PART FOUR

TEXTUAL COMMUNITIES
AN AVATAR OF THE EXTRAORDINARY

Li Zhi as a Shishang Writer and Thinker
in the Late-Ming Publishing World

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IN ANTICIPATION OF HIS DEATH, LI ZHI GAVE THIS INSTRUCTION to the monks at the Zhifoyuan Monastery in 1596: “I love books! During seasonal sacrifices to me, books that I copied, edited, and commented on must be put on the right side of the altar.” Unlike other avid readers of his time, he was a prolific best-selling writer. Between 1604 and the 1620s no writer surpassed him in wit, pungency, and profundity. He was the leading author in a vastly expanded pool of “mercantile literati” (shishang) writers, literary laborers who, while to varying degrees dependent on remuneration from publishers or patrons, continued to identify themselves with the literati (shi) and remained reticent about their pecuniary activities. The popularity and ascendance of Li Zhi to the pantheon of literary masters should be understood in the context of burgeoning commercial publishing and the transforming social and intellectual contours of the late Ming. His involvement in and manipulation of commercial publishing as well as his powerful articulation of the emerging ethos of his time—shishang ethics—contributed to the massive appeal of his brush.

COMMERCIAL PUBLISHING AND THE ECONOMIC MODE OF SHISHANG WRITERS

Li Zhi is arguably best known as an outspoken iconoclast, a nonconformist, and an advocate of the extraordinary (qi). His reputation owed much to the publicity generated by commercial publishing as well as to the expansive
ideological purview of his writings, which appealed to a burgeoning reading population with diverse interests, both ideological and practical. His strategic involvement in commercial publishing, astute use of satire, colloquial expressions, and ingenious use of paratexts transfixed readers.

A reader might encounter the name Li Zhi whether she was interested in fiction, drama, history, Confucian classics, Buddhist scriptures, or Daoist treatises. The inscription of his name on innumerable imprints spanning several literary genres no doubt contributed to his exceptional reputation as a prolific and versatile shishang writer. Amid the cutthroat competition of commercial publishing in the late Ming, publishers favored Li Zhi’s works, many of which assumed the popular forms of “critical commentary” (pipìng) written in an increasingly simple and plain (tongsú) mode.⁴

Even though the direct and indirect participation of literati in commercial publishing reached unprecedented heights in the late Ming, their habitus transformed slowly due to a lack of discursive efforts to fashion a distinct literary identity for professional writers. The only social identity that educated elites were willing to embrace was that of the literatus (shì). Specific information about writers’ interactions with publishers or their publishing careers is elusive and remains buried under allusions and metaphors in their personal writings. The common practice of deliberate “forgetting” of the positions the literati once occupied in the economic field further obscures the process by which they labored for economic benefit.⁵ Despite the substantial amount of writing attributed to Li Zhi, authentic or otherwise, information about his involvement in commercial publishing remains scanty at best.⁶

Li’s father was a private tutor who trained his son to excel in the increasingly competitive examinations. Li became a government student at about the age of sixteen.⁷ After passing the provincial examination in 1552 at the age of twenty-six, he decided not to pursue the metropolitan degree and applied for a government position in 1555.⁸ He was sent to Huixian, Henan as a lecturer (jiaoyu) at the government school, which marked the beginning of his twenty-some-year-long official career.⁹ He unexpectedly retired from government in 1580 at the age of fifty-four. For the next twenty-two years, he eked out a meager living with the support of a few friends and admirers, pursuing his passion for reading and writing, as well as his religious goals.

Li Zhi’s economic mode of existence after withdrawal from government service defies classification. He relied heavily on patronage of friends and devoted supporters and occasionally received remuneration for literary
labor he expended for commercial publishers. But it does not seem that he depended on these sources of income as a major means of support, as did professional writers. He occasionally worked as a tutor, grooming students for the civil service examination. These instructional responsibilities surely generated some income. Acceptance of invitations to visit or lecture customarily came with material and monetary compensation as well.

After he relinquished his official career in 1580 and up until his suicide in 1602, he depended on the patronage of a few ardent followers, some of whom were high-ranking officials. Support might be offered in the form of direct financial assistance or material gifts. In Macheng, Zhou Sijiu and his brother Zhou Sijing, both official patrons, paid to build his residence at the Vimalakīrti Monastery. Yet despite the generosity of Liu Dongxing, Mei Guozhen, and other friends, Li Zhi’s economic position was precarious, and he may have found editing and publishing a satisfying way to supplement his income.

Li Zhi’s passion for reading was intense and the range of his interests immense. While reading was indisputably his favorite and perhaps his only pastime in solitude, there are reasons to believe that reading was also a type of work critical to the production of publishable manuscripts. He did not just enjoy commenting on the books he read; he also authorized or abetted the publication of his reading notes as comments, whether as private publications or as commercial imprints. He confided to Jiao Hong, “I have copied and commented on numerous writings of great men past and present. It’s a pity that I cannot send all of them to you for comment!” Once he finished writing, the manuscripts would be taken to a publisher. He joked that he could not prevent his notes from being published.

