

## Li Zhi - The Beauty of Music, from Nature

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i9/22944>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i9/22944

**Published Date:** 20 September 2024

### Abstract

Li Zhi (23 November 1527 - 7 May 1602) was a Ming Dynasty historian and litterateur, who lived through the three dynasties of Emperor Shizong, Emperor Mu Zong, and Emperor Shen Zong of the Ming Dynasty. In an authoritarian society where imperial examinations were prevalent, Li Zhi, as an innovator, opposed traditional Confucianism, male superiority and female inferiority, corruption of corrupt officials, and pursued the liberation of thought and individuality. This paper takes the dynasty under the rule of the three emperors Zhu Houjian, Zhu Zaijian and Zhu Yijun as its historical background, it explores the reasons for the formation of Li Zhi's musical aesthetics, its content and influence.

**Keywords:** Li Zhi, Ideology, Music Aesthetics

### Introduction

Li Zhi's music aesthetics had a progressive significance and democratic spirit at that time, and had a profound impact on the study of music aesthetics in later generations. It is not only the embodiment of the wisdom of Li Zhi's personal life experience, but also reflects the excellent quality of the literati's courage and daring to make breakthroughs, and is a microcosm of the social and cultural progress of the mid-to-late Ming dynasty. The study of Li Zhi's musical aesthetics is conducive to understanding the development of traditional Chinese musical aesthetics, the positive spirit of the people and the process of the formation of the ideology of individuality and emancipation. It is not only a treasure of Ming music and literary thought, but also a breakthrough in our understanding of Ming art and culture, providing valuable materials and new perspectives for the study of the aesthetics of modern and contemporary Chinese music.

The importance of studying Li Zhi's music aesthetics is reflected in the following aspects: 1. A critique of traditional musical aesthetics: Li Zhi's music aesthetics combines the music aesthetics of Confucianism and Taoism, but reflects on and transcends them. Li Zhi based on *The Tongxin Shuo*, emphasising natural beauty and promoting the liberation of individuality, which had a profound influence on the theories of literature, opera and folk songs in later times. 2. It has the spirit of anti-feudalism and anti-ritualism: Li Zhi's music aesthetics is like a revolution in thinking, which opposes the old thought and culture, prompts the progress of

Confucianism and Taoism's music aesthetics, and, at the same time, promotes the progress and development of traditional Chinese music aesthetics. In Li Zhi's aesthetics of music, the idea of the pursuit of democracy emerged, and he advocated that people oppose dogma and pursue freedom and rights. Such an idea exists not only in the realm of musical aesthetics, but also in the desire to achieve the happiness of the people and the progress of society in a democratic way. 3. Promote the emancipation of personalities: Li Zhi requires musical works to be natural, sincere, and truly respond to the inner feelings of the creator, which is a manifestation of advocating the beauty of humanity. His admiration for "authenticity and naturalness" contributed to the idea of individuality and emancipation at the end of the Ming Dynasty. 4. It has the historical significance of humanistic concern and anti-feudal autocracy: Li Zhi's aesthetic thought of music requires people to be human-centred and from the heart, emphasising and respecting the dignity and individuality of human beings. It is concerned with the spiritual world of man, social harmony, and opposes Confucianism's use of ritual as a standard and Taoism's use of heaven as a norm. It advocates the emancipation of individuality and believes that people have the right to pursue their freedom and desires, and such an idea is of great significance in promoting the progress and development of society.

As a thinker, Li Zhi's thoughts on the aesthetics of music have academic value and significance. To study Li Zhi's musical aesthetics, we can explore his necessity in these aspects: 1. Reflect the cultural context and the spirit of the times: Li Zhi lived in an era of many social changes and turbulence during the Ming Dynasty, which was the period of the budding of capitalism in China. His theories of musical aesthetics can reflect the cultural characteristics of this historical period and help us better understand the cultural and social background of the time. 2. Challenging traditional musical aesthetics: Li Zhi's music aesthetics is innovative and dares to challenge Confucianism and Taoism, which were the dominant theories at that time. By studying Li Zhi's music aesthetics, it is possible to understand the development of music theory in the Ming Dynasty and the evolution of the theory of music aesthetics. Li Zhi's music aesthetics thought has rationality and scientific view, close to the heart and people, is the most natural representative. 3. Integration of music and multidisciplinary: Li Zhi's music aesthetics does not exist in isolation, it is closely related to Li Zhi's philosophical concepts and literary creations. The study of Li Zhi's musical aesthetics facilitates our in-depth study of his system of thought and understanding of how he combined music, philosophy, and literature, providing the value of interdisciplinary research. 4. Enrichment of musical aesthetics: Li Zhi's understanding and aesthetics of music is unique and different from other traditional ideas, which helps us to broaden the diversity of music aesthetics and make our understanding of music more diversified. 5. Impact and succession: Li Zhi's music aesthetics had a significant impact on the development of music aesthetics that followed, and studying it allows us to understand how subsequent scholars inherited and developed Li Zhi's theories. For example, Li Zhi mentioned "the qin is the heart" in *Burn Book · Fugue of the Qin*, which played an important role in the development of the art of the guqin.

