] Buddhists works speak about saṃsāra [that is, the cycle of birth and death], but Confucian scholars usually do not believe in this. Be that as it may, people from the past to the present have indeed heard and seen so much [about this], which they published in records, that the sheer number is hard to contradict. Hence, it cannot be that this Principle does not exist.

Confucius said: “How abundantly do spiritual beings display the virtue they hold! If we look for them, we cannot see them, if we listen for them, we cannot hear them. In their vast abundance, they seem to be [. . . p. 25b/26a . . .] over the heads, and to all sides [of their worshippers].”^{xvii} But to talk about such officials of the underworld is preposterous – in short, it is nature that is profoundly mysterious and hard to describe. There is nothing more to this than the division of Yin and Yang that makes people unable to see and hear certain things. When it is time to make sacrifices to the gods and ancestors, spiritual beings arrive. Their bodies and souls may have been separated, but their spirits’ consciousness is still gathering. When Buddhist texts speak

XIV YK: Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688), and Giulio Aleni (1582–1649) were Jesuit missionaries who played key roles in facilitating scientific and cultural exchange between Europe and China.

XV YK: *ngĩa lí* 義理 refers to the concepts of righteousness and principle from Confucian metaphysics. Since both concepts are so important, after the thirteenth century, this pair of words became synonymous with Confucian learning itself.

XVI YK: Lê Quý Đôn goes on to quote ancient Chinese texts to ‘prove’ that the idea of transmigration was not invented by the Buddhists, but ultimately prefers to leave it at that and not discuss this further.

XVII YK: This is a referential quote of a somewhat longer passage in the *Doctrine of the Mean*. The author expects his audience to be very familiar with it and leaves out (allegedly) Confucius’ affirmation of the spirits’ existence and how they cause people to fast, dress up and engage in sacrifices, before the ‘vast abundance’ of them occurs locally.

about forming the body to be reborn, they are also just referring to this spirit consciousness.^{XVIII} The quintessence of the sun and the moon descends to become water and fire, the essence of water and fire ascends to become wind and thunder. How could the past and future wonders of the transformations between heaven and earth be fathomed, let alone those of men.^{XIX}

XVIII YK: In the Buddhist teaching, there is no soul to be reincarnated but there is something hard to grasp that affects the next life by karma, and this undescribed cause of effect is what Lê Quý Đôn identifies with his idea of spirit.

XIX YK: On pages 26b–28a, the author considers further ideas of the underworld and strange things. He criticises that these topics are not commonly discussed (among Confucians), since Confucius did not want to confuse scholars and therefore avoided to talk about spirits. In consequence, Confucians fail to guide the people in this regard. He rhetorically asks if there really are no strange things (that is, supernatural phenomena) and continues to explain that things in themselves are not strange, only the way people talk about them can make them strange. “Strangeness is in us, not in the strange thing,” and strangeness comes from the people being accustomed to the familiar and unnerved by what is unfamiliar. He concludes on page 28a that Confucius started to teach the people to resolve doubts and hesitations for exactly this reason.

