AFFILIATION AND DIFFERENTIATION

Li Zhi as Teacher and Student

RIVI HANDLER-SPITZ

In Li Zhi’s mind, no word was more strongly associated with “friend” (you) than “teacher” (shi). In an essay titled “True Teachers” (Zhen shi), he asserted, “Teachers and friends are essentially the same.” Since he equated pedagogical relationships with friendship, it should come as no surprise that he nurtured with his teachers and students relationships no less complicated or emotionally fraught than those he cultivated with friends. Part of the difficulty of analyzing these relationships, however, lies in Li Zhi’s explicit disavowal of them. Although he wrote prolifically on the subject of friendship, he proclaimed, “I have never bowed four times and accepted assignments from a single teacher, nor have I ever received four bows and officially taken on a friend.” Elsewhere he avers, “I will not take on one single disciple.” Yet despite these denials, the historical record demonstrates beyond any doubt that Li Zhi did indeed study under leading scholars and take on a wide array of disciples. This chapter analyzes Li Zhi’s attitudes toward teacher-student relationships from three perspectives: his theoretical discussions of pedagogy, his conversations with some of his own pupils, and his relationships with two of his most renowned mentors, Wang Ji and Luo Rufang. As prominent members of Wang Yangming’s School of the Mind, these teachers promoted an eclectic, syncretic philosophy, central to which was the cultivation of students’ individual nature. Their teachings raise the question of how, or even whether, a student educated in this tradition can pay homage to his mentors. Should the student strike off on his own, thus demonstrating his independence of thought? Would acknowledging a debt to his masters signal the teacher’s
failure to nourish the student’s originality? Li Zhi and his pupil Yuan Zhongdao grappled mightily with these problems and arrived at slightly different conclusions. Whereas Li emphasized his affiliation with his teachers and deployed the powerful discourse of friendship to cast himself as “one who understood” them, Yuan opted to accentuate his radical autonomy from Li. Each man in his own way struggled with the challenges of affiliation and differentiation within a distinguished intellectual legacy.

Examining his relationships with his teachers and students requires consulting sources both by and about Li Zhi. *A Book to Burn* contains funerary tributes Li Zhi composed for Wang Ji and Luo Rufang. These texts provide windows onto his attitudes toward each master. Biographies of both teachers also appear in *Another Book to Keep (Hidden)*, a work of history attributed to Li Zhi. However, these biographies provide only ancillary evidence, since according to a preface by Li Weizhen, Li Zhi compiled *Another Book to Keep (Hidden)* by excerpting and recombing passages from existing histories. The authenticity of this book has also been doubted because of its posthumous publication. Nonetheless, the biographies it contains supplement and complement more dependable sources. For Li Zhi’s theory of education, I have relied on a substantial afterword published in *A Book to Burn*. Evidence concerning his interactions with his students was recorded in four collections of recorded sayings (*yulu*), all compiled by his students: *Conversations by the Lake* (*Hushang yulu*), *Illuminating Discussions of Antiquity* (*Mingdeng dao gu lu*, also known as *Discussions of Antiquity, Dao gu lu*), *Answers to Questions at Yongqing Temple* (*Yongqing dawen*), and *Conversations in the Oak Grove* (*Zuolin jitan*).

*Conversations in the Oak Grove* was the liveliest of these accounts. It was composed by Li Zhi’s distinguished protégé Yuan Zhongdao probably in the late 1590s and likely not published until two decades later. Although a preface to this collection claims that the text, which presents anecdotes and brief dialogues between Li Zhi and his pupils, “depicts Li Zhi just as he really was,” many of its vignettes are historically unverifiable. Moreover, compiling collections of “recorded sayings” necessarily involved translating fleeting oral discourse into static written documents and, as Jiang Wu argues in chapter 9, the production of such compilations, at least in Buddhist circles, also necessitated adapting source material to conform to established generic conventions. Thus, it would be unwise to regard Yuan’s text as an accurate rendering of actual conversations between Li Zhi and his students. Rather, I propose that this text be interpreted as providing vivid images of Li Zhi’s pedagogical style as remembered, creatively reimagined, or strategically constructed by one of his more accomplished protégés.
and original students. Just as Li Zhi crafted images of his teachers in the essays he wrote to commemorate their deaths, so too did Yuan Zhongdao fashion a literary portrait of Li Zhi in *Conversations*.

**IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE MASTERS**

Writings by and about Li Zhi closely affiliate him with distinguished teachers, including the founder of the Taizhou branch of the School of the Mind, Wang Gen, as well as Wang Ji, Luo Rufang, and many others. Wang Gen and Wang Ji were among the most prominent disciples of Wang Yangming, while Luo Rufang was a generation younger and studied under Wang Gen’s protégé Yan Jun (1504–1596). Upon meeting Wang Ji and Luo Rufang in Nanjing in the early 1570s, when he participated in “lecture meetings” (*jianghui*), Li Zhi swiftly developed a deep respect for both men. Despite their relatively brief in-person encounters, these two masters profoundly influenced Li Zhi. Eager to showcase his debt to them, he quotes one of his own students’ description of the sway they held over Li: “The name Master Wang [Ji] was always on [Li Zhi’s] lips, followed by that of Master Luo Rufang.” In Li Zhi’s account, the student adds, “not a year passed when [Li Zhi] did not read books by these two masters, [nor did he ever] open his mouth without speaking of their teachings.”

Li Zhi’s decision to place these comments in the mouth of his student lends them an air of objectivity that enhances their credibility.

In his funerary tributes to Wang Ji and Luo Rufang, Li Zhi also uses his own voice to highlight his deep affective bond with these teachers. The latter text begins by lamenting that Luo died without being able to pass on his teachings to a worthy student. Here, Li Zhi empathetically imagines how the master may have felt when, “on the verge of death, just as he wanted to cry out but dared not, [Luo] conceived the desire to persevere one more day in the hope of finding [someone who truly understood him]. But in the end, he was unable to find such a person.” Having himself suffered anguish over the possibility of dying friendless and alone, Li Zhi poignantly comments, “A thousand years hence, when people hear this story [about Luo Rufang’s dying without a worthy disciple or friend], they will still shed tears over the unendurable pain the master suffered.” The pathos with which he recounts Luo’s death rhetorically strengthens Li Zhi’s emotional connection to his master.

This bond may explain why, even though in this essay Li Zhi emphatically repeats that he “never formally studied with the master,” he nonetheless takes upon himself the weighty ethical responsibility of ensuring that
Luo’s teachings be carried on. Li writes, “For the master’s sake, I must not hesitate to trek high and low searching among his disciples for a truly understanding and accomplished person. When I find this person, I will commemorate the master and utter . . . words intended to reassure his soul. . . . Those who leave behind no descendants have nothing more to hope for; but the master was not one of these.” Devoted as he was to Luo Rufang, Li Zhi evidently could not bear the possibility of his master’s dying without an heir. But it is difficult to account for the discrepancy between his previous claim that Luo Rufang died without a successor and his confident tone here—in the same essay—that the master did indeed have an heir. The contradiction could perhaps be resolved by reference to Luo Rufang’s recorded conversations, a text to which Li Zhi alludes. Did Li Zhi believe that at the time of Luo Rufang’s death none of his disciples fully grasped his teachings, but later, by studying Luo’s recorded sayings, someone gained insight into them? Li Zhi appears to have been in quest of such a person. Yet, unless and until such an outstanding student were actually found, his confident tone scarcely seems warranted. On what grounds could he so confidently affirm that the master left behind a worthy disciple? The text hints at one possibility but shies away from affirming it: perhaps Li Zhi considered himself Luo Rufang’s special student.

The text’s focus on Li Zhi’s acute grief upon learning of the master’s death lends credence to this interpretation and suggests that he may have viewed himself not merely as Luo’s disciple but also as his trusted friend. This interpretation is further bolstered by his use of the term “understand” (zhi) in the following passage. In the late Ming, this word was redolent of associations to friendship, construed as one man’s heartfelt appreciation for another. In this text, Li Zhi remorsefully confesses that he did not begin writing the memorial testimony for Luo until goaded to action by one of his own disciples. The hyperbolic assertions and dramatically repeated rhetorical questions that follow ostensibly aim to lessen his sense of guilt for not having acted sooner, but they also serve the rhetorical purpose of strengthening Li Zhi’s connection to his master. By rationalizing his initial silence as sorrow so overwhelming it could not be expressed in words, he positions himself as the master’s most emotionally receptive and therefore most authentic disciple—and his bosom friend.

Ever since I heard the news of the master’s death, I have felt as if I’ve been passing my days in a dream. Only now do I understand that the phrase “True grieving expresses no grief; true weeping sheds no tears” is not just empty words. I now struggle to calm
my anguished thoughts. Looking back on the past, how ridiculous it seems! Could anyone say I did not think about the master? Indeed I did think about him. Could anyone say I did not understand him? Indeed I did understand him, deeply. Could anyone say I was incapable of speaking about the master? Indeed no one was more capable of speaking about him than I! And yet my lips were sealed, my mind a blank; I was paralyzed, unable to lift my brush. Even I do not understand the reason why.¹⁷

