

Reviews of Books

A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture. Edited by ANTJE RICHTER. Handbuch der Orientalistik, vol. IV.31. Leiden: BRILL, 2015. Pp. xx + 978. €231, \$299.

In the fields of European history and literature, the study of letters and epistolary culture has absorbed scholars for decades, producing hundreds (thousands?) of books and articles. In Chinese studies, despite a wide range of available source material, until very recently letters have received scant attention. A 2012 conference organized by Antje Richter at the University of Colorado, Boulder, attempted to address this dearth by encouraging a diverse group of scholars in fields ranging from archeology and art to history and literature to turn their expertise to the topic of letters. The happy result is this huge volume, containing twenty-five chapters of frequently groundbreaking studies on a breathtaking array of topics.

Finding organizational rubrics under which to categorize such a diverse set of essays was clearly challenging; Richter's brief but thoughtful introduction provides reasonable justifications for the structure she has chosen. The volume is loosely organized into three broad sections devoted respectively to "Material Aspects of Chinese Letter Writing," "Contemplating the Genre," and "Diversity of Content and Style." This last section—which encompasses more than half of the chapters—is further subdivided into sections on "Informal," "Literary," and "Open" or public letters. This review attempts to introduce the rich contents of the volume by providing a brief description of each chapter, followed by more general comments.

The four essays in the "Material Aspects" section explore the ways that letters were transmitted, and how they functioned as art objects, calligraphy models, and gifts. Though not directly focused on letters per se, Y. Edmund Lien's discussion of the Han Postal Relay system provides a fascinating glimpse of the structures (literal and figurative) established by the Han government to ensure timely and efficient communication across the vast empire. Lien reconstructs the distribution of watch-towers (which ultimately became postal stations) across the Han landscape, and uncovers Han regulations that established penalties for couriers who were late with or lost their letters. His investigation inspires renewed appreciation for the technical and institutional sophistication of Han governance, while also demonstrating the centrality of epistolary communication to the dynasty's ability to control the frontier. Switching focus on both topic and time period, Amy McNair's essay in chapter 2 traces the long after-life of an eighth-century letter by the Tang calligrapher and statesman Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿. McNair demonstrates how the transformation of this particular letter into an object of connoisseurship was related to later eras' moral evaluation of the author as well as to aesthetic appreciation for his calligraphy. In elucidating the ways that the letter generated further texts in the form of colophons and even additional letters, eventually becoming a canonical calligraphy model, McNair's chapter highlights the importance of letters as cultural artifacts in the Chinese tradition. The same point emerges from Suzanne E. Wright's investigation of the history of letter-writing stationery in chapter 3. Wright finds that specially decorated letter paper was already in use by the fourth century, and provides illustrations of such paper that survive from as early as the Song. She shows that by the Ming dynasty, elegant letter paper had itself become an object of connoisseurship, commentary, and even fashion. Letter stationery came to serve as a kind of commentary on or accessory to the letters it contained, as writers tailored the paper used to the content of their letters. The final chapter in this section approaches the issue of materiality from a quite different direction, as Xiaofei Tian considers how letters functioned in gift exchange. Tian's sensitive analysis of a series of letters Cao Cao 曹操 wrote to accompany or thank people for gifts shows the subtle but important political messages that letters could convey, and also illuminates how letter rhetoric could shift with the changing status of the authors. Along the way, Tian takes up issue of genre, exploring the influence of poetry and the use of parallel prose in the development of the *qi* 啟 letter form, which was a critical sub-genre of Chinese letter from the Six Dynasties through at least the Southern Song.

