A Selection of Correspondence between Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang

Li Zhi and Geng Dingxiang (1524-96) were good friends who fell out with each other after the death of Dingxiang’s younger brother, Dingli. The letters between them chart the course of their dispute, as each came to doubt the moral vision guiding the other.

1. Li Replies to Censor Geng [autumn 1584]

Though the space within the four seas is great, finding a friend is difficult: great men are not numerous. As for those who love learning, they are even more rare. If one goes in search of someone who can pass on learning, the onus is on him to get hold of what he has learned as though it were within himself so zealously that he can experience disapproval without trouble of mind and feel no discomposure though others may take no note of him. Your younger brother embodied those merits, but now sadly he is dead. I who have made friends in all four directions had hoped to live and die in the hands of this friend, but now cannot. Once I had met Dingli, I told myself that I could die, but he has preceded me in death. Having written these words, how troubled I feel. . . . Your brother’s death has wounded you deeply. I understand that your sorrow is so great that you cannot speak of it. . . . Several times I have wanted to send you a letter offering my condolences, but my emotions were in turmoil and my mind could not calm itself. How could I dare present you with commonplace prose? Today at last I am ready. . . .

It is difficult to find a bosom friend. Was there anyone who knew Dingli as well as I did? Alas, I cannot speak to you. Having come a thousand li for you and your brother, I am saddened to learn that you are back at court. Being now isolated, who will mold me? To study and not to seek friends, rather than seeking friends and not devoting oneself to finding someone greater than oneself, is unbearable. You may call willingly submitting yourself to service an expression of your love of learning, but I don’t believe it. You wish to become something of great use, to be a great man, all the while calling this great learning, but is this something you can achieve?

2. Geng to Li [1585]

Your letter inquired whether or not in my daily activities I was really able to avoid sticking to the model of the ancients and relying on principles based on what I have seen and heard from others. I venture to say that the ancients had a model that altered with the
age and changed in accordance with the times; and they had a model which over the thousands of years from the birth of humankind up to the present could not be changed. That is, they had principles relating to names and forms that were derived from what they saw and heard, and they had principles on which their own minds obliged them to act on. This model, unchangeable for thousands of years, consists of the regulations of heaven and the rules of the mind, which the ancients originally brought forth from the principles on which their own minds felt obliged to act. This is not only what we are required to imitate but also what we cannot but imitate, what we cannot bear not to imitate.

Since the beginning of creation, all living creatures have been shaped and cast in this model of the ancients. They are born and nourished, but perceived nothing in their daily activities. Yi Yin delighted in the way of [the sage rulers] Yao and Shun but was incapable of imitating their model of humble deference. Mencius devotedly learned from Confucius but was incapable of imitating his model of venerating the Zhou dynasty. Why is this? The times were different. That it is painful to be struck or hurt, or miserable to be starved or drowned, is a pattern that has existed for thousands of years. That it is calamitous to be orphaned or rulerless, or sinful to be an unruly subject or an unprincipled son, is also a pattern that has existed for thousands of years. The ancients expended great effort and thought to create a model so that you and I might have adequate shelter and be sufficient in food and clothing, and they instructed us in ethics so that we might avoid being like wild animals. Confucius composed his teachings so that people would clearly recognize rebellious subjects and unprincipled sons, extravagant words and extreme actions. Was there anything these sages could imitate? It is said: when a spring silkworm spins its cocoon, it takes its shape from the thing to which it attaches itself. That indicates the inability to stop itself that comes from its basic mind. So how could that which one’s own mind feels obliged to act on really be like the “emotional affinity” that heterodox teachings go on about? How profound and unceasing are the ordinances of Heaven! Accepting Heaven’s [ordinance] not to stop was the mind of the ancients, such that though they might wish to stop, they could not. Those who don’t act when they should act end up stopping in all matters. The silent self-annihilators [Buddhists] may be capable of this, but I cannot learn from them.
I suspect that when you peruse these words of mine, you will say that I am proceeding from principles. You have never deigned to comprehend this feeling in my mind of being obliged to act. I am like a mute who eats bitter melon: even he who cannot speak can have something to say. You do not embrace this commitment, and are committed to leaving the world. But he who leaves the world also has a model for leaving the world. How can you bend words in this way? I am an ignorant man. All I know is that between coming into life and leaving this world, one falls short of his duty by so much, and never becomes a model himself. From what I’ve seen recently, study has become devalued and people’s hearts are sunk in depravity. I dare not presume to measure up to Confucius, yet I carry pessimistic feelings about humankind and the world.

