PERFORMING AUTHENTICITY

Li Zhi, Buddhism, and the Rise of Textual Spirituality in Early Modern China

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The influence of Buddhism on Li Zhi cannot be underestimated. Not only did he adopt Buddhist dress and live in a monastery after retiring from his official career, he also expressed himself in Buddhist terms and frequently referred to Buddhist scriptures in his writings. Unlike the conventional approach to the history of ideas, which simply presents Buddhism as abstract “unit ideas” and “categorical labels,” this chapter reexamines the relationship between Li Zhi and Buddhism by exploring his experiences of reading and writing texts related to Buddhism. His practices as a reader and writer provide insight into his spiritual life and his understanding of spiritual authenticity. His intimacy with texts fostered a special kind of “textual spirituality” that was shaped by reading, writing, and performing.

LI ZHI AND THE DAO LEARNERS (XUEDAOREN) IN THE LATE MING

Scholars have characterized Li Zhi as a follower of Wang Yangming’s movement and labeled him a member of the Taizhou School, following Huang Zongxi’s characterization in Biographies of Ming Scholars (Ming Ru xue’an). Needless to say, this labeling is too simplistic to explain the complexity of his thought and activities, especially his engagement with Buddhism. According to this Confucianism-centered paradigm, Li Zhi, a Confucian literatus, used Buddhism as a convenient means to express his “radical” ideas.
This paradigm neglects the broader intellectual changes during the time, which involved Confucian elites, “mercantile literati,” low-level examination candidates, government clerks, educated commoners, and Buddhist and Daoist clergy who aspired to pursue spiritual goals across sectarian and doctrinal lines. This group of “spiritual seekers,” who often referred to themselves as “Dao learners,” pursued the supreme truth of the Way (Dao) and were unconstrained by strict sectarian or social identities. Their learning aimed to identify and recover the *primus fons* (prime source) of the universe and the human world through a “retrieval process,” not only intellectually but also directly and experientially without mediation. In order to attain the supreme Dao, these learners valued the spiritual advice of teachers and friends and traveled constantly in search of spiritual communities. During their spiritual journey, they often dabbled in different religious traditions and developed eclectic views regarding the “teachings” they encountered. Because of their syncretic views and “stubborn” pursuit of truth, they often found themselves at the edge of society and had ambivalent social, cultural, and religious identities. They were frequently marginalized and viewed as “strange” or “heretical.”

Although as a social and intellectual phenomenon the rise of the Dao learners was visible in the late Ming, so far there has been no substantial study of the genealogy of this category or its religious significance. References to Dao learning (Xuedao) are ubiquitous in earlier Chinese sources, especially in early Chan texts, but the formation of the Dao learners as a unique social group seems to have coalesced only during the Northern Song. It is especially prominent in the work of the Northern Song literatus Chao Jiong (951–1034), who used this category extensively. His *Record of the Scrap Gold from the Dharma Treasure* (Fazang suijin lu), *New Compilation at the Zhaode Estate* (Zhaode xinbian), and *Essentials from the Dao Cloister* (Daoyuan jiyao) are miscellaneous notes on his thoughts, which resemble Western “commonplace books” on spiritual matters. Chao Jiong clearly addressed his writings to what he called “Dao learners,” individuals seeking to transcend the mundane world by “penetrating” the Dao.

During the late Ming, however, the Dao learners emerged as a distinctive social group with extensive networks. References to the Dao learners were common in Ming writings and can be found in various sources. Li Zhi mentioned this category quite often and referred to his students and followers generically as Dao learners. He sometimes alluded to “true” spiritual seekers as “Dao learners with true color” (*bense xued-aoren*). For example, when in Tongzhou Yuan Zhongdao asked him about
self-cultivation, Li Zhi suggested the method of using key phrase (huatou) contemplation. Emphasizing the role of doubt, as Chan masters did, Li remarked, “Doubt is a gem for ‘Dao learners’: The greater the doubt, the greater the enlightenment experience.” Yuan Zhongdao concurred that “Dao learners these days” (shi zhi xuedaozhe) did not appreciate the true value of doubt.5

Dao learners clearly were not restricted to the ranks of literati and officials. Many of them, such as Wang Gen, He Xinyin, and Yan Jun and his disciples Han Zhen, Luo Rufang, and Deng Huoqu, whom Li Zhi admired the most, hailed from humble origins and may be regarded as Dao learners as well.6 Deng Huoqu, for example, inspired by his teacher Zhao Zhenji, was determined to lead a wandering life in search of spiritual attainment. Dressing as a monk, he went to many places to find teachers and friends. He traveled to Yunnan and shaved his head to become a monk there in 1548. He died in a small Buddhist temple close to Beijing. Like Li Zhi, he was viewed as an outlier and was ridiculed as a “strange person” (yiren).7

Li Zhi’s life fits the profile of a typical Dao learner. His primary goal was to pursue the Way, the ultimate source of spiritual truth, without sectarian or doctrinal constraints. Like many Dao learners, who immersed themselves in Buddhist teaching and practice, Li Zhi had a particular interest in Buddhism. He was an avid reader of Buddhist scriptures and compiled many anthologies of Buddhist literature. During his spiritual journey, Buddhism played an indispensable role in shaping his life and thought. By his own account, his interest in Wang Yangming’s School of the Mind prompted him to turn to Chan Buddhism. Like many of Wang Yangming’s followers, he believed in the unity of the Three Teachings, a real synthesis of all three without any differentiation or, in the words of Edward Ch’ien (Qian Xinzu), a syncretism of “non-compartmentalization.”8

Not only did Li Zhi achieve tremendous understanding of spiritual teachings, he also attempted to live a life that embodied the Way. His retreat from his official career to the Macheng area can be read as a deliberate decision to devote himself to the pursuit of the Way.9 His apparent seclusion from the mundane world symbolized his unity with the Way, both intellectually and experientially.

