

# Send Shoes: A Letter from Yuan to Zifang

Translated by Charles Sanft

## Introduction

The letter has been a distinct literary form in China since at least early imperial times. Many early examples come to us through texts such as *Hanshu* 漢書 and anthologies like the *Wenxuan* 文選. The letters in those works were selected for historical or literary significance—or both—and in all likelihood were changed in the course of compilation and transmission.<sup>1</sup> Through the recovery of materials from archaeological sites in recent decades, we have letters of more ordinary men available too. These letters are not literary and their historical value is mainly for paleography, as they document only the smallest glimpses of their authors' lives. As a result they have received minimal attention from scholars.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, these letters are worth reading, and here I translate one that was recovered from the Xuanquanzhi 懸泉置 site, located between Dunhuang 敦煌 and Guazhou 瓜州 (Gansu).<sup>3</sup> It was written on silk and is in a remarkable state of preservation. The only impediment to reading the text is the overlaying, reverse impression of the text that resulted when the letter was folded up and the written faces of the page pressed together.

One of the colour plates accompanying the archaeological report is a photograph of the original letter (see image). The script is *lishu* 隸書 and uniform throughout, with the exception of a short addendum in another hand written by 'myself', which can only

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<sup>1</sup> For a study of literary epistles during the Han, see Eva Yuen-wah Chung, 'A Study of the "Shu" (Letters) of the Han Dynasty' (Ph.D. Dissertaton, University of Washington, 1982). In addition to frequent individual examples, *Renditions* devoted issue Nos. 41 & 42 (1994) to translations of letters.

<sup>2</sup> An exception is Edward L. Shaughnessy, 'Military Histories of Early China: A Review Article', *Early China*, 21 (1996), 181, which translates a letter recovered at Shuihudi 睡虎地. Enno Giele, 'Signatures of "Scribes" in Early Imperial China', *Asiatische Studien*, 59.1 (2005), 357–58, translates and briefly discusses the line that concerns seal carving from the letter I treat here.

<sup>3</sup> The archaeological report on this site is Gansu sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 甘肅省文物考古研究所, 'Gansu Dunhuang Han dai Xuanquanzhi yizhi fajue jianbao' 甘肅敦煌漢代懸泉置遺址發掘簡報, *Wenwu* 文物, 5 (2000), 4–20. For a summary in English and translation of another text recovered from the site, see my article 'Edict of Monthly Ordinances for the Four Seasons in Fifty Articles from 5 CE: Introduction to the Wall Inscription Discovered at Xuanquanzhi, with Annotated Translation', *Early China*, 32 (2008–9), 125–208.

refer to Yuan 元, the sender. This indicates he dictated the main body for someone else to write out. There is no date, but the archaeological context places this letter in the Han. Nothing is known of its author or recipient beyond what little information the letter contains. The letter's guilelessness lends it a charm often missing from the florid compositions of the masters, and despite its brevity and profusion of conventional phrases, it still bears thin echoes of its author's voice.

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A letter from Yuan to Zifang  
元寫給子方的信

Courtesy of Gansu jiandu baohu  
zhongxin 甘肅簡牘保護中心

I, YUAN 元, prostrate myself and bow repeatedly to you, Zifang 子方. May you be well and without worry. When you left Kudao 苦道, I missed the time and did not attend your departure. That was a crime deserving death. May your parents, household, and children be without worry. I prostrate myself and hope that you are without distress concerning them. I would not dare be careless or proud toward your parents or household. I am now respectfully receiving instruction as manager of an armory. It is the hot season. I prostrate myself and hope that you wear suitable clothes, are favoured with proper beer and food, and are well-favoured in attending to official matters.

I respectfully say: It happens that I will follow my unit to take station at Dunhuang, where shoes are lacking, as you know. I am going to be familiar. I hope you will do me the favour of buying me a pair of shoes made from grogram and tanned leather, 28 cm in length; and five writing brushes, good ones. I shall be very grateful if you do. As for the money, I request to pay it at your home when next convenient. I will not dare leave you with the burden. I hope you will favour me by keeping in mind that I want thick shoes, suitable for walking. You know I have repeatedly had trouble with this and how hard it is to get proper shoes. I shall be very grateful, very grateful! As for the amanuensis you recommended, Ciru 次孺: I would like you to ask for his reply when you pass by his home. If Ciru is not there, please see his wife Rongjun 容君 and ask for the reply. I shall be very grateful. I prostrate myself and bow repeatedly to you.

Those shoes you will favour me by buying—I hope you will entrust them to the first officer coming here, so I can put them to use in good time. I shall be very grateful. I prostrate myself and bow again and again.

Lü Zidu 吕子都 wants to have a seal carved but dares not tell you. Not knowing how incapable I am, he bids me ask you. He hopes that you will favour him by having a seal carved, imperial scribe-style, 1.6 cm square and with a turtle figure on top; the seal should say, 'Lü An's 吕安 seal'. He hopes you will give attention to this, and that he will be able to accomplish it with your aid. He dares not entrust it to anyone else.

The 200 cash that camp commander Guo 郭 sends is to buy a whip. He would like one that cracks well. I hope you will pay attention to this.

*I write this myself: I hope you will favour me by paying attention in making these purchases and not being careless—different from the others!*

Original text

元伏地再拜請

子方足下善毋恙苦道子方發元失候不侍駕有死罪丈人家室兒子毋恙元伏地願子方毋憂丈人家室

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自書所願以市事幸留意毋忽異於它人

Bibliography

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