

CHINA ACROSS THE CENTURIES  
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# Three Years and Not a Word Has Faded: Reading Letters in Early Medieval Chinese Poetry\*

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There is very little mention of reading in Chinese poetry of the early medieval period, with one exception: the reading of letters. The few poems by literati men on the reading of books that we have from this time—Shu Xi’s 束皙 (263–302) “Poetic Exposition on Reading” (*Du shu fu* 讀書賦), Tao Qian’s 陶潛 (365–427) “Reading the *Canon of Mountains and Seas*” (*Du Shanhaijing* 讀山海經), and Xie Lingyun’s 謝靈運 (385–433) “Reading in my Study” (*Zhaizhong du shu* 齋中讀書)—are exceptional pieces.<sup>1</sup> Equally rare are poems about palace ladies reading in their boudoirs to while away their time and loneliness, although Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–583), editor of the anthology *New Songs from a Jade Terrace* (*Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠, ca. 545), had in the preface to his anthology predicted that this book would be read intensely in the women’s quarters.<sup>2</sup>

If reading books is so marginal in early medieval poetry, why, then, is reading letters such a prominent motif? Because the “letter from afar” is so well suited to voice one of the major themes in Chinese poetry: the lament of parting and separation. As I will demonstrate in this essay, references to letters

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\* This is a revised and extended version of an article I published in German under the title “Briefe und ihre Leser in der Dichtung der frühen Kaiserzeit” (Letters and Their Readers in Early Imperial Chinese Poetry) in *Aspekte des Lesens in China in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, a conference volume on reading in China (Richter 2005). The preface of this volume, written by Wolfgang Behr and Bernhard Führer, provides a valuable introduction to the lexical field of reading in Classical Chinese (Behr and Führer 2005: 13–42).

<sup>1</sup> *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚, 55.991; *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩, 1010–11; and *Wen xuan* 文選, 30.1397–98. For interpretations of these poems with a special emphasis on the representation of reading see Chen 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Yutai xinyong* 玉臺新詠, 13. One of the few exceptions is He Xun’s 何遜 (466–519) “Ballad of Suffering from the Heat” (*Ku re xing* 苦熱行), see *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集, 65.938.

in poetry always denote separations, whether they are letters that are longed for in vain or arrive to be read eagerly. The lament of separation—of being parted from relatives, lovers, or friends—has pervaded Chinese poetry since the canonical *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經).<sup>3</sup> It has inspired not only poetic subgenres, such as the farewell poem, but also a range of poetic motifs, such as the long night spent alone, the dusty mirror that has fallen out of use, the loose belt, or the letter from afar, to name but a few.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from this thematic closeness of letters and poetry, the two genres also share certain literary features and functions. Poems could serve as letters, when directed at and physically transmitted to a specific addressee, who might respond in the same form, resulting in a poetic exchange.<sup>5</sup> Letters, on the other hand, frequently used techniques and devices that are common in poetry, as is quite evident in many literary letters, especially those written in parallel prose (*pianti wen* 駢體文). We also know of poems that were sent along with letters, either with no particular connection between the two texts or designed to form an aesthetic whole between a letter and its accompanying poem.<sup>6</sup>

This essay attempts to provide an overview of the letter and of reading letters as a poetic motif in early medieval Chinese poetry, that is, in poems written from the second through the sixth century CE. It looks into absent letters—unwritten, lost, longed for in vain—and into the arrival and reading of letters in poems, into the poetic conception and perception of letters as gifts, and into the ageing of letters in poetry. Through the inquiry into the poetic uses of letters, the essay also seeks to enrich our understanding of Chinese epistolary culture, whose wealth and complexity are only beginning to be appreciated.

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<sup>3</sup> Although the *Odes* never mention letters explicitly, their speakers do express hope for messages, if probably just by word of mouth. *Maoshi* 毛詩 no. 19, “Grandly Rolls the Thunder” (*Yin qi lei* 殷其雷); no. 30, “The Wind Blows” (*Zhong feng* 終風); no. 119, “The Solitary Birchleaf Pear” (*Di du* 杜); and no. 149, “Not for the Wind” (*Fei feng* 匪風) all mention “good news” (*haoyin* 好音); *Maoshi* no. 167, “Gathering Thorn-Ferns” (*Cai wei* 采薇) mentions a “messenger” (*shi* 使).

<sup>4</sup> Discussed in Richter 2013: 119–34.

<sup>5</sup> See also the discussion of early medieval “presentation and response poetry” (*zengda shi* 贈答詩) in Raft 2015.

<sup>6</sup> To mention two prominent examples: the letters and poems exchanged between Qin Jia 秦嘉 (ca. 134–ca. 164) and his wife Xu Shu 徐淑 (d. ca. 165), to be discussed in more detail below, and the correspondence between Liu Kun 劉琨 (271–318) and Lu Chen 盧湛 (285–351), transmitted in the *Wen xuan*’s poetry section (25.1168–85; see also Knechtges 2006).

**“News from Afar Does Not Get Through”:  
The Imponderability of Epistolary Communication**

Letters are fraught with a whole range of imponderables. They may, for all kinds of reasons, fail to be written in the first place or never be sent on their way. If a messenger is found, they may nevertheless be intercepted, forged, or otherwise lost. If they safely arrive against all odds, they may be misunderstood or rejected. Many of the dangers that lurk at all stages of the communication process are used in early medieval poetry as images of separation between writer and addressee. The most common case are letters that are impatiently awaited but do not arrive, as Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) put it in one of his poems, “news from afar does not get through” (音息曠不達).<sup>7</sup> Two perspectives are most common in this context, which are already present in the *Odes*: that of the woman left behind and that of the man far away from home, often stationed at the border in civil or military service, both parties bemoaning that they are cut off from messages, be it because of obstacles to transmit a letter or because of the suspected unfaithfulness of the correspondent. There are other reasons besides inconstancy, however, for not writing a letter. In a poem by Liu Xiaowei 劉孝威 (496–549), for instance, it is the pain of longing itself that keeps the female speaker from writing:

天寒硯水凍	The weather so cold, the ink is frozen on my inkstone,
心悲書不成	My heart so sad, I cannot finish a letter. <sup>8</sup>

Liu Xiaowei heightens the expression of longing by coupling it with the cold, a seasonal image that conventionally accompanies the lament of separation and, in this instance, appears as an inkstone that is frozen over.

More often, the absence of letters is attributed to the absent partner’s lack of devotion, as in Wang Sengru’s 王僧孺 (ca. 463–ca. 521) poem “Spring

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<sup>7</sup> “Written on Behalf of Gu Rong 顧榮 [270–322] to be Presented to His Wife” (*Wei Gu Yanxian zeng fu shi* 為顧彥先贈婦詩). See *Wen xuan* 24.1149–50. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations quoted in this article are my own. Other poems that lament that letters do not arrive include the third of Zhang Xie’s 張協 (ca. 255–ca. 310) “Unclassified Poems” (*Za shi* 雜詩), *Wen xuan* 29.1379.