Casting himself as the one person who “deeply understood” his master, Li Zhi arrogates to himself the authority to pass on the master’s teachings, a right he exercises by composing the commemorative essay itself. This text ensured that at least the aspects of Luo Rufang’s teachings he found most compelling would indeed be conveyed to future generations, and made himself the conduit of this transmission. In this context, Li Zhi’s confident assertion makes sense: the master did have a successor: Li Zhi himself. More difficult to explain, however, is Li Zhi’s earlier claim that the master died without such an intellectual heir. One may speculate that perhaps Li Zhi considered it self-aggrandizing or unseemly to assert this privilege openly. Yet in light of his well-documented arrogance, this conclusion scarcely seems warranted. As is so frequently the case in Li Zhi’s writings, the tension stands unresolved. But what is clear is that he strove to present himself publicly as the legitimate inheritor of an illustrious intellectual lineage, and he expressed this connection through the vocabulary of friendship.

If Li Zhi’s writings convey ambivalence about his role vis-à-vis Luo Rufang, his funerary tribute to Wang Ji provides greater clarity. Here Li Zhi presents himself as unequivocally qualified to carry on Wang Ji’s legacy and interpret his teachings. He dismisses all contemporary scholars except himself for failing to appreciate the profundity of Wang’s precepts—lessons he compares favorably to those of Confucius himself—and recounts that on first encountering Wang Ji, he “immediately acknowledged [the master] as an extraordinary person.”¹⁸ This detail bolsters the image of Li Zhi as a man of discernment. Having thoroughly disparaged his contemporaries, he concludes with a resoundingly self-congratulatory flourish: “[Wang Ji] surely would consider me someone ‘skilled in interpretation’! He surely would regard me as someone who understood him!”¹⁹ Here again Li Zhi invokes the discourse on friendship, casting himself as a uniquely insightful student. Indeed, more than a decade later, in 1599, he would publish an annotated volume of Wang Ji’s recorded conversations, thus ensuring that
his master’s words—along with his own interpretation and commentary—would be transmitted.\textsuperscript{20}

Li Zhi was particularly inspired by Wang Ji’s and Luo Rufang’s flexible, antihierarchical teaching styles, which, drawing on the tradition of Wang Yangming before them, encouraged students to seek understanding for themselves.\textsuperscript{21} He also admired these teachers’ ability to inspire and transform students of diverse backgrounds. For example, in his funerary essay on Luo Rufang, he provides a lengthy description of the many types of students the master taught:

[The master] took his students from shepherd boys and woodcutters, old fishermen, street urchins from the marketplace, officials from the yamen, peddlers and retailers, weaver women, and plowmen, reputable Confucians who might “steal straw sandals” and great bandits wearing caps and robes.\textsuperscript{22} If only they “had the right mindset,” the master did not . . . care at all whether his followers were poor scholars wearing threadbare clothes, hermits who lodged by streams and cliffs, pale-skinned young students, provincial degree holders wearing green-collared robes, Daoists wearing yellow robes and feathery accoutrements, Buddhist clergy wearing black garments, or Confucian officials.\textsuperscript{23}

Impressed by Luo’s ability to communicate his down-to-earth philosophy to students of both sexes, diverse religious commitments, and all strata of society, Li Zhi surmised that he “never interacted with anyone in vain” and added, “I doubt that any student who came to his door could have left without receiving his teachings.”\textsuperscript{24} He described Wang Ji as possessing an equally agreeable temperament and likewise making no social distinctions among his students.\textsuperscript{25}

To match Wang Ji’s welcoming stance toward all students, this master’s biography in Another Book to Keep (Hidden) attributes to him a remarkably egalitarian pedagogical method. It portrays him rejecting the traditional hierarchy of masters over disciples and instead promoting collaborative learning among equals. The biography quotes Wang as stating, “[My disciples and I] cannot refrain from honing our understanding together with people of similar aspirations. If in the process someone is stimulated to share his understanding of spirit-and-nature [xingming], then naturally everyone benefits. It is not the case that I have a method that can be transmitted.”\textsuperscript{26} Li Zhi’s funerary tribute to Wang Ji likewise compares this
master’s influence on his students to healing rain that nourishes and prompts new growth.  

Eventually, when Li Zhi himself became a teacher, he developed methods inspired by his masters’ examples. Like Wang and Luo, he attracted a motley array of students, including Buddhist clergy, laymen, and even women, and engaged in what Jiang Wu describes as a community of Dao learners (xuedaoren). He fully embraced his teachers’ antihierarchical philosophy, instructing pupils not to place undue credence in authority figures since “sages are no different from ordinary people.” And, praising Confucius’s ability to “depart from the ordinary,” he implied that one need not be hemmed in by rigid social conventions. Perhaps paradoxically, the proof of his own mastery of these teachings lay in his ability to abandon his teachers’ precedents and strike out on his own. Thus Li Zhi pioneered a theory of pedagogy that even more radically minimized the role of teachers and insisted instead on students’ attaining self-sufficiency.

