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HERESY AND PERSECUTION IN LATE MING SOCIETY: REINTERPRETING THE CASE OF LI ZHI¹

Jin Jiang

One of the most controversial, and perhaps most misunderstood, figures in late imperial China is the late-Ming intellectual Li Zhi (1527–1602). Li Zhi lived the latter part of his life, and at the end died, in conflict, controversy, and persecution. His radical ideas, dramatic writing style, and unconventional life which ended in suicide in imperial jail made him a figure of great controversy and a ready-made symbol for people with various convictions. During the four hundred years since his death Li Zhi has remained as controversial, and his books have been constantly banned and yet reprinted.² Politicians and intellectuals alike have tended to use Li Zhi as a symbol for one thing or another.³ Modern scholars have shown a similar tendency, taking him as symbol and making him martyr for various causes of their own convictions. They all, however, deem that Li Zhi's radical ideas were the cause of his persecution.

The intellectual historian Hou Wailu of the People's Republic of China argues, using a Marxist analysis, that Li Zhi represented the interests of a

¹ I am most grateful to Cynthia Brokaw who has so generously spent time and energy reading and commenting on many drafts of this article. Her criticism and suggestions for revision have been most valuable in the shaping of my main arguments. I also like to thank Harold Kahn for whose seminar this paper was first produced; and P. J. Ivanhoe for reading and editing drafts of this article, for many discussions on the topic, and for his unfailing support along the way. Thanks are also due to the two anonymous reviewers whose suggestions helped me to make my main points clearer in the final version.

² For information about the official bans of Li Zhi's work during the late Ming and Qing periods, see Yao Jinyuan (*ju ren* 1843), *Qing dai jin hui shu mu buyi* (A bibliography of banned books in the Qing and its addendum), Shanghai: Commercial Publishing House, 1957. Also see Ji Yun (1724–1805), *Qinding siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* (Annotated general catalog of the complete library of the four treasures commissioned by the Qianlong Emperor).

³ Modern scholars have studied the fascinating phenomenon of various symbolic uses of Li Zhi in the past and in the People's Republic of China. These studies include Pei-kai Cheng, "Continuities in Chinese Political Culture: Interpretations of Li Zhi, Past and Present," *Chinese Studies in History*, 17:2, 1983–84 (New York: M. E. Sharpe.); Hok-lam Chan, 1980, *Li Chih (1527–1602) in Contemporary Historiography* (New York: M. E. Sharpe); and Wilfried Spaar, 1984, *Die kritische Philosophie des Li Zhi und ihre politische Rezeption in der Volksrepublik China* (Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden). Also see Wolfgang Franke, 1988, *An Introduction to the Sources of Ming History* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaysia Press).

newly rising urban bourgeois class against feudal rule and that his oppression by the feudal state was inevitable.⁴ From a similar background of Marxist history, the Japanese scholar Shimada Kenji views Li Zhi as “the last and greatest thinker and writer of the left wing of the Wang Yangming school.”⁵ He deems that Li’s cultural criticism of the Confucian moral authoritarianism and orthodox tradition from a position of modern rationalism based on Wang Yangming’s concept of pure learning (*liangzhi*) provoked official oppression, which caused a setback of the early development of the modern mode of thinking in China.⁶ K. C. Hsiao, the Chinese American scholar, praises Li Zhi as “a willing martyr” who died “for intellectual independence.”⁷ The Columbia University historian William Theodore de Bary contends that Li Zhi was an individualist who “died for his own convictions, not necessarily in the cause of intellectual freedom for all.”⁸ For de Bary, it was Li Zhi’s scholarship on history, underlined by his individualism, that made him a true heretic to the Ming state.⁹

More recently, Ray Huang saves Li Zhi from being a martyr for various political causes. He wrote: “The historical classification of Li Zhi as a ‘martyr’ is at best dubious. When he cut his throat with a razor blade in prison in 1602 he left no perceivable course for his admirers to follow.”¹⁰ But, like others, he too believes that Li’s dangerous ideas were the cause of his persecution. After a brief discussion on how “the school of the mind tended to endanger Confucianism as an established institution” and hence “must be regarded as a serious threat to our empire,” Huang contends: “Even though [Li Zhi] was later arrested on charges of immoral and disorderly conduct, during his trial those alleged offenses, fundamentally personal and therefore less damaging to the public, were never seriously considered. The trial judge was more concerned with his publication.”¹¹ Thus, Huang returns to the conventional

⁴ See Hou Wailu, 1960, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi* (A comprehensive history of Chinese thought), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 4:B.

⁵ Shimada Kenji, 1962, “Li Zhi.” In Shimonaka Kunihiko, ed., *Ajia rekishi jiten* (Asian history dictionary.) Tokyo: Heibunsha, 9:211.

⁶ For Shimada Kenji’s thorough discussion of Li Zhi and the Taizhou school, see his *Chūgoku ni okeru kindai shii no zasetsu* (The setback of modern thinking in China), Tokyo: Chikuma, 1970.

⁷ K. C. Hsiao, “Li Chih.” Goodrich & Fang, 1976, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, 1368–1644 (New York: Columbia University Press), 807–818.

⁸ William Theodore de Bary, 1970, “Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought.” De Bary, ed., *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press).

⁹ After a discussion on how Li Zhi reevaluated historical personages in his *A book to hide away* (Cangshu), de Bary writes: “Thus the scholarship which not long before had been deprecated within the Wang Yangming school has reappeared to haunt those who believed that morality could dispense with culture. It was precisely his scholarship and his extensive use of history that made Li a more formidable antagonist, and at the same time a seemingly more traitorous and treacherous one, than any ordinary bonze could have been.” de Bary, 1970, 203.

¹⁰ Ray Huang, 1988, *1587, A Year of No Significance* (New Heaven: Yale University Press), 189.

¹¹ Huang, 204–205.

view that Li Zhi's case was representative of the Wang Yangming school of thought and its downfall in the seventeenth century.

While modern studies of Li Zhi have been immensely interesting and fruitful, this article offers a different kind of reading of Li Zhi's case. As much as Li Zhi's ideas and their significance in intellectual history remain a valuable topic, my primary interest here is to get closer to the historical Li Zhi and late-Ming society by reconstructing a flux of local events that informed Li's development and articulation of his ideas as well as led to his persecution.¹² The place was Macheng, in modern Hubei province, where Li Zhi dwelled for about twenty years. Those were the crucial years when Li Zhi was deeply involved in local conflict, published most of his works, developed his most radical ideas, and established himself as a center of intellectual controversy. From a close reading of the contemporary text *and* context of Li's time, a different picture begins to emerge. I argue that Li Zhi's central intellectual theme concerned the primacy of following one's authentic moral self. Li's ideas developed along this theme, though impressive and radical, did not go beyond the limits of the Wang Yangming school of thought. What singled out Li Zhi from numerous radical late-Ming thinkers for fame or for hatred was his unconventional social behavior. I argue that Li's heteropraxy, legitimated by his theory of authentic moral self but not the theory itself, was the immediate and primary cause of his persecution. Moreover, Li's persecution was essentially local. These arguments shall reshape our understanding of the thinker, his ideas, and his environs. They shall also cast doubts on the implication by previous studies that the late-Ming state left little room for literati to pursue independence of the mind while conforming to the suggestion that autonomy from the state was a trait of late-Ming literati culture.¹³

¹² Jean-Francois Billetier has conducted a sociological study of Li Zhi, his life and thought up to 1590. Perhaps because he stops at 1590 the author does not deal with Li's persecution as an integral part of his life story and the development of his ideas. See Jean Billetier, 1979, *Li Zhi, philosophe maudit (1527–1602): Contribution a une sociologie du mandarinat chinois a la fin de Ming* (Geneva and Paris: Libraire Droz.). For a summary in English, see Wolfgang Franke, "Some new publications and materials on Li Zhi." *Oriens Extremus* (Herousgegeben von Roland Schneider, Hans Stumpfheldt, Klaus Wenk), January 29, 1982: 137–147.

¹³ De Bary and Yu Yingshi, for example, both argued for such literati autonomy that allowed the development of intellectual movements such as the Taizhou school and the Donglin school. From a different angle, Cynthia Brokaw also suggested a rather loose ideological and local control in the late-Ming period that appeared to become tightened during the Qing period. See de Bary, 1983, *The Liberal Tradition in China* (New York: Columbia University Press), Yu Yingshi, 1987, *Zhongguo sixiang chuantong de xiandai quanshi* (Contemporary Interpretations of the Chinese Intellectual Tradition), Taipei: Liangjing Chubanshe), and Cynthia Brokaw, 1991, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

The incident

On a winter day in the twenty-eighth year of the reign of the Wanli emperor (1600), a small incident occurred in Macheng county in Huguang province (modern Hubei and Hunan). A mob traveled about nine miles from the county seat, Macheng, and stormed the Cloister of the Iris Buddha (Zhifuo Yuan). Their target was an old man named Li Zhi. The mob not only burned down Li Zhi's residence in the temple, but also destroyed the pagoda behind the main buildings in which Li Zhi had planned to have his bones buried after his death. Fortunately, Li Zhi heard about the mob beforehand and was able to flee. The Cloister of the Iris Buddha was located on the north shore of Dragon Lake east of the Macheng county seat. Macheng county was in a mountainous area on the borders of Huguang and Henan. Li Zhi probably rode in a simple sedan-chair when he secretly departed. The journey must have been hard on him, for he was almost seventy four. He had to cross several snow-covered mountains before arriving at another Buddhist temple in Mount Huangbo, over thirty miles northeast of Macheng. Monk Wunian, Li's friend and the former abbot of the Cloister of the Iris Buddha, had established the temple sometime earlier and was in charge of it. Li's new refuge was out of Macheng's jurisdiction, since it was within the borders of Shangcheng county, Henan province. For the time being, Li Zhi was safe. He soon resumed his study on *The Book of Changes (Yi jing)* in the quietness of a winter season amidst the wild mountains.

