The Objectionable Li Zhi

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PART ONE

AUTHENTICITY AND FILIALITY
Li Zhi once compared the quest for “true nature” with Daoist alchemy, the assembly and refinement of secret ingredients to produce the elixir of immortality (external alchemy, waidan) as well as the physical, mental, and spiritual discipline that turns the body into the “laboratory” of “internal alchemy” (neidan) and nourishes the “holy embryo” (shengtai), “the avatar of the realized state of immortality in the adept’s body.”¹ In a letter dated 1591 he wrote, “As soon as there is a glimmer, apply a strong flame, so that once true gold emerges from the ore, it will not be reabsorbed by the ore again. Isn’t that grand! The level of burning power having been reached, true nature will naturally be revealed. This is not the time to let go. . . . It’s all a matter of daily applying fire; it is no different from cherishing and nourishing the Holy Embryo.”²

In this model, “true nature” is attained through relentless, measured, and gradual moral and spiritual self-cultivation. The image mirrors similar formulations in the writings of thinkers on the learning of the heart and mind (xinxue). In Records of Transmission and Practice (Chuanxi lu), Wang Yangming (1472–1529) describes the “focus of intent” (lizhi) on “heavenly principles” (tianli) as a process of “condensation in the heart” (xin zhong ningju) comparable to the formation of the Holy Embryo in Daoist alchemy.³ According to Wang Yangming’s disciple Wang Ji, “Emotions return to moral nature: this is called ‘recovering the cinnabar.’”⁴ (“Recovering the cinnabar” refers to the successful creation of the elixir for immortality as well as the attainment of inner truth and inner renewal.) Wang Ji also
compares the recovery of one’s “true original nature” (benlai zhenxing) from the crust of worldly concerns and desires to the process of smelting metal. Just as gold buried in ore requires the application of a strong flame, one’s true nature can be liberated from worldly desires only by self-examination and self-cultivation.⁵

By far the more typical stance in Li Zhi’s writings, however, presents “true nature” or “genuine core” as something that needs to be expressed rather than attained—that is, the trajectory is outward rather than inward. Expression comes with the burden of confronting potential misunderstanding. It is not surprising, therefore, that Li Zhi’s most frequently cited formulation of the subject, “On the Childlike Mind” (Tongxin shuo),⁶ should focus on questions of evaluation and misjudgment (rather than self-cultivation). The essay begins with an apologetic statement from Li Zhi’s friend Jiao Hong (1540–1620) (under the pseudonym “Mountain Farmer of the Dragon Cave”), who wrote in his 1582 preface to the Yuan play The Western Chamber (Xixiang ji; ca. fourteenth century), “It will be great if those with real understanding do not say that I still have a childlike mind.” Here “childlike mind” is negative: the reader may recall examples of classical usage, such as the dire prediction for Lord Zhao of Lu in Zuozhuan as one who “would not be able to come to a good end” because he “still had a childlike mind” even at the age of nineteen, as evinced by his ritual impropriety during his mother’s funeral.⁷ Li Zhi refutes this implicit denigration of “the childlike mind” by upholding it as “the genuine mind” (zhenxin), the un tarnished beginning of consciousness: “The childlike mind cuts off all fakery and is pure genuineness—it is the original mind behind the first glimmer of consciousness. If one loses the childlike mind, then one loses the genuine mind. To lose the genuine mind is to lose the genuine person. If a person is not genuine, then he will no longer recover his beginning.”

At first glance, “the childlike mind” echoes “the heart and mind of the newborn child” (chizi zhi xin) in Mengzi (ca. fourth–third century BCE) or “the pristine moral consciousness” (liangzhi) valorized by Wang Yangming and his followers, notably Wang Gen (1483–1541), Wang Ji, and Luo Rufang (1515–1588).⁸ But it soon becomes obvious that Li Zhi is not interested in “the childlike mind” as the goal of a quest or as the impetus for moral action. Elsewhere he links sensual desires and the desire for gain to “the original heart and mind” (benxin) and “simple and immediate words” (eryan).⁹ He also affirms self-interest (si) and “the heart and mind of power and profit” (shi li zhi xin) as “endowed nature” (bingfu zhi ziran).¹⁰ If the childlike mind gives rise to works that celebrate desire and rancor such as The Western Chamber and Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan), then by
definition it encompasses emotions and impulses beyond pristine moral consciousness.

The beginning polemical stance (arguing against a negative understanding of “the childlike mind”) persists throughout the essay. This oppositional mood underlies the diatribes against “fake people” (jiaren), “fake words” (jiayan), “fake deeds” (jiashi), and “fake writings” (jiawen). Li Zhi does not explain how one reaches the childlike mind, although he implies that removing obstacles such as acquired principles and information and the desire to earn a good name or to avoid a bad one would be instrumental. This elision comes about because his prime concern is the manifestation of “the childlike mind” and its opposite as well as the authority to elevate one and decry the other.

Li Zhi’s essay is famous for valorizing The Western Chamber, The Water Margin, and Ming examination essays as being rooted in “the childlike mind” and for heretically rejecting the canonical classics as “topics and excuses for Confucian scholars, a gathering place for fake people.” (The inclusion of examination essays may seem incongruous, but it fits into his argument pitting contemporary and recent genres against hallowed ancient ones. See chapter 8.) While the praise of fiction and drama recurs in his oeuvre, his condemnation of canonical classics is obviously belied by his extensive commentaries on these works. Why, then, did he strike this pose? Perhaps contemporary hypocrisy drove him to extremes. Perhaps he obeyed the dictate of his oppositional stance vis-à-vis society. While being genuine seems to imply the spontaneous manifestation of “the childlike mind,” its expression is inevitably mediated by the anticipation of how one’s words and actions are perceived. It also involves a sense of radical difference, the awareness of the gap between one’s views and “consensual opinion” and of the corollary struggle to claim the authority of judgment.

