Ah, Ziqing! In knowing others, we most value knowing one another's hearts and minds.

嗟乎子卿！人之相知，貴相知心。1

In his “Letter in Reply to Director Xue of Daozhou Discussing the Etiquette of Letters,” the mid-Tang writer Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842) left us a tantalizing fragment in which he worries about the altered styles of letter-writing in recent decades. Although he appears most interested in the correct terms of address for men of different ranks, he notes that, “after I had been in exile for a decade, I dwelled in obscurity and meanness, hearing nothing of the world, and the only people to whom I wrote letters of inquiry were intimate relations and close friends, those who would not change [their styles]; but contemporary styles [for letters] were changing, and I had no way to learn them.”2 Liu’s concern about the changes in letter conventions expresses not merely the distress of an exile long out of the capital hoping not to embarrass himself in correspondence; it also points to a broader interest in the early ninth century for socially and culturally “correct” writing, an interest indicated also by the proliferation of etiquette manuals (shuyi 書儀) in the second half of the Tang dynasty.3 Liu’s offhand comment that the styles of letters that he exchanged with his “intimate relations and close friends” did not change is equally illuminating, since it suggests quite reasonably that the social interactions of letters to those recipients were more important than attention to changes to formal

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1 From “Letter [att. to Li Ling] in Reply to Su Wu [Ziqing]” (“Da Su Wu shu” 答蘇武書), Wen xuan 41.1848.
2 Liu Yuxi ji jianzheng, 1:267.
3 As Zhao Heping demonstrates, Liu was right to worry: in his analysis of terms of address for officials in three Tang shuyi, Zhao shows that within a century (the span of time covered by three Tang shuyi he examines), those conventions shifted significantly. See Zhao, Dunhuang shuyi yanjiu, 190–91. This 2011 volume is Zhao’s expansion on some of the same research topics found in Zhou and Zhao, Tang Wudai shuyi yanjiu.
epistolary etiquette. Since his emotional ties with those people did not change, he implies, he had no need to alter his customary style in writing them.

Liu Yuxi’s anxiety was focused on the proprieties for addressing those outside his close circle, and therefore, his brief remarks tell us little about the stylistic or rhetorical expectations of letters sent to friends and colleagues in the mid-Tang period, or the influence of the style of those more familiar letters on epistolary practices more broadly considered. The collections of mid-Tang writers contain many more letters, and many more “collegial” letters (which I define below), than the collections of individual writers either before the An Lushan Rebellion (755–63) or from the last few decades of the dynasty, a period for which letters in general are relatively scarce. Some of the largest individual collections from the entire dynasty date from the mid-Tang, including those of Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831), and Liu Yuxi, and letters are well-represented in those collections, particularly those of Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan. With respect to their role in culture, letters became an important venue for mid-Tang intellectual and literary debate, and for many ninth-century political exiles (which includes all of the major mid-Tang writers at one moment or another), letters were sometimes the only means by which they could conduct those debates. Moreover, evidence found within mid-Tang letters suggest that shu 书 (letters) of various sorts, along with a greater variety of prose genres, were becoming more prominently featured in the literary portfolios men used to seek patrons and forge reputations.4

Most extant mid-Tang letters are, like most extant letters from before the era of printing, both formal and political, concerned with an individual’s career and official duties. But we also find in mid-Tang corpora more letters sent to colleagues and friends alongside the many letters sent to patrons and political superiors. The prominent presence of letters in certain mid-Tang collections and the discussions of letter exchanges found within the texts themselves reveal that mid-Tang literati circulated their letters, even ones addressed to individual colleagues or friends, within their circles and beyond them, deploying them as proof of their literary talents and intellectual interests. Letters to colleagues and friends were also critical social tools for negotiating delicate

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4 See, e.g., the letter by Li Guan 李觀 sent to then-Chief Examiner Lu Zhi 陸贄, in which he lists ten pieces he is submitting for Lu’s perusal; of the ten, three are letters on different topics. Quan Tang wen 533.5415; see also Fu Xuancong, Tang dai keju, 264–65; Moore, Rituals of Recruitment, 142–43; Ditter, “Genre and the Transformation of Writing,” 138–39.