



ANTJE RICHTER

Letters & Epistolary Culture
IN EARLY MEDIEVAL CHINA

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Antje Richter

A China Program Book

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What's your guess? Can I still get a letter by Sunday? It should be possible. But it's crazy, this passion for letters. Isn't a single one sufficient? Isn't knowing once sufficient? Certainly, it's sufficient, but nevertheless one leans far back and drinks in the letters and is aware of nothing but that one doesn't want to stop drinking.

—FRANZ KAFKA, letter to Milena Jesenská, May 29, 1920

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Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China

Introduction

Voices a myriad of years old are presented,
responses from a thousand of miles away are incited.

—LIU XIE, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Wenxin diaolong)

Having grown up in the 1960s and 1970s, in a country where telephones were rare, I learned to consider mail as something that may hold great importance for my life. I vividly recall letters I received—longed for or arriving out of the blue—as well as letters I wrote myself, whether effortlessly or taking great pains. Unlike the e-mails and text messages that have come to replace this form of written communication since the early 1990s, letters are first of all material objects of a distinctive character and with a distinctive transportation history, having passed through many hands. We may fold and unfold them, flatten them and turn them over; we may crumple them or tear them up but also bundle and keep them. Messages that reach us electronically travel with great speed across great distances, although a certain characteristic time lag remains. Easy enough to read and answer, they are cumbersome to collect and store. To search through them in a file after a few years have passed is much less satisfying than to rummage through stacks of envelopes and sheets of rustling paper in different textures, sizes, and colors, bearing different handwritings in all kinds of tints, along with sketches, scrawls, stickers, and stamps. If they are old enough, letters may be faded, smell funny, and easily fall apart, stimulating our memories and imaginations through all the senses. So even if, in a way, we keep on writing “letters” and receiving “mail,” probably with greater frequency than ever before in human history, it is not surprising that we prefer to call these electronic and largely dematerialized pieces of writing “texts” and “messages,” thus emphasizing

a difference between two forms of written communication that we obviously feel to be significant.

This most recent media change and its cultural implications have been studied extensively during the past two decades. Depending on a scholar's general outlook, the appraisals of this transformation differ widely: it may be either characterized dismissively as a cultural decline or embraced as a promising new development.¹ Whatever stand one may take on this issue, it is beyond doubt that the deficits of the new means of written communication—especially the loss of the material and sensual dimension of a letter but also the neglect of traditional epistolary conventions—are counterbalanced by considerable gains. Among these are the enhanced informality and dialogicity of written communication, which appear chiefly to be functions of the greater speed of transmission, as well as the development of a whole new world of words, phrases, complex symbols (such as emoticons), and distinct conventions that are peculiar to e-mails, text messages, and other forms of electronic communication.²

This media change is part of a longer process that has led to the almost complete abandonment of letters, one of the earliest-known types of written communication. In the West, the process started in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the typewriter, the telegraph, and the telephone dealt severe blows to the use of handwriting and all written communication.³ From the beginning, this change triggered not only general concern about the supposed decline of letter writing as a key constituent of any society's communicative practice and literary culture but also scholarly interest of a rather nostalgic turn, often triggered by the particular materiality of traditional letters, which carry a broad spectrum of personal and historical marks, from the individuality of the handwriting to the various traces left by postal transmission. Just as letters themselves live on a handful of *topoi*—lamenting separation, concern for the recipient, letters as insufficient substitutes for face-to-face conversation, and so forth—so apparently does Western epistolary research, whose most conspicuous common *topos* is the decline of letter writing. The end of epistolary culture has long been predicted and has been rediscovered and reaffirmed time and again. One of the earliest such voices in Europe was that of Georg Steinhausen who in 1889 already assumed the end of epistolary history. In 1962, Theodor W. Adorno declared, in a preface to a letter collection originally edited by Walter Benjamin in 1936, that history had passed its

judgment on letters as a literary form and that those who can still practice it possess “archaic abilities.”⁴ However, the denial of this variety of cultural pessimism is another common topos of epistolary research. In 1990, when a special edition of the journal *World Literature Today* pursued the question in “The Letter: A Dying Art?” most authors readily admitted to a decline in letter writing but, at the same time, were reluctant to speak of its demise, pointing out that we are witnessing “a magnificent autumnal flowering” of letter writing and suspecting that “perhaps, who knows, one day it may rise again from the tomb.”⁵ The list of autumn flowers is impressive indeed, given the corpora of letters that came to light during the past century. Some of them are gigantic in size, for instance, the 250,000 preserved letters and postcards by George Bernhard Shaw alone.⁶ Others are fascinating because of their literary powers and startling frankness, such as the letters of Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, and many other prominent writers. Outside of the literary world, a crucial development in terms of epistolary research was the discovery, exploration, and publication of enormous collections of personal letters that were never meant to be published—such as war letters, immigrants’ letters, women’s letters—and yet have come to be appreciated as invaluable primary sources of history, language, and the culture of everyday life.⁷

