PART THREE

MANIPULATIONS OF GENDER
IMAGE TROUBLE, GENDER TROUBLE

Was Li Zhi An Enlightened Man?

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Li Zhi’s fame and notoriety combine to create an example of “image trouble”: fragmented, polarized images being circulated beyond the individual’s control, a reality that troubled many prominent political and cultural figures in the seventeenth century. This image trouble was deeply gendered: as the literati engaged in new intellectual, spiritual, and social explorations on intensely mediatized and mediated platforms, their reputations were often reduced to how such explorations led them to either excel or fail in performing Confucian masculine roles. Li Zhi’s case sheds light on the various intersecting developments that gave rise to this historical phenomenon. Intellectual and religious debates at a time of intensified syncretism produced innovative writers and thinkers but also generated more pressure on linguistic, textual, and moral clarity. As established gender ideals were contested or negotiated in society to an unprecedented extent, print culture and social networking helped disseminate information widely but unevenly. All these can be observed in literati reactions to the ways in which Li Zhi—and his enemies and friends—employed gendered language to discuss social norms and literati self-cultivation in published works and circulated letters.¹

Li Zhi and his audience did not have the digital platforms that saturate our lives today or the convenience of modern mass media. But the sample of texts by and about him that ended up in wide circulation among contemporary readers operated just like the news headlines we live with today. This mechanism led to sensationalism and polarization in the perceptions of and debates about Li Zhi among his contemporaries. In addition, as
scholars have pointed out, print proliferation in the late Ming had paradoxical consequences. For instance, it further disseminated Confucian orthodoxy but at the same time undermined its authority by propagating deliberate misreading and creative reinterpretation of canons. This cultural environment was destined to encourage both creativity and abuse. Hence, having an “image problem” was a historical condition and phenomenon that the individuals could not control, even though they could make choices and take action. A product of print culture, Li Zhi both deployed print as a weapon and also fought against its negative impact on his reputation. His image as a man remained at the center of these battles, and his published writings and public correspondence by him, his friends, and his critics reveal the complicated ways in which gender concerns shaped political communication in the late Ming.

A REAL MAN AND HIS GENDER TERMINOLOGY

Li Zhi’s use of multiple names and categories for himself in published works manifests an intense desire to clarify and finesse his message about living the life of an enlightened person. Chapters 1 and 2 have shown that it is more productive for us to read his writings as self-exploration than as transparent, consistent confessions. The gendered vocabularies he employed, drawing on and synthesizing different traditions, actually exhibited much intellectual coherence, even though such coherence got lost in readers’ minds and in fragmenting media at a time when gender was a destabilized and destabilizing discursive field.

Li Zhi’s self-references borrowed from the gendered vocabularies of Buddhism and Confucianism. In Upon Arrival at the Lake (Chutanji), explaining why he publishes commentaries on women, he lets his thought come out through the voices of “Li Wenling” and “Zhuo lao”.

Li Wenling comments: Students of the Buddhist truth consider life as suffering; they hope to break away from samsara and reach nirvana. If people cannot break away from the living, they not only indulge themselves in the extremes of sensual pleasures, but also get mired in suffering. Even chaste wives and exemplary daughters, whom Zhuo lao praises and admires as having accomplished what only a real man [zhen nanzi] could, suffer tremendously from the living. [Zhuo lao] puts three enlightened women’s stories at the end of this part of the book to show the sufferings of the living and teach people how to realize the
The voice of Li Wenling illuminates the significance of Zhuo lao’s writings on women and expresses appreciation for his comments on Buddhist transcendence. But this Li Wenling also explains to the reader that Zhuo lao (also known as Zhuowu and Zhuowu zi) is a true Confucian man despite his shaved head: “Zhuowu had his reasons to shave his head. Although he has shaved to become a monk, he is truly a Confucian. Thus he first compiled Confucian books, and placed morality at the forefront of these books. Zhuowu, more than anyone else, knows how to read Confucian books and illuminate the meaning of morality.”

In this text, Li Wenling assumes the voice of the Confucian literatus who recognizes the moral qualities of Zhuo lao, an enlightened Buddhist who does not abandon Confucian morality as his fundamental belief. In the particular intellectual and religious atmosphere of the late sixteenth century, when many literati explicitly advocated the compatibility of Buddhism and Confucianism in their self-cultivation, it was possible for these two affiliations to jointly sustain and enrich the public image of exemplary men. But Li Zhi went further. His texts demanded that the reader suspend the everyday usage of certain gendered terms to appreciate his particular intellectual and spiritual agenda. Take, for example, “real man” (zhēn nánzi), a key concept in his scholarly and personal writings and a term he applied to both men and women: “Wuji’s mother, Ban Zhao, Huang Chao’s women followers, Sun Yi’s wife, Li Xinsheng, Li Kan’s wife and Mother Lü of Haiqu, each of these women can indeed be considered a ‘real man’ [zhēn nánzi]. Men are everywhere in the world. [But] how many of those who call themselves ‘real men’ actually are not ‘real men’? And how many men in this world can be considered ‘real men’? Unless I used the word ‘real’ [zhēn] here, I’d be afraid that ordinary men would think I was just a ‘man’ [nánzi]. This is why I put ‘real’ in front of ‘man.’” Elsewhere in Upon Arrival at the Lake, Li Zhi refers to “twenty-five women [who] possessed extraordinary intelligence and sharp vision. If some could have been trusted with important military and political responsibilities, they would have achieved success. That among them, Zhao E, a girl who had no one to depend on, and who single-handedly exacted revenge on the person who had killed her father, is especially amazing. The venerable Li Wenling [zhangzhe] remarks: These are real men [zhēn nánzi]! Real men! He then comments again: Men [nánzi] are inferior [to them]!”
Who are the “men” in this context? Li Zhi complicates this gender category in a famous public letter on women’s capacity for learning and enlightenment: “A woman may have a female body but may also have male insights; [she may] appreciate serious teachings and know the bareness of vulgar speech; [she may] delight in learning Buddhist teachings and realize that this floating world is not worth cherishing. I am afraid that before such a woman, today’s men [nanzi] would feel ashamed and shut their mouths.”