3. Li Replies to Censor Geng [1585?]

Yesterday I received your letter in which you so penetratingly identified my errors of impetuosity and ignorance. Extending and broadening the genuineness that comes from following one’s own disposition and then joining with the world to fashion our common concern: only this we can call the Way. Once having desired to promote [the Way] together with this age and these people, one’s success in using it to take control and straighten out what was crooked must be great.

“How can study be without a method?” These words of yours are excellent: you have taken them from Confucius and so deeply believe them that you have adopted this as the principle of your school of learning. What can I possibly say to this? Yet these are Confucius’ words, not ours. When heaven gives birth to someone, then that person naturally has the functionality of a complete person. He doesn’t need to wait to be made complete by Confucius. If everyone needed to be made complete by Confucius, then wouldn’t that mean that people in the time before there was Confucius ended up unable to attain personhood? Thus, as one who devotedly learned from Confucius, even Mencius only got to his own level by following Confucius. I am deeply troubled by the cowardice of this attitude, and yet you tell me to follow it blindly!

Actually Confucius never told anyone to learn from Confucius. Had he instructed others to learn from Confucius, then why, when Yan Yuan asked about benevolence, did he say, “the practice of benevolence comes from oneself” and not from others? . . . Since
it comes from oneself, Confucius’ disciples didn’t need to ask Confucius about benevolence. And since one acts for oneself, Confucius had no method to pass on to his disciples. His method depended on there being neither self nor other. To be independent of the self, the most important thing to learn is to control the self. To be independent of others, what is most important in teaching is in working with person being taught.

Let me offer one or two examples. Ran Yong was a man of reverent disposition and careful practice. When he asked Confucius about benevolence, Confucius pointed directly to him and said that it is nothing but reverence and generosity. Ran Yong was smart. Realizing Confucius’ meaning, he requested to go into service. Sima Geng was under constant anxiety on account of his brother, which made him careful in word and cautious in deed. When he asked about benevolence, Confucius pointed directly to him and said, “He is cautious and slow in his speech.” Sima Geng was not so smart. He doubted what he was told and yet it was inadequate. So when did Confucius ever teach others to learn from Confucius? Yet though Confucius never instructed anyone to learn from Confucius, those who claim to learn from Confucius are intent on setting aside their own [interests] and insist that they have to take Confucius as their object of study. Even you must find this really funny!

It is because Confucius never instructed others to learn from him that he was able to attain his purpose. He most certainly did not use himself to teach everyone in the world. For this reason, when the sage occupies the highest position, the ten thousand things find their proper places and everything follows as it should. Thus the people of this world are able to hold to their places permanently. What causes them to lose their places are when violent men trouble them and “benevolent” men harm them. When the people of the world lose their places, “benevolent” men trouble them and fuss over wanting to force them into the zone where they can find their places. Accordingly they use virtuous conduct and ritual to restrain their minds, and administration and punishments to constrain their bodies. Only then do people really begin to lose their places in a big way.

The people and things of the realm are so numerous. If you desire them all to act according your dogma, then the world would certainly not be able to manage it. Cold can prevent glue from sticking, but it is not enough to prevent people from rushing off to the court or the market. Heat can melt metal, but it is not enough to melt the hearts of
competitive people. Why is this? Wealth, honor and success are means that satisfy the senses we were born with: the tendency of things is such that this is so. For this reason the sage accords with these, and when he accords with them, pacifies them. For this reason, those greedy for wealth he endows with emolument, and those pursuing opportunity he endows with rank; the strong he endows with authority, the capable he assigns suitable posts, and the weak he assigns tasks. The virtuous he honours with ceremonial positions so that all might regard them with respect. The talented he invests with serious responsibilities without close scrutiny of their comings and goings. If everyone pursues what he likes, everyone undertakes what he is good at, and there is not a single person who is without his function: how easy to put people to work! He might want everyone to engage in deception in order to win his favour, but suppose I have no favour to win? He might want everyone to hide his faults in order to put his own excellence on display, but suppose I have no faults to hide? How difficult then to convince people! . . .

What you believe and earnestly put into practice may be your method of learning, but not everyone is like you. Whatever you do is of course good, how you put things to use is of course broadly applied, and what you study is of course apt, so of course I respect you, but I don’t have to be just like you. You of course can show concern for me, but you are not necessarily any wiser than me. If this is the case, then when you go this time to the capital, everyone will flatter you on taking office. If you don’t go, you may find that those who agree with you are few and those who differ from you are many, that the wise are few and the ignorant and unrighteous are many, in which case, when will there be peace in the world?

