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The Trouble with Wang Xizhi:

Illness and Healing in a Fourth-Century Chinese Correspondence

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Abstract

Containing many reports of his own illnesses and attempts at treatment, along with inquiries after the health of correspondents and acquaintances, the letters of Wang Xizhi (303-361) constitute the earliest sizeable corpus of personal health reports in Chinese literature and are thus a valuable source for the study of Chinese epistolary communication and medical history. This article explores the rhetorical strategies of Wang's medical narratives and the role that writing about illness and healing may have played in the correspondents' relationships and broader networks. Examining the medical ideas and terminology evident in Wang Xizhi's letters, the article also seeks to illuminate a section of the multifaceted world of early medieval Chinese healing practices. By allowing us to get closer to the calligrapher's body, Wang's illness narratives further help us to heighten our awareness of the circumstances that shape the artistic process.

Résumé

Les lettres de Wang Xizhi (303-361) contiennent de nombreuses informations sur ses propres problèmes médicaux et sur ses façons de se traiter, ainsi que des questions

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adressées aux destinataires quant à leur santé et celle de leurs connaissances communes. Elles constituent ainsi le plus ancien corpus de taille conséquente au sein de la littérature chinoise traitant de l'histoire médicale d'individus ; elles ont donc une valeur importante comme source tant pour l'histoire épistolaire que médicale. Cet article explore les stratégies rhétoriques dans les récits qu'offre Wang au sujet de la santé, ainsi que le rôle que ses écrits sur les maladies et les guérisons ont pu jouer dans ses rapports sociaux avec ses correspondants et au-delà. En examinant les idées et la terminologie médicale exprimées dans les lettres de Wang Xizhi, cet article ambitionne aussi d'éclairer un pan du monde très varié des pratiques de guérison chinoises médiévales. Ses témoignages sur ses maladies, qui nous permettent d'approcher de près le grand calligraphe dans sa corporalité, nous rendent plus attentif aux conditions les plus physiques de sa production artistique.

Keywords

Wang Xizhi, letter-writing, calligraphy, medical history, illness, healing

Introduction

The letters of Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303-361) have been admired for their calligraphy for centuries.¹ Countless hours have been, and still are, dedicated to copying them and studying the minutest details of their handwriting.² The special calligraphic appreciation of personal letters is rooted in the relative formal freedom they enjoyed. As Robert E. Harrist has observed, many of the coveted features of Wang Xizhi's and other elite calligraphers' handwriting, such as "sudden changes of speed and brush direction that vividly recorded the impulses of the writer's hand ... would have been unacceptable in more formal types of writing or in the work of professional scribes."³ The content of Wang Xizhi's letters, on the other hand, has received little attention, mostly because his notes

¹ Details of Wang Xizhi's life remain uncertain and controversial. Biographical studies include Wang Yuchi 王玉池, *Wang Xizhi 王羲之* (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 1991) and Qi Xiaochun 祁小春, *Mai shi zhi feng: You guan Wang Xizhi ziliao yu renwu de zonghe yanjiu 邁世之風：有關王羲之之資料與人物的綜合研究* (Taipei: Shitou chuban, 2007), 369-461 and 659-80.

² Studies of Wang Xizhi's position in the history of Chinese calligraphy include Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition in Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979); Qi Xiaochun, *Mai shi zhi feng*.

³ "Reading Chinese Calligraphy," in *The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection*, ed. Robert E. Harrist and Wen C. Fong (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Art Museum, 1999), 5.

are rather mundane in character: their literary and intellectual merits are widely perceived as not measuring up to their calligraphic mastery.

Wang's letters nevertheless present a rich trove of material for Chinese cultural history. Their value for the study of Chinese letter writing, as shown in this journal several years ago,⁴ rests on the unique corpus of Wang's surviving letters: the fame of the "Calligraphy Sage" (*shusheng* 書聖) helped to preserve not only an exceptionally large corpus of more than six-hundred transmitted letters, but also letters of quotidian content that only survived because of their handwriting. Wang's letters thus allow us glimpses into informal letter writing practices of the period that are otherwise largely lost. Because health, or rather the lack thereof, is such a pervasive topic in this corpus, Wang Xizhi's letters are also a valuable source for the study of Chinese medical history. In brief notes to friends, relatives, and superiors, Wang wrote about his maladies and how they affected his mood, he mentioned treatments, inquired after ailments of his correspondents and expressed good wishes for their health. Fragmentary as they are, Wang's letters constitute the earliest sizeable corpus of personal health reports in Chinese literature.

The following exploration of Wang Xizhi's letters intends to add to our understanding of the medical discourse and practice among members of the educated elite in fourth-century southern China by illuminating a section of the multifaceted, but scantily documented world of early medieval Chinese healing practices, which included classical, text-based medicine as well as practices based in popular and elite religions.⁵ On the epistolary side, we examine the rhetorical strategies of Wang's health reports, inquiries, and wishes in a given letter in the context of

⁴) Antje Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy: Reading Wang Xizhi's Letters," *T'oung Pao* 96 (2011): 370-407.

⁵) It seems safe to assume that a similarly broad spectrum of health care practices as the one that Nathan Sivin recently described for the Northern Song also existed in fourth-century Jiangnan. See *Health Care in Eleventh Century China* (Berlin: Springer, 2015). Studies that describe the plurality of medical ideas and practice beyond classical medicine include Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, ed. Bernard Faure (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002); Li Jianmin, "They Shall Expel Demons: Etiology, the Medical Canon, and the Transformation of Medical Techniques before the Tang," in *Early Chinese Religion, Part One: Shang Through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Marc Kalinowski (Leiden: Brill, 2010), vol. 2, 1103-150; and Michael Stanley-Baker, "Drugs, Destiny, and Disease in Medieval China: Situating Knowledge in Context," *Daoism: Religion, History and Society* 6 (2014): 148-55.

conventions of letter writing and ask what role the written exchange about illness and healing may have played in the correspondents' relationship and broader networks. On the medical side, we study the ideas and terminology evident in Wang Xizhi's letters and ask what may have ailed Wang and how he conceptualized his illnesses and treatments. Throughout this inquiry we address questions of how to interpret the letters that have come down to us and how to integrate their messages with what we know about early medieval medical knowledge and practice. Analyzing what and how Wang wrote about his own health and medical practices and those of his correspondents, we attempt to do justice to the amalgamation of the personal, conventional, and medical that we find in his letters. We shall thus not merely extract pieces of medical information, but rather present them as part of the correspondence they come from, which also means that we usually quote letters in their entirety.

Because of the fragmentary character of Wang Xizhi's transmitted epistolary oeuvre, the first section below provides a brief description of our sources and our approach to the philological and methodological challenges their interpretation involves. In the second section, we present an inventory of Wang Xizhi's main complaints, not with the ambition to offer a retroactive diagnosis, but rather to give an overview of his illnesses as well of his ways of writing about them. The third section continues this investigation by introducing further letters, now with a focus on the emerging etiologies in light of the medical thinking of Wang Xizhi's time. The concluding section is dedicated to an inquiry into the treatments mentioned by Wang.

Sources and Approach

The majority of early medieval letters were transmitted because of their subject matter, literary accomplishments, or prominent authors. These letters survived in anthologies or were quoted in other texts, such as standard histories, encyclopedias, and so forth, where they appear in heavily edited form.⁶ The corpus of Wang's surviving letters also con-

⁶ For letter-writing in early medieval China in general, see Antje Richter, *Letter Writing and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2013), esp. pp. 7-10 on aspects of historical transmission.

tains about a dozen letters of this type (usually labeled *shu* 書 or *jian* 牋). Although most of them are fragments, they are clearly different in character from the hundreds of short notes (*tie* 帖) that were transmitted for their calligraphic value and which form the majority of the corpus.⁷

Historical and anecdotal sources indicate that Wang Xizhi was admired for his calligraphy already during his lifetime, but it was the favor of later Chinese rulers, especially emperor Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626-49, Li Shimin 李世民) of the Tang dynasty (618-907), who established Wang as the most renowned calligrapher of all time, a position that he enjoys to the present day. The long history of imperial recognition and ensuing canonization of Wang Xizhi's handwriting has led to the preservation of hundreds of examples of his calligraphic art in various reproductions. It is important to note, though, that no originals written by Wang's own hand survive and that the first preserved copies as well as the first catalogues of Wang's works date back to no earlier than the Tang dynasty, two and a half centuries after Wang's death.⁸ Since then, many of the manuscripts have been lost altogether, and only the contents of these letters in the form of transcriptions in various catalogues remain. The loss of the original traces of his handwriting, and thus of a direct physical connection to the artist, has surprisingly not diminished the appreciation of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy.⁹

⁷ The majority of Wang Xizhi's letters are collected in *Quan Jin wen* 全晉文, j. 22-26, in *Quan shanggu Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文, ed. Yan Kejun 嚴可均 (1762-1843) (1887; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958). More recent publications collect a few additional pieces; see Morino Shigeo 森野繁夫 and Satō Toshiyuki 佐藤利行, *Ō Gishi zen shokan* 王羲之全書翰 (Tokyo: Hakuteisha, 1996) [hereafter *Shokan*]. Unless otherwise specified, we quote Wang's letters as they appear in *Quan Jin wen*. Emendations based on *Shokan* are indicated without further comment. Occasionally, we also make reference to Liu Maochen 劉茂辰, Liu Hong 劉洪, and Liu Xing 劉杏, eds., *Wang Xizhi Wang Xianzhi quanji jianzheng* 王羲之王獻之全集箋證 (Ji'nan: Shandong wenyi chubanshe, 1999) [hereafter *Jianzheng*]; and Liu Zhengcheng 劉正成, ed., *Zhongguo shufa quanji* 18 & 19: *Sanguo Liang Jin Nanbeichao Wang Xizhi Wang Xianzhi juan* 中國書法全集：三國兩晉南北朝王羲之王獻之卷 (Beijing: Rongbaozhai, 1991) [hereafter *Quanji*].

⁸ See Chu Suiliang's 褚遂良 *Youjun shumumu* 右軍書目 and Zhang Yanyuan's 張彥遠 (ca. 815-880) *Youjun shu ji* 右軍書記, both preserved in Zhang's *Fashu yaolu* 法書要錄 (ca. 847), *Congshu jicheng* edn.

⁹ Lothar Ledderose has suggested that the identity of a piece is not physical but rests in "the continuity of tradition." See his "Schrift als Kunst, Schrift als Kommentar: Die Überlieferung von drei chinesischen Briefen aus dem 4. Jahrhundert," in *Text und Kommentar*, ed. Jan Assmann and Burkhard Gladigow (Munich: Fink, 1995), 470. See also Martin Kern's recent

The exploration of Wang's letters is complicated by four, fundamentally unresolvable problems, which are, however, by no means unique to these particular sources. The first of these problems concerns the letter corpus overall. We have to reckon with fragmentation on the level of the individual letter (which may have been transmitted only in part or have suffered textual damage as a result of copying and editing), as well as on the level of the corpus. We have no way of knowing what factors determined which of Wang's letters were preserved. Since we neither know how the surviving pieces in number, character, and content relate to the hypothetical corpus of all the letters that Wang Xizhi ever wrote, we must stay aware of the fundamentally fragmentary nature of the information provided in the received letters.¹⁰ The overall incompleteness of the corpus and the contingency of the information it yields become even more palpable if we consider the almost complete loss of the second half of the correspondence, that is, letters written to Wang Xizhi.¹¹

The second problem, the authenticity of Wang Xizhi's transmitted letters, has been discussed for centuries.¹² While the calligraphic faithfulness of a copy may not be consequential for a biographic or autobiographic approach, doubts about the authenticity of specific letter texts themselves need to be taken seriously. We must accept the possibility that the letters we know today were subject to intentional and accidental changes during copying and editing,¹³ as well as the possibility that

study "Made by the Empire: Wang Xizhi's Xingrantie and Its Paradoxes," *Archives of Asian Art* 65 (2015): 117-37

¹⁰ This has been repeatedly discussed in Western epistolary scholarship. Concerning the letters of Olive Schreiner (1844-1920), e.g., Liz Stanley has observed that "there is a complex and now largely unknowable relationship between Schreiner's letters that survive and those that have not, many of which were deliberately destroyed. Crucial information—like the overall shape (number and names of her correspondents), relative density (of letters per correspondent), temporal coverage (distribution of letters to her correspondents over time), and these matters concerning their letters to her—are now unrecoverable." "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences," *Auto/Biography* 12 (2004): 204.

¹¹ See Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 374 n. 8.