Meanwhile, Ma Jinglun (*jinshi* 1589), Li's good friend who lived in Tongzhou county, which was about thirteen miles from Beijing, was on his way south to help the old man. Ma was once an attendant censor at the court but was later degraded to commoner status because he offended the Wanli Emperor with a memorial admonishing the Emperor to behave in accordance with the good of society.¹⁴ Traveling about eight hundred miles in the snow, Ma reached Mount Huangbo the following spring. He took Li Zhi back with him to his home in Tongzhou. In the following year, Li Zhi lived a peaceful life and was well provided for, thanks to his loyal friend Ma Jinglun.¹⁵

Li Zhi was very sick at the time, suffering from asthma and digestive problems. He sensed that the end was near and secretly awaited his destiny to come. In the second month of the thirtieth year of the Wanli reign (1602) he wrote his will, in which he described the funeral he desired in painstaking detail.¹⁶ Despite his poor health, Li managed to finish up a final revision of

¹⁴ See Ma's biography in Zhang Tingyu, *Ming shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), 234:6104–6106.

¹⁵ For more details of Li's sojourn in Tongzhou, see Li Zhi, *Xu Fenshu*, v. 2, 4, and 5.

¹⁶ Li Zhi, "Li Zhuowu xianshen yiyuan" (The will of Li Zhi). Li Zhi, *Xu Fenshu*, 4:96.

his commentary on *The Book of Changes* entitled *The Ninth Revision of the Inner Logic of the Book of Changes (Jiuzheng Yi yin)*. Li considered this book the highest scholarly achievement of his life. Having completed this work, he could now die in peace. On the fifteenth day of the third month imperial guards came and arrested him on the Emperor's order.¹⁷

Li's arrest was precipitated by a censor named Zhang Wenda (*jinshi* 1583), who had submitted a memorial to the emperor accusing Li Zhi of three acts of misconduct. Li Zhi was said to be guilty of writing and circulating books whose unorthodox evaluation of historical personalities confused people's minds. Li Zhi was also accused of living a licentious life, consorting with prostitutes, and seducing the daughters of local gentry families with his teachings when he resided in Macheng. Moreover, Zhang charged that Li Zhi, a scholar-official in the prime of his life, shaved his head in his later years and thus failed in observing the family rules of Confucius (*Kongzi jiafa*) by defiling himself with Buddhism. Zhang finally recommended that Li Zhi be sent back to his native town, Jinjiang in Quanzhou prefecture, Fujian province, and put under the surveillance of local officials. The Wanli Emperor quickly ordered Li Zhi arrested and his books burned. Li Zhi was immediately taken to the capital.¹⁸ One day in jail, while waiting for the Emperor's final decision, Li asked for a hair-cut. He then seized the barber's razor and cut his own throat. When the prison guard asked him why he did this to himself, unable to speak, Li Zhi asked for a piece of paper and wrote: "What can a man over seventy do?" After two days, he died in prison, at the age of seventy five.¹⁹

Ma Jinglun's account and beyond

Among Li Zhi's many friends, Ma Jinglun appears to have been the only one who protested Li's persecution in a loud and clear voice. During the time when Li was jailed, Ma wrote many letters to various people who he thought might influence the case. These letters provide important sources for the present study.

In these letters, Ma strongly petitioned the officials on the basis that the allegations against Li were false. According to Ma, Li was simply a victim of grievances between some local gentry families, and the court was misled by

¹⁷ *Ming Shenzong shilu* (Official record of Emperor Shenzong of Ming Dynasty), 369:11–12. Also see Yuan Zhongdao, "Li Wenling zhuan" (A biography of Li Zhi). Li Zhi, *Fenshu*, 3–7.

¹⁸ *Ming Shenzong shilu* (Official record of Emperor Shenzong of Ming Dynasty), 369:11–12.

¹⁹ See Yuan Zhongdao, "Li Wenling zhuan" (Biography of Li Zhi). Li Zhi, *Fenshu*, 3–7. The *Shilu* simply says that Li feared [the consequence] of his own offense and starved himself to death in the prison. See *Ming Shenzong shilu* (Official record of Emperor Shenzong of Ming Dynasty), 369:11–12. In both versions, however, Li Zhi killed himself in imperial prison.

false accusations made by certain biased Macheng gentry. Ma argued forcefully that it was ridiculous to accuse an old, sick, and dying seventy-five year-old man of seducing the daughters of gentry families. He pointed out that one so-called “daughter of a gentry family of Macheng” actually referred to the widowed daughter of Mei Guozhen (*jinsshi* 1583), a high-ranking field official and a prominent member of the Macheng gentry. “The intent of these gentry-scholars of Macheng was to allude to the bad reputation of promiscuous monks and nuns²⁰ in order to slander the Mei family and thereby damage Mei’s official career.”²¹ In another letter to a different court official, Ma explained that Li Zhi was not at all like what people said he was. What people in Beijing heard were words from the mouths of the jealous gentry in Macheng. False accusations spread so widely that people now took them as unvarnished truth.²²

How should we regard Ma Jinglun’s account? From all available sources, Ma appears to have been a person of integrity and courage. We have no reason to doubt the truth of his account. In addition, Mei Guozhen’s own writings also hint at his being involved in some local conflicts. In an essay written at the departure of the Macheng magistrate Liu Wenqi, who governed Macheng shortly after the Li Zhi incident, Mei Guozhen angrily blamed Liu’s predecessors for misgoverning the county and held them responsible for the increasing number of quarrels and excessive amount of litigation. Mei painfully pointed out that when he visited his hometown in 1601, shortly after the violence against Li Zhi occurred, the atmosphere was so nasty that even small children knew how to accuse others. In his preface to Li Zhi’s *A book to hide away* Mei lamented: “I am far inferior to the old bold man [Li Zhi], but I resemble him in that we do not get along with the world.”²³ There can be no doubt that Mei was deeply upset with what had happened to Li and his own family in Macheng.²⁴ We shall return to this topic after we have learned more about local politics.

On the other hand, we have to remember that Ma Jinglun was writing to petition the officials on Li Zhi’s behalf. To emphasize personal grievances in the motivation of Li Zhi’s accusers could have considerably undermined the reliability and legitimacy of the accusation against Li Zhi. Thus, Ma may very

²⁰ In Chinese folk culture, there was a cynical view about how strict monks and nuns followed the Buddhist rule of sexual asceticism.

²¹ Ma Jinglun, “Yu dangdao shu” (A Letter to the Official in Charge), 2. Pan, 4:21b–22a, 272–73.

²² Ma, “Yu Li Lingye Dujian zhuan shang Xiao Sikou” (A Letter to Li Lingye to be Transferred to Minister Xiao), Pan, 4:24a, 277.

²³ Mei Guozhen, “Cangshu xu” (Preface to *A book to hide away*). Fujianshen Li Zhi zhuzuo zhushizu Fuzhou xiaozu, 1975, ed., *Li Zhi zhuzuo xuba ziliao huibian* (A collection of prefaces and introductions to Li Zhi’s works. Fuzhou), 2.

²⁴ Mei Guozhen, “Song yihou Liu Yibai (Liu Wenqi) rijing xu” (An Essay to Send off Magistrate Liu Yibai to the capital at His Promotion). Yu Jinfang, *Macheng xianzhi* (Macheng Gazetteer. Taipei: chengwen chuban she. 1975, reprint), 7:8a, 477.

well have exaggerated the role of personal grievances that had little to do with Li Zhi himself and been less concerned with telling the whole story. In order to fully understand the nature of the local conflict which resulted in Li Zhi's persecution, we need to go beyond Ma Jinglun's account and look at some indirectly related, but no less important, events.

Evidence shows, contrary to Ma's claim that Li was only the victim of a conspiracy directed against someone else, that Li Zhi actually played an active part in the conflicts from the very beginning, and that Ma's account of local gentry conflicts was only part of a larger story. The 1600 incident was not the first instance of violence against Li Zhi. There had been at least two previous occasions when Li was harassed. The first occurred around 1591 in the provincial capital Wuchang when Li Zhi and his friend Yuan Hongdao (*jinsshi* 1586) were touring the famous Pavilion of the Yellow Crane. Li Zhi was dragged out of the Pavilion by a mob of local gentry because he had shaved his head like a monk but was wearing a traditional Confucian gown.²⁵ On the second occasion, Li was openly threatened with expulsion from Macheng by a general surveillance circuit censor by the surname of Shi who was on an inspection tour to Macheng in 1596.²⁶ Both incidents had to do with Li Zhi's quarrel with Geng Dingxiang (1524–1596, *jinsshi* 1557), a Macheng-Huang'an²⁷ native and a high court official. The relationship between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang is for many reasons particularly interesting to us, for it reveals not only key causes of Li Zhi's persecution but also the particular context within which Li Zhi produced his most radical ideas.

Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang

One ancestor of the Geng family was a retainer of Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming dynasty. The family had maintained a moderate standard of living but had not produced any degree holders until the generation of Dingxiang. Dingxiang was the eldest among the four Geng brothers. Both Dingxiang and the third brother, Dingli, passed the metropolitan examination and became vice ministers at court. Dinglii,²⁸ the second brother, quit the pursuit of an official career after he failed a provincial exam and instead became well-known for his intellectual endeavors.

²⁵ See Rong Zhaozu, 1937, *Li Zhuowu ping zhuan* (Biography of Li Zhi. Shanghai: Commercial Publishing House). Also see Li Zhi, "Da Zhou Youshan shu" (A reply to Zhou Sijing). Li Zhi, *Fenshu*, 2:47.

²⁶ See Li Zhi, *Xu Fenshu*, 1:13–25.

²⁷ Huang'an county was established in the middle of the reign of the Jiajing Emperor by combining parts of Macheng, Huangpi, and Huanggang. Geng Dingxiang was one of the founding fathers and spiritual leaders of this new county. He was, moreover, the author of the original county gazetteer which has been incorporated into later versions. See *Huang'an xianzhi* (Huang'an Gazetteer).

²⁸ I romanize the name of the second Geng brother "Dinglii" to distinguish his name from that of the third brother, "Dingli". The characters are both read "li" but the tones are different.