In that sense Li Zhi’s essay is intensely dialogic and proleptic: the argument proceeds by refuting its imagined detractors. It is an act of communication that presumes misunderstanding, hence the concluding line: “Alas, how can I get to have a word about writing with a true great sage who has not yet lost his childlike mind?” It echoes the last line of “External Things” (Waiwu) in Zhuangzi: “How can I get to have a word with one who has forgotten words?” The paradox of transcending language through language in Zhuangzi becomes the paradox of spontaneity and mediation, individual difference and authority in Li Zhi’s essay. The question becomes: How can the genuine core that defies external constraints seek external validation?

This version of genuineness makes it problematic as the goal of quest, for Li Zhi associates deliberation (youxin) with pretense (zuowei; literally,
“creating falsehood”). Instead it seems tied to the notion of spontaneous expression. Li Zhi describes the process whereby this childlike mind produces great works through the “natural generation of finely patterned writing” (ziwen). His other discussions of literary creation are likewise dominated by images of spontaneous and involuntary creation. Yet even as there are unexplained mediatory steps between the “childlike mind” and formal perfection, the quest for genuineness is bound to be somewhat self-contradictory.

The problem is compounded by self-division. If one is torn by conflicting motives and desires, which “genuine self” does one express? To what extent can “genuineness” accommodate inconstancy, inconsistency, or contradictions? One can of course characterize (or even dramatize) the process of conflict as itself the “stuff” of genuine expression, but that is not admissible if the genuine is valorized as something pristine, indivisible, and “expressible,” as in Li Zhi’s essay on the childlike mind. Further, does the awareness of one’s audience compromise genuineness? Li Zhi often declares that he is following his own inclinations as he defies conventions or that he is writing for his own pleasure, yet the obsession with how he will be judged or understood is never far from the surface. Sometimes there is a distinct sense of performance. In what follows I will focus on Li Zhi’s autobiographical writings to ponder the tensions and contradictions in the idea of genuineness (“expressing the genuine” and “genuine expression”) in his writings, beginning with his short “Self-Summation” (Zizan) from 1588.

THE LIAR’S PARADOX

His nature is intolerant and impatient. His appearance is self-possessed and arrogant. His words are outlandish and vulgar. His heart is wild and deluded. His actions are careless and reckless. His friends are few and yet he shows great warmth. As for whether he approves of others—he is eager to seek their faults and takes no pleasure in their strengths. As for how he hates others—having cut ties with them, he would to the end of his life want to harm them. His ambition is the warmth and satisfaction of material wellbeing, but he calls himself Boyi or Shuqi. His character is that of the shameless, boastful man from Qi, but he presents himself as being sated with virtues and the Way. Obviously unwilling to “give away even a blade of grass,” he nevertheless appeals to Yi Yin as an excuse. Obviously unwilling to “pull out even a hair,” he yet denounces Yang Zhu
for destroying humaneness. His actions go against the multitude; his mouth contradicts his heart. That being the way he is, all the men in his community abhor him. Formerly Zigong asked the Master, “What if all the men in his community abhor him?” The Master said, “One cannot judge him yet.” As for the Layman, perhaps one can!

The “Self-Summation” is written in the third person, and Li Zhi refers to himself as “the Layman” (Jushi), the usual designation for a man who embraces Buddhist or Daoist ideals without belonging to a religious order. In Li Zhi’s writings the term seems to invoke his liminal state and his defiance of categorical distinctions. The modern editors of Li Zhi’s collected writings (Li Zhi quanji zhu) tentatively date this piece to 1588, when attacks from his erstwhile friend Geng Dingxiang (1524–1596) might have accounted for its bitterly ironic tone. They read this negative self-portrait as transparently tongue-in-cheek: “Not only does it indicate his lofty and pure character that places him far above the mundane crowd, it also contains barbs directed against Confucian scholars.” According to this reading, Li Zhi is simply affecting the venomous tone of his critics as they denounce his arrogance, perversity, vindictiveness, and hypocrisy. However, closer examination reveals distinctions in the string of negative epithets. To describe oneself as proud, impatient, obsessed, or reckless is a common way to affirm one’s defiant character in the late Ming. Being unforgiving and given to fault-finding points to a relentless need to go beyond the polite veneer of society. Elsewhere Li Zhi claims to glory in exposing his own flaws (although we see him often bristling at criticism and being intolerant of disagreement): “I take pleasure not in being without faults but in having my faults pointed out by others, I do not worry about having faults so much as not having my faults made manifest.” The first half of “Self-Summation” may thus be taken “straight” as a conventionally unconventional mode of self-validation.

The picture becomes murkier with self-accusations of hypocrisy and false claims. Is it possible to read at least part of this diatribe as being rooted in unease? Is Li Zhi at all troubled by the margin between “not giving away a blade of grass” and “not giving away a blade of grass to those not upholding the Way,” following the example of Yi Yin (Mengzi 5A.7)? We are landed in the liar’s paradox. His critics no doubt charge him with being concerned with material well-being even as he professes disdain of gain and power as if he were Boyi or Shuqi, who, according to Sima Qian, vie to give up kingship and eventually die of starvation because they cannot
approve of the Zhou leader’s (the future King Wu of Zhou) campaign against Shang (Shiji 61). Does Li Zhi feel any self-doubt as he relies on his friends’ patronage and financial support even as he abjures worldly gain?23 The man of Qi from Mengzi hides the truth of how he begs at gravesides for offerings and instead boasts about grand friends in front of his wife and concubine (Mengzi 4B.61). Was Li Zhi aware enough of his own desire for fame or the indignities of dependence to contemplate a possible analogy? In a letter (1585) defending the Confucian-scholar-turned-Buddhist-monk Deng Huoqu, Li Zhi writes, “Now everybody knows that those who seek wealth and profit beg at gravesides, but how could they know that the multitude with gourds and bamboo hats wandering among clouds and rivers (i.e., recluses or monks) are also begging at gravesides? . . . I am but a man of Qi, how can I laugh at Huoqu?”24 To style himself “a man of Qi” is to aggressively refute the expectation that he should rise above worldly cares; it conveys both rueful recognition of the contradictions of his situation and disdain of his critics.