¹² See, e.g., Robert E. Harrist, "Copies, All the Way Down: Notes on the Early Transmission of Calligraphy by Wang Xizhi," *East Asian Library Journal* 10 (2001): 176-96; and "Replication and Deception in Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties Period," in *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties*, ed. Cai Zong-qi (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 31-59. See also Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy," 372-74.

¹³ For a discussion of possible editorial changes to Wang Xizhi's letters see Qi Xiaochun, *Shan yin dao shang: Wang Xizhi yanjiu congzha* 山陰道上：王羲之研究叢札 (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 2009), 247-51.

there are forgeries among Wang Xizhi's transmitted letters, produced because of the enormous demand for his calligraphy.

The third and probably most blatant problem is the absence of reliable information about the context of the letters. Typically, we do not know a letter's addressee and the time of writing. Adhering to epistolary conventions of his time, Wang did not mention the addressee in the pre-script of a letter (which became the epistolary norm only in the Tang dynasty), nor did he add the year of writing (a practice reserved for official communications), although he dated some of his notes by indicating the day of the month, the season, or an annual festival.¹⁴ The lack of a timeline is particularly unfortunate when it comes to the interpretation of Wang Xizhi's ailments. Not only would it be significant to know about sequences of and connections between certain complaints, it would also help if we could correlate specific letters with certain periods of his life. Sometimes such correlations seem possible, especially if Wang explicitly describes himself as old—for instance, “this citizen is already in his twilight years” 民年以西夕.¹⁵ But even in these cases, a degree of conjecture remains, since we know of many men calling themselves “old” at a rather early age, for a variety of rhetorical reasons. How valuable chronology is, becomes clear with the one temporal dimension that is preserved: many letters are dated within the course of the year and thus allow the correlation of complaints with the seasons, which is highly relevant in Chinese medicine.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that we are dealing with texts that are difficult to decipher and interpret and, in some cases, may be impossible to unlock. Personal letters are usually not meant to be read by anyone but the actual addressee, the only reader who is supposed to be fully cognizant of a letter's referentiality and can thus make sense of both what the letter says and what it leaves out. Although this is true of

¹⁴ On prescripts in early medieval letters see Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 76-78. Scholars have proposed dates for certain letters of Wang Xizhi, along with hypotheses about contexts and occasionally also addressees, but these attributions are usually tenuous and disputed. For an attempt at dating some of Wang Xizhi's letters and a discussion of the problems involved, see Qi Xiaochun 祁小春, *Shan yin dao shang*, 21-37.

¹⁵ “Qu dong zai dong Mao tie” 去冬在東鄴帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.8a; *Shokan* #199. Wang uses the self-deprecatory self-designation *min* 民 (this citizen or commoner, your subject) in several letters to superiors.

all letters, the brevity and elliptical character of Wang's notes, which brings the telegram style to mind, are an additional problem. Writing about the difficulties of understanding the "calligraphic shorthand" of Wang Xizhi's letters along with their "verbal shorthand," Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910-1999) characterized this problem as the correspondents' shared "universe of discourse" 語言天地, which often remains opaque to other readers: "Trivial family matters, scattered words between relatives and friends, casual jottings, rough and careless, but the recipients understood" 家庭瑣事，戚友碎語，隨手信筆，約略潦草，而受者了然。¹⁶

All four of these problems complicate the interpretation of Wang Xizhi's illness narratives. The letters do not present their information about Wang's or anybody else's health in chronological order; we cannot assume that the information they give is either complete or accurate; nor can we be sure that we fully understand them—which, daunting as it may sound, means that reading and interpreting these letters poses just about the same problems as reading and interpreting many other texts from early medieval China. The most important way to address the challenge presented by these sources is to maintain an awareness of their fragmentary nature.¹⁷

The interpretation of the medical information in Wang's letters presents additional difficulties that need to be spelled out as well. One regards the identification of Wang's medical terms, because words for symptoms, disorders, drugs, and prescriptions were not used consistently, both throughout China and throughout Chinese history. Attempting to do justice to the lack of systematic information about their use in fourth-century Jiangnan, we thus have to qualify interpretations that are not supported by Wang Xizhi's writings themselves. Being aware of the varying composition of certain medical compounds, for instance, we need to keep in mind that the particular formula of a compound con-

¹⁶ *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 1109. See also Ronald Egan's translation in his *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 236-38.

¹⁷ Among the scholars who have repeatedly emphasized this point is Xiaofei Tian, see, e.g., "Remaking History: The Shu and Wu Perspectives in the Three Kingdoms Period," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136 (2016): 731.

sumed in Wang Xizhi's circle is unknown to us. Similar difficulties arise when it comes to the identification of drugs and other terms.

Since we also know little about the distribution of medical texts in this period and region, a second area of caution regards our assumptions about Wang Xizhi's knowledge of medical literature, and not only because it is uncertain where to place him on the spectrum from medical layman to expert. Although a literatus in Wang's elevated position would have had access to most of the texts that were circulating at the time, it is easy to underestimate how difficult it may have been to get one's hands on a certain manuscript.¹⁸ We have no way of knowing if Wang was familiar with those medical texts of his time that we, in hindsight, call classical, or how representative of the spectrum of contemporaneous medical approaches the surviving texts are. This understanding also influences our interpretation of Wang's ailments. While most scholars of medical history would agree with Nathan Sivin that "translating traditional accounts of disease directly into biomedical language usually leads to grossly inadequate understanding,"¹⁹ it might easily seem more acceptable to frame the symptoms, disorders, and treatments described by Wang in terms of classical Chinese medicine, based on the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經, the *Shanghan lun* 傷寒論, or another contemporaneous text. That such an approach would be similarly unfounded and inappropriate, is one of the most important results of our investigation. That is, to interpret Wang's gastrointestinal complaints in biomedical terms, for instance as celiac disease, would be just as inappropriate as interpreting them as a spleen disorder on the basis of an indigenous medical model that Wang Xizhi did not necessarily subscribe to. He did not write in such terms and never even mentioned his spleen.

In spite of the difficulties we have described above, it is both surprising and gratifying how much information Wang Xizhi's letters yield. Taking Wang's case from across the span of centuries and listening to his troubles, tangled up as they are in other stories and concerns, it is

¹⁸) See nn. 76 and 136 below.

¹⁹) *Health Care in Eleventh Century China*, 48. In Chinese studies, biomedical identifications seem to be more accepted, perhaps in an attempt to appear more "scientific." See, e.g., Li Jingwei 李經緯 and Lin Zhaogeng 林昭庚, *Zhongguo yixue tongshi: Gudai juan* 中國醫學通史：古代卷 (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 2000), passim.

possible to glean quite a few threads of medical information from the overall fabric of his written communications—threads which moreover appear to fall into certain patterns.

Wang Xizhi's Complaints: An Overview

That Wang Xizhi brings up illness in his letters is only to be expected, since health reports, inquiries, and wishes are a regular component of the epistolary formula across cultures. It is also typical that the health of others—especially the correspondents and their families, but also mutual friends and acquaintances and members of Wang's family—is a more prevalent subject than the writer's health. It is extraordinary, however, how frequently and in how much detail Wang Xizhi comments on his own maladies.²⁰ There is only one note in which he declares to be “in excellent health” 體氣極佳,²¹ and just a dozen more in which he describes himself as being “in fairly good health” 平平 or “fairly well” 可耳, including a few reports of convalescence.²² In about three dozen letters, he briefly states that he is “not quite well” 小佳, “unwell” 不平, “weak” 劣, “miserable” 無賴, “feeling a malaise” 勿勿 / 忽忽, etc., without going into details.²³ Approximately eighty letters, by far the largest percentage of his personal health reports, mention various kinds of indispositions, sometimes along with accounts of the distress they caused or details of their treatment. Wang appears to have been willing to write about his ailments in considerable detail with a wide range of correspondents. In light of the exceptionality of the corpus it is quite possible that the high incidence of illness narratives in these letters is less an expression of an idiosyncrasy on Wang's part, but rather a reflection of an epistolary con-

²⁰ Wang mentions his own health in ca. 125 letters and the health of others in ca. 280 letters, in the form of inquiries (ca. 110 letters), good wishes (ca. 60 letters), and comments (ca. 190 letters), including reports of death by illness. Usually, more than one of these are found in the same note.

²¹ “Danyang dan song tie” 丹陽旦送帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.12a; *Shokan* #627.

²² See “Qiuri ganhuai shen tie” and “Qiu zhong tie,” both translated in full below.

²³ See “Xiang bi ren shi ping'an tie” 想彼人士平安帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.4b; *Shokan* #184; “Bian zhi dong ri tie” 便陟冬日帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.6b; *Shokan* #241; “Gao Li shi biao tie” 告李氏甥帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.5a; *Shokan* #633; “Yu han tie” (translated below); “Yueban aishang qiexin tie” 月半哀傷切心帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.10b; *Shokan* #253.

vention that is absent from the transmitted literature of the period because it was excised as irrelevant or inappropriate.²⁴

Judging from the frequency and tenor of his letters and from the variety of complaints he mentions—including chronic or at least recurring complaints as well as acute ailments and aches, often related to the seasons—Wang Xizhi emerges as someone who considered himself to be sickly and whose health was probably indeed infirm. A reader of his letters is left with the impression that Wang, at certain points in his life, felt he was wasting away and was deeply distressed about this. We know that he retired from office pleading illness, as many Chinese officials before and after him did, whether this was a pretext or not, and it is regrettable that the piece of official communication he must have produced on this occasion has not survived.²⁵ It would be fascinating to compare Wang Xizhi's references to his physical body in that lost document with the accounts he gives in his personal letters, where they are not primarily serving the ulterior motive to prepare his retirement from office, although other ulterior motives may still be at work.

Fatigue and Weakness

Among the most pervasive of Wang's complaints are fatigue and weakness. In about sixty letters he describes himself as "still very weak" 甚尚劣, "tired and weak" 頓劣, or "frail and worn out" 羸乏, to mention only three of the phrases he uses. The following notes are representative of this complaint; they are quoted in full to show how the health report is embedded into a letter's overall message:

²⁴ It is difficult to assess whether Shen Kuo's 沈括 (1031-1095) explanation for the frequency of medical topics in received calligraphic letters is correct: he assumed that letters about mourning and illness are so commonly seen in his day because they were not collected by the court during the Zhenguan period (627-664). See *Mengxi bitan jiaozheng* 夢溪筆談校證, comm. Hu Daojing 胡道靜 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 17.553 (晉、宋人墨跡，多是吊喪問疾書簡。唐貞觀中，購求前世墨跡甚嚴，非吊喪問疾書跡。皆入內府。士大夫家所存，皆當日朝廷所不取者，所以流傳至今)。Commenting on Greek letters, John Muir remarked that "it is curiously rare to find a writer not in good health." See his *Life and Letters in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

²⁵ According to *Jin shu* 晉書, Wang Xizhi retired because of the rise of a rival, Wang Shu 王廙 (303-368), but pleaded illness to be released from office. *Jin shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 80.2101.

On the 1st day of the 1st month [Wang] Xizhi reports:

Suddenly we have moved into a new year. I am overwhelmed by feelings of longing for you that I can hardly endure. What can I do? What can I do? How have you been with all your illnesses in this unusual cold? I have not had any news from you for many days and miss you more than I can say. I am just a little better and still very weak. Despite all my efforts, my dispatch cannot inform you comprehensively. This is what [Wang] Xizhi reports.

初月一日羲之報。忽然改年。感思兼傷。不能自勝。奈何奈何。異更寒。諸疾比復何似。不得問多日。懸心不可言。吾猶小差。甚尚劣。力遣不知。羲之報。²⁶

On the 14th day [Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

Because the last [messenger] returned I could not write to you in detail [?]. Are you two in good health? I have not had any news from you lately, so I wanted to inquire if you are still unwell. I am tired and weak, so I cannot go into more detail. This is what [Wang] Xizhi lets you know.

十四日羲之白。近反不悉。兩足下佳不。不得近問。問無殊不佳。頓劣。因不一。羲之白。²⁷

On the 7th day of the 11th month [Wang] Xizhi reports:

Lately, because I received [?] a letter from Ziqing, I have been wanting to visit him. It is freezing cold. Have you been fairly well? In the last days, I could not bring myself to eat. I am extremely exhausted and weak. Despite all my efforts, I cannot put down more than a few words.

This is what [Wang] Xizhi reports.

十一月七日羲之報。近因□子卿書。想行至。霜寒。弟可不。頃日了不得食。至為虛劣。力及數字。羲之報。²⁸

On the 24th day of the 12th month [Wang] Xizhi reports:

At the end of the year I heave a sigh. Having received your letter of the 12th, I feel comforted. Have you been fairly well in these days of the Great Cold?²⁹ I am still frail and worn out. Despite all my efforts, I cannot go into more detail.