“Genre” becomes the explicit focus of the second section of the book, which primarily focuses on the pre-Tang period. David R. Knechtges opens chapter 5 with a list of all thirty-seven genres contained in the famous early sixth-century anthology *Wen xuan* 文選, and contextualizes the anthology among others of its day. The center of Knechtges’ chapter, however, is a detailed description of every letter included in the anthology. For each entry, Knechtges provides references to existing annotations, translations, and secondary scholarship. He stresses the evident importance of the *shu* 書 genre to the *Wen xuan* editors, and the importance of those specimens included in the anthology as models of literary elegance. Given the tendency of later Chinese scholars to model their writing on the *Wen xuan*, Knechtges’ catalog here will undoubtedly prove to be an invaluable reference for those studying later Chinese epistolary culture. Chapter 6 turns to a particular sub-genre of letters, as Antje Richter examines letters of admonition written to sons or younger family members. These letters (Richter’s examples date from the Han and Six Dynasties) are unusual in the context of early Chinese letters in not being exquisitely polite and humble. Richter interrogates the issue of genre by exploring the similarities and the distinctions between admonitory letters and testamentary communications. She closes by suggesting that these letters were preserved and passed down not simply as models of style, but because they “express societal values in an especially effective way.”

In chapter 7, Zeb Raft’s close analysis of a set of “presentation-response poems” (*zeng da shi* 贈答詩) exchanged by the early fifth-century writers Qiu Yuanzhi 丘淵之 and Yang Hui 羊徽 echoes Tian’s findings regarding the blurred boundaries between poetry, letters, and gifts in the Chinese context. Raft emphasizes that the “space of separation” is central to such poems as well as to letters. He also suggests that the intimacy of the relationship between the two interlocutors paradoxically hinged on the public circulation of their communications. The relationship between public display and personal expression is also central to chapters 8 and 9, where Robert Joe Cutter (on the development of personal expression in Cao Zhi’s 曹植 letters and memorials) and Pablo Ariel Blitstein (on “Liu Xie’s [劉勰] Institutional Mind”) explore the boundaries between state and private communications. Both Cutter and Blitstein show—and Blitstein argues explicitly—that in fifth- and sixth-century China, there was no real conceptual divide between public and private. In contrast, Lik Hang Tsui’s chapter 10, focused on the Song dynasty, demonstrates that by the eleventh century a conceptual boundary between public and private was indisputably recognized, albeit frequently breached. Tsui quotes Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 castigating a friend for adopting the conventions of government documents when sending a personal letter, and shows Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙 warning his students not to use the bureaucratic *zha* form and its associated “empty formalities” in their private correspondence. Taken together, these three essays suggest that the evolution of the relationship between government and personal communications in China is a worthy topic for further exploration.

By far the longest section of the book, part three does indeed present a “Diversity of Content and Style.” Chapters 11 through 15 consider various types of “informal letters.” Enno Giele’s chapter 11 examines “manuscripts” (including letters on bamboo or wood) of private or personal letters from the Qin and Han that have been unearthed in archeological finds. His discussion suggests that perhaps there was a “public-private” (or at least “personal-bureaucratic”) divide in early China after all, though such a divide may not be visible in the published letters that have come down to us. The letters Giele translates are clearly not bureaucratic—they consist primarily of polite greetings—though they cannot be called not personally revealing either. Still, they show “the eagerness of people from all ranks . . . to connect with relatives, friends, and acquaintances” (pp. 412–13). Giele’s detailed annotated translations of nine Qin-Han letters (pp. 424–69) could serve as useful primary source documents in an undergraduate class on early China, or as material for a graduate seminar on reading letter texts.

In chapter 12, Ronald Egan considers the much later informal (though in this case, published) letters, or *chi du* 尺牘, of Su Shi 蘇軾. Egan finds that these are frequently revealing of Su’s emotional life, his friendships and moods, as well as of his non-official activities. Egan’s chapter demonstrates the historical and literary richness of such informal letters, especially when composed by an author of Su Shi’s brilliance. Chapter 13 turns to an extraordinary set of even more “personal” letters, which Janet Theiss has found preserved within a Qing dynasty legal case file. The love letters (or more accurately, love notes) Theiss studies were reportedly exchanged between a young wife and her lover, the family