But could the boundaries between abstract concepts and everyday usages be kept so neat in real-world life and politics? Li Zhi’s repeated attempts to explain his usage of “men” and “real men” only foregrounded the difficulty of demanding terminological clarity. He was not the first to praise some women as better than ordinary or unenlightened men, or to apply to extraordinary women such categories as “manly man,” zhangfu. The Chinese term da zhangfu had been used by Buddhist masters to refer to “honorary men” or “great men” who possessed the ideal qualities that could be attained by both men and women. But as Beata Grant argues, the application of the term da zhangfu to male and female Buddhists shows “a range of ambivalent, and sometimes confused ideas which point to a continued awareness of, and unease about, the misfit between a universal and non-dualistic metaphysical vision of ultimate reality and the traditional gendered binary divisions and hierarchies central to the traditional Chinese social order.” Meanwhile, engaging Confucian ideals through creative and deliberately vague use of categories was also a defining feature of gender discourse during this time. Therefore, writing at the intersection of popular and intellectual understandings of Buddhist and Confucian gender terms, which had already made contemporary gender discourse volatile, Li Zhi’s use of the locution zhen nanzi to illuminate the meaning of self-cultivation was apt to earn both praise and criticism.

At the risk of committing historical mind reading, let us take a step further and consider the implications of Li Zhi’s experiments with gendered vocabulary. In his published works, he reserved the category “real man” mostly for historical and contemporary women who excelled in their intelligence and morality. The only male historical figure he praised as a “real man” in his massive historical work A Book to Keep (Hidden) is Lin Xiangru, an official and strategist during the Warring States Period (fifth century–221 BCE), whose intelligence and bravery prevailed against the mighty king of Qin. Li Zhi considered Lin a “real man” and a “true sage” and also referred to him as a “bodhisattva” and even a “Buddha.” Here, the “real man” as a category identifies a superior kind of masculine person; its usefulness lies in taking the question beyond conventional gender distinctions while still
managing to signify a gendered superiority. When Li Zhi repeatedly called himself a “real man” while rarely applying this category to other men, he boosted its gendered value and unambiguously asserted his own accomplishments as a superior man.

Real-life consequences of manipulating gender terms can be detected in people’s strong reactions to Li Zhi’s use of two other terms that he liked to apply to himself: *daren* and *zhangzhe*. *Daren* is a respectful salutation used when addressing elders or men of noble character and lofty aspirations. *Zhangzhe* refers to venerable male elders and influential figures. Unambiguously masculine, these terms highlight seniority and moral and spiritual superiority, valued qualities of literati manhood. When Li Zhi used these words to refer to himself, he differentiated himself from unenlightened men and drew attention to the heights of self-cultivation he had attained. But his usage of these terms deliberately isolated the age factor and, deviating from the conventional understanding, granted older men—or more precisely, himself—the right to practice self-cultivation without engaging in Confucian ethical relations. For neo-Confucians who believed in coherent, consistent, and interconnected moral-spiritual efforts throughout one’s life, the implication of this kind of terminological manipulation was ontologically and socially dangerous. This was especially clear in Li Zhi’s uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the discourse of filial piety.

Arguably the most important masculine virtue for the literati, filial piety went beyond taking care of one’s parents and performing filial rites diligently. By the end of the sixteenth century, Confucian thinkers had become increasingly convinced that filial piety was not only central to moral cultivation but also critical to comprehending the ultimate truth and sagehood. Li Zhi did not oppose upholding this ethical ideal in everyday life; in fact, as Maram Epstein demonstrates in chapter 2, his writing represented him as the embodiment of this virtue. But he also argued that because he was a *daren* who had reached an advanced age and had fully grasped the spiritual value of filial piety, he no longer needed to pursue self-cultivation by fulfilling familial roles. After all, adhering to form was superficial and inferior to living in accordance with the *essence* of Confucian ethical ideals. The idea underlying Li Zhi’s self-expression as a senior, enlightened man reflected the influence of the Yangming School, which privileged individualized, authentic articulation of the true spirit of Confucian teachings rather than superficial study or display. But this way of thinking disturbed many prominent Confucian thinkers, including some within the Yangming School in the late Ming, who became increasingly vigilant about the potential fallout of downplaying everyday performance
of Confucian ethics. For instance, the scholar-official Geng Dingxiang repeatedly discussed the dangerous implications of Li Zhi’s claim that cultivating virtues such as filial piety was of minor concern and necessary only for youths (dizi), not for mature adult men (daren). In a letter, Geng criticizes some people’s misunderstanding of a line from the Analects, “Young people should be filial at home, brotherly with others” (Dizi ru ze xiao, chu ze ti), partly in response to Li Zhi’s argument that traditional educational material such as “duties of juniors” (dizi zhi)—as well as books about familial duties—was proper for boys younger than fifteen; adults should study the universal truth.

