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This is the first study I know of in English on letter-writing in the Chinese tradition. Philologically well-informed, it covers the place of letters in literary thinking, with much detail about their conventions of phrasing and style. It also tells what they were actually made of, how they were conveyed, and how they are organized. This is a fine piece of work and its 150 pages of text (though not the 80 pages of notes) will be accessible to the general reader interested in the history of literature. The author has used tony words here and there (“materiality”, meaning materials, 17; “normativity,” 139; “dialogicity,” 146) that may demoralize some readers, but what she actually has to say is clear, unpretentious, and worth hearing.

Most discussion of the significance of the letter in native literary thought comes from a close reading of one chapter in Liú Xié’s sixth-century Literary Mind; there are also excerpts from the letters about literature in the Wénxuān anthology. All are
translated and analyzed with care. Terminology, which may interest mainly the technically minded, gets a fair amount of coverage. But to non-specialists the chapters on conventional sentiments (“Topoi”) and the expression of individuality will probably be the most interesting — those thirty pages distill the generally formal eloquence with which literate Chinese people once put their feelings into words. That is the best part of the book, and worth the purchase price.

This book needed much more editing than it got. As in much scholarly translation, some of the English is stilted:

Voices a myriad of years old are presented;
responses from a thousand of miles away are incited. (62)

One bad case is the formulaic greeting dùnshǒu 頓首, here rendered “[I] knock my head on the ground.” If I wrote this in a letter you would wonder about my state of mind. But the word just means ‘to kowtow: to touch one’s head respectfully to the floor’; it is a conventional way of saying “I send you my respects”. Editing failed the author here.
Another editing issue: the notes are packed with erudition, but most citations to original texts are missing Chinese characters, a nuisance for anyone who will actually use those notes. Compound Chinese words are sometimes rendered as discrete syllables (zhí bǐ 執筆 ‘to hold one’s brush’, 137) and sometimes joined (dūnshǒu, as above, 77). The author perhaps tries to divide syllables based on words’ internal structure, but if so then with inconsistent results; these two words have the same structure. It was an editor’s job to fix all this.

Taking all in all, this book is important because it introduces a major genre of Chinese literature to the Anglophone public, and it does so readably and in a voice for the most part accessible to general readers. I recommend it without reservation. But I do hope the second edition gets a good editorial refactoring — and possibly without anyone’s head being knocked on the ground.

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