

Introduction

I. LI ZHI'S LIFE IN THE EIGHTEENTH YEAR OF THE WANLI REIGN (1590)

Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), widely known as one of the foremost iconoclastic thinkers in Chinese history, was born in the commercial southern district of Jinjiang 晉江 in the port city of Quanzhou 泉州, the southern province of Fujian, in the sixth year of the Jiajing reign of the Ming period (1527).¹ In the course of his lifetime, he came to participate actively in a wide and passionate discourse of his time that centered around a cluster of notions, including “desire” (*yu* 欲), “feeling” (*qing* 情), and “genuineness” (*zhen* 真). Critical voices from this period—Li Zhi himself, Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道 (1570–1624),² Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1541–1620),³ Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616),⁴ to name just four—differed, often times quite radically, in their focus, conception, and philosophical positions regarding these related ideas. The terrain of this discourse was complex and varied, and disputes were sustained, wide-ranging, and passionate.

Much recent scholarship has drawn attention to this widespread discourse among literati in the late-Ming and referred to voices within it as forming a “cult of feeling” or “*qing*.”⁵ The late-Ming,⁶ of course, is not the only period in Chinese history when we find such intense and feverish debate regarding the spontaneous expression of the self.⁷ But the period spanning the 16th and 17th centuries is certainly one of the highpoints in Chinese history on this subject and offers a distinctive variation on this broader theme.⁸ In Li Zhi we find one of the most compelling and subtle expressions of this general point of view and a developed philosophical vision that is relevant and significant to contemporary ethics. Li argues for a rich and philosophically viable account of the good life as the spontaneous expression of *genuine feelings*. He was one of the most

central, celebrated, and creative thinkers within the late-Ming “cult of feelings,” and significant aspects of his view remain both viable and interesting today.

The titles of Li Zhi’s major works reveal much about his bold and iconoclastic character: *A Book to Burn* (*Fenshu* 焚書) and *A Book to Hide* (*Cangshu* 藏書).⁹ The letters (generally in fascicles 1–2), miscellaneous writings including essays (fascicles 3–4), historical commentaries (fascicle 5), and poetry (fascicle 6) from the former work comprise a six fascicle, or chapter, book commonly considered the most controversial and imaginative of Li’s works. In the preface to this collection, Li Zhi explains the title of his book:

A Book to Burn includes responses to questions written to me by my dearest of friends (*zhi ji* 知己). Because these letters come so close to what gives sustenance to contemporary scholars, and since these letters strike at the heart of their chronic diseases, if these scholars were to read these letters they would certainly wish to kill me. Therefore I desire to burn this book. I say that I must burn and discard it. I cannot keep it. . . . When I declare that I desire to burn this book, I say so because the book grates upon people’s ears. When I declare that I desire to engrave the blocks for this book, I say so because the book speaks to people’s hearts (*ru ren zhi xin ye* 入人之心也).¹⁰ As for those who find my work grates upon their ears, they most certainly will succeed in killing me, which is something that merits fear. But I am sixty-four *sui*.¹¹ If one of my essays speaks to the heart of another, then perhaps I may find somebody who understands me! I take joy (*xing* 幸) in those few who might understand me and therefore have carved these printing blocks.¹²

Historian Timothy Brook helpfully calls on the metaphor of the changing seasons to schematically illuminate the socio-historical developments in Ming China. The period begins in the winter, a time of stability, strict adherence to role-specific duties, and careful attention to farming. Spring, from the mid 1400s through the 1550s, brings emerging social mobility and economic prosperity. In summer, from the mid 1500s through the fall of the period in 1644, mobility and prosperity yield to corruption and greed.¹³ Li Zhi’s life spans both the spring and summer. Throughout his writings, there exists boundless evidence of Li’s frustration with what he referred to as the “chronic diseases” of his age—the corruption, superficiality, materialism, extravagance, and greed that plagued late 16th century China. He was equally frustrated with ways of thinking embodied in the stereotype of the cramped, narrow-minded scholar-bureaucrats who unreflectively embraced the

teachings of the great “orthodox” neo-Confucian, and arguably the most influential Chinese thinker, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).¹⁴ While Zhu Xi is in fact a brilliant and subtle writer and one of the greatest synthetic thinkers in any culture, from his own time through the present, he has persistently been adopted as a symbol of a thinker who unyieldingly holds fast to a given tradition, social hierarchy, and stifling rituals. Li commonly refers to this type of individual as a “gentleman of the Way” (*daoxue xiansheng* 道學先生), an oft-used derogatory term meaning a pedantic and rigid scholar wanting in creativity and spontaneity.

