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A PUBLIC OF LETTERS
The Correspondence of Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang
TIMOTHY BROOK

Li Zhi’s radical approach to friendship—as a philosophical value and as an opening for the production of new moral meaning—is the subject of the preceding chapter. There Martin Huang examines the place that friendship came to assume in Li’s life, a development driven in part by the break with a close friend, Geng Dingxiang, in the summer of 1584. Li had spent the previous three years as the guest of Geng and his two younger brothers in Huang’an County in northeastern Huguang, where the brothers had gone home to observe mourning.1 Geng Dingxiang’s decision to return to service that spring, followed by the sudden death of his middle brother and Li Zhi’s particular friend, Dingli, that summer, drove a wedge between the two. The break is noteworthy, and knowable, because it left a train of recriminatory letters that managed to survive. This chapter attends less to the message of the letters than to the medium through which Ming writers most often expressed not just their friendships but their ideas about friendship.

Friendship is usually initiated as a face-to-face relationship, but it often survives, now as then, by being sustained through writing. As time and distance attenuate contact, writing becomes the relationship, a way of maintaining contact with a friend now absent, whether across town, across the country, or across time. As friendship is the condition for writing letters, so letter-writing becomes testimony to that condition, and often a reflection of it. But a letter is also a form of text, and like any literary text, cleaves to genre conventions and operates within shared expectations. The conventions and expectations organize what is put on paper and, in so
doing, act to guide and restrain the readership. We shall see this process at work in the course of examining the correspondence of Li and Geng.

Interpreting letters from the late Ming is necessarily a mediated exercise, as few originals from the period survive, and none by Li Zhi. We can read their correspondence only through the two filters between us and them. Copying supplies the first filter. Writers often made copies of their letters to others, which then might be recopied so that the author and addressee could share them with friends and relatives. They might even be recopied in order to circulate to a larger, informal readership. But just as we have none of the originals, so none of the handwritten copies survives either. We read them only as they have been printed in the collected works of the two men. The second filter is publication. As I have tried to sequence their letters into a single stream of correspondence, as they were first written, I have become persuaded that their letters were heavily redacted on both sides before going into publication. It is evident that Li reworked his letters before publishing them in *A Book to Burn*, for he chose to combine some of the letters into a single extended text, turning what was a sequence of discrete texts into an extended essay designed to produce a more general argument. Similarly, Geng’s letters evince heavy redaction in *The Collected Writings of Master Geng of Tiantai* (*Geng Tiantai xiansheng wenji*), which appeared only in 1598, two years after his death. His letters there read more like extracts.

The result of these two filters is that we are unable to read the actual letters that Li and Geng sent to each other. What we are reading, instead, is what they wanted us to read after the fact, prepared and staged to make their appeals persuasive to readers. The original letters may have been milder or fiercer, depending on the moments at which they were written in the larger emotional arc that their letters created. Casual barbs tossed off in the heat of writing may have intensified the gap between the two to a degree that face-to-face communication might have moderated—as appears to have happened when Li called on Geng to patch things up shortly before his old friend died. To recognize the difference between letter and print is not to nullify the interpretive work in this or the preceding chapter, but it is a condition to bear in mind as we reflect on how letter-writing shaped, and even made possible, their debate over friendship.

That noted, putting their letters into print is an important fact for assessing the terms of their debate. While publication suggests that the letters have been altered, it also signals that each man made a decision to go public. This implies a certain agreement that their exchange of views over how to weight the Confucian value of friendship was worth involving
anonymous readers. Making their letters public attested to a state of mutual trust that neither man rejected. However strained their friendship became, they remained friends. So too they remained colleagues in the same tradition, differing only in how each sought to shape the content of that tradition. Their letters—as also the letters of the other late-Ming intellectuals who printed their correspondence—helped create a public that, by reading, could participate in this phase of the unfolding of neo-Confucianism.

These remarks bring us to the end of the process in which Li and Geng were involved. Let us begin instead by considering the material conditions that allowed someone in the late Ming to expect that a letter written would be a letter received, which is to say, mail.

**LETTERS AS MAIL**

Letter-writing was hardly a late-Ming invention, yet the rate of survival of letters from the period suggests that more people were writing, circulating, and reading them than at any earlier time. Letters were socially inclusive, as full literacy was not required to send them, given the inclusion of the sample letters in letter guides and household encyclopedias. They also marked out socially inclusive space by extending social interaction beyond face-to-face meetings. Acts of expression, they were also acts of connection between family members, peers, and friends. By defying physical separation, letters strengthened the ties between those who wrote them and those who received them, confirming familiarity, identity, and common purpose.