**Li Zhi and the Civil Service Examination**

In the late Ming, the market for books of all genres expanded dramatically, but books published for examinees and gentry indisputably dominated the market. The examination system continued to structure the field of literary production in Li Zhi’s time even though commercial publishing had expanded to the point where reputations generated by a massive volume of imprints created positions of authority that came to challenge official, governmental authority over literary and exegetical standards. Despite his invective against the civil service examination, Li Zhi did not call for the abolition of the institution nor the eight-legged essay. Repulsed as he was by the pedantry with which his contemporaries approached Confucianism, he nonetheless found reasons—intellectual as well as economic—to
publish his own readings of the Four Books. In his preface to the 1590 edition of *A Book to Burn*, he explained why he decided to publish controversial works like *A Book to Burn* and *A Book to Keep (Hidden)* (Cangshu), even though he expected opprobrium and persecution to follow. In contrast, his *Expositions of the Four Books* (Si shu ping, also known as Shuo shu) strove to illuminate the sublime meanings of the sages’ remarks, rendering their teachings “quotidian and ordinary” (*riyong zhi pingchang*). He published his essays on the Four Books in several editions of incremental length: the first edition of *Expositions of the Four Books*, published in Macheng, contained 20 percent of the entries included in the final edition. This initial edition apparently consisted only of essays on questions on the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*. He later published essays on the other two books: the *Analects* and the *Mencius*.

Known for adopting a critical stance toward Confucian texts in his famous essay “On the Childlike Mind” (*Tongxin shuo*), Li Zhi considered *Expositions of the Four Books* a venue for voicing his disagreement with the official commentary by Zhu Xi and presenting his own understanding of the Four Books. According to Jiao Hong, Li Zhi considered *Expositions of the Four Books* one of his three most important books. But its publication served a more practical purpose. By his own account, his friends frequently asked him to read and comment on their eight-legged essays, and the book represented his accumulated efforts to help them write such compositions. Oddly enough, Li enjoyed writing model eight-legged essays. He often wrote them on examination questions (*ti*) and sent them to Jiao Hong for comment.

Elsewhere, Li Zhi confided to Jiao Hong that the comments in *Expositions of the Four Books* were prompted by “students who did not comprehend the main ideas of examination questions.” Obviously many of his so-called friends (*you*) wrote to him seeking advice on how to write great essays so that they could distinguish themselves in the increasingly competitive examinations. In order to ensure that his readers would not fail to appreciate this use of his *Expositions on the Four Books*, in the preface he added a note specifying that this text would “be beneficial to writing eight-legged essays.” These words would serve a promotional purpose, drawing readers’ attention to the publication’s value as an examination aid. Nevertheless, Li Zhi followed his remark with a caveat: “There are also many [essays in this book] that offer no assistance with writing eight-legged essays.” Such an adroit use of discursive space in paratexts allowed him to camouflage any economic desire he might have had for his publication. He did not mean to mislead his readers with commercial parlance concocted merely to court examinees.
It is important to note that Li Zhi was not opposed to eight-legged essays or to students dedicating themselves to preparing for the examinations. In fact, he believed that the best eight-legged essays were evidence of the talents and achievements of the examinees. In a preface to a collection of eight-legged essays he penned for a patron, he criticized those who disapproved of the essays as ineffective in producing competent civil servants. “Those who say that eight-legged essays [shiwen] can be instituted to recruit official candidates but those essays would be swiftly forgotten neither understand essay writing nor fathom the nature of time.”

He ranked eight-legged essays among the best writings of all time (gujin zhiwen), which include works of vernacular fiction such as Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu zhuan) and dramas like The Western Chamber (Xixiang ji). He considered all these works creations of the “authentic mind” (zhenxin).

After he moved to Macheng, Li Zhi took in a student, Wang Benke, who studied with him for nine years seeking to hone his skills writing eight-legged essays and deepen his understanding of Confucian texts. Reminiscing about a three-month stay at the Zhifoyuan Monastery in 1594, Wang stated, “During the day, I was taught how to prepare for the civil service examination and at night I studied one trigram of The Book of Change” (Rike juzi ye, ye du yi yigua). When Li Zhi went to Beijing in 1597, Wang again went to study with him in the Temple of Bliss (Jile si). Li was somewhat disappointed in Wang, who was primarily interested in learning the craft of producing winning essays. Li voiced his discontent thus: “If I were to teach you only how to prepare for the examination, I would be a tutor specialized in grooming students for examinations, which I am not.”

Li no doubt did not consider himself a petty career tutor. Even though he did not see writing eight-legged essays as incompatible with seeking the Way (dao), he still placed a premium on the latter. His own priorities notwithstanding, he did take Wang’s objective seriously, as a professional writer or instructor would. He sent him his Expositions of the Four Books and Ancient Meanings of Examination Essays (Shiwen guyi) to commit to memory. Doubtless, both teacher and student understood that their short-term goal was Wang’s success in the examinations.