This is what Wang Xizhi reports.

十二月二十四日羲之報。歲盡感歎。得十二日書。為慰。大寒。比可不。吾故羸乏。力不一。王羲之報。³⁰

26) "Huran gai nian tie" 忽然改年帖 #2, *Quan Jin wen* 24.10a; *Shokan* #252.

27) "Jin fan bu xi tie" 近反不悉帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.9b.

28) "Shuang han tie" 霜寒帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.11a; *Shokan* #214.

29) Great Cold (*da han* 大寒) is one of the 24 climatic periods (*jieqi* 節氣) of the solar year in China.

30) "Da han tie" 大寒帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.12a; *Shokan* #245.

Judging from the personal pronouns (*wu* 吾, *zuxia* 足下, *di* 弟), these are all casual letters written to equals. They feature a regular and complete epistolary frame, including prescripts and postscript, and open with conventional remarks on the season, followed by expressions of longing and concern for the addressees. Wang's inquiries about the physical well-being of his correspondents—often related to the lack of recent news—show his intimate knowledge of the other's disposition and their close relationship. The correspondents seem to be in frequent contact, otherwise it would not just be “many days” that went by without a letter. That the health inquiries appear rather unspecific could be due to common politeness: unless there was an acute situation that required attention, it might not have been considered tactful to write about the recipient's ailments in too much detail. Even in health inquiries that refer to a correspondent's chronic condition, which must have been well-known to Wang, these illnesses are rarely spelled out.³¹ Another reason for the absence of details could also be that—as is characteristic of epistolary communication—anything the addressees were assumed to know would be left out or only just hinted at, since they could have easily filled in the missing bits and thus decoded the writer's intent properly. The last part of the brief letter-bodies is dedicated to the writer's own health. Wang Xizhi mentions fatigue in each note, in the first case reporting a slight recovery, obviously from a condition he knew the addressee would be familiar with. Wang often uses variants of “still” (*shang* 尚, *wu shu* 無殊, *gu* 故) when he reports about his own health or asks about that of his addressees—another indication that the correspondents were well-acquainted with each other's health complaints. Epistolary phrases lamenting the incompleteness of the letters and the closing part of the epistolary frame conclude the messages. It is worth noting that phrases such as “despite all my efforts, I cannot put down more than a few words” are conventional in character and should not be read as statements on Wang's failing health.³²

³¹ See “Dong zhong ganhuai tie,” translated below. Wang is much more forthcoming when he writes about third parties that are not related to the recipient. See, e.g., the letter quoted in n. 95 below.

³² See Richter, “Beyond Calligraphy,” 391-92; Qi Xiaochun, *Shan yin dao shang*, 85-88.

Wang wrote similar letters to superiors, as the following example demonstrates:

Having received your announcement [i.e., letter], I know that Changping is not well. It would be excellent if he got better soon. I hope everything is going well for you, sir. Knowing about your ailments, I am concerned about you. I am thinking of you with a weary heart. I myself eat very little. I am weary and very tired. My reply is not comprehensive

Wang Xizhi bows repeatedly.

得告。承長平未佳。善得適適。君如常也。知有患者。耿耿。念勞心。食少。勞甚頓。還白不具。王羲之再拜。³³

This is a more polite letter, as indicated by the honorific letter designation *gao* 告, although the use of *jun* 君 as a form of address shows that it is still addressed to an equal.³⁴ It shows Wang writing not only about his own health and that of his correspondent, but also exchanging news about the health of mutual acquaintances. Although we do not know who Changping was, this and many other messages that relate rumors about other people hint at the social networks in which these letters circulated and which they helped to maintain. We cannot be certain why the opening of this letter is incomplete. The prescript may have been lost in the course of the text's historical transmission or it was never there in the first place.³⁵

Sleep Disorders

In about half a dozen letters, Wang Xizhi complains about not sleeping well. The following note is in perfect harmony with conventional epistolary strategies: Wang first professes delight in the other's good health and then briefly, but expressively, reports that he is doing poorly:

³³) "Changping tie" 長平帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.10a; *Shokan* #613.

³⁴) We usually have no way of telling whether a letter was addressed to a man or a woman. Our translation of *jun*, which can be used to address either a man or a woman, as "you, sir" is thus conjectural, assuming that it is more likely that the recipient be a man.

³⁵) That personal letters may not always have required a prescript is suggested by the fact that transmitted letters lack prescripts more often than postscripts. It is difficult to know if any particular case reflects an epistolary convention or just a problem of historical transmission.

[Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

That we are no longer meeting each other makes me weary. Having received your letter, I know that you are in good health, which is a comfort to me. I, however, have been restless and my sleep has been very disturbed, too. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be comprehensive.

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know.

羲之白。不復面。有勞。得示。足下佳為慰。吾卻遽。又睡甚勿勿。力不具。王羲之白。³⁶

Wang's insomnia not only coincided with restlessness, but also with a lack of appetite, as in the following more detailed letter:

On the 29th day [Wang] Xizhi reports:

It is the end of the month and I am devastated by a piercing grief. What can I do? What can I do?

Having received the letter you wrote yesterday, I know that your diarrhea has not stopped and that you are not yet well, even after taking Purple-Stone Powder yesterday.³⁷ Even before you were very, very frail. Have a good rest! I have been extremely unwell these last days. I could not eat nor sleep and was extraordinarily tired. If I can gather my *yang* [qi], I hope to get better. Despite all my efforts, I cannot go into more detail.

This is what [Wang] Xizhi reports.

二十九日羲之報。月終哀摧傷切。奈何奈何。得昨示。知弟下不斷。昨紫石散未佳。卿先羸甚羸甚。好消息。吾比日極不快。不得眠食。殊頓勿。令合陽冀當佳。力不一。羲之報。³⁸

The references to the addressee's last letter show that Wang Xizhi is familiar with the other's health—his long-term condition, acute ailments, and treatments—and thus express intimacy in a similar way as his own

³⁶) "Bu fu mian you lao tie" 不復面有勞帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.9a; *Shokan* #242.

³⁷) Xia 下 appears to have been Wang Xizhi's preferred term for diarrhea. The composition of the Purple-Stone Powder mentioned here is unknown. It could be a reference to a preparation containing fluorite (*zishiying* 紫石英), a substance the *Shennong bencao jing* 神農本草經 describes as "mastering the chest, abdomen, counterflow cough, and pathogenic qi," adding that "long-term ingestion warms the middle, lightens the body and prolongs life" 主心腹咳逆, 邪氣... 久服溫中、輕身延年. See *Shennong bencao jing* in Chen and Song, *Zhongyi shida jingdian quanlu*, 1.15.279. *Zishiying* is not recognized in the materia medica literature as treating diarrhea, nor are preparations called *zishisan* 紫石散 documented in later periods. See *Zhongyi fangji dacidian* 中醫方劑大辭典, ed. Peng Huairan 彭懷仁 (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1993-97), vol. 10, no. 85315 and vol. 2, no. 17674, s.v. *fengyin tang* 風引湯.

³⁸) "Yue zhong tie" 月終帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.9a; *Shokan* #340.

health report does later on in the same letter. Remarkably, this is the only letter in which Wang writes about his own health in terms of *yin* and *yang*.³⁹

Wang also wrote about lack of sleep that may not have been due to a sleep disorder at all, for example during a seasonal festival—“over the holidays I was mired in worries and did not get much sleep, but slightly roasted tea from Qi made me well again” 節日縈牽少睡，蘄茶微炙善佳⁴⁰—and, on another occasion, because a visitor had kept him up:

I have received your letter and gratefully acknowledge your consideration. He Wan has arrived. I didn't get any sleep all last night, so I am all worn out now. I gratefully acknowledge your affection.

Wang Xizhi.

得書知足下問。何萬來。一昔不得眠。便大乏。知足下念。王羲之。⁴¹

Gastrointestinal Complaints

Gastrointestinal problems are the most commonly seen specific complaint in Wang Xizhi's letters. Wang reports that he is troubled with diarrhea, has no desire for food, is not digesting what he eats, is suffering from belly aches, dry heaves, and vomiting. Although his fatigue could have had many causes, it was probably linked to the state of his digestive system, a connection Wang himself seems to draw in this letter:

On the 4th day of the 11th month [Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

It is midwinter and I feel a deep longing for you. How are your usual illnesses, now that it has started to get cold? I am dejected because I have not had any news from you lately. I am still suffering from epigastric pain and could not eat for days. I am very exhausted and tired. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be comprehensive.

³⁹ In medical literature, *heyang* is best known as the name of an acupuncture point, but this does not seem to fit here. Texts that use the term similar to Wang are rare, see, e.g., *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋, ed. Huang Hui 黃暉 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 65.944 (倍陰合陽), and Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581?–682), *Qianjin yifang* 千金翼方 (Taipei: Zhongguo yiyao yanjiusuo, 1974), 22.260b (此等六藥應六時合陽養陰常須服之).

⁴⁰ “Qi cha tie” 蘄茶帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.7b; *Shokan* #373. It is unclear what kind of tea Wang referred to. Qi 蘄 / 鄆 might be a reference to Qichun 蘄春 (in modern Hubei).

⁴¹ “He Wan lai tie” 何萬來帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.9a; *Shokan* #673. *Shokan* suggests that He Wan 何萬 is a miswriting of A Wan 阿萬, i.e., Xie Wan 謝萬 (320–361), younger brother of Xie An 謝安 (320–385).

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know.

十一月四日羲之白。冬中感懷深。始欲寒。足下常疾何如。不得近問。邑邑。吾故苦心痛。不得食經日。甚為虛頓。力及不具。王羲之白。⁴²

Understanding *xin tong* 心痛 (lit., “heart pain”) in this letter as epigastric pain is in keeping with the medical literature of the time, where the area covered by this complaint includes the chest as well as the epigastrium.⁴³ Given the pervasiveness of Wang’s gastrointestinal problems, it is likely that he is complaining of a stomach ache in this note, although *xin tong* can also indicate chest pain, which can lead to appetite loss just as easily. (Since there are other letters, in which Wang complains of chest discomfort, we will return to this topic presently.) The letter at hand follows the rhetorical pattern seen above, which assumes that the correspondents knew about each other and serves as a powerful affirmation of their personal relationship.

In the following letter Wang Xizhi mentions a whole spectrum of digestive complaints:

On the 12th day of the 1st month [Wang] Xizhi writes again:

Having received your letter of the 26th of last month, I feel comforted. Have you been fairly well lately? Your servant’s diarrhea is persistent and won’t stop. I have not the slightest appetite. And if I eat something, it is never digested. All my maladies are so bad. I do not know how to get any relief. I am at a loss for words. I cannot go into details.

This is what [Wang] Xizhi lets you know.

初月十二日。羲之累書。至得去月二十六日書。為慰。比可不。僕下連連不斷。無所一欲。噉輒不化消。諸弊甚。不知何以救之。罔極然。及不一一。羲之白。⁴⁴

⁴² “Dong zhong ganhuai tie” 冬中感懷帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.2a; *Shokan* #283.

⁴³ *Shanghan lun* has an entire class of herbal formulas known as “Epigastrium Draining Decoctions” 瀉心湯, which are primarily focused on treating the digestive system. See Li Peisheng 李培生, ed., *Shanghan lun* (Taipei: Zhiyin chubanshe, 1999), 194-207 and 745-50. Zhang Ji’s 張機 (aka Zhang Zhongjing 張仲景, ca. 150-219) original work *Shanghan zabing lun* 傷寒雜病論 now exists in the form of two texts revised and edited by Wang Shuhe 王叔和 (ca. 265-317), viz. *Shanghan lun* and *Jingui yaolue* 金匱要略. Wang Shuhe’s *Maijing* 脈經 mentions *xin tong* in connection with swallowing (心痛咽酸) and eating (胃中有寒時, 苦煩痛不食, 食即心痛). *Maijing* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1961), 2.24 and 4.46.

⁴⁴ “Chu yue tie” 初月帖 (aka “Xizhi lei shu tie” 羲之累書帖), *Quan Jin wen* 23.12b; *Shokan* #344.