<sup>8</sup> “Presented to Xiao Yi 蕭繹 [508–555, Emperor Yuan of the Liang dynasty 梁元帝, r. 552–54] to Harmonize with his ‘Winter Morning’” (*Feng he Xiangdong wang yingling* “Dong xiao” 奉和湘東王應令冬曉), *Yutai xinyong* 8.92. On this and related morning poems presented to Xiao Yi see Chen 2002: 174–76.

Discontent” (*Chun yuan* 春怨), where a woman bemoans the disruption of all communication with her beloved, whether by word of mouth (*yin* 音) or letter (*shu* 書):

萬里斷音書      Ten thousand miles apart, without news and letters,  
十載異棲宿      Ten years spent in different houses.<sup>9</sup>

The momentousness of this separation is heightened by the syntactic and semantic parallelism of its spatial and its temporal dimension, which is a familiar poetic device in writing about separation. The “ten thousand miles” and “ten years” effectively reinforce each other, whether they are read as objective coordinates of this separation or, more likely, figuratively.

The perspective of the man far away from home and longing for someone he left behind is depicted less frequently. In the “Ballad of Longxi” (*Longxi xing* 隴西行), a poem by Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–551), Emperor Jianwen of the Liang dynasty 梁簡文帝 (r. 549–551), it is a soldier on a campaign who wonders:

長安路遠書不還      Far is the way to Chang’an, my letters are not answered.  
寧知征人獨佇立      Can I be sure that this soldier is not alone in staying  
   faithful?<sup>10</sup>

Poets not only talk about the absence of letters, but also about the difficulties of sending them, chiefly about the scarcity of messengers, as in Shi Baoyue’s 釋寶月 (*fl.* 483–493) simple and straightforward, but quite charming poem “The Traveling Merchant’s Music” (*Gu ke yue* 估客樂), “written at court by a Buddhist monk,” as Donald Holzman observed:<sup>11</sup>

郎作十里行      You’re going on a ten-mile trip,  
儂作九里送      I’m going on a nine-mile see-off.

<sup>9</sup> *Yutai xinyong* 6.67.

<sup>10</sup> *Yuefu shiji* 37.543.

<sup>11</sup> Holzman 1986: 94. Holzman’s study of “*Gu ke yue*” (or “*Gu ke le*”) poems also includes a translation of Shi Baoyue’s piece on p. 94.

拔儂頭上釵	Pulling a pin from my hair,
與郎資路用	I give it to you for your travel expenses.
有信數寄書	If there's a messenger, often send me letters,
無信心相憶	If there's none, keep me in your heart.
莫作瓶落井	Don't be a jar fallen in a well:
一去無消息	Once gone, there is no news. <sup>12</sup>

The poem's overall understatement adds to its charm: the singer does not have to endure a ten-thousand-mile separation, as in Wang Sengru's "Spring Discontent," but suffers from being parted from her lover just the same. The connection to the mercantile sphere is worn lightly, too, via the poem's reference to travel expenses.

The difficulties of epistolary communication by messenger<sup>13</sup> have also inspired the idea of transmitting letters through swift and supposedly reliable non-human messengers, such as birds, including the idea of the winged letter or of turning into a messenger-bird oneself.<sup>14</sup> In Chinese mythology, the most famous messenger-birds are the Three Blue Birds (*san qing niao* 三青鳥), helpers of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母).<sup>15</sup> In early

<sup>12</sup> *Yuefu shiji* 48.700.

<sup>13</sup> Other poems that mention the scarcity of messengers include Wu Jun's 吳均 (469–520) "Boudoir Discontent" (*Gui yuan shi* 閨怨詩) and Yu Xin's 庾信 (513–581) "Poem Sent to Wang Lin" (*Ji Wang Lin shi* 寄王琳詩), *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 1746 and 2401.

<sup>14</sup> For a winged letter, see Zhang Shuai's 張率 (475–527) "Song about White Hemp" no. 6 (*Baizhu ge* 白紵歌, *Yuefu shiji* 55.802); for the wish to turn into a bird see Xu Shu's "In Response to Qin Jia" (*Da Qin Jia shi* 答秦嘉室, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 188) as well as *Nineteen Old Poems* no. 16 (*Gu shi shijiu shou* 古詩十九首, *Wen xuan* 29.1349), discussed in more detail below. The *locus classicus* for the wish to turn into a bird may be *Maoshi* no. 26, "The Cypress Boat" (*Bai zhou* 柏舟), in which the speaker laments his inability to fly away (不能奮飛). The winged sandals of Hermes, the messenger of the gods in Ancient Greece, are one of many prominent examples to show that the topos is widespread in Western literary traditions as well. Extending the image beyond the animate world, poets also expressed the wish to entrust messages to the clouds, as, for instance Lu Ji in his "Imitating 'On and On, On and On'" (*Ni 'Xing xing chong xing xing'* 擬行行重行行, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 685), to the wind, the moon, and other celestial bodies.

<sup>15</sup> They are mentioned several times in the *Canon of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing* 山海經, see, e.g., 12.306). See also Cahill 1993: 91–98.

medieval poetry, they carry Xiwangmu's letters, communicating between the mundane and celestial spheres.<sup>16</sup>

Migratory birds such as the swallow (*yan* 燕, *xuan niao* 玄鳥) or the wild goose (*yan* 雁, *hong* 鴻) are especially closely associated with letters, probably because they cover great distances with a certain regularity.<sup>17</sup> The wild goose acquired further epistolary connotations through a celebrated story of loyalism and betrayal set in the Han dynasty: the story of two representatives of the Han court, who both fell into the hands of the Xiongnu and spent many years in captivity.<sup>18</sup> While the disgraced general Li Ling 李陵 (d. 74 BCE) never returned to the Han, the emissary Su Wu 蘇武 (d. 60 BCE), who had become Li Ling's friend, did return after nineteen years.<sup>19</sup> That Su Wu is said to have fastened his letters to the feet of wild geese migrating south to his homeland certainly contributed to the emergence of the wild goose as a powerful and multifaceted poetic image of separation and connection.<sup>20</sup>

In the poem "[To] Li Ling's 'Following the Troops'" (*Li Duwei Ling* 'Cong jun' 李都尉陵從軍), Jiang Yan 江淹 (444–505) assumes the persona of Li Ling, who, after years in Xiongnu captivity, bids a tearful farewell to his fellow-captive Su Wu, imagining the days when they would no longer be together:

而我在萬里	When I'll be ten thousand miles away,
結友不相見	No longer seeing my friend,

<sup>16</sup> In Shen Yue's 沈約 (441–513) poem "Master Huayang [i.e. Tao Hongjing 陶弘景, 456–536] Climbed a Tower and Does Not Come Down Again" (*Huayang xiansheng deng lou bu fu xia* 華陽先生登樓不復下), for instance, "letters are only delivered by the Blue Birds" 銜書必青鳥. See *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 1638.

