

LI ZHI IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract: Li Zhi (1527–1602) was a philosopher, historian and writer of the late Ming Dynasty. In terms of themes, besides the traditional social, political, historical and philosophical topics, more scholarship has been written about Li Zhi from the perspective of literary studies and the arts since 1980. Before 1980, translation was largely secondary to or an offshoot of the more principal goal of producing scholarly studies of Li Zhi and more extensive translation work has been published in the new millennium. With the development of Sino-western cultural communications, Sino-American scholars will cooperate to bring the translation and dissemination of Li Zhi to a new altitude both quantitatively and qualitatively, and establish the communicating bridge.

Li Zhi (1527–1602) was a philosopher, historian and writer of the late Ming Dynasty. In terms of themes, besides the traditional social, political, historical and philosophical topics, more scholarship has been written about Li Zhi from the perspective of literary studies and the arts since 1980. Before 1980, translation was largely secondary to or an offshoot of the more principal goal of producing scholarly studies of Li Zhi and more extensive translation work has been published in the new millennium. With the development of Sino-western cultural communications, Sino-American scholars will cooperate to bring the translation and dissemination of Li Zhi to a new altitude both quantitatively and qualitatively, and establish the communicating bridge.

Li Zhi otherwise known by his pseudonym Zhuowu, was a philosopher, historian and writer of the late Ming Dynasty. Ever since the May Fourth New Culture Movement, when he was rediscovered by the famous anti-Confucian Wu Yu, Li Zhi has attracted a great deal of attention because of his controversial behavior, the ideas he articulated about human desire, and how he challenged conventional norms. The voluminous scholarship about his philosophy includes studies of his ontology, theory of human nature, and method of self-cultivation, among many other topics. With his concept of the childlike heart-mind, Li Zhi promoted a notion of authenticity that challenged norms and broke down boundaries. All these philosophical ideas, as well as his enigmatic conduct and iconoclasm, still carry significance for our contemporary life and world. Li Zhi is one representative of Taizhou School of Yangmingism, and thus his philosophical studies are also an indispensable element of current studies of the Wang Yangming School.

Since Reform and Opening, scholarship and conferences on Li Zhi have blossomed in the People's Republic of China. In 1987, the first Li Zhi Research Seminar was held in Quanzhou, and since then there have been seven research seminars held in places where Li Zhi lived or stayed for a time, including Nan'an,

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Quanzhou, Kunming, Macheng, Shangcheng, and Tongzhou. The most recent international conference was held at Nan'an, Fujian, China in December, 2017. In tandem with this outpouring of papers, scholars have written state of the field studies for the Chinese-language literature, adding to the classic English-language review written by Pei-kai Cheng in 1982.¹

With more scholarship about Li Zhi being published in China, some specialists have also been interested in the state of studies on him globally. They have noted that the European and North American scholarship on Li Zhi has developed substantially over the last few decades. Historiographical studies have already appeared in Chinese-language journals. Bai Xiufang's "Li Zhi Studies in America and Europe" (1995) and "Li Zhi Studies Outside China" (1996) are two of the first articles written in China about the state of Li Zhi studies outside China. He includes discussion of scholarship on Li Zhi published between 1930 and 1988 in North America. (Bai,1995,19-23; Bai,1996, 82-87) Bai found that, "In American scholarship, some scholars of Chinese history mention Li Zhi in their works, and thus we can see that Li Zhi as attracted the attention of historians in America, an economically developed western society. Li Zhi's thought had a certain impact in America." (Bai,1996,21) Similarly, in a paper that she presented at the Li Zhi conference held in Quanzhou in 2004, Li Chao states that, "since the twentieth century, the thought and historical value of Li Zhi has been attracting attention from scholars in such countries as America, Germany,² France,³ Singapore, South Korea, and former Soviet Union." (Li ,2004, 342) In his study of the dissemination of Li Zhi's work, Zhang Xianzhong claims that, "It was through Matteo Ricci that Li Zhi came to be known to the western world. But Li Zhi was not well-known until 1930, and after that greater numbers of scholars focused on Li Zhi and Li Zhi's ideas, their copious scholarly achievements disseminating knowledge of this to the Western world." (Zhang,2009,145) Lastly, regarding the importance of Li Zhi to Ming scholarship outside of China, Lu Peimin concludes that, "Thus far, scholars from all over the world have produced in-depth studies on Li Zhi, the representative of Taizhou School. It is clear to see that Taizhou School has exerted considerable influence on international scholarship which is sustainable and far reaching." (Lu, 2016, 152)