When Li Zhi went to stay with Liu Dongxing in Shangdang, Shanxi in 1596, he instructed Liu’s son in the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean. Even though the conversations between them were published as Illuminating Discussions of Antiquity (Dao gu lu, also known as Mingdeng dao gu lu), which underscored Liu Dongxing’s and his son’s moral and personal quest for understanding Confucian truths, the contents of Li Zhi’s lessons also coincided with the examination curriculum. Surely the father
and son expected Li’s intellectual and spiritual instructions to benefit the son’s pursuit of examination success. Li Zhi’s reputation attracted examinees who wanted to learn to write winning essays, but few could or would make the trip to visit him in Macheng. Some sent him letters seeking advice on comprehending the Four Books. These requests were customarily accompanied by some kind of remuneration, in the form of either gifts or money.

Had his writings not met the examinees’ practical needs, Li Zhi would not have gained such high visibility, for the examination not only structured the literary field; it also undergirded the patronage system. Examinees became increasingly involved in commercial publishing as readers, producers, and arbiters of literary excellence. Li Zhi’s reputation as a best-selling writer was itself part of that process. And he never lost sight of the largest reading public for his time: examinees. His *Expositions of the Four Books* exemplifies a new type of examination aid—a compendium of commentaries on the Four Books. His preface to that volume explicitly identifies the reader as an examinee. The paratexts of *A Book to Keep (Hidden)* and *The Collected Writings of Poxian (Poxian ji)* likewise emphasize literary skills one had to master in order to pass various examinations.

Honing the skills requisite for writing eight-legged essays was the foremost responsibility of any examinee. The late Ming witnessed the unprecedented proliferation of new types of anthologies of actual examination essays as well as personal exercises and failed samples. Anthologies of model essays flooded the book market as leading writers competed for the attention of examinees. Selecting and commenting on the best prose, including eight-legged essays, was always on Li Zhi’s mind.

**LI ZHI AND SHISHANG ETHICS**

The enormous popularity of Li Zhi’s books and the antipathy they evoked from orthodox literati epitomize the mixed reactions of readers who were dazzled by the words and deeds of an eccentric, nonconformist, and dissenting luminary. But did his popularity rest solely on his witty and entertaining iconoclasm and his adept manipulation of paratexts? Were his ideas truly idiosyncratic and uniquely at odds with conventional values? As Wai-yee Li and Maram Epstein argue in this volume, Li Zhi’s self-representation is fraught with tension and fragmentation. Wai-yee Li observes that Li Zhi’s “true core remains opaque to others and perhaps even to himself.” These characteristics typify not only his individual intellectual and psychological conditions, but also those of the emerging class
of *shishang*. Thus, Li Zhi’s popularity flourished in large part because his ideas and values resonated with those of the mercantile literati, a social class that developed out of the conjoining of career paths and social practices associated with conventional literati (*shi*) and merchants (*shang*). In contrast to William Theodore de Bary, who characterizes Li as “almost a classic case of alienation from his whole society and culture,” I maintain that Li’s ethics were congruent with the emerging values of a group that was gradually gaining dominance, the *shishang*. The values he openly promoted and vociferously defended echoed and gave shape to a new ethics of the *shishang*, which cannot be classified neatly in terms of any of the conventional intellectual systems of Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism.

While the popularity of Li Zhi’s writings is beyond any dispute, mapping his intellectual affinity has been challenging for his critics and admirers alike. De Bary considers Li Zhi an “arch-individualist,” representing the zenith of the “tide of individualistic thought in the late Ming.” Keenly aware of the “problem of ‘individualism’” as a Western concept, de Bary nonetheless cannot avoid using this concept to represent Li’s ethics. De Bary’s use of the phrase “public individualism” bespeaks the inapplicability of the term “individualism” to the study of Chinese thought. Moreover, the concept itself is problematic inasmuch as it glorifies the autonomous, isolated, and desocialized individual. As Michel de Certeau has remarked, and Epstein also argues in this volume, “Individualism is a historical trope of occidental modernity.”

De Bary mistakes Li Zhi’s advocacy of pursuing selfish desires for evidence of his “individualistic” ethics. But “selfishness” does not adequately convey Li’s idea of personal interests (*si*). His ethics is not individualism but a system of values focusing on what is important to the individual as a social subject. Unlike individualism—a self-centered, self-asserting concept, privileging the self over all other individuals in political, social, and economic relations—Li Zhi’s ethics situates the self in a network of relationships. The well-being of the self includes—and even privileges—duties to and concerns for family members and friends. The Western ideology of individualism is incapable of articulating the change in discourse on the self in the late Ming, when change in the formation of the self involved not so much an individuation in socioeconomic and political practices as a reconfiguration of the self in different relational contexts: marriage, inter-generational relationships, personal identities, and relationships to the state. Michel Foucault’s idea of “care of the self,” which allows for these reconfigurations, may be applicable to this mode of ethical thinking, which is at odds with the liberal idea of individualism. Foucault subsumes at least
three different conditions under the radiant icon of the self: “the individualistic attitude,” “the positive valuation of the private life,” and “the intensity of the relations to self.” Foucault’s analysis lays bare the problem of glorification of the self in utter independence from social relations.