Li Zhi’s realignment of the age factor with the ideal of manhood was not merely terminological, nor did it appear only in his writings; he embodied this idea in his life. He sent his wife back to Quanzhou in 1587 and shaved his head in Macheng in 1588. These actions, which demonstrate his dedication to his intellectual and spiritual endeavors, immediately alarmed local critics, who described him as someone who had “cast aside human ethics and abandoned his wife” (qi renlun li qishi). But Li Zhi repeatedly maintained that his actions did not amount to “abandonment,” citing his age as the main factor. In response to a local literatus who expressed a desire to model himself after Li Zhi, he replied that an old man like him, who had already fulfilled his familial duties, could live as a monk and did not have to be burdened with “mundane affairs” (sushi). He told this young friend that he should not abandon his familial responsibilities but instead pursue self-cultivation at home.

He used half of the letter to discuss his own life experience so as to show that, before shaving his head, he had made steady and significant progress in self-cultivation by doing his utmost to fulfill his public duties as an official and his familial roles as a son and husband. According to this self-portrayal, before he shaved his head Li Zhi lived in a perfectly neo-Confucian way by pursuing a kind of “mundane transcendence” based on critical reflection on and engagement with his everyday sociopolitical responsibilities and roles.

Li Zhi even employed Confucius as his model to justify his terminological maneuver around age and his choice to pursue a style of self-cultivation that increasingly appeared Buddhist. “We don’t hear that Confucius remarried; neither do we hear that he took concubines. Confucius was quite uninterested in conjugal intimacy,” he writes to a longtime friend. To his key critic, Geng Dingxiang, Li Zhi retorted that he had had four sons but that they had all died. If even Confucius, after the death of his son, had not remarried or tried to take a concubine, on what grounds could Geng find
fault with Li? Was he not pursuing the Way in the very same manner that Confucius had?23

In these ways, Li Zhi employed various gendered vocabularies available at the time—social, metaphysical, neo-Confucian, and Buddhist—to articulate an enlightened man’s view on life and self-cultivation. His image problem partly resulted from the tensions among these vocabularies and from their complex usages. His multiple names, obsessive explanations of categories, and repetitive invocations of theories and precedents reveal his struggle to grapple with the reality that not all his readers accepted his terminological system. In addition to the difficulty of achieving linguistic clarity or terminological coherence in this volatile intellectual and religious environment, when words could travel widely and quickly in print and were received by an audience that indulged in liberal reading (as Li Zhi himself did), an author who believed he had the ultimate authority to interpret his own words and control his image was just fooling himself.

TEXTUAL AND SEXUAL SCANDALS

Li Zhi’s image trouble cannot be reduced to a generalized backlash from the so-called Confucian conservatives, as is clear from the difficulties he encountered in manipulating gender terminology to express his ideas. Further complicating this challenge was the intersection of late-Ming print culture with gender discourse. While rumors, exaggeration, speculation, and facts mingled in the controversies surrounding Li Zhi, the bits and pieces most cited focused on his gender behavior. Li Zhi himself contributed to his image trouble by publicizing an “antihypocrisy” self-image using provocative gender rhetoric.24

The most notorious example is Li Zhi’s published letter to Zhou Hongyue, a Macheng native who had served as a metropolitan official and written to express criticism of Li Zhi. In the letter Li Zhi explains the relationship between his intellectual-spiritual exploration and his “deviant” behavior, using his own experience to illustrate a path to enlightenment. He mentions that, after he had moved to Macheng, he turned himself into a free spirit and even visited brothels in his pursuit of the Way. But he realized that living as a recluse in temporary retreat did not yield true enlightenment. Nor did his experiments with alternative methods of self-cultivation—such as “visiting brothels” (churu yu huajie liushi zhijian)—bring him peace of mind because Confucians reviled such behavior. Therefore, he resorted to an extreme strategy: “If I shave my head and ruin
my appearance, I will be loathed not only by the Confucians but by the masses as well.”

But Li Zhi’s readers might have paid attention not to his spiritual agenda but to the public acknowledgment that he had experimented with lifestyles, from seclusion to fooling around to head shaving. The explosive image of “visiting brothels” in particular proved to be distracting. In her analysis of the controversies caused by these words, Jin Jiang has argued that this passage demonstrates how Li Zhi, inspired by the example of Vimalakīrti, at some point associated “commoners and their presumably carefree lifestyle, symbolized by wine and sex,” with “nature, enlightenment, and health.” She suggests that Li Zhi tried to “legitimize such ‘deviation’ [from] orthodox morality” and that this “action of theorization” could constitute an offense to the Confucian elite who single-mindedly stressed moral behavior. William Theodore de Bary suggests that, to his “sophisticated” readers, Li Zhi might have adopted the “epicurean attitude toward sexual indulgence” preached by some Buddhist monks to show that indulgence is empty. If modern historians cannot agree on how to read Li Zhi’s message here, one can imagine how his contemporary audience reacted. Just which Buddhist idea inspired him and his rhetoric is not our main concern here. More important is the fact that even had he meant to use “visiting brothels” as a Buddhist rhetorical device to convey an “innocent” method of spiritual transcendence, his readers not only fixated on this small detail in a long letter but also insisted on different readings, just as they did with the gender terms he manipulated.