If the exchange of letters grew in the late Ming, it was assisted by the emergence of institutions to handle mail, for which there is evidence as early as the fifteenth century. The state operated its own mail service through the Ministry of War, its couriers traveling the thoroughfares linking every county seat with the capital administrations in Beijing and Nanjing, but that system was for handling official correspondence (gongwen) and not “private articles” (siwu), in the language of the Ming Code. Couriers were undoubtedly asked to carry personal letters under official cover, but that was not why the service existed, nor was it available to those not authorized to send documents through the system. The great majority of people who could not access the system could dispatch letters only by sending them with travelers. This practice is attested in the letters that Xu Guangqi sent home from Beijing, where he was posted, to his family back in Shanghai in the early decades of the seventeenth century. In the letters themselves he refers to sending and receiving letters via friends, servants,
and acquaintances traveling to Shanghai. In one, for example, he instructs his son, “Watch for anytime to find a convenient messenger to send a letter to us.” He made a point of numbering his letters and asking his son to confirm in his replies which letters he had received and which he hadn’t in an attempt to verify which deliveries had been made and which had failed. Xu also used letters home as a chance to enclose letters to other recipients, which he asked his family to forward.7

Xu’s letters give no indication that he used a commercial service to handle his mail. Such services emerged slowly in the Ming, probably evolving from the services that commercial guilds made available to members and therefore limited to the routes along which their members regularly circulated. The late fifteenth-century edition of the standard Chinese-language textbook for Koreans, *My Khitan Buddy* (*Lao Qida*), sets one of its lessons at the livestock market outside the southwest gate of Beijing, where a certain shop run by a Korean proprietor held and forwarded letters going back and forth between Beijing and Korea.8 Gradually, agencies specializing in this sort of service and open to broader use emerged. Similarly, there is evidence from the same century that Ningbo merchants were able to take advantage of Ningbo guilds scattered across the realm to send and receive mail. As Macheng, the county out of which the Gengs’ county of Huang’an was carved in the mid-sixteenth century, was closely linked to a Ningbo commercial network extending up the Yangzi Valley into Sichuan, this was a service that could have been available to Geng and Li.9 There is evidence of commercial agencies eventually emerging outside such associational networks to take on the task of forwarding letters. “News bureaus” (*bao-fang*), which appeared in the late Ming to reproduce and sell the official *Beijing Gazette* in provincial capitals, began sending and receiving letters in the seventeenth century. So too, though the evidence for them does not come into view until the early Qing, “stamp agencies” (*piaohao*) were operating in larger towns specifically to handle private mail.10

The emergence of postal agencies independent of state institutions could have come about only in response to a strong demand for such services. We cannot yet recover the structure of that demand. It would seem reasonable that the new services emerged in response to the need for regular business communication as the commercial economy expanded rather than for handling personal correspondence. Business communication would have flowed along well-established, predictable routes between markets, whereas private letters moved in the more random patterns linking writers and recipients. Accordingly, even after mail-handling services emerged, families such as Xu Guangqi’s relied on their own networks of personal connections to
forward their letters. It helped, of course, that Xu was in Beijing, the highest central place in the political system, which Huang’an was not. But as agencies formed and the scheduled relay of documents became a feature of urban life, the circulation of private letters outside family networks became a more regular feature of Ming life. Letter-writers could anticipate that a letter sent would be a letter received, and that a letter received created the possibility of a letter in reply. Letters were no longer confined to family circles but were connecting otherwise unconnected people on a regular basis, thereby shaping a larger social zone of interaction.

One sign of the increase in the use of mail was the publication of letters in authors’ collected works. As letters more regularly entered communication circuits, so they carried enough weight to feature in an author’s literary oeuvre. Addressed initially to a single recipient, letters came to be written for the world to read. The exchange of ideas about matters of concern to the writer and recipient could be uploaded to a broad reading public and, indeed, could assume that such a public existed to read these letters. In other contexts, in Europe, for example, the emergence of mail services heightened concerns about the privacy of communication, to the point of elevating privacy to a new value. But not in Ming China. The political constitution of the dynasty energetically denied the legitimacy of the private, but lest we resort to a “Chinese” ideology of the illegitimacy of the private, take note of media historian and theorist Bernhard Siegert’s proposition that the idea of the private emerged in Europe only after the installation of the postal system. He argues, “The private did not precede the private letter in the process of this transformation—in either a chronological or a causal sense.”11 For Siegert, private life emerged as “an epoch of the postal system,” not as its prior condition. Arguably, the same logic could be applied to the emergence of privacy in China, but that is a proposition for an essay other than this one.