This seclusion, however, did not signify his complete renunciation of the outside world. Rather, he was connected to regional and national networks of like-minded friends and followers through constant epistolary communication and publishing activities. Friends, travel, and communities were
crucial for the late-Ming Dao learners to develop spiritual insights. To some extent, their spiritual pursuit was not a secluded, private enterprise but a public and collective effort relying on community support and the development of a “communication circuit” that helped to connect Dao learners in geographically disparate communities.

His Nanjing period, from 1567 to 1577, was crucial to his later intellectual life: not only did he participate actively in “lecture-meetings” (jianghui), but he also built a strong network of like-minded Confucian literati such as Jiao Hong, Guan Zhidao, Fang Hang, and Luo Rufang. In his later life, he constantly drew upon this network for his livelihood and kept himself connected to the intellectual communities in Beijing and Nanjing. His meeting with Geng Dingli in 1572, for example, introduced him to the intellectual community in the Macheng area.

However, Li Zhi’s pursuit of the Way created an enduring controversy about his identity, especially because of his decision to shave his hair and dress as a Buddhist monk. It was in the Zhifoyuan Monastery that he made the radical change in his appearance. This decision, along with his choice to send his wife back to Fujian, brought criticism that he had “abandoned human relations,” because in the Confucian tradition a grown man’s keeping his hair symbolized his assuming familial and social responsibilities. Li Zhi defended himself as “having had no choice” other than to shave off his beard. He also claimed he was “old and afraid of death.” He argued that he did not wish to shirk his moral duties; rather, he “wanted to fulfill them but was not able to” (yu zhi er buneng).

Li Zhi was ambivalent about his decision because after he shaved his head many people considered him a Buddhist monk. He spent about twelve years at the Zhifoyuan Monastery, where he completed many of his works. Although other monks assumed that he had shaved his head because he believed that doing so was a prerequisite for engaging in Dao learning, he insisted that this was not the case. Nonetheless, despite his protestations, his iconoclastic behavior led Confucians and monks alike to view him as an outcast and a “charlatan” monk.

It is against this background of the rising spiritual, intellectual, and social movement of the Dao learners that Li Zhi can be seen as one of its representatives. Instead of thinking through the lenses of the traditional division of the “Three Teachings,” I emphasize the common characteristics among these Dao learners in order to gauge their impact on culture and society. One commonality is their engagement in reading and writing spiritual literature, in particular, Buddhist texts.
Dao learners like Li Zhi saw no need to differentiate among the Three Teachings since they perceived in each teaching just one side of the truth. Such a spiritual tendency toward syncretism and eclecticism nourished a large group of people, mostly Confucian literati, educated commoners, low-status examination candidates, and Buddhist and Daoist clergy who were connected through a national network of communication. To understand how Buddhism influenced the formation of their spirituality and why Li Zhi emerged as a leader, we have to understand how such a type of spirituality came into being.

“Textual spirituality” involved reading, writing, hand-copying, and printing religious books. Books, as well as many other “superfluous things” (changwu), including stylish scholars’ studios, strange rocks, and ancient vessels and utensils, had become indispensable components of literati leisure life. These objects were used for “pure enjoyment of cultured idleness.” A book-centered elite culture in the late Ming privileged reading, writing, publishing, and collecting. Li Zhi, in *Upon Arrival at the Lake* (Chutanji), listed four categories related to book culture: collecting (jushu), transcribing (chaoshu), reading (dushu), and writing (zhushu). Gradually, a distinct social class emerged, which has often been referred to as “book readers” (dushuren).

To a large extent, Dao learners can be treated as a subset of “book readers” because Dao learners shared a deep commitment to reading and writing. In addition to Confucian Classics, they read Buddhist and Daoist scriptures; in the late Ming, Buddhist scriptures such as the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, Avatāṃsaka Sūtra, Platform Sūtra, and other Chan literature came to occupy a central position in their reading activities. This facilitated the immediate apprehension of “truth” by reading books rather than solely participating in devotional activities mediated by clergy or institutions. Moreover, the spiritual orientation of this group of spiritual seekers was to emphasize the supreme and sophisticated expression of philosophical and intellectual wisdom. Although they did not entirely dismiss faith and devotion, they did not consider them primary criteria for judging spiritual progress.

In addition to reading religious texts, Dao learners also engaged in writing, commenting, and anthologizing. As Paul Griffiths argues, the act of religious reading implies a set of epistemological views regarding the reader’s attitude and knowledge and often entails religious writing, such as
performing anthologies and composing scriptural commentaries. Thus, religious writing reinforces the set of spiritual attitudes developed in religious reading. In my book *Enlightenment in Dispute*, I give some evidence of this kind of religious reading and writing of Chan literature in the late Ming. Here, I focus on Li Zhi’s reading and writing of Buddhist literature to illuminate the formation of his textual spirituality.

There is no evidence that Li Zhi studied Buddhist scriptures systematically. His understanding of Buddhism seems to have derived from a variety of sources, including popular morality books. According to his own account, he truly began to engage in reading Buddhist scriptures only in 1576, when he was fifty years old. It is not known, however, which scriptures he initially read. But the titles of the *Heart Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Combined Treatise on the Avatāṃsaka Sūtra* (Huayan helun) by Li Tong-xuan, and works of Chan literature such as the *Joint Collection of the Five Lamps* (*Wudeng huiyuan*; hereafter *Five Lamps Collection*) often appear in his writings.

His strategy for interpreting these pieces of Buddhist literature is most clearly stated in “The Outline of the *Heart Sūtra*” (*Xinjing tigang*), which was carved and printed in Huang’an. According to Li Zhi, the classics or scriptures were written in order to reveal the supreme truth, or Dao. His task as a commentator was to “explain” or “interpret” (*jie*). However, “explanation” is a double-edged sword: it can block the reader from apprehending the Dao; only if used correctly can it lead students to enlightenment:

> The Way is fundamentally great, but since the Way [is presumed to] rely on scriptures, one cannot clearly make it out. [Moreover], when seeking to clarify the Way by clarifying the scriptures, one can’t discern the way because of the [attached scriptural] explanations. Thus, scriptures are robbers of the Way and explanations are barriers to the scriptures. So what use are they? Despite all this, good scholars penetrate the scriptures while bad ones are stuck clinging to them. Explanations enlighten the capable and mislead the incapable. And so it is appropriate that [scriptures and explanations] should be considered as robbers and barriers.