<sup>17</sup> Poems that mention swallows as messengers include Bao Linghui's 鮑令暉 (d. ca. 456) "A Sentiment of Old, Presented to a Man of Today" (*Guyi zeng jinren* 古意贈今人, *Yutai xinyong* 4.47) and Yu Xin's "Song of Yan" (*Yan gexing* 燕歌行, *Yuefu shiji* 32.473). Geese feature in Fan Yun's 范雲 (451–503) "Dedicated to Zhang Ji from Xuzhou" (*Zeng Zhang Xuzhou Ji* 贈張徐州稷, *Wen xuan* 26.1217–18) and Liu Xiaowei's "Poem of Discontent" (*Yuan shi* 怨詩, *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 1867).

<sup>18</sup> See Owen 2006: 243–50. For earlier connotations of the image of the wild goose as a symbol of separation see Shaughnessy 1999: 340.

<sup>19</sup> For biographies of Li Ling and Su Wu see *Hanshu* 漢書 54.2450–58. See also Chung 1982: 204–5, 316–20.

<sup>20</sup> See also the poem "In the Voice of Su Wu's Wife" (*Dai Su Shuguo fu* 代蘇屬國婦) by Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (464–549, Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty 梁武帝, r. 502–49), in which the speaker impersonates Su's wife to lament separation. In this poem the "wild goose from the northwest" (西北雁) has become a poetical protagonist, "carrying a ten-thousand-mile letter in its beak" (果啣萬里書). *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 1533–34.

袖中有短書      And have a letter in my sleeve,<sup>21</sup>  
 願寄雙飛燕      Would that I can send it with a pair of swallows.<sup>22</sup>

Li Ling's wish to emulate Su Wu's ways of sending messages appears as a weak, insufficient compensation for the much more consequential but forsaken act of following Su Wu back home. It is even possible that the exchange of the majestic wild geese for swallows was meant to support this unfavorable comparison.

In Wu Jun's 吳均 (469–520) "Song of Returning From Seeing You Off" (*Song gui qu* 送歸曲) both swallows and wild geese are evoked as messengers to express the singer's worry that she may not hear from her beloved again:

燕至他人鄉      The swallows arrive at someone else's town,  
 雁去還誰國      The wild geese return to another land.<sup>23</sup>

Not only air, but also water promises greater speed and smoothness of movement than is normally attainable for humans. Fish (*yu* 魚), particularly the carp (*li* 鯉), thus became associated with the transmission of messages and used as poetic metaphors for letters, too. Two possibly historical explanations for this connection have been put forward. The first is that Chen Sheng 陳勝 (?–208 BCE), during a rebellion against the Qin, is said to have enclosed letters foretelling his rise to power into the bellies of fish.<sup>24</sup> Another explanation, although as yet without material evidence, is that wooden envelopes in the form of a fish or letters folded in the form of a fish were in use in ancient China.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For *duanshu* 短書 (lit., "a brief letter"), one of the many designations of the letter, see Chung 1982: 259–60.

<sup>22</sup> *Wen xuan* 31.1453–54. The commentary to this poem in *Wen xuan* quotes two poems that have not been transmitted: an anonymous "Old Poem" (*Gu shi* 古詩), which expresses the wish to "turn into a swallow on its way south" (願為南飛鸞), and Yu Yi's 虞義 (early 6th c.) "Seeing You Off" (*Song bie* 送別), which says "I only have a one-character letter, / I'll entrust it to a swallow on its way south" (唯有一字書，寄之南飛燕).

<sup>23</sup> *Yuefu shiji* 77.1084.

<sup>24</sup> *Hanshu* 31.1786, Tsien 1962: 118.

<sup>25</sup> Chung 1982: 205, 259. The phrase "to cook fish" (*peng yu* 烹魚) in *Maoshi* no. 149, "Not for the Wind" (*Fei feng* 匪風) has been interpreted as a metaphor for opening a letter. See Sun 1999: 600–601.

Wang Sengru in his poem “Fulling Cloth” (*Dao yi* 擣衣) combines fish and geese in the speaker’s lament of the imponderability of communication by letter:

尺素在魚腸      My foot of silk lies in the guts of a fish,  
寸心憑雁足      My inch of heart clings to the feet of a goose.<sup>26</sup>

The parallelization of a “foot of silk”—that is, one’s letter (whether written on a foot-long piece of silk or on less expensive stationery)—with one’s “inch of heart” first appears in Lu Ji’s “Poetic Exposition about Literature” (*Wen fu* 文賦).<sup>27</sup> Two hundred years later, Wang Sengru imaginatively employs the otherwise conventional analogy to convey the idea that a letter, once entrusted to a messenger, is released into uncertainty.<sup>28</sup> Geese and fish have remained staple images of letters throughout Chinese literature.

The more general lament about the limits of language and writing is topical in poems as well as letters.<sup>29</sup> Although mainly put in terms of the writers’ frustration at their lack of ability to express themselves, this topos also reflects the writers’ anticipation of disappointed readers and thus communicative failure, as in the following poem by Xu Fei 徐悱 (ca. 494–524) to his wife:

聊因一書札      Just relying on one letter,  
一代九迴腸      One standing in for nine agonies.<sup>30</sup>

A poem by He Xun points out the fundamental limitations of written communication through a similar poetic play with numbers:

<sup>26</sup> *Yutai xinyong* 6.67. The famous poem “The Carriage Rolls” (*Che yaoyao* 車遙遙, *Yue-fu shiji* 69.987) by the Tang dynasty author Hu Zeng 胡曾 (fl. 806) also features fish and geese together.

<sup>27</sup> *Wen xuan* 17.765. See also *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍註 25.456.

<sup>28</sup> This sentiment is also expressed in Shen Yue’s poem “The One I Love” (*You suo si* 有所思, *Yutai xinyong* 5.55).

<sup>29</sup> See the chapter “The Limits of Writing and Language” in Richter 2013: 134–38.

<sup>30</sup> “Zeng nei” 贈內, *Yutai xinyong* 6.69.

欲寄一行書      I wish to send you a one-line letter,  
 何解三秋意      But how to explain three autumns of brooding?<sup>31</sup>

Other poems made the doubts about the capacity of the written word even more explicit, as this last couplet of a farewell poem by Xie Zhan 謝瞻 (ca. 383–421):

誰謂情可書      Who says feelings can be put into writing?  
 盡言非尺牘      To capture words fully is beyond letters.<sup>32</sup>

Xie Zhan alludes to the famous sentence in the “Commentary on the Appended Words” (*Xici zhuan* 繫辭傳) of the canonical *Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易), “writing does not fully capture words, words do not fully capture meaning” (書不盡言，言不盡意).<sup>33</sup> This skeptical dictum, ascribed to Confucius, was a prominent subject of philosophical and literary debates in early medieval China, especially in third- and fourth-century “mysterious learning” (*xuanxue* 玄學).<sup>34</sup> It was also a virtually ubiquitous topos in Chinese letters, where it is quoted in the hope of hinting at the dimension of the unwritten or even inexpressible behind one’s own paltry words.<sup>35</sup>

While the lament of the imponderability of epistolary communication in all these poems constantly voices the desire to bridge the separation between writer and addressee, the same lament also highlights the existence of separation and how difficult it is to overcome it. Adopting a basic feature of the epistolary situation, which is “conditioned by absence and the ‘impossible’

<sup>31</sup> “Having Followed My Lord to Xizhou Where I am Stationed Now and Staying in My Study While it was Raining and Would Not Clear Up, I am Fondly Thinking of Our Travels Together in Your Commandery” (*Cong zhu yi Xizhou yuzhi zhai nei linyu bu qing huai junzhong youju* 從主移西州寓直齋內霖雨不晴懷郡中遊聚), *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 1698.