Li Zhi's music aesthetics thought occupies an important position in ancient Chinese music aesthetics thought, which has important significance and inspiration in the fields of music theory, creation, performance, education and cultural research. He advocated everything "natural" and believed that the value of music is reflected in its natural expression, and his ideas about the aesthetics of natural beauty provided resources and guidance for the practice

of music theory. For scholars of musicology, Li Zhi's theories can help them understand the importance of the relationship between music and emotion, the cultural content rich in music, and weaken the push for technical arts; For creators and performers, Li Zhi's musical aesthetics can help them to introspect, and on the basis of consolidating the basic skills, pay more attention to the natural flow of the music, and pay attention to the emotional expression of the work; For music educators, Li Zhi's aesthetic theory of music provides theoretical support for music education. Teachers communicate the importance of natural beauty to students by explaining and interpreting musical pieces and theoretical knowledge. This not only helps students to develop a good aesthetic sense, but also stimulates their creativity and allows them to develop a correct outlook on life and understand the importance of personal expression. For the listeners, Li Zhi's idea of the beauty of nature can help them better understand the works, pay attention to the emotional expression of the composers and interpreters, and enhance the level and ability of the listeners to appreciate and understand the music, and to obtain a rich artistic experience. For cultural researchers, Li Zhi's aesthetics of music involves multiple disciplines and can provide them with a more diversified perspective, not only to understand the historical development of the Ming Dynasty and the ideological concepts of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, but also to explore the important position of music in culture.

Li Zhi's musical aesthetics mainly pursues the expression of natural beauty and individuality, and its practicality and effectiveness can be reflected in actual music composition and performance. It encourages music creators to write works that are not just formalities, and favours creators in finding their own genres and styles of music that are truly their own, as well as works that break away from traditional constraints. It allows the performer to focus more on conveying the emotion of the piece rather than indulging in technical expertise, avoiding excessive displays of skill and interpreting the musical work in a simple, sincere manner. In this way, the listener can feel the emotional intensity of the work, have a better listening experience and aesthetic enjoyment, and make the music more unique and infectious. Through the creation, performance, and aesthetics of musical works, we can reflect on artistic expression through Li Zhi's musical aesthetic thought.

### **Purpose and Methodology of the Study**

Centuries ago, Li Zhi was a controversial figure as a critic of musical aesthetics. His ideas combined Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism and opened the way for new ideas in the traditional feudal society. Li Zhi's attainments in philosophy and literature are considerable, but his contribution to the aesthetics of music is often overlooked. Li Zhi's concept of music is of modern significance. His concept of "art without distinction" and "music without class" coincided with the Italian literary critic Croce's idea that "art cannot be categorised". With this essay, the author hope to add to the existing articles on Li Zhi's musical aesthetics.

The author found that there is very little literature detailing Li Zhi's contribution to music, especially with regard to music books. For example, pp. 75-86 of Liang Xiaoping's *Aesthetic History of Chinese Opera* records "Li Zhi's Aesthetic Thought of Opera", and pp. 98-101 of Hu Yuqing's *Aesthetics of Ancient Chinese Music* describes "Li Zhi's Aesthetic Thought of Music". In National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), with "Li Zhi" as the keyword search, appeared

2091 articles. Among them, there are 86 articles with "Li Zhi's music" as the keywords, and 61 articles related to "Li Zhi's music aesthetics".

The author writes the article through the literature research method, and the innovation is that the author does not directly describe Li Zhi's contribution to music aesthetics, but analyses his music aesthetics in the context of Li Zhi's history of thought. Using Xu Jianping's *A History of the Evolution of Li Zhi's Thought* as the main reference, the author describes the three dynasties Li Zhi experienced and the role of each period in the change of his thought. It was the complex social changes that Li Zhi experienced that led to the constant changes in his thinking. At the same time, Li Zhi was also influenced by various schools of thought, which combined with his life experiences to form a unique musical and literary aesthetic. As a historical figure born more than 500 years ago, Li Zhi's thinking was no different from that of modern people, and even more daring and groundbreaking. His lifelong quest for "truth" and "nature" is reflected in his outlook and lifestyle, and can be found in his literary works and debates with others. Such a newcomer with an ancient flavour is neither a composer nor a singer, nor is he skilled in music, but he has a unique insight into opera criticism. This aroused the author's curiosity and the desire to explore Li Zhi's musical ideas and write an article. The author tries to make the article more scientifically meaningful by understanding Li Zhi's life and history of evolution of his thought, and discovering the uniqueness of his musical thought and his contribution to the aesthetics of music.