**Finding One’s Own Voice: Li Zhi’s Theory of Education**

In “Afterword to Journeying with Companions,” a short essay published in *A Book to Burn*, Li Zhi articulates a theory of pedagogy that aims to liberate pupils from the authority of their masters. Although this essay deals with musical—not ethical—education, it nonetheless provides a valuable lens through which to examine Li Zhi’s relationships with his students. The text pivots away from his vision of a disciple as one who “understands” (zhi) his master. Instead, it calls to mind the related metaphor of the zhi-yin, “one who understands the sound.” Li Zhi maintains that teachers must not presume to understand their students or offer too much guidance. Each student must discover his own voice. The text alludes to a heated discussion between Li Zhi and his close friend Jiao Hong regarding interpretations of a legend from *The History of the Zither* (Qin shi). The two friends disagreed on the moral of the story: Jiao Hong considered the tale proof that teachers can effectively guide students to refine their talent; Li Zhi, on the other hand, regarded the story as evidence of the superfluity of teachers and argued that students must undertake the difficult work of self-discovery.

The story concerns a student named Bo Ya, who, in ancient times, studied under a renowned zither master. Although Bo Ya attained a high degree of technical proficiency on his instrument, his teacher criticized his playing on the grounds that it did not express the full range and depth of human
emotion. To remedy the problem, the teacher invited Bo Ya to accompany him on a journey to meet his own master. Together, teacher and student traveled beyond the edge of civilization to the sea, whereupon the teacher left, promising to return with his master. Bo Ya waited patiently for ten days, but his teacher did not return, nor did the teacher’s master appear. Frightened and alone, Bo Ya became frantic. He craned his neck in every direction, searching for some sign of his teacher, but he heard nothing but the crashing of waves on the seashore and the sad cries of birds overhead. Gazing up at the sky, he cried, “My teacher has no master! He left me here in order to excite my emotions!” With that, he picked up his zither and composed his most harrowing song, “The Melody of Water Immortals.”

Jiao Hong maintained that the chief lesson to be learned from this story was that great art depends on both raw talent and formal instruction from a teacher. Were it not for the technical foundation Bo Ya acquired from his teacher first, his wilderness adventure would have produced nothing deserving the name of art. Li Zhi disagreed. He claimed that Bo Ya’s training was irrelevant, perhaps even detrimental to his musical accomplishment. Only by going out into nature and forgetting the skills he had previously been taught was Bo Ya able to produce such powerful music. Li Zhi wrote, “It was only because Bo Ya went to a remote seashore, a wilderness of hollow caves, a place distant from any human trace, that the ancient scores ceased to exist for him and there was no longer anything to be passed on nor any teacher to be found; in short, when none of the things he had formerly studied were available to him, he attained understanding by himself.” This passage evinces Li Zhi’s deep suspicion of a teacher’s ability to transmit knowledge or skills. His opinion resonates with Wang Ji’s denial, mentioned earlier, of his ability to communicate any method to his students. Expanding on this idea, Li Zhi argues in this text that students must seek understanding for themselves. By making Bo Ya the agent of the story, Li Zhi credits the student with the entire educational experience: traveling to the remote location, forgetting everything he had previously learned, and attaining understanding by himself.

However, Li Zhi’s interpretation overlooks the fact that Bo Ya did not undertake this journey of his own accord. It was the teacher’s idea to embark on this perilous field trip; the teacher engineered this transformative experience and then removed himself strategically so that Bo Ya could taste autonomy. And yet, although Li Zhi omits these details from his interpretation, the pedagogical strategies Yuan Zhongdao attributes to him in Conversations suggest that on some deep level Li Zhi understood—and even practiced—methods similar to those of Bo Ya’s zither teacher. Li Zhi
implemented pedagogical methods designed to stimulate his students’ own processes of self-discovery. The text portrays him goading them repeatedly to reduce their reliance on formal instruction and urging them instead to arrive at their own conclusions. It even suggests that these methods proved as efficacious for at least one student as they did for Bo Ya.

LI ZHI, PEDAGOGUE

Throughout the 1590s, a stream of students made the long trek to study with Li Zhi in his remote monastery by the edge of Dragon Lake.36 Yuan Zhongdao’s Conversations depicts Dragon Lake as a friendly, convivial pedagogical environment: students and teacher not only discussed on serious matters; they also joked and teased one another outdoors, enjoying the moonlight and sometimes indulging in alcohol until the wee hours of the night.37 Li Zhi is shown elaborating on and creatively adapting Wang Ji’s and Luo Rufen’s traditions of avoiding rigid doctrines and instead fostering students’ self-discovery through open-ended discussion. Central to his project is weaning his students from their dependence on his own authority as teacher.