What I find striking in the late-Ming context is the insistence of Li Zhi and others that it was legitimate to express private views on public matters outside the embargoed space of officeholding authority and that the publicly circulated letter was a vehicle for that expression. To bend the language of the Ming Code, views expressed in letters may have been counted as “private things”—siwu in the language of Ming regulations for couriers—but they were not thereby barred from entering the sphere of public texts, gongwen. Rather than administrative documents, these were understood as discourses on matters of public import. At the same time, among the more radical wing of late-Ming intellectuals, going public should not be taken as an offense against official doctrine. There should be public space for private views.
The tension between public and private is central to the exchange of letters between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang, as the powerful current running beneath the surface of their extended dispute was the issue of whether a person with less than a sage’s wisdom should seek office in the belief—false for Li, true for Geng—that he could act benevolently on the world. This issue was Li’s stated reason for withdrawing from state service, just as it was Geng’s reason for rejecting eremitism as a morally sufficient position. They agreed that the highest moral task of the Confucian was to shoulder the burden of serving the public interest, but they were divided over whether taking a post in the bureaucracy was the way to acquit that duty. To argue this issue, Li took their disagreement to a public readership in 1590—Geng’s heirs would follow in 1598—by printing the letters that passed between them.

To argue that social conditions created by the commercialization of the late-Ming economy enabled individuals to appeal to a public of letters to elevate *si* as a vehicle for attaining what is *gong*—and thereby incubate that public as a zone in which to express an ethical claim of moral independence from state ideology—may strike some readers as excessively materialist. Rather than make that claim, I intend more modestly to suggest that commercial postal relay played a role in enhancing social capacity to communicate ideas on a regular schedule and that, consequent to that regularity of exchange, this condition stimulated the production of ideas as a range of alternative possibilities rather than as a rehearsal of a single unified view. The possibility of publishing letters, which, as it happens, was also a consequence of the commercialization of the economy, in turn encouraged the crafting of letters that, as originals, were addressed to a unique recipient but that, as printed copies, became available for “public consumption” by a general third-party readership in a public of letters. This was something new.

Nonetheless, it is worth bearing in mind that letters were a genre choice that entailed personal connection. Essays were formally addressed to anyone who could read them. A letter was addressed to one person alone. It claimed not just acquaintance but a right of acquaintance, whether on the grounds of kinship or of friendship. This right in turn implied a bond of intellectual connection, even community, within which it was permissible not just to exchange ideas but to disagree, and to agree to disagree. Publishing letters extended that bond of community between two people outward to a community of readers by inviting them to participate vicariously in the exchange. Private letters enabled a public exchange, and to that public, Li Zhi made his appeal.
The earliest surviving letter between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang is Li’s letter of condolence on the death of Geng Dingli (#1). For Li, his attachment to Dingli expressed the ideal of friendship that he placed at the heart of the Confucian program. Friendship, not social hierarchy, was the essential condition for higher learning. He closes his letter by suggesting that Geng’s decision to reengage in government service signals his prioritizing of career over friendship and his abandonment of the task of learning, which is possible only when one withdraws from politics. A hasty return to service, even by someone of great dedication, can lead only to bad outcomes.

Geng’s collected works do not include his response to this letter. His first letter in that collection (#2) is a reply to another, later letter, now lost. In that letter, Li had asked whether Geng felt he was “really able to avoid sticking to the model of the ancients, and really able to avoid relying on principles derived from what [he has] seen and heard from others.” In his reply, Geng writes that he does not claim that the ancients had unalterable answers to everything. He has sorted their models into two types: those that have changed over time—models based on experience and that therefore are mutable—and those that have persisted without alteration for thousands of years because their minds perceived rules laid down by heaven, not by people. Geng concedes that times change and that particular policy recommendations that a wise person might make must change with them, yet this does not alter the fundamental truths from which the moral life arises: “That it is painful to be struck or hurt, or miserable to be starved or drowned, is a pattern that has existed for thousands of years. That it is calamitous to be orphaned or rulerless, or sinful to be an unruly subject or an unprincipled son, is also a pattern that has existed for thousands of years. The ancients expended great effort and thought to create a model so that you and I might have adequate shelter and be sufficient in food and clothing, and they instructed us in ethics so that we might avoid being like wild animals.”