Here, “explanation” is not the literal understanding of the meaning of words, as in the conventional Confucian and Buddhist commentarial tradition. (Actually there is little evidence that Li Zhi consulted these
commentarial works.) Rather, “explanation” refers to the “subjective meanings” he imposed upon the texts, as Rivi Handler-Spitz has pointed out.\(^{21}\)

Li Zhi had a leisurely reading life, which he describes in many places. He thoroughly enjoyed books and even wrote a poem to celebrate the joy of reading.\(^{22}\) Residing at the Zhifoyuan Monastery, he used to “close and lock the door, and spend his days reading books.”\(^{23}\) Writing, commenting, and anthologizing were also part of his daily routine. Not only did he write commentaries on Chinese Classics,\(^{24}\) but he also wrote commentaries on Buddhist scriptures such as the Heart Sūtra, the Diamond Sūtra, the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, and others. His writing philosophy has a strong individualistic tendency, which can be summarized in his own words: “In general, I write only to amuse myself, not for other people.”\(^{25}\) For him, a textual world centered on himself was created through writing, regardless of the existence of others and their opinions. This philosophy leads to a unique writing strategy: “When ordinary people write, they begin from the outside and fight their way in; when I write, I start from the middle and fight my way out.”\(^{26}\) Here, he highlights that good essays must rely on the author’s own understanding and insight. His writing is also a direct expression of his feeling, even if the manner he used was direct, poignant, and “vulgar,” in a way not conventionally acceptable. As Pauline Lee has pointed out, “When Li Zhi writes of writing, he speaks of ‘spewing’ (pen), ‘spitting’ (tuō), and ‘pouring’ (su) out one’s feelings.”\(^{27}\)

Li Zhi established a routine of reading and writing that led him to compile anthologies. While reading, he selected and hand-copied passages he deemed worthy. Sometimes he asked his monk attendants to work for him. When they had completed their copying, he was ready to compile an anthology. After moving to the Zhifoyuan Monastery, he wrote to Jiao Hong, wanting to compile a book called Confucian Chan (Ruchan) to document the ideas of Confucians who spoke about Chan; he also mentioned publishing another volume, called Clergy’s Chan (Sengchan), to collect monks’ Chan sayings. He intended these two volumes to be published together, so that readers could gain access to “precise, pithy, and essential” teachings.\(^{28}\) As a result, during his lifetime, Li Zhi compiled a variety of anthologies related to religion.\(^{29}\)

Besides being a prolific writer and compiler, Li Zhi directly participated in the production process of his works. As Kai-wing Chow elaborates in chapter 8, Li Zhi was deeply engaged in printing activities, including publishing religious texts. In 1574, together with Jiao Hong, he published the famous morality book Tract of the Most Exalted on Resonance and Response (Taishang ganying pian), which might be his earliest foray into publishing.
In this book, he argues that the essential Buddhist teaching of causation was a corollary to the Confucian teaching of resonance response (ganying). The purpose of printing this book was to show that resonance response is not a hollow teaching but rather a profound truth.³⁰ Li Zhi seems to have responded to the printing request favorably and promptly, showing his eagerness to get his works publicized. In a letter to Jiao Hong dated 1588, he divulges interesting details about his involvement in publishing. His Commentary on Three Classics (Sanjing jie, most likely his commentaries on Laozi, Zhuangzi, and the Heart Sūtra) was carved in Jinhua, possibly by Pan Shizao (1537–1600). He compiled these anthologies rather quickly, in roughly nine days, by his own estimation. His comments on “The Outline of the Heart Sūtra” were added to a calligraphic rendering of this text, which he wrote for his friends. He did not expect to publish most of these works. Instead, he claimed to have written them simply for his own entertainment.³¹

Li Zhi’s fondness for Chan literature led him to reprint several important Chan texts. While he was in Yunnan, he had the Platform Sūtra recarved at Mount Wuhua in Kunming.³² He also arranged for the printing of the Five Lamps Collection, a text that he studied extensively. The preface he wrote for this printed work shows he was sensitive to the textual variations in different editions, especially the description of Tianhuang Daowu from the Yuan monk Yehai Ziqing’s reprint.³³ As is well-known in Chan history, the identity of two Chan monks from different lineages in the Tang dynasty, Tianhuang Daowu and Tianwang Daowu, was the focus of a series of debates during the seventeenth century.³⁴ However, Li Zhi’s preface to the reprinted Five Lamps Collection already contains important textual information related to the later Tianhuang and Tianwang debate. Li Zhi’s investigation of the biography of Tianwang Daowu by Qiu Xuansu pre-dated any polemical works about the debate. It may be the case that his substantial study of Chan literature influenced a group of literati and sparked the debate in the seventeenth century.

Not only did he engage in textual verification of Chan texts; he also attempted to rearrange the accepted Chan lineage based on his own understanding. In his “Treatise on the Five Lineages” (Wuzong shuo), written in 1598, he made a bold claim that the teaching styles of all the five Chan lineages actually resembled the style of Mazu Daoyi, whom he regarded as the spiritual source of all Chan traditions. His view resurfaced in the later debate on Chan lineage, which sought to rearrange the accepted Chan lineage by emphasizing Mazu’s spiritual heritage.³⁵ What’s more, he drew attention to Nanyang Huizhong and Yongjia Xuanjue because he thought
even without dharma heirs, their superb understanding proved that they were the true heirs of the Sixth patriarch Huineng. Clearly, Li Zhi placed his “interpretation” based on reading above the sectarian conventions established in Chan communities.