Li Zhi’s ethics centers on the self’s well-being, including its material, relational, spiritual, and intellectual interests. The fulfillment of an individual’s “material” and “relational” needs is anchored in the affirmation and priority of one’s personal needs. Personal interests (si) were denounced or diminished in conventional Confucian ethics, especially in Cheng-Zhu dao xue, which upheld rigorous moralism. In his comments on “Confucian Officials with Virtuous Achievements” (Deye Ruchen), Li Zhi remarks, “Selfishness is the heart-and-mind of man. Men must be selfish so that what is in their minds can be made known. If there is no selfishness, there is no mind.” In seeking to meet one’s material and relational needs, one must be selfish, giving priority to oneself over others. But this “selfishness” is not a form of individualism that requires one to put oneself over other persons. The selfishness Li advocates, in fact, was materialized in a social network of relationships. This is the “relational” need that is integral to the care of the self. It is not indicative of an autonomous, isolated, desocialized subject. Li’s understanding of the material and relational needs of the self is rooted in Confucianism.

Recall Li Zhi’s emphasis on “ordinary, quotidian activities” (riyong zhi pingchang) as the core of Confucius’s teachings. Elsewhere he glossed this idea as the basic needs of “wearing clothing and eating food” (chuanyi chi-fan). Nothing is more fundamental to a person’s material existence. He proclaimed, “There can be no ethical relations beyond wearing clothes and eating food” (Chuque chuanyi chifan, wu lunwu yi). All human relationships rest on our basic material needs, our sustenance. Morality and economics are fused, and economics becomes the criterion for fulfilling one’s moral obligations. Unlike conventional literati who would not openly acknowledge the quest for material well-being as a priority, Li Zhi justified seeking it: “Wealth, high position, profit, and social advancement enrich the heavenly endowed five senses. They are necessarily so. Therefore, the sages follow these tendencies; and following these tendencies results in everyone’s being contented. Hence, those who are greedy for wealth are given stipends. Those who hanker after positions are granted ranks, and those who are strong and powerful are given authority. Competent people are appointed officials; less capable ones are made to provide service.”

Striving for wealth and power are most natural and in fact necessary to “enriching one’s five senses.” Selfishness is redefined in relational and
material terms. Since Li Zhi sees moral obligations as economic obligations, fulfilling one's moral duties requires pursuing material interests. There is nothing shameful about these worldly pursuits. And in pursuing wealth and power, everyone takes up the vocation that suits him best. All vocations are worthy insofar as they further these goals. In a letter to Geng Dingxiang, Li points out that everyone “plows to get food, [and] purchases land to cultivate; in building a house, one seeks safety; in studying, one desires examination degrees; and in government, one seeks promotion and fame. One goes after geomantic sites in order to benefit one’s descendants. All these quotidian activities are undertaken for oneself and family, not one bit for others.”47 He dubbed all these “selfish” pursuits “simple and immediate words” (eryan). He was repulsed by the hypocrisy of Geng Dingxiang, who insisted upon preaching daoxue morality to the literati while seeking wealth and fame no less earnestly than an ordinary person. Rather, Li advocated talking openly about desire for wealth and social advancement. He deemed them legitimate concerns for all regardless of their vocation. In his letter to Geng’s student Deng Lincai, he defended his preference for honestly and unaffectedly embracing the “quotidian life of the ordinary people” (baxing riyong). Folks “desire good products, beauty, diligence in study, and advancement; they amass gold and valuables, purchase estates for their descendants, and seek geomantic sites that will protect their progeny. Everyone craves and engages in economic production and enterprises; these are what they know and talk about. This is truly simple talk!”48 His censure of Geng’s ignominious conduct stems from his revulsion at dishonesty on the one hand and, on the other, Geng’s censorious attitude toward ordinary people’s pursuit of self-interest. Everyone, including Geng himself and all the officials and gentry, Li averred, strove for the same goal: a better life for themselves, or care of the self.49

The conflict between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang symbolizes two general positions of Confucian-educated literati. Geng upheld conventional Cheng-Zhu daoxue ethics, which privileged moral perfection as the primary goal. This position publicly defined the aspirations and conduct of the literati, since they were required to master daoxue teachings in their preparation for the civil service examinations. In contrast, Li’s ethics underscored the pursuit of material interests and worldly success as fundamental to caring for the self and its relational needs. Consequently, Li relegated the pursuit of moral perfection and public service to the status of secondary activities.

Such ethics valorizes the pursuit of material well-being and worldly success as goals for all. As the normative goal of government service, inherent
in Confucian education, became increasingly elusive, late-Ming literati could no longer dismiss out of hand the possibility of supplementing their incomes by engaging in pecuniary activities. The ideal of the Confucian gentlemen (junzi) who speaks only of righteousness (yi), not profit, could no longer be sustained.