Li’s tonic for the malady of his age is in many respects its opposites: “joy,” “true” or “soul friends” (*zhi ji* 知己), “desire” (*yu* 欲), deep “understanding” (*zhi* 知), and the resonance between “hearts” (*ru ren zhi xin* 入人之心) expressing genuine feelings and thoughts. As we will later see, Li never offers a specific, narrow prescription for living life well but rather uses character sketches, metaphors, wit, irony, and humor to draw us into looking at the world from new perspectives; in this way Li gestures toward a general direction where we might find and develop our own distinct vision for living life well. Li does insistently and vigorously condemn what he believes are narrow, stifling, and enervating ways of living life; with no ambiguity he censures the vice of “phoniness” (*jia* 假), the overly tutored, the ornate. At the same time, his vision celebrates a wide variety of ways of living life well. Central to Li’s loose, broad, and accommodating normative ideal is the virtue of “genuineness” (*zhen* 真),¹⁵ and specifically genuine self-expression. In one of the most often-cited passages from among his writings, he speaks of this virtue:

The child-like heart-mind is the genuine heart-mind (*zhen xin* 真心). If one denies the child-like heart-mind, then he denies the genuine heart-mind. As for the child-like heart-mind, free of all falsehood (*jia* 假) and entirely genuine, it is the original heart-mind at the very beginning of the first thought. Losing the child-like heart-mind is losing the genuine heart-mind. Losing the genuine heart-mind is losing the genuine self. A person who is not genuine will never again regain that with which he began.¹⁶

The text of *A Book to Burn*, the preface of which I have quoted from above, was first printed in the relatively small but nationally prominent Macheng 麻城 county,¹⁷ in the inland Huguang province,¹⁸ in the 18th year of the Wanli 萬曆 reign (1590).¹⁹ There exist reproductions of various editions of the *A Book to Burn*;²⁰ however, neither the original manuscript nor copies of the first printed editions remain. The first edition was carved on wood blocks, likely from the pear tree, and printed on what was most probably bamboo paper.²¹

Publication of *A Book to Burn* immediately elicited both deep admiration for and outrage against Li. When it was first published, Li was living in relative solitude. Five years earlier, in 1585, he had sent his wife, his son-in-law, and his one surviving daughter²² back to his natal home. Soon thereafter, in 1588, his wife died, but Li remained in Macheng county and did not return to Jinjiang for the funeral. At the invitation of the two most well-known brothers of the nationally powerful Zhou lineage, Zhou Sijing 周思敬 (*jinshi*, 1568) and Zhou Sijiu 周思久 (*jinshi*, 1553),²³ Li retreated to live on the wooded cliff of the north shore of Dragon Lake, in Macheng county, in the Cloister of the Flourishing Buddha (*Zhifo yuan* 芝佛院), one of a complex of Buddhist temples constructed by the Zhou brothers around the lake, a place renowned for its natural beauty.²⁴ The cloister was home to more than 40 monks, but Li considered it an intellectual and spiritual refuge rather than a place for Buddhist worship.

Despite protests from a number of friends, Li, a self-described “Confucian,”²⁵ shaved his head that summer soon after moving into the Cloister.²⁶ He declared he shaved his head purely for pragmatic reasons—to symbolize a severance from Confucian duties and specifically familial obligations back in Jinjiang. But many saw Li’s newly tonsured state as evidence of his commitment to Buddhism. Li himself wittily writes of the tension between “Confucianism” and “Buddhism”: “I too simply follow the masses. Not only do I follow the masses and consider Kongzi²⁷ to be a sage, but I also follow the masses and worship him.” And, in a last line that radically reframes and alters the meaning of his essay, Li adds, “And so, I follow the masses and worship Kongzi while in the Cloister of the Flourishing Buddha.”²⁸ Such a technique—unexpectedly throwing the reader off kilter in the last moments of his essays, letters, or commentaries—is typical of Li Zhi. In his writing Li reframes conventional ways of looking at the world, turns our heads, and entices us to move toward new directions. If we are looking for specific formulas and detailed prescriptions for living life well, Li Zhi will leave us deeply dissatisfied. While there are general directions and places to look for living the good life, Li would argue that to offer specifics or details is to mislead. The best we can do for others is to help each individual find his or her own heart and mind, what Li conceives of and calls the child-like heart-mind.