The purpose of this article is to review the English-language scholarship on Li Zhi, most of which was published in North America. In sum, between 1930 and 2018,

¹ And translated into Chinese in 1984, see Cheng,1984,15-22. Cheng's paper divides Chinese-language Li Zhi studies before 1980 into four periods. Between 1900 and 1920 Li Zhi was rediscovered and characterized as an anti-traditionalist. From 1930 to 1949 more in-depth, wide-ranging studies were published, especially concerning his thought. He was still characterized as an anti-traditionalist but also written about from a Marxist point of view. Between 1950 and 1969, in Maoist China, Li was analyzed primarily in terms of Marxist categories. After the establishment of new China, Marxist historical theories are used to analyze the capitalist enlightenment of Li Zhi; 4. From 1970 to 1979, Li Zhi studies were stuck into a deadlock, trapped in political perspectives, and he was often cast as an iconoclast. See Cheng,1983,4-29.

² For German scholarship on Li Zhi, see Franke, 1982,137-147; Shin,1982; Spaar,1984.

³ For French-language Li Zhi scholarship as of 1979, see especially Billeter,1979.

Li Zhi has been the subject of three monographs, six master and doctoral dissertations, over thirty articles, as well as a respectable number of encyclopedia and dictionary entries. One major translation of his work has also been published. In general, studies on Li Zhi have increased in number over time, especially since the 1980s. As well, a wider variety of disciplines have been brought to bear on his life and works. In general, earlier studies of Li Zhi were largely written from a political, historical, and social point of view while more recent works give more attention to his significance for literary studies and the arts. Li Zhi studies in English-language world can be roughly divided into two periods: 1930-1980 and 1980-2018.

I. Early Studies, 1930-1980

K. C. Hsiao was the first to write about him for an English-reading audience. He was a Chinese scholar and educator, best known for his contributions to Chinese political science and history. In 1938, he published his article, "Li Chih: An Iconoclast of the Sixteenth Century" in the journal *T'ien Hsia Monthly*. This was the first essay to introduce Li Zhi to America, and Hsiao presented him as an iconoclastic thinker with contradictory ideas.⁴ Hsiao highlights tensions and apparent contradictions abounding in Li Zhi's works brought out by Yuan Hongdao's "Biographical Sketch of Li Wenling." Yuan had written that, "For the most part, Mr. Wenling's behavior was hard to explain. A successful degree holder who had renounced his post, he talked about nothing but the art of statesmanship: the affairs of all under heaven, he said, are too important to be left to the management of the typical fame-seeking scholar." (Hsiao, 1938, 341)

Hsiao believes that the origins of Li's innovative ideas are to be found in just such tensions. In traditional China, where there was a deep-rooted traditionalism, Li Zhi's independent thinking was a challenge to the conventional ethics and philosophy of Neo-Confucianism represented by Cheng-Zhu School. Hsiao notes that "It was this infantile paralysis of the mind, so to speak, that Li Chih abhorred and undertook to cure." (Hsiao, 1938, 327) Wang Yangming's philosophy of mind had opened the way to a remarkable emancipation of Chinese thought from the fetters of Neo-Confucianism, and Li Zhi capitalized on it. In conclusion, Hsiao held that Li Zhi was a self-contradictory iconoclast, and he said that, "His philosophy therefore cannot stand the test of logic; like an object of art it may be enjoyed by those who have a taste for it, but it does not prove anything or convince anybody. It amounts to a charming statement of an ineffectual theory-ineffectual because it bore no fruit either immediately or in the time that followed." (Hsiao, 1938, 341)