The gentry’s extensive involvement in luxurious consumption, production, and trade accompanied attempts to renegotiate the value of commerce and the role of merchants in the hierarchy of social relations and values. The career of a merchant was no longer deemed undesirable or secondary to that of a literatus (shi). Merchants were able to win respect and social prestige by financing projects important to their communities and even by purchasing degrees. It is no surprise that the social status of merchants rose most prominently in areas where commerce had been crucial in maintaining wealth and power for the local elites.

This leveling out of social classes finds corroboration in the remarks of Xu Fang, an obscure figure, one of whose essays was nonetheless included in Huang Zongxi’s colossal anthology of Ming writings, *Sea of Writings of the Ming* (Ming wenhai). Xu argued that there were only “three classes of people” in his time—farmers, artisans, and merchants—because in practice the shi class had disappeared long ago:

> When literati, brooding over their books, look up in reflection, they are not concerned with the truth of sages and worthies. They [studied] those books for social advancement. The teachings of father, elder brother, teacher, and friends do not aim to cultivate sages and worthies; they aim to produce wealthy and powerful persons. . . . Today there is no literatus who is not preoccupied with profit. How can they be called literati? I simply call them shang [merchants]. . . . If hundreds and thousands become merchants, how can we claim that there are literati? [We can] say that there are only “three classes” because the literati class disappeared long ago.

Two points here bear elaboration. First, Xu observed that the purpose of education for most people was dissociated from the quest for moral cultivation. Rather, they studied to get ahead in society by accumulating wealth and power. Any moral precepts they learned from books were merely incidental. Second, even those studying to become officials did so primarily to enrich themselves. In pursuing wealth, they were as obsessive as merchants. For Xu, the shi no longer had a moral calling; in practice they had
become careerists just like members of other occupations. Xu explained that he did not mean to denigrate commercial careers. On the contrary, he recognized that merchants labored hard to earn a living, and this was not at odds with acting righteously. His view accurately reflects the new social reality echoed in Li Zhi’s writings.

Regardless of vocation, everyone was striving to enrich himself and his family in the late Ming. Educated elites, gentry, and officials, no less than merchants, scrambled for wealth and competed in lavish consumption as social distinctions became increasingly porous and markers of status came to be defined in terms of material wealth. Materialism was the order of the day and engendered a discourse on luxury consumption (she) both as a solution for unemployment and as a justified practice of the rich.

Li Zhi’s decisions and experiences symbolize the emerging demand for adjustments to conventional Confucian ethics. He had to negotiate the length of his service to the government and his responsibilities toward his family. His frequent justifications of his pursuit of personal self-interest point to the growing difficulty with which literati had to contend as they sought to fulfill their dream of obtaining an official career. Increasing numbers of literati found it necessary to pursue careers as tutors, merchants, doctors, private secretaries, professional writers, publishers, and litigation masters. The growing trend in the merging and mixing of careers of the literati and merchants became all the more conspicuous in the sixteenth century.

In castigating the hypocrisy of officials who engaged in moral lecturing while striving for wealth and fame, Li Zhi compared them to merchants. But like Xu Fang, he hastened to add that there was nothing shameful about real merchants, who labored diligently to make a meager living. Li Zhi did not view merchants’ pursuit of profit in terms of conventional morality. Like Xu Fang and many others, including later thinkers like Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) and Tang Zhen (1630–1704), Li regarded profit from trade and commerce as the worthy rewards of labor. And, to justify this pursuit of profit, he transformed the conventional dichotomy between “righteousness” and “profit” (yili)—the one morally sanctioned, the other condemned—into a single, morally neutral end toward which people of all vocations equally strove.

This ethics of the “quotidian life of ordinary people” fused profit-seeking and moral duties. Li Zhi both practiced this type of ethics and articulated his ideas in his widely read publications. His ethics underscores the legitimacy of material interests for both literati and merchants. Moreover, his ideas accorded with the values of the majority of literati and merchants,
who increasingly intermingled. In plain language that everyone could understand, he powerfully verbalized and eloquently defended this transformation of the career structure and class stratification of late-Ming society.

For mercantile literati, care of the self involved fulfillment of the needs of the “five senses.” Sensual needs underwent profound changes in the late Ming as commercial publishing produced huge quantities of imprints to meet the intellectual, spiritual, practical, and entertainment needs of multiple reading publics. Large quantities of fiction and drama were produced to provide alternative reading materials for the educated elites. In terms of readership, literati and merchants overlapped considerably. From the publishers’ perspective, many genres—practical manuals, travel guides, and entertaining publications—could target the two simultaneously. *Shishang* ethics grew from the common experiences of literati and merchants, which included education, travel, and interactions with officials. The titles and subheadings of many travel guides and practical manuals simply and directly addressed literati and merchants in the same breath. Titles such as *Classified Essential Knowledge for Literati and Merchants* (Shishang leiyao), *Essential Readings for Literati and Merchants* (Shishang yaolan), *Essential Rules for Literati and Merchants* (Shishang guilüe), and *Ten Essential Rules for Literati and Merchants* (Shishang shiyao) simply leave out the other two vocations: farmers and craftsmen.

