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The Rise of a New Tradition: Changes in Values and Life Styles in Late Ming China

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Abstract Ethics based on Confucian moral virtues and guides as core values have long formed the “old tradition” in determining the direction of China’s social development. Changes of urban residents’ values and corresponding changes in life styles in late Ming Dynasty demonstrated the emergence of a new cultural tradition that advocated for human freedom and the development of individuality, material enjoyment and pleasures in life, and questioned and critiqued Confucian moral virtues and guides. Although such a cultural tradition had not yet matured, its humanist values made deep imprints in that period. This tradition survived despite of the successions of dynasties and vicissitudes of the ages, although from time to time it became so weak as on the verge of extinction. It was this continuous and unceasing cultural progress that later laid the primitive but essential cultural foundation for the start of China’s efforts to achieve modernization after the middle of the 19th century.

Keywords late Ming Dynasty, new tradition, old tradition, humanism, social culture

During the late Ming period (from the middle of the 16th century to the middle of the 17th century), the most profound cultural achievement in Chinese society was the new tradition of humanist values that was forming with ever expanding influence.

Ethics that took Confucian moral virtues and guides as core values formed the “old tradition” that had long been guiding the direction of China’s social development, while the new tradition, which had been taking shape during late Ming Dynasty and was rooted in rapid economic development under a new

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historical condition, had the newly risen stratum of city residents as its basis.¹ This new tradition advocated for the freedom of human nature and the development of individuality, pursued material enjoyment and pleasures in life, questioned and critiqued Confucian moral virtues and guides. In short, humanist values were the essence and soul of this new tradition.

Although this new tradition, which was in continuous existence from late Ming Dynasty to the middle of the 19th century, was not able to fundamentally change the orthodox status of the old tradition, it nonetheless changed the face of society and culture, profoundly influencing the life styles of the time and providing spiritual motivation and intellectual support, through a change in values, for Chinese society to break free from the shackles of Confucian moral virtues and guides. This paper analyzes the new humanist tradition's performance and influence in society and culture during late Ming Dynasty.

“Moral Principles in Inner Quarter” and Changing Views on Women

A change in values always starts from changes in people's perception of their own environments. During the late Ming period, one of the important characteristics of the changes in values in Chinese society was people's sharp recognition of the need to respect individuality. In “Zhi Zhang Youyu zhenming hou” 识张幼于箴名后 (Note on Zhang Youyu's proverb inscriptions), Yuan Hongdao viewed those that dared to break from the shackles of traditional ethics as “etiquette-ignoring people,” similar to “Sima Xiangru who eloped with Zhuo Wenjun, Dongfang Shuo who would act like a vulgar comedian, Cai Zhonglang (Cai Yong) who often lay on street like ‘a drunk dragon’ and Ruan Ji who did not stop eating meat and drinking alcohol while still in the mourning period for his mother.” He called people who would stick to the rules as “the so-called etiquette-abiding people.” Although he considered these two types of people “as different as water from fire,” he emphasized: “they will not laugh at each other's behaviors since they are simply following their personalities.” He raised the

¹ There was an apparent trend of urbanization with the development of the market economy in late Ming Dynasty. For instance, the area of Wujiang County experienced rapid urbanization starting in late Ming, leading to a marked increase of the number of cities and towns and a marked decrease of the number of villages. *Wujiang xianzhi* (Qianlong) said: “During the 300-some years since the start of the Ming Dynasty, population and wealth have both increased due to the daily progress of prosperity in industrial and commercial activities. That is why the three annals have had to revise the number of cities and towns from time to time, while the villages have been shrinking in size and seen their names becoming more vulgar and their number no longer growing.” There are rich reference materials like the above and I will not spend more time dwelling on them since there has been quite some research in this respect.

following point: “Personality cannot be forced to change, and those who follow their personalities are truly honest to themselves. If we force the etiquette-ignoring people to follow etiquette and etiquette-abiding people to ignore etiquette, we would be acting like trying to cut off a crane’s head and put it on a duck’s neck. Would not that be something to lament about?”² This remark demonstrates a fairly distinct respect for individuality.

Generally, changes of social values in a given time tend to begin within the spheres of ethics and moralities. The attention given to physical and psychological needs as well as the social status of women is an important starting place for research into the changing values of late Ming Dynasty. *Wuzazu* 五杂俎 (Five miscellaneous groups), written by Xie Zhaozhe, showed a very obvious tendency to improve the social status of women. In fact, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, quite a few male scholars were angry about the unfair treatment that women received. One of them pointed out: “A woman has to stick to one husband all her life, fearing public gossip about her outside the house and paying meticulous attention to her conduct inside the house. A man can experience ten women without being considered lewd, while a woman will be considered shameful for experiencing two men. Too bad to be born as a woman!”³ There were some men who stood for loosening restrictions on women and allowing women to participate in more social activities.

After the middle of the Ming Dynasty, most often in areas with a more developed economy, more opportunities became available for women to participate in social activities. For instance, in Suzhou, it was very common for women to go sightseeing. In “*Hehua dang*” 荷花荡 (Lotus Flower Lake), Yuan Hongdao talked about the “grand scene of people hanging around”. According to his descriptions, there were more sightseers on June 24th, the day specially designated for touring the Lotus Flower Lake, and women accounted for a large proportion of them. What deserves attention is that Yuan Hongdao showed a certain degree of appreciation in describing men and women sightseeing together rather than denounce it in the capacity of an ethics upholder. In early Qing Dynasty, especially the 18th Century, women and men going out sightseeing together gradually became a remarkable social phenomenon that society paid close attention to.

If a social phenomenon finds widespread reflection in literature, then the generality and social influence of its existence deserves historians’ special attention. During late Ming Dynasty, the reason for the special attention paid to issues about women lies to a large degree in literature’s advocacy for new views about women. Although on surface, many writings during this time would still be

² Yuan Hongdao, 193.

³ Fuci jiaozhu, “Bigeng shanfang zuixihu xinyuezhuren xu,” 3.

under the umbrella of ethics and virtues, they would adopt opposite positions in their descriptions and treatment of specific events, and express agreement with or appreciation of women's pursuit for the freedom to love and seek out sexual pleasures. *Xiuping yuan* 绣屏缘 (Affinity from the embroidery screen) advocated for the free union between men and women and opposed pre-arranged marriage. Although the novel *Zhaoshi bei* 照世盃 (A vase mirrors world affairs) was written during the early Qing Dynasty, it reflects to a large extent people's behaviors and feelings during late Ming Dynasty.

While attaching importance to the issue of marriage, society was not as demanding as it used to be for the chastity of women. In associating with men, women were breaking away from their usual passive roles and becoming more proactive. *Chunmeng suoyan* 春梦琐言 (Random chatting in spring dreams) included a story about the relationship between a man named Han Qi and two women who both seduced him. The novel *Shanshui qing* 山水情 (Love like mountain and water) involved a love story between Wei Cai, a young scholar, and Liao Fan, a nun, in which Liao Fan also takes the initiative. It was because of the breaking away from the traditional ideas about chastity that people tended to sympathize and appreciate courtesans' pursuits of love. Corresponding to the changed views about women's chastity, some celebrities even dared to marry prostitutes. For instance, the marriage between Wu Sangui and Chen Yuanyuan and that between Qian Qianyi and Liu Rushi reflected and confirmed to a certain degree the changing nature of such ideas.

Cohabitation and adultery between young men and women breaking away from the restraints of the established ethical codes were the focus of stories in late Ming Dynasty about urban residents. Such descriptions were also reflected in other forms of literary works. For instance, folk ballads and melodies popular in late Ming Dynasty included many descriptions about how men and women broke through the restraints of the ethical codes and lived together of their own will.