In spring of the year 1590, living in the Cloister, having just published his controversial book, Li leisurely journeyed southwest over 300 kilometers to the county of Gong'an 公安, in what was then Huguang province, and there, the Yuan brothers (Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道 (1560–1600), Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610), and Yuan Zhongdao), nationally renowned for their literary achievements, heard

of his presence and eagerly came to meet with him.²⁹ In “Writings of Extravagance at the Oak Forest” (*Zuolin jitan* 柞林紀譚) Yuan Zhongdao leaves us with a record of their conversation. Zhongdao was struck by Li’s impassioned nature and describes Li as “bursting with ideas and wild with ardor” (*hua duo dian kuang* 話多顛狂).³⁰ Yuan Hongdao was the founder of the Gong’an school of literature, and his two brothers were renowned members of this group. The school, named after their natal home, espoused the genuine, the spontaneous, and the expression of ardent feeling as opposed to the overly tutored and imitative. Li is widely considered to be by far the greatest single intellectual influence on the Yuan brothers.³¹ After a second visit with Li, in 1591 at the Cloister, Zhongdao writes,

Only when [Hongdao] met Longhu [Li Zhi] did he realize that until then he had been culling worn-out phrases and had thoughtlessly stuck to conventional opinions, as if he were crushed under the language of the ancients and a vital spark was completely covered up. But then the floodgates opened, and like a down feather carried along by a favorable wind, like a giant fish sporting in a huge waterway, he was able to be the master of his thoughts, rather than be mastered by them, was able to manipulate the ancients, rather than be manipulated by them; when he spoke forth, each word flowed out from his innermost being.³²

While many literati such as the Yuan brothers found inspiration in Li Zhi’s life and works, many others were vexed or even outraged by both. One such individual was Li Zhi’s one-time intimate friend Geng Dingxiang 耿定向 (1524–1596, *jinshi* 1556).³³ Like Li Zhi, Geng Dingxiang identified with the Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) school of learning. Wang Yangming is one of a handful of the most influential thinkers in Chinese history. His thought is “wild” (*kuang* 狂) rather than restrained, intuitive and spontaneous rather than synthetic and logical, and some insisted, unorthodox and “Buddhist” rather than truly “Confucian.” The neo-Confucian Lu-Wang school, the school of the mind, in one part bears his name. Along with Kongzi and Zhu Xi, Wang is without doubt one of the greatest Confucian thinkers and one of the greatest thinkers in Chinese history.³⁴

Within the Wang Yangming school of learning, both Geng and Li saw themselves as part of the most free-spirited branch, the Taizhou, a school to which as we saw earlier the Zhou brothers also belonged.³⁵ The school derives its name from the natal home, Taizhou prefecture, south of the Yangzi River, of the man regarded as the founder of this school, Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541).³⁶ The son of a salt farmer and with only five

years of formal education in a small village school, Wang Gen studied under Wang Yangming, and in 1529 founded his own school of learning. Those who identified with this school were often characterized as “wild Channists” (*kuang chan* 狂禪), Chan (Japanese: *Zen*) being one of the least tradition-bound schools of Chinese Buddhism, who were independent, populist, and eccentric. From a school of learning centered on Wang Yangming’s teachings, it grew into one of the most influential intellectual movements in 16th century Jiangnan (or lower Yangzi region), a geographic, economic, and most importantly, for our purposes, cultural area within the southern reaches of the famously long Yangzi River, distinguished for its urbanity, affluence, economic prosperity, and abundance of both natural and cultural resources. The Taizhou school claimed as members both literati and commoners, including a woodcutter, a potter, stonemasons, merchants, and agricultural laborers. Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), editor of the well-known *Records of Ming Scholars* (*Ming ru xuean* 明儒學案), writes that under the influence of the Taizhou school, Wang Yangming’s teachings “spread like the wind over all the land.”³⁷

Li knew all four Geng brothers well, and had spent time as their houseguest in Huang’an 黃安 county, neighboring and until 1562 part of Macheng county, immediately after his retirement from official service. He stayed with them from 1581 until 1584, when the more free-spirited and youngest Geng brother, Geng Dingli 耿定理, passed away. Soon after Geng Dingli’s death, Geng Dingxiang and Li Zhi increasingly quarreled over Li’s unorthodox behavior, intellectual views, and Li’s neglect of his family obligations.

In 1590, the year *A Book to Burn* was published, Geng Dingxiang had just retired from his quite successful official career, his last post being the powerful position of Minister of Revenue. A substantial portion of *A Book to Burn* consists of letters in response to Dingxiang, and one scholar has argued that the book can most illuminatingly be read as a set of sharply critical and personal comments on Dingxiang’s views and way of life.³⁸ In one letter Li writes in exasperation to Dingxiang, “And so, the person who desired to learn the teachings of Kongzi, that is, Mengzi, was unable to go beyond being a mere follower of Kongzi. I deeply regret that he [Mengzi] was not a sage. And you say that I wish to follow Mengzi!”³⁹ Li Zhi found Dingxiang unimaginative, hypocritical, lacking in intellectual and moral courage; Dingxiang was incensed by Li’s published criticisms.