Li Zhi ends this piece with an equivocal reversal of the exchange between Confucius and his disciple Zigong in the Analects (13.24). The Master says that the condemnation of the community (or more literally, people from the same hometown or region) does not suffice as grounds for judgment: only when we evaluate the men offering judgment can we trust the judgment. In the case of Li Zhi, “perhaps one can [rely on the judgment of his community]”: this seems to be a perverse affirmative implying negation; it echoes the sentiment Li Zhi expresses in a letter (1586) to Jiao Hong, where he compares heroes to “big fish” destined to be rejected by their communities: “Now if one were to seek heroes among those loved by everybody in the community, it would be like angling for fish in a well, how can that be possible? . . . Heroes are certainly not loved by their communities, and certainly no heroes will emerge from those belonging to their communities.”25 In this passage Li Zhi categorically rejects consensual judgments, while in “Self-Summation” he adopts the voice of his critics to embrace such judgments or posit them as plausible. If Li Zhi dons a mask to unmask the fatuousness of his critics, does he consider whether the self-division endemic to masking poses problems for the ideal of genuineness?

**EMOTIONS AND REPRESSION, SELF AND OTHER**

Perhaps all attempts to give an account of oneself are doomed to be caught in self-division, inasmuch as it involves a basic separation of the self as observer and as observed. The gap between the self as the source of judgment and its
object is heightened with the incorporation of a fictive chronicler and narrator, as in the case of “A Sketch of Zhuowu [Li Zhi]” (Zhuowu lunlù), written in 1578 when Li Zhi was fifty-two. Here the narrator, Kong Ruogu, is a supposed friend who explains Li Zhi’s life. The name does not appear elsewhere in Li Zhi’s writings, and it seems transparently allegorical. Wu Pei-yi glosses Kong’s name as “an aperture as large as a valley.” The possibility of an unreliable narrator can bracket the whole account as mere fiction. Alternatively, “Kong Ruogu” may also imply the voice of wisdom (with Kong suggesting Confucius) and humility (as in the expression “keeping the mind empty [of preconceptions] as if it were a valley [encompassing all things],” xuhuai ruogu). Is Li Zhi positing an ideal interlocutor who can understand his struggles? Is he using the idea of a fictive or unreliable narrator to distance himself from his own story? Does the narrator’s implied judgment provide the prism for self-criticism or for self-justification? Does this dialogue dramatize his inner conflicts?

“A Sketch of Zhuowu” begins with Li Zhi’s different names, and the proliferation of his cognomens becomes a persisting theme, a way for him to consider the gap between name and reality, intention and execution, emotions and self-restraint, self-perception and judgment by others. “The Layman calls himself ‘Zhuo,’ but he is called ‘Du’ in the official records. Even in his hometown, some call him ‘Zhuo’; others call him ‘Du.’ There is no uniformity.” “Zhuo” and “Du” sound similar enough in Li Zhi’s local dialect; hence the confusion. “Kong Ruogu” suggests that Li Zhi should resolve the confusion, but he refuses: “Do you want me to replace something useful with something useless? Also, ‘Zhuo’ (eminent, outstanding, distinctive) is of course me, and ‘Du’ (steadfast, sincere) is also me. Yet if you call me ‘outstanding,’ I am not yet capable of it; and if you call me ‘steadfast,’ I am not yet capable of it. Why should I replace what I am not yet capable of with what I am not yet capable of?” “Something useful” is “functional naming,” the ascertainable connection between Li Zhi and the names “Zhuo” and “Du.” “Something useless” is the quest for absolute correspondence between name and reality. “Zhuo” and “Du” are both names Li Zhi gladly answers to, but both announce ideals that he claims to fulfill insufficiently.

Li Zhi’s protestation of being “not yet capable” of the qualities encoded by the names “Zhuo” and “Du” may be no more than conventional modesty, but it also points to the gap between intention and execution in all the acts of naming in this essay. He calls himself Layman of Wenling (Wenling Jushi) after the Song Chan Master Wenling (twelfth century), who was famous for his commentary on the Lotus Sutra and who lived in Quanzhou, Li Zhi’s hometown. The verbal connection between the name of Li
Zhi’s birthplace and that of Hundred Springs Mountain (Baiquan Shan), a famous landmark in northwest Henan, seems almost providential; hence the cognomen Layman of Hundred Springs (Baiquan Jushi). With this name Li Zhi also marks his aspiration to achieve moral and spiritual self-cultivation like the Song Confucian thinker Shao Yong (1011–1077), who made his home, the Abode of Bliss (Anle Wo), at Hundred Springs Mountain. Yet Li Zhi comes no closer to Buddhist enlightenment or Confucian spiritual self-discipline. Unlike Shao Yong, who found an inspiring teacher of the Changes in Li Zhicai (980–1045),28 “Li, proud and independent, finally did not hear of the Way after staying at Hundred Springs for five years.”

“Wenling” or “Hundred Springs” marks the distance between aspiration and mundane toil. Looking back in 1566 on the first ten years of his official career, Li Zhi exclaims, “For ten years I rushed north and south, all for the sake of family affairs. I have completely forgotten about the thinking behind Wenling or the Abode of Bliss at the Hundred Springs!” In 1566, Li Zhi began working in the Ministry of Rites in Beijing. Responding to criticism that he was prone to find faults in others and should “broaden” himself by studying the Way, he adopted the moniker Hongfu (Broad-Minded Elder), a name at odds with his nature. The name was intended to encourage him to “broaden” himself, but all evidence suggests that he remained unforgiving of himself and others.29 The last name Li Zhi mentions in “A Sketch of Zhuowu” is “Layman Sizhai” (Sizhai Jushi; Yearning for My Father, Master Baizhai), signaling his regret at not being able to share with his deceased father the joy of “immersion in the wonders of the Way.” The acts of naming here suggest absence, longing, and disappointment.