In his early years, experiencing the hardship of *corvée* labor imposed on commoner families such as his, Dingxiang was determined to succeed in the civil service examinations.²⁹ While Dingxiang was working diligently on his scholar-official career, his second brother Dinglii, much disturbed by a personal crisis concerning the fundamentals of life and death, found truth in the teachings of Wang Yangming and Chan Buddhism. It was Dinglii who turned Dingxiang to Wang Yangming. Dingxiang's conversion occurred in 1557, when he passed the metropolitan examination and made a glorious home-coming trip with the title of "His Majesty's personal representative in Huguang province to announce imperial decrees." Returning home as a rising star at court and received with great honor by local society, Dingxiang was surprised to find Dinglii committing himself to something apparently more fundamentally important than success in the civil service. Dingxiang therefore began to adopt Wang Yangming's ideas and to meet with Wang's followers. Before long, Dingxiang began to criticize the dogmatism he saw in the contemporary Zhu Xi school of thought from the point of view of Wang Yangming's doctrine of pure knowing (*liangzhi*).³⁰ Within a few years Dingxiang emerged as a leader of the Wang Yangming school in central China.

Thanks to Dingxiang's political influence and his organizational talent, Wang Yangming's thought flourished in the Hubei area. Under the leadership of the Geng brothers, many academies were set up in the area, and public discussions (*jiangxue*)³¹ elaborating Wang Yangming's interpretations of the Way of the sages became popular. In 1566, when serving as the education intendant in Nanjing, Geng Dingxiang established the Academy for the Veneration of Literature (Chongwen shuyuan) and appointed his student Jiao Hong (*jinshi* 1589) head of the academy. The Geng brothers' activities attracted many disciples and friends, including He Xinyin (1517–1579)³² and Li Zhi.

The same year, Li Zhi, then thirty nine, buried his father and his grandparents in Quanzhou and, taking his family with him, returned to Beijing. He was appointed office manager at the Ministry of Rites.³³ It was at this time that Li

²⁹ Ming law allowed the degree-holders and their families to be exempted from state *corvée*.

³⁰ Chi Shengchang has a fuller discussion on Geng's conversion to the Wang school. See Chi, *Geng Dingxiang yu Taizhou xuepai* (Geng Dingxiang and the Taizhou school). Unpublished Master's thesis, Taiwan Normal University. Taipei: 1990, 23–25.

³¹ *Jiangxue* were public and semi-public meetings for lecturing and discussing in Confucian philosophy.

³² For a brief introduction to He Xinyin, see Wu Pei-yi and Julia Ching's biography in Goodrich and Fang, 513–515. Also see de Bary, 1970.

³³ Li Zhi was from a commoner family in Jinjiang, Fujian. He passed the provincial examination in 1552 and entered an official career in 1555 without further pursuing the *jinshi* degree. His official career was of limited success, due partially to frequent interruptions caused by the deaths of his father and grandfather and perhaps his lack of the *jinshi* degree. For details of Li Zhi's early life and official career see Rong Zhaozu's biography of Li Zhi.

Zhi was introduced to the Taizhou school of Wang Yangming thought by his colleague Xu Yongjian (1528–1611). For the next five years, since his responsibilities as an office manager at the Ministry of Rites were light, Li Zhi was able to immerse himself in the learning of the Way.

Li Zhi's introduction to the Geng brothers appears to have been another turning point in his life. Li Zhi first met Dinglii when Li attended a public discussion in Nanjing in 1572, and he became immediately attracted to Dinglii. For the next five years, while serving as office manager at the Ministry of Justice in Nanjing, Li Zhi became an active member of the club, participating in public discussions and forging friendships with a circle of literati friends around the Geng brothers and Jiao Hong.

In 1577, Li Zhi was promoted to the position of Prefect of Yaoan in Yunnan province. On his way to Yaoan, he paid a visit to the Geng brothers at Huang'an. Dingxiang was at home observing a period of mourning. Li Zhi thought of giving up his position in Yunnan and his civil service career together so he could spend time with the Geng brothers. But Dinglii advised him to take the post, for the sake of Li's family. After serving a term of three years in Yaoan, Li Zhi decided to retire early from his official career. Instead of going back to his hometown in Fujian, he went back to Huang'an to live with the Geng family. Dinglii, however, died in the summer of 1584. At the same time, Dingxiang was recalled and appointed Vice Censor-in-Chief of the Censorate. The third brother of the family, Dingli, had passed the metropolitan examination in 1571 and probably was also away on official assignment.

It was at this point that the conflict between Li Zhi and Dingxiang began. The conflict was precipitated by the issue of the education of the Geng children. Dingxiang was unhappy about what he perceived to be Li Zhi's personal inclination to forsake his duty to his own family and native place, and was worried that Li Zhi's example would have a negative influence on the children of the Geng family. Dingxiang felt uneasy about leaving Li Zhi there to assume so much responsibility in the guidance of the younger generation, while he and Dingli were away to attend official duties. In his letters home, Dingxiang cautioned Li Zhi about the message he was transmitting to the young, through his words and personal example.³⁴ The two men began to criticize one another in private circles of friends and disciples. The next year Li Zhi moved out of the Gengs' household and took up residence in Macheng.

³⁴ Geng Dingxiang, 1598, *Geng Tiantai xiansheng wenji* (A collection of works of Geng Dingxiang). Taipei: Wenhai chuban she. 1970, reprint, 3:58a, 359. Li Zhi, "Da Geng Sikou" (A reply to Minister Geng), *Fenshu*, 1:28. Also see Yuan Zhongdao, "Li Wenling zhuan" (Biography of Li Zhi), in Li Zhi, *Fenshu*, 3–7.

The argument

Our sources about the argument between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang are mainly the letters between them and their exchanges with a few mutual acquaintances. The two men argued on two issues of great concern to Wang Yangming's followers: what was the *Dao* (the great Way) and what was the proper method to pursue it. For Dingxiang, the Confucian virtues of loyalty (*zhong*) and filial piety (*xiao*) constituted the fundamentals of the Way that one had to follow sincerely in action and elaborate effectively through public discussion. Li Zhi, on the other hand, emphasized cultivation of an authentic moral self for which moral codes such as loyalty and filial piety were vehicles.

The argument between the two men reflects an ongoing debate within the Wang Yangming camp in general and the Taizhou school in particular. The main issue was Wang Yangming's doctrine of "the extension of pure knowing" (*zhi liangzhi*). Wang Yangming taught that *liangzhi* (pure knowing) is the original state of the mind which, as Wing-tsit Chan puts it, "naturally knows the principle of filial piety, for example, when one sees one's parents, and naturally extends it into action."³⁵ This leads to Wang's philosophy of the unity of knowledge and action (*zhixing heyi*), which identifies the pure knowing and the natural extension of it in action as one and the same. As P. J. Ivanhoe puts it, pure knowing, truthfully reflecting the situation at hand like a mirror, will "constitute the beginning of action, and the action it initiates will be the morally correct response to the situation at hand."³⁶ Moreover, this original moral mind is there within everyone. In fact, commoners may be better off than those who are learned, for without artificial efforts their pure knowing naturally manifests itself in their daily lives, in the five human relations. As the virtues of the five human relations are taken as necessary manifestations of the original mind in Wang Yangming's teaching, the question then becomes whether these manifestations should be codified into a set of standard moral practices for everyone to follow, or should people concentrate on cultivating the original mind, out of which virtuous practice will naturally flow, Geng Dingxiang endorsed the first proposition and Li Zhi the second.

Like Wang Yangming, Li denied that there is a fixed set of practices that constitutes loyalty and filial piety; he instead emphasized spontaneous actions accordant with true moral feelings. For him, the rebel heroes in the novel

³⁵ Wing-tsit Chan, 1963, trans & ed., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 656. Also see Chan's translation of Wang's "Inquiry of the Great Learning" in the same book.

³⁶ P. J. Ivanhoe, 1990, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholarly Press), 82. Also see Tu Weiming, 1979, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

The Water Margin, not moralists like Geng Dingxiang and his students, embodied loyalty and filial piety. In his marginalia to *The Water Margin*, Li time and again praised rebel heroes such as Li Kui and Song Jiang as being truly loyal and filial because they had a heart for their friends, parents, and the emperor and did whatever they could for them.³⁷ Li Zhi was, in contrast, angry with Geng Dingxiang for his failure to use his influence in the court to save the life of his friend He Xinyin. For Li Zhi, Geng betrayed his friend no matter how he preached the virtue of loyalty.³⁸

For Li Zhi, therefore, it is clear that one should focus on the cultivation of one's authentic moral mind, not a fixed set of moral practices. Li argued that things like filial piety are taught at the first stage of learning, before the age of fifteen; the truly subtle and deep learning of the sages lies in "illuminating the bright virtue" (*ming ming de*).³⁹ Public discussion should concentrate on the true meaning of "illuminating the bright virtue" as discussed in the *Great Learning*, not on simple teachings of filial piety as represented in texts like the *Duties of Juniors* (*Dizi zhi*).

Geng Dingxiang, also following Wang Yangming's teaching, emphasized normalcy and common sense as the true Way, and filial piety as one and the same as "illuminating the bright virtue." For Dingxiang, the virtues of the five human relations, most importantly loyalty and filial piety, are the rules of the sages. Yes, everyone can be a sage—if one manifests the virtues of the five relations. He said, "your [Li Zhi's] so-called 'illuminating the bright virtue' is to understand and appreciate the wisdom and subtlety of absolute quietness. I, however, take 'illuminating the bright virtue' as referring to a more common sense meaning, as stemming from the root and heart of being a son, a subject, a younger brother, and a friend."⁴⁰ Dingxiang pointed out that Li Zhi had a tendency of mixing Confucian teachings with Buddhist mysticism. Li Zhi, however, saw nothing wrong in this approach. To him, there is only one authentic moral self. Confucianism has offered the best approach, yet all three teachings—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—lead toward the same end.⁴¹

³⁷ See Li Zhi's comments on *Shuihu zhuan* (*Water margin*). Li Zhi, *Li Zhuowu piping Zhongyi shuihu zhuan* (Li Zhi commenting on the *Water margin*).