Evidence suggests that Li Zhi inhabited a world of textual spirituality constructed by intrinsic links among religious books. But when the issue of practice and devotion came to the forefront, he became equivocal and hesitant. Sure, he lived in a Buddhist monastery for a long time and was familiar with monastic routines; he even acted as abbot in the absence of Wunian Shenyou and set rules for monks. He also once chanted the Medicine King Sūtra (Yaoshi jing) for an extensive period in the hope of recovering from asthma. However, he remained at a remove from the genuine life of the monastic community and abstained from serious devotional practice. Even after he shaved his head, he continued to consume meat.

It is a puzzle, however, that Li Zhi seems to have committed himself to Pure Land belief and practice, which appeared to be deeply devotional, in addition to Chan Buddhism. In 1593 he returned to Dragon Lake and built a Buddha hall. In 1597 he resided at Jilesi in West Mountain in Beijing and compiled Essentials of Pure Land (Jingtu jue) in three fascicles. This raises the interesting question of whether Li Zhi’s spirituality was purely “textual.” In fact, his discussions of Pure Land Buddhism are couched in the Chan rhetoric of spontaneity and nondualism. In his “Preface to Resolving Doubts about the Pure Land” (Jingtu jue qianyin), he declared, “Amitābha Buddha’s Pure Land is no other than the Pure Land of one’s own mind.” Moreover, chanting Buddha’s name and Chan investigation serve the same purpose of “purifying one’s own mind.” As he also claimed in a letter to his friend Li Shihui, “There are many Buddha worlds. Wherever there is a world, there is Buddha. Wherever there is a Buddha, I would travel there and sojourn there. . . . If there is a Buddha in Heaven, I’d go there; if there is a Buddha in Hell, I’d go there as well. Why must I restrict myself to solely going to the inner court of the Tusita Heaven like Bai Letian [Bai Juyi] or being reborn in the Western Land like Tiantai Master Zhiyi and Chan master Yongming Yanshou?” This passage mentions multiple descriptions of the Buddha Land, including the ones famous Buddhists such as Bai Juyi, Zhiyi, and Yongming Yanshou aspired to. However, for Li Zhi, these are all equal options with no differentiation or preference. The key point is to be with the Buddha no matter where he resides. Even here, where he is promoting Pure Land practice, he does not consider himself restricted by a devotional program aiming at rebirth in the Western Paradise. Rather, he conceives of Pure Land practice as simply one option for pursuing the
supreme Way. In this sense, it was only one of the many practices subordinated to and supplementing his textual spirituality; his regular Buddhist practice could be considered auxiliary.42

PERFORMANCE AND AUTHENTICITY

The late Ming was a time of performance: drama, opera, and ceremonial rituals were staged in cities and villages and greatly enjoyed by people of all walks of life. Not satisfied with operating purely on the intellectual plane, late-Ming Dao learners sought to demonstrate their superior understanding of the truth through action. Wang Yangming’s thought on the “unity of knowledge and action” (zhixing heyi) expressed such a tendency. The late-Ming “spiritual seekers” thus had a strong inclination to “do things” in order to demonstrate their “textual spirituality.”

The performances I analyze here were largely enactments of Chan encounter dialogues (jifeng wenda), in which two or more interlocutors discuss spiritual matters.43 The purpose of these performances was to demonstrate one’s supreme understanding of authenticity (benzhen). In my book Leaving for the Rising Sun, I explain how the notion of authenticity as a spiritual, cultural, and political ideal became a hotly debated issue in early modern East Asia. The sharp contrast between ideal and reality stimulated an urge to search for “the real” in spiritual traditions. As I define it, authenticity is “the foundation of a tradition and the source for forming a coherent and consistent value system.” Disbelief and doubt inevitably lead to what I call an “Authenticity Crisis.”44

As is well known, authenticity is central to Li Zhi’s thought and has been extensively studied.45 Some argue that he advocated for a view of authenticity that included a full appreciation of human nature, especially pure, pristine, and genuine human feelings and desires as the basis of a full-fledged human life. He expected all Dao learners to cultivate themselves based on the notion of authenticity: “Dao learners should root themselves in authenticity [jiaogenzhen]. They must consider it their ultimate goal to be released from birth and death, to depart from the sea of suffering, and to avoid fear.”46

Philosophically speaking, Li Zhi’s view on authenticity can be summarized as a type of “radical nondualism.” This hermeneutic strategy is consistent with the methods he used when commenting on the second fascicle of the Śūrañgama Sūtra. He studied the scripture extensively and at one time may have attempted to write a commentary for the entire text. However, just one fragment of his commentary has been preserved; it can be
found in A Book to Burn. This text contains his interpretation of the paragraph “Darkness as Void” (Huimei weikong), which provides a cosmological vision of the world. This paragraph points to the deluded ideas of common people and explains how the “darkness” of ignorance creates a “mental void” that becomes the source of dualistic thinking. Li Zhi explains as follows:

How could the manifestation of the Mind be emptied! . . . Don’t you know that everything, from my material [Rūpa] body to the mountains and rivers in the external world, the entire earth and all the space you can see is the material manifestation from my “Marvelously Illuminated True Mind” [Miaoming zhenxin]? All these are the natural manifestations of the Mind. Who can empty them? If the manifestation of the Mind is always the manifestation of the True Mind, is the True Mind situated within the Rūpa body? It is that all phenomena are but part of my True Mind, as the waves are floating bubbles of the great ocean. If the ocean could empty itself of bubbles, then the True Mind could empty itself of its phenomena as well. How self-delusional!\

