Chapter 4

Material and Symbolic Economies: Letters and Gifts in Early Medieval China*

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This essay examines a group of letters in early medieval China, specifically from the turn of the third century and from the early sixth century, about gift giving and receiving. Gift-giving is one of the things that stand at the center of social relationships across many cultures. “The gift imposes an identity upon the giver as well as the receiver.”¹ It both produces social relationships and affirms them; it establishes and clarifies social status, displays power, strengthens alliances, and creates debts and obligations. This was particularly true in the chaotic period following the collapse of the Han empire at the turn of the third century, often referred to as the Jian’an 建安 era (196–220), after the reign title of the last Han emperor. At such a time of social disintegration, gift-giving practices—along with feasting, a powerful social institution that brought people together and reinforced the values of fellowship and civility—constituted material and symbolic exchanges that fostered bonds, rebuilt hierarchical structures and reconstituted the community.

Modern gift theory was largely initiated by anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) in the early twentieth century, and has subsequently become a subject of interdisciplinary inquiry in fields as diverse as anthropology, sociology, economics, folklore, history, and literary theory. The greatest contribution of Mauss was to situate the apparently simple exchange of gifts within a complicated network of social rules and obligations and to show that reciprocity is a key aspect of gift-giving, which operates as a process of exchange and circulation.² Derrida extends the idea of reciprocity and argues that, since all

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² Mauss’s most famous work is Essai sur le Don, Forme et Raison de l’Échange dans les Sociétés archaïques, translated by Ian Cunnison into English as The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies.
gifts implicate the recipient in social obligations, a true gift must not appear as a gift, or it would not be a gift at all: “For there to be gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt.” Derrida’s argument about the impossibility of the gift draws attention to the gift’s aggressive nature: in that it implicitly demands a return, a gift is just like an insult or a blow. Indeed, sometimes a gift itself serves as an insult: in the early third century, the minister of the Shu-Han kingdom, Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234), once sent the gift of female clothes to his nemesis Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179–251), the Wei commander, in a desperate effort to challenge Sima Yi to military action; Sima Yi’s refusal to fight proved the best return gift because it matched Zhuge Liang’s present in its ill intention. To study gift-giving is therefore to study the process of exchange and circulation in which an object takes on additional value, economic or symbolic or both, besides its use value.

The exchange of letters in many ways evokes the exchange of gifts. To address a letter to someone implicitly carries with it a request for timely response and reciprocation, and epistolary conventions create a complex system of rules and constraints that define and maintain social relations. Furthermore, a letter itself is also a material object. As Antje Richter states in her ground-breaking study of epistolary culture in early medieval China, “The materiality of letters is more pronounced than that of many other genres.” This fact is particularly important in the case of a famous calligrapher whose handwriting is prized for its aesthetic and commercial value. In a well-known story, the statesman Xie An 謝安 (320–385) deliberately wrote his reply in the blank end space of a letter from Wang Xianzhi 王獻之 (344–386), a celebrated calligrapher, and sent it back to Wang to show that he did not care to preserve Wang’s calligraphy, to Wang’s chagrin. This story underlines the physical nature of a letter and highlights the resemblance of the presentation of a letter to that of a gift. Thus, exchanging letters regarding giving and receiving a gift constitutes yet another

3 Derrida, Given Time, 12.
4 Sanguo zhi 3.103. The anecdote originally appears in Sun Sheng’s 孫盛 (302–73) Weishi Chunqiu 魏氏春秋, cited in Pei Songzhi’s 裴松之 (372–451) commentary to Sanguo zhi. In analyzing Gawain and the Green Knight, Britton J. Harwood remarks that “with insults, reciprocal blows, and gifts, the recipient controls not only the nature but the timing of the return.” Harwood, “Gawain and the Gift,” 487.
5 Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture, 17.
6 For a description of the emergence and subsequent prevalence of this phenomenon in early medieval China, see the section on “Calligraphy and Letter Writing” in Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture, 23–26.
7 The anecdote can be found, among other early sources, in Zhang Huaiguan’s 張懷瓘 (fl. early 8th c.) Shu duan 書斷, which was completed in 724. Lidai shufa lunwen xuan, 205.