Again and again the text shows Li Zhi resisting providing direct answers to students’ questions. For instance, when one student asks how to tell the difference between a sage and an ordinary person, Li Zhi behaves as a Chan master, turning the question back on the student: “Whom would you regard as a sage? Whom would you regard as an ordinary person?”38 Elsewhere, the text portrays Li Zhi inviting his students to ponder what a certain Song dynasty Chan master failed to understand. Stumped, his students mull over the question in silence until Yuan Zhongdao, assuming the question is a test, blurts out, “What was it? What did he fail to understand?” Li Zhi enigmatically replies, “I don’t know any more than you do!”39 Here Li Zhi is shown deliberately frustrating his students’ desire to rely on their teacher for guidance. In fact, his question prompts students to seek answers beyond what he himself knows. In one instance, he even explicitly calls upon them to teach him: “Since you’ve come all the way here, what do you have to teach me?”40 Perhaps more striking, in another passage a student’s diffident answer to a question elicits a harsh rebuke. When Li Zhi compliments a student on his spiritual attainment, the student bashfully replies, “And yet, I need a teacher to show me the path.” Li Zhi responds with anger. Making a face, he blurts out, “That kind of remark is just despicable!”41 These several incidents demonstrate Yuan Zhongdao’s perception that Li Zhi placed
a premium on students’ releasing themselves from reliance upon their master’s authoritative judgments.

Yuan Zhongdao’s observations find corroboration in works authored by Li Zhi. In letters and essays, including his most influential piece, “On the Childlike Mind” (Tongxin shuo), Li Zhi repeatedly warns of the dangers of merely transmitting the teachings of others, and elsewhere he analogizes this behavior to “lapping up [other people’s] snot and spit.” To avoid this error, he exhorts readers to develop their own moral and aesthetic compass and states, “Whether people are virtuous or not depends on their standing on their own two feet; it has nothing to do with teachers or friends.” To further emphasize this point, in his epistolary correspondence he even went so far as to address some of his students by the respectful title “Teacher” (shi). This highly unusual practice underscores Li Zhi’s commitment to encouraging students to question rather than accept his authority as master.

Yet despite Li Zhi’s explicit statements on the importance of fostering students’ independent thinking, conversations recorded by students other than Yuan Zhongdao do not especially stress this aspect of Li Zhi’s pedagogy. One could surmise that, following the example of his own teachers—and of Confucius before them—Li Zhi adapted his pedagogical strategies to meet his students’ individual temperaments and abilities: having identified in Yuan a student who thrived on intellectual sparring, Li Zhi engaged him especially frequently in such repartee. More likely, because Li Zhi had a nationwide reputation for gruffness and irascibility, he provoked all students equally. Why, then, did other pupils omit this aspect of his pedagogy or minimize its significance? One possible answer concerns the students’ purpose in seeking instruction. The students who compiled Illuminating Discussions of Antiquity studied Confucian classics with Li Zhi. Because this subject related directly to the imperial examinations, they may have privileged content over form in compiling their record. Yuan Zhongdao, on the other hand, not motivated by such utilitarian concerns, paid closer attention to Li Zhi’s pedagogical methods. Li’s emphasis on fostering students’ individuality resonated powerfully with Yuan’s own nascent aesthetic sensibilities and his budding understanding of the individual as the source of creativity. Years later, Yuan Zhongdao, along with his brothers Yuan Hongdao and Yuan Zongdao, would found an artistic movement, the Gong’an School, that championed a “romantic vision” of poetry as untutored outpourings of the soul, not laboriously crafted homages to past masters. Yuan’s abhorrence of anything smacking of imitation

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made him leery of overt displays of filiation and especially receptive to Li’s provocative pedagogical methods, which he enshrined in *Conversations*.

**A PARTICULARLY INDEPENDENT STUDENT?**

*Conversations* presents itself as testimony to Yuan Zhongdao’s independence of mind, fostered through his interactions with Li Zhi but not limited to what Li taught him. Perhaps the most salient indication of Yuan Zhongdao’s self-portrayal as independent from his teacher lies in his complete omission of Li Zhi’s name from the text. Instead, the text consistently refers to him as “the old man” (*sou*). Yuan even disingenuously states, “I’m not sure of the identity of the Old Man of the Oak Forest. . . . He was an exceedingly peculiar person.” The text relates that after having studied with “the old man” for some time, Yuan and his brothers left Macheng to continue their travels. When they later returned to seek further instruction, “the old man” had disappeared. By deliberately omitting Li’s name, Yuan renounces any possibility of filiation or indebtedness to his teacher. He presents himself squarely as his own man, unencumbered by any scholastic tradition. Additionally, the details about Li Zhi’s disappearance and the emphasis on his residence in an oak forest resonate with the pedagogy of Bo Ya’s teacher: in each case, an eccentric master renders himself physically inaccessible so as to compel the student to develop greater powers of self-reliance. Significantly, this transformative experience occurs far from society, in nature, where the authentic self can thrive unencumbered by social conventions.