Here Li Zhi repeats a typical Mahāyāna trope about the unity of the Mind and its manifestations, noumena and phenomena, essence and function. His rhetoric of nonduality also echoes the key tenets of Wang Yangming’s philosophy of the mind. However, what Li Zhi advocated was radically different from a mere reiteration of the rhetoric of nondualism, resulting in literary and philosophical exposition of the Mahāyāna teaching. Unlike most monastic and scholarly commentators, Li Zhi attempted to carry out in his real life the teaching of nondualism, and he sought to change the “corrupt” and “fake” reality he and his fellows criticized. This meant breaking down social boundaries, tearing up masks of hierarchy, and abolishing hypocritical “Daoxue” discourses, so as to return human existence to its “authentic” root, or in Li Zhi’s words, so as to restore the “childlike mind.” In his nondualistic world, the social divide between elite and commoner disappeared, and the differences among the Three Teachings could no longer hold. In other words, Li Zhi’s teaching implies that the ideal of nondualism went beyond mere rhetoric and became part of an individual’s knowledge of his own being. It held transformative power over a person’s worldview, social behavior, and life experience. For Li Zhi, to
embody the ideal of nondualism, the ultimate goal was to “penetrate, then transcend” (toutuo).

The most powerful display of such a radical understanding is performance. The type of performances in which Li Zhi engaged were natural extensions of his textual spirituality and depended heavily on his use of text. Just as Chan practitioners enacted encounter dialogues, groups of like-minded people, both Dao learners and later Chan masters, enacted their spiritual ideals by performing “scenes” recorded in Chan texts. These events, in turn, would be recorded in text format. After being collected, printed, and published, these textualized performances would be circulated among an even larger community, reinforcing a sense of “performatively created reality.” Although the performances may appear to be “impromptu,” or even “faked” and “forced,” they originated from textual sources and remained “distinctively real” within the textual realm through anthologizing and publication.48

Such performances were often recorded in compilations of anecdotes, recollections, and memoirs as well as in anthologies, essays, and treatises, providing references to their origins in Li Zhi’s life. His performances with his followers were recorded in collections such as Conversations in the Oak Grove (Zuolin jitan) and Answers to Questions at Yongqing Temple (Yongqing dawen). How to interpret them, however, poses a challenge. I suggest considering these documents as literary imaginings of performances based on actual happenings. Interpreting the texts in this way presupposes the existence of a community of performers, “audience members” who watched “live performances,” and readers who encountered these performances on the printed page. Through such a communal link and exchange of ideas, consensus could be reached within this community. As in many kinds of theater, performances followed a “script,” which could be repeated and duplicated. Very often, the voluminous Chan gōng’an stories (Jpn. kōan), full of performative encounters, served as textual sources and models for Li Zhi’s performative imitations.49 As we will see, action and performance—the result of textual spirituality—took place in a networked community and largely followed the model of encounter dialogue in Chan Buddhism.

Li Zhi’s enthusiasm for the performance of encounter dialogues can be seen in his comments on Yan Jun’s famous “performance” of “rolling on the ground” (dagun). In his letter to Zhou Sijiu in 1588, Li Zhi remarked upon an anecdote about a commoner named Yan Jun who was inspired by Wang Yangming’s learning. According to Geng Dingxiang’s account, during a lecture meeting Yan attended, when the Great Learning was discussed, Yan...
suddenly began rolling on the ground and yelling, “Look at my ‘pristine moral consciousness’ [liangzhi]!” This episode became legendary and circulated widely among the literati. However, the anecdote received mixed reviews. Apparently, some viewed Yan’s rolling negatively and criticized it as the action of a mad Chan Buddhist. Li Zhi, however, viewed Yan’s behavior positively. He said the following in response to Geng Dingxiang’s negative characterization of the event:

I don’t know whether Shannong [Yan Jun] truly attained this state. I don’t even know whether Shannong was actually capable of rolling on the ground for his entire life. I fear that even he may not have been able to do so. But if he did attain this level, then he is my teacher. How could I doubt this man’s accomplishment simply because other people laugh at him? To base my opinion of him not on my own investigation but on other people’s ridicule would be a mistake. It would oppose the principles of empirical investigation, of learning for one’s self. These were the very source of Shannong’s spontaneous intuition; it had absolutely nothing to do with “Chan [Zen] tricks.” Shannong attained the highest level of “studying for one’s own sake.” That is why he was able to behave in such a way. Had any fraction of his mind been diverted by the desire to impress other people, he would not have been able to succeed.

Let’s take a close look at an example of such a performance between Li Zhi and the Buddhist monk Wunian Shenyou to illustrate how he demonstrated his “authentic” self through performance. Wunian, a local monk from Macheng, lived with Li for more than ten years. The two developed a deep bond, despite occasional conflicts due to differences in personality. Through Li’s network, Wunian came to be known among the literati as an eminent monk. The collection of epistolary correspondence between him and famous literati was preserved in the Jiaxing Buddhist canon (Jiaxing-zang). The following conversation between the two occurred because Wunian was having trouble reaching enlightenment and felt perplexed about his self-cultivation. Here is the record from Wunian’s biography:

When he saw [Wunian], the layman [Li Zhi] asked: “How is your cultivation [gongfu]?” Master [Wunian] replied: “I have doubts.” Li Zhi asked further: “What do you doubt?” The master said: “If I have insight I will know.” Li Zhi became serious and remarked:
“This is not your insight.” The master was confused again. [Later], Li Zhi invited his friends to meet [Wunian] at Sima mountain. There was also a scholar-monk who came and joined the meeting. Sitting at night, Li Zhi asked: “How can the pure and original [mind] suddenly produce mountains, rivers and the earth?” After the scholar-monk explained, the layman [Li Zhi] said: “Wunian, would you explain how?” When Wunian Shenyou was just about to open his mouth, Li Zhi pushed Wunian’s knee and said: “How about this [ni]!” Wunian was suddenly awakened. When he returned to Dragon Lake, he practiced quiet sitting for several days and all he had learned in his lifetime disappeared completely. From that time on, all his doubts and anxieties disappeared forever.

