

Li Zhi's suicide: Martyrdom or Sarcasm?

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<Contents>

1. Buddhist or Confucian?
2. Persecution and Suicide
3. Death as Martyrdom or Sarcasm?

1. Buddhist or Confucian?

Li Zhi李贄 (1527-1602, styled Zhuowu卓吾), who ended his life by stabbing himself in the throat in the prison, was certainly a high profile figure in the Ming intellectual scene. His being was, however, in a veil in the sense that none of his contemporaries could recognize him successfully; he was sometimes regarded as a Buddhist monk but sometimes as a Confucian scholar-official regardless of his own claim:

People who are fond of me are not fond of me being an official or a monk, but they are fond of just me. People who want to kill me do not dare to kill an official or a monk; they want to kill just me. If I cannot be loved by others, then I am just not a person who is worth loving. That is all. What harm can those who love me have from it? If I cannot be killed, then I must be benefited from the grace of Heaven. Don't they who want to kill me [vainly] labor! Thus my putting on a cap is not because I am afraid that people might kill me as a monk. Donglao 侗老 (i.e., Geng Dingxiang) has originally leadership, but he cannot avoid being biased. Most people under his care do not want Geng and me to

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get along with each other as before, and they spread groundless rumors in Wuchang武昌 all day long. Although they originally wanted to defame me, they don't know that it instead brings fame to me.

世人之愛我者，非愛我爲官也，非愛我爲和尚也，愛我也。世人之欲我殺者，非敢殺官也，非敢殺和尚也，殺我也。我無可愛，則我直爲無可愛之人耳，彼愛我者可妨乎！我不可殺，則我自當受天不殺之佑，殺我者不亦勞乎！然則我之加冠，非慮人之殺和尚而冠之也。侗老原是長者，但未免偏聽，故一切飲食耿氏之門者，不欲侗老與我如初，猶朝夕在武昌倡爲無根言語，本欲甚我之過，而不知反以彰我之名。¹⁾

The above passage shows us the fact that Li Zhi had ambiguous multiple identities which put him into trouble; particularly, his identity as a Buddhist monk must have troubled him so much as he was aware of the possibility of anti-Buddhist terrorism, not to mention people's defamation of his character. However, in fact, he was never officially ordained to Buddhist monkhood, and moreover he did not refrain himself from being a layman. Thus strict Buddhist monks and believers did not regard Li Zhi as a decent Buddhist monk. On the other hand, Li Zhi was an ardent Confucian official in "a cap." As a matter of fact, he was a sincere follower of Yangming learning and yet, after his death by suicide, he was denied and forgotten not only by Cheng-Zhu scholars but also by other Yangming scholars. Huang Zongxi黃宗羲 (1610-1695), one of the greatest Confucians in early Qing清 dynasty and a follower of Yangming learning, did not even include Li Zhi's biography in his voluminous work, *Mingru xuean*明儒學案 (*The records of Ming scholars*)²⁾ Another great mind of the Qing, Gu Yanwu顧炎武

1) "Yu Yang Dingjian與楊定見," Shuda書答 (Letters), *Fenshu*焚書 (Hereafter **FS**), *juan* 2, *Fenshu*焚書/*Xu fenshu*續焚書 (Taipei, Hanjing wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 1984), pp. 64-65.

2) However, due to Li's large social influence and relationship with other scholars, it is still possible to find the passages related to Li Zhi in the *Mingru xuean*. Eleven passages are found in the *Mingru xuean*. Refer to Xiamen daxue lishixi廈門大學歷史係 ed., *Lizhi yanjiu cankao ziliao*李贄研究參考資料 (Fujian: Remin daxue chubanshe, 1975), volume 1, pp. 79-82. For a selective English translation, refer to Julia Ching and Chaoying Fang ed., *The Records of Ming Scholars* (Honolulu: University of

(1613-1682) commented on Li Zhi:

From ancient times till now, (morally) petty men never have scruples [about doing anything bad], but [among them] no one is worse than Li Zhi in daring to contradict the sages. Although we enforce the strict order from the emperor, the popularity of his books among people is still the same as before.

