

**Communicating and Creating Networks:  
The Art of Letter-Writing in the Graeco-Roman World**

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What benefits do we gain from studying ancient letter correspondence? What can we learn from it in order to address current challenges? One of the many benefits of studying this subject are insights into the ways how earlier societies experienced communication. Whereas nowadays we have the technical means to communicate via social media and live-stream tools such as Zoom or Skype in real time and over a large distance, ancient societies did not have the same possibilities. Their communication over a distance was often marked by slowness and delay – a problem of which ancient Greek and Latin letter writers often complain about in their texts.

From Greco-Roman antiquity a large number of letters and a variety of epistolary corpora has come down to us. Archaeologists have discovered real letters written on material such as lead, wooden tablets (e.g. in British Vindolanda) or papyrus leaves (e.g. in Egyptian Oxyrhynchos). On the other hand, many letters were written not only for specific addressees, but for circulation among a larger readership and as literary artefacts. Apart from real letters or literary letters discussing matters of daily life, culture or politics, there exist several corpora containing fictional letters, i.e. letters entirely written for literary entertainment.

In addition to the letters themselves, we also have theoretical treatises on the question how one should write a letter: Theorists considered letters as one half of a dialogue and as mirrors of the soul, revealing the character of the writer. They also distinguished two main functions of letter correspondence: To give an account of events (*narrare*) or to chat and joke with the addressee (*loqui/iocari*). Similar to today's social media, ancient letters not only served for exchanging information and chatting, but were also important media of self-representation and self-promotion.

From antiquity a large variety of types of letters as well as topics which were discussed in letters have come down to us: accounts of political events and daily news, recommendation or characterization of individuals, friendly joking, complaining, exchanging poetry, telling tales and so on. In many cases, letters are also seen as gifts which help to consolidate the good relationship between individuals.

Delivering private letters was often difficult, as the postal system (*cursus publicus*) which the emperor Augustus (31 BC – 14 AD) had installed was only used for official messages. Thus, letter writers had to find a messenger (*tabellarius*) themselves who would deliver their letters.

I could continue to speak for hours about ancient epistolography, but due to the limited time I will stop here and just add one more thought: Ancient letter correspondence is a research area where scholars studying Greco-Roman antiquity could collaborate with those studying Chinese culture and compare the ways how communication and networking in the two cultural contexts worked over similar periods of time.

Questions by the students:

- Which aspects of Chinese traditional cultures are studied at Chinese Universities?
- Which aspects of Western traditional cultures are Chinese students especially interested in?
- How important are Classical studies (ancient Greek and Latin) in China?
- Do young people in China still write messages by hand or do they use exclusively modern technologies to communicate?
- Do you think it important to preserve traditional ways of communication, such as writing a letter by hand? Should young people be encouraged to do so?
- Do Chinese students of medicine and law need basic knowledge of ancient Greek or Latin?