The first-person pronoun *pu* 僕 suggests that this is one of the more polite letters, although the message is focused on the writer himself and displays a certain self-indulgence that appears to contradict the idea of politeness. Not only does Wang report on his bad health in some detail, he also writes about his state of mind and shares his anxiety about the future course and curability of his illness with the addressee. That this may have been *comme il faut* in writing to superiors (or at least certain superiors) is suggested by a note written in an even higher register:

[Wang] Xizhi deserves death punishment:

I have lately sent a letter through Adjutant Zhou and respectfully surmise that it must have arrived. This spring is almost over. That time goes by so fast moves me profoundly. I am overwhelmed by a piercing grief that cuts to my heart. What can I do? What can I do? Soon we will celebrate the Cold-Food festival.⁴⁵ I am not cognizant of the state of your venerable body, because I have not received news for several months. I am eagerly awaiting [your letter]. The treatment of the root of this citizen's illness has stalled.⁴⁶ There are no signs of improvement at all. It has become chronic, which worries me deeply. Uncle [?] sent a messenger. Despite all my efforts to express myself crudely, I won't write more.

[Wang] Xizhi deserves death punishment.

義之死罪。近因周參軍白牒。伏思必達。此春以過。時速興深。兼哀傷摧。切割心情。奈何奈何。須臾寒食節。不審尊體何如。不承問以經月。馳企。民疾根治滯。了無差候。轉久憂深。叔口遣信。自力粗白。不宣備。義之死罪。⁴⁷

While medical texts do speak in various terms of the origin of an illness, the word used by Wang, *ji gen* 疾根, is unusual. Since it occurs once more in Wang's correspondence and also in a letter by his son Xianzhi 王獻之 (344-386/88), it might well be a regional or even familial term.⁴⁸

In the next letter, Wang's health report is presented in a consecutive narrative covering a night and a morning, which contributes to the im-

⁴⁵ This festival was celebrated during the climatic period Pure Brightness (*qing ming* 清明).

⁴⁶ *Zhi* 滯 could also be a medical term here, referring to stagnation (see below) or, more specifically, diarrhea.

⁴⁷ "Ci chun yi guo tie" 此春以過帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.4b; *Shokan* #216.

⁴⁸ See Wang Xizhi, "Xiang guanshe jia tie" 想官舍佳帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.5b; *Shokan* #161; and Wang Xianzhi, "Jin yu Tie Shi tie" 近與鐵石帖, *Quan Jin wen* 27.8b. The hardly more common term "source of an illness" (*ji yuan* 疾源) is used in Wang Xizhi's "Zhou jiang shiwu ri gao tie," see n. 95 below. The synonymous *bing gen* 病根, which is the more common term, especially starting in the Tang dynasty, is not found in Wang's letters.

pression that he and his correspondent wrote each other frequently, perhaps daily:

This morning it was extremely cold. Having received your letter, I know that your wife has a slight cough again and does not get much sleep, but tosses and turns ever more. I hope she will soon be better. What medicine has she been given? Thinking of you, I am deeply worried. Are you fairly well? I vomited heavily again last night. When I ate a little something, it happened again. Only in the morning did I begin to feel fairly well. I gratefully acknowledge your affection.

Wang Xizhi knocks his head on the ground.

旦極寒。得示。承夫人復小欬。不善得眠。助反側。想小爾。復進何藥。念足下猶悚息。卿可否。吾昨暮復大吐。小噉物便爾。旦來可耳。知足下念。王羲之頓首。⁴⁹

Unassuming as it may appear, this letter demonstrates how complex epistolary communication about illness can be. It includes health inquiries and reports referring to three different people and presents a mix of explicit and implicit rhetorical motivations: expressing sympathy and, tacitly, seeking it; asking for and providing medical information; signaling competency in treatment and offering assistance; venting distress—all of which ultimately affirm the bond between the correspondents. Wang's concern for the correspondent's wife is particularly interesting here. He not only inquires about her condition but also about her medication. This is part of his self-presentation as deeply caring about the addressee, but might also be meant to present himself as competent to judge the wife's treatment and thus to make alternative suggestions or to help in procuring ingredients.⁵⁰

It is remarkable that the apparently rare occasions when Wang is not bothered by gastrointestinal complaints are themselves worthy of mention in his correspondence. Wang seems to be more functional on these days, as the following, decidedly upbeat letter demonstrates. Yet this same missive—one of the few that contain a positive health report—also illustrates just how debilitated he really is. For him, the fact that he was able to be up and about once a day meant that he was doing quite well, at least during certain times of his life:

49) "(Dan) ji han tie" (旦) 極寒帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.6b; *Shokan* #329.

50) For similar inquiries, see "Leng guo tie" 冷過帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.1a; *Shokan* #328; and "Shanxia duo ri tie" 山下多日帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.11a; *Shokan* #334.

Recently, I managed to get up once a day. My belly is extremely well-balanced, and there is nothing to worry about. As always, my affection for you is just beyond words.

吾昨得一日一起。腹中極調適。無所為憂。但顧情不可言耳。⁵¹

Despite the conventional expression of concern at the end, this note clearly focuses on the writer's health—at least if this brief text without any traces of an epistolary frame is a complete note and not just a fragment surviving from a longer piece.

Pain

Wang Xizhi's letters indicate that his fatigue and gastrointestinal complaints were accompanied by a broad range of peripheral ailments, among them pain, either throughout the body or in localized areas; he mentions his legs, shins, thighs, hips, shoulders, neck, head, and teeth. The two notes below, one polite and reporting suffering and despair, the other casual and reporting an improvement, again focus on the writer's health:

I hope the reply I sent this morning has arrived. Has your ailment gotten better? I am concerned about you. Your servant's legs cannot bear this deeply overcast weather.⁵² The heavy pain is beyond words.⁵³ I don't know how to cure it, which worries me deeply. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be comprehensive.

Wang Xizhi knocks his head on the ground.

且反想至。所苦差不。耿耿。僕腳中不堪沈陰。重痛不可言。不知何以治之。憂深。力不具。王羲之頓首。

⁵¹ "Yi ri yi qi tie" 一日一起帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.7b; *Shokan* #357.

⁵² *Chen yin* 沈陰 (lit., deep yin) is a meteorological term. In *Huangdi neijing* it is described as allowing Cold *qi* to reach the body (燥濕更勝，沈陰乃布，寒氣及體，風雨乃行). See Yang Weijie 楊維傑, ed., *Huangdi neijing Suwen yijie* 黃帝內經素問譯解 (Taipei: Lequn chuban gongsi, 1977) [hereafter *Suwen*], 71.598. Paul U. Unschuld and Hermann Tessenow translate *chen yin* as "heavy overcast" and explain it as "deep-reaching, dense yin clouds." See their *Huang Di nei jing su wen: An Annotated Translation of Huang Di's Inner Classic – Basic Questions* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2011), vol. 2, 333, 436.

⁵³ *Huangdi neijing* uses *zhongtong* 重痛 in connection with the head (癩疾始生，先不樂，頭重痛 ...), see Yang Weijie 楊維傑, ed., *Huangdi neijing Lingshu yijie* 黃帝內經靈樞譯解 (Taipei: Tailian guofeng chubanshe, 1984) [hereafter *Lingshu*], 22.218. In Huangfu Mi's 皇甫謐 (215-282) *Zhenjiu jiyijing* 針灸甲乙經 it is also used in reference to the limbs (寒熱懈爛，淫漑脛酸，四肢重痛 ...), see Chen Zhenxiang 陳振相 and Song Guimei 宋貴美, eds., *Zhongyi shida jingdian quanlu* 中醫十大經典全祿 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 1995) [hereafter *Jiyijing*], 8.1b.792.

Your two announcements comforted my mind. My belly is a little better. I was hurting all over [lit., my body was obstructed] and my *qi* was depleted, but then I got better, which is a profound comfort to me. May it comfort your heart, too.

Wang Xizhi knocks his head on the ground.

重告慰情。吾腹中小佳。體痺乏氣。便轉差。深以為慰。慰足下意也。王羲之頓首。⁵⁴

Both notes lack a prescript, but it is less likely that they are fragmentary than in the example above, because these letters close with a postscript and open with a reference to previous correspondence, which is a typical element of the proem, the second part of the epistolary frame.⁵⁵

Our interpretation of Wang's words "my body was obstructed" 體痺 as "I was hurting all over" deserves comment. In contemporaneous medical literature, (*shen*)*ti bi* (身) 體痺 / 痺 describes a "generalized painful obstruction" that is not limited to a certain part of the body.⁵⁶ The term *bi* alone, on the other hand (which in Wang's letters occurs only once in a health inquiry⁵⁷), indicates localized painful obstructions.⁵⁸ These obstructions are understood as blockages of the channels and networks (*jing luo* 經絡) that arise when three of the pathogenic Six Excesses—Wind, Cold, and Dampness—together invade the body, causing pain in joints, muscles, bones, and connective tissue, sometimes accompanied by symptoms of heaviness or numbness.⁵⁹ Since the notion that the Six Excesses can cause illness was a major element of Wang Xizhi's medical understanding, we will return to it in the next chapter.

In the following two letters, Wang reports pain and a lack of appetite, which could also be due to obstruction:⁶⁰

⁵⁴ "Zhuan chai tie" 轉差帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.7a; *Shokan* #366.

⁵⁵ See Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 79-93.

⁵⁶ Ding Guangdi 丁光迪, ed., *Zhubing yuanhou lun jiaozhu* 諸病源候論校注 (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1992), 26.743 and 746.

⁵⁷ 比日何似痺差不, "Yue ban ai gan tie" 月半哀感帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.3a; *Shokan* #284.

⁵⁸ See *Jiayijing* 7.1c.779.

⁵⁹ See the chapter "Bi lun" 痺論 in *Suwen* on the origin and various types of painful obstruction (風寒濕三氣雜至合而為痺也, 其風氣勝者為行痺, 寒氣勝者為痛痺, 濕氣勝者為著痺也). *Suwen* 43.328 and Nathan Sivin, *Traditional Medicine in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, Univ. of Michigan, 1987), 275.

⁶⁰ Gastrointestinal complaints accompany musculoskeletal pain in some of the obstruction patterns described in the *Huangdi neijing*, see, e.g., *Suwen* 74.643.

On the 19th Wang Xizhi knocks his head on the ground.

Tomorrow it will be two weeks [after your bereavement?], my piercing feelings for you increase. What can I do? What can I do? Having received your letter of the 12th and knowing that you are well, I feel comforted. Your servant suffers from intense pain on his left side. I also eat very little. I am extremely exhausted and worn out. Despite all my efforts, I cannot go into more detail.

Wang Xizhi knocks his head on the ground.

十九日羲之頓首。明二旬。增感切。奈何奈何。得十二日書。知佳為慰。僕左邊大劇。且食少。至虛乏。力不一一。王羲之頓首。⁶¹

Because I lately had a letter from someone in your neighborhood, I was wondering about the swelling of the face that you suffered from. Are you better now? Although my appetite has improved in the last days, my shins have not. I suffer intensely from this and can hardly do anything involving physical exertion. Just a few words to let you know what's going on.

近因得里人書。想至知故面腫。今差不。吾比日食意如差。而胛中故不差。以此為至患。至不可勞力。數字令弟知聞耳。⁶²

The second message is one of many in which a network beyond the two correspondents emerges, consisting of other people with whom writer and addressee were connected through letters and hearsay. Wang's juxtaposition of his improved appetite and the persistent pain in his shins could indicate that he saw these symptoms as linked, either because he connected his digestion with his overall pain level, or because he was aware that the pain could be caused by disorders of the stomach channel, which runs along the shins.

Chest Complaints

In the midst of these more overt rheumatic pains, Wang also experienced sensations of discomfort in the chest, which he described as an "unpleasant feeling" and a "vague oppression." Oppression (*men* 悶), a term that occurs throughout Chinese medical literature, designates an irritation characterized by a sense of pressure or heaviness caused by the obstruction of *qi*.⁶³ Since oppression is also associated with mel-

⁶¹ "Ming er xun tie" 明二旬帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.5a; *Shokan* #249.

⁶² "De li ren shu tie" 得里人書帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.9b; *Shokan* #635.

⁶³ See Nigel Wiseman and Feng Ye, *A Practical Dictionary of Chinese Medicine*, 2nd ed. (Brookline, Mass.: Paradigm, 1998), 421. Although it is usually associated with the chest, in Chao Yuanfang's 巢元方 (fl. 605-618) *Zhubing yuanhou lun* 諸病源候論, where oppression

ancholy, another of Wang's regular complaints, it is often understood as a somatic expression of a psycho-emotional state.⁶⁴ While in the following letter Wang's emphasis is on his physical experience, his enumeration of symptoms culminates in an expression of worry:

I hope everything is going well for you all. When I returned yesterday I was exceedingly tired. I felt a vague oppression in my chest and the dry heaves have intensified. I cannot bring myself to eat. Since the illness is so high in the body that it is difficult [to cure] by purging [i.e., inducing defecation], I am very worried about it. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be comprehensive.