Hence, to understand Li Zhi’s increasingly polarized public image as either exemplary or licentious, we need to take seriously the heterogeneity of the readership and the fragmenting effects of media. Those who defended the superiority of neo-Confucianism to Buddhism for literati self-cultivation and those who dismissed or even condemned Buddhist learning as misleading and altogether corrupting would definitely denounce Li Zhi’s rhetoric and approach manifested in this letter. Prominent Buddhist masters condemned him, not for his alleged immoral behavior but for his egoistic performance, a misleading model for others. Meanwhile, among Li Zhi enthusiasts, some truly appreciated his approach on both intellectual and spiritual levels; some did not fully comprehend but nonetheless cited him freely for their own purposes. When these readers, either opposing or supporting him, circulated excerpts of this letter, the context of the exchange got lost. What spread most quickly and most widely tended to be catchy, sensational, and provocative selections that fed opposing perceptions of him. Li Zhi’s close friend and official Yuan Hongdao reported:
Throughout his life, Li Zhi detested hypocritical teachings. When he went to the academy or lecture hall, he would put on his Confucian scholar outfit. If a student went up to him with questions about the Classics, he would wave his sleeves and say, “Oh, I would rather spend time with singing girls and dancing ladies, sipping wine and singing songs.” Once he saw a student walking up with a prostitute. He smiled and said, “This is at least better than having a Confucian scholar as company.” Therefore, in Macheng and Huang’an counties, the lecturers hated him to the bone. Thus appeared the malicious charge that he preached indecency and corrupted society.  

To further explore the centrality of the questions of perception and sensationalism, I shall now return to examine more closely the famous debate between Li Zhi and the retired official, his old friend Geng Dingxiang. Geng grew increasingly concerned about how Li Zhi was understood much more than what Li actually meant to preach. On the surface, Geng’s opposition to Li seemed similar to his attitude toward Deng Huoqu and Fang Yilin, two prominent figures who had created an uproar in the recent history of the Huang’an-Macheng area. Deng and Fang became devoted Buddhist teachers and as a result left their familial responsibilities behind. Geng harshly denounced Deng’s teachings as “encouraging sensual pursuits and abandoning self-discipline” and therefore extremely threatening to social stability. Li Zhi’s life decisions generated an obviously similar image: head-shaving, traveling, abandoning familial responsibilities, promoting Buddhism, and preaching the legitimacy of human desire. But Li Zhi was more dangerous than the other two because he had published so much more. Geng realized that Li’s words, especially those concerning literary masculine ideals, were read in wildly different ways by readers who had varied intellectual capacities, intentions, and interests. In the aftermath of Li’s head-shaving, for instance, Geng wrote off those who obsessively speculated or opined on why Li decided to shave his head, dismissing them as “pointlessly fussing over the hair” because they mistakenly framed the incident as a man choosing between Buddhism and Confucianism. Geng told others that a shaved head meant different things to men who harbored different aspirations; Li was but one ambitious man trying to achieve his particular intellectual and spiritual goals through this action. Intellectual differences aside, Geng was annoyed and worried that most of the audience of Li’s spectacle were not equipped to critically appreciate his project; their weakness drove them to disseminate and follow what they believed to be
his position, namely, abandoning Confucian ethical expectations. Indeed, when young men in their community had begun enlisting Li’s words to justify their own pursuit of sensual pleasures or self-indulgence, Geng’s worst nightmare came true.

While Geng Dingxiang focused on how Li Zhi’s dramatic actions were received by a shallow audience, Li saw this controversy as an open debate between him and Geng on a public stage as representatives of two intellectual camps.\(^{33}\) Li’s spin successfully shaped how the literati of the time understood the difference between these two men: they saw Geng as an advocate of Confucian moral teaching (\textit{mingjiao}), whereas they regarded Li as a teacher of universal truth (\textit{zhenji}).\(^{34}\) Li’s letters to his friends portrayed Geng as taking an intellectual debate so personally as to organize attacks against him based on fabricated rumors of his immorality.\(^{35}\)

Geng, in the meantime, was disturbed by this false dichotomy Li put forth. Earlier, Geng had indeed tried to debate metaphysical and epistemological issues with Li, but soon he seemed to shift his attention to the reading public’s perceptions of Li. He concentrated his efforts on explaining how Li should not be interpreted, hoping that this might help limit his influence on local youths. Geng’s comment on Li’s head-shaving is a good example. Another example can be found in Geng’s letter to Zhou Sijiu, an old friend of Li Zhi’s, on the news that Li had bragged about hanging out with prostitutes and encouraged local youths to follow suit. In this letter, Geng clearly laid out what he considered to be the real stakes:

As to the question of hanging out with prostitutes [\textit{xiaji zhi shi}], that might be fine in Zhuowu’s [Li Zhi’s] case, but it is not proper for you. I insist on [making] this distinction. The distinction has large and small implications that are difficult to explain in a letter. But let me try to explain briefly. Zhuowu’s intellectual endeavors only need to solve his own problems; they are not meant to help others. We should simply let him be. But can you, a widely influential figure in our hometown, set an example like this for young men? That would destroy them! I can imagine when Zhuowu hears what I am saying here, he will probably mock me again. That doesn’t matter. But you have only one son. His physical energies are not fully controlled yet. Where do you want to direct him with this kind of teaching?\(^{36}\)

Since the late Ming, much has been written about the debate—especially its intellectual aspects—between Geng Dingxiang and Li Zhi, some of
which took place in their correspondence with shared friends. We should also consider how Geng’s approach to Confucian learning shaped his reaction to Li as a media phenomenon. Fundamentally, Geng was a practical man. In the local community, he advocated education and scholarship that emphasized filial piety and fraternal respect so that youths would not consider their families a burden or detest Confucianism as if it were nothing but a set of rigid rules. In the government, he worried about corruption, irresponsibility, and bad politics. Interestingly, he had voiced opposition to a recent trend in political communication among officials: lodging personal attacks based on rumors of sexual immorality, to which Li Zhi himself fell victim. Geng’s emphasis on the practical naturally led him to pay more attention to the literati’s perception of Li than to what Li actually intended to do.