It was also in 1590, that Geng wrote “A Letter Asking for Admonition” (*Qiu jing shu* 求儆書)⁴⁰ in which he vented his frustration against Li’s words and describes them as “evil sounds unworthy of entering one’s ears.”⁴¹ Geng Dingxiang was not the only one vexed by Li’s writings.

In 1602, Li was charged with three crimes: deviant views, sexual promiscuity, and confusing Buddhism for Confucianism.⁴² The Wanli emperor ordered Li to be arrested and his books—including Li's *A Book to Burn*—to be banned and burned.⁴³ Li's life and thought are fraught with complexity and sometimes uncomfortable strain and tension; and so too was the reception of his *A Book to Burn*. The book stirred up anger and fear among many literati. And yet it inspired as many others. One literatus wrote in 1625, "even though Li's books are prohibited, still they circulate broadly among the populace."⁴⁴

II. THE CULT OF *QING*

Li's ethics of genuine feelings, the central subject of my book, grows out of a vibrant discourse that developed in his time and place. The events surrounding the publication of Li's *A Book to Burn* give us a glimpse into this intellectual world. The Yuan brothers insisted on unfettered, spontaneous expression; Wang Gen argued for "spontaneity" or "naturalness" (*ziran* 自然), the virtue of the feeling of "joy" (*le* 樂), and loving and caring for the self. If we turn from 1590, or the 18th year of the Wanli reign, to 1598, the 26th year, we find another example from one of the most prominent voices within the late 16th century "cult of feeling" or *qing*, the great late-Ming dramatist Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616). The preface from his drama of true love entitled *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭), dated 1598,⁴⁵ is perhaps the most quoted passage on the subject of *qing* in the late-Ming. When the play premiered, it was so popular that one literatus remarked, "When the published edition of the play first came out, there was no man of letters or scholar without a copy on his desk."⁴⁶ Based on a poem Tang Xianzu wrote mourning Li Zhi's death, we know Tang was familiar with Li's work and admired him.⁴⁷ Tang was a student of one of Li Zhi's teachers, Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515–1588),⁴⁸ and it is apparent that Tang was much influenced by the writings of the Taizhou school in general.⁴⁹

Tang writes in his famous preface:

Love comes from a source unknown, yet it grows ever deeper. The living may die of it, by its power the dead may live again. Love is not love at its fullest if one who lives is unwilling to die for it, or if it cannot restore to life one who has died. And must the love that comes in dreams necessarily be unreal? For there is no lack of dream lovers in this world.⁵⁰

The word *qing*, translated in this passage as "love," is portrayed as the all-powerful sustaining force of life. If we use the language of virtue,

which in this context is well-warranted, *qing*, often translated variously also as “desire,” “feeling,” or “sentiment,” trumps traditional Confucian virtues such as benevolence (*ren* 仁), dutifulness (*yi* 義), observance of the rites (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智).⁵¹

This valuing of *qing* also is found in the preface, composed by the nationally influential editor and publisher of popular literature Feng Menglong,⁵² to his widely read collection of over 800 love stories entitled *History of Desire* (*Qing Shi* 情史). Like Tang, Feng too was influenced by Li Zhi as is evidenced by the frequent appearance of quotations from Li Zhi’s works in Feng’s writings. It is unlikely that Feng and Li ever met, but Feng clearly was familiar with Li Zhi’s writings and there is evidence that Feng had read Li Zhi’s commentary on the *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳).⁵³ In his preface to the *History of Desire* Feng writes:

With *qing* the unrelated become kin.
 Without *qing* even kin become strangers.
 Not having *qing* and having *qing* are worlds apart.
 I desire to establish a school of *qing*,
 To instruct all living things.
 The son faces his father with *qing*;
 The minister faces the emperor with *qing*.
 The same holds true for all other relationships.
 Things in this world are like loose coins.
Qing is the cord that strings them together.
 Just as loose coins are strung together by a cord,⁵⁴
 Even those from far corners of the earth can become couples.⁵⁵

In this work too, *qing* trumps “orthodox Confucian” virtues such as filial piety towards parents, duty to ruler, or obligations between brothers. “Desire” or “love” is the very fabric of the life well lived. The renowned scholar of Chinese literature Anthony Yu speaks of Feng’s call for establishing a religion of *qing* as “nothing short of a trans-valuation of Confucian values.”⁵⁶ As we shall see, at least in the writings of Li Zhi, the valuing of *qing*, what I render as “feeling”—as well as of other ideals such as the expression of desire, genuineness, and spontaneity—is at times *trans-valuing* and at other times *reinvigorating* the tradition of “Confucianism” or “Confucian” thought.