Wang Xizhi.

足下各如常。昨還殊頓。胸中淡悶。干嘔轉劇。食不可強。疾高難下治。乃甚憂之。力不具。王羲之。

This is a casual, apparently intimate letter to an equal, with an incomplete frame. After expressing good wishes at the beginning, Wang promptly describes his symptoms, including oppression in his chest, dry heaves (elsewhere we also see him complaining about actually vomiting), and eating or swallowing problems. Chest oppression is an experience of heaviness, as if being weighed down by a heavy quilt or rock, producing a sense that one cannot get enough air. The symptom may be mild or severe, and may be caused by anxiety or emotional distress, or it may be the consequence of heart or digestive problems, as seems to be the case here. That Wang describes his oppression as *dan* 淡 (“vague, faint, light, weak, bland”) suggests that he experiences it as a rather mild discomfort. This perception, however, could itself be an indication of the extent of his debilitation, because he might well feel this symptom as more pronounced if he were in better health.

Since *dan* 淡 is a well-established variant of *tan* 痰 (which does not occur in Wang's letters), another interpretation would be to read it as a reference to “phlegm” (congealed pathological fluids). If Wang indeed

plays a particularly important role, it is also linked with pain in the extremities, rib sides, stomach, below the umbilicus, and elsewhere. See *Zhubing yuanhou lun*, 1.22 (四肢疼悶) and 2.46 (去脊腰悶風冷). This text commonly attributes oppression to Wind and Cold, an etiology consistent with Wang's own understanding of his illnesses.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., the *Suwen*'s discussion of “fire constraint” (*huo yu* 火鬱), which, “when extreme, presents as confusion, oppression, and melancholy so severe that one wishes to immediately die” 甚則瞀悶懊善暴死. *Suwen* 71.573.

attributed his chest oppression to this pathogenic factor,⁶⁵ this would be in tune with medical perspectives of the time: according to the *Shanghan lun*, an accumulation of phlegm in the chest and epigastrium could easily account for this entire constellation of symptoms. The treatment strategy of the formulas in *Shanghan lun* that address just such a pattern is based on the principle of expelling phlegm and pathological fluids downward, though not necessarily by precipitating a bowel movement.⁶⁶ Wang's concern that this constellation of symptoms is too high in the body for a purgative strategy suggests that he considers the problem to be due to a pathogenic factor as opposed to some sort of inherent weakness.⁶⁷

Although by no means a comprehensive list of the illnesses that appear in Wang Xizhi's letters, fatigue, insomnia, pain, gastrointestinal trouble, and chest complaints delineate his main health concerns. Other medical issues are addressed in the fourth section below, in the discussion of treatments Wang wrote about.

Wang's Etiologies and Illnesses in the Light of Contemporaneous Medical Literature

In the preceding section's overview of Wang's illnesses, we have already started to point out possible connections between Wang's medical terms and concepts and contemporaneous medical literature. In this section, the focus on the prevalent etiologies that emerge in Wang Xizhi's illness narratives will allow us to deepen this approach.

What we know about medicine in early and medieval China comes primarily from technical or professional literature written from the

⁶⁵ As, e.g., suggested in *Hanyu da zidian* 漢語大字典 (Chengdu: Sichuan cishu chubanshe, 1990), 1661. On the emergence of the concept of phlegm, see Fabien Simonis, "Ghosts or Mucus? Medicine for Madness: New Doctrines, Therapies and Rivalries," in *Modern Chinese Religion, I: Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan* (960-1368), ed. John Lagerwey and Pierre Marsone (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 611-14.

⁶⁶ E.g., *Shanghan lun* describes a form of diarrhea due to clumping of heat (*re jie* 熱結) that is treated by purgation. The most prominent formula for this strategy is the "Minor Qi-Coordinating Decoction" 小承氣湯 (*Shanghan lun* 542).

⁶⁷ Especially in light of this turn, Liu Tao's 劉濤 interpretation of the medical report in this letter as a description of the side-effects of taking Cold-Food Powder is unconvincing (*Quanji* #114).

perspective of the physician: transmitted medical treatises⁶⁸ and the materia medica literature,⁶⁹ and archaeologically retrieved manuscripts.⁷⁰ Apart from technical literature, we also have anecdotal reports of medical matters scattered throughout ancient texts from oracle bone inscriptions to standard histories.⁷¹ Even if some of these reports may represent more of a lay approach, they are third-person accounts with a focus on the workings of a physician or other medical authority. Wang Xizhi's letters, on the other hand, as first-person reports of a patient and educated layman, provide us with glimpses of illness and healing from a very different perspective. His illness narratives do not represent patient-doctor consultations, but reciprocal conversations between relatives, friends, and acquaintances. While the correspondents may also have been concerned with an exchange of practical information about treatment, the most important function of these health reports and inquiries was to share afflictions and worries and to extend sympathy. This last motive seems to have been an important aspect of intimate communication, serving the wish to maintain relationships as well as the desire to better cope with illness, aging, and mortality.

Both his display of medical knowledge and his general communicative habitus indicate that Wang Xizhi, and probably some of his literati correspondents, too, must have had a certain medical and pharmacological expertise, but its character and extent are difficult to assess.

⁶⁸ In addition to those mentioned above, see *Jinguiyaolie* and, less important for our study, (*Huangdi bashiyi*) *Nanjing* (黃帝八十一) 難經.

⁶⁹ The earliest extant pharmacopeia is *Shennong bencao jing*. Materia medica are also discussed in works such as *Bowu zhi* 博物志 by Zhang Hua 張華 (232-300) and *Baopuzi neipian* 抱樸子內篇.

⁷⁰ See, e.g., *Mawangdui Han mu boshu* 馬王堆漢墓帛書, vol. 4 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1985) as well as Donald Harper's translation and study, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London: Kegan Paul, 1998). See also Vivienne Lo and Christopher Cullen, eds., *Medieval Chinese Medicine: The Dunhuang Medical Manuscripts* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

⁷¹ The oracle bone inscriptions record hundreds of diseases; see David N. Keightley, "The 'Science' of the Ancestors: Divination, Curing, and Bronze-Casting in Late Shang China," *Asia Major* 3rd ser., 14.2 (2001): 143-87; and Zhang Wei 張煒, *Shangdai yixue wenhua shilue* 商代醫學文化史略 (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu chubanshe, 2005). To cite only one example from transmitted literature: the "more than forty-five consultations or descriptions of diseases" occurring in *Zuozhuan* 左傳, first pointed out by Joseph Needham in 1966, have so far not been studied systematically. See Needham, *Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), 264.

Wang does not mention any particular textual traditions as points of reference in his descriptions of disorders or treatments, possibly because of the marginal role that classical medical texts played in early medieval China and the greater reliance on family treatments, as observed by historians of Chinese medicine.⁷² Despite the absence of references to medical texts—or to literati physicians (*yi* 醫) or other medical authorities⁷³—Wang writes in terms that would have been familiar to Chinese physicians of his time and that remain largely familiar to Chinese medical scholars and practitioners today. He does, for instance, occasionally describe his health in terms of *qi* 氣 (pneumas or vital energies), complaining, as quoted above, that his *qi* was depleted 乏氣,⁷⁴ or asking a correspondent whether he (or she) could recover their *qi* and strength 氣力.⁷⁵ This use of *qi*, however, like that of other terms such as “cold damage” 傷寒, was hardly restricted to technical discourse, and is neither sufficient proof of Wang’s medical expertise nor of his preference for any particular medical approach. Other terms one might expect to see—such as *yin* and *yang*, the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行), or other terms associated with *Huangdi neijing*—are rare or completely absent.⁷⁶ Wang, with one exception, also neither remarks upon the “nature” (*qi* or *xing* 性) nor on the “flavor” or “sapor” (*wei* 味) of medicinals,⁷⁷ which were the hallmarks of pharmacological categoriza-

⁷² See, e.g., Li Jianmin 李建民, “Zhongguo yixue shi yanjiu de xin shiye” 中國醫學史研究的新視野, *Xin shixue* 新史學 15.3 (2004): 215.

⁷³ This may be another indication of the importance of self or family therapy. On the one possibly relevant term, *xiansheng* 先生, see n. 146 below.

⁷⁴ For other letters that use this phrase see “Zhong bu chai tie” 腫不差帖 (*Quan Jin wen* 26.2a; *Shokan* #364) and “Zhuan chai tie” 轉差帖 (*Quan Jin wen* 26.7a; *Shokan* #366).

⁷⁵ “Huran gai nian tie” 忽然改年帖 #1, *Quan Jin wen* 23.10a; *Shokan* #244.

⁷⁶ Place and personal names account for most uses of *yin* and *yang* in Wang’s letters. The only occurrence of *yinyang* is in a letter where Wang asks his addressee to lend him Dong Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 (179-104 BCE) *Kaibi yinyang fa* 開閉陰陽法. See “Dong Zhongshu Kaibi yinyang fa tie” 董仲舒開閉陰陽法帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.5a; *Shokan* #95. Both Five Phases and Five Flavors are among the terms that occur in the *Huangting jing* 黃庭經, a Celestial Masters text Wang Xizhi is supposed to have copied by his own hand. See Li Jintang 李錦堂 et al., eds., *Wang Xizhi Wang Xianzhi quanji* 王羲之王獻之全集 (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1994), 105-14.

⁷⁷ “Fu shi gu bu ke tie” mentions “cooling medicinals” (*leng yao* 冷藥), see under treatments below.

tion beginning with the early imperial *Shennong bencao jing*, which classified materia medica into four natures and five flavors.⁷⁸

As many of the letters quoted above show, Wang usually attributed his immediate health woes, and those of his correspondents, to the weather—in particular to wind, cold, heat, and dampness—and that he took their potential severity seriously. These and other exogenous climatic pathogens were conceptualized in classical medical texts of the period as the so-called Six Excesses (*liu yin* 六淫).⁷⁹ Wang never refers to them as *xie* 邪 (heteropathies or pathogenic influences), though, the term used in classical medical literature. The concept has its origins in archaic notions of demonic possession leading to illness.⁸⁰ While demonological or magical medicine remained strong throughout Chinese history, much of transmitted medical literature from the Han dynasty onward is informed by naturalistic approaches. *Huangdi neijing*, compiled toward the end of the Western Han, mainly discusses *xie* as natural, if clearly unsalutary influences. Celestial Masters beliefs were observed in Wang's family (discussed under the section below on "treatments"), but there is no indication that Wang regarded any of the pathogenic factors he mentioned in his letters as demonic in quality or "ghost infusions" (*guizhu* 鬼注), which may, however, be due to the fragmentary character of the surviving corpus.

As most other key terms of classical Chinese medicine, the words that designate the climatic excesses are not restricted to technical use. In Wang Xizhi's letters, too, "wind" (*feng* 風), "cold" (*han* 寒), etc., occur in a spectrum of contexts where they do not refer to medical or even climatic matters. One might argue, for instance, that the phrase "the heat begins to abate" 徂暑 at the beginning of a letter is nothing but a conventional way of referring to the sixth month via an allusion to the *Book*

⁷⁸ The natures are cold (*han* 寒), cool (*liang* 涼), warm (*wen* 溫), and hot (*re* 熱), sometimes including neutral (*ping* 平). The flavors are sour (*suan* 酸), acrid (*xin* 辛), sweet (*gan* 甘), bitter (*ku* 苦), and salty (*xian* 鹹), sometimes also bland (*dan* 淡) and astringent (*se* 澀). Although Wang does not mention these properties explicitly, he seems to have been mostly interested in warming substances, most notably Cold-Food Powder.

⁷⁹ The remaining two excesses are dryness and fire. See *Suwen* 74.661 (夫百病之生也，皆生於風寒暑濕燥火); Sivin, *Traditional Medicine*, 275-77.

⁸⁰ See Sivin, *Traditional Medicine*, 102-6; Paul U. Unschuld, *Medicine in China: A History of Ideas* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), 34-50.

of *Songs*,⁸¹ or that a report such as “the wind was so strong that the water of Lake Pei rose” 遇風緊帔湖泛漲 was just a reference to the weather, and that both these instances should not be interpreted as being of relevance for the medical narrative they accompany.⁸² We believe that such an approach would be inappropriate because it would not do justice to Wang Xizhi’s own understanding of these terms. It is unlikely that the differentiation we make in spelling between “piercing cold” weather and a “severe Cold disorder” was an equally clear differentiation in Wang Xizhi’s mind or that of his contemporaries.⁸³ By the same token, we do not restrict our analysis of climatic pathogens to the list of terms that appears in *Suwen* and other medical texts, but also include synonyms and implicit references to the seasons and the weather into our consideration.