### Historical Background and Biography

Zhu Houxi (16 September 1507 - 23 January 1567) was the Jiajing Emperor. Within three years of his assumption of the throne, he quickly grasped imperial power in solving the problem of welcoming his mother's rituals, the Zuoshunmen case, and other matters, which had a profound impact on the political and social aspects of the Ming Dynasty. He was diligent in his early years and returned land to the people, ushering in the era of the Jiajing Zhongxing. *The History of the Ming Dynasty* praises that "at the beginning of the reign of Emperor Shizong, he endeavoured to eliminate all the evils of government. The people of the world generally regarded him and the policies he pursued as good, and they were widely recognised and praised". In the more than two decades of innovation, there has been an explosion of talent. In the middle and late stages of his reign, the emperor reappointed the treacherous minister Yan Song, indulged in Taoism, and aspired to immortality, which led to the Renyin palace mutiny, and the country began to go from strength to weaken. Born in 1527 during the reign of Emperor Jiajing, Li Zhi saw the prosperity of the Ming Dynasty and witnessed the gradual decline of the country. In 1539, Li Zhi read the story of "Fan Chi asked Confucius to teach him about farming and was ridiculed" in *The Analects of Confucius - Zi Lu*, and at the age of twelve, he wrote *Theories of experienced farmers, flower and vegetable growers*, which argued against Confucius' view of the farmer as a villain. In 1552, Li Zhi went to Fuzhou to take the township examination and was awarded the title of Juren (举人). In 1553 and 1556, Li Zhi went to Beijing twice to participate in the examination, failed to pass, was sent to Henan Weihui Province, Hui County, began his journey to the bureaucracy. In 1559, Li Zhi was promoted to the post of Doctor at the Nanjing Imperial College. During this period, his father died. Li Zhi returned to his hometown to pay homage to his father, on the way to encounter the Japanese attack, he and the Quanzhou army and people fought bravely against the enemy and won the victory. In the same year, Li Zhi heard that the second daughter of Su Liugong family was dissatisfied with the marriage match and jumped into a well to commit suicide. Li

Zhi completed the *Lychee Chronicle* overnight, advocating that people should bravely pursue the freedom of marriage. In 1564, Li Zhi was transferred to Beijing to serve as a doctor at the Imperial College. In 1566, Li Zhi became the person in charge at the Ministry of Rites in Beijing.

In February 1567, Zhu Zaijian assumed the throne and became known as Emperor Mu Zong. Zhu Zaiji reigned for only five years, but he did two great things - the Longqing Kaiguan and the Anda Fenggong<sup>1</sup>. In 1567, he opened a port in Yuegang, Zhangzhou, Fujian, to allow private foreign trade, prompting the inflow of countless amounts of silver into the Ming dynasty, this is one of the most important events in the history of Chinese trade. In 1571, the Ming Dynasty named Anda, the leader of the right-wing Tumut tribe of Mongolia, as King of Shunyi, and opened eleven border crossings to facilitate trade between China and Mongolia, known as the Anda Fenggong. Through this event, it ended more than 200 years of war between the Ming Dynasty and the northern regime. Li Zhi did not seek an official position upwards during the reign of Emperor Mu Zong, but applied for a transfer to Nanjing in 1570 as a member of the Ministry of Justice. During this period, he studied the theories of Wang Yangming's Xinxue, Laozi's *Tao-te Ching*, and the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra*, and realised that all things are interconnected, each has its own strengths, and is applied in an integrated way.

In 1572, Zhu Yijun assumed the throne, opening the Wanli Dynasty. Zhu Yijun (4 September 1563 – 18 August 1620) reigned for forty-eight years, the first fifteen years of the reign, the Ming Dynasty into the Zhongxing<sup>2</sup> situation, domestic and foreign stability, the people rich. From September 1586 onwards, he did not see his courtiers, and was regarded by the later generation as "the death of Ming was really due to Emperor Shenzong". This was the last dynasty that Li Zhi experienced. In 1580 Li Zhi stepped down as governor of Yaoan. From 1580 to 1585, Li Zhi lived in Tianwo Academy in Wuyun Mountain, Huang'an, Hubei Province, during which time he wrote *Burning Books*, *Collect Books*, *Continued Collect Books*, and *Preface to the Explanation of Laozi*, etc. From 1585 onwards, he stayed at Wimoan in Macheng for nearly three years, calling himself "an old monk who left his home with his hair", and composing *Tongxin Shuo*. In 1590, Li Zhi's *Speaking of Books* and *Burning Books* were published, but he was persecuted by Geng Dingxiang and lived in Wuchang under the protection of Liu Dongxing, who wrote *Water Margin of Loyalty*. In 1599 and 1600, Li Zhi met the missionary Matteo Ricci three times to discuss natural science and religion. In 1602, Zhang Wenda wrote a letter of impeachment against Li Zhi to the Wanli Emperor, defaming his remarks and writings for confusing the people and committing crimes such as heresy, lechery and seduction, and Li Zhi, who was already 75 years old, was immediately arrested. On the night of 16th March of the same year, Li Zhi, a clean and honest thinker, committed suicide in prison.

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<sup>1</sup> Fenggong was a policy of diplomatic relations established between the Ming Dynasty and other countries, whereby other countries accepted the Ming Dynasty as their suzerain state and accepted its title in return for establishing official trade with the Ming Dynasty. [https://www.sohu.com/a/526465254\\_121300147](https://www.sohu.com/a/526465254_121300147) (accessed 14 may 2024) .