自古以來，小人之無忌憚，而敢於叛聖人者，莫甚於李贄。然雖奉嚴旨，而其書之行於人間自若也。³⁾

Gu Yanwu's words reflect the fact that Li Zhi was identified as a heretic by the government and ruling class. For pharisaic Confucians and Buddhists, Li Zhi could be neither a monk nor a Confucian: he was just merely a heretic who foments social disorder. Li Zhi lectured on Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism to Confucians, monks, and even women with his hair shaved. Both higher monks and Confucian scholars of the time could not fully understand such idiosyncrasy. The following passage is a good example of how and why he gave a shock to the society, revealing his idiosyncrasy:

All people regard Confucius as a great sage, and I regard him as a great sage, too: all people regard Laozi and Buddha as heretics, and I also regard them as heretics. But people don't really know what great sages and heretics are. This is because they get used to what they have heard from their parents and teachers [about sages and heretics]. Nor do their parents and teachers really know what great sages and heretics are: they are just used to what they heard from the scholars and elders. And the scholars and elders do not really know either, except [their conjecture that] Confucius said something relevant to these things: "Sagehood is not that which I [i.e., Confucius] am capable of" (*sheng ji*

Hawaii Press, 1987)

³⁾ Gu Yanwu, "Li Zhi," *Rizhilu* 日知錄, *juan* 18; Xiamen daxue lishixi ed., *Lizhi yanjiu cankao ziliao* volume 1, p. 84.

wubuneng聖則吾不能, Mencius 2A:2), which is interpreted as just an expression of modesty, [not denial of the 'fact' that he is a sage], and "focusing on the extremes" (gonghuyiduan攻乎異端, Analects 2:16) is interpreted as referring to [digging into] Laozi and Buddha. The scholars and elders had made a conjecture and asserted these things: parents and teachers repeated and recited them, and children have blindly listened to them. All words from ten thousand mouths are the same, so that I cannot overrule the words. This has been the way in which the same words have been transmitted and repeated for thousands of years: nevertheless, people do not know it by themselves. However they do not hold, "We just vainly cram in the words," but hold, "We know the [great] figures [who said such true words]," and do not hold, "We are forced to say 'we know' about what we do not really know," but hold, "We say 'we know' only about what we already know." So [I dare to say that] in the present people do not use their eyes (thinking faculty) [to judge their status] although they have eyes. What kind of person am I then? Can I dare to say I use my thinking faculty? I follow people, thereby regarding him as a sage and paying homage to him. Accordingly, I follow the way people do, thereby setting [the image of] Confucius on a pedestal at the Buddhist monastery, Zhifoyuan.

人皆以孔子爲大聖，吾亦以爲大聖：皆以老、佛爲異端，吾亦以爲異端。人人非真知大聖與異端也，以所聞於父師之教者熟也；父師非真知大聖與異端也，以所聞於儒先之教者熟也；儒先亦非真知大聖與異端也，以孔子有是言也。其曰“聖則吾不能。”是居謙也。其曰，“攻乎異端，”是必爲老與佛也。儒先億度而言之，父師沿襲而誦之，小子聾而聽之，萬口一詞，不可破也；千年一律，不自知也。不曰“徒誦其言，”而曰“已知其人”；不曰，“強不知以爲知，”而曰“知之謂知之。”至今日，雖有目，無所用矣。餘何人也，敢謂有目？亦從衆耳。既從衆而聖之，亦從衆而事之，是故吾從衆事孔子於芝佛之院。⁴⁾

4) "Ti Kongzixiang yu zhifoyuan 題孔子像於芝佛院" (Hanging up the image of Confucius in the Zhifoyuan), Zashu 雜述 (Various writings), Xu fenshu 續焚書 (Hereafter **XFS**), juan 4, Fenshu/Xu fenshu (Taipei, Hanjing wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 1984), p. 100; Translation is partly adapted from de Bary's abridged translation. (W. T. de Bary, *Learning for One's self: essays on the individual in Neo-Confucian thought* (Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 232-233.)