Wind

Wind (*feng* 風) appears as the prevalent pathological influence in early Chinese medical texts, where it is made responsible for a wide range of disorders from simple colds to strokes or madness.⁸⁴ Under certain conditions, Winds were supposed to be able to penetrate the skin and its pores and thus to interfere with the body’s regular functions. Wang Xizhi mentions Wind in a climatic or medical sense in six letters, always in agreement with notions expressed in contemporaneous medical texts. The common association of Wind and pain, for instance, is implied in the following letter, as is the concurrence of several pathogens:

It is mid-autumn and I feel a longing for you. It is rainy and cold, but I hope you and your family are fairly well. It looks as if the Wind disorder in my shoulder is threatening to become a [serious] ailment. I am very worried about it. Pray do let me hear from you.

⁸¹ *Mao shi* 204.

⁸² “Chushu tie” and “Ai e tie,” the letters in which these phrases are used, are translated below.

⁸³ See “Han qie tie” and “Jie jin gan tan qing shen tie,” translated below as well.

⁸⁴ *Suwen* 3.27 and *Lingshu* 49.370 (風者百病之始也), *Suwen* 19.165 and 42.324 (風者百病之長也). On Chinese notions of Wind, see Kuriyama Shigehisa, “The Imagination of Winds and the Development of the Chinese Conception of the Body,” in *Body, Subject and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 23-41.

Wang Xizhi knocks his head on the ground.

秋中感懷。雨冷。冀足下各可耳。胛風遂欲成患。甚憂之。力知問。王羲之頓首。⁸⁵

Like other notes quoted above, this letter was written on the occasion of a seasonal festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival. Apart from a conventional expression of longing and a health wish, it consists of a brief, but rather specific health report with worries attached: as in several other letters, Wang expresses anxiety about the future course of his illness. The association of Wind and pain that remains implicit in this letter is spelled out in the following note:

I have recently suffered a malicious strike in my chest.⁸⁶ I have not had any appetite and felt a malaise for many days. In the last five or six days it has become a little better, but I am still very exhausted and weak. In addition to that, I had a major stirring of Wind and feel intense pain all over my body. What can I do? Despite all my efforts and because of your family messenger [his departure?], I cannot say all. Wang Xizhi.

吾頃胸中惡。不欲食。積日勿勿。五六日來小差。尚甚虛劣。且風大動。舉體急痛。何耶。賴力及足下家信。不能悉。王羲之。⁸⁷

The letter must have been written during a truly taxing time for Wang Xizhi, who is here suffering from all the complaints we have discussed so far, with the exception of insomnia. The main body of the note is completely dedicated to his own health, which is unusual and may appear as lacking in politeness. This might be a wrong impression, if the text is a fragment whose opening with the usual attentions to the addressee is missing. If it is indeed a complete letter, it could have been a message of a more informal kind, in which Wang dispenses with the claims of etiquette that require attention to the correspondent, and just vents his own feelings. He indeed sounds exhausted and miserable, and is not diffident about his condition. Wang attributes his pain to a “stirring of

⁸⁵ “Qiu zhong tie” 秋中帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.6b; *Shokan* #270. A copy of this letter has been transmitted in the form of a rubbing, see *Jianzheng* #190, p. 479.

⁸⁶ For *zhong'e* 中惡, see Li Jianmin, “They Shall Expel Demons,” 123 and 130.

⁸⁷ “Wu qing xiong zhong e tie” 吾頃胸中惡帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.8a–b; *Shokan* #348. Another letter, “Wu ri tie” 五日帖 (*Quan Jin wen* 26.6b; *Shokan* #539), may have been written at about the same time.

Wind” (discussed below) and draws a connection between his overall condition and his propensity to suffer from Wind disorders. The notion that exogenous pathogenic factors can only affect those whose correct or orthopathic *qi* (*zheng qi* 正氣) was already compromised may well have derived from contemporaneous medical thought, where it is a staple.⁸⁸

The related term “Wind due to exhaustion” (*feng lao* 風勞) is used in the following letter, in which Wang complains about the afflictions of old age:

[Wang] Xizhi knocks his head on the ground:

We have been separated for very long. Affection grows with time. How are you in this bitter cold? I only wish you peace and happiness. The leisure to open our hearts to each other—when will we have this supreme joy again? ... My illnesses of decay are making me more frail and tired every day. On top of this I again contracted Wind due to exhaustion. All this is utterly bad. We won't be sitting knee to knee anytime soon. I am looking east with deep emotion. I only hope that the days and months will pass easily and that the time of your return may not be far away. With deep respect, if it should suit you to send me a message, do so as often as possible. In a hurry to still catch the messenger I can only set out a tiny fraction [of what I wanted to say].

羲之頓首。闊別稍久。眷與時長。寒嚴。足下何如。想清豫耳。披懷之暇。復何至樂。... 吾之朽疾。日就羸頓。加復風勞。諸無意賴。促膝未近。東望慨然。所冀日月易得。還期非遠耳。深敬宜音問在數。遇信益遽。萬不一陳。⁸⁹

“Wind due to exhaustion” is mentioned in *Zhubing yuanhou lun*, but a much later text, Wang Huaiyin's 王懷隱 *Taiping shenghui fang* 太平聖惠方 (dated to 992) describes Wind exhaustion in terms that are consistent with many of Wang Xizhi's complaints: “In people with exhaustion damage, the interior and exterior are very deficient, *qi* and blood are debilitated, and the interstices of the skin are loose and leaky, allowing Wind pathogens to invade easily, which then either easily wander through the skin or sink to cause stagnation in the receptacles and viscera. Depending on the place affected, it can give rise to a variety of different illnesses” 夫勞傷之人，表裏多虛，血氣衰弱，膚腠疏洩，風邪

⁸⁸) See *Lingshu* 66.468 (風雨寒熱不得虛，邪不能獨傷人 etc.) and Sivin, *Traditional Medicine*, 100-101.

⁸⁹) “Kuobie tie” 闊別帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.7b; *Shokan* #273.

易侵，或遊易皮膚，或沈滯藏府，隨其所感，而眾病生焉。⁹⁰ Wang was clearly aware that his exhaustion and poor health made him vulnerable to Wind and other exogenous pathogens: of the three letters about Wind cited so far, two additionally mention Cold, and one of them also rain, that is, Dampness.

In the next letter, Cold figures as the backdrop of a more detailed account of the repercussions of a Wind disorder:

Toward the winter solstice I became aware of a stirring of Wind. It got worse every day until the 10th of last month, when it was at its most critical. Everything was the same as last spring, only a bit lighter. Since then it got a little better, but I certainly cannot overcome it. [This Wind has caused] a deep stagnation, which waxes and wanes. As a consequence, I am much decreased in *qi* and flesh, which worries me very deeply. Today I managed to sit up and so I am in fairly good spirits again. This is an incessant illness that I cannot get rid of and that does not allow me any relief day or night. I do not know when I will get some temporary respite or even be able to convey [?]. Now, my vision is blurred and my hand is also so bad that I cannot write this letter [well?]. This is what I wanted to let you know.

吾涉冬節。便覺風動。日日增甚。至去月十日。便至委篤。事事如去春。便為輕微耳。尋得小差。固爾不能轉勝。沈滯進退。體氣肌肉便大損。憂懷甚深。今尚得坐起。神意為復可耳。直疾不除。晝夜無復聊賴。不知當得甦有閒。還得□其寫不。如今忽忽目前耳。手亦惡。欲不得書示。令足下知問。⁹¹

This is another piece that starts with the writer's health report right away without even nodding to the addressee. That it is a complete letter is unlikely, because it appears to have been written to someone with whom Wang Xizhi did not correspond frequently, given that at least two months had passed between the winter solstice and the time of writing, probably in the first or second month, and assuming that this is not a summary of earlier letters to the same addressee. Wang's health report confirms that his susceptibility to Wind is not only compounded by his exhaustion, but also by the cold weather, which brought on the same complaint for two winters in a row. The "stirring of Wind" (*feng dong* 風動) probably also affected Wang's fine motor skills by creating

⁹⁰ *Taiping shenghui fang*, comp. Wang Huaiyin (fl. 976-992) (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1980), 2285.

⁹¹ "Wu zhi dongjie tie" 吾涉冬節帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.1b-2a; *Shokan* #345. Deep stagnation is mentioned in two other letters: "Jin de shu tie" 近得書帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.5b; *Shokan* #223; and "Yu Anshi ju jia tie," discussed below under treatments.

tremors, which would explain his difficulties writing, and may have been responsible for his blurred vision. Unfortunately, no calligraphic copies of this letter have been transmitted, otherwise it would have been interesting to see if Wang's "bad hand" had an influence on the calligraphy of the letter or not.

"Deep stagnations" (*chen zhi* 沈滯) disrupt the fundamental *qi* dynamic, causing all manner of apparently contradictory symptoms, among them diarrhea. In Ge Hong's 葛洪 (283-343) *Zhouhou beiji fang* 肘後備急方 it is described as a result of "suffering from depletion because of accumulated exhaustion or from not having recovered after a serious illness," which would fit Wang Xizhi's situation well.⁹²

The characterization of an illness as waxing and waning in this and half a dozen other letters generally indicates a condition the writer experiences as deeply worrying.⁹³ The following note reports on someone else's health, Yu Cun, who is hovering between life and death:

I have heard that Yu Cun 虞存 (*zi* Daochang 道長) has not responded to the power of the medicine [he was given]. His illness is grave and has recently been waxing and waning. This makes me very worried. I am waiting for the messenger to return with news.

知道長不（孤）得散力。疾重而邇進退。甚令人憂念。遲信還知問。⁹⁴

In this case, the lack of pre- and postscript appears only reasonable, because it is in tune with the urgency of the message. This letter also shows the communicative network in action: Wang Xizhi seems to be waiting for the messenger in order to forward the news he would bring—a perfect illustration of a close-knit group of people who are concerned about each other and keep each other informed.⁹⁵

⁹² 凡男女因積勞虛損或大病後不復常若四體沈滯, *Zhouhou beiji fang* (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1994), 87a.

⁹³ A similar development, the fear of sudden deterioration, is expressed in "Sima sui du ji jiu tie" 司馬雖篤疾久帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.6a; *Shokan* #179.

⁹⁴ "Daochang tie" 道長帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.8b; *Shokan* #322. The phrase also appears in "Lei shu xiang zhi tie," translated below.

⁹⁵ Although the letters in which Wang reports on ailments of mutual friends and acquaintances—usually introduced by *yun* 云—are not at the center of our interest here, a prominent example would be "Zhou jiang shiwu ri gao tie" 州將十五日告帖, which starts: "I just had a letter from Huan Wen 桓溫 [312-373] written on the 15th. The [Regional Inspector] of Xuzhou has an abscess bigger than a square foot with a four-inch opening. He said it's been

Cold

Judging by how frequently it is mentioned, Cold (*han* 寒) appears to have been the preeminent exogenous pathogen for Wang Xizhi. More than two dozen of his letters indicate a connection between illness and cold weather (either as *han* or *leng* 冷 or by way of references to the season), whether he was writing about himself or others. As for Wang's own health, every one of his conditions apart from insomnia appears in at least one of his letters as related to Cold. The health inquiries addressed to his correspondents—many of which are quoted above, such as “How have you been with all your ailments in this unusual cold?”⁹⁶—also show that Wang regarded cold weather as a risk factor. The following two letters demonstrate both the explicit connection between Cold and well-being in reference to the addressee as well as the implicit connection between the weather and the writer's own complaints:

On the 27th day of the 11th month [Wang] Xizhi reports:

I have received your two letters of the 14th and 18th. To hear from you was a comfort to me. The cold is piercing. Is everyone in your family in good health these days? Thinking of you, I am worried and weary. I have missed you for too long. I am eating extremely little, and I am very weak. Pray do rely on Marshal Xie [i.e., Xie An]. My letter is not comprehensive.

This is what [Wang] Xizhi reports.

十一月廿七日羲之報。得十四十八日二書。知問為慰。寒切。比各佳不。念憂勞。久懸情。吾食至少。劣劣。力因謝司馬。書不具。羲之報。⁹⁷

On the 22nd day of the 12th month [Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

The New Year Festival is approaching and I heave a sigh, feeling deeply. Having received your letter of the 23rd of last month, I know that you, sir, are still suffering these days. I am concerned about you. Take good care of yourself! Are you going to

getting smaller and better during the last couple of days, but an illness of this origin is still deeply worrying” 適州將十五日告。徐一癰方尺許口四寸。云數如來小如差。然疾源如此。憂恒尚深。 *Quan Jin wen* 22.9a; *Shokan* #80.