Li Zhi was a key intellectual figure in late 16th century China. As noted above, he was intimate friends with the Geng and the three Yuan brothers. He may have been influenced by and clearly deeply influenced the writings of Tang Xianzu and Feng Menglong. In the following chapters we will have the opportunity to point to other significant interlocutors who also were prominent figures in the late-Ming discourse on the

related subjects of spontaneity, feelings, the genuine, and desire: Li's close friend from the Taizhou school Jiao Hong 焦竑, his teacher from the Taizhou school Luo Rufang 羅汝芳, his pupil Mei Danran 梅澹然,⁵⁷ perhaps better known as the young widowed daughter of the powerful Mei Guozhen 梅國楨, among others.

III. SECONDARY LITERATURE, METHODS, AND AUDIENCE

A. EVOLUTIONARY, HISTORICALLY REDUCTIONIST, AND *PHILOSOPHICAL* READINGS

Although at present western language studies of Li are limited to a number of articles, book chapters, and one edited volume,⁵⁸ he has received well-deserved and extensive scholarly attention in Chinese and Japanese⁵⁹ ranging across the subjects of metaphysics, literature, women, politics, history, and ethics. Much of the extant scholarship on Li can be divided into two general approaches. One places Li within an “*evolutionary*” framework⁶⁰ and sheds light on his work by examining his ideas within the larger framework of intellectual and literary developments.⁶¹ A second reads Li Zhi as a figure deeply rooted or even mired in and “reduced” to the sentiments of his specific *historical* time and place.⁶² While there should be no doubt either that Li's ideas did contribute to later intellectual and literary developments or that he is indeed a product of his time and place, Li is also something else; his writings lay out a striking and robust *ethics*. Among the views for which I shall argue is that he is a thinker we ought to engage and bring into the growing body of international religious-philosophical discourse on the importance of desires and the expression of feelings, as well as the ideal of authenticity or genuineness.

In 1970, intellectual historian Wm. Theodore de Bary noted in his path-breaking study on Li Zhi and individualism, “Despite the considerable literature on Li [Zhi], a full-length study of this important figure is badly needed.”⁶³ While at present a number of such monographs do exist in Chinese and one in French,⁶⁴ almost forty years later, still, no full-length study of this significant Chinese thinker exists in English. He is a fascinating and important figure in Chinese cultural history and one of the best-selling and most widely read authors in his own time, late-Ming China,⁶⁵ but his life and thought have remained almost wholly inaccessible to English-speaking audiences.

While there exist monographs on Li Zhi in Chinese and French, these extant works—studies from which I have benefited immeasurably—tend to present Li either within an evolutionary or historically reductionist framework. Both are fruitful frameworks; at the same time,

as with any method of study, both have their particular inherent limitations. For one, such approaches are not effective for treating and presenting works as interesting and valuable *in their own right*. In one way or another, they tend to favor history and context over the content of the work itself. In my study of Li Zhi, I will aim to present his thought as valuable in its own right by studying his ethical views. I take seriously the historical rootedness of his ideas and at the same time am firmly convinced that his writings ought not only be reduced to their historical context; his works deserve to be read, critically analyzed, and celebrated as the masterful philosophical and literary works that they are.

B. READING LI ZHI AS A WRITER

While I argue in this book that ethics is an integral part of Li's thought and writings, equally central to my argument is that Li is importantly different from our contemporary conception of a religious ethicist or a moral philosopher. Li was a writer: he was a truly gifted short essayist, a remarkable master of the art of writing letters, a good poet who wrote short verse, a shrewd historian who effectively defended unorthodox views, a passionate, astute, and vitriolic social critic of his time, and a creative thinker who effectively challenged and imaginatively amended prevailing views on a number of subjects including government, metaphysics, and ethics. In his own time and in the centuries following his death he was most celebrated as a literary critic. What is arguably the most influential commentary on the great Ming novel the *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳) is attributed to Li Zhi. Countless volumes and articles have been written on the "Li Zhi commentary" and the authenticity of this attribution.⁶⁶ Li was a master of canonical literature, and at the same time he was a staunch defender of the value of traditionally marginalized works and especially fiction. In multiple ways Li plays a significant role in Chinese intellectual and literary history, and in my work I shed light upon Li's important role in the vibrant late-Ming world of *writing*.

