Liu Xie’s Institutional Mind: Letters, Administrative Documents, and Political Imagination in Fifth- and Sixth-Century China*

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Letters are private; administration is public. Letters are for family and friends; administration is for bureaucrats and public servants. These are widespread assumptions. However, when we look at letters and administrative documents from early medieval China, we find that the boundaries between private and public are blurred. As David Pattinson has argued, early medieval letters seem—as administrative documents—to be devoid of “private matters.”\(^1\) He gives some major reasons for this absence: self-protection (quite necessary in a period of social and political turmoil), etiquette (letters were highly codified ways of keeping social relations) and literary concerns (letters could be read as stylistic models by a wider audience than the intended addressee). Here I propose to look at this absence from a different point of view. If early medieval letters look as “public” as administrative documents, is it because “privacy” existed somewhere other than in letters, or it is simply that our public-private dichotomy does not apply to social institutions in early medieval China? Furthermore, if that dichotomy is not an appropriate framework of analysis, what were then the specific boundaries between letters and administrative documents?

Although the public-private dichotomy has been interpreted in different ways,\(^2\) in modern political language it has come to convey a very specific meaning opposing the “impersonal” sphere of the state to the “personal” sphere of

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\(^1\) Pattinson, “Privacy and Letter Writing,” 97–118.

\(^2\) Following Julie Inness’ “intimacy-based account of privacy,” Pattinson defines it as “the ability of people to control access to things they regard as intimate.” Inness, Privacy, Intimacy, and Isolation, 138; Pattinson, “Privacy and Letter Writing,” 97.
family and friends. The modern distinction between “private” letters and “public” administration is based on this differentiation of two “spheres” of social relations. Here, I will argue that the public-private dichotomy, in this specific meaning of an opposition between “personal” and “impersonal,” did not have a place in early medieval China, and so could not define the way written genres—especially letters and administrative texts—were codified and organized. After showing in the first section the evidence that letters and administrative documents were conceived of as contiguous genres, I will contend that, rather than being differentiated on the basis of the public-private dichotomy, these genres bear different names because of the ritual distinctions necessary to mark the personal and hierarchical relations between the senders and addressees. These ritual distinctions of genres are related to the general demand of verbal ritualization and, more generally, to the personal nature of authority, which makes impossible any distinction between “private” and “public” social spheres and, as a consequence, between “private” and “public” types of writing. I do not intend to deny the existence of personal experience in early medieval China. On the contrary, since I suggest the public-private dichotomy is heuristically limited as a framework of historical analysis, my intention is to give the self-representations of personal experience a more fundamental role in the study of early medieval institutions.

One of our main sources in the study of the epistolary and administrative genres, Liu Xie’s （劉勰）（465–522 ?）The Literate Mind and the Carving of Dragons (Wenxin diaolong 文心雕龍), provides valuable information that

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3 For the historical development of the public-private dichotomy, see Habermas, Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, esp. 107–16; Elias, Die höfische Gesellschaft, 91–94; Sennett, The Fall of Public Man, 16–24; Bourdieu, Sur l’État, 24–25. About the establishment of this dichotomy in Chinese discourses, see Zarrow, “The Origin of Modern Chinese Concepts of Privacy,” 121–46.

4 Inspired by Gary Hamilton’s distinction between “role” and “person,” I will understand “person” and “personal” in two different senses: in the sense of person as such (with his or her particular psychical, physical and social characteristics) and in the sense of personal role (“father,” “mother,” or “lord”). Hamilton, “Patriarchy, Patrimonialism, and Filial Piety,” 92–97. I use “personal” in these two senses as opposed to “impersonal,” that is, as opposed to institutions which, as the so-called “modern state,” are not supposed to be identified with any person or personal role. Persons can indeed hold a position in the state, but they cannot be the state (as they can be fathers or lords).

5 For some reflections on the relation between secrecy and privacy, see McDougall, Love-Letters and Privacy, 187–90 (with many references to sociological studies about secrecy).

6 This famous treatise on different aspects of writing, written by Liu Xie in the late 5th c. for the literate circles at Jiankang 建康 (Nanjing), became later one of the main references for any