<sup>32</sup> “Farewell Poem for Wang Hong 王弘 [379–432] and Yu Dengzhi 庾登之 [382–443]” (*Wang fujun Yu Xiyang jibie shi* 王撫軍庾西陽集別詩), *Wen xuan* 20.979–80.

<sup>33</sup> *Zhouyi*, “Xici zhuan,” in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 7.157.2.

<sup>34</sup> For comprehensive discussions of the subject see Tang 2008 and Liu 1986.

<sup>35</sup> While many letters just allude to the dictum from the *Zhouyi*, Lu Chen’s letter to Liu Kun (271–318) (*Zeng Liu Kun bing shu* 贈劉琨並書, *Wen xuan* 25.1179) makes this reference explicit.

present,” the poems thus works “against the grain of absence, the alterity of space and the lags of time.”<sup>36</sup>

***“In Three Years Not a Word Has Faded”: How Letters Are Read***

Astonishingly, and somewhat counterintuitively, letters that safely arrive to be read by their addressees produce a similar effect. Poetic narratives of seemingly successful epistolary communication are usually told to reveal the emotional ambiguity of letter-writing. Although the recipient may feel temporarily comforted by a letter and the imagined presence of its writer, the letter will eventually cause the writer’s absence to be felt all the more poignantly.<sup>37</sup>

One of the texts associated with the possibly historical narrative about the ill-fated relationship between Qin Jia and his wife Xu Shu shall provide the first example, not only because of the prominence of this case, but also because the text in question is unusual among the poems discussed here.<sup>38</sup> The first of three “Poems Presented to His Wife” (*Zeng fu shi* 贈婦詩) attributed to Qin Jia clearly resembles a letter, through its setting (the correspondents living apart), its form of address (exclusively directed at one specific addressee), and the range of epistolary topoi it brings up:

人生譬朝露	Human life is like the morning dew,
居世多屯蹇	Our sojourn in this world has much “hardship” and “obstruction.” <sup>39</sup>
憂艱常早至	Sorrow and grief always arriving early,
歡會常苦晚	Joyful reunions always bitterly late.

<sup>36</sup> Herman 1999: 529–30.

<sup>37</sup> See the explicit declaration of momentary relief provided by a letter and enclosed poem (“although my comforts are few, my sorrows became for a moment lighter” 伊余雖寡慰，殷憂暫為輕) in Xie Zhan’s poem “In Response to Xie Lingyun” (*Da Lingyun* 答靈運), *Wen xuan* 25.1189–90.

<sup>38</sup> The poems attributed to the couple (*Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 185–88) are now widely regarded as Six Dynasties “persona compositions” (Owen 2006: 250). What has been transmitted of the correspondence between Qin Jian and Xu Shu—two letters each, partly fragmentary—is collected in *Quan Hou Han wen* 全後漢文 66.3a and 96.8b–9b (in *Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文). For a positive assessment of the letters’ authenticity see Chung 1982: 657–63.

<sup>39</sup> *Zhun* and *qian* are the names of hexagrams no. 3 and no. 39.

念當奉時役	I remember when I was charged with my present position
去爾日遙遠	And had to leave, farther away with every day.
遣車迎子還	When I sent a carriage to bring you back to me,
空往復空返	Empty it went and empty it returned again.
省書情悽愴	Perusing your letter, my mood became woeful and sad,
臨食不能飯	Come mealtime, I cannot eat.
獨坐空房中	Alone sitting in an empty room,
誰與相勸勉	Who shall encourage me?
長夜不能眠	Long are the nights, I cannot sleep,
伏枕獨展轉	Lying on my pillow alone, tossing and turning. <sup>40</sup>
憂來如循環	Sorrow comes in circles like a ring,
匪席不可卷	“[My heart] is not a map, it cannot be rolled up.” <sup>41</sup>

Following two couplets of general reflection on the transitoriness and misery of human life, the speaker—or rather, letter-writer—turns to his own past, reminiscing about the time when he had to part from his wife. The next couplet describes the *raison d'être* for this letter-poem: the wife's decision not to board the carriage sent to fetch her, but, instead of joining her husband, to send him a letter. Arriving in lieu of its writer, the letter forcefully draws attention to the continuing separation of husband and wife. The remainder of the poem is dedicated to a description of the writer's response to the letter;

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<sup>40</sup> The phrase “tossing and turning” is famously used to describe love-induced sleeplessness in *Maoshi* no. 1, “Guanju” (*Guanju* 關雎) and no. 145 “The Shores of the Marsh” (*Ze po* 澤陂). On sleeplessness in ancient Chinese literature see Richter 2001: 173–83, Owen 2006: 77–92.

<sup>41</sup> *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 186. The last line alludes to *Maoshi* no. 26, “The Cypress Boat.”

it is “perused” (*xing* 省), a not uncommon, respectful term that indicates close, repeated, and probably also silent reading.<sup>42</sup> Descriptions of reading letters in early medieval letters themselves mention both reading silently and reading aloud, very likely depending on the type of letter and the circumstances.<sup>43</sup> The feelings of sadness arising from the letter are associated with the lack of appetite, loneliness, and sleeplessness, all conventional topoi in poetry and letters alike.

The seventeenth of the anonymous *Nineteen Old Poems*, collected in *Wen xuan* and probably composed in the late Han dynasty, provides another influential model for writing about separation:<sup>44</sup>

孟冬寒氣至	In the first month of winter, cold air arrives,
北風何慘慄	The north winds, how cruel and frigid they are.
愁多知夜長	My sorrows are many, I know how long the nights are,
仰觀眾星列	Looking up to gaze at the multitudes of stars.
三五明月滿	On the fifteenth, the bright moon is full,
四五蟾兔缺	On the twentieth, toad and rabbit are waning. <sup>45</sup>
客從遠方來	A traveler came from a faraway place <sup>46</sup>
遺我一書札	And left me a letter. <sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> On vocalized and silent reading see Behr and Führer 2005: 17–33; Chen 2009. While Chen assumes that “vocalized reading was the dominant mode” in premodern China (2009: 59), Behr and Führer (2005: 30) are more cautious, citing the lack of textual sources, while emphasizing evidence of reading for oneself (and thus probably silently) already in the late Zhanguo period.