Guazhier 挂枝儿 (Hung the branch) was a type of ballad that emerged during the Wanli Period of the Ming Dynasty and became very popular during the Tianqi and Chongzhen periods. One of the ballads, called "Worrying about Pregnancy," reflected the phenomenon of pregnancy outside of marriage. "Folk Song-Affair" vividly described the spiritual bearing of a woman who boldly pursued sincere love in contempt of the social customs and ethical codes. The ethical tendency reflected in "Folk Song-Catch Adulterers in the Act" was even more remarkable. It said:

The remarks by ancient people do not sound right; how can a pretty girl marry only one man? If Empress Wu Zetian would change the laws of the grand Ming Dynasty, nobody in the world would dare to catch adulterers in the act.⁴

⁴ Feng Menglong, 2005, "Shan'ge" Vol. 1, "Zhuojian zhisan," 352.

It is noteworthy that this folk song was written by a scholar instead of having originated from the common folks. The author was Su Zizhong, a close friend of Feng Menglong.⁵ The fact that a scholar like Su Zizhong was able to produce such a song shocked Feng Menglong, who said: “Zizhong is a scholar with integrity. A person like him even cherishes such whimsical ideas! There is really no boundary for literary minds.”⁶ Obviously, some intellectuals of the Ming Dynasty at least understood these women’s efforts in trying to break through the restraints of ethical codes, and showed respect for, or even appreciation of, women’s efforts in seeking the freedom of their human nature.

With the changes in views about chastity and women, the life styles of women in some areas moved beyond the restraints of traditional ethical norms. In some cases, women even initiated divorce after getting married. Xie Zhaozhe said: “Women residing in the capital have five shortcomings: gluttonous, lazy, cunning, lewd, and dumb. I have seen quite a few officials from other places that have married women from the capital. They all spent all their money to satisfy these women’s stomachs and exhausted themselves to satisfy these women’s desires. When they brought their wives to their hometowns, all the women would seek a divorce by making a scene, and would stir things up among these officials’ family members, including their parents and brothers. You cannot even find one or two out of a thousand that are willing to maintain the family in an economical way.”⁷

Other people of the same time felt the same way. Xu Guangqi once commented: “Nowadays moral principles in inner quarter have faded and women everywhere do not stick to chastity any more. Five of ten reported cases are related to lewd acts.” Believing that such phenomena might be a result of women’s life being too comfortable due to the decline of their activities in raising silk worms and weaving, he commented: “No weaving leads to comforts, comforts lead to lust and lust leads to erosion by men. The consequence is that customs are becoming degenerated day by day.”⁸ The author of *Yunxian xiao* 云仙笑 (Smiles of fairies above clouds) also became aware of the huge difference between the values of chastity advocated for by the mainstream public opinions and the real lives of women. He commented: “Which women do not say they stick to chastity? But how many of them are moral? Catkins fly with the winds and drop on the roadsides, and peach blossoms without owners show their beauty from the other side of the wall. If girls are all as pure as jade, women who keep moral integrity should be worth nothing. May lustful ideas not get into

⁵ Feng Menglong was a famous scholar and writer who wrote quite a few books, including a few that contains independent short stories based on folklores and legends.

⁶ Feng Menglong, “Shan’ge” Vol. 1, “Zhuojian zhisan,” 352.

⁷ Xie Zhaozhe, Vol. 8, “Renbu si,” 152.

⁸ Xu Guangqi, Vol. 31, “Cansang zonglun,” 616.

women's dreams, so that honest norms would prevail over a thousand years."⁹ The author further wrote: "A common saying goes that lust is the worst evil. How come nowadays men will try to get a woman by hook or by crook if she is somewhat pretty. However, the reason for this phenomenon can be attributed to women instead of men since it is women that are seeking men than vice versa."¹⁰ It was the author's prejudice to attribute the affairs between men and women to women only, but the social phenomenon he revealed more or less reflected women's changes in their attitudes about life.

While views about women were changing, women saw a rise in their family status. One important confirmation of this can be found in the widespread phenomenon of men getting increasingly henpecked. Xie Zhaozhe once gave a detailed analysis of the reason for men getting nagged by their women in late Ming Dynasty. He said:

There are three types of henpecked men. The first type consists of those who, together with their wives, were poor initially and then would go through numerous hardships. Once they emerge out of the hardships, they can no longer control their wives. The second type consists of those that, having become deeply attached to their women on pillows and in beds and expressed pledges of everlasting love, love their wives so much as to become afraid of them, or those that so spoil their wives as to become addicted to them. The third type consists of those that are able to find a younger wife only in a later age and the young wife becomes imposing; the world turns upside down and control changes hands. When a woman wants to interfere with the man's power, she will first need to take over his financial interests. Once she gets them, she will be free in issuing orders to subjugate the servants and maids. Then she will be able to learn of the man's whereabouts and all his remarks. When she has reached such a position, the man will have no way out but to accept the status quo.

The less intelligent men are afraid of their wives for their abusive power; the smart men are afraid of their wives for their indulgence in love of them; the poor men are afraid of their wives for dependence on them for a living; the rich men are afraid of their wives for their need to avoid disputes and keep a peaceful life. The ugly wife is feared because she controls the family; a young wife is feared because she intoxicates the man sexually; the wife who has children is feared because she carries the influence; the wife who has no children is feared because she is powerful. It is difficult to find a man who can

⁹ Tianhua zhuren, Vol. 3, "Dujialang nüzhuang jianyinfu, Gengshinü nanban xunfu," 40.

¹⁰ Ibid.

stand up like a man without belonging to these eight categories!¹¹

Xie's analysis appears to be quite comprehensive. However, judging by the deeper level of social changes occurring at the time, the phenomenon of more men getting henpecked was essentially a specific reflection of women's rising status in the family. Such a rise in status in the family was a result of the changed values. It was also closely related with the strengthened role of women in economic life. We have previously said that Xie Zhaozhe remarked that "the poor men are afraid of their wives because they depend on them for a living." Zhang Lüxiang further elucidated women's roles in the commodity economy:

Female workers in the Western Township are weavers of cotton, silk and ramie fiber, while female workers in the East Township engage in farming or raising silk worms or weaving. Female workers of my township mainly engage in weaving cotton and raising silk worms for silk. Depending on where they live, they all generate income to help their husbands. A family will thrive if the female worker works hard; a family will decline if the female worker floats around doing nothing. Women's roles are similar to men's in this situation. What women are engaged in are merely things like ramie or silk, and their work seems to have little to do with the family's wellbeing. However, a hardworking woman can make the family thrive in all aspects while a lazy woman can lead the family to decline in all aspects. Hence the saying: "A poor family needs a wife of virtue and a disaster-stricken country need a prime minister of virtue." If we look at their supportive roles, they in fact play very similar roles.¹²

It was commodity production that had increased women's weight in the welfare of the family and laid an important foundation for the rise of women's social status.

"Behave as They Like": Widespread Lustful and Luxurious Life Styles

Sexual activity forms the foundation of human beings' social life and further influences the whole system of culture development. Bronislaw Malinowski points out in his book, *The Sexual Life of Savages*, that sex in its broadest sense is the motivating force for society and culture instead of merely being the

¹¹ Xie Zhaozhe, Vol. 8, "Renbu si," 153.

¹² Zhang Lüxiang, Vol. 50, 1426.

physical relationship between the two genders.¹³ This remark may not be entirely accurate, but there are still sufficient arguments supporting it. The most important distinction of human beings' sexual life from animals' sexual life lies in its rich and systematic cultural connotation. It is true that in human sexual life, the physiological needs, including the pursuit of happiness and the need for reproduction, are the important foundation, but it has been influenced or even restricted to a large extent by a variety of factors, such as values, social norms and customs, social systems and social traditions. We can find ample evidence to support this argument even in the so-called savages' sexual life as investigated by Malinowski. It turns out that sexual life not only influences culture, it is also a basic ingredient of culture. People's changes in views about sexual life in different times embody a vivid and specific aspect of a changing society.