Clearly, contemporary western distinctions among literary genres—e.g., fiction, philosophy, history—and disciplines—e.g., literature, philosophy, religion—have little if any hold in Li Zhi's time and place. Li's ethical views directly impact on his literary criticism, and his assessment of literary and historical figures, as well as his views on aesthetics, are themselves expressions of his ethics. In the following chapters I draw out just how centrally important a subtle and sure grasp of his ethics is to understanding his work in general, including his more widely studied literary criticism and literary theory.⁶⁷ In Li Zhi's writings, what we in our time conceive of as ethics, aesthetics, or history all comprise a seamless whole. To more fully understand and appreciate his work, we

absolutely must see and analyze the *multiple* dimensions of his thought: literary, historical, and, fundamentally, *ethical*.

C. REPERTOIRES, METAPHORS,
NARRATIVES, AND FAMILY RESEMBLANCES

Scholarship on the “cult of *qing*” increasingly strives to shed light on the diversity of views and the fine nuances within this discourse regarding a wide range of subjects including the origins of feeling⁶⁸ and its relation to other ideals such as “spontaneity.”⁶⁹ Another aspect of my work on Li Zhi involves the exploration and use of effective methods for studying a concept as slippery, intangible, and amorphous as *qing*, or “feeling,” which is inextricably intertwined with a cluster of other ideals. I look for methods that effectively capture change, ambiguity, and elusiveness while at the same time seeking for what might seem, considering the subject matter, to be unattainable: I seek for a substantive, clear, and precise understanding of Li’s ethics of the expression of genuine feelings.

The various ways in which I proceed in my study include considering a *repertoire*⁷⁰ of related ideas batted back and forth within a certain cultural milieu, including expression of feelings and fulfillment of genuine desire, rather than seeking to study one specific ideal or “tradition”; identifying and shedding light on historical and literary *characters*⁷¹ and *metaphors*⁷² in Li’s writings; and looking for *family resemblances*⁷³ rather than a core essence or set of unchanging attributes in Li’s views on ideals such as genuineness and spontaneity. In the following chapters I will have opportunity to discuss these various methods and how I adopt and use them—or in the case of metaphors, how I adapt particular theories—to shed light on Li’s thought. Here, let me say a few words regarding the concepts of traditions and repertoires.

Much scholarship on Li Zhi has sought to illuminate his work by identifying him as a member of one or another school, or trend of thought. One scholar writes, “Li Zhi has been labeled a Confucian, Buddhist, Legalist, iconoclast, progressive, nihilist, populist, individualist, and more.” Li Zhi, this same scholar continues, is in fact “a rather dramatic exponent of relativism.”⁷⁴ In light of much of what already has been said about the spontaneous expression of genuine feeling serving as a normative ideal for Li Zhi and many others of his time, this last claim is difficult to accept. This mistaken portrayal of Li’s philosophy sheds a clear and revealing light on how critically important it is to understand his ethical views not only on their own but as a way to grasp other, related aspects of his thought. Even more central for the purpose of our argument, while illuminating Li and his thought by casting him

as working *within* or *against* a certain school of thought or tradition can certainly yield helpful insights, such a perspective can and has obscured certain nuances and details of Li Zhi's ideas.

Historian of religion Robert Campany makes the following insightful remark about the framework of "schools" and "traditions":

The use of such suffixes [-isms and -ist], rampant in the study of Chinese religions (where we have the big three of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) and elsewhere, amounts to a kind of shorthand, a convenient way to generalize over vast numbers of particulars. But it is also a sleight of hand, creating in three key strokes an entity that, in addition to its sudden existence as a thing among other things, is further implied to have the property of systematicity and therefore to be a well-integrated and clearly demarcated whole, such that aspects or parts of the whole must resemble each other more strongly than they resemble any outside aspects or parts.⁷⁵

Campany proposes that instead of conceiving of religions, and I would add religious thinkers, as parts of a *tradition*, an often more productive framework is to examine thinkers, practitioners, and movements as engaging a number of "*repertoires*" of resources whether ideas, concepts, practices, or symbols. This is the general approach I follow in my study of Li Zhi. Rather than examining him primarily as a member of a tradition or even as a syncretic thinker weaving together ideas from diverse traditions—whether "Confucian," "Buddhist," or "Daoist," for example—I adopt a looser category of analysis that, I argue, sheds more light upon Li's thought. Instead of examining the ways in which Li affirms or trans-values a particular tradition or school of thought, I show how Li Zhi both newly imagines and reinvigorates a "repertoire" of virtues having to do with desire, expression of feeling, spontaneity, and genuineness. Li's ethics of genuineness is one expression, a powerful, rich, and interesting one, within the late-Ming "cult of *qing*." By presenting a portrait of him and his views, in one small but distinct way, I see my work as contributing to the consideration and use of effective methods for illuminating the subtle and diverse voices within this discourse on a subject as important—but also as intangible, slippery, and amorphous—as feelings.