<sup>43</sup> See Richter 2013: 88.

<sup>44</sup> *Wen xuan* 29.1343–50; see also Sui 1955, Tian 2009. About the difficulties of dating the *Nineteen Old Poems* see the first chapter in Owen 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Toad and rabbit are conventional metaphors for the moon.

<sup>46</sup> Perhaps an allusion to *Lunyu* 論語, 1.1, *Shisanjing zhushu* 5.1.

<sup>47</sup> Although it is difficult to infer the writing material from the term that is used, *shuzha* could have referred to a thin wooden board, as they were commonly used in letter-writing during the Han dynasty. See Giele 2015.

上言長相思	At the top it said “always loving you,”
下言久離別	At the bottom it said “forever apart.” <sup>48</sup>
置書懷袖中	I tucked the letter away in my sleeve,
三歲字不滅	In three years not a word has faded.
一心抱區區	With my whole heart I cling to you,
懼君不識察	Fearful you may never know. <sup>49</sup>

The first part of the poem is dominated by metaphors of separation, as are many others of the *Nineteen Old Poems*. Coldness, sleeplessness, and the waning moon bespeak sorrow and loneliness. No reasons for the separation are given, not even indirect suggestions of military or civil duties, as we have just seen them in Qin Jia’s poem.<sup>50</sup> Until the letter left by the messenger is read and tucked away, the poem appears to refer to the speaker’s present tense. The lapidary statement in line 12, however, that “in three years not a word has faded,” suddenly removes the arrival of the messenger into the past and bestows a startling temporal dimension to the spatial separation. This changes the notion of reading in this poem, too, as it transforms the short, apparently singular act described in lines 9 and 10 into a recurring, ongoing activity: for three years, the speaker has been reading and re-reading this letter, or just gazing at it or holding it in her hands. The actual words of this message, which must have become familiar soon, may meanwhile have become null and void: the writer could be long dead or no longer care for his former love.<sup>51</sup> In that light, the three years of re-reading may also be interpreted as a hyperbole of the regular and unavoidable epistolary delay that challenges the value of any information conveyed by letter.

<sup>48</sup> See also the other “Always Loving You” poems in *Yuefu shiji* 69.990–95.

<sup>49</sup> *Wen xuan* 29.1349–50.

<sup>50</sup> Such explanations are not uncommon. In Lu Ji’s poem written on behalf of Gu Rong (mentioned above), for instance, the absent lover is described as a “traveling official” (*you huan* 遊宦). See *Wen xuan* 24.1149.

<sup>51</sup> The contemporary German poet Reiner Kunze expressed this possibility pointedly in the twelfth poem of his “Twenty-one Variations on the Subject ‘Mail’” (Einundzwanzig Variationen über das Thema “Die Post”): “But if one dies / Between two letters” (“Doch wenn man stirbt / zwischen zwei Briefen”) (Kunze 1984: 130).

Disregarding this fundamental fallibility, of which the reader of this letter must have been acutely aware, the letter itself is treasured as a material object beyond being just a text, as an object that carries physical traces of its faraway writer. This is suggested by the place where the letter is kept: inside the robe, next to the body, where it may evoke the presence of the writer or even be felt to be his embodiment. In this sense, the appreciation of a letter may come close to that of an original, unique work of art that, in the words of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility” (1936), has an “aura” that would be lacking from any facsimile.<sup>52</sup> The haptic pleasure or “tactile contemplation” provided by the slip of wood may well have been considered more important than the content of the letter.<sup>53</sup> On the purely visual level, a similar phenomenon may be observed with the appreciation of calligraphy in China, where “reading was subordinated to viewing,” as Bai Qianshen put it so succinctly.<sup>54</sup> But even if we do not go so far, it is beyond doubt that the sensory qualities of a letter, including the handwriting, partly compensate for the limited powers of language and writing.

The famous “Ballad of Watering Horses at a Long Wall Hole” (*Yin ma Changcheng ku xing* 飲馬長城窟行) has many correspondences with the seventeenth of the *Nineteen Old Poems*, although the relationship between these two texts remains unclear:

青青河邊草	Green, green, the grass on the river bank,
緜緜思遠道	Long, long, I've been thinking of his far way.
遠道不可思	His far way is unthinkable,
夙昔夢見之	But last night I saw him in my dream.
夢見在我傍	I saw him in my dream at my side,

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin 2008: 22–24.

<sup>53</sup> We should mention here that Benjamin (2008: 40) remarked—albeit in the context of the appreciation of architecture—that “on the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side.”

<sup>54</sup> Bai 1999: 385, see also Richter 2011. Despite the unique position of calligraphy in China, the appreciation of someone's handwriting, especially in letters, is a common phenomenon in other cultures as well. See, for instance, the response of the novel's heroine, Fanny, to a letter from her beloved, in Jane Austen's (1775–1817) *Mansfield Park*: “To her, the hand-writing itself, independent of anything it may convey, is a blessedness” (chapter 27).

忽覺在佗鄉	Suddenly, awake, you are in a different town.
佗鄉各異縣	In a different town, each in another county,
輾轉不可見	I toss and turn but can no longer see him.
枯桑知天風	The withered mulberry senses the heaven's wind,
海水知天寒	Sea water senses the heaven's cold.
入門各自媚	Entering their gates, all have their own amusement,
誰肯相為言	But who wants to talk to me?
客從遠方來	A traveler came from a faraway place,
遺我雙鯉魚	And left me a pair of carp.
呼兒烹鯉魚	I called the boy to cook the carps,
中有尺素書	Inside was a letter on a foot of silk.
長跪讀素書	Long did I kneel to read the silk letter—
書中竟何如	What was in the letter then?
上言加餐食	At the top it said “do eat more,”
下言長相憶	At the bottom it said “always loving you.” <sup>55</sup>

This poem again evokes a complex narrative situation, enriched by intertextual references to other poems, including the *Odes*, and their respective narrative situations. Starting with a nature image whose seasonal associations with spring and summer form an alluring contrast with the cold of separation to emerge later in lines 9 and 10, the poem first sketches the speaker's

<sup>55</sup> *Wen xuan* 27.1277–78. While both *Wen xuan* and *Yuefu shiji* list the poem as anonymous, *Yutai xinyong* attributes it to the late Han literatus Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192).

loneliness. We are not as sure, as the translation above suggests, that she indeed dreamed of the faraway lover “last night”—*su xi* 夙昔 may as well mean “earlier” or, and this may be even more consequential, “night and day,” that is “all the time.” The letter from afar that arrives, in disguise, in line 13 appears as a substitute for its writer in a slightly different way than in the seventeenth *Old Poem*: here it provides the company the speaker had earlier described as sorely missing. We can assume that reading was an extended, iterative process in this case, too, and well beyond the “long kneeling” mentioned in line 17. The verb *du* 讀, which is often interpreted as referring to reciting or reading aloud, could be an indication that the letter was shared with the “boy,” perhaps a servant or a son.