³⁸ See Li Zhi, "He Xinyin lun." *Fenshu*, v. 3. Also see Huang Zongxi's account of Geng Dingxiang, in *Mingru xuean*, v. 35.

³⁹ "Ming ming de" is the first sentence in the *Great Learning*, the first in the Neo-Confucian canon listed and annotated by Zhu Xi.

⁴⁰ Geng Dingxiang, "Yu Li Zhuowu" (Letters to Li Zhi). Geng Dingxiang, 4:43, 455.

⁴¹ Geng, 4:45a, 459.

The grievances

There was nothing unusual about intellectual disputes in the late Ming era. Dingxiang's late brother, Dinglii, would probably have agreed more with Li Zhi than with Dingxiang. But when real life issues and personal suspicions were involved, intellectual disputes could erupt into private grievances. This was very much the case between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang after the death of Dinglii, who had acted as a mediator between the two men.

Within the Taizhou school, Dingxiang was probably a bit more conservative in following the anti-authoritarian implications of Wang Yangming's philosophy. The danger he saw in Li Zhi was a kind of willfulness that could lead youth astray. For Dingxiang, the willfulness of the late Dinglii, a trusted brother and a mature scholar, may have been acceptable and even inspiring; willfulness in Li Zhi, a friend and a fellow scholar, might have been acceptable and even interesting, if he had kept it to himself. But willfulness should not be taught to the young and to the common people, for it would certainly jeopardize the family and undermine public morality.⁴² As I have pointed out earlier, Dingxiang was concerned with the education of the sons of his own family and the local community, and worried that Li Zhi's unconventional life choice, abandoning his official career and forsaking his responsibility to his native place, was at the very least a misleading, if not a bad example for the youngsters. When Dingxiang tried to warn and restrict Li Zhi, he was met with violent reactions from the latter.

Li Zhi had an impatient disposition. He had not gotten along with his superiors in the official posts he had held, and this was one reason he had quit his official career early. He had come to Huang'an to enjoy life as a free intellectual, with his best friend and spiritual companion Dinglii. Now Dinglii had passed away and, to Li Zhi's dismay, Dingxiang wanted to discipline him. He felt, once again, that he was being oppressed by someone who assumed superiority over him because of his higher official rank. This time, however, he did not have to take it, and he decided to defend his right as an equal member of the scholarly community. He had disagreed with Dingxiang in interpreting Confucian teachings, but such issues could not be determined by political power. "Does one's learning advance just because one is a grand official?" Li wrote in his letter to Dingxiang. "Were that the case, Confucius and Mencius would not dare to open their mouths."⁴³

In rebutting Dingxiang's admonition, Li Zhi developed some of the boldest claims in the late Ming era. He argued in his letter to Dingxiang that everyone

⁴² See Geng, "Yu Zhou Liutang" (Letters to Zhou Sijiu). Geng, 3:58a, 359.

⁴³ Li Zhi, "Da Geng Sikou" (A Reply to Minister Geng). Li Zhi, *Fenshu*, 1:33.

has the potential to be a sage and that, pushing an intellectual iconoclasm inherent in Wang Yangming's philosophy to its extreme, one does not have to follow Confucian teachings in order to become a sage: "Master Yangming says, 'The streets are full of sages.' Sakyamuni also says, 'To realize one's mind is to be a Buddha. Everyone is a Buddha.' . . . Shun, from the beginning, never had the intention to teach people about the good. . . . All his life, Shun believed that the original good dwelled in the people and he simply learned it from them." Li Zhi contended in the same letter: "If the good of the ones who labored in the fields, made pottery, and fished should be learned,⁴⁴ then why should not the good of the thousands of other saints and sages? Why must one follow Confucius in order to be orthodox?"⁴⁵

Li Zhi also declared that self-interest was part of human nature and there was nothing shameful about it. To Li Zhi, Dingxiang's assertion of his own universal benevolence and selfless concern for all was annoyingly hypocritical. He relentlessly pointed out that too often those who claimed to have selfless concern for all actually had a strong desire for power, high office, and fame: "Whenever I think about the fact that you [Dingxiang] have obstinately stuck to a wrong course, I realize that it is because you have too many desires. . . . It is apparent that you covet high office and good pay in the belief that it will make you respected and illustrious, and you crave high rank in the belief that it will honor your father and grandfather. These are things you really cannot help but feel, and they are all appropriate thoughts. But you claim instead that, 'I go forth to serve Yao, Shun, the Emperor, and the people. I go forth as one who is first to awaken and takes responsibility for the whole world.'⁴⁶ Li Zhi went on to denounce the hypocritical relationships between Dingxiang and his students: "The teacher, forgetting that they [the students] come to flatter him and make connections, accepts them uncritically, declaring: 'They are attracted by my great virtue.' The students also forget that they come to ingratiate themselves with the famous and powerful. They stick to their lies so long that they cannot acknowledge their true purposes, saying: 'My teacher is the Way and my friend is virtue.'⁴⁷ Alas, if this is the learning of the Way, no one with even a few aspirations would want to establish a relationship with them, let alone I, your servant."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ This is a reference to Mencius' comments on Shun in *Mencius*, 2a:8. Li Zhi's writing is full of allusions to the classics.

⁴⁵ Li Zhi, "Da Geng Sikou" (A Reply to Minister Geng), *Fenshu*, 1:31. Wang Yangming praised certain Daoist and Buddhist practices concerning personal enlightenment. But he also pointed out the fundamental inadequacy of their methods. Li seems to have gone beyond Wang on this point. For a good discussion of Wang's view, see Ivanhoe, 63–64.

⁴⁶ This is a quote from *Mencius*, 5a:7. Li Zhi, "Da Geng Sikou" (A Reply to Minister Geng), *Fenshu*, 1:36.

⁴⁷ This is a quote from *Mencius*, 5b:3.

⁴⁸ Li Zhi, "Da Geng Sikou" (A Reply to Minister Geng), *Fenshu*, 1:38.

In 1586, Li Zhi was sixty *sui*. A year earlier, after his quarrel with Geng Dingxiang started, he had sent his wife back to Fujian and himself moved to Macheng. For the next two years he was hosted by the son-in-law of Zhou Sijiu (*jinshi* 1553), a good friend of both Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang. Li's wife had long wanted to go back to their hometown and now Li Zhi decided to let her go. Their daughter and son-in-law accompanied her. Li Zhi resisted pressure from relatives in Jinjiang asking him to return home and take up family and community responsibilities as a retired official. He also refused to adopt his brother's son as his heir. His relatives did this on his behalf, despite his refusal, with the excuse that he was away from home. Li Zhi had no desire to go back. He felt that he had fulfilled his family duty, and now he aspired to concentrate on the learning of the Way. He longed to travel across the land, enjoying nature, friendship, and intellectual companionship, just as his friend Zhou Sijiu was doing at the time.⁴⁹ Thus Li Zhi chose to stay in Macheng after sending his family back to Jinjiang.

The quarrel with Dingxiang seems to have affected Li Zhi's health.⁵⁰ He suffered from an infection of the spleen and was often sick and weak. Like most other Chinese, he believed that his sickness was a result of a blockage of the unimpeded flow of his *qi* (vital energy). After medical treatment had failed, Li Zhi found his cure by immersing himself in "the pleasures in the market place," and he was ready to philosophize about the result.

A year later, as Li Zhi recalled his life in Macheng, he wrote: "When I was in Huang'an, every day I shut myself in the room and did not breathe the dust of this world along with common folks (*yu min tong chen*). It was only after I came to Macheng and began to frequent the brothels that I was able to breathe the dust of this world along with commoners. Yet, I was still not able to share enlightenment with them, for I was arguing with Geng the Vice-Censor-in-Chief in many letters. Today, when I think of it again, I realize that it was useless to argue."⁵¹ In this passage Li Zhi used a view strongly implied in Wang Yangming's school of the mind favoring nature and spontaneity against artificial effort. Here, the commoners and their presumably worry-free life style, symbolized by wine and sex, were associated with nature, enlightenment, and health, while Confucian moralists, such as Dingxiang and his students, by

⁴⁹ Zhou Sijiu was from a prominent gentry family in Macheng. He and his brother Sijing both passed the metropolitan examination and served as ministers at the court. Zhou Sijiu was the same age as Li Zhi. At that time, Zhou had sold part of his property and left home for a prolonged travel around the country, visiting places famous for their scenery, meeting with well-known personalities, and making friends. Biographies of the Zhou brothers can be found in Yu Jinfang.

⁵⁰ Li Zhi, "A reply to Minister Geng," *Fenshu*, 1:35.

⁵¹ Li Zhi, "Da Zhou Erlu" (A reply to Zhou Erlu), *Fenshu*, 259. Li Zhi's reference to being among the common people and specifically his reference to patronizing the brothel is reminiscent of themes characteristic of the layman Vimalakirti. See Robert Thurman, 1983, trans., *The Teaching of Vimalakirti* (Pennsylvania State University Press).

contrast, were hypocritically opposed to the legitimacy of natural human desires. Li lamented the futility of his argument with Geng Dingxiang as he realized that such scholarly argument was irrelevant to an enlightened life among the commoners.

Li Zhi certainly made an important and quite radical philosophical contention here. In reality, however, he enjoyed the Zhou brothers' patronage and was surrounded by literati friends—hardly a life of commoners. Though he had a romantic appreciation of the virtue of commoners, Li still chose to pursue the Way in his scholarly work, in which lay his greatest pleasures and pains. He moved to the suburbs and immersed himself in reading and writing soon after he recovered from his illness, and perhaps from the emotional distress that had resulted from separation from his family and the quarrel with Geng Dingxiang.

Li's short adventure in Macheng, however, had consequences. Literati consumers seeking pleasure in the market place was nothing new or unusual, but to legitimize such "deviation" against orthodox morality was something different. The action of theorization could constitute an offense to the moral dominance of the Confucian elite as a whole. It is no surprise that Li Zhi's opponents later used his claims as evidence to attack him for his "licentious" lifestyle, even though his relaxed life in Macheng lasted only a few months.