None of this seemed to have mattered. Neither Li Zhi nor Geng Dingxiang could control the direction of the debate. As Timothy Brook points out, Li Zhi’s notoriety “derived in part from his skill in getting his books into circulation and read. Even his letters with prominent debating partners he got into print as soon as he was able to collect enough for publication.” Overexposure in print operated as a double-edged sword. Li Zhi’s letters responding to Geng Dingxiang, published in the best-seller A Book to Burn, for instance, popularized his image as a truly enlightened person and victim of hypocritical Confucians, a framing that Geng had resisted. In the meantime, Li began to face more aggressive threats from Geng’s self-proclaimed supporters, who portrayed him as a heretic and an immoral man. In 1591, the hostility toward Li Zhi in Macheng ran so high that, during a trip he took to nearby Wuchang with Yuan Hongdao, he was physically assaulted and chased out of town. It took the efforts of many patron-friends to secure his return to the area.

Still, Li Zhi was reluctant to surrender to the reality that authors lacked the power to control the reception of their printed words, even if the subject matter involved women or sexual morality. Earlier we examined how the multiple gender vocabularies employed by the literati in the late Ming created new opportunities for self-expression but also created problems based on competing interpretations. In Li Zhi’s alleged “sexual scandal” in Macheng, publicizing his writings to openly celebrate cavorting with women in the name of Buddhist learning simply did not convey an image of enlightenment or moral superiority. Instead it invited image trouble.

Mei Danran, one of the Macheng gentry women who discussed Buddhist learning with Li Zhi, was the second daughter of Mei Guozhen, Li Zhi’s friend and a scholar-official who became famous across the empire.
for supervising a successful military campaign on the northern frontier in 1592. Mei Danran devoted herself to Buddhist studies after she was widowed at a young age. Mei Guozhen supported his daughter’s spiritual pursuits. According to the local history, “[Mei Guozhen] was familiar with Buddhist teachings in his late years. His daughter Mei Danran became a stay-at-home nun during her widowhood. Mei Guozhen made no attempt to prohibit her from doing so. Mei Danran strictly observed the moral rules and reached a notable level of accomplishment in her Buddhist pursuits. Father and daughter also discussed Buddhist teachings in their correspondence.” In the late Ming, a young widow from a prestigious gentry family could earn respect for her piety and chastity by devoutly pursuing Buddhism as long as she did not violate Confucian behavioral norms.

If women practicing Buddhism was commonplace in late-Ming Macheng, why did Mei Danran and other women of the Mei family attract gossip and criticism for corresponding with Li Zhi to discuss Buddhist teachings? Obviously, these criticisms targeted Li Zhi, who touted his presence in these women’s self-cultivation, even though it was only “textual.” Some locals threatened to tear down the monastery that Li Zhi’s rich friend had renovated and let him inhabit. Li Zhi insisted in letters to friends that he was a victim of attacks launched by men who disapproved of women’s learning. To those who suggested forcing him to return to his hometown to “restore morality” (zheng fenghua) in Macheng, he insisted, again citing his advanced age, that he was but an old monk who posed no threat to the moral order.

Then he resorted to print. In 1596, responding to rumors about his motives for interacting with the Mei women, Li Zhi published Questions of Guanyin, a compilation of his letters to the women over several years, in which he discussed Buddhist learning and praised the moral and spiritual accomplishments of his female correspondents. He also wrote a series of letters and essays arguing that women were fully capable of seriously studying Buddhist teachings and used this to justify his association with these women. To his way of thinking, his correspondence with Mei Danran epitomized his moral exemplarity and enlightenment. Not only did he continue to correspond with the Mei women; more important, the publication of Questions of Guanyin was a slap in the face of his attackers delivered before the reading public.

The same year that the controversial Questions of Guanyin went into print, Li Zhi drafted a list of principles concerning the management of his monastery and the performance of Buddhist rituals in the essay “An Agreement in Advance” (Yuyue), which he immediately circulated to his
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In this essay Li Zhi also refers to Mei Danran and some of the other Mei women with whom he communicated as bodhisattvas (pusa). He states that it is rare even among “extraordinary men” (qi nanzi) to demonstrate as much persistence as these women in their Buddhist study. They truly deserve respect. He blames his attackers for denying women’s ability to learn: “Because these bodhisattvas were born as women, relatives who envy them spread gossip too disgraceful to listen to.” By defining the nature of this scandal as “family gossip” promulgated by men too ignorant to comprehend the Way, Li Zhi portrays himself as an innocent victim and urges readers of his texts to regard him as an enlightened master of unimpeachable moral standing. Curiously, he rarely promoted himself as a master for male disciples of Buddhism; instead he only discussed these exemplary women disciples. His usage of the category “real man” followed the same pattern. Thus, his publications and public letters might effectively reinforce the impression that he was interested only in pursuing opportunities to interact with gentry women.

Indeed, perceptions of Li Zhi’s correspondence with gentry women were key to this textual-sexual scandal. It is interesting that the friendly narrative in the local history quoted earlier chooses to highlight the correspondence about Buddhist learning between the Mei father and daughter, a completely proper and admirable domestic interaction, while omitting the
well-known correspondence between Li Zhi and Mei Danran. Likely an editorial effort to sanitize the reputation of the Mei family, this small detail reveals how sensitive the question of “correspondence” became in this scandal. A widespread story at the time about Li Zhi’s attempt to approach a local female poet, Mao Yulong (n.d.), also drew attention to correspondence. In a biography of Li Zhi composed after his death, Qian Qianyi (1582–1664) quoted the following anecdote from the official Zhou Hongyue, the Macheng native we encountered earlier: “Madam [Mao] worshipped the Buddha in her later years. She followed the commandments and sought a life of compassion and tranquility. A master [Li Zhi] visiting this region riled up a lot of men and women by preaching transcendence and what he considered the most sophisticated Buddhist teachings. He informed Madam Mao that he wished to visit her in person. She rejected his proposal. He then asked to correspond with her. This she also refused.”