The similarities between this poem and the seventeenth *Old Poem* are not confined to the identical line “a traveler came from a faraway place.” The following line as well as the last couplet are syntactically parallel, too, and correspond in content.<sup>56</sup> “Watering Horses” moreover shares lines and phrases used in several other of the *Old Poems*, for instance line 1 alludes to the second poem and line 19 to the first.<sup>57</sup> Although scholars have held one or the other opinion on the relationship between these poems, there is no way of knowing today if “Watering Horses” was written under the influence of the *Nineteen Old Poems* or the other way round, or if both drew on the same pool of poetic material, which would appear to be the most plausible scenario.<sup>58</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of the “Ballad of Watering Horses at a Long Wall Hole” is the analogy between letter and dreaming that it proposes (the dream probably standing in for the sleeplessness that we see in other poems). Since neither a letter nor a dream can truly undo a separation, the momentary semblance of a reunion with a faraway partner that they both afford in their specific ways—through written communication or shared dream-time—lets a separation appear even more substantial. Letters are granted no more than the illusory comfort that dreams provide, which resonates with Franz Kafka’s (1883–1924) misgivings about letter-writing as “communication with ghosts.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> The substitution of “長相憶” for “長相思” in the last couplet seems to be motivated by the rhyme.

<sup>57</sup> *Wen xuan* 29.1343–44.

<sup>58</sup> In the context of his discussion of intertextuality in Chinese Music Bureau (*yuefu* 樂府) poetry Joseph R. Allen (1992: 83) argued that the affinities between these poems are not “the product of influence or borrowings, but rather are derived from the literary system to which they belong.” Stephen Owen (2006: 3) used the term “one poetry” and suggested that it was “created from a shared poetic repertoire and shared compositional procedures.”

<sup>59</sup> See his famous letter to his lover Milena Jesenská (1896–1944), written at the end of March, 1922, which masterfully summarizes the limitations of communication by letter (Kafka 1986: 302).

The sixteenth *Old Poem*, the only one of this group that mentions dreaming, links it with separation and letters as well, albeit in a less explicit way. Couched in allusions of coldness, it features a lonely woman who recounts in some detail a dream of her traveling, handsome lover, whom she suspects of unfaithfulness and who proves elusive even in her dream. Awoken from this dream she laments:

亮無晨風翼      Clearly lacking falcon's wings,  
焉能凌風飛      How could I mount the wind and fly?<sup>60</sup>

Later Chinese poets continued to associate epistolary and oneiric communication in their works, among them Xiao Yan in “The One I Love” (*You suo si* 有所思),<sup>61</sup> Xiao Ji 蕭紀 (508–553) in “Harmonizing with Xiao Yi’s 蕭繹 ‘Dream at Night’” (*He Xiangdong wang* “Ye meng” *yingling* 和湘東王夜夢應令),<sup>62</sup> and Du Mu 杜牧 (803–853) in “Staying at an Inn” (*Li su* 旅宿).<sup>63</sup>

The idea of recurrent, iterative reading implicit in the seventeenth *Old Poem* is elaborated in one of the better-known adaptations of this poem, written by Liu Shuo 劉鑠 (431–553). The following quotation starts with line 7:

客從遠方至      A traveler arrived from a faraway place,  
贈我千里書      And offered me a thousand-mile letter.  
先敘懷舊愛      At the beginning it spoke of “cherishing old love,”  
末陳久離居      At the end it said “forever living apart.”  
一章意不盡      At first sight I did not fully understand its meaning,  
三復情有餘      Having read it thrice I was overwhelmed.

<sup>60</sup> *Wen xuan* 29.1349.

<sup>61</sup> *Yutai xinyong* 7.76 (see also below).

<sup>62</sup> *Yutai xinyong* 7.84.

<sup>63</sup> *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 525.6014.

願遂平生眷      Would that your love lasts for a life-time,  
無使甘言虛      Don't let your sweet words prove hollow.<sup>64</sup>

That the poetic force of this poem is much weaker, seems to be mainly due to the lack of any references to the sensory perception of the letter, be they visual or tactile.

Other poems pursue different avenues to intensify the poetic effect of the letter motif. In Xiao Yan's "The One I Love," for instance, a further sensory dimension is adduced. The letter in this poem is not only seen and touched; through the scent of the writer's clothes, even its smell is associated:

衣上芳猶在      On my clothes your scent seems to remain,  
握裏書未滅      In my hands your letter's not yet faded.<sup>65</sup>

In Jiang Hong's 江洪 (*fl.* ca. 502) poem "In Celebration of a Red Letter Paper" (*Yong hong jian* 詠紅箋), the female speaker revels in her stationery's color and scent, hoping that they might enhance the effect of her letter to the absent beloved.<sup>66</sup> The belief that a textual message might be intensified by such means clearly demonstrates an understanding of the sensuous aspects of reading.

Another poem inspired by the seventeenth *Old Poem*, composed by He Tuo 何妥 in the sixth century, is especially interesting because it contrasts a letter with a conversation:

門前車馬客      At the gate is a stranger with horse and carriage,  
言是故鄉來      Saying that he comes from my hometown.  
故鄉有書信      From my hometown, there is a letter,  
縱橫印檢開      The crisscross sealing label is opened.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> "Imitating 'In the First Month of Winter, Cold Air Arrives'" (*Ni* 'Mengdong han qi zhi' 擬孟冬寒氣至), *Yutai xinyong* 3.41–42.

<sup>65</sup> *Yutai xinyong* 7.76.

<sup>66</sup> *Yutai xinyong* 5.58. Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361) is said to have used violet letter paper, see Tsien 1985: 92. On decorated stationery see also Wright 2015.

開書看未極	I opened the letter, but did not read it through,
行客屢相識	Since travelers have so many acquaintances.
借問故鄉人	Asking about people from my hometown,
潺湲淚不息	My tears flow incessantly.
上言離別久	At the top it said “apart forever,”
下道望應歸	At the bottom it said “hope to return.”
寸心將夜鶻	My inch of heart will go for a night-magpie,
相逐向南飛	Following it on its flight south. <sup>68</sup>

Although He Tuo’s poem shares much with the seventeenth *Old Poem* and related material, it does reverse the usual gender roles, as is not the least indicated by the direction of the flight of the magpie: a woman sent the letter, addressed to a man in the north. The breaking of the sealing label evokes the sensory experience of a letter and its envelope, while at the same time emphasizing the value of confidentiality. Opening the letter is followed by reading—the verb in this case is *kan* 看, which is often associated with silent reading. At this time, however, the letter temporarily recedes into the background in favor of the traveler-messenger, a valuable source of information: after all, a letter cannot be queried and, being a written message, suffers from “not being able to capture words fully.” The specific value of the letter as a piece of written communication becomes evident in line 9, when reading is resumed and the traveler seems to have gone. Unlike him, the letter remains available and may serve as a reminder of or substitute for the absent writer—as we have seen, sometimes for years, turning into a projection screen for the reader’s thoughts and emotions that were originally meant for the absent writer.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> On early imperial sealing labels, see Giele 2015: 415–21.