4. Li’s Letter Sent in Reply to Senior Censor Geng [1585-86?]

. . . I follow only doctrines that the people can put into practice. To know what one can do oneself, and as well what others can do, is a case of recognizing that what is good for oneself is good for others. Thus no-one’s self differs from the self of any other, so how could one no abandon his self? To know that others are able to do something and that one is also able to do it is a case of recognizing that what is good for others is good for oneself. Thus no others differ from oneself, so how is there who cannot be followed?
This is the doctrine of no others and no self, the accomplishment of “assisting in the nourishing powers [of Heaven and Earth],” the purpose of aiding the era and establishing a doctrine, all of which are ultimately because of truly being able to see that what is good for one is the same for others. Today, not knowing the doctrine that what is good for one is the same for others but being singleminded in pursuing a reputation for setting aside [the interests of] oneself and pursuing [the interests of] others is a case of focusing one’s intention on setting aside one’s own interests. Focusing one’s intention on setting aside one’s own interests amounts to there being a self. Focusing one’s intention on pursuing the interests of others amounts to there being others. Isn’t it worse to not set aside one’s own interests but teach others that you are setting aside your own interests? . . . Today no one is able to set aside his own interests and pursue others’, so what is this incessant talk about setting aside all one’s own interests? Telling people to set aside their interests when you yourself cannot is the perversion in declaring that you are setting aside your interests and pursuing others’. Setting aside his own delight in what was good and only encouraging virtue others is not what Mencius claimed for the Great Sage Shun. When someone says he has set aside his own interests, pause and think about it.

He who truly sets aside his own interests does not view himself as having a self. Not viewing himself as having a self, then he has no self whose interests he needs to set aside. Having no interests he needs to set aside is what can be called setting aside one’s own interests. We know this is so by studying previous cases of those who knew themselves. He who truly pursues the interests of others does not view others as existing. By not viewing others as existing, then there is no one whose interests he needs to pursue. Having no interests to set aside is what can be called setting aside his own interests. We know this is so by studying previous cases of those who knew others. To not know oneself and just talk about setting aside one’s own interests, to not know others and just talk about pursuing the interests of others: it is hardly surprising that people today are miserly and set aside nothing, resolutely refusing to support anyone else’s interests, and instead go on and on about setting aside their own interests and pursuing those of others, for no other reason than to deceive others. Are others really deceived? This is merely deceiving yourself. . . .
5. Geng to Li [1585-86?]
In my view, he who returns to his original mind and cannot stop himself from acting, even if he desires to practise forbearance and non-action, will not be able to do so should something compel him otherwise. He who returns to his original mind and cannot rest content, even if he desires to go ahead and act without hesitation, will not dare to do so should something restrain him. This program is simple: nothing more than striving not to lose one’s own mind. How can you consider this as being fettered to a teaching, as failing to attain to your lofty doctrine [Buddhism]?

6. Li Replies to My Old Friend Geng [1585-86]
People of this age detest the ordinary and delight in the new and strange, though when speaking of what is newest and strangest in the realm, nothing can outdo the ordinary. The sun and the moon are ordinary and yet from ancient times constantly renew themselves. Cloth and grain are ordinary and yet when cold they warm us and when hungry they feed us. How strange is that! The new and strange are precisely within the ordinary. People of this age don’t look closely, but instead go off in search of the new and strange outside the ordinary. How can any of it be called new and strange? The Heavenly Maiden of Sichuan is a case in point. The masses all say she is able to know events in the future and the past, so they consider her a marvel equal to the gods. Well, what is past even I can know about—why wait for her to tell me? As for what is yet to come, there is no need to know it, so what is the point of having her expound it?

Thus Confucius said, “The knowledgeable are free from perplexities.” Not perplexed by the new and strange, one cannot be troubled by disasters that have yet to come. Thus he also said, “The benevolent are free from anxiety.” Having no anxiety about the disasters that have yet to come, one does not seek foreknowledge or become perplexed by the new and strange. Is this not truly being able to see an advantage without hastening toward it, or see a danger without having to avoid it? It is like what Confucius said about “the determined officer never forgetting that his end may be in a ditch or a stream; the brave officer never forgetting that he may lose his head.” But who can measure up to that? Thus it is said, “The brave are free from fear.” Only after combining the three virtues of knowledge, benevolence, and bravery can one not be bored by the
ordinary or deluded by the new and strange. As for the people of the age wanting to know the future and therefore regarding the Sichuan maiden as strange and also new, how is that something to be marvelled at? And why? Because of ignorance. If ignorant, then malevolent; if malevolent, then cowardly; but really it is knowledge that is prior to benevolence and courage.