2. Persecution and Suicide

Li's books were banned twice during the Ming (1602 before Li Zhi's death and 1625 after his death); nevertheless, many intellectuals still embraced Li's works. The order from Emperor Shenzong神宗 (1563-1620), was "strict" indeed, which was a response to the impeachment by a censor, Zhang Wenda張問達:⁵⁾

Li Zhi dares to advocate delusive teaching, thereby deluding the world and deceiving people. Accordingly, I order the secret agency (i.e., Western Depot), the capital (Beijing) guards, and the commands from all (five) directions to arrest and bring him to trial. His books, whether they are already published or not, must be confiscated and burnt by the government offices in charge, and none may be kept and preserved. If his followers wrongfully keep them in secret, departments and offices in charge have to collaborate and bring them to trial.

李贄敢倡亂道，惑世誣民，便令廠衛五城嚴拿治罪。其書籍已刊未刊者令所在官司，盡搜燒毀，不許存留。如有徒黨曲庇私藏，該科及各有司訪參奏來並治罪。⁶⁾

As the decree instructed, Li Zhi was instantly arrested in Tongzhou通州, a Beijing suburb. And after a month, on 25th-26th of the third month, 1602 in the lunar calendar, he ended his seventy five years of existence by committing suicide while waiting for the last order from the emperor.

Reportedly, Li Zhi stabbed himself in the neck with a shaving knife

⁵⁾ Zhang Wenda, "Likejishizhong Zhang Wenda shu禮科給事中張問達疏" (Impeachment by a royal inspector, Zhang Wenda), Wanli sanshi nian runer yue yimao萬曆30年閏2月乙卯, *Shenzong Wanli Shilu*神宗 萬曆 實錄, *juan* 369.

⁶⁾ *Ming Shenzong Wanli Shilu*明萬曆神宗實錄, *juan* 369; Gu Yanwu, "Li Zhi," *Rizhilu*, *juan* 18; Xiamen daxue lishixi ed., *ibid.*, volume 1, pp. 84, 85-86.

e.⁷⁾ A possible and popular way of understanding his suicide is to view it as a “protest” against the wrongful accusation and the authority⁸⁾ or a kind of “martyrdom” for his faith.⁹⁾ In fact, many records describe Li as “indignantly cutting his throat,” thereby alluding to Li’s protest or martyrdom. However, according to the most substantial and authoritative record by Yuan Zhongdao袁中道, Li Zhi kept his routine and composure before the suicide, writing poems; at least, for Li’s servant and such best intimates as Wang Benke王本鉞 (?-?, the last disciple of Li Zhi, styled Dingfu鼎甫), Li’s suicide was all very sudden.¹⁰⁾ Li did not show

7) Yuan Zhongdao袁中道, Li Wenling zhuan李溫陵傳, *Kexuezhaijinji wenchao*珂雪齋近集文鈔; Shen Fu沈鈇, Li Zhouwu zhuan李卓吾傳; He Qiaoyuan何喬遠, Li Zhi zhuan李贄傳; Qian Qianyi錢謙益, Zhuowu xiansheng Li Zhi卓吾先生李贄, *Liechaoshiji*列朝詩集; Tan Qian談遷, an article about Li Zhi’s biography, *Guoquan*國權, *juan* 79; “Li Zhi zhuan李贄傳,” Ming wenyuan明文苑, *Quanzhoufuzhi*泉州府志, *juan* 54; Dao Guangzhong道光重, Li Zhi zhuan李贄傳, Ming Wenyuan zhuan明文苑傳, *Fujian tongzhi*福建通志, *juan* 214.

All are available in Xiamen daxue lishixi ed., *ibid.*, volume 1, p. 13, 22, 23, 24, 26, 35, and 36. Dao Guangzong describes that Li Zhi used a letter opener. However, the Annals of the Ming (*Ming Shilu*明實錄) has another account of Li Zhi’s suicide:

“Li Zhi was thereafter (after the decree) arrested. He was afraid of [being punished for] his guilt and starved to death.” (已而贄逮至, 懼罪不食死.) (*Ming Shenzong Wanli Shilu*, *juan* 369; Gu Yanwu, “Li Zhi,” *Rizhilu*, *juan* 18; Xiamen daxue lishixi ed., *ibid.*, volume 1, pp. 84, 85-86.)