This encounter closely resembles Chan gong’an stories. Li and Wunian formed a teacher-student relationship, in which Li presented Wunian with a perplexing question. Readers well versed in Chan literature may also perceive resonances between the wording of this anecdote and phrases found in existing gong’an stories. For example, Li Zhi’s use of the word ni is actually an imitation of the response of the Song Chan master Foyan Qingyuan in his encounter with the Song literatus Feng Ji (?–1153) preserved in a record of lamp transmission. It is recorded that the two one day walked through the dharma hall where a novice monk was reciting a phrase from a poem by the Tang monk Changqing Huiling: “Among all phenomena he revealed only his body” (Wanxiang zhi zhong du lushen). Upon hearing this, Foyan said to Feng, “Ni,” exactly the same response Li Zhi used in his performance.

Another example can be found in Answers to Questions at Yongqing Temple (Yongqing dawen), compiled in 1602. This document contains a precious record about Li Zhi and his conversation with his followers during his 1598 visit to Nanjing. Invited by She Changji and Wu Dechang, who were students of Yang Qiuyan, a student of Luo Rufang and an admirer of Chan Buddhism, Li Zhi resided in Yongqing Monastery in Nanjing. During the meeting, he was surrounded by his followers and acted like a Chan master. Li Zhi’s behavior and conversation in Yongqing Monastery in Nanjing, translated below, were also recorded in a way similar to the Chan encounter dialogues:

Cheng Hunzhi from Haiyang came to see Li Zhi but did not have a single word with him. One day, he and Mr. Fang Ren’an
[Fang Hang] sat together with Li Zhi, who remained silent for a long time. The two [Cheng and Fang] began to converse with one another.

Mr. Fang said: “When Mr. Luo Rufang teaches students, he is full of energy.”

Cheng replied: “Yes. Mr. Luo teaches students earnestly and honestly. He is truly a great, compassionate father.”

Li Zhi suddenly turned to them and said: “If it is so, I am not [a great, compassionate father]. Let me ask you: why did you want to see me?”

Cheng replied: “To seek the Buddha.”

Li Zhi said: “Where is the Buddha?”

Cheng said: “All over the dharma realm.”

Li Zhi said: “What is your place among the Buddhas?”

Cheng said: “I am number one.”

Li Zhi said: “Since the Buddhas are all over the place, how can you be number one?”

Cheng said: “Everyone is number one.”

Li Zhi replied: “Is there such a thing as number one?”

This encounter dialogue involves three people and begins with a conversation between Cheng Hunzhi and Fang Hang. Li Zhi remains in the background without saying a word. His silence hints at his superb understanding of the truth, like that of the Layman Vimalakīrti at the end of chapter 9 of the Vimalakīrti Sūtra. Li Zhi joins in only when the conversation between Cheng and Fang shifts to praising Luo Rufang. Li raises essential Buddhist questions about the number one Buddha. Cheng replies that Buddhas are everywhere and he himself is the number one Buddha. By declaring this, Cheng shows his understanding of the Mahāyāna teaching of the Buddha nature: All sentient beings are equal as they are endowed with the potential to become a Buddha. However, Li does not regard this as the ultimate teaching, and he is not satisfied with the logical contradiction in Cheng’s answer that everyone is number one. The conversation ends with Li’s negation: there is no such thing as the number one Buddha. He transcends the paradox of conventional thinking and comes to rest upon the state of non-dualistic “emptiness.” Readers familiar with Chan gōng’ān literature will immediately recognize the similarities. To a large extent, the structure of encounter stories like this resembles a joke: a long and paradoxical setup is created to highlight the revelation of the punch line. When the punch line,
Li Zhi’s last remark, is revealed, the episode stops with the expectation that the enlightenment experience ensues in the silence of all participants.57

Li Zhi even used his highly dramatic death as a punch line. When a follower named Wang Keshou asked him, “What will your final act be?,” Li Zhi replied, “I should benefit from people who don’t know me. Dying in jail with honor should complete my life.” He then clapped his hands and said loudly, “At the time [of my death] I will become famous throughout the world. How happy! How happy!” In this episode, both questions and answers follow a typical Chan gong’an style, as demonstrated by the phrases “final act” and “How happy! How happy!”58

Close reading of texts by and about Li Zhi reveals that performance constituted a major part of Li Zhi’s spiritual life, which was characterized by his relentless pursuit of the ideal of authenticity. Such performances of authenticity, initiated by spiritual seekers such as Li Zhi and based on Chan literature, were transformed into textual anecdotes that circulated widely and had a profound impact on the intellectual, particularly the Buddhist community. As I explain in my book Enlightenment in Dispute, such performances first developed among Dao learners. Later, when they were reintroduced into the Chan community, they became part of the Buddhist revival in the seventeenth century.59

CONCLUSION

The complexity of Li Zhi’s thought and behavior is difficult to explain. As many have pointed out, his writing is full of contradictions. The role that religion, especially Buddhism, plays is even more subtle and nuanced. Some previous scholarship, especially in Chinese and Japanese, labeled him in either Confucian or Buddhist terms so as to “classify teachings” (panjiao) and subtly elevate one teaching above the others. According to some scholars, Li Zhi either “synthesized” (zarou), “combined” (huitong), or “entered and exited” (churu) the Three Teachings, but in the end he “returned” (guiyi) to one of them.60

Unlike such scholarship, this chapter seeks to situate Li Zhi and his pursuit of Buddhist teaching in immediate life experience relevant to his thought. In my view, although his national notoriety and his embrace of extreme views set him apart from the majority of Dao learners, he was nonetheless first and foremost a member of this growing community. Like them, he read and wrote actively and fostered a kind of “textual spirituality” anchored in the notion of authenticity. For this reason, his involvement
with Buddhism must be understood within this context. Familiar questions about his connection with Buddhism must be abandoned and a new question posed in their place: How did his reading and writing of Buddhist texts contribute to the formation of his textual spirituality and his continual performance of authenticity?