An important feature of the urban residents' life during late Ming Dynasty was that the sexual values and sexual life of those living in the developed areas (including some rural residents) showed a trend of becoming increasingly open and unrestricted. "Lust and luxury" was even more prevalent to the south of the Yangtze River, which boasted of a more developed economy than other areas. Someone made the following comments: "A luxurious and lustful life was more obvious in south of the Yangtze River since people in poverty cannot afford to live in luxury and there is no need to ban luxury from them. But lust is too rampant. In Suzhou, Songjiang, Hangzhou and Jiashan, it is as bad as in Zheng and Wei in ancient times."¹⁴ ... Suzhou is the most luxurious place and therefore its lustfulness is more distinctive than that in other places."¹⁵

In the cultural history of values of Ming and Qing dynasties, the emergence and spread of urban residents' stories had landmark significance since they demonstrated, by their vivid languages and exaggerated plots, the gradual emergence of humanist ideas in traditional Chinese society and the evolution of the value system, underpinned by ethical codes, towards respect for humanist freedom and towards a meaningful expression of people's individuality. Sexual love, as the major desire of human beings, inevitably became the first goal to be attained through the new values and the number one subject for urban residents' stories. The plots of these stories might not have been true, but the value orientation and social customs they reflected contained true social elements and were set on an accurate historical foundation.

Many urban stories in late Ming Dynasty were "devoted to descriptions of sexual activities" and catered to urban residents' taste by giving elaborate

¹³ Malinowski, 6.

¹⁴ Zheng and Wei refer to two states that were notorious for their lustful life styles during the Spring and Autumn Period.

¹⁵ Anonymous, 2000, "Yiguai yanqian zhi e'nie, liang tiemian lidi kuanglan," 304–305.

descriptions of sexual activities. On the one hand, they vividly and artistically demonstrated the changes of social culture. On the other hand, they influenced the thought, values and life styles of people at that time. *Rouputuan* 肉蒲团 (The flesh cushion), written during early Qing Dynasty, may be regarded as a representative work of urban literature. Seen by today's criteria, it embodies much lower tastes than *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅 (The plum in the golden vase) and is a pornographic book purely devoted to sexual descriptions. From the very beginning, the author tried to defend his motives for writing this book. It is thought provoking that even in the grandiose preface, the author could not help trying to show his affirmative attitude for human beings' sexual love. Based on such an attitude and the detailed description of the sexual life, it is easy to draw a conclusion that *Rouputuan* is a "pornographic book" meant for urban residents. In fact, most of the love stories in late Ming Dynasty were under the flag of "mortal teaching," but actually it was undisguised pornography. *Rouputuan* was merely one of them. *Shandian chuang* 闪电窗 (Lightening window), also written during late Ming Dynasty, vividly reflected the phenomena of intellectuals throwing away their puritan clothes in pursuit of satisfaction of their desires during late Ming Dynasty through a story about a few scholars seeking carnal pleasures during their trip to the imperial examinations. This book can be regarded as a vivid reflection of the morality and value pursuit of intellectuals of late Ming Dynasty.

What deserves special attention from researchers is that the morality, taste and values reflected by the urban stories had a decent market share in late Ming Dynasty and deeply influenced the life styles of the time. *Renpu leiji* 人谱类记 (Assorted stories of different people), written by Liu Zongzhou, carried some orthodox people's comments on urban stories that showed how popular the urban stories were at the time: "The disastrous writings of current times contain all sorts of weird things. Writers often create love stories based on pornographic descriptions so that readers will get addicted and become degenerate. Their purpose of doing so is merely to make a few pennies. People with sound judgment will certainly know that these stories are merely mirages and illusions. However, there are fewer intelligent people, but more ordinary people who are easily influenced by what is prevalent. These people, upon seeing that the smart scholars and writers have openly put these sexual activities in writing and make them known to the world, will think that these private sexual activities may be appreciated by smart scholars and writers. Therefore, although they used to be extremely cautious due to their original good conscience, they are now sexually too bold without feeling bound by any restraints. As for boys and girls, despite their immature bodies, they will inevitably want to eat the forbidden fruit and then be willing to give up their lives for sexual pleasures, resulting in their self destruction at least, or even destruction of their families. Alas! Who are to be

blamed for their downfall?" Liu criticized the urban stories as "driving ordinary people to behave like animals" and as "more damaging to people's minds than anything else in the world."¹⁶

However, human beings' affection for sex and pursuit for love could not be stopped by the strict demands of orthodox people. Urban stories became extremely popular because of their reflection of people's pursuit of freedom of human nature. For instance, *Jinpingmei* was popular for a long time during the Ming and Qing dynasties. *Chunmeng suoyan*, a legendary story written in classical Chinese, describes the story of Han Qi, a scholar, and Sister Li, a witch, and Madam Cherry-Apple, seeking carnal pleasures together. Its vivid descriptions of sexual acts went to the minutest details and were highly appreciated by people of the time. Apparently, with the changes of social environments, people's pursuits of sexual satisfaction had far exceeded those of previous times, and obscured and monotonous descriptions of sexual acts could no longer satisfy people's psychological needs, which was exactly the reason for the springing up and popularity of stories like *Chunmeng suoyan* devoted to sexual descriptions. From these books, researchers can not only estimate the authors' value orientation, but also that of the readers.

Related to these urban stories, folk ballads also became very popular. Because of their distinctive deviation from orthodox ethical codes, the ballads of late Ming Dynasty have drawn the attention of researchers. Yuan Hongdao said: "Current poems and articles will not go down in history. What may be handed down in history may be songs sung by women and children, such as *Bopoyu* 擘破玉 (Cut open the jade) and *Dacaogan* 打草竿 (Sticks for hitting the straws), because these were genuine songs written by genuine people without previous knowledge or learning. These people do not copy from the Han and Wei dynasties or learn from the Tang Dynasty, and therefore can create original songs out of their genuine nature that will appeal to people's emotions and desires, which is indeed worth cheering."¹⁷ The so-called "original songs out of their genuine nature that will appeal to people's emotions and desires" fully reflected urban residents' feelings and value pursuits.

Votaries such as monks and nuns are assumed to be abstinent, secluded from immoral life. But their physiological needs received a high degree of attention. Thus we see the fact that many people would look at and try to understand votaries' mental world from a worldly person's eyes and vigorously play up their sexual passion and their thirst for the satisfaction of their sexual desires, which led to their "secularization." Such phenomena found expression in literature, and many books were fond of describing how monks, nuns and Taoists engaged in

¹⁶ Liu Zongzhou, "Zibu," Vol. 717, 234–235.

¹⁷ Yuan Hongdao, "Jinfan ji," Vol. 2, "Xu xiaoxiu shi," 188.

secret love affairs with others in disregard of “restrictions and fetters.”

In fact, during late Ming Dynasty, many urban residents broke through the restrictions of ethical taboos and underwent major changes in their attitudes about life due to their care for sexual desires, resulting in their advocacy for the principle of “pleasures first” instead of the traditional principle of “ethics first.” It was such changes that led to the gradual spread of the “luxurious and lustful” trend during late Ming Dynasty, as can be seen from the following aspects:

First, the sex industry became prosperous. This was a major scene of the late Ming society. Someone lamented: “Prostitutes are all over the country now, with their numbers in the thousands in major cities and their existence found even in poor prefectures and remote towns. Leaning against the doors, they will present a big smile and make a living by selling their bodies... the brothels of the two capitals¹⁸ were taxed by the government and the taxes are called ‘powder money.’ Prostitutes that belong to prefectures or counties are called musical households and are on call from the government. Both the Tang and Song dynasties would use official prostitutes to serve drinks. Such practice lasted to the initial period of our dynasty and was not prohibited until the early Xuande Period. However, the prohibition does not apply to the gentry’s households, which is why prostitution is still prevalent in non-government places, although it is no longer found in government halls. Another group of prostitutes do not belong to the government. They simply stay at home engaging in prostitution and are called ‘the indigenous prostitutes.’ People also commonly call them ‘private nests’ and there are indeed numbers of them.”¹⁹ The prosperity of sex industry showed to a large degree that, with the changes in the social values, the body (sex) as a commodity had been well received upon entering the market.