<sup>68</sup> “At the Gate is a Stranger With Horses and Carriage” (*Men qian che ma ke* 門前車馬客), *Yuefu shiji* 40.586.

<sup>69</sup> Wu Maiyuan’s 吳邁遠 (d. 474) poem “Always Loving You” (*Chang xiang si* 長相思) also features a conversation with a messenger, in this case one to whom a letter is entrusted along with an oral message (*Yutai xinyong* 4.47).

*“He Gave Me a Length of Silk”: Letters and Gifts*

If certain letters are perceived of and esteemed as material objects—be it because of a special bond between the correspondents, their calligraphic value, or their content—they resemble gifts.<sup>70</sup> In poetry, where gifts are a very common motif as well, they can be used in a similarly double-edged way as letters: drawing attention to the steadiness of a connection, they also reveal its precariousness. This ambiguity is owed not the least to the fact that gifts may convey different meanings for the giver and the recipient of a gift, as Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–1999) has shown in one of the chapters of his *Guanzhui bian* 管錘編.<sup>71</sup> From the great number of poems dedicated to gift-giving (which would certainly deserve to be studied on their own), the eighteenth *Old Poem* is of particular interest in our context because it tells of the transformation of a material gift, which includes the adaptation of the message that was originally inscribed into the gift:

客從遠方來	A traveler came from a faraway place,
遺我一端綺	And left me a length of silk.
相去萬餘里	More than ten thousand miles apart,
故人心尚爾	My lover’s heart is still the same.
文綵雙鴛鴦	The pattern of a colorful pair of mandarin ducks,
裁爲合歡被	I cut it up to make a love quilt.
著以長相思	I line it with “always loving you,”
緣以結不解	I hem it with “inseparably joined.”
以膠投漆中	Glue thrown into lacquer,
誰能別離此	Who could take them apart? <sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> For a comprehensive study of letters and gifts in early medieval China see Tian 2015.

<sup>71</sup> Qian 1986: 837–38, translated in Egan 1998: 141–43.

<sup>72</sup> “A Traveler Came From a Faraway Place” (*Ke cong yuan fang lai* 客從遠方來), *Wen xuan* 29.1350.

A gift may fulfill the communicate function of a letter, especially if its pattern, *wen* 文, is as easy to decipher as the one on the “length of silk” described here. The “pair of mandarin ducks” that adorns the fabric sent by the absent lover has long been a symbol of marital faithfulness in China and may virtually be read by the recipient.<sup>73</sup> Given that the birds are inscribed into the gift as a promise, the cutting of the cloth in the following line appears disruptive and slightly alarming—is the pair of mandarin ducks split up by the eager seamstress?—only to give way to a narrative that emphatically affirms the connection between the separated lovers. In her letter of response, written in needlework, the seamstress deftly adapts the fatalistic “always loving you, forever apart” formula by declaring that they are “inseparably joined.” The initial verbs that are used in this couplet are ingeniously chosen: instead of the conventional reporting verbs used elsewhere (e.g. *yan* 言), we find two technical terms of sewing, *zhu* 著, “to line,” and *yuan* 緣, “to hem.” The semantical multivalence of both words adds to the lines’ rich connotations. If *zhu* is read as “to write” and *yuan* as a reference to the predestination of this relationship, the couplet could be rendered, “Inscribed with ‘always loving you’, / By predestination ‘inseparably joined.’”<sup>74</sup>

Another parallel in the poetic treatment of letters and gifts emerges in Xie Huilian’s 謝惠連 (407–433) “A Traveler Came From a Faraway Place” (*Ke cong yuan fang lai* 客從遠方來), which is closely modeled on the eighteenth *Old Poem*. In Xie’s poem the patterned silk cloth arrives in an envelope just as a letter would: “Put in a ‘loving you’ box, / Sealed with a ‘one heart’ cord” 貯以相思篋，緘以同心繩. The cloth is then used to sew a robe to be worn by the recipient herself, perhaps even as underwear, since the phrase *qin shen fu* 親身服 could mean both “to wear personally” and “to wear next to one’s skin.”<sup>75</sup> The gift thus again carries a message and substitutes for the absent giver. The second half of Xie Huilian’s poem, however, departs from the cheerful confidence of the eighteenth *Old Poem* and instead presents a consistent counter-narrative of enduring separation.

The juxtaposition of letters with gifts (epistolary or not) that we find in early medieval Chinese poetry illustrates the peculiar blend of material tangibility and verbal abstraction that most letters represent.

<sup>73</sup> See already in the *Odes* (*Maoshi* no. 216, “Mandarin Ducks” [*Yuanyang* 鴛鴦]).

<sup>74</sup> See also the “readable” gifts mentioned in two poems by Bao Linghui: a zither inscribed with a “loving you pattern” (*xiang si wen* 相思文) in her “Imitating ‘A Traveler Came From a Faraway Place’” (*Ni ‘Ke cong yuan fang lai’* 擬客從遠方來) and “doubly-inscribed brocade” (*shuang ti jin* 雙題錦) in the second of two poems “On Behalf of Monk Ge’s Wife Guo Xiaoyu” (*Dai Ge shamen qi Guo Xiaoyu* 代葛沙門妻郭小玉), *Yutai xinyong* 4.47.

<sup>75</sup> *Yutai xinyong* 3.41.

**“Your Letter’s Words Fade with Each Reading”: The Ageing of Letters**

Proclamations that words do not fade or scents linger also have the opposite effect of alerting us to the fleeting nature of time and hence evoke the idea of ageing. This association, omnipresent in Chinese poetry through allusions or explicit declarations, is also expressed with regard to letters,<sup>76</sup> as in a farewell poem by Fan Yun:

不愁書難寄	I’m not worried that it is hard to send letters,
但恐鬢將霜	But fearful that my temples will turn white. <sup>77</sup>

Lu Qiong 陸瓊 (537–586) achieved a dramatic evocation of impermanence in his poem “Always Loving You” (*Chang xiang si* 長相思), which masterly combines many of the conventional images we have seen so far:

長相思	“Always loving you,
久離別	Forever apart.”
一罷	Once it was over,
鴛文綺薦絕	The mandarin-duck patterned silk blanket was severed.
鴻已去	The wild geese are already gone,
柳堪結	The willows will soon bear fruit.
室冷鏡疑冰	The chamber so cold, mirrors look like ice,
庭幽花似雪	The courtyard so dark, blooms seem like snow.