Li Zhi shaves his head

In 1588, Li Zhi's wife died in Jinjiang. Li Zhi was moved by her death,⁵² but did not go back for her funeral. Rather unconventionally, Li Zhi entrusted his son-in-law and student Zhuang Chunfu, not the adopted son forced on him by his clansman, to take charge of the funeral on his behalf. Li Zhi then went up to the Cloister of the Iris Buddha on the shore of Dragon Lake. The Cloister of the Iris Buddha was the private property of the Zhou brothers, not a registered religious institution, an ideal place for Li Zhi. After a while, Li shaved his head and became a monk, another action vital to the persecution that followed soon after.

One reason that motivated Li to shave his head was that he wanted to send a clear and definite signal to his family in Fujian that he would never return home. He lamented to his disciples about how humans were born to be restricted. When a man was young, Li related, he was under the control of senior members of the family and teachers in school. After one grew up and entered civil service, he was constrained by his superiors. As one retired from office, he was under the rule of local officials such as magistrates and prefects. One had to follow customs in dealing with local officials: hosting them when they came for outings, contributing cash whenever they requested, furnishing

⁵² See Li Zhi, "Yu Zhuang Chunfu" (A letter to Zhuang Chunfu), *Fenshu*, 2:45.

banquets in their honor, and providing presents on their birthdays. One had to be very careful in all these tasks, lest he would lose favor over a small mistake and thus incur disaster. Li Zhi resolved, “Thus I would rather wander in strange lands than ever go home.”⁵³ He reasoned that wherever he went he was always under the rule of some local official, and therefore only by becoming a monk could he rid himself of these restrictions.

Li Zhi’s action, however, stirred up a wave of uneasiness among those around him. Deng Shiyang, then magistrate of Macheng and a friend of both Geng Dingxiang and Li Zhi, tried in vain to dissuade Li from becoming a monk. Zhou Sijiu, in a letter to Geng Dingxiang, informed him of Li Zhi’s action and warned him not to attack Li for this. And Dingxiang, in his reply, was clearly upset with this event.⁵⁴ Moreover, two years later, Li Zhi’s having shaved head became the reason for the violence against him in the Wuchang incident.

In some sense Li Zhi and his opponents acted out an ongoing debate among Wang Yangming’s followers over the relationship between *chujia* (to leave home to become a monk) and *xuedao* (to learn the Way). It is phenomenal the degree to which Chan Buddhism permeated the Wang Yangming school of the mind (*xinxue*). Wang Yangming himself had an ambiguous relationship with Chan Buddhism, as did many of his followers to varying degrees.⁵⁵ Geng Dingxiang emphasized that the Way was centered on the practice of filial piety; to become a monk was to abandon the family and therefore turn against the Way. Li Zhi, on the other hand, insisted that the Way was more than filial piety. If, he argued, someone became a monk in order to pursue the Way, it was because he accepted the calling. The two men had exchanged harsh words on at least two occasions before Li Zhi shaved his head. The first concerned Dingxiang’s son, Geng Ruyu (Keming), who showed an inclination for being somewhat detached from an official career. Dingxiang was worried for his son and blamed Li Zhi. Li Zhi would not stand for this accusation.⁵⁶ The other incident involved a fellow Taizhou scholar, Deng He (Huoqu), who had left home to become a monk in 1587. Deng was a good friend of the late Dinglii and had stayed with him in Huang’an when Dinglii was still alive.

⁵³ Li Zhi, “Gankai pingsheng” (Sighing with emotion on my life), *Fenshu*, 4:178. It reminds the author of Li Zhi’s ancestor’s misfortune recorded in his family genealogy. One of Li Zhi’s ancestors, Lin Guangqi, was falsely accused of rebellion and executed publicly in the provincial capital Fuzhou in 1443, because he had offended a censor by forcing the censor’s nephew to descend from his horse when passing in the front of the Temple for Lord Yue (Fei) in Lin’s hometown. See *Qingyuan Lin-Li zongpu* (The genealogy of the Lin-Li family in Qingyuan), Xiamen Daxue Lishixi, 1:185. Also see “Li Zhi de jiashi, guju, ji qi qi mubei” (Li Zhi’s family genealogy, residence, and the tablet of his wife), in Fujianshen Jinjiang Diqu Wenwu Guanli Weiyuanhui (Commission on cultural preservation of Jinjiang district, Fujian province), ed., *Li Zhi sixiang pingjie* (A critical introduction to Li Zhi’s thought), 109–123.

⁵⁴ Geng Dingxiang, “Yu Zhou Liutang” (Letters to Zhou Sijiu). *Geng*, 3:59–61a, 361–65.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of Wang’s relationship to Buddhism, see Wing-tsit Chan, “How Buddhistic Is Wang Yang-ming?” *Philosophy East and West*, 12:3 (1962), 203–215.

⁵⁶ Li Zhi, “A Reply to Minister Geng,” *Fenshu*, 1:36–37.

Deng's *chujia* generated a lot of controversy within his circle of friends. Dingxiang had never liked Deng and criticized him harshly when Deng took the tonsure. Li Zhi defended Deng and counter-attacked Dingxiang's criticism.⁵⁷ Shortly afterward, Li Zhi shaved his own head.

More curious, however, was the phenomenon that the line between Confucians and monks seemed rather blurred and often permeable. Many Taizhou followers, such as Geng Dinglii, Jiao Hong, the Zhou brothers, and the Yuan brothers—just to name a few—were lay Buddhists. Li Zhi probably never had a formal tonsure ceremony. He first shaved his hair off and then grew it back. He took a private cloister as his residence and observed Buddhist rites. He seems however never to have sought to study Buddhism with a real monk for a teacher. Instead, he continued to consider himself a Confucian.⁵⁸ On the other hand, the monk Wunian, the one time abbot of the Cloister of the Iris Buddha, appears to have been an active member of a literati circle which included many of the Taizhou scholars in our story. It seems that we not only had Buddhist Confucians but also had a “Confucian” monk.

What then was Li Zhi? Was he a Buddhist Confucian or a Confucian monk? Or perhaps both? One thing is clear, Li tried to carve out a space for himself where he could avoid restraints imposed by institutions such as the family, community, and officialdom. While he knew very well that his action would be disturbing to the establishment, he certainly did not realize at the time that his dubious social status rendered him vulnerable, since such a person raised a great deal of suspicion but enjoyed little institutional protection. At any rate, what began as a quarrel between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang within a private circle of literati friends would probably have remained there, if not for what happened next.

The publication of *A Book to Burn*

The Cloister of the Iris Buddha was a beautiful place, on the shore of Dragon Lake surrounded by high mountains. Zhou Sijiu and his brother Zhou Sijing often came here to enjoy its natural beauty and peace. Most of the time Li Zhi was accompanied only by the monk Wunian and several monk servants. Li Zhi's life in the Cloister was, in contrast to his Macheng days, peaceful and quiet. He immersed himself in scholarly work and began to publish numerous books, among which was a work vital to our story, *A Book to Burn*.

⁵⁷ Li Zhi, “Fu Deng Shiyang” (A reply to Deng Shiyang), *Fenshu*, 1:9:10–14. Also see Li Zhi, “Ji da Liu Du” (A letter to the person in Nanjing), *Fenshu*, 266.

⁵⁸ Li Zhi said clearly, in the introduction to *Chu tan ji*, that “For certain reason I shaved my head. Therefore, although I became a monk, I am indeed a Confucian. And thus I write first a Confucian book.” Li Zhi, *Chu tan ji* (The first collection of episodes on Dragon Lake), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju. 1974, reprint.

In many of the essays he wrote during the period of his quarrel with Geng Dingxiang, Li Zhi further elaborated on the themes contained in his exchanges with Dingxiang. Now Li Zhi compiled these letters, essays, and poems into one volume entitled *A Book to Burn (Fenshu)*,⁵⁹ which was printed in 1590 and again in 1600.⁶⁰

In the late Ming era, it was not unusual for a scholar to publish collections of his own letters and essays. Literati often carefully copied and preserved their own letters for later publication. The content of *A Book to Burn* was, however, unusual. The book contains an all-out, relentless, and merciless attack on Geng Dingxiang and his students as well as radical ideas about the classics, sages, and orthodoxy. Geng Dingxiang was then Minister of Revenue. He had numerous students and friends, many of whom were as powerful as Geng himself. Given this fact, it is hard to understand Li Zhi's motivation for publishing his quarrel with Dingxiang.

Li Zhi seems to have fully understood the danger involved in publishing this book. In the author's preface to the first edition, he wrote: "I have four kinds of books. . . . One is called *A Book to Burn*, a collection of my correspondences with good friends. Since the things I said in the book strike at the heart of the illness of contemporary scholars, they will certainly want to kill me."⁶¹ But he chose to take the risk and have the book published. "I wanted to burn it because the words in the book would jar their ears; I wanted to print it so that the words would be imprinted on their minds. It is indeed frightening that they will definitely kill me for these unpleasant words. But I am already sixty-four. Once my words enter into people's minds, perhaps there will be a few who understand me. I hope for these few. So I have had the book printed."⁶²

Jiao Hong, a close friend both to Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang, wrote an introduction to a later edition of the book: "Hongfu (Li Zhi) was straightforward

⁵⁹ The title of the book shows the influence of Wang Yangming's attitude toward books. As we all know, Wang opposed bookish learning and himself did not write books. Occasionally, he talked favorably about the First Emperor's book burning. See "The Book Burning by the First Emperor," *Wang Wencheng Gong quan shu* (The Complete Collections of Wang Yangming's Work), 1:61:13. The curious thing lies in the irony that Li had the book printed but at the same time entitled it "a book to burn."

⁶⁰ Yuan Zhongdao, Li Zhi's good friend and student, wrote: "Master [Li Zhi] usually did not like to write books. At first, his dispute with Master Geng [Dingxiang] was written down by recorders (*shuji*). They were later collected into a book entitled *Fenshu*." Yuan Zhongdao, "A biography of Li Wenling," *Fenshu*, 5. Li Zhi prepared at least two editions of *Fenshu* by himself. The first, published in 1590, was a collection of essays and letters, including those to Geng Dingxiang and others concerning the disagreement between Dingxiang and himself. The second was an expanded edition probably published in 1600, complete with letters, essays, and poems written after 1590. Most of the later editions of the book are based on the 1600 version. The book is the most valuable source for a study of the relationship between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang.