Secondly, pornographic paintings and pornographic story books became popular. There is a wealth of reference materials about the spread of pornographic pictures and pornographic stories and academia has engaged discussions about them. For example, the relevant descriptions of *Rouputuan*, written a little later, show that pornographic pictures and pornographic story books were not only accessible for purchase at art stores or bookstores, they were, in fact, influencing people’s ordinary lives.

Thirdly, literature was paying attention to promiscuity. Promiscuity had existed in all previous dynasties. However, because of its gross distortion of normal human relationships, it had rarely been reflected in literature. The vivid and specific descriptions of promiscuity in literature started after the middle of the Ming Dynasty. There was no lack of descriptions of indiscriminate promiscuous

¹⁸ The Ming Dynasty had two capitals, one was the Northern Capital and the other was the Southern Capital. The Southern Capital had “shadow” government agencies, but no real power.

¹⁹ Xie Zhaozhe, Vol. 8, “Renbu si,” 163.

intercourses and incest in *Xiuta yeshi* 绣榻野史 (The unofficial history of embroidered beds), *Yiqing zhen* 怡情阵 (Pleasure position) which was adapted after the former, *Chipozi zhuan* 痴婆子传 (The biography of an infatuate woman) and “Sanyan erpai” 三言二拍 (The three short story collections by Feng Menglong and two surprising story collections by Ling Mengchu), and these activities were carried out “indiscriminate of the subjects’ relationships with each other, their ages, their social statuses, and whether they are votaries or not votaries. These people only know carnal pleasures in disregard of ethical codes and without any sense of shame.”²⁰ For instance, Shangguan A’na, the heroine in *Chipozi zhuan*, engaged in incest in disregard for moral decency after she initially had intercourse at an early age. The springing up of descriptions of promiscuity in the novels and stories of the Ming Dynasty and the writers’ fondness of writing about the details of sexual activities actually reflected the social reality that, with the emergence and growth of the society of urban residents, the supremacy of pleasures in life had been recognized by many people.

Fourthly, homosexuality became widespread. Homosexuality is not special within China, nor did it exist only in the Ming Dynasty. However, during the middle and later stages of the Ming Dynasty, homosexuality increasingly drew people’s attention. *Wu zazu*, written by Xie Zhaozhe contains many descriptions about gay people. Shen Defu’s *Wanli yehuo bian* 万历野获编 (The collection of unofficial findings for Wanli Period) gives a detailed description of homosexuality of late Ming Dynasty, which shows that homosexuality, whether in the lower classes or in upper classes, whether in the central cities or the border areas, had become an eye-catching social phenomenon.

It is noteworthy that the authors usually expressed understanding of homosexuality from the angle of human beings’ natural needs and acknowledged the rationality and necessity of gay peoples’ existence. This proves that the intellectuals of that time, instead of using the orthodox ethical standards, adopted a more humanist set of criteria that respected the natural and emotional needs of human beings in the judgment of some unorthodox social phenomena.

An all-around expression of homosexuality in literature started in the Ming Dynasty. Pornographic stories of the middle and late Ming Dynasty gave large sections to the descriptions of homosexuals’ lives and people would not feel surprised when seeing things related to homosexuals. During this time there also emerged a novel about homosexuals called *Bian er chai* 弁而钗 (Crossing gender). What is noteworthy is that different from prevailing views, *Bian er chai* exhibited an appreciation for homosexuality, and not only accepted the love between homosexuals, but also applauded it. This book consists of sections under the names such as “Virtuous Love,” “Chivalrous Love,” “Intense Love” and “Wonderful

²⁰ Anonymous, *Chipozi zhuan*, preface.

Love” and described tasteful love stories between homosexuals, which embodied the author’s contemplation about homosexual love and his longing for it.

Yichun xiangzhi 宜春香质 (Fragrant body appropriate for spring) is a collection of stories about gay people. It consists of four volumes: wind, flowers, snow and moon, which is quite unique among pornographic stories of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The author studied homosexuality from a different angle and emphasized the significance of affections in homosexual love. It claims: “Those who are so superior will forget about affection, and those who are inferior will not find affection. Affection is only concentrated in people like us.”²¹

The increase of literary descriptions about homosexual stories originated from the social phenomenon that homosexuality was getting increasingly widespread, the evidence of which can be found in other sources of reference materials. For instance, many descriptions of homosexuality appeared in folk ballads of this time. Generally, folk ballads should be a direct reflection of real life. *Guazhier*, compiled by Feng Menglong, contains one ballad named “Nanfeng” 男风 (Gays). Feng commented: “The book *Suwen* 素问 (Daily dialogue)²² touched on the topic of gay people, reflecting a time-honored tradition. However, ‘Polao’ 破老 (Denigrate the gentleman) and ‘Poshe’ 破舌 (Block the suggestion) each specified restrictions for either men or women, and did not deal with men and women as one category.”²³ In recent years, rumor has it that some women can also serve as male prostitutes, which is really strange. It happens that a whoremaster, in talking about his writing entitled ‘Furen zicheng yue xiaotong’ 夫人自称曰小童 (A madam claims herself to be a boy), said at the very beginning that ‘If the madam uses this name for herself, then we can tell what her husband may like.’ This may serve as a laughingstock.”²⁴

In short, the landmark feature, also the most basic feature, of the changes in social values taking place during late Ming Dynasty was their penetration of the desire-suppressing ethical codes and release of people’s basic desires, particularly sexual desires. The new tradition sought the freedom of human nature, valued pleasures in life (particularly in sex) and advocated for the pleasures of sensory organs. In specific times, to seek bodily pleasures and treasure the instinctive needs may serve as a powerful weapon to break through the restrictions of ethical codes and as an effective means to lift human beings out of irrational suppression and inhibition. However, freedom of individuality is

²¹ Zuixihu xinyue zhuren, “Shufangnei mingxiu zhandao, wotashang andu chencang,” 611.

²² *Suwen* is a book that is said to be a record of the dialogue between Emperor Huang and Qi Bo during the earliest recorded Chinese history.

²³ The phrases of “polao” and “poshe” are from *Yizhou shu* 逸周书 (Remainder of the Zhou Dynasty Documents), emphasizing the damage to king’s power by good-looking men and women, who might block the correct advices from senior officials.

²⁴ Feng Menglong, “Guazhier · Xibu · Nanfeng,” 166.

neither equal to abandonment of the most essential moral defense, nor equal to uncontrolled indulgence in sensual pleasures. The sexual indulgence demonstrated by the urban residents of late Ming Dynasty demonstrated new social culture. Although it was very destructive to the old tradition and old system during the time of its birth, it was not perfect and had not yet established a new set of moral norms that could endure the test of time and become acceptable to most members of society. In fact, regarding social morality and life styles, it has been an emphatically explored but not well-resolved complex social issue from late Ming Dynasty, through the Qing Dynasty to present day, how to find a reasonable link between the ideal and reality, tradition and transformation, freedom and norms, desires and ethical codes, and to build a moral system that can better achieve the freedom of individuality without violating the bottom line of the most essential ethical standards of human beings.