Several important acts of naming are notable for their elision. Li Zhi’s ancestors, for reasons unexplained, changed their surname from Li to Lin. Li Zhi seemed to have changed his name from Lin to Li around age sixteen. In his writings he gave no explanation for this change.30 Also, he was originally named Zaizhi. He dropped the “Zai” when it became a “tabooed character” with the ascension of the Longqing emperor (r. 1567–72), whose personal name was Zhu Zaihou. While these changes may be ignored because they have no bearing on Li Zhi’s character in this text, the same cannot be said of the widely used name Zhuowu, which appears in the title. According to Shen Fu’s biography, Li Zhi adopted this name when he was serving at the Ministry of Rites in Beijing: “He [Li Zhi] parsed moral ideas with Li Cai of Yuzhang and Xu Yongjian of Lanxi at the capital. After a few days of discussion, both gentlemen admired him for his early receptivity to the Way and his outstanding [zhuo] understanding of it. That was why he
called himself ‘Zhuowu.’ What he meant was: Yan Yuan once lamented that Confucius’ eminence [zhuo] is unattainable, but the eminence of the Way is fully in each of us, what need is there for lamentation?”

The name Zhuowu is thus a confident proclamation that the perfection of the Way can be attained within oneself. Biographies of Li Zhi single out moments of intellectual and spiritual awakening. In his “Sketch of Zhuowu,” he describes his years in Beijing (1566–70) as a period of “immersion in the wonders of the Way.” Its culmination, however, is not confident mastery (as announced by the name Zhuowu) but a new sense of loss, for at this juncture he mourns his father’s passing ever more and calls himself “Layman Sizhai.” Li Zhi thus draws attention not to enlightenment but to an unfulfilled quest, as symbolized by imagined communion with his dead father. The highlighted names signal the slippage between the ideal and the real; the one name that could have resolved a sense of uncertainty, Zhuowu, is not mentioned. Eighteen years later, Li Zhi reveled in the notion of transcending names: “I am a person from everywhere, one without name and surname. It is only that when I hear myself called Li Zhuowu, I consider myself Li Zhuowu. Coming to Pingshang, upon hearing myself called the seventy-one-year-old Li Laozi [Old Master], I should perhaps consider myself Li Laozi.”

The gap between intention and execution is echoed in the struggle between emotions and spiritual discipline. The ideal of genuineness calls for spontaneous expression of emotions, but controlling emotions is the intermittent refrain in “A Sketch of Zhuowu.” Comparing himself to Shao Yong, he feels ashamed. Shao did not marry until after he had attained “true understanding,” while Li Zhi is mired in human attachments and mundane concerns. Grief over the loss of his son threatened his focus on attaining the Way. The tension between emotions and the perceived need to control or transcend them underlies many of his writings.

The fictive interlocutor Kong Ruogu clarifies or mediates this conflict. Kong is filled with pity when Li Zhi’s second son dies the same day that he receives news of his grandfather’s death. But when Kong visits him to offer condolences, Li “appeared unchanged.” Li explains that his most urgent concern is to arrange for “three generations to return to earth.” Interment of his great-grandparents and father has been delayed because of the quest for auspicious burial grounds; he plans to bury them along with his grandfather, ignoring the convention of abiding by geomantic prescription in the interest of timely burial. To facilitate this he divides the “condolence money,” leaving half to his wife for supporting the family in Gongcheng (in Henan) and using the other half for his homeward journey and the burial.
Li Zhi explains to Kong Ruogu, “My only fear is that my wife will not agree. I will go in, but if she does not heed me, I beg you, Sir, to take up the case.”

The Layman entered, and spoke to her again and again. Lady Huang said, “It’s not as if this is not right. But my mother is old. She has lived as a widow only to bring me up. Even now, when I am fortunate to be here, she longs for me and weeps day in and day out, so much so that she has become blind in both eyes. If she sees that I am not returning, she will die for sure.” Her tears streamed down before she could finish speaking. The Layman, looking stern, paid no heed. She also knew that ultimately she could not go against him. Stopping her tears, she calmed down and apologized, “Fine, fine. All I ask is that when you see my mother, say that all is well, as usual. Tell her she should not be too sad, nor should she long for me too much. The day will come when she will see me. Do your best with the funeral. Even though I am not going back, I dare not complain.”

Kong Ruogu expects great grief, but apparently Li Zhi is unmoved. Kong draws attention to the calmness as evidence of emotions controlled rather than absent. Li solicits Kong’s assistance to persuade his wife, but no such help is needed since she realizes she must obey. Li Zhi places his filial duty above the needs of his wife and children, and the sequence of the narrative suggests that this choice represents triumph over his earlier moment of “weakness,” when grief over the death of his eldest son shows that he is “concerned only with emotions.” As Maram Epstein points out in chapter 2, Li Zhi takes pains to emphasize his role as a filial son. Fulfilling his filial duty toward dead ancestors, however, means that his wife cannot be a filial daughter to her mother. Is Li Zhi aware of the irony? His stated respect for women’s mental capacity notwithstanding (see chapter 7), he seems unyielding in the conviction of his own superior judgment. Does the inclusion of her speech, presented as reported to Kong Ruogu, indicate residual disquiet on Li Zhi’s part?

The logic that prompts Li Zhi to accept patrilineal duty as a moral imperative that should override personal emotions also gives unequivocal priority to public welfare over possible protection for his own family. Before he returns to Fujian, he arranges the purchase of land that is supposed to supply the needs of his family in Henan. At that time a corrupt official, after failing to extort money from a rich family, tries vindictively to divert water from irrigation waterways to the Grand Canal. Li Zhi tries in vain to
oppose this policy and also refuses to seek a reprieve for his personal property, even though such a request might well have been granted—he cannot accept such selective mercy when others are suffering.