⁶¹ Li Zhi, "Zixu" (Self-preface), *Fenshu*.

⁶² Li Zhi, "Zixu" (Self-preface), *Fenshu*.

and quick to articulate his ideas. He was supercilious and excessively indignant, caring not that others might feel offended. Sadly, he nevertheless worried that others might get mad at him, so he apologetically named the book *A Book to Burn*. He thus got himself killed because of his words, and his persecutors went so far as to consign his works to the raging flames.”⁶³

Both Jiao and Li himself tell us that Li Zhi was aware that his attack on Dingxiang was inviting danger, yet still had the book printed. Why? Jiao Hong's account seems to capture some truth: Li Zhi was overreacting to Geng Dingxiang's criticism of him. We have noticed that during the years prior to the book's publication, Li Zhi had gone through a series of traumas in his life. He first lost Dinglii, with whom he had come a great distance to live. The passing away of his best friend and most intimate intellectual companion also reversed his intimate relationship with the Geng family. Li now felt distanced from Dingxiang as the latter was surrounded by many others who were not Li's type. As he got into trouble with Dingxiang, his family departed and then his wife died. He had a hometown in Jinjiang but was unwilling to return to it. He took residence in a private monastery and shaved his head. He was now free but lonely and often sick, spending most of his time reading and writing in solitude. His life was transformed into one of a recluse, but his mind was as active as ever. *A Book to Burn* and its very publication testified to these changes in Li's life and their traumatic effects on him. Perhaps it is not unreasonable to suggest that the book was a lone, proud man's overreaction to his disagreement with Dingxiang.

It appears that the quarrel with Dingxiang influenced many of Li's actions. As he castigated Dingxiang for being hypocritical, Li was searching for his own authentic moral self. Not incidentally, during the same period, Li Zhi was obsessed with the rebel heroes in *The Water Margin*. For Li Zhi, the entire story of the novel revealed how the child-like mind, the authentic moral self, lies in action, especially in its resistance to oppressive, hypocritical authority. The parallel between Li's appraisal of the heroes in *The Water Margin* and his own struggle to overcome Dingxiang's authoritarianism is unmistakable. Li's visits to the brothel, his becoming a monk, and his philosophizing in *A Book to Burn* were all part of his rebuttal against Dingxiang's perceived hypocrisy and his search for an authentic moral self.

The cultivation of the original mind, or the moral self, was a central concern of Wang Yangming's followers, especially among the Taizhou scholars. Li Zhi rightly felt that his theories of his conflict with Dingxiang had something important to offer to the literati community. Lonely and uncompromising, he

⁶³ Jiao Hong, “Li shi Fenshu xu” (Preface to Mister Li's *Fenshu*), *Fenshu*, preface, 2.

longed for peer understanding and appreciation. The risk was worth taking if the book would bring him a few bosom friends. Li Zhi was right. The book simultaneously made him famous and notorious, bringing him both enemies and friends.

Moreover, Li's conflict with Dingxiang also shaped many of his ideas, a very important fact that so far has been neglected by modern scholars. It is in *A Book to Burn* that we find the strongest evidence of Li Zhi's iconoclasm. The fact that Li Zhi was arguing with Geng Dingxiang tells us a great deal about the intent behind some of his boldest statements, although Li consciously set his rebuttal within the framework of the Wang Yangming school of the mind. For example, when Li quoted Wang Yangming's words that "the streets are full of sages," what he really meant was that he, Li Zhi, as well as everyone else in the world, was a sage just as much as Geng Dingxiang was. When he declared that Confucianism was not the only path to the Way and that one did not have to follow Confucius' words, he was fighting against Geng Dingxiang's authority as a self-designated spokesman for Confucian morality in local affairs.⁶⁴ In his essay "On the Child-like Mind," which, for modern scholars, exemplifies his iconoclasm, Li Zhi wrote: "All great literature comes from the child-like mind. . . . In accordance with this, if I am inspired by writings which spontaneously come from the child-like mind, then what need is there to talk of the *Six Classics*, *The Analects*, and *Mencius*?"⁶⁵

How were these radical ideas related to Li's political conservatism? Li Zhi never attacked the existing political system and showed no interest in any Confucian reformist thinking of the time. Li once advised his friend Liu Dongxing that "all treasures under heaven are the emperor's personal property, and it may be all right for the Emperor to consume more than he should. All the people under heaven are the emperor's people, and they could only endure (the burden) if the Emperor wants to squeeze them more than he should. . . . You [Liu] should only try to console the people; you should not protest against the Emperor."⁶⁶

Li Zhi appears to have been, more than anything else, a student seeking enlightenment in the truth of spontaneity and moral authenticity. His iconoclastic comments, generated directly in his conflict with Geng Dingxiang, spelled out the radical possibilities of the Wang Yangming school in a powerful, dramatic style. But Li offered no revolutionary system that would challenge

⁶⁴ I am not claiming that Li Zhi did not believe in Confucius' and Wang Yangming's sagehood. He still had a faith in a genuine Confucian sagehood but, at the same time, also respected other forms of sagehood.

⁶⁵ Adapted from Tobie Meyer-Fong's unpublished translation of "On the Child-like Mind." The essay is in *Fenshu*, 3:98–99.

⁶⁶ Li Zhi, "Fu Jinchuan wen shu" ("A reply to Liu Dongxing"), *Fenshu*, 2:73.

the existing political ideology. On the contrary, it was his enemies, not Li Zhi, who were the predecessors and participants of the Donglin political opposition in the early seventeenth century.⁶⁷ It is quite clear that Li Zhi was not a political reformer, much less a political representative of a rising urban middle class against the feudal system.

The tendency to assign too much significance to Li Zhi's thought might have resulted from a misunderstanding of the cause of Li's persecution and his tragic death. It is however important to notice that both Jiao Hong and Li Zhi himself regarded the pointed attacks on Dingxiang and his followers, not the general radical views expressed in *A Book to Burn*, as the cause of Li's subsequent miseries. This conforms to a general impression that ideological control in the late Ming was fairly loose and suggests that ideology itself was perhaps not the major cause of Li's persecution. In fact, local politics played a far more important role.

The persecution

In 1590, when Li Zhi published *A Book to Burn*, Geng Dingxiang had just retired from office and returned home to spend the rest of his life. He probably did not expect anything as unpleasant as this book, containing many personal attacks on him. Geng was outraged. He responded by publishing a statement, "A Letter Asking for Admonition" (*qiu jing shu*). In the letter, Geng called Li Zhi's book pure slander that was not worth disputing and dismissed it as the work of a villain.⁶⁸ As an influential person, Geng's reaction, as moderate as it appeared to have been, was enough to set his followers to action.

A student of Geng's named Cai Yizhong (*jinshi* 1601) wrote an essay, "Refuting *A Book to Burn*" (*Fenshu bian*). Cai Yizhong was a native of Guangshan county in Henan province, located north of Macheng and in the same mountainous area across the borders of Hubei and Henan. His biographies in *The Official History of the Ming Dynasty* (*Ming shi*) as well as in local gazetteer describe Cai as a filial son who grasped the meaning of *The Book of Filial Piety* at age five. Moreover, he vomited blood upon the news of his mother's death when he himself had just passed *jurem* examination in 1579. Cai passed the metropolitan examination in 1601 and was immediately appointed

⁶⁷ Li Zhi's disinterest in political reform was in sharp contrast to his opponents, such as Geng Dingxiang, Cai Yizhong, and Zhang Wenda who all were involved in opposing the mining taxes, which were, along with other issues, crucial to the formation of the Donglin political opposition movement. See Chen Ding, *Donglin liezhuan* (Biographies of the members of the Donglin affiliates). Also see Heinrich Busch, 1954, *The Tung-lin Academy and its Political and Philosophical Significance* (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University).

⁶⁸ Geng Dingxiang, "Qiu jing shu" (A letter asking for admonition). Geng, 6:53b, 698.

a Hanlin bachelor. Many years later, interestingly, he also served as magistrate in Macheng.⁶⁹ Cai appears to have played an important role in Li Zhi's persecution. Many think that he was responsible for the Wuchang incident and was behind Zhang Wenda's memorial against Li Zhi. According to Dingxiang, Cai was tough on Li Zhi and even blamed Dingxiang for being too tolerant of Li.⁷⁰

The publication of *A Book to Burn* and the subsequent outrage of the Geng camp must have frightened Li Zhi. He soon left Macheng for Wuchang and stayed there for about two years. Yet he was unable to escape. It was in Wuchang that Li was physically attacked by a gentry mob consisting of Geng's students—he was pulled out of the Pavilion of the Yellow Crane because of his shaved head. The violence was such a shock to Li Zhi that after this incident he restricted his public appearances. Constantly worried about possible assault, Li Zhi had a difficult time in Wuchang. He developed a sense of self-pity and complained in his letters to friends about his lonely and homeless condition. He decided to grow his hair back and put on his Confucian cap once again. In the meantime, he began to seek reconciliation with Dingxiang.⁷¹

But Li Zhi was not just a victim of the violence against him. He became famous at the same time. Many came to see him out of admiration. Some became good friends, such as the Yuan brothers (Yuan Zongdao, Hongdao, and Zhongdao—well known literary figures from Gongan, Hubei). In fact he became so famous that Liu Dongxing, then Governor of Huguang province, made a special effort to meet him, and the two men immediately became friends. Soon after, Li Zhi moved into Liu's household in the provincial government compound, where the two enjoyed each other's company.⁷² In the summer of 1592, Liu was promoted to the post of Vice-Censor-in-Chief of the Censorate and left Wuchang. The next spring, Li Zhi returned to the Cloister of the Iris Buddha.⁷³

Reconciliation

It is important to note that the differences between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang were more of emphasis than essence. Dingxiang was also attracted to the search for personal enlightenment. He had avidly followed his brother Dinglii's deep intellectual interest in the most subtle aspects of the meaning of life. He complained about his own family burden and wished that he were freer so he could follow his friend Zhou Sijiu in his wanderings.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ See Cai Yizhong's biography in Zhang Tingyu, *Ming shi*, 216:5714–5716; and An Zhaoping, *Guangshan xianzhi yuegao* (A draft of Guangshan gazetteer. Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe).