<sup>2</sup> Zhongxing refers to the revival of a country from decline. [https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%B8%AD%E5%85%B4/15142?fromModule=lemma\\_inlink](https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%B8%AD%E5%85%B4/15142?fromModule=lemma_inlink) (accessed 21 may 2024) .

### Li Zhi's Ideology

Islam was introduced to China in 651 A.D. and was widely developed and spread during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Li Zhi's grandfather and father believed in Islam, Li Zhi by the influence of the family, early childhood developed a cleanliness habits, Li Zhi made a request for an Islamic funeral for his own burial. Li Zhi was influenced by Islam's prohibition of idolatry, and from an early age he developed the character traits of self-confidence, autonomy and self-reliance, and dared to question and criticise authority.

In Li Zhi's young adulthood, he began to work due to the increase in family size. At this time, he was under the influence of Confucianism - family before self - and the edges of his early childhood were gradually worn away. In his prime, Li Zhi was sent to serve in Huixian County, Henan Province, and was depressed. Later, he was enlightened by learning the story of Shao Yaofu<sup>3</sup>, who sought the Way from Li Changzhi in the Song Dynasty, and realised that the significance of life should not be the pursuit of trivialities in life, but the seeking of the Way to be a human being, and the thought of being independent and self-creative was once again aroused.

During Li Zhi's eleven years of service in Beijing and Nanjing, his thought entered a new phase. He studied the Wangxue<sup>4</sup> and sought to explore the question of life and death. On the road to discovering his self-worth, he made friends with Geng Dingli, Wang Longxi and Luo Jinxi, and his thoughts were influenced by them. During his tenure in Nanjing, Li Zhi began to study *Laozi* and Buddhism, laying the foundation for the Xinxue. His ideas were combined with Laozi's nature's way and doing nothing, and contrasted with the Rushi<sup>5</sup> ideas of his peers. Li Zhi's view of literature was initially formed during this period, he loved the *Shiji*, *Du Zimei collection*, *Su Zizhan collection*, *Water Margin* and *Li Xianji collection*, and believed that literature comes from Xinxue, which can express one's own emotions, and the works strive to be natural and innovative. Li Zhi's behaviour changed from listening to others to speaking well.

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Shao Yaofu, also known as Shao Yong, was a mathematician, poet, and one of the <sup>3</sup> "Five Sons of the Northern Song Dynasty".  
[https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%82%B5%E9%9B%8D/3832?fr=ge\\_al](https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%82%B5%E9%9B%8D/3832?fr=ge_al) (accessed 29 may 2024) .

<sup>4</sup> Wangxue, the branch of Songming ethics guarded by Wang Yangming, played an important role in Li Zhi's ideological changes: 1. The mind is the centre of the universe and things emanate from it; 2. To get to the root of the matter, not to be swayed by the views of others, and to understand things as they are.  
<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%8E%8B%E5%AD%A6/62307465> (accessed 30 may 2024) .

<sup>5</sup> Rushi means to devote oneself to society, which is the representative idea of Confucianism; while Chushi is its antonym, which means to be free from the world and not to be troubled by the world.

Li Zhi governed Yaoan with the philosophy of combining Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, respecting the customs of ethnic minorities, caring for subordinate officials, and allowing the people to seek their own pleasure in self-government. During his three years in power, his thinking underwent a fundamental shift from Wang Yangming's body without goodness or disgust to the Buddhist's karmic emptiness. He was committed to spreading Wang Yangming's Xinxue, but his actions were obstructed by Luo Wenli<sup>6</sup>. Li Zhi's health was deteriorating due to his inability to adapt to climatic conditions or dietary habits, which led him to want to understand life, sickness and death. So he became involved with the Buddha, read the *Buddhist Tanjing*, *Avatamsaka Sutra*, *Heart Sutra*, *Prajna Sutra*, etc., and wrote *Answers to Questions on Nembutsu* and *Six Degrees of Interpretation*. However, he read Buddhism without immersing himself in it, and he did not worship Bodhisattvas and Buddhas, believing that everyone is a Bodhisattva, which reflects Li Zhi's strong concept of equality and sense of autonomy.

After his resignation, Li Zhi lived in Huang'an from 1582 to 1585. His strong desire to seek a friend was difficult to realise, so he had to look for historical figures in books of the past as confidants. Huang'an, as the centre of the lixue science. Li Zhi, prompted by the social environment, temporarily gave up his in-depth study of Buddhism and turned to the study of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. Li Zhi's thinking has changed from Chushi to Rushi, forming the natural vacuum concept of nature, emptiness, self-centredness, truthfulness and happiness.