tutor. As is typical of legal case material, these love notes leave behind many unanswered questions, but they provide a fascinating glimpse into family conflict, the use of correspondence in household communications, the rhetoric of passion and desire, and the complexity of Qing legal machinations. Bonnie McDougall's chapter 14 also takes up the topic of love letters, pointing out some of the commonalities and differences in the ways love letters have been used and understood in Europe and China. McDougall concludes her chapter with translations of a set of love letters exchanged by the early twentieth-century writer Lu Xun 魯迅 and his lover Xu Guangping 許廣平 (pp. 568–75). In the final chapter of this sub-section, Jie Li sensitively and elegantly explores the posthumously published family letters of the mid-twentieth-century writer Shen Congwen 沈從文. The letters, selected and edited by Shen's wife of nearly sixty years, reveal a poignant picture of Shen, who was repeatedly persecuted during the Maoist period, and was simultaneously supportive of the revolution and skeptical of it. Like Egan on Su Shi, Li demonstrates the value of informal letters as both literary and historical sources.

With chapter 16, the volume turns to concern with more self-consciously “literary letters”—letters that seem to have been intended for public circulation. Matthew Wells examines autobiographical letters by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (to Ren Shaoqing 任少卿), Fan Ye 范曄 (to his nephews when he was about to be executed), and Xi Kang 嵇康 (breaking off friendship with Shan Tao 山濤). Wells acknowledges the difficulty of knowing with certainty whether such letters were intended to be public or private, but ultimately sees them as self-consciously literary works meant to reframe “the author's identity so that it remains consistent with the author's moral convictions” (p. 639). Alexi Ditter examines Tang dynasty “cover letters,” used by aspiring examination candidates or junior officials to help secure the patronage of their seniors. Through close examination of an exchange between Dugu Yu 獨孤郁 and his patron Quan Deyu 權德輿, Ditter elucidates their disparate understandings of the patron's role in Tang society. Anna Shields investigates the expression of emotion in personal letters sent by mid-Tang men to their friends or colleagues. She deftly elucidates the techniques by which the authors sought to present their sentiments as personal and authentic, even as their letters circulated publicly. Noting that “a bibliographical distinction between formal and informal letters does not emerge until the Northern Song” (p. 680), Shields also argues that Tang collegial letters—neither politically nor occasion-based—provided a new space for experimentation with expression of feeling. In chapter 19, Natasha Heller turns her investigative lens to the letters of Chan monks. Focusing on a set of thirteenth-century letters, she shows how monks' correspondence encompassed philosophical discussion and religious teaching, but also administrative and ritual matters. Letters, she concludes, held a special position in Chan thinking, such that they could be seen as “something other than literary entanglement” (p. 741).

Chapter 20 brings us back into the late imperial period, as Ellen Widmer explores women's letters as a window onto women's literary culture. Widmer discusses some of the methodological difficulties involved in studying women's letters, and also argues that letter-writing by women proliferated from the Ming into the Qing. Then Widmer turns to the letters of three seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ladies, all gently bred *gui xiu* 閨秀. Their letters show these women traveling, attending parties, and learning to ride horses: as Widmer notes, they reveal aspects of late imperial women's lives that are invisible in other sources. We get similar insights into late imperial life from David Pattison's investigation of a collection of personal letters received by the seventeenth-century official, Yan Guangmin 顏光敏. Although Pattison is interested particularly in epistolary practice, his analysis of nearly 750 letters by some 277 correspondents also highlights social interactions that are seldom seen in other sources. Yan's correspondents wrote him with requests for favors, about travel and meetings, about financial matters, and about arts and literature. Pattison also takes up a theme of several earlier chapters, considering how emotions and intimacy are conveyed. Pattison closes the chapter with an intriguing comparison of the letters sent to Yan with those found in published letter collections of the same period. He makes a case that those sent to Yan are less literary, and perhaps less consciously polished for publication.