“Only Wealth is Considered” and the Affection for Luxury

The pursuit of profit existed in every dynasty and there was nothing surprising about this. However, such a pursuit had pushed to the forefront with the economic development of late Ming Dynasty. Of course, the prevalence of such pursuit and the affection for luxuries absorbed some new elements. That is, with people participating in the market in pursuit of wealth, the traditional class divisions of scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants were blurred and there were more and more associations between scholars, bureaucrats and merchants.

Improved social mobility and closer associations between scholars and bureaucrats on one side and merchants on the other would inevitably bring new elements to social culture, which found the most noteworthy expression in the changes of people's opinions about wealth and the changes in preference for luxury or frugality in late Ming Dynasty.

During late Ming Dynasty, some orthodox people contended that the pursuit of wealth and luxury was becoming a serious social problem and constituted a threat to the orthodox status of Confucianism. They commented that: “there are more people loving profits than loving women, more people loving women than loving liquor, more people loving liquor than loving chess, and more people loving chess than loving books.”²⁵ Wei Xiangshu, who had personally experienced the profound changes during the transformation from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty, lamented: “In all officials' families, I have seen that the grandfather will go after money frantically in order to grab enough for future generations of his offspring, while his offspring will spend the money like water

²⁵ Xie Zhaozhe, Vol. 13, “Shibu yi,” 272.

and bring disasters to their families between the twinkling of an eye.”²⁶ His remark depicted a true picture of the social practice of late Ming Dynasty.

To seek wealth, people of that time were able to abandon chastity and the most essential ethics. “Nowadays cheating is so prevalent among people that it has even found its way between father and son and between brothers. Anyone who does not hold firm may be cheated.”²⁷

The frantic pursuit for wealth and profits was causing people to lose some basic human virtues. The novel *Zhaoshi bei* described how Old Man Mu tried to make a fortune by digging into a manure pit. In this story, the author specifically mentioned the fact that Old Man Mu did not even have time to handle his son’s disappearance in his hot pursuit of wealth. “Old Man Mu’s love for his son had been replaced by his love for money and of course money was more important for him than his son was.” Not only did he treat his son as less important than money, his own health was also less important than money. To seek wealth, he “did not wash his face or rinse his mouth and did not bother about what to wear to keep warm or cool, or what to eat when hungry, to the point of treating his own body like a dead log or wood ashes.... Since he did not care for his own health, he was not taking his life seriously; if he was not taking his own life seriously, how could he take his son seriously? That is why thoughts of his son had never come into his mind during his busy day.”²⁸

The pursuit for money influenced the traditional order of social classes. People of that time commented: “Nowadays the classes have been completely mixed up. In deciding on a marriage, people only consider wealth. Some upstarts who originated as servants can get married to distinguished upper class families.” With wealth instead of classes becoming the major criterion of social status, “So many masters’ families have declined to succumb to the offspring of their former servants.”²⁹ In relationships between family members, money also influenced their individual status in the family. An author commented: “I have seen someone marry a girl from a wealthy family. Arrogant, voluptuous and headstrong, the wife often jeers her husband’s family for its poverty. She definitely wants to live in luxurious magnificence regardless of costs in order to be superior to others in life style. I have never heard of her being filial to her parents-in-laws, trying to befriend her sister-in-laws, showing respect for scholars and friends, or giving benefits to the servants or maids.”³⁰

The purpose of seeking money was to enjoy life. An important feature of late Ming Dynasty was that the society was becoming increasingly luxurious. In

²⁶ Wei Xiangshu, Vol. 10, “Da jinfu Liu Mianzhi,” 505.

²⁷ Zhang Lǔxiang, Vol. 27, “Yuanxue ji er,” 739.

²⁸ Zhuoxuanting zhuren ed., Vol. 4, “Jue xinkeng qiangui cheng caizhu,” 70.

²⁹ Xie Zhaozhe, Vol. 14, “Shibu er,” 301.

³⁰ Ibid., Vol. 13, “Shibu yi,” 268.

“Gong Weichang” 龚惟长先生 (Mr. Gong Weichang), Yuan Hongdao praised the saying of “five pleasures” of human life:

There are five true pleasures and one has to know them all. Your eyes are seeing the most beautiful women in the world, your ears are listening to the most lovely music in the world, your body is taking in the most delicious food in the world, and you are talking about the most refined topics in the world. All these are considered as one pleasure in life. There are big tripods (鼎) in front of the mansion,³¹ and there are musical troupes playing in the backyard of the mansion, there are guests filled around the banquet tables, there are men and women sitting together, the fragrance from the burning candles reach the sky and a lot of jewelry drops to the floor. If the money is not enough to cover the expenses, the land will be sold to keep up the supply. These are considered the second pleasure. There are tens of thousands of rare and wonderful books in the bookcases and there is a small building next to the mansion, and a dozen or more truly good friends are invited there, and one of them is then picked up as the head of the group for his superior insights and experiences like those of Sima Qian, Luo Guanzhong or Guan Hanqing and he will assign each person a job of writing a book that will stand in sharp contrast to the shallow views of petty scholars of the distant Tang and Song dynasties and complete the uncompleted tasks for this dynasty. These are the third pleasure. To buy a boat for ten thousand pieces of gold, put a band and a few prostitutes and/or concubines on the boat, with a few carefree friends on the boat, and take the boat as a home without knowing the coming of old age. This is the fourth pleasure. However, if a person has enjoyed life to such an extent, he will have used up all his wealth and lands. He will then be in an embarrassing situation and cannot make ends meet even for a day. Then he will have to beg for food from musical prostitutes' halls or share food from old persons' plates. He will then have no sense of shame at all even in front of his fellow villagers. This is the fifth pleasure. A scholar needs only one of the pleasures to live up to his dream and die an immortal.³²

Yuan Hongdao's remark about the “five pleasures” in life was obviously advocacy for making merry while you can, which was completely the opposite to the traditional value for frugality and suppression of desires.

The prevalence of luxury was most serious in Southwest China. Zhang

³¹ A wealthy and thriving family would have so many family members that the tripods would need to be used as food containers to serve them. Therefore, tripods were considered a symbol of prosperity of a family.

³² Yuan Hongdao, “Jinfan ji,” Vol. 3, “Gong Weichang xiansheng,” 205–206.

Lüxiang talked specifically about this: “During the Chongzhen Period, customs in Songjiang were most luxuriously oriented. Those who had just passed the imperial examination to become an imperial scholar would buy dozens of *mu*³³ of land, a few big houses and hundreds of servants and maids, and live like a king. Lives of those who had been an official for years and who inherited their families’ salaries were undoubtedly even more luxurious. The other areas of the Three Wu region could not match Songjiang in this aspect.”³⁴ *Chaozhou fuzhi* 潮州府志 (Chaozhou Prefecture gazetteer) compiled in the Jiajing Period summarized the changes of customs for Chaozhou Prefecture during late Ming Dynasty:

The rise of the Ming Dynasty ushered in a new era for the booming of education and scholars gradually began to grasp the gist of the idealist philosophy of the Song Dynasty, which resulted in their widespread use of etiquettes established by Zhu Xi for his family. So it (Chaozhou Prefecture) was called the hometown of Confucius and Mencius at the seaside. However, in today’s Chaozhou Prefecture, scholars brag about their scholarly honors or official ranks, merchants focus on their pursuit of wealth, artisans focus on ingenious and impractical skills, and farmers are lazy and in neglect of their work. As for ordinary people, they take it for granted to cremate bodies and believe in Buddhism, and also take it easy to risk their lives or start a lawsuit. Therefore, the customs are no longer like those from the hometown of Confucius and Mencius.³⁵

Even in some inner areas, similar changes emerged. For instance, in Ji’an, Jiangxi Province, “with the city becoming more and more populous, customs have gradually become flamboyant and vainglorious.” “The lands cannot support the population and in recent years, resources have become depleted, which is also a result of the customs becoming more luxurious and vainglorious.”³⁶ Yuan Hongdao said: “In July and August, almost every family in the capital raises crickets. Whenever I went to the suburbs, I would see young men or boys gather among bushes, walking here and there with their ears up and looking lost in something. Whenever they heard the sound of good crickets, even though it might come from dirty restrooms or dilapidated walls, they would sprint or jump toward it, just like a greedy cat catching the sight of a mouse. There were pottery jugs and mud pots³⁷ everywhere. All people, regardless of their ages and gender,

³³ *Mu* is a Chinese measuring unit about one sixth of an acre.