In the history of Li Zhi's ideological evolution, it is necessary to mention his twelve-year-long polemic with Geng Dingxiang<sup>7</sup>. Geng Dingxiang was a rationalist who followed Confucianism and believed that life should be aimed at cultivating oneself, regulating the family, and governing the state and pacifying the world. Li Zhi, on the contrary, he left his official position, abandoned his family, and studied Buddhist thought, deeply influenced by Zhuangzi's "Taoism follows nature"<sup>8</sup>, and took truth as the standard, believing that the sons of Confucianism under the guise of studying and seeking fame and fortune. In the winter of 1595, Li Zhi travelled to Huang'an Geng Dingxiang's house before the two were reconciled. During this period, Li Zhi's character shifted from being impetuous and eccentric to not arguing with people, and his inner changes were externalised into his behaviour, which was reflected in the works he created, such as *The Tongxin Shuo*.

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<sup>6</sup> Luo Wenli compiled and lectured to his students on the *Xinxue Zhongcheng*, in opposition to Li Zhi's dissemination of xinxue during his time in Yaoan.

<sup>7</sup> Geng Dingxiang, a Ming Dynasty rationalist. He promoted the lecture movement and spoke in the capital, Nanjing and Huangzhou etc. He had a wide range of disciples and was one of the central figures in lecturing at the time. [https://www.gmw.cn/01gmr/2009-05/26/content\\_926013.htm](https://www.gmw.cn/01gmr/2009-05/26/content_926013.htm) (accessed 20 jun 2024) .

The phrase "Taoism follows nature" comes from Lao zi's *Tao Te Ching*, which means that <sup>8</sup> there is something that can be the foundation of the universe, but we don't know how to name it, so we named it "Tao", which means "naturally". "Tao" means "natural". <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%81%93%E6%B3%95%E8%87%AA%E7%84%B6/64671> (accessed 20 jun 2024) .

### Li Zhi's Music Aesthetics

Li Zhi's life pursuit of "true", true heart, true friends, true heroes, true learning, true articles. After the first engraved edition of Li Zhi's *Burning Books* appeared in 1590, he shifted his focus to critiquing novels and theatre works. In December 1591, Li Zhi began to annotate *Romance of the Western Bower*<sup>9</sup>, and the twisted love story of Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng moved him and became one of the reasons why in 1592 he composed *Tongxin Shuo*. *The Tongxin Shuo* is a summary of Li Zhi's thought, and insights into the aesthetics of music can be found in it.

The "tongxin" in *The Tongxin Shuo* is the true heart, which refers to the state of the human being at the very beginning, the natural state, which can be either evil or good. It affirmed the seven passions and six desires and opposed the content of goodness in benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom and faith, which was very shocking and deviant at that time. It departed from the Buddhist and Confucian thought of the East and came close to the humanistic philosophy of the West; it advocated intuition, non-rationalism, and opposition to rationalism, and was of enlightening significance to China's modern intellectual history.

Chinese opera is one of China's literary classics. It has a history of more than 800 years and is a comprehensive art form consisting of folk songs, dances, raps and burlesque. In *The Tongxin Shuo*, Li Zhi regarded literature as Xinxue, then the Chinese opera also became one of the Xinxue. The human heart can show emotions, and opera can express how people feel inside. In *Mr Li Zhuo's Criticism of the Romance of the Western Bower*, it is mentioned that "the way of sound is originally connected with the heart" and "the way of sound can be connected with Zen". Li Zhi believes that there are truths in sound, and these truths are connected to the human mind. In other words it is the Tao in sound that emanates from the human heart and is a direct manifestation of the heart. Human thoughts can be expressed directly through the voice, which is one of the tools of human expression. The word "Zen" is a Buddhist word, so the meaning of "the way of sound can be Zen" is that the truths in sound can be connected to the truths in Buddhism, and thus it is understood that the truths conveyed by sound contain the truths of Buddhism. People become enlightened through sound, which is not just a sound wave produced by an object, but not only a kind of music, but also a vehicle for transmitting knowledge. Listening to music we can learn about life and gain wisdom.

In Li Zhi's *The Burning Books, Volume 4, After the Journey and the Common Word*, it is mentioned that “侯谓声音之道可以禅通，似矣，而引伯牙以为证，谓古不必图谱，今不必硕师。……盖成连有成连之音，虽成连不能授之于弟子，伯牙有伯牙之音，虽伯牙

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<sup>9</sup> *The Romance of the Western Bower* is a miscellany of plays composed by the Yuan dynasty theatre writer Wang Shifu, written in c. 1295-1307. Miscellaneous Opera is one of China's traditional operas that combines song, dance and lines other than those sung in the song. [https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%B4%94%E8%8E%BA%E8%8E%BA%E5%BE%85%E6%9C%88%E8%A5%BF%E5%8E%A2%E8%AE%B0/22568522?fr=ge\\_ala](https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%B4%94%E8%8E%BA%E8%8E%BA%E5%BE%85%E6%9C%88%E8%A5%BF%E5%8E%A2%E8%AE%B0/22568522?fr=ge_ala) (accessed 20 jun 2024) .