As far as I know, none of modern scholars has made use of this record in order to explain Li Zhi’s death, except mentioning it as a defamatory description by the government. Moreover, in both the Annals of the Ming and other records including Li Zhi’s writings, there is no further collaborating information to assure us of the reliability of the above record.

- 8) For example, Qiu Hansheng丘漢生, “Taizhou xuepai de jiechu sixiangjia Li Zhi泰州學派的傑出思想家李贄,” *Lishi yanjiu*歷史研究, 1964. Vol.1: 115-133, Esp. p. 120.
- 9) William Theodore de Bary, Li Chih: Arch-Individualist, *Learning for One’s self – Essays on the individual in Neo-Confucian Tradition* (New York: Columbia University press, 1991), pp. 232-233. de Bary associates Li’s “martyrdom” with both Buddhist and Confucian spirit. In a different context, Chai Shangshi蔡尚思 describes Li Zhi’s death as “sacrificing his life for anti-Confucianism” (weifankong er xishengshengming爲反孔而犧牲生命). See his preface to *Fenshu/Xu fenshu*, punctuated by Xia Jianqin夏劍欽, (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1990).
- 10) The prosecutor tried to suggest the emperor to send Li Zhi back to his hometown, Quanzhou, Fujian. If the prosecutor had suggested it, it could have been ratified by the emperor. Thus, Li Zhi could survive the situation. (Sending back a convict

any resentment before and after his attempted suicide:

Li always said, "Since I have completed the Ninth edition of the Yiyin (*Jiuzhengyiyin* 九正易因), I might just as well die at any time soon." After he completed the Ninth edition of the Yiyin, the condition of his illness grew worse. When soldiers (sent by the court) arrived to arrest him, the residence was tumultuous. Li Zhi asked Ma Jinglun 馬經綸 about it. Ma replied, "The capital guards arrived." Li Zhi painfully sprang to his feet and staggered along by a couple of steps, yelling, "This is all because of me. You bring a plank here for me!" Li lay down on the plank, crying out "Hurry up! I am a criminal. I must not stay here." ...Even after a lapse of time, the (last) decree (about how to deal with Li's case) did not come down (from His Highness). So Li Zhi composed poems and read books in the cell, staying easy. One day, he called his servant to get his hair shaved. When the servant was not around there, he grabbed the shaving knife and cut his neck. Nevertheless, he still drew his breath for two days. The servant asked, "Aren't you hurt, Reverend?" "I am not," Li wrote his answer on the servant's palm by his finger. The servant asked again, "Why did you stab your neck?" Li wrote, "What can an aged man seek more in his seventies?" And he eventually passed away.

常曰, "我得[九正易因], 死快矣。" [易因]成, 病轉甚。至是逮者至, 邸舍忽忽, 公以問馬公。馬公曰, "衛士至。" 公力疾起, 行數步, 大聲曰, "是爲我也。爲我取門片來!" 遂臥其上, 疾呼曰, "速行! 我罪人也, 不宜留。" ...久之旨不下, 公於獄舍中作詩讀書自如。一日, 呼侍者薙發, 侍者去, 遂持刀自割其喉, 氣不絕者兩日。侍者問, "和尚痛否?" 以指書其手曰, "不痛。" 又問曰, "和尚何自割?" 書曰, "七十老翁何所求!" 遂絕。¹¹⁾

Judging from the above report, it seems unlikely that Li Zhi committed suicide out of protest and still less fear. Why, then, did he choose death?

to hometown without a specific question of law was common at the time.) Even if the emperor were to decree a death sentence, Li did not have to commit suicide because until the execution he could have prepared himself psychologically for the execution. Refer to Yuan Zhongdao, Li Wenling zhuan, *Kexuezhai jinji wenchao*: Appendix, *Fenshu/Xu fenshu*: Xiamen daxue lishixi ed., *ibid.* Vol.1, p. 13. And Lay Huang (Huang Renyou 黃仁宇), *1587, a year of no significance: the Ming dynasty in decline* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