D. COMPARATIVE THOUGHT

While this book is intended as a sketch of Li Zhi and his writings from a *philosophical* perspective, I treat the intellectual and socio-cultural

historical context seriously, albeit briefly. After all, Li Zhi is most interesting and fruitful to us for what he actually said in his time and his place, rather than what we now might *wish* he had said. This introductory chapter provides a brief, yet substantive *synchronic intellectual historical* context for Li Zhi's writings by way of focusing on one particular moment: the publication story of Li's *A Book to Burn*, a book that is most central to *this* book. The following chapters proceed from a close *textual* reading of one of his essays (Chapter Two), to a discussion of the *diachronic intellectual historical* context within which Li Zhi situated his writings (Chapter Three), to an analysis of *philosophical* issues in Li's works (Chapter Four), and conclude with a suggestive *comparative* philosophical analysis of Li Zhi's views on genuineness (Chapter Five).

Too often Li Zhi has been misread using the language and concerns most relevant to the particular reader's time and place (e.g., readings of Li as a proto-Marxist, liberal humanist, proto-capitalist). This book on Li Zhi's work begins with the words and phrases Li Zhi chooses, the conversations surrounding the publication of what is arguably his most significant book, and then moves toward and concludes with a suggestive broader comparative analysis. A central argument in the following chapters is that Li Zhi is indeed relevant, deeply relevant to our time and place, and we really ought to see him as a rich resource for penetrating ideas regarding ethical issues that cross traditional cultural delineations and that are significant to us today; at the same time, to uncover what Li Zhi *does* say, we must firmly commit ourselves to reading him within his historical context. I see no reason to doubt that comparative religious and philosophical thought is both viable and fruitful, given enough attention to the context—socio-historical, literary, linguistic—of a thinker's ideas.⁷⁶ Many recent studies in comparative religion or philosophy begin by discussing the viability of such an approach. One scholar effectively frames the heart of the matter when she asks, "Is the comparative study of religion obsolete? Should it be?"⁷⁷ I argue that comparative study is not obsolete; neither should it be.⁷⁸

E. AUDIENCE

My intended audience includes Sinologists seeking to learn more about an influential and fascinating thinker from the late-Ming period; religious and philosophical ethicists who may know much or little about China, but regardless are interested in a study of a thinker with powerful and I believe in our time often neglected insights regarding the virtues of spontaneity, self-expression, and genuineness; scholars of Ming-Qing China⁷⁹ whether of religion, literature, or history interested in an in-depth study that employs various methods to capture, without

flattening, one powerful instance of the wide and diverse “spectrum”⁸⁰ of conceptions of *qing* in the late-Ming. I write my work for such readers and have aimed to give my critical analysis the depth that would make it of interest to specialists by carefully selecting and focusing upon specific moments, particular essays of Li Zhi’s, narrowly defined but broadly relevant themes, as well as making use of footnotes to situate my contribution to Li Zhi studies, Ming-Qing studies, and religious and philosophical ethics.

Still, in the end, this portrait of Li Zhi and a sketch of his thought began and remains for me first and foremost a book for those interested in Chinese thought without necessarily a background in ethics or China studies. To this end, I have chosen to use language accessible to those without a specialist’s knowledge, and I begin this book gradually introducing Li Zhi to the non-specialist by walking the reader through a close textual reading of one of Li’s essays (see Chapter Two). I structure each subsequent chapter around a particular well-known essay of Li Zhi’s and in the appendices include heavily annotated translations of these works. In this way the student, whatever his or her degree of familiarity with China studies, is able him- or herself to wrestle with the primary material at hand in translation. With this study of a heretofore unfairly neglected thinker in English language scholarship who surely falls far outside the stereotyped view of the cramped and pedantic Confucian gentleman, my hope is that students will come to see, even more clearly and vividly than perhaps they already do, just how truly diverse, varied, and fascinating “Confucian,” or *Ru*,⁸¹ thought is, and to appreciate the real relevance to our contemporary lives of Li’s ideas on genuineness, self-expression, and feelings. My work on Li Zhi began as a doctoral dissertation on his views on women. In this book, also on Li Zhi, I have wholly re-imagined my approach and, from the beginning, written with my students foremost in mind.