The task of a statecraft activist is to conjoin the physical and moral realms on the basis of a unity of knowledge and action of the sort he believes Wang Yangming would have appreciated. The sage adapts to the time and does what is necessary, but what is necessary is already predetermined in the cosmic order and not up to the individual. Geng’s analogy is a silkworm cocoon: “When a spring silkworm spins its cocoon, it takes its shape from the thing to which it attaches itself.” The worm’s
spinning is unalterable, but the shape conforms to what is at hand. That inalterability Geng calls “being unable to stop” or “not allowing oneself to stop” (budeyi, burong ziyi), which I translate here as “the compulsion to act.” Not unlike Wang Yangming’s concept of the production of action from “pristine moral consciousness” (liangzhi), the compulsion to act is almost autonomic, something embedded in nature rather than requiring self-reflection. Worried by Li’s attraction to the Buddhist doctrine of karma, Geng insists that the principles of right action are pre-inscribed, not imposed by past moral acts. He who renounces secular activism by “leaving the world,” as the pursuit of Buddhist cultivation was termed, abandons his compulsion to act and abdicates his responsibility to improve the world.

In his response to this letter (#3) Li takes issue with the authority of the ancients, conspicuously Confucius. He is offended that Geng should put forward Mencius’s self-declared failure on this point as an example for himself. He dismisses Geng’s reverence for Confucius as his “family teaching”—a pejorative term among Ming intellectuals, but a sensitive one given Li’s former position as tutor to Geng’s family—and scoffs at the idea of learning anything from Confucius. “Confucius never told anyone to learn from Confucius,” he writes. In support of this judgment he quotes Confucius’s advice to his disciple Yan Yuan that “the practice of benevolence comes from oneself.” Li goes further by insisting that “Confucius had no method to pass on to his disciples,” then makes a Buddhist feint by declaring that “his method was learning that depends on there being neither self nor other.” His point is that the teacher must adapt to the student, not the other way round. This is not current practice, which is why the self-appointed guardians of moral truth tend to instruct people by upholding the wooden models of applying “virtuous conduct and ritual to restrain their minds, and administration and punishments to constrain their bodies.” The task of education—and by extension, the task of ruling—is not to force people into regimens but to shape their natural impulses. Only by recognizing and shaping selfishness can the sage hope to bring peace to the world. “If everyone goes after what he likes and devotes himself to what he is good at, there will not be a single person who is without his function. How easy to rule in this way!”

Toward the end of the letter, Li praises Geng for being earnest in his practice of moral cultivation but reminds him, “Not everyone is like you.” Geng should not expect everyone to do as he does just because he thinks he is right, nor should he impose uniformity on the natural variety of individual responses. “I respect you,” Li concludes, “but I don’t have to be just
like you.” Li is not arguing for moral relativism. He wants space for an ecu-
menism of method, with final moral decisions left to the individual. Only
by mobilizing individuals can Geng hope to bring “the ignorant and unright-
eous” to morality. Haranguing them with quotations from Confucius will
never work. Li and Geng both were devoted to achieving the unity of
knowledge and action that Wang Yangming called for, but they differed on
how that was to be done. That difference would split the Wanli intellectual
world down the middle.

There is a short fragment of a letter in Geng’s collected works, which I
have placed next in the sequence (#4), that seems to challenge Li’s interpre-
tation of Geng’s concept of the compulsion to act. Li raised the legitimacy
of desire as a moral wellspring, but desire, Geng writes, has nothing to do
with moral action. In his psychology, acting morally is a natural compul-
sion that overrides mere desire. The mechanism for ensuring this is the
mind, for it is the mind that controls desire and thus opens the path for
right action. Li’s reply in turn is that desire and moral action work in tan-
dem, not against each other (#5). Desire becomes a problem when officials
let the desire of their ambition overwhelm their judgments. If an official’s
desire is to effect positive change in the world, he should retire from the
fray as soon as his work is accomplished, not seek advancement and the
corruption that entails. Li then switches—perhaps because he has stitched
two letters together into a single text—to an extended complaint about
Geng’s criticism of a mutual acquaintance, Deng Huoqu, who chose to
abstain from public service. He chides Geng for not conceding the value of
detachment to those who choose to practice it and, by implication, for mis-
taking what Geng feels is his disinterestedness with an interestedness on
his own part, which is exactly what prevents him from achieving the
detachment necessary to be truly useful to the world.

