CHAPTER 7

The Space of Separation: The Early Medieval Tradition of Four-Syllable “Presentation and Response” Poetry*

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Chinese poetry as a whole could be considered under the rubric of letters, insofar as so many poems are “addressed” to another person, and as this inter-subjective quality is such a prominent feature of Chinese poetry even in the absence of a named addressee. Of course, it is rather easy to expand the concept of letters to accommodate any kind of literature, or even anything put in writing, and while Chinese poems were frequently objects of exchange over distance, letters can be distinguished for always being part of such an exchange.1

The pair of poems studied in this essay can indeed be considered letters, as can many specimens of the general type to which they belong, “poetry of presentation and response” (zengda shi 贈答詩). Presentation and response poetry covers a wide swath of early medieval (and later) Chinese poetry—at seventy two poems, it is the second largest shi-category in the Wen xuan 文選, early medieval China’s most representative anthology.2 The poems studied here belong to a sub-type, presentation and response poetry in the four-syllable meter, that possesses a more natural coherence than the category as a whole. Presentation poems of this sort are generally long, stanzaic compositions, beginning with a eulogistic treatment of the recipient, continuing with a narrative account of the shared friendship, and concluding with a message for the recipient, with the response poem requiting in close parallel. This well-defined structure evinces a kinship with medieval prose letters.3

* Research for this paper was conducted using Academia Sinica’s Scripta Sinica text database (http://hanchi.lib.sinica.edu.tw). All references, however, are to the print editions cited.
1 For an extended definition of the letter and discussion of its manifestations in early medieval China, see Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture, 37–42.
2 For an overview, see Jiang, Wen xuan zengda shi. For this statistic, p. 25; on the overlap between this category and other poetic categories, preface p. 1 and pp. 166–78.
3 On the structure of early medieval prose letters, see Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture, Chapter Three and 140–45.
This essay focuses on what I call the “space of separation” opened up by this kind of poem, with specific discussion of three topics that enter into that space in one particular pair of poems—the intimate bond of the poets, the presence of the state, and the representation of a public space. I begin with a brief account of the history of four-syllable presentation and response poetry and the formation of its special “space.” I then present the poems in translation, followed by an inquiry into the lives of the poets that lays the ground for the thematic discussion. In conclusion, I reconsider the relationship of letter and poem in the Chinese “letter poem.”

1 Four-Syllable Presentation and Response Poetry and the “Space of Separation”

By all appearances, the four-syllable presentation and response poem is a phenomenon distinctly associated with early medieval China, existing only from the mid-second through mid-seventh centuries. It arose late in the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), although the extant examples do not allow us to determine how prevalent a practice it was at that time. It achieved maturity and even grandiosity with the Western Jin (265–316), when strong classicist currents tended to favor the stately, archaic cadence of the four-syllable line. It continued to be used by literati in the Yangtze river region after the establishment of the “Eastern” Jin (317–420), but though we now—thanks to a Tang compendium partially preserved in Japanese monasteries—have quite a few such poems it is still difficult to know how extensively or consistently it was practiced. The poems studied here date from this period, and come from this source.

Judging from extant materials, in the mid-fifth century this kind of poetry seems to fade away before a brief revival in the court-dominated literary culture of the turn of the sixth century. By the Tang (618–907), four-syllable presentation and response poetry appears to have disappeared completely. The reasons for this disappearance, to the extent that we believe in reasons for historical facts, are probably two. First, literary culture from the mid-fifth century onwards showed a decided preference for the more modern five-syllable line, and the poetic formulated in that culture had five-syllable verse at its center. Second, with the rise to ubiquity of the epitaph (muzhiming 墓誌銘) in the late fifth century, the four-syllable line became almost exclusively associated

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4 For a paradigmatic example of the grand imperial style under the Western Jin, see Knechtges, “Sweet-peel Orange.”

5 This is the Wenguan cilin 文館詞林, originally in 1,000 scrolls, compiled in 658.