不能不得之于成连。……凡昔一切可得而传者，今皆不可复得之也” This passage illustrates Li Zhi's thoughts on the aesthetics of music and his views on music learning, and the text mentions the allusion to Boya learning the qin. Yu Boya was a musician and composer during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, known to the world as the Immortal of the Qin. From a young age, Boya loved music and studied with the master, Mr Chenglian. Chenglian taught Boya the guqin, and Boya learnt the technique but could not grasp the spirit of the music. Later, Chenglian took Boya to Mount Penglai in the East China Sea and ordered Boya to stay here to practise the qin and wait for his own return from searching for his master, Fang Zichun. When Bo Ya waited for ten days and did not see his master Chenglian return, he faced the sea and mountains every day, listened to the sound of waves and birds, and turned his perceptions into music, writing *High Mountains and Flowing Water*<sup>10</sup>. When Chenglian returned, he was greatly pleased to hear Bo Ya's playing and thought that Bo Ya had become the most outstanding qin master in the world, so he let him leave Penglai Island. Li Zhi believes that through the story of Boya learning to play the qin, we can understand the connection between sound and Zen. He argues that there was no need to read sheet music in the past, and there is no need for a knowledgeable teacher today. Chenglian had his own music, which was something Chenglian could not pass on to his disciples. However, Boya has his own music, which cannot be learnt from Chenglian. Everything that can be taught to circulate cannot be perfectly reproduced today. Boya's sense of music came from nature and was learnt through personal experience, not taught to him by Chenglian. Therefore, the wonders of music are not to be obtained from others, but to be comprehended on one's own, i.e., to be truly heard, truly seen, and truly felt.

Li Zhi's understanding of music is similar to that of literature in that both emphasise heartfelt and direct expression. According to Li Zhi, talking about poetry can lead to a sense of meaning and Buddhism, i.e. "talking about poetry is talking about Zen". We express ourselves and our inner truths through music. Music is just one of the manifestations of externalisation, using it as a medium to speak directly to the heart and to appreciate the wonders of Zen. Understanding, learning and expressing music facilitates professional skills and moral cultivation. In Li Zhi's *The Burning Books, Volume 4, Yuyao - Morning and Evening Bells and Drums*, it is mentioned that “轻重疾徐，自有尺度；轻能令人喜，重能令人惧，疾能令人趋，徐能令人息”，it means that there is a distinction between lightness and strength in the intensity and speed of playing an instrument. Light strength makes one cheerful, heavy strength makes one anxious, fast speed makes one anxious, and slow music makes one calm. This reflects Li Zhi's understanding of the strength and tempo of music. Although Li Zhi was not a musician and did not compose musical works, his musical aesthetic attainments were very objective. “闻则自然悲仰，亦且回心易向，知身世之无几，悟劳攘之无忧矣” Li Zhi believes that music can make people sad and can lead to respect for people of high moral character. Therefore, people are willing to share their good deeds with everyone, understand that their life experience is not rich, and realise the wisdom of life, so that their worries are eliminated and their hearts are comforted. “一鸣则蝶梦还周，耳目焕

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<sup>10</sup> High Mountains and Flowing Water, one of the top ten guqin pieces in China.

然，改观易听矣。纵有杂念，一击遂忘；纵有愁思，一捶便废；纵有狂志悦色，一闻音声，皆不知何处去矣” Li Zhi believes that the sound is like Zhuang Zhou dreaming butterfly<sup>11</sup> to give people a novel feeling. It can make people change their original opinion and appreciate it. Even if you have bad thoughts, you can forget them by listening to the sound. Even if there is sorrow, it dissipates when one hears the percussion of the instruments. Even if the listener is arrogant and cocky, he or she doesn't know where he or she is headed after listening to music.

In ancient Chinese society, literature and music were two inseparable forms of creativity. They interact and are closely integrated. Music is one of the means of literary expression, and setting a work to a melody can achieve a rich artistic effect. Li Zhi believes that literature is the Tao and music is the Tao. "The Tao is everywhere", so literature and music are everywhere. Li Zhi opposes "hearing and seeing reason" and believes that the more doctrine is learnt, the more "tongxin" is lost. He advocates that works should be free in terms of method of expression and form of content, with no distinction between high and low. Li Zhi pursued "truth", he asked for the truth of words, the truth of articles and the truth of music, to return to the pure physiological natural state. Creative work should be free from the tendency of purpose and not be made for the sake of fame and fortune. He believes that all creations should follow the natural physiological needs of human beings, so that the works can follow the natural emotions and be true. Li Zhi demanded the expression of truth, the straightforward expression of true feelings without the influence of things. Music is one of the ways to express the work that is birthed from a "tongxin". Without a "tongxin", there is no creative activity, no emotional expression. This insight was highly individualistic, potentially leading to irrationality, extremely rare in society at the time, and revolutionary.