The next letter in the sequence, also from Li, struggles with the problem
of the contradiction between the interests of self and of others (#6). The
self/other dichotomy, which is central to Buddhist ontology, Li argues, is
ignored by Confucians, to their peril. It arises in Mencius’s famous conver-
sation with King Hui of Liang in which he deplores the king’s self-interest
but offers no alternative other than banishing it. Li accepts that Geng
regards his public service as disinterested, yet his failure to take account of
interests—his own and those of the people—will doom his efforts at state-
craft. His program of moral renovation makes impossible demands on
people and is therefore impractical. Rather than force people to set aside
their interests, Geng should let them pursue those interests to bring about
change. Li’s next three letters (#7, 8, 9) enlarge on the danger of serving
without a more profound knowledge of how to guide people, the danger being that malevolence will overwhelm benevolence.\textsuperscript{16}

The next letter from Li is by far the longest on either side. As four of Geng’s letters respond to different parts of this letter, I treat this as a composite later edited for publication into a single continuous text. To catch the flow of their conversation, I have broken the first part of this long letter into what seem to me to be its original constituent parts (#10, 12, 14, 16), interspersed with Geng’s replies (#11, 13, 15, 17).\textsuperscript{17}

Li opens his letter by thanking Geng for an earlier letter, now lost (#10). He gives Geng the strongest possible compliment by saying that Geng’s desire to instruct him, and his own willingness to receive that instruction, are positive testimony to Geng’s concept of the compulsion to act, though Li reminds him that the corollary must be recognition that the views offered on both sides are equally genuine. Li then goes on to deplore the fraying of their friendship. He blames Geng’s commitment to serve a troubled regime as the context of that fraying. To prove the danger of serving, he goes back to an event that set them at odds eight years earlier, the death of their mutual friend, He Xinyin. He Xinyin had been living in Huguang, possibly as a guest of the Gengs in Huang’an, in 1576, when his social activism led the provincial governor to order his arrest. He went into hiding but was apprehended three years later and died of torture in prison in Wuchang.\textsuperscript{18} At the time Geng had been in a position to influence the outcome of the case, yet he had not acted to defend He. (He Xinyin’s biography uncannily anticipates Li’s own, for Li too would be driven out of Huguang by a censorial official a dozen years after he wrote this letter and end up dying in prison for want of intervention from higher officials.) “Your ‘compulsion to act’ consists of indiscriminately loving people without addressing them individually,” Li chides. “My compulsion to act involves finding people in the course of practicing my Way and not treating them lightly. I suspect that these are different.”\textsuperscript{19} Li then goes on to compare Geng’s moral standards to the sort of rote moralism dunned into schoolboys, and his own to the moral wisdom that resides in the Confucian classic \textit{The Great Learning} (Da xue). Geng’s problem, according to Li, is that he cannot discriminate: he soaks everything in the same moral downpour, whereas Li’s compulsion to act is like frozen snow that stores moisture until it is needed to ease drought. Geng is no better than a village schoolmaster who drills his pupils without getting results, whereas Li is like a general who sends out crack troops to capture the opponent’s king, achieving great effect with little effort. “Your compulsion to act is a case of knowing that you are not permitted to halt, but the true compulsion to act
depends on really desiring not to halt. My compulsion to act is a case of not knowing that I am obliged to act.” This might not be how Confucius would do it, but it is the best course for him.

In his reply, Geng is clearly offended by Li’s belittling comment that his teaching is nothing better than drilling schoolboys in filial piety and deference (#11). He turns the tables and argues that training the young in deference is precisely the foundation on which virtue can arise and which Li’s Buddhistic borrowings cannot account for. “Take away filiality and deference, and what virtue is left to illuminate? I suspect that what you call ‘illuminating virtue’ is watching for the evanescent principle of nonbirth from the vantage of perfect silent self-annihilation, and then saying that it is bright.” It is not possible to transcend the elementary building blocks of moral life by wishing them away with a wave of Buddhistic nonaction. Geng ends his letter as personally as Li started his, invoking an unpleasant incident from even earlier, when Li, obliged to return to Fujian to observe mourning for his grandfather, left his family in Gongcheng, Henan, the site of his first official post, returning in 1566 to learn that in his absence two of his daughters had starved to death during a famine. Geng implies Li’s responsibility for their deaths.

The breach between Geng and Li had now widened, and in his reply Li chastises Geng for “holding to [his] course without doubting” and failing to see the narrowness of his perspective (#12). More damning, what Geng thinks differentiates him from everyone else is precisely what makes him the same as everyone else, the selfish desire to survive and get ahead:

Morning to night, they plow in order to get food, buy land in order to plant, build houses in order to find shelter, study in order to pass the examinations, hold office in order to win honor and fame, and search for propitious sites in order to provide good fortune for sons and grandsons. The daily round of tasks is done for the benefit of oneself and one’s family, and not a bit for others. Yet whenever you start talking about learning, you say: “You are for yourself alone, whereas I am for others; you are out for your own advantage, whereas I wish to benefit others.”