Hsiao also wrote about Li Zhi in his book, *zhong guo zheng zhi si xiang shi* (A History of Chinese Political Thought). This book was originally published in Chinese, but Frederick Mote translated it into English in 1979. (Hsiao, 1979) Hsiao explained that Li Zhi's free thinking was focused on practice and self judgment, in conformity

⁴ In *Dictionary of World History*, Li Zhi is defined as an iconoclast, see Lenman & Anderson, 2005.

with the Chan Buddhism of leftist Taizhou School of Yangmingism. This is due to his free nature and the influence of Wang Yangming's Philosophy of Mind. (Hsiao, 1998, 526-545) Slightly earlier, Hsiao had also elaborated upon these themes in the entry he penned for the *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, which was published in 1976. He wrote that Li Zhi was the devout follower of the left-wing Taizhou school of Wang's philosophy, and had been regarded as the martyr of such a doctrine of free conscience and thinking. (Hsiao, 1976, 807-818)

Others scholars who contributed to the outpouring of studies on Ming thought in the 1970s also connected Li Zhi with what they regarded as tide of individualistic thought in the late Ming, a tide that he exemplified. William Theodore de Bary explained that Li Zhi died for his belief in individual spontaneity and freedom, and that he was both condemned and acclaimed as the greatest heretic and iconoclast in China's history. (De Bary, 1970, 213) Also writing in the 1970s, Timothy Brook concluded that, "Much of the impact of Li Zhi's thinking lies in his emotional commitment to his discoveries of how Wang Yang-ming's philosophy could be extended beyond its original theses. It is his courage as much as his originality which brought him to the notice of his contemporaries and of historians of philosophy in the 20th century." (Brook, 1978, 66)

In 1976, Ray Huang also wrote about Li Zhi in his well-known book, *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline*. He too characterized Li Zhi an anti-traditionalist who was inconsistent and contradictory, but rejected Marxist-inspired labels portraying him as anti-feudalist.⁵ It should be noted here that several scholars have since criticized his interpretations. Pan Shuming and Xu Sumin have criticized him for misreading the historical evidence and lacking a full understanding of Li Zhi's thought, by saying that in Chinese society, new economy and new thoughts will never occur, and modernization can only be realized by foreign forces. (Pan, 2000, 35; Xu, 2006, 658-659) Zhang Xianzhong also finds that Ray Huang lacked a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Li, but nevertheless praised him for playing a critical role in disseminating information about him to the West. (Zhang, 2009, 148)

In English-language scholarship, the first comprehensive study of Li Zhi's work and thought is Eng-chew Cheang's doctoral dissertation, "Li Chih as a Critic: A Chapter of the Ming Intellectual History" (1973). Cheang wrote this under the supervision of some of the most important historians working in the field of Ming studies: K. C. Hsiao, Hok-Lam Chan, and Frederick Mote. After introducing Li Zhi in the first chapter ("Preamble"), subsequent chapters discuss him as "A Social Critic", "A Philosophic Critic", and "A Literary Critic." Cheang finds that Li Zhi's eccentric behavior and formidable critical writing do indeed show that he was an anti-traditionalist. But he does not regard him as in any way revolutionary or as a social reformer. He also does not accept William Theodore de Bary's characterization of him as a "negative individualist." The term individualism is, as a general matter, too ambiguous to be useful in describing Li Zhi. (Cheang, 1973, 8-10) Cheang analyzes

⁵ See Huang, 1976. Huang also briefly discusses Li Zhi in the chapter he wrote on the Longqing and Wanli reigns for the *Cambridge History of China*, see Mote & Twitchett, 1988, 551-552.

his anti-traditionalism from several angles and in relation to several issues topical to the late Ming world: society, philosophy and literature, gender equality, free marriage, hypocrisy, all saints, righteousness and principle, the childlike heart-mind and its influence on the later literary creation. (Cheang, 1973)