⁷⁰ See Geng, "A Letter Asking for Admonition." Geng, 6:53a, 697.

⁷¹ Li Zhi, *Fenshu*, v. 2.

⁷² See *Fenshu*, 2:10-14:56–58.

⁷³ Lin Qixian, 1988, *Li Zhuowu shiji xinian* (A chronology of Li Zhi. Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe), 118–21.

⁷⁴ See Geng Dingxiang's letters to Zhou Sijiu. Geng, v. 3.

Li Zhi, on the other hand, was a person who had also felt strong obligations toward his family and relatives. Like Dingxiang, Li Zhi was the eldest in his family and had several younger brothers and sisters. He was the first in many generations of the Li family in Jinjiang to succeed in the examinations and enter the civil service. Because of his family's precarious economic situation, Li Zhi decided to enter the civil service after he succeeded at the provincial level. With the earnings from his thirty-four-year official career, he managed to have his grandparents and his father properly buried, and his brothers and sisters properly married and secured with a moderate but comfortable living. Once, when he was at home in Jinjiang during the mourning period for his father, he led the defense of the city against a pirate attack and managed to feed about thirty kinsmen when grain was in short supply.⁷⁵

Li Zhi was not as fortunate as Dingxiang, however, and life treated him rather harshly. His wife had borne him four boys and three girls, but only one daughter survived. His official career was limited by his not having passed the metropolitan level examinations, interrupted by mourning periods observed at home, and harmed by his unyielding personality. Running back and forth between the capital cities (Beijing and Nanjing) and his hometown in Fujian, often stuck with family financial problems, and tired of just trying to get along with his superiors, Li Zhi was over-burdened and frustrated by these human relations. He found himself much attracted to the learning of the Way and inspired to explore the true meaning of life and death.

After having served as the prefect of Yaoan and secured a fourth-rank salary for the rest of his life, he felt that he had fulfilled his family duty, and it was time to take care of his own spiritual need—to learn about the Way.⁷⁶ After being a house guest of both the Geng and the Zhou families, Li found his final refuge in the Cloister of the Iris Buddha, and made himself a monk out of circumstances. But he was never as devoted to Buddhism as he was to Confucianism. In fact, he often advised friends not to *chujia*, even for the sake of learning the Way.⁷⁷

While actively seeking reconciliation with Geng Dingxiang and possibly encouraged by some signals from the latter,⁷⁸ Li returned to Macheng in the spring of 1593. A formal rapprochement was realized three years later when Li Zhi personally went to Huang'an to meet with Dingxiang, probably at the latter's sick bed. On this occasion, Li Zhi visited his spiritual comrade Dingli's grave and wrote a very moving elegy, "A Biography of Master Geng Chukong,"

⁷⁵ See Li Zhi, "Zhuowu lunlue" (A brief autobiography of Li Zhi), *Fenshu*, 3:84.

⁷⁶ See Li Zhi, "Fu Deng Shiyang shu" (A Reply to Deng Shiyang), *Fenshu*, 1:10:10–14.

⁷⁷ For an example, see Li Zhi, "Yu Zeng Jiquan" (To Zeng Jiquan), *Fenshu*, 52.

⁷⁸ Geng, "Du Li Zhuowu yu Wang sen Ruowu shu" (After reading Li Zhi's letter to the monk Ruowu). Geng, 19:19b–22b:1861–68.

in which he delineated his long friendship with the Geng family. He traced the cause of his dispute with Dingxiang to a mutual misunderstanding. While Li himself emphasized the intuitive grasp of pure knowledge, Li recalled, Dingxiang emphasized the manifestation of it in human relations. These two emphases, held passionately, led to the dispute. Once dogmatic ardor receded, a reconciliation was reached.⁷⁹ Thus, for Li Zhi, his intellectual difference with Geng Dingxiang was resolved.

Persecution continued

However, reconciliation with Dingxiang seems to not have eased the tension between the Geng group and Li. Li Zhi, now gaining national fame for his radical ideas and unconventional life style, attracted friends, students, and strange admirers from all over the country. In the four years before Dingxiang's death, the Cloister of the Iris Buddha was turned into a center of teaching and learning.⁸⁰ For the Geng camp conservatives, Li Zhi and the Cloister of the Iris Buddha not only presented a dangerous alternative model for local youngsters to follow, it also constituted a potential challenge to the existing power structure of the locality.

There is no indication that Geng Dingxiang participated in the new wave of persecution that Li was to suffer. Li Zhi insisted that Dingxiang never had anything to do with the attack against him. Indeed, Dingxiang's students and followers criticized him for being too tolerant of Li Zhi. In the Macheng and Huang'an area, while Dingxiang still lived, Li Zhi was largely safe, although rumors and threats to tear down his residence and exile him from Macheng were heard from time to time.⁸¹ Li Zhi knew that Dingxiang would not allow violence against him, but his group would not easily let him go.

In the summer of 1596, when Dingxiang was probably lingering on his deathbed, a certain Shi, whose official title was General-Surveillance-Circuit-Censor, inspected the area. A rumor was circulated that Censor Shi meant to expel Li Zhi from the area. Shi respected Dingxiang as his teacher and, when in the area, often paid Dingxiang visits. Probably for the lack of Dingxiang's sanction Censor Shi did not take any action.

After Dingxiang passed away in the fall of 1596 Li Zhi again went to live with Liu Dongxing, who was then in charge of the imperial grain transportation through the Grand Canal and stationed in Jining, Shandong province. Li then traveled extensively with Liu and other friends. Even under the protection of

⁷⁹ Li Zhi, *Fenshu*, 4:143.

⁸⁰ See Pan Zenghong, v. 1.

⁸¹ See Li Zhi, *Xu Fenshu*, 1:22–26.

Liu, Li Zhi felt unsafe. Only when he traveled with Jiao Hong was Li able to relax—only a prominent member of the Geng circle such as Jiao could fend off physical assault on Li.⁸²

Moving from place to place for several years Li terribly missed the Cloister of the Iris Buddha. He returned to Macheng, probably in the fall of 1600, with the thought of living the rest of his life there in peace.⁸³ What he did not expect was that his enemies would not forget about him even after four years. At the end of 1600 Li Zhi once again had to flee a mob attack. This time the mob from Macheng burned down his residence in the Cloister of the Iris Buddha. The old man was never to return to Macheng. A small crisis in Macheng was thus resolved.

At the same time as Li's exile from Macheng, his sworn enemy Cai Yizhong obtained a *jinshi* degree and was assigned a position in the imperial academy. The northward movement of Li and his enemy, though for very different reasons, seems to have brought the local controversy to the nation's capital. Moreover, it is interesting to note that both Cai Yizhong and Zhang Wenda, the censor who submitted the memorial against Li Zhi, were blacklisted as members of the Donglin party by the powerful eunuch Wei Zhongxian.⁸⁴ The Wanli Emperor seems to also have desired to sanction Li Zhi on the basis of censor Zhang's charges against Li, and immediately sent imperial guards to arrest him. But it also seems true that neither the emperor nor the court officials had the intention to severely punish Li, other than to have his books burned and him censured. The fact that Li ended his own life in jail may indeed have saved the court from making an awkward decision on his case.

Conclusions

We are now ready to overturn the generally accepted view that Li Zhi was a revolutionary thinker and martyr for his revolutionary ideas. Hou Wailu, Shimada Kenji, K. C. Hsiao, and Wm. Theodore de Bary each in their own way make Li and his suicide a symbol of some revolutionary, or potentially revolutionary, ideology against the existing system. But we have found that

⁸² In the preface to his book *An Old Man's Travel*, Li Zhi wrote: "My original intention was to help people obtain Buddhahood or at least have faith in Buddha. But most people do not have the faith. What could I do! Some may have had faith but lost again because of the work of devils. What could I do! Thus, slanders against Buddha arose and my life was full of miseries. That's why all year round I stay behind the closed doors against bandit attack. Although I did not want to travel afar with my aging body, how could I not go away. Thus, wherever I went I still sit alone behind closed doors, not dare to have contact with the world....Fortunately, today I embark on a boat south with Ruohou [Jiao Hong]. I enjoy the peace on the boat and friendship and hence no longer close the doors." *Fujianshen*, 9–10.

⁸³ See Li, "Guanyin wen" (Questions about the Buddha Guanyin), *Fenshu*, 4:166–69.

⁸⁴ See Chen Ding.

Li Zhi was not a revolutionary thinker who systematically challenged either the existing political system or the state ideology. His intellectual interests mainly concerned the cultivation of the moral self and had little to do with political opposition. His tragic life certainly testified to the limitations late-Ming society imposed on individual freedom; but Li himself showed no effort to develop a theory against this system other than pursuing his personal enlightenment in realizing his moral self. His thought was thus firmly within the theoretical possibilities of the Wang Yangming school.⁸⁵

While Ray Huang cautions against the symbolic use of Li, he still believes that Li was persecuted as a radical representative of the Wang Yangming school. If, however, the persecution was indeed directed toward the school of the mind, as Huang contends, then Li Zhi (and He Xinyin) should not have been the only ones targeted. In fact, none of the radical thinkers including Wang Yangming, Yan Jun, Wang Gen, Wang Ji, and Luo Rufang was persecuted. In addition, we are not aware of any persecution based on pure ideological radicalism in the late Ming, not in the case of Li Zhi, nor even in the case of He Xinyin. Moreover, we have found that the conflict began and developed *within* Taizhou circles, between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang, and that Li's enemies were the disciples and friends of Geng Dingxiang. If it was a case of conservatism opposing radicalism, then it was first of all Taizhou conservatives opposing Taizhou radicals. The influential intellectuals in the next century criticized the school of the mind and blamed it for the decline and fall of Ming dynasty. But in Li Zhi's time both the Donglin political opposition and the new scholarly trend moving away from the school of the mind had yet to be developed. While Li's case may have signaled a change of mood in court politics and intellectual discourse, we should be cautious not to interpret Li's case through the lens of seventeenth-century anti-Taizhou discourse.