³⁴ Zhang Lüxiang, Vol. 38, “Jinjian,” 1035.

³⁵ “Chaozhou fuzhi” (Jiajing), Vol. 8, “Fu fengsu kao,” 287.

³⁶ “Ji’an fuzhi” (Wanli), Vol. 11, “Fengtu zhi,” 173.

³⁷ These were containers for crickets.

picked up cricket fighting for fun.”³⁸ Scholars, as the social elite under the influence of these new customs of luxury, were also getting accustomed to such trends. Wu Weiye said: “I often feel sorry for the current custom of scholars drinking liquor and gambling whenever they get together.”³⁹ It was difficult to find a scholar that could merge himself in Confucian doctrines. Zhang Lüxiang said: “Hangzhou lacks the foundation for education and Jiaxing likes flamboyance. Is not it hard for a scholar living in such environment to improve his reputation and integrity and his children’s future?”⁴⁰ When talking about the school education during the transitional period from the Ming to the Qing, Lu Shiyi of early Qing Dynasty sighed: “In ancient times, children would go to elementary school at eight and go to college at 15. This was the right way to go. However, ancient people had a simple heart and pure and honest customs. At that time, when the children were eight years old, they had not opened their minds yet. But the mentality and customs of today’s people can never match those of ancient times. Children at five or six years old are already tempted by the world around them. They will need to wait another two years to attend to elementary school and even if their fathers and the teachers are strict with them, it is already difficult for the children to change their absorbed ideas, let alone the fact that the teaching methods may not necessarily conform to the ancient teaching methods.”⁴¹ This remark vividly reflects the impact of new customs on the orthodox Confucian education.

“The Severe Degeneration of Confucianism” and the Formation of Anti-orthodox Thought

Changes in social values, when reflected in the theoretical and academic domains, will find concentrated expression in the formation of systematic social thinking. During the middle and late Ming Dynasty, Chinese society, although not in the enlightenment period yet, saw the emergence of theoretical achievements brought about by the considerable accumulation of new values. In the ideological domain, strong antagonistic emotion prevailed against Neo-Confucianism and constituted a serious challenge to the orthodox idealist philosophy and ethical codes advocated by the Cheng-Zhu School. Scholars with rebellious ideas “could mostly fight the dragon with bare hands” and “could no longer bear to be restrained by orthodox doctrines.”⁴² Orthodox idealist philosophers all lamented

³⁸ Yuan Hongdao, “Pinghuazhai ji,” Vol. 8, “Chu cuzhi,” 727.

³⁹ Wu Weiye, Vol. 37, “Wang Fengchang yanke qishi xu,” 781.

⁴⁰ Zhang Lüxiang, Vol. 48, “Xunzi yu xia,” 1378.

⁴¹ Lu Shiyi, Vol. 1, 1.

⁴² Huang Zongxi, Vol. 32, “Taizhou xue’an yi · Xu,” 703.

(about Wang's teachings) that "the lowly ideas have become widespread and vile people behave unscrupulously;" "Confucianism has declined and orthodox philosophy has become more and more eclipsed,"⁴³ "Heresies are prevailing unobstructedly and people's value systems have been turned upside down."⁴⁴ The situation was such that some people felt sad that "education has stopped and the orthodox tradition has been eclipsed."⁴⁵ *Sikuquanshu zongmu* 四库全书总目 (The general catalogue of the Imperial Collection of the Four Categories) said: "Since the reign of Emperor Wanli, whimsical ideas have become rampant at the expense of Confucianism, and people no longer study the ancient classics."⁴⁶ This remark vividly reflects the turbulent and uneasy general mentality of academia. He Xinyin and Li Zhi can be regarded as two outstanding representatives of the anti-orthodox intellectuals. Their unique views about society and their academic opinions are the theoretical achievements of the changes of values in that period, and represent the summit of freethinking during late Ming Dynasty.

As a disciple of Yan Jun, an outstanding representative of the Taizhou School of thought, He Xinyin opposed the traditional advocacy for the upholding of the "heavenly principle" and suppression of desires and confirmed the justifiability for human beings to have basic desires. Such opinions are the most unique part of his ideas. He unambiguously questioned the advocacy for the elimination of desires as proposed by the Cheng's brothers and Zhu Xi. In his opinion, it was impossible for people to have no desires, or in his words, "the mind cannot be free of desires." What he proposed was reduced desires. He pointed out: "Human nature leads to love of delicious foods, to sexual desires, to love of music, and to affection for leisure. These come from human nature."⁴⁷ This was an affirmation of the justifiability of the basic desires of human beings from the angle of Confucianism. He said again: "Reduced desires are intended to satisfy human nature. To satisfy human nature is equivalent to satisfying the nature of Heaven. Therefore, human nature goes after the natural love for delicious food, the natural desires for beauty, the natural love for music, and the natural affection for leisure and comforts. Are these like the indulgence in sex, music and leisure and comforts by those with too many desires? A gentleman satisfies his human nature given by his destiny because his human nature cannot be separated from his destiny. Destiny defines the relationship between father and son, and between emperor and subjects. It also defines the virtuous people and the heavenly way. Destiny supersedes the desires carried by human nature. Therefore, a gentleman

⁴³ Ibid., "Shishuo · Luo Nianan Hongxian," 12.

⁴⁴ Aina jushi, 103.

⁴⁵ Chen Que, Vol. 16, "Daxue biansan. Da Zhang Kaofu shu," 603.

⁴⁶ Yong Rong et al., Vol. 123, "Shaoshi shanfang bicong zhengji," 1064.

⁴⁷ Rong Zhaozu ed., Vol. 2, "Guayu," 40.

takes on a destiny that supersedes human nature as his destiny and controls his desires brought out by human nature. In this way, destiny will achieve its goal and will not get degenerated. Anyone that has desires but exercises appropriate controls over them to reach harmony with them will not aim at satisfying too many desires. Is not this an example of reduced desires? Reduced desires are for the satisfaction of one's destiny."⁴⁸ It can be seen that his basic ideas about ethics, which opposed to the elimination of desires, advocated for reduced desires and emphasized "appropriate controls over them to reach harmony with his desires," constituted the important value foundation of his opinions about society. It is easy to see their strong realistic orientation in pursuit of independent values against the broader social environments of the commodity economy and the changes of values during middle and late Ming Dynasty.

While opposing the ascetic ideas of the Confucian scholars of the Song Dynasty, He Xinyin developed unique ideas about the relationships between social organizations: he wanted to realize his social ideal by establishing "associations." He emphasized the necessity for people to "lead associations and utilize their homes for the associations, which is the right use of gentlemen and their homes and the right way for gentlemen to reveal or hide their identity as scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants, and hide themselves and their homes in these associations."⁴⁹ His "associations" consisted of members from a broad spectrum of social classes, such as scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants. These members did not enjoy equal statuses in the associations. "Merchants are superior to farmers and artisans, scholars are superior to merchants and saints are superior to scholars." "Farmers and artisans that want to be in charge of themselves have to be controlled by merchants; merchants that want to be in charge of themselves have to be controlled by scholars."⁵⁰ In other words, "associations" were special social organizations that contained all strata of society and were led by the intellectual elite.