An important turning point in Li Zhi studies arrived with the extraordinary contribution of Hok-lam Chan. He compiled several useful bibliographies for Li Zhi studies. These began as articles published in the late 1970s – “Li Chih (1527-1602): A Modern Bibliography” (1978), (Chan, 1978a, 17-27) and “Supplement to ‘Li Chih (1527-1602): A Modern Bibliography (1974-1978)’ ”(1978). (Chan, 1978b, 11-18) In 1980, these were published in an expanded version as a book, *Li Chih, 1527-1602, in Contemporary Chinese Historiography: New Light on His Life and Works*. (Chan,1980a) Chan explained that there had been a profusion of modern studies on many facets of Li Zhi since the turn of the twentieth century in both academic and semi-academic publications in Chinese, Japanese, and Western languages.(Chan,1980b,183-208) In his article “Bibliography of Modern Publications on Li Chih (1901-1979),” Chan further explained that his book is, “not a critical evaluation of their scholarship, but rather a modest inventory of the major works on the subject culled from the available publications and general bibliographies on Chinese studies.”(Chan,1980b,184) In fact, some chapters were contributed by scholars in China with particular expertise in some area of the Li Zhi archive. Topics covered by the bibliographies and related bibliographical essays include Li Zhi’s family, residence, wife, family tomb and burial inscriptions, life and thought, and writing and rare manuscripts. Special attention is given to detailing all available extant Li Zhi writing’s as of that time, as well as documenting the secondary scholarship around the world.

Several scholars recognized the importance of Chan’s work. In his “Foreword”, Frederick W. Mote commented, “Studies of Li Chih are certain to continue to be important in China and Japan, and have become more important in the West. Such studies now will start with the present work. It provides the essential overview of the place Li Chih has assumed in historical scholarship, in recent politics, and in Chinese consciousness.” (Chan, 1980a, ix) In her review of Jean-François Billeter’s monograph on Li Zhi, Julia Ching stated that, “For those who only read English, however, we fortunately have Hok-lam Chan’s careful rendition of *Li Chih in Contemporary Chinese Historiography*, which is even more bibliographically-oriented than this book.” (Ching, 1980, 95-96) Also in 1980, Morris Rossabi said, “Chan’s book is a model of its kind, shedding light on the subject while pointing to specific problems that require additional research.” (Rossabi, 1980, 54) In 1982, in his article, “Some New Publications and Materials on Li Zhi, Wolfgang Franke likewise found that it was the most complete bibliography to date. (Franke, 1982, 137-147) Chinese scholars also recognized its value. In 1996, Bai Xiufang wrote that, “This bibliography had a profound influence on American scholarship. Professor Hok-lam Chan made an enormous contribution in Li Zhi’s introduction to the western world and Li Zhi studies as well.” (Bai, 1996, 85)

II Recent Studies, 1980-2018

During the first weeks of January 1980, shortly after his draft was sent to the printer, Chan had the opportunity to visit China with a delegation of scholars of Chinese studies, and he found that leading libraries had several important publications on Li Zhi then unknown to him. He wrote that, "It was already too late to include this information in the book upon my return; thus, I take the opportunity to report these new findings herewith to supplement the bibliographic survey in my study." (Chan, 1980c, 81) Besides, Chan also mentioned that there were three doctoral dissertations in progress, which were not included in his bibliography: E.M. Frederick's "Li Chih and the Problem of Ethical Independence", (Frederick, 1975) Pei-Kai Cheng's "Reality and Imagination: Li Chih and Tang Hsien-tsu in Search of Authenticity", (Cheng, 1980) and Wilfried Spaar's "Die kritische philosophie des Li Zhi (1527-1602) und ihre politische rezeption in der Volksrepublik China." (Spaar, 1984)

Since 1980, English-language publications on Li Zhi have flowered and gone in new directions. In terms of themes, besides the traditional social, political, historical and philosophical topics, more scholarship has been written about Li Zhi from the perspective of literary studies and the arts. In 1950s, Carsun Chang had already described Li as "primarily a literary man." (Chang, 1957, 216) Thus, sophisticated translations making more of Li Zhi's corpus available to an English-reading audience reveals both the philosophical and literary world of the late Ming. While the language barrier to producing scholarship on Li Zhi has meant that much of it is still being written by Chinese Americans and Chinese students studying overseas, more scholars who grew up in and obtained their education in the States have been publishing scholarship.