¹¹⁾ Yuan Zhongdao, "Li Wenling zhuan," *Kexuezhai jinji wenchao*: Appendix, *Fenshu/Xu fenshu*: Xiamen daxue lishixi ed., *ibid.*, volume 1, p. 13.

journeys traversing the continent were always made reluctantly and had not stopped until his end since he entered into public office in Henan河南 province in 1555. The longest travel (1595-1600) was caused by a series of threats by the people and a provincial inspector, Shi Jingxian史旌賢 in Macheng麻城. After the longest travel, even fiercer ordeals befell him. Li Zhi's residential monastery since 1589, Zhifoyuan芝佛院 was burnt down by a provincial high official, Feng Yingjing馮應京 (in Longhu龍湖, Macheng, 1600). Li had to flee to his last resting place, Tongzhou通州 (a suburb of Beijing) after a short hiding in Mt. Huangnie黃蘗 (1601). The next year, Li was arrested and faced with the situations described in (A), (B), and (C) (early spring, 1602).

(D) and (E) tell us about the cause of Li Zhi's imprisonment and his attitude toward the situation. Li was accused of disparaging Confucianism in his reading of Chinese history and promiscuous behaviors with prostitutes as well as women of scholar-official families, etc.¹⁴⁾ Nevertheless, Li was still hopeful that the Emperor would clear him of all charges if he would read his works (E). His answer to the prosecutor also reflects the same attitude:

The prosecutor asked, "Why did you write those many delusive books?" Li Zhi replied, "Yes, this criminal has written many books indeed, and they are all in existence and beneficial to the sagely learning [i.e., Confucianism], not harmful at all."

金吾曰, "若何以妄著書?" 公曰, "罪人著書甚多, 具在, 於聖教有益無損。"¹⁵⁾

Since Li Zhi was confident of the contents of his works, he wished that the emperor would read and evaluate them without relying on

¹⁴⁾ Zhang Wenda, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁾ Yuan Zhongdao, *ibid.*: Appendix, *Fenshu/Xu fenshu*: Xiamen daxue lishixi ed., *ibid.*, volume. 1, p. 13.

others' criticism. In this respect, Li Zhi cannot be regarded as doubting the emperor's morality and authority. This is also shown in the last sentence of (F). Li Zhi's scathing criticism of other Confucians, which had been published as the *Fenshu* 焚書 (Book to be burnt), no doubt provoked many scholars. Their resentment and reprisal were to be expected.¹⁶⁾ Although it is still not clear whether or not Li's conflict with Geng Dingxiang 耿定向 (1524-1596, styled tiantai 天臺)¹⁷⁾ directly caused the impeachment by Zhang Wenda, a student of Geng Dingxiang, it is plausible to think that Li's indignant letters to Geng and criticism of him must have embarrassed Geng and his people. Besides, Li's personality and attitude toward other Confucian colleagues might have provoked them:

His humor is narrow and hasty; his face is tinged with pride and arrogance; his words are coarse and mean; his mind is stupid and mad; his behavior is rash and imprudent. He is not fond of company but treats people around him in a friendly and warm manner (as if he means

¹⁶⁾ "Da Jiao Yiyuan 答焦漪園," Shuda, *FS. juan* 1, p. 7.

¹⁷⁾ He was an influential scholar and high official and used to be a patron of Li. For Geng's biography, refer to Julia Ching's article, L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang ed., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) Vol.1, pp. 718-21. Huang Zongxi describes Li Zhi's conflict with Geng as follows:

"Because Li Zhi promoted the "Wild" Chan Buddhism (*kuangchan* 狂禪) and many scholars followed his lead, Geng frequently took what was practical as of chief importance. He made earnest exhortations to correct the evil and avert danger, but he in turn became muddled, half believing and half disbelieving the teachings of Buddha. In the end he could not prevail over Li Zhi. Li developed a hatred for Geng because of the imprisonment (and death) of He Xinyin 何心隱 (1517-1579) Geng was on close terms with Zhang Juzheng 張居正. Li Youzi 李幼滋, who advocated the killing of He Xinyin, was Geng's associate in conducting public discussion (in the independent academies). It certainly would not have been difficult for Geng to have saved He Xinyin at this time, but he did not soil his hands (on He's behalf), lest he violate Zhang Juzheng's prohibition against public discussion by doing so. Geng took "do not permit it to stop" (*burongyi* 不容已) as his basic principle, but in this case how could he stop trying [to save He Xinyin]?" (*Mingru xuean* 35:1a-b) (The translation is from Ronald Dimberg trans., Keng Ting-hsiang (Geng Dingxiang), Julia Ching and Chaoying Fang ed., *ibid.*, p. 192)

to be so]. In the company of others, he likes to find their faults and is not pleased by their excellence: when he does not like others, he cuts relations with them and tries to harm them to the end. His aim is taken at rich life (clothing, house, and food), but he regards himself as (such starved uncompromising patriots as) Baiyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊. His disposition is originally like that of the (shameless) person of the Qi, but he considers himself to be full of Dao and de, (assuming a virtuous air). Obviously he gives others nothing in any case, but he offers an excuse for it by taking such an example as (a man of integrity,) Yi Yin 伊尹 in the Youxin 有莘. Obviously he would not pull out a hair (even if his pulled hair could save the world), but he says that Yang Zhu ruined humanity (ren). He acts contrary to the situations and his words conflict with his heart-mind. Since that is his personality, all villagers hate him. Once upon a time Zigong asked Confucius, "If all villagers hate a man, what can we think of him?" Confucius said, "It is not yet possible to judge him." So then, is it possible to judge this person now?

其性褊急，其色矜高，其詞鄙俗，其心狂癡，其行率易，其交寡而面見親熱。其與人也好求其過而不悅其所長，其惡人也既絕其人又終身欲害其人。志在溫飽，而自謂伯夷、叔齊，質本齊人，而自謂飽道饒德。分明一介不與，而以有莘藉口，分明毫毛不拔，而謂楊朱賊仁。動與物違：口與心違。其人如此鄉人皆惡之矣。昔子貢問夫子曰，“鄉人皆惡之何如？”子曰，“未可也。”若居士其可乎？¹⁸⁾

Even if the above description of Li Zhi by himself was rhetorical, it reflects an aspect of Li Zhi's social life: many people whom Li were on bad terms with or unconsciously ignored and humiliated could have taken revenge.¹⁹⁾ Given the above description regarding his personality,

¹⁸⁾ "Zizan" 自贊 (A self-praise), *Zashu* (Various writings), *FS*, *juan* 3, p. 130. A partial English translation of Li Zhi's writings is available: William Theodore de Bary, *Li Chih: Arch-Individualist, Learning for One's self - Essays on the individual in Neo-Confucian Tradition* (New York: Columbia University press, 1991); Cheang Eng-chew, *Li Chih as a critic: a chapter of the Ming Intellectual history*, University of Washington, PhD thesis, 1973. And a full translation of the *Fenshu* is available in Korean: Kim Hye-Kyung 김혜경, *Bunseo* 분서 I, II (Seoul: Hankilsa, 2004), and a selective translation of the *Fenshu/Xu fenshu* in Korean was also consulted for this study: Hong Seung-Jik 홍승직, *Bunseo* (Seoul: Hongyik chulpansa, 1998) My translation may have many differences from these translations in many respects: however, I will not point them out in detail unless necessary for my arguments.

¹⁹⁾ Li enumerates many people with whom he was inevitably in conflict. See "Gankai pingsheng 感慨平生" (Deep emotion about my whole life), *Yuyue* 豫約 (Li Zhi's will and testament), *Zashu*, *FS*, *juan* 4, p. 187.