Li Zhi’s second and third daughters become sick and die as a result of the famine. Does he hold himself responsible for these tragedies? Rejecting private succor in the name of upholding public justice is an honorable principle, but does this justify the sacrifice of one’s children? If he can foresee the famine, why does he still decide to leave his family in Henan? Does he question his decision? His wife and eldest daughter survive through the good offices of Deng Lincai, Li Zhi’s friend serving in Henan. The narrator makes a point of reporting an exchange between Lady Huang and an interlocutor who suggests that she seek Deng’s help. Lady Huang refuses because such a request would violate female propriety; she proudly endures privations and reasons that a real friend would in any case voluntarily offer assistance. As it happens, Deng does offer help without prompting from her. Li Zhi’s moral high ground is sustained through the fulfillment of high expectations for friendship, the focus of Martin Huang’s discussion in chapter 3.

As Li Zhi finds out about the death of his daughters, we are again presented with a spectacle of how he successfully restrains his emotions.

“As I entered the family gate and saw my family, I was very happy. I asked about the other two daughters, and found out that they had both died a few months after I went back.” At that moment Lady Huang (Huang Furen) had tears in her eyes, but seeing that the Layman’s color was heightening, she greeted him with ritual propriety and asked about the burial, as well as the wellbeing of her mother. The Layman said, “That night, my wife and I grasped candles and faced each other. It was indeed like a dream! One can thus know that the emotions of women driven by exigencies are genuine. That was why I deliberately corrected my feelings [jiaoqing] to pacify her. Only then did I feel ‘the breaking of the teeth of my clogs.’”

Instead of dwelling on his own shock and grief or the hope for consolation in sharing sorrow, Li Zhi describes how his own self-control reins in his wife’s sadness. More precisely, by showing his displeasure, he intimidates his wife into submission and suppression of her own grief. The line about candles brings to mind Du Fu’s (712–770) poem about seeing his wife after a long separation in the midst of political turmoil: “Night deepens, we still
hold candles / As we face each other, as if waking from a dream.” There are also echoes of Yan Jidao’s (1030–ca. 1106) lines on the reunion of lovers: “Tonight I can only hold intently the silver lamp, / Fearing it’s but a dream even as we meet.” The image evokes Li Zhi’s deep love for his wife, yet this is also a fraught moment. The urgency of her genuine emotions calls for “correction.”

The clog alludes to a well-known story about the Eastern Jin statesman and commander Xie An (320–385). Throughout a momentous military confrontation between Eastern Jin and its powerful northern neighbor (Former Qin), Xie An retained his composure even as he devised a grand strategy. When news came of Jin victory, Xie An continued to play chess as if nothing had happened. Only later did he notice that the teeth of his clogs had been broken. “Such was the way he corrected emotions and showed his self-control.” Anecdotes about Wei-Jin (third to early fifth century) characters often describe their intense emotions, spontaneity, and wild, unrestrained behavior. At the same time equanimity and imperturbability (yaliang), which involve repressing the expression of emotions, continue to be upheld as ideal. This duality is evident in many examples from A New Account of Tales of the World (Shishuo xinyu; fifth century) and History of Jin (Jinshu; seventh century), popular references in the late Ming spawning many imitations and commentaries, including some by Li Zhi.

The pre-tense endemic to “correcting emotions” does not open one to the charge of bad faith if both self-expression and self-control are seen as ways of celebrating the self. Li Zhi seems to accept this logic; only in his case the object of control is not only his own emotions but also his wife’s. The allusion to the broken clogs reminds the reader that his calmness belies emotional turmoil, humanizing his severity and implying that the self-mastery is hard won.

The broken clog symbolizes hidden or suppressed emotions that nevertheless do have an external manifestation. It points to the desire that one will not be judged by mere appearance. Throughout “A Sketch of Zhuowu” and in his corpus more generally, there is a persistent concern with being misunderstood. Sometimes this seems to be rooted in self-doubt, ambivalence about his choices, or uncertain self-understanding. The need to fore-stall misunderstanding is entwined with self-contradiction in the episode in which Li Zhi prepares for and passes the examination in “A Sketch of Zhuowu”:

As he studied Zhu Xi’s commentaries on the classics, he failed to grasp the meaning, not being able to commune with the deep
intention of Master Zhu. He thus felt strange about it and wanted to give up the whole thing. But he had too much time on his hands and no wherewithal to while away his days, so he sighed and said, “This is but a game. It will suffice if I can steal from some compositions to fool the examiners’ eyes. How could the examiners be all experts in the essence of Confucius the Sage?” He thus chose what was original and worthy of appreciation among examination essays and memorized a few every day, and he had committed five hundred to memory by the time of the examination. When the question came down, he just replicated the essay like a copier, and that was how he passed.

He despised Zhu Xi’s commentary yet passed the examination by memorizing sample essays based on internalizing Zhu Xi’s commentary. There is a mixture of self-justification and almost embarrassment. He seems eager to show that he was above the examination system even as he accepted its premises.