⁹⁶ “Huran gai nian tie” #2. See also “Dong zhong ganhuai tie,” “Kuobie tie,” and “Da han tie” (all translated above); as well as “Bian zhi dong ri tie” 便陟冬日帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.6b; *Shokan* #241 and “Maoshan wan sheng er bu yu tie” 茂善晚生兒不育帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.2a; *Shokan* #629.

⁹⁷ “Han qie tie” 寒切帖 (aka “Nian qi ri tie” 廿七日帖 or “Xie sima tie” 謝司馬帖), *Quan Jin wen* 25.8b; *Shokan* #185.

heed my advice? Your servant has got a severe Cold disorder,⁹⁸ which is so bad that I can hardly bear it. Despite all my efforts, my reply cannot be comprehensive.

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know.

十二月二十二日羲之白。節近。感歎情深。得去月二十三日書。知君故苦日。耿耿。善護之。往不。僕得大寒疾。不堪甚。力還不具。王羲之白。⁹⁹

In the second, polite letter we indeed see the emphasis on the correspondent that we would expect. Wang expresses sympathy with the other's unspecified condition and conveys good wishes coupled with advice, all of which takes up much more space than his own brief health report. We cannot be sure about the concrete nature of the ailment Wang Xizhi mentions here. He may have well understood nearly all of his symptoms as an expression of Cold Damage disorder (*shang han* 傷寒, see below), a conceptual rubric that encompassed acute and chronic presentations of a broader range of pathogenic factors than just Wind and Cold. He could also simply have meant something akin to what in today's English vernacular would be called a "bad cold." We should keep in mind, though, that prior to the advent of antibiotics, respiratory tract infections were by no means trivial inconveniences but a common cause of mortality, especially for anyone whose health was already compromised. In any event, the Cold disorder Wang reports would have compounded his chronic condition.

Another letter demonstrates that Cold Damage is not season-bound:

Suddenly it is midsummer and I feel a longing for you. How are you in this unseasonable cold? I am concerned about you. I am still unwell. ... Pray do let me hear from you.

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know in writing.

忽然夏中感懷。冷冷不適。足下復何似。耿耿。吾故不佳。... 力知問。王羲之書白。¹⁰⁰

Zhang Ji's *Shanghan lun*, one of the most influential texts in Chinese medical history, deals specifically with illness due to Cold pathogens,

⁹⁸⁾ The term *hanji* occurs only once in Wang's letters and is rare in contemporaneous medical literature as well. See *Suwen* 69.538, *Jiayijing* 6.1.753.

⁹⁹⁾ "Jie jin gan tan qing shen tie" 節近感歎情深帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.1a–b; *Shokan* #256.

¹⁰⁰⁾ "Huran xiazhong tie" 忽然夏中帖 (aka "Xie Renzu tie" 謝仁祖帖), *Quan Jin wen* 25.2b and 3b; *Shokan* #162.

although the eponymous Cold Damage disorders covered a wider range of pathomechanisms, most notably Wind and Heat. The text was certainly extant at the time when Wang Xizhi was active and may have been circulating, but it had not yet attained the stature it enjoyed starting with the Song dynasty, and it is possible that Wang was entirely unaware of it.¹⁰¹ Although Wang uses the terms Cold damage (*shang han*) and Cold strike (*zhong leng* 中冷), his letters never mention the *Shanghan lun*'s pivotal Six-Channel model (*liu jing* 六經).¹⁰² Significantly, though, one of Wang's missives clearly expresses respect for, or rather fear of the potential virulence of Cold Damage disorders, which could easily turn into mortal illnesses:

Is Guinu better? I hope this does not turn into a critical illness. Cold Damage is frightening. It makes me worried. He should rest thoroughly.
貴奴差不。想不成太病。傷寒可畏。令人憂。當盡消息也。¹⁰³

Again, we see Wang Xizhi's apprehension about the unpredictable course of an illness, but this time his misgivings are heightened by the illness's classification as a Cold Damage disorder: had the ailment been classified differently, the writer's worry might have been slighter. Illnesses are inherently bound to socially and historically constructed evaluations and connotations, which significantly shape the experience of being ill for patients, their family and friends, and, not least, physicians. The aura of foreboding, which Cold Damage disorders obviously had for Wang Xizhi may have been a reflection of widely held cultural assump-

¹⁰¹ See Asaf Goldschmidt, "Epidemics and Medicine during the Northern Song Dynasty: The Revival of Cold Damage Disorders (Shanghan)," *T'oung Pao* 93 (2007): 90-93.

¹⁰² A letter by Wang's son Xianzhi may contain a hint of Zhang Ji's formulas. "Cheng fu shen qi wan tie" 承服腎氣丸帖 (*Quan Jin wen* 27.7b) mentions "kidney *qi* pills" 腎氣丸, which are described in *Jingui yaolüe*, ed. Li Keguang 李克光 (Taipei: Zhiyin chubanshe, 1990), 6. 167. The letter is cited and translated in a recent reference work of Chinese medical history; see Fu Weikang 傅維康, Li Jingwei, and Lin Zhaogeng, eds., *Zhongguo yixue tongshi: Wenwu tupujian* 中國醫學通史：文物圖譜卷 (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 2000), 409. The incorrect translation of the phrase "平平耳" might be due to the authors' lack of familiarity with epistolary conventions: it does not mean that a drug "has had little effect," but rather that the writer "is in fairly good health" after having taking it for a while, although he knows that it will require up to ten doses before the drug will take full effect.

¹⁰³ "Guinu chabu tie" 貴奴差不帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.6a; *Shokan* #326. In this text without frame or indications of hierarchy, Guinu, whose identity is uncertain, could be a third party, as in our translation, or an address: "Are you, Guinu, better? ... You should rest thoroughly."

tions, as evidenced in the importance attributed to Cold Damage in not only *Shanghan lun* but also *Huangdi neijing*.¹⁰⁴

Apart from the many letters quoted above that imply a connection between cold weather and Wang's or other people's ailments, there are others that mention Cold Damage or Cold strike explicitly:

I have just received your letter and gratefully acknowledge your consideration. I am on the verge of a Cold strike and feel very muddled. Because I went inside and had a good sleep in the quiet, I did not notice at all that you came. How very amiss of me. I regret not having met you just now.

Wang Xizhi.

適得書。知足下問。吾欲中冷。甚憤憤。向宅上靜佳眠。都知足下來。一甚無意。恨不覩面。王羲之。¹⁰⁵

On the 6th day of the 12th month [Wang] Xizhi reports:

Because of Assistant Magistrate Ji[’s visit ?], I could not write to you in detail. Yesterday I received your two letters of the 15th and the 23rd of last month and I feel comforted. It was first raining day and night without stopping before it started snowing tonight. How are you all? Recently I have been suffering from a Cold strike, which has started to get a bit better. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be more detailed.

This is what [Wang] Xizhi reports.

十二月六日羲之報。一昨因暨主簿不悉。昨得去月十五日二十三日二書。為慰。雨晝夜無解。夜來復雪。弟各可也。此日中冷。患之始小佳。力及不一。羲之報。¹⁰⁶

[Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

I am not cognizant of the recent state of your venerable body. I am waiting to respectfully receive further announcements. I myself am miserable because of a Cold strike. I will soon write to you again.

This is what [Wang] Xizhi lets you know.

羲之白。不審尊體比復何如。遲復奉告。羲之中冷無賴。尋復白。羲之白。¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., *Suwen* 31.250-56.

¹⁰⁵ “Shi de shu tie” 適得書帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.6b; *Shokan* #60.

¹⁰⁶ “Zuo yin ji zhubu tie” 昨因暨主簿帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.7b; *Shokan* #487. Other letters in which Wang Xizhi complains about a Cold strike are “Fu shi gu bu ke tie” (see translation below), “Shanxia duo ri tie,” and “Song Lu shan zhuo ye tie” 松廬善斲也帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.4b; *Shokan* #560.

¹⁰⁷ “Bu shen zun ti tie” 不審尊體帖 (aka “Heru tie” 何如帖), *Quan Jin wen* 26.7a; *Shokan* #286.

In this group of letters, two aspects stand out that are of wider communicative interest. The first letter may be an example of illness as, in Wilt Idema's words, "a universal and accepted excuse to escape disagreeable social obligations."¹⁰⁸ It is impossible to tell if Wang Xizhi was truly suffering from a Cold strike: he may just as well have been pleading illness to not receive visitors—or this particular visitor. The last letter is significant because it is one of only a handful of evidently submissive letters in the corpus of Wang Xizhi's letters, which, whether casual or polite, are overwhelmingly addressed to equals. Writing to a superior, this note clearly indicates the hierarchical difference between writer and addressee. On the verbal level, this shows in phrases such as "I am not cognizant," "your venerable body," or "respectfully receive further announcements" as well as in the absence of second-person pronouns and Wang Xizhi's choice of his personal name as self-designation. A surviving Tang-dynasty copy of this note, now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, further demonstrates that reverence for the addressee was not only expressed verbally, but also with calligraphic means, in this case a dot in a blank space the size of one character placed above the words "your venerable body" 尊體.¹⁰⁹ It is remarkable that of all the things one could say in a such a brief letter to a superior, Wang Xizhi would choose to report that he is in ill health. We could interpret this either in terms of epistolary conventions and conclude that writing about one's health problems, especially in connection with the weather, was much more widespread than other transmitted letters suggest, or assume that Wang was writing for personal reasons, either apologetically or to garner sympathy.

Heat

Given his susceptibility to injury due to pathogenic Cold and his apparent penchant for substances that warm the body, such as Cold-Food

¹⁰⁸) "Diseases and Doctors, Drugs and Cures: A Very Preliminary List of Passages of Medical Interest in a Number of Traditional Chinese Novels and Related Plays," *Chinese Science* 2 (1977): 44-45. Christopher Cullen has made a similar point in "Patients and Healers in Late Imperial China: Evidence from the *Jinpingmei*," *History of Science* 31 (1993): 108. See also the forthcoming article by Antje Richter, "Visiting the Sick: Textual Evidence from Early and Early Medieval China."

¹⁰⁹) See the reproduction in *Quanji* #14. Spacing rules or *pingque* 平闕 ("level and omit") are discussed in Qi Xiaochun, *Shan yin dao shang*, 261-66. See also Ledderose, *Mi Fu*, 75-76.

Powder, one might suppose that Wang's condition would improve during the summer months. This was not always the case, however, probably because his health was sufficiently impaired to make him intolerant of any extremes in his environment, including Heat, a variant of which is also known as Summerheat (*shu* 暑). Although the presentation of pathogenic Heat may be similar to what English speakers refer to as sun- or heatstroke, it may take a variety of less acute forms, such as fever, thirst, the absence of sweating, etc. Letters in which Wang Xizhi complains about Heat have often been rather mechanically interpreted as referring to the side-effects of taking Cold-Food Powder (discussed in more detail under treatments below).¹¹⁰ While this interpretation may be appropriate in some cases, it appears to be doubtful in many others, such as this note:

It has become so hot. Are you fairly well these days? I suffer very much from this heat. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be comprehensive.

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know.

便大熱。足下晚可耳。甚患此熱。力不具。王羲之（上）〔白〕。¹¹¹

While not many letters—whether on heat or other subjects—allow us to positively eliminate that they concern Cold-Food Powder, the following is certainly one of them:

I have not had any letters from your family. We have had many visitors and everyone is safe and sound. The weather this summer is extremely vicious and bound to be dangerous to everyone's health. The young ones are suffering, which makes me worried and weary beyond words.

不得君家書疏。多往來皆平安耳。今年此夏節氣至惡。當令人危。幼小疾苦。故爾憂勞不可言。¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Concerning the letters quoted above, see n. 67 for another example.

¹¹¹ “Da re tie” 大熱帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.11b; *Shokan* #282. In Wang's letters, *wan* 晚 usually means “recently” or, less frequently, “late.” It does not mean “in the evening” or “at night,” as assumed by Liu Tao, who moreover interprets Wang's “I suffer very much from this heat” as referring to the side-effects of Cold-Food Powder (Quanji #109). On *wan* 晚, see Fang Yixin 方一新 and Wang Yunlu 王雲路, eds., *Zhonggu Hanyu duben* 中古漢語讀本 (Shanghai: Jiaoyu chubanshe, 2006), 364 n. 4.

¹¹² “Ci xia jie qi zhi e tie” 此夏節氣至惡帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.2b; *Shokan* #247.