7. Li Replies to Justice Minister Geng [1587]
Your last letter of yours can be called true teaching on the one hand, and on the other, true friendship. You wish to instruct me without knowing why, and I wish to receive your instruction without knowing why; these both could be called the genuine impulse of compulsion to act. Things are the way they are without our knowing why. Alas, the way of friendship has been long disrupted! Once I exaggerated by saying that in ancient times there were rulers and subjects, but no friends. Indeed this is not an overstatement! The ruler, like a dragon, has reversed scales under his throat: he who goes against them will surely die. Still, there may be a rapid succession of those who choose to censure their ruler with their deaths. Why is this? The reputation got by censuring with death is something that determined gentlemen willingly gamble for. How much more gladly would they seek such great fortune without having to die for it! A mind set on avoiding harm is no match for a mind set on honour and advantage, and so they harm themselves without a second thought. How much more would they appreciate this great advantage without suffering harm! With friends it is different. Between those who have the fortune of becoming friends there is not the slightest desire for selfish benefit. Those who do not have the fortune of becoming friends will quarrel if they are minor and indulge in feuds if they are great. . . . Disapproval and censure are often seen at the boundary between ruler and subject, but never between friends.

How fortunate that I was recently able to present myself to you: this I value highly. How fortunate I am to receive your instruction; this I have longed for. To have returned to a place that is so important to me makes me happy. But how is it that you alone love to model yourself on Confucius whereas I have never wished to? Your compulsion to act consists of indiscriminately loving people without addressing them individually. My compulsion to act involves finding companion in my practice of the
Way, and not treating them lightly. I suspect that these are different. Your compulsion to act amounts is like teaching schoolboys to “be filial at home and deferential when abroad,” like in *The Vocation of Younger Brothers and Sons*. . . . Your compulsion to act is like a rain that soaks everything, arriving without being asked; or like the local village schoolmaster who teaches schoolchildren in great numbers and gets few results with his very great efforts. My compulsion to act is like the shock of cold snow, like waiting till the price is right before selling; like the general who deploys his soldiers to first of all capture the king, getting great results while using little effort.

Though our methods are different, we share the same basic notion of feeling compelled to act. If our minds are at one, then I can completely forget your theory about compulsion to act as though you have never uttered it. But if you say that your compulsion is right and mine wrong, that yours is the learning of the sages and mine is heterodoxy, then I cannot attest to your knowledge. Your compulsion to act is a case of knowing that you are not permitted to halt, but the true compulsion to act depends on really desiring not to halt. My compulsion to act is a case of not knowing that I am obliged to act. Naturally being obliged to act may not be the compulsion to act of the sage Confucius, but I cannot attest to his knowledge either.

I fear you are afflicted with self-righteousness. . . . You shouldn’t consider yourself right and everyone else wrong. You shouldn’t assume that everyone else is involved in heterodox learning or scorn them for studying something that is not orthodox Confucianism. If your compulsion to act is the real thing, then so is everyone else’s compulsion to act. If their compulsion to act is not genuine, then yours also is not. And this may be true of me as well. Please tell me whether I’m right or wrong.

8. Geng to Li [1587]

You say that my compulsion to act amounts merely to the teaching of “be filial at home and deferential when abroad” in *The Vocation of Younger Brothers and Sons*, whereas your compulsion to act is illuminating bright virtue for the whole world. This is not how I understand it. Take away filial piety and deference, and what virtue is left to illuminate? I suspect that what you call illuminating virtue is watching for the evanescent principle of non-birth from the vantage point of perfect silent self-annihilation and then saying that is
bright. What I call compulsion to act is nothing other than that the minds of sons, subjects, younger brothers, and friends grasp the constant way of living.

As you know, twenty years ago I learned . . . to ground myself in everyday reality, to cultivate my self and verify my knowledge. I came to understand Confucius’ remark, “I am not equal to it.” . . . You say that the great man has his own bright virtue, but no great man has surpassed Confucius. You used to quote at length from Confucius. Why do you now perversely turn your back on him now?