Episodes in “A Sketch of Zhuowu” show how self-understanding is mediated through the perspective of the actual or imagined audience. Li Zhi faces his past actions by anticipating misunderstanding. He explains how he passed the examination even as he despised its implied values and implicitly argues that neglecting his wife and children is the unavoidable consequence of following higher duties. Driven by the need to explain to the world the gap between his core and his actions, but sensing the elusiveness of that core, he ends the account with Kong Ruogu’s professed confusion when Li Zhi asks him to write his biography after his death: “I [Kong Ruogu] replied, ‘How can I be adequate to the task of truly knowing the Layman? In years to come, there will be a Gu Kaizhi who will truly know the Layman.’ I thus set forth the brief outline of his life. Later, I wandered in various places, and have not seen the Layman for a long time. That is why I have not recorded anything after his stay in Jinling. Some said, ‘The Layman died at Jinling.’ Some said, ‘He is still in Yunnan—he has not died yet.’” Kong Ruogu’s supposed role is to probe intentions and explain Li Zhi to the world. Yet he concludes by claiming that he may not be able to rise to the occasion. He ends his record unsure even whether Li Zhi is still alive. Through Kong’s deliberate evasiveness, Li Zhi implies that his true core remains opaque to others and perhaps even to himself. The famous artist Gu Kaizhi (344–406) is said to have painted a luminous portrait of the Layman Vimalakirti in 393 on the wall of a temple in Nanjing and thereby attracted legions of almsgiving believers to the temple. The narrator thus
imagines a Gu-like future biographer who will “transmit the spirit and essence” (*chuan shen*) of Li Zhi. But this possibility remains hypothetical.

**Problematic Transcendence**

Li Zhi wrote “An Agreement in Advance” (*Yuyue*) for the junior monks of Zhifoyuan Monastery in 1596 in anticipation of arrangements to be made after his death. By then he had lived in the Buddhist monastery for eight years, having invited the label of “heretic” (*yiduan*) because of his unorthodox lifestyle. “Reflections on My Life” (*Gankai pingsheng*), the last section of “An Agreement,” departs from “Self-Summation” and “A Sketch of Zhuowu” in being told apparently without irony, donning a mask, or meditation through a fictive narrator. At the same time, the idea of a “genuine core” remains elusive, perhaps because religious transcendence that could have underscored unity and continuity of consciousness remains problematic.

Li Zhi writes about how his words and actions “could not be helped” (*budeyi*), but the context is circumstantial constraints rather than untrammeled expression. He characterizes the choice of Buddhist renunciation as the result less of conviction than of the desire for escape:

I did not become a monk because I thought it was a good thing, nor did I do so because I believed that one must become a monk in order to cultivate the Way. Isn’t staying with the family good for cultivating the Way? For my whole life I have hated being controlled by others. Once born into this world, this self is under the control of others. . . . It is only because I cannot bear the constraints of being controlled that I suffer so much and endure a life of misfortunes. Even were the whole world to turn into ink [for my brush], it would still be difficult to fully express [my misery] in writing.

In his dealings with local officials, he styles himself an “itinerant sojourner” to avoid appearing arrogant or ingratiating but claims that “shaving off [his] hair and becoming a monk” is ultimately a more effective way to manage social relations. In other words, for Li Zhi monkhood is about not being at home anywhere rather than finding a home in the Buddhist sangha.

Looking back on his official career, Li Zhi laments the contradiction of “being greedy for emolument and yet unable to bear the defilement.” As an alternative to the compromised lives officials must lead, he examines the ideal of disengagement. Aside from desperate and opportunistic recluses,
whom he considers unworthy of mention, there are transcendent recluses who rise above mundane cares and disdain the world, conditional recluses whose ambition to benefit the world brooks no compromise and drives them to withdraw, and circumstantial recluses who are “greedy for wealth and honor but also find poverty painful” but whose distaste for worldly constraints nevertheless drives them to choose reclusion. Li Zhi names the poet Tao Qian (365–427) as the prime example of the third category: “He found poverty painful, that was why he was ashamed of begging for food and said, ‘Knocking on the door, I stumble over words’; he loved wealth and honor, that was why he sought to be the governor of Pengze. . . . But what could he do when he refused to bend low in bowing? That was why he composed ‘Return’ after eighty days.”

In Li Zhi’s scheme, transcendent recluses are legendary immortals; uncompromising recluses are moralists and philosophers. His only available model is Tao Qian, although traditional interpretation emphasizes his loftiness and Li Zhi professes himself unworthy of the comparison. “By coincidence, I share his one true concern—the inability to bear the constraints of the world.” Genuineness in this case is about negotiating the art of the possible and accepting contradictions and imperfections; its corollary is an almost tragic sense of life.43

Li Zhi writes that a true monk is one capable of being a true filial son, a true loyal subject, and a true dutiful friend,44 but monkhood inevitably means renouncing worldly ties. His ambivalence about Buddhist renunciation is evident in his letter to his disciple Zeng Jiquan. He is adamant that Zeng should not shave his head and become a monk. Zeng has a wife, one or more concubines, fields, estates, and no sons. For him to become a monk under such circumstances is “not only inhumane, it is also undutiful in the extreme.”45 In a similar strain, when he read the letter from Wang Shiben’s mother urging her son to give up any idea of leaving home to seek Buddhist enlightenment, Li Zhi was moved to heartfelt approbation and wrote a eulogistic postscript (1596). She eloquently debates what qualifies as real detachment and equanimity (“being unmoved”; bu dongxin) and how mental propensity determines whether an action is “genuine” or “fake.” By this logic, Wang does not have to renounce his family to become a true Buddhist. Deeply moved by Wang’s mother, Li Zhi declares that filial piety is the most important virtue, and only the filial son can pray to the “real Buddha” (zhen Fo), not the “fake Buddha” (jia Fo).46 The postscript is yet another reminder of unresolved conflicts and problematic transcendence.

Li Zhi intermittently gestures toward the possibility of transcending contradictions—the difference between adhering to social norms and
dismissing them, between engagement and disengagement. The figure who embodies a possible resolution may be Confucius. In the numerous references to him in Li Zhi’s writings, Confucius is a restless, itinerant figure tenuously attached to family and official positions, one who suffers from “having to leave everything behind,” one whose persecution echoes his own, an arch-individualist who “never taught others to imitate Confucius,” an accidental teacher who “takes no pleasure in becoming the teacher of others but is driven by circumstances that leave him no choice.” At the same time Confucius seems to have resolved his own contradictions by combining his faith in the golden mean with his appreciation of defiance and by “making the whole world his home without having a home, treating worthy men rather than fields and property as his life.”