Li must have been well aware of the feelings of others toward him. However, in the last part of the passage, Li counsels people to reserve judgment on him by quoting from the Analects. This indicates that Li is sure of his integrity as a Confucian, regardless of others' impression of him. Besides, as we can see in poem (G), Li Zhi thinks highly of the honorable death of Confucian gallants. Although most critics of Li Zhi have asserted that he rejected established Confucian norms and traditions, he never attempted to fundamentally deny Confucian values. However, the examples of Confucian worthies in the poem cannot be understood to mean that Li regards himself as good and the regime as evil and would protest against the latter by a heroic death. Rather, Li's viewpoint on death is greatly influenced by the Buddhism, i.e., that death is not diametrically opposed to life.²⁰ In the Buddhist sense, life and death are not ontologically distinct but are no more than convenient classifiers referring to the continuous cosmic process of aggregation and separation of the four elements (*sida*四大; the four components of "corporeality" (*se*色; form; *rūpa*): earth, water, fire, and wind) as mentioned in (B). Hence, for Li Zhi his suicide may not be a professed heroic action but a spontaneous action as part of a cosmic process:

Life cannot but be followed by death like day cannot but be followed by night. Once we die, we can't be revived, which is just as what passes away can't be reversed. People have no occasion in which they don't want to live (more). However, they can never make their life longer (than given): people have no occasion in which they don't grieve about what has gone away. However, they can never stop (things' passing away) to let them stay. If we can't already make life longer, we'd better not want to live longer: if we can't already prevent things from passing away, we'd better not grieve about them. Thus, I straightforwardly say that we don't have to grieve at death: rather, life is no less than what

²⁰ Refer to Li Zhi's words, "There is originally neither life nor death" (Yuanwu shengsi 原無生死) in a reply letter to Zixin 自信 (?-?). ("Da Zixin 答自信," Guanyin wen 觀音問, Zashu, *FS*, *juan* 4, p. 170.)

we can grieve about. Don't grieve about passing away, but I wish you to grieve about life!

生之必有死也，猶晝之必有夜也。死之不可復生，猶逝之不可復返也。人莫不欲生，然卒不能使之久生；人莫不傷逝，然卒不能止之使勿逝。既不能使之久生，則生可以不欲矣；既不能使之勿逝，則逝可以無傷矣。故吾直謂死不必傷，唯有生乃可傷耳。勿傷逝願傷生也！²¹⁾

If one understands death, Li Zhi says, one would not grieve over it. This may suggest that by his suicide, Li Zhi might have wanted to cast away any sense of attachment to life. Li's idea in the above passage is indeed reminiscent of Chan (Zen) Buddhism and Daoism. Nevertheless, in so far as one is not frightened by such a phase in the cosmic process, his mental achievement can be considered to be parallel with Confucian gallants seen in (G). Elsewhere,²²⁾ Li writes that the best death is that which one voluntarily dies for a great cause, which certainly has a Confucian flavor. However, as seen below, Li regrets that he cannot have such a great death:

I am just an oldster now. Although I want to die the same way as the five examples (the five kinds of great deaths), I cannot make any of them. If it is already impossible for me to die greatly, but a heroic gallant (that I want to be) should not die in a normal way, what kind of death can I have? Given my situation, I can just make a small deal (about my death).²³⁾ It deserves to be called a big deal that which Gongsun Chujiu 公孫杵臼 and Nie Zheng 聶政 made: nevertheless, even they could not already see the right buyers (appreciator) of their deaths (at the moments of their deaths).²⁴⁾ If they did so, how can I (shamefully) die,

²¹⁾ "Shangshi 傷逝" (Grief at passing away), Zashu, *FS*, juan 4, p. 164.

²²⁾ "Wusipian 五死篇" (Five kinds of death), Zashu, *FS*, juan 4, p. 163.

²³⁾ This metaphor of "deal (buying and selling)" comes from the *Lunyu* 9:12 (D. C. Lau, *The Analects*, 9:13): "Zigong said, 'If there is a beautiful gem here, should we keep it in a chest and store it? Or should we seek a good price and sell it?' Confucius said, 'Should sell it, sell it! I am the one who waits for a good price to sell it.'" (子貢曰, "有美玉於斯, 韞匱而藏諸, 求善賈而沽諸?" 子曰, "沽之哉, 沽之哉! 我待賈者也。") "A good price" means the right appreciation of one's idea or vision.