Before 1980, translation was largely secondary to or an offshoot of the more principal goal of producing scholarly studies of Li Zhi. In his article, "Li Chih: An Iconoclast of the Sixteenth Century", K.C. Hsiao translated parts of Li Zhi's "Li Shih Fen Shu", "Chu Tan Chi", "Tsang Shu", "Hsu Tsang Shu", and "Li Wen Ling Chi". (Hsiao, 1938) But since 1980, translation work has made a substantial progress. Clara Yu translated five of Li Zhi's letters for inclusion in the widely used Ebrey sourcebook, including "Letter to Zhuang Chunfu", "To Zeng Jiquan", "On Reading the Letter to Ruowu from His Mother", and "To Liu Xiaochuan". (Ebrey, 1993, 257-263) In 1996, Stephen Owen also translated "On the Child-like Heart". (Owen, 1996, 808-811) In 1999, Yang Ye published "Vignettes from the Late Ming: A Hsiao-pin Anthology." After her introduction, she provided five annotated essays, including "Three Fools", "In Praise of Liu Hsieh", "A Lament for the Passing", "Inscription on a Portrait of Confucius at the Iris Buddhist Shrine", and "Essay: On the Mind of a Child". (Yang, 1999)

More extensive translation work has been published in the new millennium. In 2002, in the appendix to her doctoral dissertation, "Li Zhi (1527-1602): a Confucian Feminist of Late-Ming China," Pauline Lee included annotated translations of some Li Zhi's letters, poems, historical commentaries, and prefaces. Lee states that, "The

essays have been selected to give the reader an introduction to Li's views on topics central to his works, ranging from the context-sensitive nature of truths, Li's novel concept of the mind, to his disputations with the Neo-Confucian preoccupation with abstract metaphysics." (Lee, 2002, 177) In 2016, Rivi Handler-Spitz, Pauline C. Lee, and Haun Saussy published a translation of a substantial portion of two of Li Zhi's most important works – *A Book to Burn* and *A Book to Keep (Hidden)*, as well as selected historical documents pertaining to his life. This was the fruition of five years of careful translation and editing, and the product is the most comprehensive in its genre up to this point in time. The poems were translated by Timothy Billings and Yan Zina. The translations also include a useful chronology of Li Zhi's life and bibliography. The translations are mainly based on Zhang Jianye's *Li zhi quanji zhu* (Annotated Complete Works of Li Zhi) (Zhang, 201) and they supplemented Zhang's annotation whenever necessary with further research of their own. (Li, 2016)

In addition to much translation work, thematic studies of Li Zhi have also been published, especially in the areas of comparative literature and the arts. Pei-Kai Cheng's doctoral dissertation, "Reality and Imagination: Li Chih and Tang Hsien-tsu in Search of Authenticity" (1980) was the first lengthy English-language comparative literary study of Li Zhi. The dissertation is a study of the lives and intellectual pursuits of Li and Tang in the historical context of the sixteenth century Chinese society. Cheng focuses on the relationship between their intellectual journeys and late-Ming social change, economic development, and political factionalism. Of course, the teachings of Wang Yangming, especially the ideas promoted by the Taizhou School, play an essential role in the development of Li's and Tang's thinking and deeply influenced the future direction of their intellectual pursuits. Both men were deeply frustrated by the environments in which they grew up and sought for new models of authenticity as a result. (Cheng, 1980)

Qingliang Chen's master's thesis, "Li Zhi (1527-1602) and his Literary Thought" (1999), focuses on Li Zhi's status as a literatus. She devotes chapters and discussion to the ChengZhu Neo-Confucian background to Li's thought, and analyzes the influence of Wang Yangming's learning of mind on him; Li's enthusiasm for vernacular literature; recognizable phases in Li Zhi's life; his criticisms of writers; Li Zhi's critical method for reading the classics and reasons for taking fiction seriously as literature; appraisals of Li Zhi's thought and his influence on Chinese literary history. She notes that Li Zhi is indeed one of the pioneers of Ming-Qing vernacular literature; after all, as she summarizes his thinking, "The very essence that makes a good writer is in his original mind—the 'mind of a child'...For Li Zhi, there are three terms—talent, courage and insight—these are adequate to encompass the quality of individual mind of a good writer." (Chen, 1999, 40)

