Chinese Autobiographical Writing
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LETTERS HOME

Three letters sent by ordinary men and women (3rd c. BCE and 9th–10th c. CE)

Three private letters that survive from the early imperial period reveal bits and pieces of the lives and concerns of ordinary people away from home.

When people are separated for lengthy periods, they naturally crave news from home. And such separations were not rare occurrences. The vast size of the Qin and Han empires and the practice of universal conscription meant that many men spent long periods away from home. Women who married into families some distance from their own could also try to keep in touch by sending letters.

This selection introduces accidentally preserved private letters from ordinary people to their relatives. Because the letters have not survived in perfect condition, there are often gaps in what can be deciphered today, but there is still much that can be learned from them. “Heifu and Jing’s Letter to Zhong and Mother,” written on wooden strips and discovered in a Qin dynasty tomb in Yunmeng, Hubei, is generally considered to be the earliest extant “letter home.” The second letter, “Zheng’s Letter to Youqing and Junming,” from the Han period, and the third letter, “Second Daughter’s
Letter to Home," from the ninth or tenth century, were written on silk and discovered among the documents found in a Dunhuang cave temple. Each can be read as a personal account, as they reveal close emotional bonds between the senders and their family members and their hometown friends and neighbors, as well as their experiences away from home. Brothers Heifu and Jing were part of the Qin conquest of the Chu state, yet their army provisions do not seem to have been sufficient, and the soldiers often ran out of money. Zheng, the author of the second letter, was frustrated by the fact that he had been stationed in the middle of nowhere for more than five years and had no hope for a transfer or promotion. Second Daughter, author of the third letter, was fascinated by the variety of silks she could find in the eastern capital. Taken together, these letters remind us that ordinary people may not have left behind poetry or travel diaries, but their letters allow us to piece together aspects of their lives.

1. Heifu and Jing’s Letter to Zhong and Mother (ca. 223 BCE)

On the xinsi day, the second month, Heifu and Jing send their warmest greetings to Brother Zhong and Mother. How are you? We are both fine here. Recently we were separated, but now we are together again. Heifu begged me to see that this letter is delivered:

Send Heifu cash, not summer clothes. Once this letter arrives, Mother, look in Anlu [Yunmeng, Hubei] for cheap silk cloth that can be made into an unlined skirt and shirt, which you should make and have sent here together with the cash. If silk cloth is too expensive, just send the cash, and I will buy cloth here and tailor them myself. We are stationed in Huaiyang [Henan] to attack rebel cities. I am not sure if I will be sick or injured during this tour. I hope that Mother will send enough provisions for me. When the letter arrives, please, all of you, reply. In the reply, be sure to say whether Xiang Jiajue has come or not. If he has not, please tell me what’s going on. Have you heard whether Wang De is all right? Has Wang De bid farewell to Xiang Jiajue? When the letter and clothes arrive at the Southern Army . . .

Give Aunt [father’s elder sister], Elder Sister Kangle [possibly married], Eldest Aunt Gushu, and her husband . . . our sincere regards . . . How are they? Give Sister at the eastern wing our sincere regards. We hope she is all right.
Give young Ying Fan our sincere regards. What has happened with that matter? Is it settled?
Give the elders of Lü Ying’s family in Xiyang Lane and the elders of Yan Zheng’s family in Bing Lane our sincere regards. How are they? Yin and Zheng are all fine here, though they have run out of money and clothes.
Jing gives his wife and daughter his sincere regards. How are you? My wife, do your best to look after our parents. Don’t give . . . Yuanbai [possibly Jing’s brother-in-law] does not know when he will be back. My wife, please do your best.


2. Zheng’s Letter to Youqing and Junming
(Former Han Dynasty)

Zheng prostrates himself, bows repeatedly, and states:

Your Honors, Youqing and wife Junming, how are you? We have not seen each other for a long time. It is the hot season, and I prostrate myself to offer my sincere wish that Youqing and Junming clothe yourselves appropriately, eat enough food, and stay informed about the prefect’s affairs. I have been stationed in Chengle [Shanxi] for more than five years and have not been transferred or promoted. The place is in the middle of nowhere, and transportation is minimal. My official position is insignificant, and my status low, so I cannot write you often. I kowtow in respect. Since a young colleague of mine, Wang Zifang, is now promoted to become an assistant to Duke Yuze of Dunhuang, I respectfully beg you to look after him…. [Yang] Junqian did not participate in the defense or stay in the northern border region. Therefore, when he returned, he did not submit a report. I kowtow in respect. Governor Mr. Ren got sick in the middle of the first month of the year and unfortunately passed away. Governor. . . . I often receive your admonition [letters] and know that your sons are all fine, which makes me feel very fortunate. I hereby respectfully send my greeting to your honors, Youqing and Junming.

Please convey my greetings to Brothers Zhangshi, Zizhong, and Shaoshi.
3. Second Daughter’s Letter Home

... I have been away for a long time and miss you deeply. Unfortunately, we are separated by clouds and rivers... I long for you helplessly. The last month of summer is extremely hot... I wish you good health and every comfort, as if I am serving you at your side. Outside... How have you been since we parted? I hope you are adapting to the change of seasons. Take great care of yourself. This is my humble wish.

Since leaving home, I, Er’niangzi, accompanied the imperial commissioner and minister of works of the Guiyi Circuit and arrived at the eastern capital, Luoyang, on the seventh day of the intercalary third month of this year. The trip went well. My stay here is also peaceful and pleasant; please do not worry from far away. Since the season is now at its most sweltering, I earnestly hope Mother and everyone else in the family rest well and eat regularly. Please do take it easy, and don’t worry about me, Er’niangzi, here.

I am sending a piece of red brocade to Elder Sister as a gift; it is tuan brocade. The plain violet undergarment is also for Elder Sister. The half bolt of white damask silk is for Mother. I thought about sending other goods but worried that they might not reach you, so I do not dare to send them with this letter. Please forgive the paucity of my gifts. [Since I have been away for so long], I respectfully write this letter of greeting, though it is nowhere near sufficient.

Daughter Er’niangzi writes, with respectful bows to Mother, on the twenty-first day of the sixth month.

PS. As for my sister’s sons, Mosi and Huaizhu, I assume they are well and happy. I am sending two pieces of red Tuanchao brocade and a small mirror as gifts for them.

source: Li Zhengyu 李正宇, “Anhuisheng bowuguan cang Dunhuang yishu Er'niangzi jiashu” 安徽省博物館藏敦煌遺書《二娘子家書》, Dunhuang yanjiu 69, no. 3 (2001), 91.
Further Reading