Although Zhou Hongyue thought Li Zhi’s “deviant” behavior and his zeal for Buddhist learning would bring disaster upon society, he did not object to women’s pursuit of Buddhist studies or literary activities. According to the local gazetteer, from the mid-Ming on, this area produced many talented and exemplary women. Zhou’s own wife, along with the poet Madam Mao, enjoyed respect and a high literary reputation. What Zhou Hongyue—and authors like Qian Qianyi—passed along was a popular perception of Li Zhi as seeking opportunities to interact with women in the name of promoting Buddhist self-cultivation, and this image repulsed even those who considered women’s learning and Buddhist pursuits legitimate. The emphasis on the chaste Madam Mao’s refusal to correspond with Li Zhi in this anecdote is particularly revealing. A textual scandal made a sexual scandal seem likely.

Hence, the more Li Zhi wrote about these women and published accounts of his interactions with them, the more damaged his image became. Finally, the textual-sexual scandal surrounding the Mei women led to his forced exile from the Huang’an-Macheng area. From 1596 to 1600, Li Zhi traveled to Shanxi, Nanjing, and Shandong, where his patron-friends held important official positions and provided him with a comfortable material and intellectual environment. He composed many poems during this period, including flower poems, most of which, interestingly enough, evoked plum blossoms. These poems, with their conventional literary tropes, often situated him in a textually romantic relationship with plum flowers. Considering that the Chinese name for plum flowers, mei, is the family name of Mei Danran, these poems undoubtedly sent a mixed message. Toward the end of this long trip away from Macheng, Li Zhi wrote
four more flower poems directly to Mei Danran in response to her letters trying to persuade him to return to Macheng. One reads:

Flying snow in the wind lightly brushes through
Plum flowers wear the rain like rouge on a beautiful face
Busy visitors at the door are not worth mentioning
The cuckoo is calling Spring to return.

Another says:

You are the Guanyin we long to see
The lotus flower belongs to the beautiful one.  

Although these poems could easily be cited as damaging evidence against him, Li Zhi nonetheless included them in an expanded edition of *A Book to Burn*, which was published in Jiangnan in 1600 and became an instant hit in literati society. When he returned to Macheng months later, local opponents had rekindled the flames of persecution, based on the charge that “monks and nuns were engaging in immoral activities.” After they burned down his monastery, destroyed his pagoda, and forced him into hiding, he took refuge in the mountains until his patron-friend Ma Jinglun came to help. If earlier they had let him get away with outlandish rhetoric that could be “misread” by ignorant young men, this time, when Li Zhi publicly and persistently advertised his frequent interactions with gentry women, they could not tolerate such provocation. Not only did they insist that he should be deprived of the right to publish on the subject of women, but they also fulminated that he had to be expelled from the community for good.

The diversity of the late-Ming intellectual and spiritual world generated an ideal platform for new explorations but also put tremendous pressure on linguistic, rhetorical, and moral clarity. The prevalence of print and its operational patterns in the late Ming contributed to these developments. Li Zhi became a sensation by widely publicizing novel commentaries on Confucian classics, official histories, popular literature, and social phenomena as a way of diagnosing the causes and culprits of “moral decline” of his era. However, his effort to elucidate true moral teachings and ways to lead the life of an enlightened person reached most of his audience in printed segments or gossip. His iconoclastic writing style and strong desire to publicize his ideas met a perfect match in the “unruly” audience that freely interpreted and cited his words. As a result, his words and actions came under attack as the very cause and symptom of late-Ming moral decline.
In a sense, Li Zhi was caught in a perfect storm. Years of experimenting with names, terms, and methods of self-cultivation in writing as well as many best-selling, provocative publications of scholarship and personal correspondence did not amount to greater clarity or persuasion in his messaging. At the peak of his fame, he was fighting against the vast discrepancy between his claim of enlightenment and his perceived image as a moral threat—an irresponsible husband, a licentious womanizer disguised as an enlightened master. In the meantime, during the last decade of the sixteenth century, literati-officials who actively pursued Buddhism could face the serious criticism that Buddhist exploration prevented them from fully engaging in the study and practice of Confucian statecraft. In addition, escalating political factionalism, made messier by print culture and the sensationalism it fed, compelled officials to scrutinize opponents’ personal lives for any impeachable behaviors.

It is particularly revealing that in the last months of his life, Li Zhi turned to the most conservative rhetoric of male self-discipline to fight for his life. Not long before his imprisonment, he wrote in an essay recalling a conversation with Yuan Zhongdao, “Throughout my life I have been obsessed with cleanliness. Things such as alcohol, sex, and money in the mundane world cannot pollute me one bit. I am seventy-five this year. I have done nothing that would cause me to fear the scrutiny of ghosts and deities.” This rhetoric of purity and lack of desire could be found in both Confucian and Buddhist discourses on self-cultivation. But painting Li Zhi as a Confucian moral exemplar became critical to his friends’ efforts to defend him in an increasingly precarious situation. It was a key argument after his arrest, which quickly ensued once the censor Zhang Wenda submitted his famous memorial blasting Li Zhi as a threat to social order.

