Introduction: The Study of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*

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It would seem surprising that this book should be the first publication, in any language, dedicated to the study of Chinese epistolary literature and culture in its entirety; surprising because of the immense riches of a tradition of writing, transmitting, reading, and preserving letters that, in China, spans more than two millennia; surprising also because of the acute attention that scholars in other disciplines have been paying to letter writing for at least a century and a half—from the European Classics and ancient Near Eastern Studies to research on the dramatic changes in written communication we are witnessing in our day and age.¹ One reason for the relative neglect of epistolary matters in China seems to be that letters do not play a significant role in the Confucian canon, in contrast to the epistles in the New Testament, whose cultural significance lead to a sustained scholarly interest in this medium of written communication. Another reason for the delay of attention to the Chinese epistolary world may be that letter writing was well and alive in China until rather recently, when it began to be substituted by digital media of written communication in the 1990s. In the West, the decline of handwriting as a means of communication was felt more than a century earlier with the spread of typewriters and telecommunication, which failed or were slow to gain a foothold in China.² Meanwhile, nostalgia for the vanishing world of letter writing is growing in China, too, and along with it, scholarly interest. There has been a moderate rise in publications since the mid-1990s, both in China and the West, but much more is yet to be discovered in the long and incredibly rich history of Chinese epistolary culture. The present volume with its wide range of essays on a variety of epistolary matters from the third century BCE to the twentieth century clears and covers enormous ground and by this very act exposes the even larger

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¹ I would like to thank Brill’s anonymous reviewer for their appreciative, perceptive, and constructive reading of this introduction (not to mention every contribution in this volume!) and for their immensely helpful comments.

² The bibliography of scholarship on Chinese epistolary literature and culture in the appendix includes a very brief section on seminal studies of letter writing in other cultures.

² I have also written about this in the introduction to Antje Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 5–7.
uncharted territory that is still awaiting discovery and appreciation, thus highlighting the great potential for future research.

The twenty-five essays collected in this book demonstrate the significance of written communication in China as well as that of our research in this field. They show letters to be all-important elements in the negotiation of societal as well as individual values and relationships in all kinds of situations and throughout Chinese history since at least the Han dynasty; they examine the literary and visual means by which letter writers attempted to do justice to this important role; they propose ways of understanding historical letters that largely came down to us not as original manuscripts but in edited form; they cast light on questions of authorial authenticity in the context of a genre regulated by normative discourses and employed for varying, often unknown agendas—to mention only the most crucial concerns. Not the least, they introduce dozens of letters, often the first translation into English, and thus make epistolary history palpable in all its vitality and diversity: letters written by men and women from all walks of life to friends and lovers, princes and kings, scholars and monks, seniors and juniors, family members and neighbors, potential patrons, newspaper editors, and many more. Among them are very personal documents that were never meant to be read by anyone but the addressee, but also explicitly open letters and circulars as well as letters that seem to hover between these poles. There are literary and non-literary letters; letters that came down to us as manuscripts written by obscure authors and letters transmitted from the greatest writers of their times; casual personal letters and letters polished to achieve maximum public effectiveness. In order to draw attention to the broad spectrum of linguistic conventions of letter writing and to familiarize readers with this language that is often regarded as difficult to access, all epistolary texts translated here are also provided in the original Chinese. Another strength of this volume is that its essays take very different approaches. This is not only due to the breadth of epistolary material they introduce, but also reflects the potential of epistolary material, which allows and calls for very different modes of scholarly inquiry.

Part 1: Material Aspects of Chinese Letter Writing Culture

The materiality of written communication is particularly pronounced. While the material form in which a poem, disquisition, or biography circulates may certainly influence its reception, the singularity of the exemplar we are reading is usually of little or no concern. A letter, on the other hand, is written both with a specific addressee in mind and with the intention and knowledge that