9. Li Replies to Justice Minister Geng [1587]
When I look at what you do, there is little that differentiates you from others. Everyone is the same; I am, and you are too. From the time people reach the age of reason, morning to night they plough in order to get food, buy land in order to plant, build houses in order to find shelter, study in order to pass the exams, hold office in order to win honour and fame, and search for propitious sites in order to provide good fortune for sons and grandsons. The daily round of tasks is for the benefit of oneself and one’s family, and not a bit for others. Yet whenever you start talking about learning, you say to me: “You are for yourself alone whereas I am for others; you are out for your own advantage whereas I wish to benefit others. I pity my neighbours to the east who may be suffering from hunger; I think of the unbearable cold of my neighbours to the west. Some like Confucius go out to teach, whereas some will have nothing to do with others: they are slaves of self-advantage. Some may not be scrupulous in their actions but do good for others, whereas some may be perfectly proper but enjoy using Buddhist dharma to harm others.” When you look at this, you may see that what you say is not necessarily what you do, and what you do is not necessarily what you say. . . . Is it right to say that this is the teaching of the sage Confucius? As I think this over, I feel that you are not the equal of peasants in the market place talking about what they do. Those who do business say it is business; those who do farm work say it is farm work. Their talk really has substance, words that are truly virtuous, so that when others hear them they forget their cares.

What is this “in speaking think of acting” that Confucius mentioned? He said that he himself was not capable of attained to all the Ways of son, subject, younger brother, and friend. He really was not capable; this is not false modesty. How could anyone born
into this world ever exhaust these four Ways even if they were at it all their lives? To say that you are capable is to stop and not advance. The sage knew that these Ways were the most difficult things to execute, and therefore said he was not capable. If when you are not capable you say that you are not, that is “in speaking think of action.” If when you say you are not capable and you really are not, that is “in acting think back to speaking.” Thereby you are reliable, constant, loyal, and honest with yourself: a true sage. Ignorant of what they are not capable of, people today use these four qualities to scold and tutor others. Setting heavy demands on others, they place only light responsibilities on themselves. How can anyone believe them?

Sages do not demand of others that they be capable, hence all people can become sages. Accordingly, Wang Yangming said: “The streets are full of sages.” The Buddha said: “Mind is Buddha, all men are Buddhas.” If everyone is a sage, then sages do not distinguish different principles about compulsion to act to display to others. Hence Confucius said: “I wish to do without speaking.” Since everyone is Buddha, there has never been a Buddha who has saved all living creatures. Without the phenomenon of living creatures, how can there be the phenomenon of people? Without the phenomenon of principles, how can there be the phenomenon of self? Without the phenomenon of self, I can discard myself; without the phenomenon of others I can follow others. This is not forced, because I see myself that everyone is a Buddha, and that my goodness is the same as everyone else’s. If my goodness really is the same, how can there be goodness only in myself? How can there be a good person from whom I cannot learn?

10. Geng to Li [1587]

“Holding to a course without doubting”: as Confucius said, this is merely “assuming the appearance of benevolence.” He who assumes the appearance of benevolence does so only from his recollection of what he knows and witnesses: this is not the genuine tradition of benevolence. . . . Such a man sets off in the wrong direction and holds to his course without doubting. Confucius’ tradition of benevolence is consciously grasped from the position of being unable to stop oneself. Unable to do anything else but “attend to other people’s words and observe their countenances,” then like Confucius one is “anxious to humble himself to others.” Those who are addicted to emptiness and hold
onto appearances may see all the way to the ultimate absolute, but in the end they grasp merely the appearance of things. If you are done with just one glance, then where is there any doubt, and how can you bear to “humble yourself before others”? By starting from the true impulse of being obliged to act, once one thinks about being a son, subject, younger brother, or friend, one realizes by how much he falls short of his duty. “Not attaining to it in personal conduct”: even Confucius reproached himself on this point. How can you not doubt and not humble yourself before others?

11. Geng to Li [1587]

... Eyes are easy to open, but bones are hard to change. In assessing others, you rely on their eyes whereas I rely entirely on their bones. In your letter you say, “The unicorn runs with ordinary beasts and the phoenix flies with ordinary birds because they are the same in kind.” The reason why these two creatures exceed the category of birds and beasts is not their feathers, fur, or scales. It is because they do what other animals cannot do, or warble more harmoniously, that they can are outside the category of birds and beasts. Although monkeys are prehensile, lions and tigers ferocious, and parrots and orangutans endowed with powers of speech, all of these animals in the end have the bones of birds and beasts and cannot exceed their category. ... Where the sages exceed their category is in the sense of benevolence that oblige them to act. This has penetrated the world to ten thousand generations. Please consider this carefully. Is it so, or is it not?