Contemporary vernacular fiction and drama attest to the growing resemblance, even the merging of literati’s and merchants’ quotidian experiences. Literati and merchants were often protagonists in fictional worlds that mimicked the social world. Li Zhi not only was an avid reader of this burgeoning literature but also a fierce and eloquent champion of its literary value. In his widely read essay “On the Childlike Mind,” he cites a comment on the popular drama *The Western Chamber* to proclaim that “the child’s mind is the authentic mind.” By “the childlike mind,” he means that “the first thought of the original heart-mind is without dissimulation and sincerely authentic” (fu tongxin zhe, juejia chunzhen, zuichu yinian zhi benxin ye). As Pauline Lee has observed, “Li’s ethical view directly impact[ed] his literary criticism, and his assessment of literary and historical figures, as well as his views on aesthetics.” The idea is that “the child’s mind” is the foundation of his literary view, which is egalitarian, pluralistic, historical, and aesthetic. Any writing that expresses the authentic is great literature. For him vernacular literary works were even more valuable than Confucian classics, since not all of the latter were the authentic words of the sages. It bears pointing out that contemporary literary genres such as fiction, drama,
and eight-legged essays provided *shishang* writers like Li Zhi with a new discursive space for articulating and justifying the practices and ethics of the *shishang*. These genres also created a supplementary economic foundation for such practices as commercial publishing in the sixteenth century, enabling literati to take up positions in the economic field as professional writers.\(^6^4\) Li Zhi did not, however, redefine great literature simply in terms of expression, nor did he repudiate the Confucian view that literature should serve didactic and social purposes.\(^6^5\)

Like millions of other *shishang*, he navigated a world in which consumerism, commercial expansion, and the blurring of social distinctions were calling for a new ethics that reflected the changing structure of social possibilities and accentuated material desires. The teeming public of readers—literati seeking official careers without a moral calling and merchants going after profits without a sense of moral deficiency—thirsted for literature of the quotidian world, a world in which their paths crisscrossed as they struggled to fulfill their personal goals in the care of the self. As a writer, Li Zhi offered them not only practical aids like model eight-legged essays but also amusing and satirical comments on their favorite novels and dramas. With his brush, he entertained them with tantalizing stories, many of which were autobiographical, enlightened them with penetrating censure of the hypocrisy and moral condescension of officials, and moved them with honesty and a relentless quest for personal spiritual improvement.

**SHISHANG AND THEIR RELIGIONS**

Unlike conventional literati, who were expected to embody Confucian ethics, *shishang* were free to seek spiritual meaning in any religion. The great variety of syncretic practices bringing together the Three Teachings were emblematic of this late-Ming intellectual milieu. Wang Yangming and many of his disciples, such as Wang Ji, Luo Rufang, Yuan Huang (1533–1606), Lin Zhao’en (1517–1598), and Li Zhi, his teacher Wang Bi, and friends like Jiao Hong, all exhibited an open and inclusive attitude toward different religious traditions.\(^6^6\) Liberated from the moral strictures of Confucianism and its daoxue doctrinal censure of heresy (*yiduan*), *shishang* were free to pursue their personal religious interests, as religion in the late Ming had become immensely private and personal.

I would argue that despite his deep interest in Buddhism, Li Zhi’s ethics were those of a *shishang* literatus, not a Confucian literatus, a Buddhist adherent, or a Daoist practitioner in the conventional sense. Li Zhi was a syncretist in the broadest sense. As the chapters in this volume by Wai-ye Li,
Maram Epstein, Miaw-fen Lu, and Jiang Wu show, Li Zhi, whether in his authorial or objectified mode of presentation, was genuinely devoted to his own vision of the three religions. In his intellectual and religious convictions, he was a Confucian, a Buddhist, and a Daoist. He might not openly advocate the union of the Three Teachings, as Wang Ji and Lin Zhao’en did, but he embraced all three as vehicles for transmitting the Way.

Li Zhi’s embrace of all the Three Teachings was a factor in his conflict with Geng Dingxiang, an outspoken follower of Cheng-Zhu daoxue. Hostile to those who derided Buddhism, Li Zhi articulated an ethics akin to the common position of the shishang, who were free to create their own personal spiritual world.

Li Zhi’s much publicized flirtation with Buddhism notwithstanding, he was, as Jiang Wu confirms in his chapter, not a Buddhist in the conventional sense. Jiao Hong once asked Li which of the books he had authored were his favorites. Li replied, “All of them; none should be neglected. A Book to Keep (Hidden) embodies my spirit, A Book to Burn registers my life experiences, and Expositions of the Four Books bears witness to my learning.” It is worthy of note that none of these texts focuses exclusively on Buddhism, although A Book to Burn does contain some Buddhist content.