Additionally, unlike Li Zhi, who fashioned for himself the public image of a student steeped in his masters’ teachings, Yuan Zhongdao cast himself as extraordinarily willing to differentiate himself from his teacher and assess him from a critical perspective. Although in the text Yuan Zhongdao occasionally presents himself as a favored pupil, he also unflinchingly paints himself as the butt of Li Zhi’s derision. More than once, the text portrays Li Zhi dismissing Yuan Zhongdao’s questions and comments as “irrelevant” (*bu xianggan*) or “illogical” (*bushi daoli*). These ostentatious, tongue-in-cheek performances of humility showcase the student’s disregard for his master’s opinions and his far greater interest in conveying his own ideas. Had he truly been ashamed of his teacher’s disapproval, Yuan could simply have omitted unflattering remarks. His decision to include them exhibits his rejection of the idea that his teacher’s judgments must be authoritative. This point is strongly corroborated in Yuan’s biography of Li, in which he emphatically affirms that although he admired Li, he absolutely did not consider himself Li’s “follower.” This example further underscores
Yuan’s eagerness to present himself as standing on his own two feet rather than bending to his teacher’s influence or authority. Thus, *Conversations* presents Yuan as a Bo Ya–like figure, whose crowning achievement lies in his original composition. It likewise casts Li Zhi as a pedagogue whose chief objective is to get out of the way and allow his student to come fully into his own.

**CONCLUSION**

Yuan Zhongdao’s presentation of himself as a student who has definitively broken free of his master’s authority seems to clash with Li Zhi’s sustained efforts to call attention to his prestigious pedigree. Yet both men’s actions exhibit their struggles with the twin challenges of affiliation and differentiation. While Yuan’s text pretends to minimize the role Li played in his education, the very existence of this text belies this implicit claim. Had Yuan gained total independence from his master, he would not have felt compelled to transmit his master’s conversations, much less lovingly record his biography. A similar ambivalence radiates throughout Li Zhi’s writings, which simultaneously celebrate and disavow the lineage of Wang Ji and Luo Rufang. Both cases provide examples of students attempting to craft their public image through the medium of print. And while one leaned toward embracing his connections with renowned teachers and the other accentuated—or perhaps even exaggerated—his autonomy from his master’s influence, both men struggled to adapt and transform their teachers’ precepts, making them more fully their own. In the late Ming era, a period known for its unprecedented emphasis on the individual, Yuan and Li each forged names for themselves as distinguished disciples as well as individuals remarkable in their own right.

**NOTES**

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1 Li Zhi, “Zhen shi,” in *LZ* 1:197; Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn*, 25. This idea is reinforced in his prominent use of the term “teacher-friend” (shiyou) to classify relationships in *Upon Arrival at the Lake* (Chutanji), a text in which he reorganizes and comments upon anecdotes from the fifth-century collection *New Account of Tales of the World* (Shishuo xinyu) and the more recent work *Mr. Jiao’s Grove of Categories* (Jiaoshi leilin) by Jiao Hong.
Li Zhi’s comments on the relationships between teachers and friends in *Upon Arrival at the Lake* deserve serious analysis but are beyond the scope of this chapter. On the compilation and structure of *Upon Arrival at the Lake*, see Ren, *Li Zhi shixue*, 28–34.


3 Li Zhi, “Yuyue,” in *LZ* 2:105. For further instances of Li Zhi’s disavowal of his role as a teacher, see chapter 8. See also Li Zhi, “Da Liu Jinchuan,” in *LZ* 3:128.

4 On the rhetoric of the friendship in premodern China, see Shields, *One Who Knows Me*; Martin Huang, “Male Friendship in Ming China”; Billings, introduction.


6 Even at the time of publication, the authenticity of this book was doubted. See Jiao Hong, “*Xu Cangshu xu*,” in *LZ* 11:367; Sheng Yusi, *Xi’er yingyu, Xiyuji wu*, cited in Ren, *Li Zhi shixue*, 9n1; Zhang Dai, “Li Zhi, Jiao Hong liezhuan,” in *Shikui shu*, 9:205–2086. However, not all the contents of *Xu Cangshu* are considered spurious. The contemporary historian Ren Guanwen has divided the material into three categories: portions likely by Li Zhi, portions likely by others, and portions of uncertain authorship. According to his classification, the biographies of Wang Yangming, Luo Rufang, and Wang Ji all fall into the most reliable category (cited in Ren, *Li Zhi shixue*, 17–18).