He Xinyin's ideas about society received strong opposition from orthodox people. Pu Bingquan of late Ming Dynasty denounced him: "He Xinyin's neo-Confucianism is a completely fake, and is a traitor to morality and a monster for Confucianism."⁵¹ What is more, He Xinyin was not merely a thinker and he put his ideas to practice with determination. Huang Zongxi said: "In the capital, Xinyin opened a variety of guild halls and recruited people from all over the country, including people in folk medicine and other lowly skills."⁵² He gathered many disciples through giving lectures, "traveled across the country and bragged

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., Vol. 2, "Yuhui," 29.

⁵⁰ Ibid., Vol. 3, "Da zuozhu," 53–54.

⁵¹ Pu Bingquan, Vol. 9, "Yousixuan qinghua," 136.

⁵² Huang Zongxi, Vol. 32, "Taizhou xue'an yi," 704.

about, thinking he would be able to succeed in his way forever. Students from the provincial imperial schools, the Imperial College and young ruffians would all gather around him and admire him.”⁵³ During the reign of Emperor Wanli, he was said to have changed his name repeatedly, hidden himself in different places across the country and seized unaccountable wealth through intimidation.” His followers included a person named Lü Guang, who was strong enough to fight many people on his own and was willing to risk his own life for Xinyin as a loyal friend. He also went to the region of Dong nationality to agitate people there by demagoguery and taught military tactics to the chiefs there.”⁵⁴ *Wanli yehuo bian* said he “gathered disciples and criticized the government’s policies.”⁵⁵ Such “associations” would inevitably cause worries in the ruling class because He Xinyin “would use lectures as a means to gather gallant people and then use gallant people for his own greed and tyranny.” “Those who were determined to follow him would gather together to promote him and cover for him when needed. They would gather and disperse at lightening speeds, causing concern since they were reminiscent of the rebels of the Yellow Headscarves Army and the Five-Dou-of-Rice Society.”⁵⁶ Pu Bingquan said: “He Xinyin was indeed an outstanding hero among the vile characters. If Zhang Jiangling had not informed about his crafty schemes and gotten him beheaded, his evil influence would have spread forever.”⁵⁷ That was why He Xinyin got killed, because he disturbed the existing ruling order.

The person that wielded the greatest influence among the unorthodox thinkers after He Xinyin during late Ming Dynasty was Li Zhi, who was an important admirer of He Xinyin and wrote an article named “He Xinyin lun” 何心隱論 (On He Xinyin) to voice grievances for him. In his article “Yu Jiao Yiyuan Taishi” 与焦漪园太史 (To Court Historian Jiao Yiyuan), he highly valued He Xinyin’s article and personal integrity, saying: “When I read his articles, I can imagine his personality. His articles are so wonderful. Not a single word had been copied from previous authors and nothing like them has existed before. They flow powerfully like torrents down the river and are complete and comprehensive with all details. I cannot imagine any reader that will not be touched by his articles.”⁵⁸

In late Ming Dynasty, Li Zhi was a heroic anti-orthodox fighter and attracted

⁵³ Wang Shizhen, 1998, 703–704.

⁵⁴ Wang Shizhen, 1982, Vol. 10, “Heyan weidaoxue,” 233, 234.

⁵⁵ Shen Defu, Vol. 18, “Daxia dunmian,” 480.

⁵⁶ Wang Shizhen, 1998, 702–703. Five-Dou-of-Rice Society was a society organized during the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Anyone that would contribute five *dou* of rice (*dou* was a measurement unit roughly equal to 10 liters) would be eligible to join the society.

⁵⁷ Pu Bingquan, Vol. 9, “Yousixuan qinghua,” 136.

⁵⁸ Li Zhi, “Xu fenshu,” Vol. 1, “Yu Jiao Yiyuan taishi,” 28–29.

attention from people of the times by his bold and unique ideas and activities. He was said to “give lectures to scholars during the day, with women among the listeners, and highly praise Buddhism while belittling Confucianism and the words of Mencius.”⁵⁹ He was said to be “more intelligent than anyone of his generation. Although his comments may sometimes sound weird, they are so straightforward and eloquent as to enlighten listeners’ minds a great deal.”⁶⁰ A few of his ideas deserve attention here:

The first one is his idea about human desire. Li Zhi boldly acknowledged the rationality of human desires for their own welfare and viewed them as the foundation for human minds. He said: “It is by nature that I want to be wealthy and successful to benefit my naturally born five sense organs. That is why saints will not go against such desires and therefore the people will be at ease.”⁶¹ Starting from this idea, Li Zhi said: “Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty expanded the territory by more than ten thousand *li*⁶² because of his great talent and bold vision, and Emperor Wu of the Wei Dynasty occupied central China because of his heroic acts. But their achievements had all come from indulgence in music and women.”⁶³ He made it clear that “Clothes and food are human ethics and material laws. Without them there would be no human ethics or material laws.”⁶⁴ By this, in essence he almost completely negated the advocacy of the orthodox philosophy for “elimination of human desires in observance of the heavenly principle” and put the basic human desires as the important foundation for building moral systems.

The second is his idea about individuality. Li Zhi inherited the time-honored concept of equal morality and equal human nature handed down from ancient times and stressed that “everybody possesses such ‘big mirror’ wisdom, the so-called personal understanding of the virtues. Such an understanding of virtues, at the higher level, is the same as that by the sky, at the lower level, is the same as that by the earth, and at the middle level, is the same as that by the numerous saints. Theirs is not any more than mine and mine is not any less than theirs. Since neither theirs nor mine can be improved or weakened, I am unable to resign from being a saint or from learning what the saints have learned.”⁶⁵ However, at the same time, he admitted the difference of individuality between different people and pointed out the rationality of such difference. He said: “As for the Way, it refers to paths and there is more than one path; as for human

⁵⁹ Zhang Tingyu et al., Vol. 221, “Li Zhi,” 5817.

⁶⁰ Shen Defu, Vol. 27, “Er da jiaozhu,” 691.

⁶¹ Li Zhi, 1975a, Vol. 1, “Da Gen zhongcheng,” 17.

⁶² One *li* equals to 500 meters.

⁶³ Li Zhi, 1975b, Vol. 3, Fufu,” 23.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 1975a, Vol. 1, “Da Deng Shiyang,” 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1975b, Vol. 1, “Yu Ma Lishan,” 3.

nature, there is more than one type.”⁶⁶

It was starting from such recognition of individual differences that Li Zhi contended that government administration should center on people and be based on people's needs. He said: “A gentleman governs by setting himself as an example while a person of profound wisdom governs by relying on the people. By setting himself as an example, the ruler will set rules after his own rules while the ruler who relies on the people will govern according to people's needs. Of course the outcomes from these two will be different.”⁶⁷ To govern according to people's needs requires the denial of controls on thinking. So Li Zhi adamantly objected to the dominance of Confucianism in China and to the restrictions imposed on people by Confucian virtues and ethics. He said, “Because Confucius did not let others study his teachings, he would not allow himself to become an idol for Chinese people to learn from, even if he would arise to power. Therefore, there is a reason that when a sage is at the top position, all the other things will settle in their respective appropriate positions. If anyone has not settled in his appropriate position now that people in the country have long settled in their appropriate positions, it must have resulted from the disturbances from the greedy and the tyrant and from the damages done by the so-called ‘benevolent people.’ The ‘benevolent people’ will then begin to worry about the dislocation of the people and make every effort to bring them back to their ‘right’ position. Thus they generate the virtues and etiquettes to shape their minds and generated rules and laws to confine their limbs. In the end people become seriously dislocated.”⁶⁸

The third is his doubt and critique of the Confucian classics. During middle and late Ming Dynasty, some scholars treated Confucian classics as historical books, which to a certain extent ushered in the doubts and critiques of Confucian classics in the 17th and 18th Century. Wang Yangming once came to an important conclusion that “the five classic works are also historical books.” He said, “To speak by events is called history; to argue by principles is called classics. Events are actually principles and principles are events. Thus *Spring-Fall* is a classic, while *The Five Classics* are also history.” He also said: “*The Five Classics* are after all also historical books.”⁶⁹ Since they were historical books, it went without saying that they could be doubted and critiqued. Li Zhi inherited the idea that the classics were historical works and raised the important proposition that “classics and history are one thing.” In his “Tongxin shuo” 童心说 (On childlike innocence), he sharply questioned the authenticity of the Confucian classics and

⁶⁶ Ibid., 1975a, Vol. 3, “Lunzheng pian,” 87.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., Vol. 1, “Da Gen zhongcheng,” 17.