Many if not most of the letters considered thus far circulated publicly, but the last section of the book addresses letters that were explicitly intended for wide circulation. Paul Kroll opens the section by considering three letters by the early Tang poet Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰. A tragic figure, Lu was stricken at a fairly young age with some sort of painful and incurable disease, and ultimately committed suicide to

escape his misery. His first letter is an open call to “Luoyang’s Court Gentlemen,” pleading for money to buy medicine; a second letter thanks a few individuals who have helped him; and a third is a request for poetry, or as Kroll explains, for the companionship that poetry exchange implied. Kroll analyzes these poignant letters in impressive philological detail, and reminds us how different such letters are from those in letter-writing manuals of the period. In chapter 23, Imre Galambos considers a very different type of open letter from a very different social milieu. He surveys a series of circulars, preserved among the Dunhuang cache, announcing meetings of village associations (*she* 社). In highly formulaic language, the circulars demand attendance of the *she*’s members and threaten punishment if they do not comply. Galambos sees the circulars as a particular genre of letter, but also observes that many of the extant examples seem to have been used as writing exercises—models for writing practice rather than actual circulars to be sent out. In any case, they provide a rare window onto less literate sectors of late Tang and Five Dynasties society. Suyong Son’s essay in chapter 24 brings us forward to the early eighteenth century, and a public conflict between the famous book publisher Zhang Chao 張潮 and his colleague and sometime rival, Zhang Yongde 張庸德. The conflict, over who had the rights to a jointly published book, was adumbrated in a long letter published in one of Zhang Chao’s collections of informal letters (*chi du*). Son points out that the letter is somewhat anomalous in that context: the other letters in the collection are mostly brief and amiable. She argues that the publication of this particular letter should be understood as a “social performance” intended to protect the publisher’s rights in an era when those rights were not well-defined or upheld in the law. The final chapter in the volume, by Natascha Gentz, investigates the establishment of the genre of “letters to the editor” in Chinese newspapers of the early twentieth century. Gentz evocatively describes the early days of newspaper publishing in China, when editors desperate for content willingly printed essays sent in by the public, and may also have fabricated “letters to the editor” themselves. She analyzes the pseudonyms used by letter-writers to get some sense of their identities, observing that most letters were interested in local events and social issues. While some letters told stories in the manner of later installment fiction, Gentz sees others as forerunners of political commentary, and suggests that the authors may even have evolved into journalists.

As in any successful conference volume, the essays in this book add up to more than the sum of their parts. To begin with, they robustly demonstrate the value of letters as sources for various kinds of literary and historical inquiry. On the literary side, the chapters raise fascinating questions about the boundaries between prose and poetry; about the relationship between self-expression and literary artifice; and about related issues such as the use of literary expression to convey or build human connections. Historically, many chapters add to our knowledge of social life in the periods they survey, while others demonstrate the particular usefulness of letters to biographical inquiry. Still other chapters raise important topics for further exploration within the realm of epistolary studies, such as the boundaries or relationships between categories like formal and informal, public and private, or bureaucratic and personal. Others broach interesting methodological or historiographical issues, including the impact of publication and editing, and the more general problem of authenticity.

As a historian, I sometimes wished that the volume had been organized with greater attention to chronology—the current arrangement obscures the ways that the forms or usages of letters might have changed over time. Similarly, given the editor’s scholarly interests, as well as the importance of letters as sources in periods for which documentation is rare overall, the volume’s disproportionate focus on letters from early periods of Chinese history is not surprising; still, the richness of the chapters dealing with later eras made me wish for a more balanced distribution.

These self-serving quibbles aside, however, this volume provides a splendid introduction to the world of Chinese letters, in all its complexity and diversity. Brill (and the editor!) should be particularly commended for the meticulous production. The care taken to provide Chinese text for all translations; the usefully annotated bibliography; and especially the magnificent illustrations (many in color) of ancient wooden letters, delicately painted stationery, and letter manuscripts all wonderfully enhance the volume’s aesthetic and scholarly value. One hopes this book will inspire many others scholars to turn attention to the study of Chinese letters.

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