EPISTOLARY RESEARCH IN CHINESE STUDIES AND BEYOND

In the West, research on epistolary cultures of the ancient and medieval world has been a thriving field for more than a century. Comprehensive and detailed studies on letter writing in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe have illuminated the fundamental questions of written communication in different societies and have made translations of letters from these cultures available to a wide audience.⁸ In addition to these general studies, a great number of works have been published that are dedicated to specialized areas of investigation, from epistolary subgenres, letter-writing manuals, specific formal features of letters, letters written by specific groups of people (such as women or merchants) to letters by individual authors and epistolary fiction.⁹ Letter writing in the early modern and modern periods has received even more scholarly attention, resulting in a rich body of secondary literature that provides fascinating insights into a

broad range of fields, from history to literature to sociology, to name but a few.¹⁰

The same cannot be said of Chinese studies. In Sinology, scholars are not only a long way from the abundance and diversity of specialized research, as it is known from the West and Near East, but also lack basic studies. Western secondary literature on personal letter writing for China's entire imperial period (221 BCE—1911 CE) consists of no more than three unpublished dissertations,¹¹ a textbook on late imperial epistolary language,¹² and about three dozen articles,¹³ (much less than has been written on the letters of Cicero or Pliny alone) and is utterly insufficient to do justice to more than two millennia of vibrant Chinese letter writing. Translations of Chinese letters into Western languages are also scarce. One of the most prolific translators of premodern Chinese letters remains Erwin von Zach (1872–1942), whose translations from *Selections of Refined Literature* (Wen xuan) into German include many official and personal letters.¹⁴ So far there is only one publication that presents a sizable selection of Chinese epistolary literature through the ages, the 1994 edition of the Hong Kong journal *Renditions*, a collection of about forty famous letters in excellent English translations along with short commentaries. All in all, Chinese epistolary literature and culture are seriously underrepresented areas in Chinese studies that definitely deserve to be made visible, both within Chinese studies and for a wider audience in the humanities and beyond.

The reason for the lack of critical interest in the epistolary and the marginality of the genre is certainly not that letters were irrelevant in this part of the world. The significance of correspondence in China, whether official or personal, is beyond doubt. Written communication informed administrative processes, social and business networks, family relations, and personal friendships. Thousands of letters of all kinds became part of the transmitted corpus of Chinese literature. The neglect of letters and the epistolary sphere in China is due to a multitude of reasons, among which the absence of two major scholarly motivations appears to be foremost. First, letters play no remarkable role in the Confucian canon, that is to say, there is no Chinese equivalent to the epistles in the New Testament that were so decisive in instigating and sustaining research on letter writing in the West.¹⁵ If the Confucian canon contained texts in letter form comparable to the Epistles of Paul, the genre would have had a very different history in China. Second, scholarly nostalgia for a vanishing mode of

communication, a key motivator for research today, is only a recent phenomenon in China. In the West, concern about the supposed decline of letter writing emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Owing to the peculiarities of the Chinese script (which rendered the typewriter impractical) and to the sparse distribution of the telephone in China for the greater part of the twentieth century, personal letter writing was very much alive and taken for granted until about the mid-1990s, when it abruptly started to be supplanted by new media such as e-mail, cellular phones, and text messaging.

Since the mid-1990s, interest in Chinese letters has been growing steadily, in both China and the West. A look at the prestigious *Cambridge History of China* confirms this rise in interest. While the early volumes of the 1980s do not even list “letters,” “postal service,” or similar subjects in their indexes, the latest volume, published in 1999, features a substantial chapter on the transportation of official documents and private letters via courier and postal systems.¹⁶ A number of ongoing studies pursue promising approaches that either focus on letters or take epistolary material into account.¹⁷ In China itself, the recent growth in epistolary awareness is not only noticeable on the art market, where handwritten letters can command exorbitant prices; it has also stimulated moderate scholarly interest.¹⁸ The first and so far only book-length survey of Chinese epistolary literature in Chinese came out in 1999,¹⁹ and articles about individual literary letters or correspondences are published occasionally.²⁰ However, in China, letters are still rarely perceived as a genre that needs and deserves to be treated on its own in order to realize its potential. Letters are utterly marginal, and if they are mentioned in more general literary scholarship at all, they are usually noted only because they constitute part of the literary oeuvre of an author or on account of their subject matter, but there is no reflection on the epistolary character of these texts.²¹

TEXTUAL SOURCES OF EARLY MEDIEVAL CHINESE LETTER WRITING

The majority of ancient and medieval Chinese letters have come down to us because they were considered to be of historical or literary value and were thus incorporated into other works: standard histories, encyclopedias, anthologies, collections of biographies, and so forth. We have little information about the particulars of this process, especially its beginning. It is not known, for instance, how personal letters

achieved wider circulation and thus could be included in a standard history or any other received text. Did their authors copy them before they sent them off? Or did their recipients keep and disseminate them? Had these letters been published in any other way before they were incorporated in a received text?