In the background lurks Mencius’s observation, to which Li alludes, that goodness and self-advantage are polar opposites, with Sage-Emperor Shun standing for the one and the infamous Robber Zhi for the other. Li Zhi sides with the bandits against the sages, doubting that the sages had a perfect understanding of all matters for all time. All are “slaves to
self-advantage,” he argues. To pretend otherwise is to put words and deeds at odds. Even Confucius and Mencius went about their business just like everyone else, no different from traders and farmers: “You are not the equal of peasants in the marketplace talking about what they do. Those who do business say it is business; those who do farm work say it is farm work.” Geng’s inability to own up to his own self-interest makes him their moral inferior.  

Li closes by reminding Geng of Wang Yangming’s famous remark, “The streets are full of sages,” and the Buddhist adage, “Everyone is a Buddha.” Even Confucius made no distinctions when it came to accepting students.

Geng rejects Li’s charge that he is holding to the old course without doubting himself (#13). He agrees that doubt is necessary for the exercise of moral thinking and insists that the Confucian concept of benevolence requires doubt if it is to attain any depth. But this is precisely where the Buddhist approach to moral action goes wrong as a philosophy of education. Reducing reality to mere appearance drains the student’s capacity to delve below the surface of things and find the deeper foundation of moral being. Li responds by accusing Geng of condemning others while regarding himself as immune to moral failure (#15). Geng in his turn goes back to his starting point by insisting that Confucius and Mencius are worth emulating because their “tradition of benevolence . . . compelled them to act.” Weary of metaphysical sparring, Geng wants to bring the issue back into the realm of action, which is where he feels he can make his contribution and the withdrawn Li cannot. Li responds with a reminder about the emptiness of words—here he too seems to have tired of metaphysics—and asks Geng once again to allow other methods than his own to bring people to goodness (#16). After all, he and Geng are on the same path of illuminating virtue and, as such, equals: “[Accept this,] and then you can forget everything you have ever said about my discarding ethics, leaving my wife and family, shaving my head, and wearing Buddhist robes. What do you think? There has never been anything in which I have not been the same as you, except for your being a high official. How can your learning be superior to mine because of your high office? If it is, then Confucius and Mencius would not have dared open their mouths!” It is an artful dodge, and Geng responds by telling Li so (#17). Yes, the great teachers of the Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions understood that they were “setting up names and appearances to change those who came after them,” quoting directly from Li’s letter, but the lesson is not that their formulas are equally valid versions of reality, or that the distinctions among them do not matter. The challenge is to decide which of the sages offers the best program.
The most important letter on Li’s side is his “Farewell to Justice Minister Geng” of 1588, when Li left Huang’an for neighboring Macheng County, where the local gentry were more tolerant of his Buddhist inclinations (#18). He writes that he went to the Geng family compound to take his leave but found only two or three youths to whom he could not utter what was in his heart. That situation led him to reflect on Confucius’s saying, “Not to talk to one who could be talked to is to lose a person; to talk to those who cannot be talked to is to waste one’s words.” Discouraged, he presses ahead with his complaint that Geng has behaved like one who “follows old paths” and “treads in old footsteps”—one of the “sanctimoniously orthodox” (xiangyuan) whom Confucius singled out as conventionally minded—whereas he himself is an impetuous soul, “like the phoenix flying at a great height,” ambitious and uncompromising (kuang), who aspires to “hear the Way.” “There exist impetuous and uncompromising people who have not heard the Way, but never has there existed anyone who could hear the Way who was not impetuous and uncompromising.” How could Geng hope to “hear the Way” if he continued to cleave so closely to proper behavior?

In his reply, Geng chides Li for his condescension. People in the category of “the sanctimoniously orthodox” are not stupid; they just feel that they do not have the capacity “to enter the Way of Yao and Shun” [#19]. With proper instruction, though, they could. After all, that Way “is simply the tradition of benevolence by which these men felt a compulsion to act.” The problem is not the slow, patient learning that Confucianism offers, but the refusal of “the Chan fanatics of this era” to compromise. Buddhism has simply given people a deceptively easy alternative that produces no results. “The Way of Sakyamuni is certainly difficult to penetrate,” Geng accepts, but that does not mean it is on a par with “the Way of Yao, Shun, Confucius, and Mencius.” Despite Li’s departure from Huang’an, Geng asks Li to think over what he has said in hopes that their conversation might continue. And there the stream of letters ends.

**LETTERS AND FRIENDS**

The charges of personal moral failure that Li and Geng laid against each other in these letters must have been difficult for one friend to hear from another. Still, it behooves us to remember the genre: these were letters between friends, no matter how estranged. The bonds between them were deep. As Li reveals in a later letter to another friend, his early years in Huang’an were the happiest of his life. “All three Geng brothers treated me
“Dingxiang was my strict master, Dingli was my understanding friend, and it went without saying that Dinglih was also very close. In affection they were generous; in protective influence, even more so.”