What then were the causes of Li Zhi's persecution? We may say it was not so much Li's heterodox views as his heteropraxis that got him into trouble. In other words, it was his unconventional social practices, more than his iconoclastic ideas, that invoked the local conservatives who hunted him all the way down to his last days in the name of anti-heresy.

One important subtext in Li's local persecution lay in the local community's perception of the "otherness" of Li Zhi. For the long-term Macheng residents Li was an outsider, a guest of his local literati friends, with disturbingly dubious

⁸⁵ Like de Bary, the Japanese intellectual historian Mizoguchi Yūzō also views Li Zhi as a forerunner of the seventeenth-century revolutionary ideas of Huang Zongxi, Gu Yanwu, and Wang Chuanshan. But, unlike others, Mizoguchi believes that these intellectuals viewed Li Zhi as a heretic because of Li's eccentric behavior. See Mizoguchi Yūzō, 1980, *Chūgoku zen jindai shisō no kessetsu to tenkai* (The development of early modern thinking in China. Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai).

social status. He was head of a household but did not live within it, a retired official but one who failed to assume related social responsibilities, a Confucian scholar but one who lived in a temple, and a Buddhist monk but one who never formally took tonsure. If he had conformed to local mores, he might have been accepted by the community. Instead, he directly and openly confronted the local leadership, and thus made himself an intruder to the “natural” order of the local community.

Li’s heteropraxis culminated in 1590 when he published *A Book to Burn*. The local Geng group responded immediately, with violence as well as printed attacks. In spite of his uncompromising appearance, Li Zhi was actually in a vulnerable position. Having detached himself from familial, communal, and official ties, Li Zhi was left without institutional support. His only major source of protection in Macheng was the powerful Geng family. Li Zhi took full advantage of his relationship with the Geng family in his years in Macheng until Dingxiang’s death. In a sense then, the expulsion of Li Zhi at the end of 1600 was a result of long-accumulated suspicions and hatreds on the part of some local conservatives toward him as the dangerous “other.”

The expulsion of Li Zhi was also a display of power by one segment of the local gentry, as indicated by Ma Jinglun. While the details of this local power struggle remain obscure, various evidence shows that the local Geng group took offense against the Mei family. The Mei, in contrast to the newly rising Geng family, was one of the most prestigious families in Macheng, one that had produced many degree holders over generations.⁸⁶ Mei Guozhen held a reputation among friends as a brilliant scholar with a chivalrous demeanor, fond of participating in drinking and poetry-competition parties with good friends. It is quite obvious that Mei was not in the circle of Geng’s friends, since one finds no correspondence between the two men. Li Zhi and Mei appreciated each other’s characters and scholarship, and shared a common disgust for those who were locally powerful.⁸⁷ Most of the time during Li’s residence in Macheng, Mei was away from home on official duties. But there were many occasions when Li Zhi discussed the Way of the Buddha with Mei’s widowed daughter both in person and through correspondence.⁸⁸ With Mei’s support his daughter followed the Buddhist path and converted her residence into a private chapel. It is obvious that the local Geng clique was behind the accusations against Mei’s daughter, defaming her together with Li Zhi.

⁸⁶ For an account of the Mei family in Macheng, see Yu Jinfang.

⁸⁷ As mentioned earlier in this paper, Mei wrote: “I am far inferior to the old bald man [Li Zhi], but I resemble him in that we do not get along with the world.” Mei Guozhen, “*Cangshu xu*” (Preface to *A Book to Hide Away*). Fujianshen, 2.

⁸⁸ See Li Zhi, “Guanyin wen” (Questions about the Buddha Guanyin), *Fenshu*, 4:166–69.

The court case against Li Zhi was also based mainly on his heteropraxis. Censor Zhang's memorial charged Li Zhi both for his heteropraxis and his heterodoxy. However, two of the three charges, Li's alleged sexual promiscuity and his confusing Confucianism with Buddhism, were cases of heteropraxis. Note further that the immediate reason for Li's arrest was, according to the memorial: "A current report indicates that he [Li Zhi] has now moved to Tongzhou, just forty *li* [about 11 miles] from the capital What transpired in Macheng may repeat itself here."⁸⁹ Here, Zhang warned against the possible spread of Li's socially deviant behavior in the capital area with Li's northward movement. It is apparent that it was Li's physical presence in the area, not his publications, that warranted the court action against him. If the court were primarily concerned with Li's publications and radical ideas it would not have waited for so long, as Li's major works had been printed and circulated widely for years before the court's action in 1602.⁹⁰

Furthermore, Li's getting into trouble in Beijing was largely an extension of his local persecution. We know that Li Zhi had stayed for several months in a temple in the Western Hills in the suburbs of Beijing from September 1597 to spring 1598, and later moved to Tongzhou with Ma Jinglun in the spring of 1601. Nothing had happened to him until the spring of 1602, after Cai Yizhong had passed the capital examination and was appointed to the court. Cai must have known Li's whereabouts and, most likely, brought Li's case to the attention of his colleagues in the court, thus inducing censor Zhang's memorial against Li.

But Li Zhi was not simply a victim of local oppression. He was determined to fight his own battle for the realization of his true moral self. His single most important action in this regard was to publish *A Book to Burn*, an action that for him manifested his authentic moral self. The publication of this book permitted Li Zhi to adopt the identity of an independent thinker and carve out a niche for himself among the great thinkers of the dynasty. The book not only exposed some locally powerful officials to criticism, it turned his personal quest for moral cultivation into a representation of a general literati search for

⁸⁹ *Ming Shenzong shilu*, 369:11–12. I have adopted the translation by K. C. Hsiao in Goodrich & Fang, 814.

⁹⁰ Further evidence for this theory involves the case of the monk Dagan. Dagan had a close relationship with many Taizhou scholars. Li Zhi first met Dagan in Nanjing in the 1570s when both were active in *jiangxue* (discourse activities). At the time when Li Zhi was arrested, Dagan was also near Beijing when he traveled to visit various scholars and friends across the country. A censor named Kang Peiyang submitted a memorial charging Dagan of promiscuous association with Confucian scholars. The emperor ordered his police to dispel Dagan and his gentry followers from the capital area. Dagan, however, never had book published. The charge against him was purely based on his social heteropraxis. *Ming Shenzong shilu*, 370:2–3.

authenticity and his private actions into public statements of protest against hypocrisy. The popularity of his works among the literati in Ming dynasty, despite the imperial court's occasional proscriptions, attests to his success.

Now we can conclude that it was the interplay of ideas, praxis, personal grievances, and local power struggles that determined the course of Li Zhi's persecution. For the purpose of this article, we may emphasize that Li's heteropraxis, more than his ideas that supported his social behavior, were the crucial factor. We may further conclude that it was his unconventional social choices, the consequent persecution, and his tragic death that made him a legendary personality, and hence dramatically enhanced the attraction of his ideas for both his contemporaries and people in later periods.

The symbolism invoked by Li's life and words in many ways blocks easy access to the historical Li Zhi and his thought. When particular statements and actions are detached from their original context the ideas expressed are transformed and often gain general meanings. They enter a life of their own, subject to appropriation and reinterpretation. It is at this level that some of Li Zhi's statements and actions became ready-made symbols of iconoclasm and other forms of radicalism. For various anti-traditionalists, Li's radicalism was a source of inspiration. For conservatives, it offered a perfect target to attack. Both used it to make their own political and moral statements. In the past four hundred years the symbolic use of Li Zhi, which reached its height during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), has left many misinterpretations of the man, the thinker, and his thought. In this paper I have tried to put the thinker back into his social context and study his ideas within his life story. It is my hope that such a highly contextual study can do away with the lenses of various forms of symbolism and take us closer to the historical Li Zhi, allowing us to see more clearly the landscape of intellectual, social, and political life of the late Ming, of which Li Zhi's life story and his writing were part and parcel.

Glossary

Cai Yizhong	蔡毅中	Deng He (Huoqu)	鄧鶴(豁渠)
Chongwen Shuyuan	崇文書院	Dizi zhi	弟子職
chujia	出家	Fenshu	焚書
Daguan	達觀	Geng Dingli	耿定力
dao	道	Geng Dinglii	耿定理
Daxue	大學	Geng Dingxiang	耿定嚮

Geng Keming	耿克明
Geng Kenian	耿克念
He Xinyin	何心隱
Hebei	河北
Hou Wailu	侯外廬
Huang'an	黃安
Huangbo	黃蘗
Hubei	湖北
Huguang	湖廣
Hunan	湖南
jiangxue	講學
Jiao Hong	焦竑
jinshi	進士
jushi	居士
Kongzi jiafa	孔子家法
Li Zhi (Zhuowu)	李贄(卓吾)
liangzhi	良知
Lin Guangqi	林廣齊
Liu Dongxing	劉東星
Ma Jinglun	馬經倫
Macheng	麻城
Mei Danran	梅澹然

Mei Guozhen	梅國禎
ming ming de	明明德
qi	氣
renxing	任性
renqing	任情
Shangcheng	商城
shuji	書記
Tongzhou	通州
Wanli	萬歷
Wang Yangming	王陽明
Wuchang	武昌
Wunian	無念
xiao	孝
xinxue	心學
Xu Yongjian	徐用儉
xuedao	學道
Yang	陽
Yaoan	姚安
yumin tongchen	與民同塵
Yuan Hongdao	袁宏道
Yuan Zhongdao	袁中道
Yuan Zongdao	袁宗道

Zhang Wenda	張問達	zhong	忠
zhi liangzhi	致良知	Zhou Sijing (Youshan)	周思敬(友山)
Zhifo Yuan	芝佛院	Zhou Sijiu (Liutang)	周思久(柳塘)
zhixing heyi	知行合一	Zhuang Chunfu	莊純甫

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