Certainly letters were subjected to editorial interventions, mostly abridgments and embellishments, in order to adapt them to the requirements of their new literary environments.²² While it is impossible to accurately assess the extent of literary enhancement the editors deemed appropriate, the pruning they effected is clearly evident, since it concerned mainly the largely formulaic frame of a letter. Unfortunately, it is precisely the frame that usually contains the most interesting information about both the particular context of a letter and contemporaneous epistolary practice, as some of the few apparently intact letters demonstrate. In beginning and concluding letters, authors usually mentioned the external and internal circumstances of their writing, sending, receiving, and reading letters and made reference to the tangible and emotional importance that these pieces of personal communication held for them. However, most editors obviously regarded the frame to be of little significance compared to the main text that all too often bears no trace of originally having been part of a letter but reads like a treatise instead. Of the more than two thousand extant letters and letter fragments from early medieval China, only about 10 percent seem to have been received in their entirety, with prescript and postscript intact; about 30 percent retain other parts of the epistolary frame, such as the proem or the epilogue. This means that in the process of reducing them to their perceived relevant core, most early medieval letters were practically “de-epistolarized” and turned into much less genre-specific vignettes. This editorial practice continues even today, despite a general awareness of the importance of genre for the appropriate understanding of a text.²³

A second route of transmission, particularly relevant for early medieval China, is the collection and subsequent reproduction of letters that were cherished as masterpieces of calligraphy. Since these letters were transmitted not for literary or historical reasons but because of their visual appeal, they usually differ in content and character. Calligraphic letters generally are short, casual, and intimate and seem to represent the more quotidian of written communication. Although calligraphic letters may initially have been transmitted in their entirety and not deliberately modified, many of them eventually

also suffered losses, either from material damage of the writing support or from textual damage of various kinds—not to mention the problem of forgery. Textual damage could be caused by misrepresentations during the process of transcription or by copying practices, which occasionally interfered with the original layout of the source document, produced only excerpts of a given letter, or combined originally unrelated texts into one piece.²⁴

Finally, personal letters were and continue to be archaeologically recovered, albeit on a smaller scale than official communication, which is clearly prevalent among the manuscripts from early and early medieval China.²⁵ However, the amount and content of these manuscripts are hard to assess, as only the smallest portion of them has been published or is otherwise accessible.²⁶

So even if an ample number of early medieval Chinese letters are available for scholarly investigation today, we need to be aware of the problematic nature of this corpus. A minor problem lies in the form this corpus takes, consisting mostly of fragmentary texts scattered all over medieval literature.²⁷ Not only must we accept that many of the transmitted texts are products of editing, but the composition of this corpus is also unlikely to be representative of letter writing at the time, which must have been much more extensive and diverse than what is known today. Although similar caveats need to be considered for other literary genres as well, the discrepancy in quantity and quality between the letters that were written at the time and those that have survived until today is much larger than in the case of other literary genres, such as poetry. The main reason for this difference is that no other genre was practiced by such a large part of society, including authors who were untrained amateurs, lacked any kind of literary talent, and often enough were not even literate.

The philological difficulties involved in reading and understanding early medieval letters pose further challenges. These difficulties, although shared by other genres of the period, are magnified in epistolary writings by the problem of contextualization that complicates the study of any letter. This problem often remains unresolved, because it is impossible to reconstruct the original communicative framework along with the specific knowledge that allowed the intended reader, be it the addressee or a wider audience, to understand a letter with all its implications.²⁸ Some of the most eminent Chinese scholars have remarked upon the complex difficulties of reading early medieval letters, among them Luo Zhenyu (1866–1940) with reference to