²⁴⁾ Since they decided to die because of their already dead soul mates, they could

lying on the bed although I have to die vainly? In order to search for the right buyer of my death here, I have already left my hometown and sent back my servants. Nevertheless, I do not have anyone to understand me here. Then how should I die without a person to understand me? I know I can't make a big deal. A heroic gallant should not have anything to vent his indignation on. If I can die without a person to understand me, I will die before people who can't understand me, registering my indignation. By this article, I would like to urge people, who appear to know me, not to touch my corpse when they hear of my death and come to see me. This is my solicitation! (My underlines)

第餘老矣。欲如以前五者，又不可得矣。夫如此而死既已不可得，如彼而死又非英雄漢子之所爲。然則將何以死乎？計唯有做些小買賣耳。大買賣如公孫杵臼聶政者，既不見買主來到，則豈可徒死而死於床褥之間乎？且我已離鄉井捐、童僕，直來求買主於此矣。此間既無知己。無知己又何死也？大買賣我知其做不成也。英雄漢子，無所洩怒。既無知己可死，吾將死於不知己者以洩怒也。謹書此以告諸貌稱相知者，聞死來視我，切勿收我屍！是囑。²⁵⁾

Obviously, Li Zhi thinks that his death cannot be a martyrdom which requires a great cause. Moreover, even if he had died exactly as instructed in the above ("death venting his indignation on people who can't understand him"), Li would not have regarded his death as martyrdom or great death. If we try to collectively interpret the above words and his 'peaceful' suicide recorded by Yuan Zhongdao, presumably, Li's suicide may be regarded as a sarcastic performance to indirectly vent his indignation on the worldly discernment between right and wrong and the unfair accusations leveled against him. In doing so, his suicide may have aimed to reveal a real person in pursuit of learning of *Dao*.²⁶⁾

All this is but speculation, of course. But it may be suggested that

neither die in the eyes of their soul mates nor be understood genuinely by others at the time.

²⁵⁾ "Wusipian" (Five kinds of death), *Zashu*, *FS*, *juan* 4, p. 164.

²⁶⁾ Refer to the first quotation in this article, "Yu Yang Dingjian," *Shuda*, *FS*, *juan* 2, pp. 64-65. In this letter, Li Zhi emphasizes "me" as his self which is free of any reputation by others.

Li Zhi's philosophical stance toward death is neither entirely Buddhist nor Confucian although it has been influenced by both of them. This feature of Li's thought relates to the syncretism that prevailed in the Ming dynasty. This requires further discussion.

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< 국문요약 >

이지(호는 탁오, 1527-1602)는 명대 지성사에서 가장 두드러진 인물들 가운데 하나이다. 75세의 나이로 감옥에서 행한 그의 의문의 자살은 철학자로서의 그의 존재를 더욱 신비롭게 만들었다. 당시부터 지금에 이르기까지 그의 자살은 부당한 정부의 체포, 구금에 대한 저항, 나아가 종교적 신념을 위한 순교로까지 해석되어 왔다. 반면에 정부와 그를 혐오하는 사람들은 그의 자살을 사형에 대한 두려움에서 비롯된 비겁한 행위로 폄하하기도 하였다. 이 논문은 그의 제자 원중도가 남긴 이지 마지막 순간의 기록과 이지가 만년에 남긴 인생과 죽음에 대한 기록들을 살펴보고 그의 자살의 사상적 의미를 살펴보려는 시도이다. 이 논문은 그의 죽음에 대한 관점은 불교와 유교로부터 동시에 영향을 받고 있으면서도 그 어느 것에도 정확히 일치하지 않음을 논하며, 그의 죽음은 불교나 유교적 신념을 수호하기 위한 소극적인 정치적 저항, 종교적 순교로 보기에는 무리가 있음을 주장한다. 결론적으로 이지의 자살은 죽음에 대한 의미를 최소화한 상태에서 이루어진 철학적 풍자로 음미할 수 있음을 논의한다.

중심어: 이지(이탁오), 자살, 불교, 유교, 순교, 저항

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