Wang, Baofeng 王寶峰, Studies of Li Zhi’s Confucian Thought 李贄儒學思想研究
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Wang Baofeng 王寶峰 has long engaged himself in the research of Ming 明 dynasty Confucianism. His recent work Studies of Li Zhi’s Confucian Thought invites readers to reconsider this lonely thinker. In terms of research methodology, the author employs “restoring interpretation” (huanyuanxing jieshifa 還原性解釋法), that is, “based on the subjectivity of Chinese thought … the author adopts an attitude of ‘putting himself in the thinker’s position’ and takes the issues with which the thinker was confronted into consideration. The method emphasizes restoring the original thought of the thinker and the ideas in the ideological circle at that time by returning to the historical circumstance where the thinker lived against the background of the whole social existence (economic, political, and social, etc.)” (39). This method echoes Benjamin Schwartz’s theory that “the core issue of the history of ideas is to find people’s conscious response to the circumstances where they are in” (Benjamin Schwartz, “Some Primary Examinations on the History of Chinese Thought” 關於中國思想史的若干初步考察, in Collected Reviews on Chinese Thought and Institutions 中國思想與制度論集, trans. by Liu Renni 劉紹尼 et al. Taipei 台北: Lianjing 聯經, 1976, 14).

The book is divided into three parts. Part I contains introductory remarks about the history of the studies on Li Zhi’s 李贄 Confucian thought, including research in the Ming and the Qing 清 dynasties, the periods of the Republic of China, the People’s Republic of China and the Cultural Revolution, and the latest studies. The author emphasizes the works of Taiwanese scholars such as Lin Qixian 林其賢, Jiang Canteng 江燦騰, Chen Qinghui 陳清輝, and Gong Pengcheng 龔鵬程, whose approach of “sympathetic understanding” has inspired many later scholars. Meanwhile, the author puts forward his own theory of “restoring interpretation,” maintaining that the book focuses on the embodiment of Chinese features instead of examining the issue through Western philosophical and intellectual perspectives, which regard one’s thought and soul as separate entities. Part II consists of eight chapters: Li Zhi’s social background (41–62); his education and performance in imperial examinations (63–75); the beginning of his career: learning from Wang Yangming 王陽明 (76–94); his academic
sources: friends and masters (95–113); practice of Confucianism (114–129); settling down and getting on with his pursuit and the distinction between Confucianism as a religion and authentic Confucianism (130–168); Li Zhi’s idea towards women from the perspective of Confucian ethics and rites (lijiao 禮教) (169–228); and his Confucianism: centering on Confucian history (219–304). In these eight chapters, with Li Zhi’s life story as the clue, Wang presents the new idea of “Confucian society.” According to the author, this means a society with Confucian ethics and rites. He reconstructs a panoramic picture of the original appearance of a Confucian society: Confucian ethics and rites are the foundation of the state; grassroots religious organizations are based on Confucian ethics and rites; Confucian ethics and rites are the fundamental contents of imperial examination syllabus; under the debate of orthodoxy and heresy, serious conflicts occurred among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism; the essence of traditional ideas towards women is Confucian ethics and rites; Confucianism is actually a study of classics and history that serves ritual administration, and so on. Li Zhi’s Confucianism is studied and evaluated under the social circumstances of Confucianism as a religion (Confucian ethics and rites). According to the author, Li Zhi, in his historical works, comments on historical figures with practical standards such as helping people in danger or poverty, strengthening the state, assisting the lord, and being a pillar of the state. Wang considers Li Zhi a legalist, or an anti-Confucian thinker, rather than a Confucian (312).

Part III is the book’s conclusion (305–314). It summarizes the most important breakthroughs of the book: the method of restoring interpretation and the idea of Confucian society. On the one hand, the author emphasizes the purpose of “finding China” with the method of restoring interpretation. On the other hand, he offers a summary of his understanding of a “Confucian society,” that is, “a society with Confucian ethics and rites” by saying that “Confucianism is the theory and system of education and moralization of human relations, which regards Confucian doctrines as the guidelines and Confucian ethics and morals as the fundamental content. In other words, a Confucian society takes Confucianism as the foundation to build the state and social system. Following the inherent sequence of Chinese history, according to particular historical facts, we can find that traditional Chinese society, though in different forms in different dynasties, had been actually a Confucian society since the Han 漢 dynasty when Confucianism was regarded as the state religion till the end of the Qing dynasty” (314). From a historical point of view, Confucianism is absolutely not a religion. The stability of Confucian ethics and rites in traditional Chinese society led to the super stability of Confucian society (313).

In order to restore Li Zhi’s thought, Wang, having conducted much research of historical documents, presents Li Zhi’s life and his social circles in different periods. The examples he selects are very precise. For instance, in Chapter 5 (Li’s masters and friends), JIAO Hong 焦竑, GENG Dingli 耿定理, WANG Bi 王襞, WANG Ji 王畿, and LUO Rufang 羅汝芳 are selected not only to restore the historical circumstances of Li Zhi’s social circle but also to point out the factors affecting the formation of Li Zhi’s Confucianism. JIAO Hong was not only a congenial friend but also greatly influenced Li Zhi’s thought, and printed and published Li Zhi’s important work Cang Shu 藏書. Another of his works, Xu Cang Shu 續藏書, was finished with the help of JIAO Hong, who provided his family with collections of books about famous and public affairs in the Ming dynasty and encouraged Li Zhi to add commentary notes on contemporary