In this study, I will argue for a dynamic view of the epistolary genre in middle period China, with the hope that it replaces the static view of a fixed typology of subgenres. I do this by examining the influences of bureaucratic documents on the writing conventions of letters in Song China (960–1279), especially those observed in extant manuscripts in an epistolary subgenre called zhazi劄子, and also by studying how notebooks and encyclopedias of this period described these influences. By doing so, I aim to shed light on one of the universal aspects of Chinese epistolary culture, namely, the impact of bureaucratic writing practices on the conventions of writing personal correspondence. In a period when most of the highly literate members of the empire served the government or were aspiring to forge a career in officialdom, it is nearly impossible to draw a clear distinction between the writing practices of bureaucratic correspondence and personal letters.

Although letters are seldom studied as a subject in Chinese literary studies, existing secondary studies on classical Chinese literature do provide convenient explanations for understanding the wide range of epistolary subgenres by outlining and explaining their key features.1 The explanations in these studies are helpful in making sense of the main differences between subgenres, but their basic assumptions more or less represent a static and fixed view of epistolary subgenres. To be sure, taking epistolary subgenres as

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1 E.g., Zhao Shugong, *Zhongguo chidu wenxue shi*. See esp. 1–14.
well-demarcated literary units is problematic because this view often assumes little or no overlap in the formal, rhetorical, and thematic features of subgenres. It does not reflect the reality of Chinese epistolary texts because a fluid genre such as letters can often be placed in multiple categories of subgenres which span across the personal-public spectrum in their usages. Consequently, a clear-cut arrangement of subgenres cannot be possibly achieved. Theorists on genre have in fact warned against the risk of taking genre as a “rigid trans-historical class exercising control over the texts which it generates.” For studying a genre that is as adaptable, malleable, and engaged with social relationships as letters, an alternative approach is much needed.

In order to place more emphasis on the dynamic literary context of Chinese letters, one of the more refined approaches to the epistolary genre, in my opinion, would bear strong resonance with what Hans Robert Jauss proposed in his seminal essay, “Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature.” According to Jauss, it is advisable to “ascribe no other generality to literary ‘genres’ . . . than that which manifests itself in the course of its historical appearance.” Genres “cannot be deduced or defined, but only historically determined, delimited, and described.” When scholars deal with the problem of genre, they should not only “relinquish the substantialist notion of a constant number of unchangeable essential characteristics for the individual genres,” but also “dismantle the correlative notion of a sequence of literary genres closed within themselves, encapsulated form one another.” Jauss therefore suggests to “inquire into the reciprocal relations that make up the literary system of a given historical moment.” Even though the considerations of Jauss mainly lie in approaches to the vernacular literatures of medieval Europe, they are also instructive when applied to traditional Chinese letters, including to those from middle period China which are studied in this article. In it I place the zhazi subgenre within a system of subgenres that included letters as well as bureaucratic documents in Song China. Not only did these epistolary and bureaucratic subgenres influence each other, but the writing conventions of these two changed throughout the course of Song history; I try to investigate both of these aspects in this study.

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2 For example, epistolary works fall into multiple genres in Liu Xie’s 劉勰 (ca. 465–ca. 532) Wenxin diaolong. Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture, 49–62. See also the articles by Pablo Ariel Blitstein and Robert Joe Cutter in this volume.

3 Frow, Genre, 23.

4 See the reflection on letters as a genre in Jolly and Stanley, “Letters As / Not a Genre.”


6 Ibid., 105.