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The Stone-Eaters: Lithophagy and Scholarly Fantasies of Ascetic Diets in Late Imperial China

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This paper discusses lithophagy (i.e., the eating of stones), a common if not bizarre literary trope in late imperial China (ca. 1550–1800). Why were well-educated literati so keen on writing and circulating accounts of such a strange diet? This paper argues that lithophagy became an object of great symbolic importance to disaffected scholars, as this fascination had roots in Daoist hermetic and medical texts which emphasized the virtues of a “rustic” lifestyle with precepts that also implicated dietary practices. Such visions appealed to academics confronting the emergence of mercantilist trading practices and changing employment prospects, particularly during the massive expansion of the imperial civil service examinations during the late imperial period. A life of officialdom became increasingly tenuous even among literate populations, and this resulted in a renunciation of worldly habits among many disenfranchised literati. There was a corresponding shift in the objectives of literati identity from classical cultivation to eccentricity. Lithophagy represented an extension of this zeitgeist, for Daoist self-cultivation offered the fantasy of physical immortality, which contrasted with immortality by scholastic reputation, a more “traditional” aspiration under neo-Confucian orthodoxy. Lithophagy therefore represented an extreme yet idealistic embodiment of this subculture that privileged self-cultivation over worldly pursuits.

Short Biography

Brian S-K Li is an MPhil student in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge. He holds an AB in Comparative Literature from Princeton University. He is broadly interested in the intersections of early science and medicine with literature and rhetoric.

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E-mail

bsli@alumni.princeton.edu

Affiliation

University of Cambridge

Position

Postgraduate student

Primary author: Brian Li

Presenter: Brian Li

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