Su Shi’s Informal Letters in Literature and Life

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The “informal letters” that are my subject are some fifteen hundred documents that survive in Su Shi’s 宋軾 (1037–1101) complete works. These are classified as belonging to the form of informal notes or letters (chidu 尺牘) and are to be distinguished from his “formal letters” (shu 书). The latter are longer and considered “literary writings.” As such they were included in Su’s “literary collection” (wenji 文集). Not so with the chidu, which hereafter I will refer to as “informal letters” or simply “letters.” These are mostly extremely short, often no more than fifty to seventy-five characters in length, although some long pieces are found mixed among the others. These are informal messages and their subject matter tends to be very practical and mundane. Hence they were traditionally not thought of as “literary writings” and were not included in Su’s literary collection as it was first constituted. Yet a case can be made for considering these informal letters a key part of Su’s output; important not just as an invaluable source for our understanding of Su’s biography, which they undeniably are, but even important in his output as a writer. There are two considerations that bear mentioning here. We need not, first of all, be bound by the traditional view that these works are not “literary.” We may bring a different understanding of what constitutes literary work than that found in traditional conservative Chinese literary thought, something that has happened over time with many genres of Chinese writing. Actually, some Chinese scholars and critics in the Ming and Qing dynasties already began to break free of traditional notions in this regard, and began to appreciate Su’s letters for their literary qualities. It is exemplified, for example, in the selection of the letters by Su Shi and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 compiled by the early Qing scholar Huang Shi 黃始 (fl. 1684), Su Huang chidu xuan 蘇黃尺牘選, and reprinted many times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.1 Huang’s annotations on the letters he presents primarily draw attention to their literary qualities. The repeated reprinting of Huang’s selection suggests the enthusiasm readers in the late imperial period felt for this previously overlooked segment of Su’s output as a writer. By Huang Shi’s time, of course, Su had taken his place among a handful

1 Huang Shi’s anthology has been republished under several different titles. One modern one is: Su Dongpo Huang Shangu chidu hece.
of the “greatest writers” of the entire sweep of China’s literary history, so that anything from his hand was considered worthy of attention. Second, the sheer quantity of this type of writing that Su Shi produced suggests that it may have played a role of some significance in his life and identity as a writer. Fifteen hundred examples in a single form is not a small number. In a recently published new edition of Su Shi’s complete works, these informal letters fill three of the total twenty volumes, or more than one-seventh of the total.2 This same new edition marks the first time, to my knowledge, that these letters have been made available with explanatory commentary and collation notes. This scholarly apparatus renders Su’s letters more accessible to our understanding than they have been previously. The moment may be right, then, for a new consideration of these remarkable documents, which is what I attempt in this paper.

It is not that Su Shi’s informal letters have not been studied previously. They often been read by scholars for the many ways that they supplement biographical information about Su that is found in other sources, whether written by him or someone else. But his letters have seldom been studied for their inherent interest or for what they reveal about the letter form generally. Still less have Su’s letters been read against his writing in other forms for what they reveal, directly and indirectly, about the ways genre affects Su’s self-expression and how a consideration of that issue affects, in turn, our larger understanding of Su Shi. These are the matters I hope to begin to explore in this chapter.

There are obvious reasons Su’s letters are of interest. The first is the large quantity of them. It is doubtful that we have such a large corpus of letters from any earlier figure in Chinese history. If such a corpus survives, it is not from the hand of a writer of Su’s stature. No earlier major Chinese writer left more than a fraction of the number of letters that survive for Su Shi. Naturally, the size of Su’s corpus of letters alone does not guarantee their literary quality, but it does mean that this portion of his output has a certain substantiality that a small collection of letters could never have, and this bodes well for the possibility of meaningful analysis. Second, we have in Su’s letters a large corpus that stands apart from his great achievement in shi (poetry), song lyrics (ci), and literary prose. Su’s letters thus offer the possibility of reading across genre, that is, of comparing how the same writer who is recognized as a master in other literary forms expresses himself when writing in this distinctive form. We may expect, then, that Su’s letters will be particularly valuable for what they reveal about the form itself and how it may lend itself to a different manner of expression or possibly different subjects or perspectives than we find in the more prestigious forms of writing.

2 The letters are contained in Su Shi wenji jiaozhu, in vols. 16–18 of Su Shi quanjí jiaozhu.