In Li Zhi’s colophon on a portrait of Confucius in the Zhifoyuan Monastery (1588), he dramatizes the fluid line between conformity and deviation, self-definition and self-alienation. He starts by declaring his own conformity: “Everyone considers Confucius a great sage, and I also consider him a great sage. Everyone considers Daoism and Buddhism heretical, and I also consider them heretical.” He proceeds to undermine such opinions as uncritical adherence to inherited learning transmitted by teachers, fathers, and earlier masters and to positions misattributed to Confucius himself: “By now, even for those who have eyes that can see, there is no way to use them. Who am I that I should dare to say that I have eyes that can see? I too am following the multitude. Having followed the multitude in considering Confucius a sage, I also follow the multitude in serving him. That is why I have followed the multitude and serve Confucius at the Zhifoyuan Monastery.” Honoring Confucius may be perfectly conventional, but doing so in a Buddhist monastery is not. Earnestness and self-mockery are here inextricably conjoined: even as he claims conformity, Li Zhi may yet be immodestly imitating the sage, whose decision to “follow the multitude” on certain rituals (Analects 9.3) is premised on judicious deliberation, not blind conformity. The gesture is self-effacing and self-aggrandizing at the same time, and Confucius continues to represent both a confirmation of Li Zhi’s conflicts and their elusive solution.

Another path is to glory in persecution as a tragic hero. Li Zhi is fascinated with heroes dogged by disasters, like He Xinyin (1517–1579) and Zhang Juzheng (1525–1582). He implies an affinity with He Xinyin, who “almost wanted to use death to make his name.” Li Zhi often reiterates the idea that calumny only makes him famous. He flaunts the negative epithets his critics impose on him to dramatize the odds he faces, fulfilling their label of “heretic” to “let those fools make their mark” so that he can despise...
them even more. He claims in a letter to Jiao Hong (1597) that those who hate him “make” him, even as “a benign [literally, ‘beautiful’] sickness [does not compare to] painful acupuncture or bitter medicine” (*meichen yaoshi*). A Lu minister in *Zuo zhuan* explains that the partiality of an undiscerning man is like a “benign sickness” (*meichen*), while criticism from a foe of unerring judgment is like “acupuncture or medicine stone” (*yaoshi*). Here Li Zhi is using the allusion with a twist: he obviously does not believe in his foes’ judgment, whose function is to steel his spirit rather than correct his errors. “Instead of dying without friends, I could savor the sweetness of death in prison or death on the battlefield. Why must you, sir, try to save me? Even with death the fragrance of knightly bones lingers and the name of a martyr remains.” Martyrdom is the fulfillment of genuineness but also a paradoxical confirmation of its dependence on the sway of naming and the perception of others.

**CONCLUSION**

The seventeenth-century thinker Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) notes that the word *zhēn* (genuine), so prevalent in late-Ming writings, does not appear in the Five Classics and contrasts its use in *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, where it is first used and carries implications of Daoist transcendence and immortality, with its meaning of correspondence between name and actuality (*shí*) in early historical writings. Gu is one of Li Zhi’s vociferous critics in the early Qing. Inasmuch as Gu’s critique of Li Zhi and other late-Ming writers’ valorization of genuineness is based on their alleged deviance from Confucian teachings, he actually shares common ground with contemporary Chinese scholars eulogizing Li Zhi as an arch-rebel and arch-individualist. What Gu condemns is what these scholars lionize—these are but two sides of the same coin. Both Gu’s critique and modern quasi-hagiography emphasize Li Zhi’s consistent commitment to expressing his true “anti-Confucian” beliefs.

But for every “anti-Confucian” statement, one can easily find counter-statements in Li Zhi’s vast collection. Even when he is consistent, as with his affirmation of filial piety, discussed in the following chapter, we can find examples from his actions that seem to go against such avowals (e.g., his decision to become a monk or his disregard for patrilineal claims). These all-too-human inconsistencies claim our attention precisely because Li Zhi is so insistent on reaching for and giving expression to his “true core.” Autobiographical writings, perhaps more than any other kind, yield insights into the self-contradictions endemic to the quest for genuineness.
in his writings. The very notion of such a quest implies self-division, inasmuch as it seems to presume obstacles posed by language, conventions, and familial and social expectations.

The common thread in all the examples discussed in this chapter is Li Zhi’s self-awareness of performance and his vigilant anticipation of his audience’s reaction. This is perhaps most dramatic in “Self-Summation” but is also easily traceable in the device of the fictive narrator in “A Sketch of Zhuowu” and persists even through the pathos of final testament in “Reflections on My Life.” He seems to be caught in involutions of self-questioning and self-exoneration as he explains life choices (such as monkhood, financial dependence on his friends, leaving his wife and children to fend for themselves) that can be perceived as morally problematic or compromising. In the process he dwells on self-division and self-observation (most obviously in “Self-Summation”), the notion of multiple possibilities for his development (perhaps answering to multiple names, as in “A Sketch of Zhuowu”), the promise of religious transcendence and moral certainty that may be clouded by inevitable compromises (“Reflections on My Life”). Ultimately, the quest for genuineness in Li Zhi becomes more compelling precisely because it is steeped in contradictions even as it beckons as an ideal.