7 Although Yuan Zhongdao visited Li Zhi at Dragon Lake in 1590, accompanied by his brothers Yuan Hongdao and Yuan Zongdao, it seems that *Conversations* depicts discussions that occurred on a later visit, in 1592 or 1593. Yan and Zhu, *Li Zhi zhuan*, 233n4. *Conversations by the Lake*, no longer extant, was recorded by the monk Wunian; *Illuminating Discussions of Antiquity* was assembled by Liu Yongxiang and Liu Yongjian, the son and nephew of Li Zhi’s patron Liu Dongxing, and published by Li Zhi in 1597; *Answers to Questions at Yongqing Temple* was compiled by She Yongning and published in 1602. On the compilers of *Illuminating Discussions of Antiquity* and their motivations for publishing this book, see chapter 8. On the compilation of *Answers to Questions at Yongqing Temple*, as well as analysis of this text, see chapter 9.

8 Pan Zenghong, “*Shu Zuolin jitan*,” in *LZ* 18:303.

9 Li Zhi provides a detailed account of his intellectual pedigree and mentions the teachers Wang Gen, Xu Yue (d. 1551), Yan Jun (1504–1596), Zhao Zhenji (1508–1576), Deng Huoqu (1498–ca. 1569), Luo Rufang, He Xinyin, Qian Tongwen (n.d.), and Cheng Xueyan (n.d.). Li Zhi, “Da xiao,” in *LZ* 1:194–95; Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn*, 24–25. Several of these teachers also appear in *Conversations*, as well as in *A Book to Burn*. For Li Zhi’s attitudes toward Yan Jun, see “Da Zhou Liutang,” in *LZ* 1:218–26; *A Book to Burn*, 65–74. For his views on He Xinyin, see “He Xinyin lun,” in *LZ* 1:245–51; *A Book to Burn*, 84–88.
Several years later, Li Zhi again interacted with Luo Rufang. Li Zhi, “Luo Jinxi xiansheng gaowen,” in LZ 1:343n36. On Li Zhi’s appreciation of Wang Ji’s teachings, see also chapter 11.

Li Zhi, “Luo Jinxi xiansheng gaowen,” in LZ 1:339. A letter Li Zhi wrote to Jiao Hong in 1589 exhibits his eagerness to read Wang Ji’s complete works as soon as they are published and his conviction that the recorded sayings of Luo Rufang require a discriminating reader. Li Zhi, “Fu Jiao Ruohou,” in LZ 1:112.

Li Zhi, “Luo Jinxi xiansheng gaowen,” in LZ 1:339; Li Zhi, A Book to Burn, 152. On Li Zhi’s unfulfilled yearning to die in the company of a cherished friend, see chapter 3. Li Zhi surmises that even Confucius died without successfully transmitting his teachings, since the sage’s most promising student, Yan Hui, predeceased him. Li Zhi, “Da Liu Fangbo shu,” in LZ 1:131; Li Zhi, A Book to Burn, 17. See also “Da yi niuren xue dao wei jianduan shu,” in LZ 1:144; A Book to Burn, 31, analyzed in chapter 7.


Li Zhi, “Fu Jiao Ruohou,” in LZ 1:112.

Elsewhere, Li Zhi claims that the authenticity of his writings derives from the fact that they are rooted in insuppressible emotions (“Za shuo,” in LZ 1:272–76). For interpretations of this claim and its connection to the concept of authenticity in Li Zhi’s oeuvre, see Pauline Lee, Li Zhi, 69–99; Handler-Spitz, Symptoms, 28–32.


Li Zhi, “Wang Longxi xiansheng gaowen,” in LZ 1:335; translation slightly altered from Li Zhi, A Book to Burn, 149.


Wang Yangming was known for encouraging students to question received traditions and is often cited as saying, “If words are examined in the mind and found to be wrong, even if they have come from the mouth of Confucius, I dare not accept them as correct.” Wang Yangming, “Da Luo Zheng’an Shaozai shu,” 248; Wang Yangming, “Letter in Reply to Vice-Minister Lo Cheng-an,” 159. For a similar statement by Li Zhi, see Dao gu lu, in LZ 14.11.306.

According to an anecdote in the Mencius, a pair of straw sandals was missing from the hostel where Mencius and his retainers were staying. When asked whether one of his men might have stolen them, Mencius replied, “In setting myself up as a teacher, I do not go after anyone who leaves, nor do I refuse anyone who comes. So long as he comes with the right mindset, I accept him.
That is all" (Mengzi 7B30; translation slightly altered from Lau, Mencius, 200).