NOTES

1 The “unit idea” approach was most famously proposed by Arthur Lovejoy for the study of the history of ideas. See Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being. On the confusion of using labels in Chinese religion, especially Daoism, see Sivin, “On the Word ‘Taoist.’”

2 On Li Zhi’s boundary-crossing as a mercantile literatus, see chapter 8 especially pp. 158–59.

3 They often called themselves xuedaoren, xuedao zhiren, xuedaozhe, or simply xuezhe. Because of the spiritual purpose of their pursuit of knowledge, I feel hesitant to use the word “student” or “scholar” to translate the term. It should be noted that in Li Zhi’s writing the term xuedao takes on a meaning drastically different from the meaning of orthodox Confucian “Learning of the Way” (Daoxue), which he vehemently opposed.

4 Chao Jiong, Zhaode xinbian (Siku quanshu edition), j. 1, p. 5. For Chao Jiong’s practice of religious reading, see Jiang Wu, Enlightenment, 54–56. See also Skonicki, “Getting It for Oneself.”

5 Yuan Zhongdao, “Shu Yuegong ce,” in Kexuezhai ji, j. 21, in LZ 26:164.

6 Li Zhi also published Deng’s works and befriended Deng’s disciples in Huang’an. According to Li, Deng Huoqu had a disciple named Li Shou’an who hailed from Huang’an, and two of his disciples were Wang Shiben (Ruowu) and Zeng Jiquan. See Li Zhi, “Zhenshi,” in LZ 1:197–98; Li Zhi, “Gaojie shuo” (1589), in LZ 1:294–96. For a full translation, see Li Zhi, A Book to Burn, 121–24. In 1585, Li Zhi wrote a preface to Deng’s Nanxun lu (“Nanxun lu xu,” in LZ 3:191). On Li Zhi’s relationships with his teachers and students, see chapter 5.

7 Li’s intellectual opponent Geng Dingxiang described three intellectuals of his time as “strange people”: Deng Huoqu, He Xinyin, and Fang Yilin. See Geng Dingxiang, “Lizhong san yi zhuan.” For the conflict between Geng and Li, see chapter 4. See also Rowe, Crimson Rain, 95–103.


9 Because of its geographical advantage, during the mid Ming the Macheng area, including the newly created Huang’an County, gradually rose to prominence as a transportation hub and commercial center, fostering education and culture. According to William Rowe, agricultural commercialization, lineage building, accumulation of wealth, and the formation of
a merchant network brought this area to regional prominence and allowed Buddhism to flourish. See Rowe, *Crimson Rain*, especially chs. 3 and 4.

10 See also chapters 4 and 8.

11 Here I have adopted the concept of the “communication circuit” from Darnton’s “What Is the History of Books?”


13 See Li Zhi, “Fu Deng Shiyang,” in *LZ* 1:25, and the four poems he wrote about shaving his head (*LZ* 2:260). It is noteworthy that Li Zhi’s tonsure was not accompanied by an ordination ceremony. Ordination was a serious, life-changing event, and historically Buddhist monks were supposed to accept three types of ordination ceremonies in succession: for novice, full precepts, and bodhisattva. The government usually controlled the official ordination platforms (*jietan*), which offered the full precepts ordination ceremony. However, during the 1560s, the Jiajing emperor ordered that official platforms be halted. This led to an unusual situation: ordained monks could no longer receive official recognition. The Triple Platform Ordination (*Santan dajie*), which is the commonly accepted ritual today, was not invented until the early 1600s. The silence about the ordination ceremony in Li Zhi’s and other monks’ writings during this period seems to corroborate this lack of a centralized ordination system at that time. On the reinvention of the ordination ceremony, see Jiang Wu, *Enlightenment*, 28–31; Jiang Wu, “Discipline.” On Li Zhi’s alleged renunciation of family ties, see chapters 2 and 3.

14 See chapter 6.


23 Yuan Zhongdao, “Li Wenling zhu’ai,” in *LZ* 26:158.

24 These works include exegeses of *The Book of Change* (*Jiuzheng yiyin*), *Laozi* (*Laozi jie*), *Zhuangzi* (*Zhuangzi jie*), and *Expositions of the Four Books* (*Si shu ping*). On Li Zhi’s commentarial practices, see chapter 7, especially 135–39 and chapter 10.


Pauline Lee, *Li Zhi*, 111. See also Rivi Handler-Spitz’s discussion of Li Zhi’s “provocative” style in *Symptoms*, ch. 6.

Li Zhi, “You yu Congwu Xiaolian,” in *LZ* 1:208.

As a follower of Wang Yangming, he published Wang’s selected works (Yangming xiansheng Daoxue chao) and chronological biography (Yangming xiansheng nianpu). He also published Wang Ji’s selected writings (Longxi xiansheng wenlu chao). His Buddhist compilations include Dahui Zonggao’s recorded sayings (Li Zhangzhe pixuan Dahui ji), *Records of Cause and Consequence* (Yinguo lu, also known as Ganying pian), *Commentary on Yao Guangxiao’s Daoyu lu* (Li Zhuowu xiansheng pidian Daoyu lu), *Essay of Good Words* (Yanshan pian, also known as Sanjiao miaoshu), and more. He also published selections of popular religious texts such as *A Record of a Cart Full of Ghosts* (Kuichezhi) and the anthology *Unstringing the Bow* (Shuohuzhi).

It was reprinted in 1578, during the time Li Zhi was posted to Yunnan. This work later became known as *Yinguo lu* after he took up residence at Dragon Lake.


Li Zhi, “Chongke Wudeng huiyuan xu,” in *LZ* 3:180; Jiang Wu, *Enlightenment*, 319–23. It should be noted that the issue of the two Daowus was made public by Qu Ruji (1548–1610), who visited Li Zhi in 1595. It is possible that Li’s note influenced Qu’s compilation of *Zhiyue lu*.

