Chapter 13

The Letter as Artifact of Sentiment and Legal Evidence

Janet Theiss

This article pursues a close analysis of letters included in the Board of Punishments routine memorial (xingke tiben 刑科題本) presenting a lawsuit involving an elite family from Huzhou, Zhejiang in the 1740s. Among them are sixteen love letters exchanged between a gentry wife and her lover who was the live-in tutor for her children, and several other letters exchanged amidst the ensuing crisis between her husband who is an expectant official awaiting appointment in Beijing, his older brother who is the head of the family confronting the affair in Huzhou, and her eldest son still resident in her household. Preserved as legal evidence, these letters were never intended for public view unlike other extant published letters. They pose many complex problems of interpretation. From the beginning, their authenticity is called into question as the putative authors assert that the love letters are forgeries designed to slander them. There is copious supporting evidence beyond this case memorial that the affair in fact happened. But I am intrigued also by what these letters tell us about private emotions and motivations that were not packaged for viewing by anyone other than the recipient. Both sets of letters offer us unique insight into the role of the written word in shaping feelings and relationships, fostering intimacy, and sometimes also reifying distance within and beyond the household. Although they were written with an assumption of privacy these letters are infused with the values and concerns of their day manifested in thematic and stylistic points of resonance with published epistolary rhetoric, fiction, and medical discourse. Yet even as they attest to the salience of cultural norms in everyday elite life, their departures from public forms of discourse reveal the limitations of idealized values like family harmony and emotional authenticity (qing 情) in real life and the pain caused by this disjunction.

The letters are the textual traces of an adulterous affair between Fei Li Shi 費李氏, wife of Fei Yuyou 費豫游, an expectant ministerial official, and Xu Yantan 徐延菼, the live-in tutor employed to educate their sons, that erupted into public view in the spring of 1739. Over the next two years this scandal became a cause célèbre for the urban public of Zhejiang and within elite and government circles as it destroyed the Fei family and became entangled with
corruption charges leveled against the popular Zhejiang governor, Lu Zhuo 卢焯 (d. 1767), after Fei Li Shi bribed him to prejudice a lawsuit she filed against the head of her husband’s family to salvage her reputation. In 1741, Governor Lu was impeached and exiled for taking bribes in this and several other cases. These intertwined adultery and corruption cases were the subject of local and regional gossip in the Fei hometown of Huzhou and the Zhejiang provincial capital of Hangzhou. They were investigated and interpreted by numerous officials at every level of the imperial bureaucracy from the county magistrates who first encountered the case to ministers in the capital at the Board of Punishments and Board of Rites, imperial censors, grand secretaries, and the Qianlong Emperor. News of the adultery spread across the empire with announcement of Fei Li Shi’s lawsuit in the official newsletter the Peking Gazette. The story of the adultery spread further through the investigation into the charges of bribery and corruption against Lu Zhuo, which involved officials at various levels in three provinces and depositions from over 100 people. In the midst of the investigations, demonstrations broke out in the streets of Hangzhou in support of Governor Lu and in protest against the way the investigation was being carried out. Biographies of Lu Zhuo written decades later by the eminent Chen Hongmou 陈宏谋 and Yuan Mei 袁枚 attest to the empire-wide visibility of the case and ongoing chatter about it.

The Fei case, richly attested in bureaucratic and legal documents as well as county gazetteers and private writings, touches on numerous themes from imperial and local politics to elite family life. For the purposes of this volume, I will focus on what the letters tell us about the functions and meanings attached to private epistolary communication in the mid-Qing. The case demonstrates the porousness of the inner-outer divide that allegedly structured elite family life and defined respectability. Although the letters were meant to be private, they became after their discovery the mechanism for the exposure of the secret affair to an ever-widening audience, circling out from extended family members to neighbors to official networks, the bureaucracy, and the Zhejiang public. For an elite family like the Feis, full of men in public office and servants, it was near impossible to maintaining the privacy of inner family life. As we will see, both the love letters and those written by Fei Li Shi’s husband evince constant anxiety about the affair becoming public. Ironically, despite assumptions of the possibility of privacy in these letters, the inevitability of exposure shapes their rhetoric and the intimate feelings expressed within them.

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1 The many dimensions of the case will be explored more fully in a book-length study that is currently in progress. See also Theiss, “Elite Engagement with the Judicial System.”