IV. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Following this introduction, in Chapter Two of this study, entitled “Life Stories (傳),” I illuminate Li’s thought by studying his own narrative of his life story—his birth, marriage, official life, and death. I do so by giving a close textual analysis of one of Li’s well-known essays, “A Sketch of Zhuowu” (*Zhuowu lunlüe* 卓吾論略). By employing the approach of close reading, I seek to give the reader an appreciation of the deep and self-conscious manner in which Li skillfully manipulates genre, words, and quotes from classical texts. I also show that in multiple ways at every point and throughout his works Li expands the world of writing in order to more fully accommodate the expression of the “genuine” and of

“feelings.” In particular I examine the ways in which Li adopts, amends, and subverts conceptions of the proper life journey as presented by earlier thinkers, with particular attention to Kongzi 孔子 and Mengzi 孟子. Throughout my analysis, I examine Li’s presentation of himself against two other widely read biographies of Li, one by his friend, the literary critic Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道, and the second, a well-received modern biography by Rong Zhaozu (Jung Chao-tsu) 容肇祖. I use Rong’s biography to lay out a “conventional” biography of Li, and point to significant differences in “facts” or style among these three biographies in order to show how Li’s account is distinctive in repeatedly arguing for the virtue of genuineness. In describing her analysis of, or “commentary” on, literature, Martha Nussbaum writes, “The philosophical explanation acts, here, as the ally of the literary text, sketching out its relation to other forms of moral writing.”⁸² I see my analysis of Li Zhi’s “autobiography” as a commentary that serves to show us how to read the characters, the choice of words, and the allusions to classical texts for our moral development.

Chapter Three, “The Heart-Mind (心),” is structured as a commentary on Li Zhi’s famous essay “On the Child-like Heart-Mind” (*Tongxin shuo* 童心說) and shows how Li adopts, rejects, and amends the conceptions of the mind articulated by the earlier thinkers. I begin the chapter by tracking and carefully exploring the references skillfully laid out in Li’s essay—to the *Commentary of Zuo* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳), the *Mengzi* (孟子), the *Platform Sutra* (*Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經), and the works of Wang Yang-ming and Luo Rufang. This allows me both to illuminate Li’s essay and provide a brief yet substantial intellectual historical context for Li’s ideas. I then use categories of analyses identified in the first portion of the chapter and apply them to a detailed study of the metaphors and images Li uses to shed light on Li’s concept of the child-like heart-mind. While much scholarship argues that Li’s conception of the mind, or heart-mind, is undeveloped though often innovative or influential, by examining images of revealing and concealing, and of health and illness in Li’s works, I show Li’s conception of the mind is philosophically coherent and powerful and that what I refer to as his “preservation” model of self-cultivation offers a distinctive and robust conception of moral development.

In Chapter Four, “Virtue (德),” I focus on another well-known essay, “On Miscellaneous Matters” (*Za shuo* 雜說), and argue that Li conceives of the spontaneous expression of genuine feelings as the necessary and sufficient condition for living the good life and turn to the question: What does Li imagine *genuine* feelings to be? In answering this question I first identify a cluster of features manifested by *any* feeling Li would consider to be genuine. Second, I examine the idea of “self-satisfaction”

(*zi de* 自得) as described throughout Li's writings and show how such a sense enables one to know when one's expression is indeed genuine. Third, I identify the limits Li draws around his conception of the genuine by exploring some of his core metaphysical beliefs. I go on to show that Li puts forth an ethics of genuine desires that adopts and assumes concepts within the rich repertoire of what I refer to in shorthand as "orthodox Confucianism"—whether regarding metaphysics, conceptions of the self, or key virtues such as loyalty and righteousness. Within this world, he substantively amends and re-imagines "orthodox Confucian" concepts in a way that both reinvigorates and newly imagines a cluster of ideals that he identifies with the tags "feeling," "genuine," and "desire."

In my fifth and final chapter, I conclude by arguing that Li Zhi's ethics can both be understood as an example of and a help in illuminating what contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor refers to as an "ethics of authenticity."⁸³ A Li Zhi-inflected ethics of genuineness or authenticity would give rightful place to what is all too often ignored and dismissed as too naïve to have faith in within our modern ethical discourse: the truly natural and pure. In Li we find powerful resources for developing an ethics of genuineness that takes absolutely seriously the ideas of playfulness, spontaneity, a purity of love—or a raw sense of terror and horror at the grotesque—existing prior to language and culture. Another insight we can take from Li Zhi is perhaps among what we truly need to be reminded of in our contemporary society: there is, or at least can be, something undeniably powerful in the written word and world. And so, in our on-going, local, and fragile efforts at shaping and re-shaping a vibrant conception of the genuine—our struggles daily to live the noble ideal "to thine own self be true"⁸⁴—the story, the essay, the poem matters, or *can* matter, profoundly. While my book aims at providing a sketch of the writer Li Zhi, or of Zhuowu, and his writings, through the following chapters, I also hope to convince some readers that in Li Zhi—and I would suggest within the wider, fervent, and passionate discourse of 16th century, late-Ming China—we find a creative source for meaningful, important, and what in many ways in our time are relatively neglected insights concerning an ethics of genuineness or, the virtue of desire.