Li Zhi takes nature as the basis of aesthetics, reflecting the Taoist idea of "The Tao follows nature". "Tao" means nature. Everything should follow the laws of nature, arising, developing and dying naturally, and works are no exception. Li Zhi was a scholar who disapproved of the use of technique, he denied technique and believed that true art should be natural, not deliberately artificial. Li Zhi pointed out in *ZaShuo* in Volume 3 of *The Burning Books* that “《拜月》、《西厢》化工也；《琵琶》，画工也。夫所谓画工者，以其能夺天地之化工，而其熟知天地之无工乎？Li Zhi advocates "化工" (huagong), and believes that *Baiyue* and *West Chamber*<sup>12</sup> are works of natural flow, while *Pipa*<sup>13</sup> contains pure and superb playing

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<sup>11</sup> *Zhuang Zhou dreaming butterfly*, from Zhuang Zhou's article *Zhuang Zi - The Adjustment of Controversies* in the Warring States period. One day Zhuang Zhou had a dream that he turned into a butterfly and fluttered happily in the air. When he woke up, he couldn't tell the difference between the dream, whether he had turned into a butterfly in Zhuang Zhou's dream, or whether the butterfly had turned into Zhuang Zhou in its dream. This idiom is used to describe the unpredictability of life.

<sup>12</sup> The Story of the *West Chamber*, also known as *Cui Yingying to Wait for the Moon in the West Chamber*, was a work written by the Yuan dynasty opera writer Wang Shifu between 1295 and 1307, and was widely circulated during the Ming dynasty.

*Pipa*, the full name of which is *Pipa Ji*, is a work by Gao Ming, a theatre writer of the late Yuan and <sup>13</sup> early Ming dynasties. It is based on the play *Zhao Zhen Nü Cai Er Lang*, which is the first play in the history of Chinese Southern Opera to be written with the participation of literati from famous families. Chinese Southern Opera, a Han Chinese opera genre that first emerged in the southern region of China

skills. The musician who is good at technique thinks he can perform the most natural work, but in fact there is no technique in the world.

“要知造化无工，虽有神圣，亦不能识知化工之所在，而其谁能得之？由此观之，画工虽巧，已落二义矣”，there is no skill in creative evolution, and the gods don't know where the skill is. Though skillful, they are fundamentally different from nature's work. “《西厢》、《拜月》，何工之有！盖工莫工于《琵琶》矣。……吾尝揽《琵琶》而弹之矣；一弹而叹，再弹而怨，三弹而向之怨叹无复存者。此其故何耶？岂其似真非真，所以入人之心者不深耶？盖虽工巧之极，其气力限量之可达于皮肤骨肉之间，则其感人仅仅如是，何足怪哉！”

Li Zhi thinks that *West Chamber* and *Baiyue* have no technique, and talking about technique must be *Pipa*. He had tried to play the *Pipa*, and the first time he played it he made people sigh, the second time he played it his heart was full of resentment, and the third time all the mourning was gone. What is the reason for this? Is it because the music doesn't go deep enough to make it sound and feel real? While the *Pipa* is very skillful, the emotion is not genuine. Thus the power of *Pipa* only reaches the skin, which is why the work is touching but superficial.

Li Zhi believes that there is no distinction between good and bad music, nor between high and low class. In the Ming Dynasty, people respected orthodox books, but Li Zhi believed that operas and novels had the same status as history books and Confucian classics, and even that operas and novels surpassed poetry and literature. The "tongxin" of *Tongxin Shuo* is the basis of Li Zhi's "no genre is good or bad" and also the basis of creation. Without a tongxin there is no good work, with a tongxin there is excellent work. In 1597, Li Zhi wrote *Read the Collection of Sheng'an*, Volume 5, *Silk is better than bamboo, bamboo is better than meat* mentioned that

“丝者，丝之声也，出乎于手；竹者竹之声也，出乎口；歌者，口也，心之声也，肉之为也，岂假竹而有乎。可以知自然之道矣。若夫马赋长笛、自然赞笛，亦如嵇康赋琴，自然赞琴耳。无差别也。噫！伯牙之琴，王子之箫，孙登之箫，亦可谓之不自然，亦可谓之不如肉乎？”

Li Zhi believes that "silk"<sup>14</sup>, "bamboo"<sup>15</sup>, "flesh"<sup>16</sup> three kinds of music are equal. He objected to the ancient Chinese view that "silk is better than bamboo and bamboo is better

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between the 12th and 14th centuries, is based on rap literature, and the music is Nanqu. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%AB%98%E5%88%99%E8%AF%9A/3561280?fromtitle=%E9%AB%98%E6%98%8E&fromid=10244290> (accessed 9 jul 2024) .  
<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%8D%97%E6%88%8F/1605203> (accessed 9 jul 2024) .

<sup>14</sup> Silk, refers to ancient Chinese stringed instruments such as the qin and pipa.

<sup>15</sup> Bamboo, refers to ancient Chinese musical instruments made of bamboo, such as bamboo flutes and bamboo xiao.