26 Li Zhi, “Langzhong Wang gong,” in LZ 11:113. As Wai-yee Li points out in chapter 1, the notion of an accidental teacher possessing no fixed method resonates strongly with Li Zhi’s interpretation of Confucius.

27 Li Zhi, “Wang Longxi xiansheng gaowen,” in LZ 1:335; Li Zhi, A Book to Burn, 147.

28 See chapter 9.

29 Li Zhi, Dao gu lu, in LZ 14:11.260. Li Zhi’s best-known female disciple was Mei Danran, daughter of the prominent statesman Mei Guozhen (1542–1605). Although Li Zhi disavowed his role as her formal mentor, he clearly guided her study of Buddhism. His letters to her and other women of her household are recorded in “Guanyin wen,” in LZ 2:76–95. In chapter 6, Ying Zhang analyzes the ways in which Li Zhi’s interactions with female disciples, especially Mei Danran, complicated his public image. On the influential position of the Mei family in Macheng society, see Rowe, Crimson Rain, 85–90.

30 Li Zhi, “He Xinyin lun,” in LZ 1:245. In this essay Li Zhi extols He Xinyin for his bold disregard of social mores. Li Zhi’s hero-worship of He Xinyin, a man he never met, contrasts with his more ambivalent feelings toward his actual teachers, especially Luo Rufang. Perhaps the absence of any real relationship with He Xinyin freed Li Zhi to give full-throated expression to his admiration of this man without fearing compromising his own independence. I am grateful to Haun Saussy for suggesting this idea.


32 According to legend, whenever Bo Ya played his zither for his friend Zhongzi Qi, Zhongzi Qi wordlessly understood Bo Ya’s subtlest implications, so deep was the empathy of this extraordinary listener and friend. Liezi, “Tang wen.”

33 Li Zhi’s position in this debate is rooted in Wang Yangming’s teachings emphasizing the value of attaining understanding for oneself (zide).

34 Zhu Changwen, Qin shi, 2:12. See also Li Zhi, A Book to Burn, 158–59.

35 In this way, Li Zhi’s theory is reminiscent of Zhuangzi’s parable of Wheelwright Bian. Zhuangzi, “Tian dao,” j. 13.

36 For an English-language description of the pedagogical scene at Dragon Lake, see Rowe, Crimson Rain, 95–103.
A similarly casual pedagogical environment is described in Li Zhi’s preface to *Illuminating Discussions,* “Dao gu lu yin,” in *LZ* 14:227.


Li Zhi, “Xun Qing, Li Si, Wu Gong,” in *LZ* 2:210; Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn,* 205.

His students, including Mei Danran and Yuan Zhongdao, reciprocated by addressing him in like fashion. See Li Zhi, “Yu Yue,” in *LZ* 2:105; Li Zhi, “Guanyin wen,” in *LZ* 2:76–96; Yuan Zhongdao, *Zuolin jitan,* in *LZ* 18:325.32.

In *Answers to Questions,* Luo Rufang’s student Yang Qiyuan suggests that the compiler and his friend Wu Shizheng visit Li Zhi. They express trepidation, citing rumors that Li Zhi often lashes out at guests. Li Zhi, *Yongqing dawen,* in *LZ,* 18:1.334. Li Zhi’s irascibility was a central part of his public persona and was even deliberately imitated by the author of the spurious “Li Zhuowu” fiction commentaries (see chapter 10). He was also roundly excoriated by early Qing scholars on account of his arrogance (see chapter 11).

On Li Zhi’s efforts to help students prepare for imperial examinations, see chapter 8.

The phrase is borrowed from Hung Mingshui, *The Romantic Vision.* On Yuan Zhongdao’s involvement with the Gong’an School, see also Chou, *Yüan Hung-tao;* Zhou Qun, *Yuan Hongdao pingzhuan,* 259–309.

Yuan Zhongdao, *Zuolin jitan,* in *LZ* 18:305. Yuan was not unique in writing about Li Zhi in ways that disguised his identity; Li Zhi also wrote about himself anonymously. For analysis of his use of the impersonal term “layman” (*jushi*), see chapter 2.

The sylvan location may simply be a literary conceit, as there was an Oak Forest Lake (Zuolin Tan) near Yuan Zhongdao’s home in Gong’an. Yuan Zhongdao, “Guan mujiang zhuan,” in *Kexuezhai ji,* 2:703. Nonetheless, Li Zhi’s preface to *Illuminating Discussions* also emphasizes the remoteness of the locale, Pingshang, where his discussions with Liu Dongxing took place. Li Zhi, “Dao gu lu yin,” in *LZ* 14:227.