Pauline C. Lee and Rivi Handler-Spitz are two representatives of younger generation of Li Zhi scholars. Lee is a professor in the Asian Studies department of Washington University, who has conducted much research on the comparative study of Li Zhi and feminist theory. Early on while studying Li Zhi, Lee found that "Despite Li's considerable role in Chinese thought, at present there exists but a handful of articles on him in the English language." (Lee, 2002, 4) She holds that there is a rich and vibrant Confucian feminism in Chinese history with the focus of

self-cultivation. Li Zhi is one of the earliest Confucians to seriously advocate for gender equality.

In an edited volume published in 2000, Lee contributed an essay titled “Li Zhi and John Stuart Mill: A Confucian Feminist Critique of Liberal Feminism.” In Lee’s opinion, such contemporary feminist schools as liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, existentialist feminism, and psychoanalytic feminism have voiced ideas that to some degree still place women in a subordinate role or subjugated position. She compares the feminist thought of Li Zhi with John Stuart Mill, an English Unitarian philosopher and economist. Based on her close reading of both, Lee finds that Li Zhi’s Confucian feminism and John Stuart Mill’s liberal feminism are compatible and complementary to each other for addressing the problem of patriarchy. Both believed that something must be done to give women the kinds of opportunities for education and work that men have. Li Zhi’s concepts of gendered inner and outer spheres are permeable and graduated, while Mill’s private and public are impermeable and categorical. Regarding changing women’s status and measures to promote gender equality, while for Mill self-cultivation is secondary to legal reform, it plays a central role in Li Zhi’s thinking on this issue. For Li Zhi, women too can engage in moral self-cultivation with a view to returning to the “childlike mind.” Mill rather supports legal and education reforms that would bring women out into the public realm. Lee points out, “One of the shortcomings in Mill’s feminist vision is indeed his inability to imagine a social world where there exists permeability between the spheres of the domestic and the public.” (Lee, 2000, 123)

Lee’s chapter was, in fact, spun off from the process of writing her dissertation, which was completed in 2002. In “Li Zhi (1527-1602): a Confucian Feminist of Late-Ming China”(2002), Lee interprets Confucian views of feminism with Sino-western feminist comparative theories. Lee first explains the feminist dimensions to Li Zhi’s life and work and the theoretical frameworks that she uses to approach this topic. She then explains Li Zhi’s life and work in the context of late imperial China’s history and intellectual history. Following, Lee elucidates Li Zhi’s central philosophical concepts and method of moral self-cultivation, including the influence of Wang Yangming and Luo Rufang on his notions of mind and the child-mind. Contrary to what Willard Peterson had claimed, Li Zhi is not a moral relativist but rather an ethical particularist and realist – to use philosophical terminology for Western ethics. (Peterson,1998,746)Then Lee explains issue of hierarchy, complementarity, and gender relations as pertain to Li Zhi’s thought, followed by her comparative study of Li and Mill discussed above. In conclusion, Lee reiterates that Li Zhi had not embraced a kind of relativist ethics. She also proposes other direction for future research. One is to study earlier conceptions of gender that inform feminism as it develops in China. The other is to move forward in time and study contemporary Chinese feminists. (Lee, 2002)

Since then, Lee has published other essays. In “Spewing Jade and Spitting Pearls: Li Zhi’s Ethics of Genuineness” (2011), she compares Li Zhi’s “On the Child-like Heart-Mind” with Charles Taylor’s “The Ethics of Authenticity”. Li Zhi holds that genuineness is inborn - like “spewing jade and spitting pearls”, while Charles Taylor thinks that authentic life should be shaped with language and culture. (Lee,