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<sup>76</sup> The same association can be detected in other cultural traditions and media. A “Vanitas Still Life” (1625) by Pieter Claesz (1597/98–1661), currently held in the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, The Netherlands, shows a skull, a burning candle, a clock, and a letter as symbols of the vanity of all earthly pursuits as opposed to Christian values. See <http://www.franshalsmuseum.nl/en/collection/search-collection/vanitas-still-life-80/>.

<sup>77</sup> *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi*, 1549.

容貌朝朝改      My looks are changing every morning,  
 書字看看滅      Your letter's words fade with each reading.<sup>78</sup>

Lu Qiong uses a forceful image of the intensity of reading, which slowly fades or eradicates (*mie* 滅) the words of the letter. Subjected to the passing of time and to continual handling by the reader, the letter turns into her doppelganger, ageing and wasting away.

The damage done by persistent reading evokes Confucius and his ardent study of the *Book of Changes*, reported by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (?145–?86 BC):

In his old age Confucius was fond of the *Changes*. He arranged the *Tuan*, *Xi*, *Xiang*, *Shuogua* and *Wenyan* [commentaries]. Reading the *Changes*, he broke the leather binding thrice.<sup>79</sup> He said: “If I had a few more years left, I could master the *Changes*.” 孔子晚而喜易，序彖、繫、象、說卦、文言。讀易，韋編三絕。曰：『假我數年，若是，我於易則彬彬矣。』<sup>80</sup>

This anecdote seems strangely out of character for any traditional Chinese scholar, and even more so for Confucius. Why did he have to *read* the book again and again? Did he not know the *Changes* by heart? Yan Shigu's 顏師古 (581–645) commentary on the parallel account in *Hanshu* may provide an explanation. Yan comments, “this is to say that Confucius cherished the *Changes* very much” (*yan ai wan zhi shen* 言愛玩之甚).<sup>81</sup> Sadly, the English “to cherish” is a rather lame rendition of the words *ai wan* 愛玩 that Yan Shigu uses to describe Confucius' relationship with the *Book of Changes*, mainly because “cherish” lacks the sensory connotations of *wan*, especially its haptic dimension (which also has an iterative or durative implication, approximating the meaning “to caress or fondle”). Yan's choice of the word *wan* suggests that Confucius not only appreciated the wisdom of the *Book of Changes*, but that he was also fond of the material object that carried the text, that he enjoyed

<sup>78</sup> *Yuefu shiji* 69.993.

<sup>79</sup> According to Tsuen-hsuei Tsien (1962: 112), this passage is the only indication that leather was used to bind bamboo or wooden slips in ancient China.

<sup>80</sup> *Shiji* 史記 47.1937.

<sup>81</sup> *Hanshu* 88.3589–91.

handling the book and holding it in his hands. It is tempting to speculate that he may have had similar motives for this particular fondness as the poetic recipients of letters: it may well have been that Confucius regarded the book as a way to enter into an especially intimate communication with its reputed author, his role model, the Duke of Zhou 周公 (*fl.* 1042–1036 BCE).<sup>82</sup>

Similar phrases are used in early medieval letter-writing to emphasize the pleasure of holding a piece of writing by the correspondent in one's hands.<sup>83</sup> Liu Kun, for example, replying to a poem and a letter he had received from Lu Chen, starts his letter with a praise of his correspondent's writings: "Again and again I held your writings to cherish them, I would not let them out of my hands" (執玩反覆，不能釋手).<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusion

Although letters are a significant motif in early medieval Chinese poetry, their content, if mentioned at all, remains strangely bland: lamenting the separation, hoping for a reunion, and pledging everlasting love. Even the surprisingly concrete plea to "eat more" turns out to be utterly conventional.<sup>85</sup> The corpus of historical letters that survive from the period includes many such apparently bland pieces as well. The most important information these letters carry seems to be their very existence, which signals the continuing care of their writers in the face of separation. Scholars of epistolary literature in other cultures have spoken of the letter's "capacity to refer to itself and to its own communicative function independently of any propositional content it may

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<sup>82</sup> The *Wen xuan* commentary (29.1350) cites the story a son's appreciation of his father's handwritten instructions: Zhao Wuxu 趙無恤 keeps documents in his sleeve that his father, Zhao Jianzi 趙簡子 (517–458 BCE) wrote for him three years earlier. Transmitted editions of the source reported in the *Wen xuan* commentary, *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, do not contain this passage.

<sup>83</sup> For examples see Richter 2013: 24–25, 131–133, including the notes to these pages.

<sup>84</sup> Liu Kun, "Poem in Response to Lu Chen, with a Letter" (*Da Lu Chen shi bing shu* 答盧諶詩並書, *Wen xuan* 25.1169. See also the sensory connotations of *wan* at the end of the letter: "The pearl that could illuminate the night—why should only the hand of the marquis of Sui cherish it?" (夜光之珠何得專玩於隨掌).

<sup>85</sup> There is one prominent exception: Chen Lin's 陳琳 (d. 217) "Ballad of Watering Horses at a Long Wall Hole" (*Yin ma Changcheng ku xing* 飲馬長城窟行). The second part of this poem consists of poetic renderings of a correspondence between husband and wife, all in all four letters, in which the wife rejects the husband's suggestion to abandon him and remarry because he might well die in service at the northern border, see *Yuefu shiji* 38.556–57.

express”<sup>86</sup> or of letters as “writing proclaiming itself as writing in the process of correspondence.”<sup>87</sup> This sentiment was also voiced in poetry, for instance by the German literatus Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) in the succinct form of a sonnet: “Why do I turn to paper once again? / You surely do not have to ask me that: / For truly there is naught I have to tell / Yet in the end it comes to your dear hands.”<sup>88</sup>

The relative irrelevance of the content of letters in poetry thus illuminates important aspects of their writers’ view of human relationships: bearing forceful witness of the vulnerability of human connections, they also attest to the strength of these connections in the face of adversity. Another valuable finding is the perspective on reading letters that emerges in these poems. While reading letters is consistently described as a weak substitute for face-to-face communication, not the least because of the fundamental limitation of writing, we also see strategies to compensate for these weaknesses. One way to intensify the reading experience is to prolong it by reading repeatedly, even recurrently—employing the enduring availability of written documents, which constitutes one of the main advantages of writing as compared with conversation. Another strategy is to make the reading experience more complex by adding a richer sensory dimension to it. A letter’s materiality, including its handwriting, may complement its lack of vocal, facial, and gestural expressiveness and even act as a realization of its writers. Reading does not only serve to gather textual information—be it from letters or canonical books—but was also conceived of as an important means to facilitate human relationships: to a faraway lover, as in the case of the poetic letters, or even to the Duke of Zhou, as in the case of Confucius.

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<sup>86</sup> Violi 1985: 160.

<sup>87</sup> Guillén 1986: 80.

<sup>88</sup> “Warum ich wieder zum Papier mich wende? / Das muß du, Liebster, so bestimmt nicht fragen: / Denn eigentlich hab ich dir nichts zu sagen; / Doch kommt’s zuletzt in deine lieben Hände” (Goethe 1987: 16–17).

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