NOTES

1 Yu, Journey, 1:86. As Yu explains, this process of nourishing the “inner embryo” is syncretist during the late Ming, combining Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian elements. See also Baldrian-Hussein, “Neidan.”
2 Li Zhi, “Yu Lu Tianpu,” in LZ 3:16. All translations in this chapter are mine.
3 Cited in n. 16 of “Yu Lu Tianpu,” in LZ 3:16.
4 Huang Zongxi, Ming Ru xue’an, in Huang Zongxi quanji, 7:280.
5 Wang Ji, Nanqiao bieyan, in Wang Ji ji, 685–86.
7 “By the time of the burial, he had changed his hempen mourning clothes three times, but the hempen lapels still looked soiled.” See Yang Bojun, Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu, Xiang 31.4, 3:1186; Durrant, Li, and Schaberg, Zuo Tradition, 2:1275.
1. The paradoxes of genuineness

12 Li Zhi, “Ba wu,” in *LZ* 2:59.
13 See Li Zhi, “Za shuo,” in *LZ* 1:272–73.
14 See, e.g., Li Zhi’s letter to Yuan Zongdao (1592), “ Ji jing you shu,” in *LZ* 1:171.
15 According to Sima Qian (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE), Boyi and Shuqi, princes of the Guzhu kingdom, protest the Zhou conquest of Shang, which they see as “replacing violence with violence,” by refusing to eat “the grains of Zhou” and die of starvation on Shouyang Mountain (*Shiji* 61).
16 “The man from Qi” is a liar and a braggart in an anecdote from *Mengzi*; see later.
17 Yi Yin would not compromise his moral principles even if what was at stake was no more than a blade of grass (*Mengzi* 5A.7).
18 According to Yang Zhu’s philosophy of acting only on his own behalf, he would not pull out a hair even if it would benefit the whole world (*Mengzi* 7A.26).
19 The complex relationship between and Li and Geng unfolds in their correspondence, as Timothy Brook shows in chapter 4.
20 Zhang Jianye et al., *LZ* 1:357n1.
21 Being unforgiving of others can imply similarly stringent standards applied to oneself; see “A Sketch of Zhuowu,” discussed later.
22 Li Zhi, “Da Geng Sikou,” in *LZ* 1:76.
23 See, for example, Li Zhi’s letter (dated 1594) to Zhou Sijing (d. 1597), where he asked Zhou to give up a year’s salary as a third-rank official to build a study in which Li Zhi could chant poetry, write, and have the blocks for his books stored. “Yu Zhou Youshan,” in *LZ* 3:35–36.
26 Li Zhi, “Zhuowu lunlüe,” in *LZ* 1:233–42. For a translation of this text, see Li Zhi, *A Book to Burn*, 75–84.
28 Li Zhi includes Li Zhicai and Shao Yong in the category of “Confucian officials with virtuous achievements” (De ye Ruchen) in *Cangshu*, in *LZ* 6:492–94.
29 Li Zhi, “Gankai pingsheng,” in *LZ* 2:110.
31 See *Analects* 9.11.
32 Shen Fu, “Li Zhuowu zhuanz,” in *LZ* 26:76.
33 For example, in “Li Wenling zhuanz,” Yuan Zhongdao describes Li Zhi’s encounter with “a man of moral learning” (dao jue xiansheng) who captures his attention with the proposition that “learning the Way is the wherewithal to be freed from the fear of death.” See Yuan Zhongdao, *Kexuezhai ji*, 2:720.


Yan Jidao, to the tune “Zhegu tian,” in Tang Guizhang, *Quan Song ci jianbian*, 131. Yan Jidao’s lines are also quoted in *Pipa ji*, which Li Zhi refers to in “Zhao shuo” (*LZ* 1:272–75).

Fang Xuanling et al., *Jinshu*, 79.2074–75.

See Nanxiu Qian, *Spirit and Self*, 247–82.

This is one way that jiaoqing can be justified in late-Ming writings. See, for example, the essay by Li Zhi’s friend Yuan Zongdao, “Lun Xie An jiaoqing,” in *Yuan Boxiu xiaopin*, 244–46.


Gu painted the eyes as the final “enlivening” touch in his portraits because they “transmit the spirit and essence” (*Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, 21.13).

For similar views on Tao Qian, see Yuan Zongdao, “Du Yuanming zhuan,” in *Yuan Boxiu xiaopin*, 247–50.

Quoted by Zhou Sijing in “Zhou Youshan wei seng Mingyu shu fayu,” in *LZ* 2:26–27.

Li Zhi, “Yu Zeng Jiquan,” in *LZ* 1:129.

Li Zhi, “Du Ruowu mu jishu,” in *LZ* 2:19–20. This letter is also discussed in chapters 2 and 3, this volume.

Li Zhi, “You da Shiyang Taishou,” in *LZ* 1:10–11.

Li Zhi, “You da Geng Zhongcheng,” in *LZ* 1:46.

Li Zhi, “Fu Deng Shiyang,” in *LZ* 1:24–27. Elsewhere Li Zhi refers to Confucius as one who “leaves home [i.e., becomes fully detached like a monk] by staying at home” (*LZ* 1:362–63). Martin Huang also discusses the meanings of Confucius “leaving home” (chapter 3).

Li Zhi, “Yu Zhou Youshan shu,” in *LZ* 1:133–34.

Li Zhi, “Da Geng Zhongcheng,” in *LZ* 1:40–41.

Li Zhi, “Da Liu Xianzhang,” in *LZ* 1:61. As Handler-Spitz points out in chapter 5, Li Zhi is deeply concerned with the teacher-student relationship. Li implies a parallel between himself and Confucius the inadvertent teacher.

Li Zhi, “Yu youren shu [Yuan Zongdao],” in *LZ* 1:181–82; Li Zhi, “He Xinyin lun,” in *LZ* 1:245–51. Elsewhere Li Zhi talks about the “unrestrained and impatient” (*kuangjuan*; *LZ* 1:66–68) and “men with a heroic spirit” (*yingling hanzi*; *LZ* 1:194–95) as being best able to understand the Way.

“He Xinyin was a hero among commoners, that is why he got killed; Zhang Juzheng was a hero among prime ministers, that is why he suffered infamy after death” (“Da Deng Mingfu,” in *LZ* 1:37–38).

56 Li Zhi, “He Xinyin lun,” in *LZ* 1:245–47.

57 On the moral and epistemological implications of the label “heretic,” see Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms*.