<sup>16</sup> Flesh, referring to a person's throat.

than flesh"<sup>17</sup>. The text states that the sound of silk strings comes from the hands; the sound of wind instruments, from the mouth; and the sound of song through the mouth, originating from the heart, from the human throat. It is a law of nature that wind music cannot replace other sounds. Ma Rong's *Flute Fugue* praises the sound of the flute, just as Jikang's *Qin Fugue* praises the sound of the qin, without any difference. The qin of Bo Ya, and the xiao of Wang Zi and Sun Deng, are all natural and the same as the human voice. In the same year, Li Zhi wrote *Reading History · Qin Fu*, which elaborated the concept of equal status of musical instruments in Volume 5, *Burning Books*. It is mentioned in the text 《白虎通》<sup>18</sup>曰：

‘琴者禁也。禁人邪恶，归于正道，故谓之琴。’余谓琴者，心也，琴者，吟也，所以吟其心也。……《尸子》曰：‘舜作五弦之琴，以歌南风，曰：南风之薰兮，可能解吾民之愠兮。’因风而思民愠，此舜心也，舜之吟也。微子伤殷之将亡，见鸿雁高飞，援琴作操，不敢鸣之于口，而但鸣之于手，此微子心也，微子之吟也。……由此观之，同一心也，同一吟也，乃谓‘丝不如竹，竹不如肉’，何也？夫心同，吟同，则自然亦同，乃又谓‘渐进自然’，又何也？岂非叔夜所谓‘未达礼乐之情者耶？’”

*The Baihu Tong*<sup>18</sup> mentions that the qin means love and is equal to prohibition. The qin can prohibit one's evil thoughts and return one to the right path, hence the name qin. And according to Li Zhi, the qin is the heart and a chant that expresses true thoughts. *The Shizi*<sup>19</sup> mentions Shun<sup>20</sup> created the five-stringed qin<sup>21</sup>, which was designed to accompany the *The South Wind*. *The South Wind* is like a gentle breeze that relieves the people of their sorrows, which is a manifestation of Shun's love for the people. Weizi<sup>22</sup> was saddened by the demise of the Shang Dynasty. He saw the geese flying high and composed qin music to express his state of mind through playing it. Li Zhi concluded that the same heart, the same chanting, how is it that "stringed instruments are not as good as bamboo instruments, bamboo instruments are not as good as the human voice"? With the same idea in mind, it naturally plays the same

<sup>17</sup> The phrase "silk is better than bamboo and bamboo is better than flesh" comes from the Tang Dynasty poet Wu Rong's *Song of Li Zhou Playing the Zheng*, which means that stringed instruments are not as good as bamboo instruments, and the sound of bamboo instruments is not as good as the human voice.

<sup>18</sup> 《白虎通》 *The Baihu Tong*, also known as *The Baihu Tongyi*, was written by Ban Gu, a historian and writer of the Eastern Han Dynasty, who expounded on social and natural phenomena through yin and yang and the five elements. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%99%BD%E8%99%8E%E9%80%9A%E4%B9%89/784854> (accessed 25 jul 2024) .

<sup>19</sup> *The Shizi* is a pre-Qin work written by Shijiao, a statesman and thinker of the Warring States period. Shijiao synthesised various schools of thought, with different schools offering different views on politics, culture and economics.

<sup>20</sup> Legend has it that Shun was the leader of a tribal confederation in the later stages of Chinese patrilineal society. He was one of the "Three Emperors and Five Emperors" and Shun was the representative of the Eastern barbarian group. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%88%9C/79389> (accessed 19 aug 2024) .

<sup>21</sup> Five-stringed qin, plucked string instrument, a type of guqin. The five-stringed qin has been used in the production of many ancient Chinese chordophones. It is used for solo performance or to accompany folk songs and folk dances. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%BA%94%E5%BC%A6%E7%90%B4/3877975> (accessed 19 aug 2024) .

<sup>22</sup> Weizi, also known as Song Weizi and Yin Weizi, was the founding ruler of the state of Song at the end of the Shang Dynasty and the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty, and the eldest brother of King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty, Dixin. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%BE%AE%E5%AD%90/67097> (accessed 19 aug 2024) .

way, gradually entering the realm of natural creation, aren't Shun and Weizi what Jikang<sup>23</sup> believes "those who fail to fully understand the culture of rites and music are given to practice it"? This shows that Li Zhi believes that "nature" occupies an important position in music creation and musical works, and that there is no status difference in music, and no distinction between good and bad musical instruments and human voices.

### Summary

Li Zhi's ideas were novel and rebellious in his time, and unique in the entire history of Chinese music. His forward-thinking musical aesthetics epitomised historical progress. *The Tongxin Shuo* covers Li Zhi's musical thought, which can guide musical activities and is one of his basic theories of music aesthetics. Adhering to the principle of "everything is false when a tongxin is lost", Li Zhi pursues the beauty of nature, advocates the equality of music, and requires that the works reflect the true feelings of the creator's heart, which was a rare modern concept in the society at that time. Li Zhi is not to be underestimated in promoting the development and progress of musical thought, and deserves to be studied and researched by future generations.

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<sup>23</sup> Jikang, a thinker, musician, and litterateur from the state of Wei during the Three Kingdoms period, was the spiritual leader of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. He was well versed in music and rhythm, especially loved to play the qin, and was the author of the music theory works *Qinfu* and *Sounds Having Nothing to Do with Grief or Pleasure*. He advocated that the essence of sound is harmony, and that harmony with heaven and earth is the highest state of music, believing that joy, anger, sadness and happiness are not essentially musical feelings but human emotions.