Insofar as his literary legacy is concerned, his interests and values revolved around the quotidian life of the human world. To the extent it was important, Buddhism was but one of the Three Teachings or three paths (dao).

While Li Zhi considered the pursuit of worldly interests and success as worthy and justified for all, his own personal priorities lay elsewhere. For him, wealth and status were sources of unbearable suffering in his personal spiritual pursuits, even though he demonstrated a Confucian interest in just and peaceful governance. His personal frustrations with endless demands from his family and kin led him to relinquish all ties with his family in Quanzhou by taking the tonsure. But he did not abandon his family for the same reasons that might have motivated a Buddhist monk to take this step. He had striven for years to fulfill his obligations toward his family, and only after he considered his duties fulfilled did he renounce his family. They had become an obstacle to his pursuit of friendship, reading, writing, and the Way.

Government service was likewise a conventional duty of Confucian literati, but it was becoming more elusive, expensive, and unsavory. By retiring from office, Li Zhi attempted to free himself from the Confucian literatus’s obligation to serve the government. At any rate, he had already fulfilled his obligation by working in the government for over twenty years.
In “Miscellaneous Remembrances” (Za shu), he lamented his agonizing experience as an official.71

Regarding government service as merely an obligation, Li Zhi did not abandon his other Confucian values. He continued to uphold Confucian social ethics, but as a participant and critic, not as a gatekeeper or master. Indeed, he was committed to many Confucian values essential for sustaining the social order. As a shishang whose world depended on good government as well as loyal and competent officials, he took a deep interest in statecraft and dynastic history. Even after he retired from the government and took the tonsure, he never gave up his interest in problems of governance (jingshi).

His profound interest in Buddhism and his shaved head notwithstanding, he was no ordinary Buddhist and, by conventional standards, not even a good Buddhist. His use of the expression “leaving the family” (chujia) when applied to himself was more social than religious. He used this phrase not to indicate his cutting off all social ties and living as a monk in a monastery, but instead to connote the mode of existence he cultivated—hovering between that of a Daoist hermit and a Confucian gentleman disinterested in government service but fully engrossed in the quotidian world and harboring no cravings for wealth or power.

As illustrated by the three of his own books he prized most highly—A Book to Burn, A Book to Keep (Hidden), and Expositions of the Four Books, all of which concern his life experiences and views on government, history, and the Confucian classics, he unmistakably did not advocate the Buddhist negation of the mundane world. In light of his view of “leaving the family,” his writing and publishing these three works no longer appears incompatible with his interests in Buddhism. His idea of the Way encompassed aspects of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, which in infinite configurations were practiced by the educated, including literati and merchants alike, or simply the mercantile literati (shishang). Different configurations of shishang syncretism were practiced by his friends Jiao Hong and Tao Wangling (1562–1609) and other shishang writers like Tu Long (1543–1605) and Tang Xianzu (1550–1616).

CONCLUSION

The significance of Li Zhi’s thought and experiences needs to be reckoned in terms of the distinctive practices in late-Ming society. Li Zhi was a practical, satirical, entertaining writer and social critic. He was also a champion
and a defender of a new society in which the dominant social group was no longer the Confucian literati but the mercantile literati, the *shishang*. He articulated the ethics of this new group in his writings. Ethical relationships were redefined in material terms of the quotidian life, and worldly interests were legitimate pursuits of all regardless of their social and vocational positions. This ethics reconfigured the social hierarchy, elevating merchants to the status of literati, whose moral calling was in turn dissociated from its practical goal of worldly success. Both the literati and merchants, who were becoming indistinguishable in their career trajectories, sought wealth, power, and social distinctions as their legitimate and essential life goals. Moral perfection, government service, and spiritual pursuits were all optional, incidental, and the private concerns of the individual. To readers of his times, Li Zhi was truly an avatar of the extraordinary, but in the social world, he was a *shishang* writer for the quotidian world and a penetrating heroic thinker and critic of his times, who with supreme discernment and literary ingenuity blazed the trail along which modern Chinese society tumbled forward.

**NOTES**

1 Li Zhi, “Zaowan shouta,” in *LZ* 2:103.
2 For an intellectual history approach to Li Zhi’s ideas, see Pauline Lee, *Li Zhi*.
3 For the emergence of *shishang* culture, especially *shishang* involved in commercial publishing, see Chow, *Publishing*, especially chs. 3, 4, and 5.
4 Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction*.
6 In a letter to Pan Shizao (1537–1600), Li Zhi mentioned that the living expenses had been paid for his stay in Xishan Temple. This is information rarely found in late-Ming literati writings. Li Zhi, “Yu Pan Xuesong,” in *LZ* 3:123.
7 Lin Haiquan, *Li Zhi nianpu kaolüe*.
8 Li Ruiliang, “Li Zhi nianpu jianbian,” in *LZ* 26:426.
9 Li Zhi, “Da Geng Sikou,” in *LZ* 1:77.
10 For example, he wrote prefaces to an anthology of examination essays, a collection of memorials, and a study of Zhang Zai’s *Book of Change* for patrons. He was the ghostwriter for a treatise on government. Li Zhi, “Lun zheng pian,” in *LZ* 1:242; Li Zhi, “Li Zhongcheng zou yi,” in *LZ* 1:318–19; Li Zhi, “Ji wu ji wen, dai zuo,” in *LZ* 1:346–48.
11 See Li Zhi, “Da Li Weiqing,” in *LZ* 3:73.
Monastery on Dragon Lake east of the city in the fall of 1588. Li Ruiliang, “Li Zhi nianpu jianbian,” in LZ 26:449. The expenses for constructing other buildings at this site were disbursed from funds raised by his friends in Beijing and Buddhist devotees. Li Zhi, “Yu Chenglao,” Xu Fenshu, in LZ 3:62.