⁶⁹ Wang Shouren, Vol. 1, “Yulu yi · Chuanxi lu shang,” 18.

stressed that even if what the classics contained had indeed originated from the saints, they were meant to be used in specific historical periods and should not be regarded as “eternal truth.”

Li Zhi had a deep understanding of the hypocrisy of the teachings of orthodox academia. He said: “Teachings from previous saints can only be applied to poor and lowly places instead of upper class regions that boast of gentry classes; they can only be applied to illiterate girls of tiny villages instead of learned gentlemen superior to ordinary people.”⁷⁰ Someone from the Qing Dynasty said: “(Li Zhi) always hated hypocritical teachings. Every time someone who had dressed up formally like a scholar approached him with questions about classics when he went to a school or teaching hall, he would forcefully wave his arm, saying: ‘You had better go to have a drink and have fun with some dancing or singing girls than asking about this.’ When he saw students hanging around with prostitutes, he would smile and say, ‘This is better than to accompany Neo-Confucian scholars.’ Therefore, instructors in Macheng and Huangzhou all harbored deep hatred against him. That was why he was condemned as advocating for lust and offending public decency.”⁷¹ It should be said that of the ideas of all the thinkers in late Ming Dynasty, Li Zhi’s were indeed innovative and challenging. He paid attention to human desires, recognized individual differences, emphasized the necessity for governance based on human nature, and courageously doubted the Confucian classics. With these ideas, he was unique among the thinkers of late Ming Dynasty, surpassed, to a certain degree, the knowledge level of that time and was considered an important pioneer for the enlightenment trend of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Since his ideas and activities had seriously offended the orthodox ethics and moral order, Zhang Wenda, an official from the government agency in charge of etiquettes, submitted a report to the government in the leap month of February during the reign of Emperor Wanli to denounce Li Zhi’s various “crimes,” which was a profound revelation of the fierce conflicts between the two types of moral thoughts.

For a long time afterwards, orthodox scholars one after another denounced Li Zhi as “a traitor to the people” and as “shaking our moral foundation.”⁷² The Ming government’s conviction of Li Zhi was well received among some orthodox scholars, who believed that “it is a grand event for upholding the right and dispelling the wrong (for the government) to convict Li Zhi and burn all his books for confusing and misleading the people.”⁷³ Even some anti-orthodox thinkers considered Li Zhi as too rebellious and deviating too far from classics

⁷⁰ Li Zhi, 1975a, Vol. 5, “Tang Guimei zhuan,” 209.

⁷¹ Zhen Fangkun ed., Vol. 7, “Li Zhi,” 389.

⁷² Shen Jia, Vol. 8, “Zou Shouyi,” 896.

⁷³ Sun Chengze, Vol. 40, “Zheng shixi,” 645.

(Gu Yanwu was one of them). However, among the broad masses, Li Zhi still had his followers. A person from the Qing Dynasty said, “Li Zhi started from being a Confucian scholar to become a 2 000-*dan*⁷⁴ official. But he cut his hair, kept his beard, and behaved as if he were crazy by slandering Confucius and Mencius. The gentry’s class across the board was influenced by him.”⁷⁵ Descriptions about Li Zhi in *Rizhilu* 日知录 (Daily findings), a book written by Gu Yanwu, vividly reflected what actually had happened. Gu said:

Since ancient times, vile people that have dared to rise in rebellion against saints were no match for Li Zhi. Although there have been tough orders from the emperor, his books are still circulated in society as if nothing had happened.

In September of the fifth year of Tianqi Period (1625), Sichuan’s government Censor reported: “By order of His Majesty, books written by Li Zhi are weird and abnormal, and shall be burned by the supervising agencies and banned from market and circulation.” However, scholars like his books and tend to collect them. That is why his books have not disappeared yet.⁷⁶

Li Zhi’s imprisonment and death marked, to a certain degree, the conclusion of a period that had seen the peak of the anti-orthodox thought during late Ming Dynasty. In a comment about the anti-orthodox expression as the lingering influence of the Taizhou School in *Mingru xue’an* 明儒学案 (Educational cases involving Confucian scholars of the Ming Dynasty), it was written: “These gentlemen capsized the heaven and the earth, which was unprecedented and would not be repeated in the future.”⁷⁷ That was an appropriate remark. Lü Liuliang of early Qing Dynasty sighed: “Since the start of Zhengde Period and Jiajing Period, heretical ideas permeated, causing confusion and hurting the administration of the government, and eventually led to the sinking of the Ming Dynasty. Therefore, they were the source of disasters and disorders for people and society instead of being merely competing for academic dominance.”⁷⁸ Zhang Lüxiang said: “While the country was in chaos and the right practices were being eclipsed or eroded, the less intelligent intellectuals indulged in the pursuit of wealth and official statuses and the highly intelligent ones were only engaged in the study of Buddhism. However, the less intelligent cause superficial

⁷⁴ In ancient China, government officials were ranked by how many *dan*, a measurement unit, of grain they would receive per year. A 2 000-*dan* official was equivalent to the current county chief or mayor of a medium sized city.

⁷⁵ *Jiangnan tongzhi* (Qianlong), Vol. 150, “Renwuzhi · Wang Daozeng,” 362.

⁷⁶ Gu Yanwu, Vol. 18, “Li Zhi,” 1070, 1071.

⁷⁷ Huang Zongxi, Vol. 32, “Taizhou xue’an yi,” 703.

⁷⁸ Lü Liuliang, Vol. 1, “Fu Gao Huizhan shu,” 485.

damages and the more intelligent cause deeper damages. Those who are concerned with the destiny of the country need to investigate them to be thoroughly clear about them.”⁷⁹ These remarks reflected the painful reflection about the history, particularly the history of thought, of late Ming Dynasty by scholars of early Qing Dynasty in face of a losing battle to invasion from the north and the deepening social crisis.

The changes in social values during late Ming Dynasty and the corresponding changes in life style marked the emergence of a new cultural tradition. Although it had yet to mature and had not found a rational link between ideal and reality, inheritance and reform, freedom and restrictions, and desires and ethical codes, its soul, humanist values, had indeed made a deep imprint on that time. The tradition itself had not died in face of the changes of dynasties and ups and downs of the country and its existence lingered through the following ages. During the transition from Ming to Qing, scholars such as Chen Que and Tang Zhen were its inheritors and propagators. With the prosperity of the market economy in early 18th century, its core ideas were further enriched and developed through the propagation, elaboration and advocacy of scholars such as Yuan Mei and Dai Zhen, and the new humanist tradition was revived and enhanced, leading to its broader and deeper influence on social life. Under its influence, “There were more desires, more delicate life styles, more smart tricks, and more unscrupulous personalities.”⁸⁰ It was this unceasing cultural progress that later provided the primitive but essential cultural foundation for the initial modernization of China after the middle of the 19th century.

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⁷⁹ Zhang Lüxiang, Vol. 14, “Da Xu Chongwei jiu,” 412.

⁸⁰ Hong Liangji, “Juanshige wen jiaji,” Vol. 1, “Xingzhi pian,” 28.

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