The official Ma Jinglun, who made the greatest effort to rescue Li Zhi, emphasized Li’s commitment to Confucian ethics. To his colleagues, Ma forcefully argued that a man like Li, who had devoted his life to intellectual and spiritual exploration, could not possibly have enjoyed inappropriate intimacy with women: “How can a man who dedicates all his energy to scholarly work and has published almost a hundred books indulge himself in sexual immorality? I need not mention his old age. Even a young man seriously engaged in study will not be interested in women. Young men who like women invariably dislike study. People consider Li Zhi’s writing a crime; they charge him with sexual immorality. They criticize his head-shaving and accuse him of seduction. These charges contradict one another.
and are truly ridiculous!” Ma Jinglun’s defense presumed—and in effect helped perpetuate the idea—that a literatus’s dedication to scholarly life in the company of fellow (male) scholars could not coexist with an interest in women and sex. Contradicting Li Zhi’s own previous confession, Ma chose to ignore Li’s sensational experiments and instead argued that his dedication to and passion for scholarship excluded the possibility of sexual indulgence.

Further, Ma’s defense connected the masculine virtue of loyalty to self-discipline. In several letters addressed to colleagues on behalf of Li Zhi, he vehemently dismissed the charges against Li as vicious fabrications employed for political purposes. In a letter to an official in charge, he argued that the accusations of Li Zhi as “a deluder of society” (huoshi) who “blatantly engaged in sexual immorality” (xuanyin) were launched for political reasons. He believed that the honorable official Mei Guozhen was the real target of the attacks and that Li Zhi was simply a convenient sideshow. Contrasting Li with womanizers and fame-chasers among his colleagues, Ma presented him as a true Confucian exemplar and model official: “Men in this world enjoy official positions as if they were candy. If they do not sleep with a woman for even a few days they feel as if they may expire. They even put on makeup, seeking to attract their superiors’ attention if just briefly or to gain a moment’s intimacy with their concubines. These habits have become the fashion; even worthy men succumb. Don’t they feel any shame when they compare themselves to Li Zhi’s spotless conduct?”

Ma Jinglun’s construction of this ideal image for Li Zhi is not as formulaic as it appears. Li Zhi was a vocal proponent of the cult of qing and was championed as a leading figure of this discourse, which also drew inspiration from Yangming neo-Confucianism. His seemingly incoherent rhetoric in fact was quite consistent on one matter: the form self-cultivation took was less important to him than the sincere, meaningful pursuit of true enlightenment. Accordingly, he experimented in writing and everyday life, including reworking gendered vocabularies in Confucian and Buddhist cultures and exposing the superficiality of the existing moral curriculum by—at least rhetorically—breaking behavioral norms. In contrast, though heavily influenced by the Yangming School as well, Ma adopted an unmistakably ascetic approach. He advocated restraining one’s desires and emotions and cultivating sagehood by cultivating wuqing (literally, “no desires” or “no emotions”). He once argued, “A great man who wants to succeed in great undertakings must keep his own body clean; a wife and concubines are the heaviest burden.” His vocabulary

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6. IMAGE TROUBLE, GENDER TROUBLE
reflected an important internal development in seventeenth-century neo-Confucianism: scholars who shared many similarities with the radicals of the Yangming School theorized and practiced a new kind of “extreme moralism.”

Ma’s enthusiastic defense of Li, depicting him as a conventional exemplar of manly self-discipline, was in line with his own approach to self-cultivation. Although the efforts to “correct” Li Zhi’s image eventually failed to save his life, the gendered moralistic rhetoric it employed helped create one of the images of Li Zhi that we have inherited from the seventeenth century.

The extraordinary friendship between Li Zhi and Ma Jinglun aptly illustrates the rich texture of history beneath the seemingly cliché image of the ideal Confucian man. Indeed, nothing was straightforward in the colorful world of the late Ming, when the web of information and exchange became much more varied, dense, and intense than before. Precisely because of this, simplification became an inevitable, destabilizing part of life; so did polarization of the images of prominent men along the axis of gender. This paradoxical situation appears oddly familiar to us at this historical juncture.

NOTES

1 On these phenomena, see Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chamber; Handler-Spitz, Symptoms.

2 See, for example, Bai, introduction to Fu Shan’s World; Yuming He, Home and the World.

3 Chapter 1 shows the inner tensions and contradictions in Li Zhi’s discussion of genuineness. Additionally, Pauline Lee argues that the names Zhuowu and Duwu allowed him to embody an ethic of genuineness (Li Zhi, 22–24).

