This essay examines a 1706 letter from the renowned early Qing publisher Zhang Chao 張潮 (ca. 1650–1707) to a fellow publisher, Zhang Yongde 張庸德 (fl. 1706), in order to explore the nature of the letter medium during the letter-publishing boom in the seventeenth century. The letter in question was included in Zhang Chao's voluminous letter collection Chidu oucun 尺牘偶存 (Random preservations of letters), which was published as a companion volume to Chidu yousheng 尺牘友聲 (Friends' voices in letters). While Chidu yousheng gathered letters that Zhang Chao's contemporaries had sent to him, Chidu oucun collected Zhang Chao's replies to them. The two letter collections were published in several installments over a span of more than thirty years, from 1677 until 1706, and gained wide popularity.\footnote{Gu and Liu, “Chidu oucun,’ ‘Yousheng,'” 263–74. The original editions of Chidu yousheng and Chidu oucun are not extant, but reprint editions of 1780 survive. Chidu yousheng consists of three collections, each of which has 5 juan, collecting 1,009 letters sent to Zhang Chao. Chidu oucun is made up of 11 juan, collecting 454 replies of Zhang Chao. This essay is based on the editions held in the Beijing University Library.} The sheer quantity and wide geographical distribution of the letters reveal the extensive epistolary network that Zhang Chao established, exchanging letters with more than 300 of his contemporaries, mainly literati from the major cities in the Jiangnan area, such as Yangzhou, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Nanjing.

Among the 1,463 letters gathered in chronological order in both letter collections, the letter of Zhang Chao to Zhang Yongde stands out in terms of its length, tone, and subject matter. As indicated in the titles of the two collections, the term chidu 尺牘, which usually designated short, casual, intimate letters, as distinct from formal and longer shu 書,\footnote{Although the boundary between chidu and shu was often blurry, the distinction was conventionally acknowledged in late imperial China. When Zhou Lianggong, e.g., published his letter collection Chidu xinchao, he discarded long letters and mostly gathered short ones, to capture the true nature of chidu. Zhou Lianggong, “Fanli,” in Chidu xinchao sanji, 3; Richter, Letters and Epistolary Culture, 35, fn. 84.} most letters included in both collections are indeed informal and short, usually not exceeding one leaf.
However, Zhang Chao’s letter to Zhang Yongde is relatively formal and lengthy, covering twelve leaves—and is, in fact, the longest letter in either collection. Furthermore, it is one of the letters exchanged during Zhang Chao’s dispute with Zhang Yongde over the proprietorship of the book that they had published together nine years before. Although the popularity of publishing letters in the late Ming and early Qing periods greatly expanded both the scope of letters that found their way into print and the sort of topics published letters could address, such a conflictive letter would not usually be published because most private letter collections, particularly those of contemporaries, were meant to display the letter writers’ friendships, social status, and literary accomplishments. The tone of friction and refutation in Zhang Chao’s letter clearly distinguishes it from the friendly and amiable correspondence that makes up the majority of Zhang Chao’s two letter collections.

The unusual character of this letter to Zhang Yongde therefore makes one wonder what Zhang Chao’s intention was in publishing it. The letter ostensibly justifies Zhang Chao’s property rights to the book against Zhang Yongde’s claim. However, the letter is undoubtedly partial, in the sense that it explicates only Zhang Chao’s claim to ownership of the book in question. When the scholar-official Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612–1672) published his letter collection Chidu xinchao 尺牘新鈔 (Newly copied letters) from 1662 to 1670, he intentionally excluded letters about lawsuits and disputes because he wanted to avoid prejudice in favor of one side over the other. Since Zhang Yongde’s

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3 Chidu oucun, 11.9a–14b.
4 Pattinson, “The Market for Letter Collections,” 132. Letter collections published in the 17th c. included not merely the correspondence of historically eminent literary men such as Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072), Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1011), and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045–1105), but also letters of their contemporaries, from respected celebrities of the time to figures who might otherwise have slipped into obscurity. The topics of the published letter became more diverse, encompassing model letters of literary quality, notes penned in fulfillment of social etiquette, and correspondences on a variety of quotidian affairs of the literati, such as sharing poetry, inviting friends for drinks, borrowing and lending books, introducing friends, discussing literature and scholarship, etc.
5 Since no authorial preface or editorial principles are attached, the selection criteria of the letters in Zhang Chao’s letter collections are not clear. But most of the letters they include are written in a relatively informal and casual style, covering a variety of mundane details of the life of a man of letters. And since Zhang Chao was engaged in publishing ventures, a large number of the letters in the collections concern details of his endeavors, such as soliciting manuscripts, asking for and giving financial support, discussing editorial decisions, hiring carvers, proofreading, collating, distributing, and selling books.