He was working on Supplement to New Account of Tales of the World (Shishuo xinyu bu). Li Ruiliang, “Li Zhi nianpu jianbian,” in LZ 26:447.

16 Chow, Publishing, ch. 4.
17 For discussion of Li Zhi’s dismissive attitude toward his own examination success, see chapters 1 and 2.
18 Li Zhi, “Zi xu,” in LZ 1:1.
19 The first edition of Expositions of the Four Books was published in Macheng between 1585, when Li moved to Macheng, and 1590, when Fenshu was first printed.
23 See, for example, Li Zhi, “Yu Jiao Ruohou,” in LZ 3:130. For a general study of the civil service examination, see Elman, A Cultural History.
26 Li Zhi, “Shiwen houxu,” in LZ 1:324. The editor of that anthology of eight-legged essays may have been Li Yuanyang, who is referred to in the preface as Dazhongcheng, an unofficial title for governor.
29 Li Ruiliang, “Li Zhi nianpu jianbian,” in LZ 26:467, emphasis added.
33 For example, Li Zhi, “Da Jiao Yiyuan,” in LZ 1:17; Li Zhi, “Da Geng Sikou,” in LZ 1:74–76.
34 There are no direct or allusive records of payments by correspondents. But it was customary or li for seekers of assistance to provide some form of remuneration for the service. Even if there had been such information, it would have been excised during the editing process.
35 Chow, Publishing, ch. 4.
36 For instance, A Book to Keep (Hidden) provided new perspectives on major historical figures likely to appear in the section of the examination devoted to policy (celun). Li Zhi, “Yu Geng Zijian,” in LZ 3:135.
37 Chow, Publishing, ch. 5.
41 De Certeau, Heterologies, 24.
43 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 42.
45 Li Zhi, “Da Deng Shiyang,” in LZ 1:8.
46 Li Zhi, “Da Geng Zhongcheng,” in LZ 1:41. See also Li Zhi, “Da Deng Mingfu,” in LZ 1:94.
47 Li Zhi, “Da Geng Sikou,” in LZ 1:72–73.
48 Li Zhi, “Da Deng Mingfu,” in LZ 1:94.
49 On the conflict between Li and Geng, see chapter 4.
50 For a study of luxury consumption of the literati in the late Ming, see Wu Jen-shu, Pinwei shehua.
51 For instance, in the Huizhou area, careers in business were considered no less respectable than official positions. See Yu Ying-shih, “Shi-shang.”
52 Huang Zongxi, Ming wenhai, 994–95.
53 Huang Zongxi, Ming wenhai, 995.
54 Wu Jen-shu, Pinwei; Clunas, Superfluous Things.
56 In the Song, merchants could become officials. Guo Dongxu, Songdai fazhi yanjiu, 386. For members of the same family taking up careers in trade and government service see Bossler, Powerful Relations, 203–12. For examples in the Ming, see Szonyi, Practicing Kinship, 56–89.
58 See the essays in Brokaw and Chow, Printing and Book Culture; Chow, Publishing, 92, 123–26.
59 Chow, “The Merging.”
60 Li Zhi, “Tongxin shuo,” in LZ 1:276.
62 Pauline Lee, Li Zhi, 10.
63 Li Zhi did not repudiate the Confucian classics in their entirety. He was actually criticizing the way in which phony lecturers used them. Li Zhi, “Tongxin shuo,” in LZ 1:276–77.
64 For the application of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the field to the study of the changing relationship between literary production and commercial publishing, see Chow, Publishing.
65 Li Zhi, “Hongfu,” in LZ 2:133.
66 For studies of various forms of syncretism, see Berling, The Syncretic Religion; Brokaw, The Ledgers of Merit; Ch’ien, Chiao Hung.
68 Despite the diverse contents of his writings in *A Book to Burn*, in a letter to Jiao Hong he nonetheless characterized this work as records of his musings on Buddhism. Li Zhi, “Da Jiao Yiyuan,” in *LZ* 1:17.


70 When he sent his family back to Quanzhou in 1587, his daughter was already married.

71 Li Zhi, “Gankai pingsheng,” in *LZ* 2:109–110. On Li Zhi’s obligations and devotion to his family, see chapters 2 and 3.