4 On the source of the names Wenling and Zhuowu, see chapter 2.

5 Li Zhi, Chutanji, in LZ 12:1:27, emphasis added.

6 Li Zhi, “Chutanji xu,” in LZ 12:1, emphasis added.

7 Brook, Praying for Power, esp. ch. 2. See also chapter 9 of the present volume.

8 To preserve her son from likely disaster, Wuji’s mother never revealed to him that the powerful Wang family had killed his father. Ban Zhao wisely chose to stay away from the emperor to avoid trouble in the imperial house. Sun Yi’s wife plotted to kill the men who had murdered her husband. Li Xinsheng, a courtesan, tried to persuade her master not to follow a rebel. Li Kan’s wife reproached him for not taking on the responsibilities of a county magistrate. Mother Lü of Haiqu spent all of her fortune over a period of some years, determined to recruit young men to kill the county official who had wrongfully executed her son.
9 Li Zhi, “Fufu lun er,” in LZ 12:43.  
10 Li Zhi, “Da yi nüren xue dao wei jianduan shu,” in LZ 1:144. See also chapter 7.  
11 Grant, “Da Zhangfu,” 186.  
12 For example, in The Libertine’s Friend Giovanni Vitiello has characterized the discourse on male-male relations in early modern Chinese literature as syncretic.  
13 Li Zhi’s comments in the section “Zhongcheng dachen,” in LZ 5:95.  
14 Lu Miaw-fen, Xiao zhi tianxia.  
15 Again, on the genuine and the filial in Li Zhi’s self-image, see chapter 2.  
16 Analects, 1:6; Watson, The Analects, 16.  
18 Li Zhi, “Yu Zeng Jiquan,” in LZ 1:129.  
19 On Li Zhi’s abandonment of his family, see chapters 2 and 3.  
20 I adopt this term from Hawes, “Mundane Transcendence.”  
21 Li Zhi, “Fu Deng Shiyang,” in LZ 1:27. For more on this question, see chapter 3.  
22 Li Zhi, “Da Geng Sikou,” in LZ 1:76–77. For a discussion on the question of male fidelity, see Hinsch, “The Emotional Underpinnings.”  
23 William Theodore de Bary suggests that Li Zhi appealed to “the taste for sensational and shocking literature” among the reading public of the late Ming (“Li Chih,” 259). Also see Ge, Zhongguo sixiang shi, 2:328.  
24 Li Zhi, “Da Zhou Erlu,” in LZ 1:214. This letter was written around 1588. Li Zhi clearly invokes the Daodejing here.  
25 Jin Jiang, “Heresy and Persecution,” 14. It should be noted that the image of the layman Vimalakirti in Chinese Buddhism had been transfigured to help reinforce the masculine virtues of the Confucian gentry and had had great appeal for literati since the early medieval period. See, for example, Ch’en, Buddhism in China, ch. 7.  
26 De Bary, “Li Chih,” 263.  
27 De Bary, “Li Chih,” 263–64. On Li Zhi’s connections to Buddhism, see chapter 9.  
28 Qian Qianyi, “Yiren san ren,” in Liechao shiji xiao zhu, 744. On Li Zhi’s relationships to his teachers and students, see chapter 5.  
29 For example, see Geng Dingxiang’s letters to friends in Geng Tiantai xiansheng wenji (1970): “Yu Zhou Liutang,” 314–69, and “Yu Wu Shaoyu,” 377–93. In addition, his biographies of these men emphasize their deviance: Deng Huoqu did not return home to formally mourn his father’s death, did not arrange his daughter’s marriage, and instead indulged in a homosexual relationship with a young male servant surnamed Zhu. Geng Dingxiang

31 Geng Dingxiang, “Yu Zhou Liutang.”
32 Geng Dingxiang, “Yu Zhou Liutang.”
33 Li Zhi, “Da Geng Sikou.” See also chapter 4.
35 Lin Haiquan, *Li Zhi nianpu kaolüe*, 226–27. Some historians argue that Geng Dingxiang (like many in the government and later the Donglin camp) increasingly tilted toward a moralistic stance in the face of the widespread social unrest and encouraged these attacks against Li Zhi. For example, Jin Jiang, “Heresy and Persecution.”
36 Geng Dingxiang, “Yu Zhou Liutang,” 3.57a–58b, emphasis added. Geng Dingxiang is referring to *Analects* 16.7, where Confucius says this about manhood: “There are three things which the superior man guards against. In youth, when his energies are not fully controlled yet, he guards against lust. When he is strong and the physical powers are full of vigor, he guards against quarrelsomeness. When he is old, and the animal powers are decayed, he guards against covetousness.”
37 Huang Zongxi’s intellectual history of the Ming points out that Geng Dingxiang never aimed to engage in the metaphysical aspect of Confucian studies. He believes that Geng tried to root his words firmly in the most fundamental and practical Confucian teachings when debating with Li Zhi’s wild Chan Buddhism. However, he argues, because Geng did not fully think through some important philosophical issues, and because he could not adamantly repudiate Buddhism, he failed to defeat Li. Huang Zongxi, “Taizhou xue’an si” and “Gongjian Geng Tiantai xiansheng Dingxiang,” in *Ming Ru xue’an* (1985), 815–16.
40 Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 233. See also chapter 4 of the present volume.
41 Whether Geng Dingxiang explicitly instructed his students and the local gentry to attack Li Zhi needs to be studied more carefully case by case. Geng Dingxiang wrote a public letter defending himself from accusations that he had incited his disciples to attack Li Zhi physically or verbally. Geng Dingxiang, “Qiu jing shu,” in *Geng Tiantai xiansheng wenji* (1970), 696–98.
42 Yu Jinfang, *Minguo Macheng xianzhi qianbian*, 175, emphasis added.
Rowe has pointed out that almost all major social-political figures in this region at the time were interested in Buddhism, including those who disliked Li Zhi (Crimson Rain, ch. 3).

For example, a set of two poems composed during Li Zhi’s visit to Mei Guozhen in the northern frontier, “Fu song mei,” in LZ 2:276.

Li Zhi, “Que ji,” in LZ 2:301.

Cited in Lin Haiquan, Li Zhi nianpu kaolüe, 386.

Brook, Praying for Power, ch. 2.

Zhang Ying, Confucian Image Politics.


Ming Shenzong shilu, 6917–19.

Ma Jinglun, “Yu Zhangke Li Linye zhuan shang Xiao Sikou,” in Qian Ming Henandao jiancha yushi Chengsuogong wenji, 36a–38b.


Ma Jinglun, “Yu Zhangke Li Linye zhuan shang Xiao Sikou.”

On Li Zhi and the discourse of qing in the late Ming, see Pauline Lee, Li Zhi, 70–71. On the cult of qing, see Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers; Epstein, Competing Discourses.

Ma Jinglun, “Yulu,” in Qian Ming Henandao jiancha yushi Chengsuogong wenji, 1b–2a.

Wang Fansen, Ming mo Qing chu de yi zhong daode yange zhuyi.

See chapter 3. Additionally, for analysis of their friendship and how it resembled the legendary examples in history, see Zhang Ying, “Politics and Morality,” ch. 1.