archaeologically retrieved letters²⁹ and Qian Zhongshu (1910–1999), who, writing about the letters of Wang Xizhi, pointed out that the correspondents shared a “universe of discourse” (*yuyan tiandi*), which easily eludes and excludes the noninitiated reader: “Trivial family matters, scattered words between relatives and friends, casual jottings, rough and careless, but the recipients understood.”³⁰ The oldest personal letter that was transmitted as a calligraphy, today kept in the Palace Museum in Beijing, illustrates the difficulties of deciphering early medieval letters very well. Although “Letter on recovering from illness” (Pingfu tie) by Lu Ji (261–303) received a fair amount of scholarly attention, not only as a revered example of early medieval calligraphy, but also because it was written by one of the greatest poets of Chinese history, there is little agreement about the content of this brief and humble letter (fig. I.1). Even transcriptions differ considerably, by more than a third of the characters, let alone interpretations.³¹ The challenges posed by letters such as Lu Ji’s “Letter on recovering from illness” undeniably complicate the exploration of early medieval epistolary literature and culture, but these challenges are more than compensated by the potential of this rich and promising field.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Given these problems and the limited general knowledge about the conventions of letter writing in early medieval China, it is not surprising that only a tiny fraction of the extant personal letters from this period have been translated or studied so far.³² This is a great loss, because we have an abundance of transmitted sources that promise fascinating insights into personal communicative culture and the historical, literary, and intellectual developments related to or expressed in letters. This book addresses this unsatisfactory situation by providing an introduction to the epistolary literature and culture of early medieval China. It aims to make the social practice and the existing textual specimens of personal Chinese letter writing from this period fully visible for the first time, both for the various branches of Chinese studies and for the already well-established epistolary research in other ancient and modern cultures—which has, by the way, provided decisive methodological inspirations for this project. This study also intends to provide an impetus for further research and publications on letter writing in other periods of Chinese history and, in the long



Figure I.1. Lu Ji (261–303), “Letter on recovering from illness” (Pingfu tie), written in ink on paper, 23.7 x 20.6 cm, Palace Museum Beijing.

run, to encourage a more confident and consistent use of letters as historical and literary sources.

While the earliest evidence of diplomatic correspondence in China dates from the seventh century BCE and personal letter writing appears in the third century BCE, it was only in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that letters began to be viewed as constituting a literary genre. Especially the letters written during the last decades of the Han foreshadow the impressive flourishing of letter writing in the four centuries that followed. The early medieval period (ca. 200–ca. 600), with its heightened sense of the individuality of authors, artists, and members of the elite in general, features a mature epistolary literature and thus lends itself particularly well to an introduction of Chinese letter writing. My exploration of the field, which includes

translations, analyses, and appraisals of a large number of representative letters, covers the following areas.

Part I, “Materials and Concepts of Letter Writing,” explores basic circumstances that defined epistolary culture in early medieval China. Chapter 1, “Materiality and Terminology,” is dedicated to aspects of material culture that shaped letter writing and letter terminology, concluding with a definition of the personal letter in early medieval China, the main subject matter of this book. Chapter 2, “Letters and Literary Thought,” discusses the critical and theoretical approach to letters in Chinese literary history as expressed in a broad spectrum of early medieval texts about literary thought, including letters that contain self-reflective statements about the genre.

Part II, “Epistolary Conventions and Literary Individuality,” describes the peculiar language of letters with respect to vocabulary and textual patterns as well as the correlation between topicality and creativity. Chapter 3, “Structures and Phrases,” introduces the most common elements of the letter formula as well as specific forms of address and self-designation used in letter writing. Chapter 4, “Topoi,” expands the exploration of the epistolary language and communicative intentions of personal letters by investigating principal topoi. Chapter 5, “Normativity and Authenticity,” continues this line of inquiry, exploring the relationship between epistolary normativity and cliché, on the one hand, and authenticity and literary originality, on the other, which provides an occasion to recapitulate the major topics addressed earlier in the book.

REMARKS ON TRANSLATION

All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted. Letters and other source materials translated in this book are usually followed by their Chinese text. If a text is composed in parallel prose, it is presented in tabular form, occasionally with added spaces, to emphasize the parallel structure. Letters are usually referred to by the titles found in Yan Kejun’s *Complete Collection of Prose Literature from the Three Dynasties of Remote Antiquity, the Qin, Han, Three Kingdoms, and Six Dynasties* (Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen). In my translations of these titles, recipients generally appear with their family names and personal names, even if the traditional letter titles use other designations such as official positions (which may be anachronistic). Since the Chinese titles of letters preserved primarily for

their calligraphic value rather than for their text are often taken randomly from the first line of a letter, these titles (most of which are of letters by Wang Xizhi) will be left untranslated. Early medieval literature is teeming with allusions, although it is often difficult to decide whether a phrase is intended as a specific allusion to or even a quotation from earlier literature or whether it has already become part of the general vocabulary of educated writers at the time. In order to reveal as many intertextual references as possible in the translations, potential allusions are indicated by quotation marks, even when it is probable that they were just part of the common stock of literary phrases. I highlight the vast variety of words that are translated as “letter” by adding transcriptions of the respective Chinese words—almost two dozen in this book alone—in square brackets (e.g., *shu* or *bizha*), sometimes along with a further explanation (e.g., “*gao*, note” or “*ming*, directive”).