2011, 114–132) In another essay, “‘There is Nothing More...Than Dressing and Eating’: Li Zhi 李贽 and the Child-like Heart-Mind (Tongxin 童心)” (2012), Lee discusses different interpretation of Li Zhi’s “Childlike Heart-Mind”. In Chinese culture, Lee writes, this phrase can be interpreted at two different levels: naive and pure. Li Zhi accepts the original and genuine heart-mind in the commentary on the *Western Chamber* by “The Farmer of Dragon Ravine”. Lee holds that Li’s conception of the heart-mind is meaningfully similar to the genuine heart-mind found in the *Platform Sutra*. (Lee, 2012a)

In 2012, Lee published a revised version of her dissertation and these essays as the book *Li Zhi, Confucianism, and the Virtue of Desire*. Individual chapters are devoted to the publication of *A Book to Burn*, Li Zhi’s life in the year 1590 (Wanli 18), what she calls the secular cult of feeling, and historical, philosophical, and literary interpretations of him; the relationship between Li’s life and thought; comparison of the thought of Li, Mengzi, and the Wang Yangming school; Li’s ethics of feeling, genuineness, and desire; and comparing his ethic of genuineness to Charles Taylor’s ethics of authenticity. In general, Lee believed that Li Zhi, “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...but his life and thought have remained almost wholly inaccessible to English-speaking audiences...his works deserve to be read, critically analyzed, and celebrated as the masterful philosophical and literary works that they are.” (Lee, 2012b, 9-10) Unlike what is the case for earlier scholarship, Lee did not see Li Zhi as a radical thinker who wholly jettisons tradition; rather, he is “a thinker who has mastered the traditional canon of literature and passionately strives to reform, amend, and embellish upon what is given.” (Lee, 2012b, 34)

Because it brought so much of the earlier scholarship as of this point in time to fruition, Lee’s monograph was positively received. John H. Berthrong found that her use of the work of Charles Taylor to illuminate how a late-Ming thinker might contribute to modern ethical debates was especially fruitful. Both, he points out, were concerned with the ethics of authenticity. Berthrong concludes that, “Dr. Lee argues that Li Zhi shows us how to reform Confucian philosophy, and those insights might indeed help us grapple with the complexities of the ethics of a globalized modern world.” (Berthrong, 2014, 221) After praising the writing style, clarity of the translation, Hammond affirmed the importance of the subject, stating, “The field of Chinese history needs more studies of important figure such as Li Zhi, and this book is a major contribution to a growing body of biographical and semi-biographical works.” (Hammond, 2014, 1111) Lastly, De Weerdts states that, “The author is to be commended for working across literary, historical, and philosophical boundaries in shedding light on Li Zhi’s historical significance and intellectual legacy. By recovering Li Zhi from the (sometimes contradictory) modernist readings to which he has heretofore been subjected, this book opens the way to a new intellectual history of the late Ming era.” (Weerdts, 2014, 1110)

Rivi Handler-Spitz, a professor of Department of Comparative Literature University of Chicago, has been another important contributor to Li Zhi studies. In her essay, “Relativism and Skepticism in the Multicultural Late Ming” (2008), she examines the social and cultural origins of dimensions of Li Zhi’s well-known skepticism. She found that, “Li’s skepticism and relativism stem largely from his close encounters with a wide range of cultural ‘others’ including the tribal peoples of Yunnan over whom he governed, Muslims in his own family, international merchants, and the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci.” (Handler-Spitz, 2008, 13)

Handler-Spitz’s doctoral dissertation, “Diversity, Deception, and Discernment in the Late Sixteenth Century: A Comparative Study of Li Zhi’s ‘Book to Burn’ and Montaigne’s ‘Essays,’” was published the next year. In it she explores the relation Handler-Spitz gives a synchronic analysis of similar themes and styles in Li Zhi’s and Montaigne’s writing and holds that their similarity can be connected to global trade at that time. Handler-Spitz explains the connections between globalization of the Chinese and French economy and culture in the sixteenth century, the similarity between Li Zhi’s and Montaigne’s biography, writings, and publishing activities. Handler-Spitz adopts analogical approach to deal with the uncertainty of text in changing society. She explores the impact on literary creation from the uncertain society and economy. She holds that the reader should make their own choice of textual skepticism and judgment. (Handler-Spitz, 2009)