12. Li Replies to Justice Minister Geng [1588]

... Am I so unlike you? You enjoy office and wealth, have a family and home, and receive guests and friends, but does that make you better than I? How is it that only you should have learning enough to lecture, that only you are compelled to act? If I am the same as you, then you can forget everything you have ever said about my discarding ethics, leaving my wife and family, shaving my head, and wearing Buddhist robes. What do you think? There has never been anything in which I have not been the same as you, except for your being a high official. How can your learning be superior to mine because of your high office? If it is, then Confucius would not have dared open his mouth!
Scholars at your county are smart, but there are only two or three of advanced learning with whom I am able to speak. To be able to speak to someone and yet not speak to him is an instance of losing a friend, but this is entirely my fault. The others were all young men, some as yet unenlightened and some lacking in purpose. What Confucius called “speaking to speak to someone who should not be spoken to” is “to err in reference to our words.” Although this something of which I do not approve, I would rather waste words than lose a friend. Wasting words may be acceptable, but how can losing friends be? Human talent from ancient times has been rare. When talent is this hard to find, how can one not be distressed at the fortune of finding a talented person and then losing him?

Alas, as Confucius said of Yan Yuan, “Now there is not such another. I have not yet heard of anyone who loves to learn as he did.” Confucius in his time certainly realized how hard it is to find a friend. How much harder is it today! He searched through his seventy disciples and found no one, so he turned to the crowd of three thousand. Not finding anyone there, he had no choice but to wander in all directions searching. Having looked everywhere without success, he decided to go back, sighing and saying, “Let me return! Let me return! The petty ones of my school are still in need of being shaped.” Confucius being this distressed over not having friends, we can understand that those “pursuing the middle course” are not easily found. An impetuous person does not follow old paths nor tread in old footprints, so he sees and knows much. He is like the phoenix flying at a great height. Who can stop him? So he does not believe that he is of the same category as ordinary birds. Even though he sees from a lofty height, if he is not practical, he will fail to “pursue the middle course.” An uncompromising person will not commit one act of unrighteousness, or put to death one innocent person. . . . When the tiger is in the mountains, all animals quake with fear for none dares oppose him, so he does not believe that he and all moving creatures are alike beasts. Even though he is unshakable, if he is not modest, then he cannot attain to “pursuing the middle course.” . . .

As for those thieves of virtue, though the “sanctimoniously orthodox” passed his gate, Confucius would not let them enter. His rejection of them was deep-seated. How was he was able to see them nonetheless as people? Today one has no choice but to take the sanctimoniously orthodox as his companions, acting with loyal sincerity for the time
being in the hope of bringing them to the Way. It is no surprise that they hate him, for he wastes his words. Still, what does wasting words matter? What is more troubling is the fear of losing people. If one has the tiniest bit of regret over losing someone, then he will carry this sorrow to the end of his life, and die without peace. If we talk about liking virtuous examples or liking good company, then the sanctimoniously orthodox are number one; if we talk about travelling in the Way and receiving the teachings of a thousand sages, then why bother about getting rid of the “sanctimoniously orthodox”?

You have travelled as an official over half the empire. The two capital cities are reservoirs of people. With all your looking and doing, have you ever found the talented person you seek? Have you sought for him and not found him? Have you even sought for him at all? None of those you have sought and found are impetuous or uncompromising. Had they been so, they would have been rejected for not being reliable, yet has there been any of perfect honesty? . . . Studying the Way without such people will not lead to achieving the Way, and transmitting the Way without such people will prevent you from expressing the Way. There exist impetuous and uncompromising people who have not heard the Way, but never has there existed anyone who could hear the Way but was not impetuous or uncompromising.

Today as I bid you farewell, I have pondered the questions of the impetuous and the uncompromising, of wasting words and losing people. What I have just written is, I think, all I can do return my brief thanks to you. My dependents wanted to go home, and I had no choice but to send them.¹ Now I will travel in all directions as the ancients did in search of friends. Confucius looked for friends greater than himself to whom he could transmit the Way. Only when one’s knowledge is greater than his teacher’s is transmission possible. People like us seek friends greater than ourselves to verify the Way. . . .

¹ Li sent his wife and daughters home to Fujian in 1585.