The significance of this debate is that the biographers of these two monks claimed that the Chan monk Longtan Chongxin, from whom the two Chan lineages, Yunmen and Fayan, derived, was their dharma heir. The different attributions of the lineage affiliation of Longtan Chongxin would thus significantly alter the official lineage transmission system promoted in *Jingde chuandenglu* and *Wudeng huiyuan*. The earliest reference I have found to the dubious identity of these two monks was made by Qu Ruji in his Chan anthology *Pointing to the Moon* (*Zhiyue lu*) published in 1602. See Jiang Wu, *Enlightenment*, 198.


During Wunian Shenyou’s absence, Li Zhi temporarily assumed the position of abbot and led a series of ritual events. He also helped to regulate the monastic assembly. See related essays in *Fenshu*, j. 3 and 4 (*LZ*, vol. 1) and *Xu Fenshu*, j. 4. (*LZ*, vol. 3). A number of these pieces are translated into English in Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn*, 172–85.

See Li Zhi, “Lisong Yaoshi gaowen” and “Lisong Yaoshi jing bi gaowen,” in *LZ* 2:38 and 41. The assembly started on the fifteenth day of the tenth month and lasted for 120 days. Participants first chanted *Yaoshi jing* in forty-nine fascicles for Li Zhi’s health. In total, they chanted nine scriptures.
9. Performing Authenticity

40 Li Zhi, A Book to Burn, 180.
41 Li Zhi, “Yu Li Weiqing,” in LZ 1:149.
42 This is similar to what Charles Jones has classified as a type of Pure Land practice “subordinated to other practices.” See Jones, “Toward a Typology of Nien-fo.” Li Zhi’s close associate Yuan Hongdao used similar rhetoric to justify Pure Land practice as a legitimate method of self-cultivation. See Jones, “Yuan Hongdao and the Xifang helun.” Similar to Li, after compiling a major Pure Land anthology to defend its practice, Yuan did not convert to Pure Land Buddhism but remained committed to Chan Buddhism. See Jones, “Yuan Hongdao and the Coral Grove.” For Yuan’s connection with Li Zhi, see Zi, “Strolling in ‘Coral Grove,’” 23–28. For analysis of a literati community with extensive links to Li Zhi, see Eichman, A Late Sixteenth-Century Chinese Buddhist Fellowship.
43 According to John McRae’s definition, encounter dialogue “refers to the spontaneous repartee that is said to take place between master and student in the process of Ch’an training. This type of communication includes both verbal and physical exchanges that are often posed in the form of sincere but misguided questions from Ch’an trainees and perplexing, even enigmatic, responses from the masters” (“Encounter Dialogue,” 340–41). For a recent study, see Van Overmeire, “Encounter Dialogue.”
44 Jiang Wu, Leaving, 5–7. The issue of authenticity was a prevalent topic in seventeenth-century philosophy, literature, and art. See Bentley, The Figurative Works; Epstein, Competing Discourses.
45 See, for example, chapter 1. See also Pauline Lee, Li Zhi; Handler-Spitz, Symptoms.
47 Li Zhi, “Jiejing wen,” in LZ 2:6. For a translation of the original texts in juan 2 of the Śūraṅgama Sūtra, see Hsüan Hua, The Śūraṅgama Sūtra, 52–53.
48 I have studied extensively how this type of performance was first enacted within the literati communities and later extended to the revived Chan communities. See Jiang Wu, Enlightenment, 160.
49 For understanding gong’an, see Sharf, “How to Think.” For comprehensive studies of the gong’an tradition in East Asia, see also Heine and Wright, The Köan.
50 Geng Dingxiang seems to be the only person who mentioned this anecdote. For a description of this episode in English, see Li Wai-yee, “The Rhetoric of Spontaneity.” Yan Jun is a neglected “Taizhou” scholar who nurtured students such as He Xinyin, Luo Rufang, and Han Zhen. His complete collection, printed in 1855, was discovered only in the 1980s. Aside from Geng Dingxiang’s reference to this anecdote, there is no reference to Yan Jun’s rolling on the ground in this rediscovered collection. There is only one
similar account of his student’s rolling on the ground. According to Yan Jun, once he traveled on a boat, his student Cheng Xueyan, after realizing the truth, rolled ten times on the cabin floor (jiu gun cangban shizhuan). See Yan Jun, “Cheng Shendao zhuan,” in Yan Jun ji, 22.

Li Zhi, “Da Zhou Liutang,” in LZ 1:220, translation adapted from Li Zhi, A Book to Burn, 72.

51 Wunian hailed from Macheng and became an eminent monk in his own right. His interactions with Li Zhi were extensive. Li’s tensions with him and other monks in the Zhifoyuan Monastery reached their peak in 1594. Wunian left for Huangbo Mountain in neighboring Shangcheng County to build Fayan Monastery. For his relationship with Li Zhi, see Ling, “Wunian yu Li Zhi.” There is a collection of his records, including a dozen letters exchanged with famous literati during this time. See Huangbo Wunian Chanshi fuwen, in Mingban Jiaxing dazangjing 20:6. For the CBETA online edition, go to http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/J20nB098_006. A punctuated edition was published recently in China. See Hou Suping, Chan fei yizhihua.

53 This is a quote from the Śūraṅgama Sūtra.

54 “Xingyou” (Biography of Wunian), Huangbo Wunian chanshi fuwen, in Mingban Jiaxing dazangjing 20:526 (traced through CBETA). My translation is adapted from my Enlightenment, 69–70.

55 Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō, 51:671b.

56 Li Zhi, Yongqing dawen, in LZ 18:337.

57 For the use of the joke structure to understand the teaching of nondualism, see Ziporyn, Evil, 154–57.

58 Li Wenling waiji, in LZ 26:84.

59 I have argued that the revival of Chan Buddhism in the seventeenth century should be considered an extension of late-Ming literati culture. See Jiang Wu, Enlightenment and Leaving.

60 There are numerous such categorizations in East Asian scholarship on Li Zhi. For a recent example, see Dai Jingxian, “Li Zhi yu Fojiao.”