Despite everything, he remembered all three with great fondness.

It was the strength of their friendship that made their disagreement so heated. Each was disappointed in the other. As friendship was central to Li’s philosophy of the conduct of ethical life, the pain of Geng’s withdrawal of friendship was all the more sharp. As Li writes in his first letter, “Though the space within the four seas is great, finding a friend is difficult”; once found, that friend should not be abandoned. After enlarging on this theme, Li writes with sadness, “[I] had hoped to live and die in the hands of my friends, but now cannot.” He concludes by admitting to Geng, “How troubled I feel.”

The ideal of friendship runs through Li’s letters. In the tenth letter in the sequence, he praises Geng for a now lost letter in which, he writes, Geng took the trouble to correct him. Correction, Li declares, is a sign of “true friendship.” Even at the height of their disagreement, at least from Li’s side, the two recognized each other as friends. And yet Li wouldn’t leave the issue there. In his letter chastising Geng for how he failed to handle the He Xinyin affair, he uses the word “friend” nine times to underscore the emotional devastation he feels. Geng owed He the duty of friendship but retreated to the obligations that serving the state imposed on him. In reply, Geng invokes a statement in the Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong yong) and explains, “What I call obligation to action is when the minds of sons, subjects, younger brothers, and friends grasp the constant way of living.” This is an important declaration on Geng’s part. It declares that friendship is only the fifth of the five cardinal relationships, posterior to all the other relationships based on the hierarchies of kinship (parent-child, elder brother–younger brother, husband-wife) and the political order (ruler-subject). As several scholars, including Timothy Billings and Martin Huang, have noted, some late-Ming philosophers desired to elevate the fifth relationship, of friend-friend, above the other four. In his ordering, Geng has declined to move friendship up ahead of the others. The first four bonds have to be fulfilled before friendship can be permitted to direct action.

In his response, Li subtly corrects Geng’s citation from the Doctrine of the Mean, reminding him that Confucius names the four prior bonds in the context of declaring that he himself failed to live up to any of them. The point of the passage was not to establish a hierarchy among these bonds; rather, Li maintains, it was to express how difficult they are to uphold. Geng quietly accepts the correction in his reply, suggesting that the key
message of the passage is humility. But Confucius admits his errors, and Li doesn’t. Geng does not deny the bond of friendship but insists that it must coexist with the other bonds. By implication, society is best organized by hierarchy; equality can only ever supplement what hierarchy provides. In his farewell letter, though, Li acknowledges that the blame for “losing a friend” is entirely his. He does not insist that friendship is a higher bond than the others, but he does call Confucius to his side by instancing his sadness at the death of his most favored disciple, Yan Yuan, in unspoken parallel to his own loss of Geng Dingli. “Confucius in his time certainly realized how hard it is to find a friend. How much harder it is today!”

When Li Zhi found himself caught in the crossfire of the politics swirling around the conduct of Chief Grand Secretary Shen Yiguan, whose denunciation he was falsely rumored to have been composing, he had only his friends to turn to, and some of them came to his defense. Ma Jinglun, with whom he was lodging at the time, wrote to officials in charge of his case and defended him on the grounds that it was unreasonable to require a uniformity of views. “Since everyone has his own view,” Ma pointed out, “how can everyone be the same? Why should it be necessary that their views all be the same?” He suggested that they recall the great founding figures of neo-Confucianism in the Song dynasty: “If all philosophers who agreed completely were judged acceptable, and all who disagreed unacceptable, then Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan would not have had their debate.” Rather than mount a general argument about a right to privacy in the expression of personal views, Ma preferred to situate Li’s outspoken disagreements with Geng and others squarely within the Confucian tradition. To do so was to assume that Confucianism was still a living body of thought, subject to public scrutiny and evaluation, not a doctrine that had achieved its final form. It was more than most sitting officials were willing to endorse.

Arguing for the diversity of views rather than uniformity may have been behind the decision to include a fragment of one of Li’s letters to Geng in the posthumous collection of his writings, Another Book to Burn, in 1618. The scholar in charge of the edition was the moderate Wang Yangming adherent Jiao Hong, then the senior neo-Confucian in Nanjing. Inclusion of the letter could be seen as a provocation to reopen the Li-Geng dispute, or it could indicate that Jiao did not think the discussion should be buried; perhaps he wanted to invite the reading public to think again about what the two men had written. The altercation had not been a petty personal squabble but a principled debate between friends who cared deeply enough about issues of common concern to want to bring each other over to the other side. Indeed, this is more or less how Li represents their difference in
every letter he wrote to Geng, assuring him of his friendship and asking Geng to recognize this bond.