Handler-Spitz has since continued to publish on Li Zhi, including an essay and then a book. In her essay, “Provocative Texts: Li Zhi, Montaigne, and the Promotion of Critical Judgment in Early Modern Readers” (2013), Handler-Spitz furthers comparison of Li Zhi and Montaigne by applying various critical literary theories. Her monograph, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age: Li Zhi and Cultures of Early Modernity* is in some sense the fruition of over a decade of research. “Unruly Age” is what Montaigne uses to describe his age. Handler-Spitz describes Li Zhi’s pursuit of primordial, pure, and transparent semiotic system and analyzes the full manipulation of these rhetoric devices in Li Zhi’s works. She examines particular instances of Li’s behavior and use of language as they relate to core spheres of material life and semiotic activity in the early modern period: dress codes, economic conditions, and publishing. She tackles the question of how contemporary readers interpreted Li’s bluff-laden texts. In her book, Handler-Spitz adopts her constant comparative approach, and she says, “I have undertaken such comparisons in the hope and with the conviction that by examining and comparing diverse cultural products, we in the twenty-first century may gain insight into features of the early modern world that may have eluded the comprehension or cognizance of contemporaries in the sixteenth century.” (Handler-Spitz, 2017, 9)

Finally, aside from their joint translation of Li Zhi’s works, Pauline C. Lee, Rivi Handler-Spitz and Haun Saussy are co-editing the book *The Objectionable Li Zhi: Fiction, Syncretism, and Dissent in Late Ming China* for publication. Robert E Hegel will contribute a chapter entitled “Performing Li Zhi: Li Zhuowu Fiction Commentaries”. (Hegel, forthcoming). He also wrote a conference paper, “Reading Fiction in the Guise of Li Zhi”. (Hegel, 2013) Ying Zhang is responsible for writing the chapter “Li Zhi’s Image, Print, and Late-Ming Political Culture.” (Zhang,

forthcoming) She had already written about Li Zhi in her doctoral dissertation on politics and morality during the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. In the first chapter, “Before the ‘Conservative Turn:’ Li Zhi’s Tragedy and the Late Ming (1570-1620),” Ying Zhang explores Li Zhi’s moral formation through self-cultivation by social and cultural means, and focuses on his gender equality in his thought. (Zhang, 2010, 51-145) She also given several papers on Li Zhi, such as “Li Zhi’s China: Secular Fiction and Post Secular Reality” (Zhang, 2012) and a workshop report “Li Zhi’s Image Trouble and Late-Ming Political Culture” (Zhang, 2013).

Lastly, one other article should be mentioned. Jin Jiang’s essay, “Heresy and Persecution in Late Ming Society-Reinterpreting the Case of Li Zhi” (2001), provides a case study Li Zhi’s activities in Macheng Hubei in order to analyze the development of his heretical thinking. She holds that the core of Li Zhi’s thought is an ethics of authenticity (genuine morality) directly derived from Wang Yangming’s School of Mind, and the real cause of his trouble. (Jiang, 2001)

In sum, a rich tradition of writing about Li Zhi in the English-language literature has now developed over nearly the course of a century. This is important because, considering the Ming dynasty as a whole, few Ming figures have received such attention as he has. The most notable exceptions are the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang and Wang Yangming. But Zhu belongs to the early Ming, Wang belongs to the mid-Ming, and Li Zhi belongs to the late Ming dynasty. Thus, by studying him scholars have been able to establish much about the cultural, social, and political landscape of this crucial time in Chinese history. Furthermore, Li Zhi has been considered worthy of study because he is a brilliant and yet contradictory person, with a compelling life and tragic end, telling us something about the human predicament. Finally, his life and ideas have been shown to be relevant not only academically, for studies in literary theory, the arts, ethics, and metaphysics, but also for modern times. He was, in many ways, innovative, and transcended the limitations of his time. Thus, his philosophical, historical, and literary theories and insights are still useful for today’s global society, including his people centered politics, egalitarian notions, and insistence on leading an authentic life. (Zhang, 2012, 1) With ever more publication work happening both east and west, and more bridges being established through conference and other collaborative activity, Li Zhi scholarship is sure to expand and develop even further.

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