CHAPTER 21

Epistolary Networks and Practice in the Early Qing: The Letters Written to Yan Guangmin

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Among the numerous collections of letters from the late Ming and early Qing period, *Yanshi jiacang chidu* 顏氏家藏尺牘, or “Letters Kept at the Yan Family Home,” is particularly valuable for the study of epistolary practices for two main reasons. Firstly, it is a rare example of a collection of letters written to an individual, and one that we can be almost certain was not subject to significant selection or editing. Secondly, because the authors of the letters would not have expected that their letters would one day be published, it provides a rare window into unguarded epistolary practices among the cultural and official elite during the early Qing. The recipient of the letters, Yan Guangmin 顏光敏 (1640–1686), was not only a direct descendant of Confucius’s foremost disciple Yan Hui 顏回 (trad. dates 521–490 BCE), but he was a prominent member of the political and cultural elite of the period as well. Therefore, by analyzing the profile of the correspondents represented in *Yanshi jiacang chidu* and the functions of the letters they wrote, we can enhance our understanding of the epistolary networks of someone of that social status during that period, and of what those networks were used for. Furthermore, although only a few authors’ letters appear both in *Yanshi jiacang chidu* and the anthologies of literati letters that were published during the 1660s, the socio-cultural profile of the letter-writers in both types of collection was similar. Therefore, by comparing *Yanshi jiacang chidu* with some of the published collections, we can try to determine the extent to which the letters published during the early Qing reflected everyday epistolary practice, and if they were different from the Yan letters, in what ways.

1 The Transmission and Publication of the *Yanshi jiacang chidu* Letters

*Yanshi jiacang chidu*, which has hardly been the subject of any research at all, is a collection of approximately 750 letters by over 250 correspondents.¹

¹ The work by Chinese researchers will be referred to in the course of this chapter, but their interest in *Yanshi jiacang chidu* has been almost entirely as a source for information on Yan’s life and literary output, rather than as letters in themselves.
Although the letters are mostly difficult to date, they appear to cover all of the period from the late 1660s up to 1686, the year of Yan’s death. We cannot know for certain why Yan kept the letters, but calligraphy was probably the main reason, as Yan himself was an accomplished calligrapher. The collection’s first publisher, the wealthy Cantonese salt merchant, publisher and philanthropist Pan Shicheng 潘仕成 (1804–1873), says in his preface that the letters were passed down for their calligraphy, though this does not necessarily mean this is why Yan kept them. While many of the letters are by prominent officials, scholars and cultural figures, he also kept many by obscure correspondents, so the fame of the writer was not a motivation. As the discussion below will demonstrate, the letters in Yanshi jiacang chidu generally did not have particular literary value, so literary factors are unlikely to have been important. Yan valued friendships—his diaries record many visits to and from friends—so he might have kept the letters as a way of marking those friendships. There is no evidence that he kept the letters with a view to publishing them; most later reprints and library catalog entries say that Yan Guangmin compiled (ji 輯) the collection, but in fact he seems to have done no more than keep them. It is true that Yan was collecting the letters during a period when there was considerable appetite for letter anthologies amongst the educated public, but there is no evidence that Yan kept the letters for any reason other than his own appreciation.

Most of what we know about the process by which the letters came to be published is gleaned from the colophons which appear at the end of the fourth chapter of the published editions. The letters seem to have been kept in the Yan family home until the autumn of 1770, when Yan’s great-grandson Yan Chongju 顏崇榘 (fl. 1770–after 1795) brought some of them to the capital and asked Gui Fu 桂馥 (1736–1805), a fellow Qufu native and an expert in epigraphy, to have them bound. In his colophon to the collection, Gui, who at the time was a Tribute Student at the National University, says that he had the first installment bound into eight or nine fascicles, but over the next four years Yan twice brought more letters to Gui, so that in the end there were three times as many letters as there had been in the first bundle; this is why the letters are in no real order. Gui also says that at first he cut the salutations out of the letters

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2 Amy McNair discusses the practice of collecting letters for their calligraphy in her study of a letter by the Tang statesman Yan Zhenqing in this volume.
3 Preface to Yanshi jiacang chidu, ib.
4 Yan kept three diaries, Deyuan rili 德園日曆, Jingshi rili 京師日曆, and Nan you rili 南遊日曆, all of which exist in manuscript form, but I have not had the opportunity to see them. There is some discussion of them in Zhou Hongcai “Zhongguo guji shanben shumu,” 69.