Despite their falling out over the compulsion to act, friendship prevailed in the end. Li returned to Huang’an shortly before Geng died in 1596 to effect a reconciliation. Once Geng was gone, however, the protection that Li had enjoyed in the area dissolved and he departed. He returned to the area three years later, but after only one season he was driven out by Administration Commissioner Feng Yingjing. Ironically, or cruelly, Feng moved to Beijing shortly after Li fled there, developed a friendship with Matteo Ricci, and contributed a preface to the third (1601) edition of his book on friendship. Li died in custody the following year, neither condemned nor vindicated and without having resolved the tensions—between hierarchy and friendship, service and withdrawal, moral inadequacy and moral perfection, action and thought—that animated his philosophy and that have continued to echo in the public of letters down to the present.30

NOTES

1 Geng Dingxiang’s mourning status is noted in one of the prefaces to the first draft gazetteer of Huang’an County (completed 1588). Geng is celebrated there because he was instrumental in founding the county by separating it from Macheng County. See Huang’an xianzhi (1822), yuanxu, 6a–b.

2 For a selection of original letters from the late Ming, see Shi and Yang, Mingdai mingxian chidu ji; neither Li nor Geng is represented in this collection. The collector of these letters, Gary Ho, says that Geng’s letters are difficult to find, and Li’s impossible. On the interest of the genre for the history of calligraphy, see Bai, “Chinese Letters.”

3 A selection of these letters has been translated in Brook, “Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang Correspondence” in A Book to Burn, 34–62; quotations from the letters have been taken from this text. For a summary of the exchange between Li and Geng, see Brook, The Troubled Empire, 179–81.

4 Most surviving letters reside in the collected works of their authors, though some have been reproduced for their calligraphic interest, for example, Shi and Yang, Mingdai mingxian chidu ji.

5 Popular household manuals of the late Ming included letter-writing guides, e.g., Yu Xiangdou, Wanyong zhengzong.

6 Lei, Dulü suoyan, 293 (prohibition on carrying “private goods”), 289 (prohibition on carrying “luggage” for other people); translated in Jiang Yonglin, The Great Ming Code, 151–52.

7 King, “The Family Letters of Xu Guangqi,” 9, 10, 23, 24, 26, 27.

8 Dyer, Grammatical Analysis, 397–403. For more on this book, see Brook, Great State, 131–35.

Brook, The Confusions of Pleasure, 186–89.

Siegert, Relays, 13.

The term “public consumption” is taken from Bai, “Chinese Letters,” 386.

Numbers in parentheses correspond to the sequence of numbers of the letters of Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang published in Li Zhi, A Book to Burn.

On Li Zhi’s attitudes toward friendship, see chapter 3.

On Li Zhi’s relationships with and attitudes toward his teachers and students, see chapter 5.

The eighth letter is a short extract from the seventh, which Jiao Hong chose to include in Another Book to Burn, rather than a separate letter.

The four fragments on Li’s side make up only the first third of the composite letter.

Wu Pei-yi and Julia Ching, He Xinyin biography in Dictionary of Ming Biography, 513–15.

Li Zhi was not alone in blaming Geng. Huang Zongxi also held Geng responsible for He’s death, observing, “If Master Geng took as his ruling principle the compulsion to act, how then could he not have acted in this case?” (Ming Ru xue’an, 815).

For interpretations of Li Zhi’s accounts of these events, see chapters 1 and 2.

For additional interpretation of this passage and the conflict between Li and Geng, see chapter 8.

On the Macheng gentry’s tolerance of Buddhism, see Macheng xianzhi (1882), 10.10b.


Billings, introduction, 37; Martin Huang, “Male Friendship and Jiangxue,” 168; see also chapter 3.

Eleven years after the correspondence ended, Li Zhi met Matteo Ricci in Nanjing. The second edition of Ricci’s collection of one hundred European maxims on friendship had just been published. Li was so pleased with the book that he had several copies made to distribute among his students. See Billings, introduction, 23.

Shen Defu, Wanli yehuo bian, 691.

Ma Jingsun, “Yu Zhangke Li Linye zhuan shang Xiao Sikou” and “Li Zhi shengping zhuanji ziliao huibian,” in Li Zhi yanjiu cankao ziliao 2:54–55.

On the continuing state pressure to discourage a public of letters today, see Howard Choy, review of Fang Fang, Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City, Modern Chinese Literature and Culture, The Ohio State University: https://u.osu.edu/mclc/2020/08/19/wuhan-diary-review-2/