Wang Xizhi writes about Heat in connection with illness in more than a dozen letters, either explicitly (usually using *re* 熱 and once also *shu*) or in the form of indirect references, such as “I hope it gets colder, this would be good” 想得冷此為佳也,¹¹³ or “recently it has been cool, so you should be quite safe and sound” 比日涼即至平安也.¹¹⁴ As in the letters that mention Cold, Wang draws a more explicit connection between Heat and well-being in his inquiries of other people’s health than in his reports about his own condition, as the first two letters of the following sample show:

On the 1st day of the 7th month [Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

Suddenly, it is the first month of autumn, and I have nothing but sighs. When the messenger returned, I received your letter of the 7th of last month. I gather you are still sickly because you contracted Heat on your long journey. I am worried for you more than I can say. I am still frail and worn out. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be comprehensive.

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know.

七月一日羲之白。忽然秋月。但有感歎。信反。得去月七日書。知足下故羸疾。(問)〔而〕觸暑遠涉。憂卿不可言。吾故羸乏。力不具。王羲之白。¹¹⁵

On the 15th day of the 7th month [Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

In these autumn days, I feel a deep longing for you. Having received your announcement of the 5th, I feel very comforted. Recently the heat has been extreme. Have you, sir, been fairly well lately?¹¹⁶ I am waiting for further communications. Your servant is in fairly good health. Despite all my efforts, I cannot be more detailed.

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know.

七月十五日羲之白。秋日感懷深。得五日告。甚慰。晚熱盛。君比可不。遲復後問。僕平平。力及不一一。王羲之白。¹¹⁷

¹¹³ “Shijiu ri tie” 十九日帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.10b; *Shokan* #321.

¹¹⁴ “Xie Fan xinfu tie” 謝范新婦帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.10b; *Shokan* #572.

¹¹⁵ “Qiyue tie” 秋月帖 (aka “Qiyue tie” 七月帖), *Quan Jin wen* 25.9b; *Shokan* #277.

¹¹⁶ An alternative interpretation that assumes *re sheng* 熱盛 to refer not to the weather, but to a medical condition would read: “Recently you have been afflicted with extreme Heat. Have you been fairly well lately?” For an example of the medical use of this term, see *Shennong bencao jing* 1.115.286 (s.v. *niu huang* 牛黃).

¹¹⁷ “Qiuri ganhuai shen tie” 秋日感懷深帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.2a; *Shokan* #246.

On the 3rd day of the 6th month [Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

The heat begins to abate.¹¹⁸ This year is already halfway over. I sigh with deep feeling. Having received your letter of the 27th, I know that you are safe. Recently, I have been concerned about you, knowing that your ailments have become worse. Have a good rest. I am feeling an extreme malaise. I often fear that I cannot survive this summer. I cannot go into more detail.

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know.

六月三日羲之白。徂暑。此歲已半。感慨深。得二十七日書。知足下安。頃耿耿。悉增患耶。善消息。吾至勿勿。常恐一夏不可過。不一。王羲之白。¹¹⁹

On the 19th day of the 6th month [Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

The messenger has returned. Having received your letter of the 8th, I know that you are not well. Why does it have to be like this? I am concerned about you. Your servant's health is deteriorating every day, and then I was struck with this Heat. I spend my days in nothing but malaise. Despite all my efforts, my dispatch cannot be comprehensive.

This is what Wang Xizhi lets you know.

六月十九羲之白。使還。得八日書。知不佳。何爾。耿耿。僕日弊而得此熱。忽忽解日爾。力遣不具。王羲之白。¹²⁰

In the last letter, Wang Xizhi again owns that he is prone to suffer from pathogenic Heat due to his already compromised health—similar to “Kuobie tie” quoted above, where he is referring to Wind. In contrast to the letters that cite pathogenic Wind and Cold, though, those about Heat seem to be much less specific, with Wang mostly complaining about general fatigue and malaise. The context suggests that the sultry weather is contributing to his overall decline, but he may also be saying that he is feeling hot or “feverish.” It is worth noting that Wang’s use of the word *re* 熱 in this context reflects a subjective experience: he would have had no way of knowing whether he actually had an elevated basal body temperature.

Only one letter implies a connection between seasonal heat and gastrointestinal disorders:

Lately, there has not been a single day when I was in good health. Every day, another malady of decline and old age appears. [Now,] in the summer, I cannot get myself to eat. It feels like having a tiresome duty. I am very weak.

¹¹⁸) An allusion to *Mao shi* 204 (六月徂暑).

¹¹⁹) “Chushu tie” 徂暑帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.4b; *Shokan* #265.

¹²⁰) “De ba ri shu tie” 得八日書帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.9a; *Shokan* #230.

吾頃無一日佳。衰老之弊日至。夏不得有所噉。而猶有勞務。甚劣劣。¹²¹

Another specific complaint associated with Heat is edema, but since Wang mentions it in connection with Heat and Dampness, these letters are introduced below.

Notwithstanding his travails with pathogenic Cold and Summerheat, Wang apparently considered winter and summer to be his good seasons:

Generally, I am fairly well in summer and winter, but in spring and fall I am always ailing. This is truly a human constant. ...

大都夏冬自可。春秋輒有患。此亦人之常。...¹²²

The idea that it was during the more volatile spring and autumn seasons that his health truly deteriorated, is expressed in two other letters as well.¹²³

Dampness

Although the term Dampness (*shi* 溼 / 濕) occurs only in four of Wang Xizhi's extant letters, he nevertheless connects many of his health problems with this pathogenic factor, usually through references to rain, which are found in more than two dozen notes. Pathogenic Dampness resulting from excessive summer humidity in combination with pathogenic Heat (*shu shi* 暑溼 / 濕) presents with generalized feverishness, gastrointestinal disorders (such as poor appetite, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea), and oppression in the chest—all of which emerge in Wang's letters. The same is true of swellings or edema, another common consequence of this combination of pathogenic factors.¹²⁴

Wang inquired about swellings in his correspondents or mutual acquaintances¹²⁵ and complained about suffering from this disorder himself in the following two letters:

¹²¹ "Shuailao tie" 衰老帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.7a; *Shokan* #355.

¹²² "Dadu xia dong tie" 大都夏冬帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.6b; *Shokan* #565.

¹²³ See "Fu shi gu bu ke tie" (translated under treatments below) and "Maiqiu tie" 麥秋帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.5a–b; *Shokan* #453.

¹²⁴ See the descriptions in *Suwen* 3.23–25, 5.47, 71.474–79.

¹²⁵ See "De li ren shu tie" 得里人書帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.9b; *Shokan* #635; "Wei de Anxi wen

It has cleared up after the recent torrential rain and is now very hot. I have received your letter. Learning that you are all in good health, I feel comforted. I suffer from swelling with edema.

頃災雨晴。便大熱。得書。知汝各佳。為慰。吾腫水。¹²⁶

On the 14th day of the 5th month [Wang] Xizhi lets you know:

The last messenger has arrived. Having received your letter of the 7th, I know that you are still so [unwell]. I am concerned about you. Have a good rest. My swelling has worsened due to this heavy rain. I am deeply worried. Despite all my efforts, I cannot go into details.

[Wang] Xizhi.

五月十四日羲之〔白〕。近反至也。得七日書。知足下故爾。耿耿。善將息。吾腫得此霖雨轉劇。憂深。力不一一。羲之。¹²⁷

While the first text may be just a fragment, the second appears to be a complete letter. In this brief note's main body we see the usual sequence of communications: Wang first acknowledges the arrival of a letter and offers the addressee sympathy for his suffering and general good advice. Remaining vague, he does not name the other's ailment. He then goes on to write about himself and is now more specific. He updates the addressee about a condition he suffers from and about which his correspondent obviously knew. Mentioning the ill effect of the weather on this condition, Wang also shares his anxiety about the course of this illness and, tacitly, his future.

The next letter is not dated, but seems to have been written during summer as well. It again demonstrates that inquiries after the correspondent's health often operate with climatic excesses:

This steaming dampness is hard to bear.¹²⁸ Having received your letter, I know that you still endure travelling. I only hope you may not develop an illness. I am extremely miserable. May your travels be successful.

Wang Xizhi knocks his head on the ground.

tie” 未得安西問帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.5b, *Shokan* #114; and “Fa dong xie zhong tie” 發動脅腫帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.3b, *Shokan* #347.

¹²⁶ “Yu qing tie” 雨晴帖, *Shokan* #668.

¹²⁷ “Wu yue shi ri tie” 五月十四日帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.1a–b; *Shokan* #337.

¹²⁸ Since *zheng* 蒸 is used in another letter as referring to the weather, it is likely that the phrase 蒸溼 refers to the weather as well. See “Jin shu zhi ye tie,” translated in full below.

此蒸溼難為人。得示。知足下故爾堪行。想不成病耳。吾至無賴。行剋。王羲之頓首。¹²⁹

A larger number of letters is dedicated to the coexistence of pathogenic Dampness and Cold, sometimes also Wind, as two of the letters cited above demonstrate.¹³⁰ In the following notes we see Wang Xizhi complaining about general fatigue as well as about more specific ailments:

Are you and your family in good health in this rainy cold weather? With all my ailments, I am quite miserable. Despite all my efforts, I cannot go into details.

This is what [Wang] Xizhi inquires about.

雨寒。卿各佳不。諸患無賴。力無不一一。羲之問。¹³¹

It has been cold and rainy for many days. I suffer from pain in my lower back because of my kidney *qi*, and I am again coughing all day long. The wind was so strong that the water of Lake Pei rose and one could not cross it in a boat. Do not be upset. Xie Guanglu's¹³² geese are at the foot of the hill. I miss you, take good care of yourself.¹³³

This is what [Wang] Xizhi sends.

數日雨冷。腎氣痠腰。復嗽動靜。遇風緊。岐湖泛漲。船不可渡。勿訝。謝光祿鵝在山下。懸情。(可)〔自〕愛。羲之遣。¹³⁴

¹²⁹ “Zheng shi tie” 蒸溼帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.2b; *Shokan* #534.

¹³⁰ See “Qiu zhong tie,” cited in our subsection under Wind; and “Zuo yin ji zhubu tie,” under Cold.

¹³¹ “Yu han tie” 雨寒帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.6a; *Shokan* #240.

¹³² “Guanglu” could be the abbreviation of the official title *guanglu dafu* 光祿大夫. Later, “Xie guanglu” became a reference to Xie Zhuang 謝莊 (421-466), but in Wang’s letter it must refer to another member of the Xie family, possibly Xie An. See *Shokan* #124.

¹³³ Morino and Satō (*Shokan* #124), in keeping with the title under which this letter is known, read the last sentence as referring to Wang Xizhi’s fondness for geese and translate: “They are always on my mind, they are lovely.” This interpretation is out of tune with the use of *xuanqing* in correspondence, where it describes a worried longing, usually for the addressee, often at just this position in a letter. See Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 92. Since the term is rarely found outside of Wang’s letters, however, it is difficult to assess its full semantic range. The only indication that it might have denoted longing for an object (or animal) is the exceptional use of a similar phrase, *xuanxin*, in medical texts to describe a hankering for food, e.g., in *Lingshu* 29.266 (胃中熱則消谷，令人懸心善飢). The second part of the phrase, *ke ai*, does not make sense as a closing formula after *xuanqing*, but *zi ai* would—see our translation. The characters *ke* and *zi* may have looked similar to a superficial reader, or, and this seems more likely, to a reader who fancied the idea that this was a letter expressing Wang’s emblematic fondness for geese.

¹³⁴ “Ai e tie” 愛鵝帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.7b; *Shokan* #124.

The second note is unique in two ways: nowhere else in the corpus of Wang Xizhi's letters is "qi" used in such a specific way, and nowhere else do geese appear. That Wang attributes the pain in his lower back to his kidney *qi* is only to be expected, since a debilitation of kidney *qi* was recognized as a common cause of lumbar pain at Wang Xizhi's time, as it is in Chinese medical practice today. Many of Wang's specific complaints, such as his intolerance of cold and his susceptibility to edema, as well as his overall frailness and, not the least, his cough, could actually be interpreted as evidence of weak kidney *qi*. Wang's attraction to Cold-Food Powder, a medicinal compound that aggressively warms the *yang*, is also consistent with his apparent self-diagnosis of weakened kidney *qi*.

That geese are mentioned in this letter is of interest, too, albeit not in connection with dampness, since Wang Xizhi's fondness for this bird has come to be *the* emblem of his artistic personality in popular and elite imagination alike: depictions of the great calligrapher in popular prints and paintings invariably show him in the company of geese, as do many literati paintings.¹³⁵ While early textual references from the fifth to the seventh century frame Wang's fondness for geese as a somewhat eccentric character trait,¹³⁶ it later became conventional to connect it with calligraphy and to assume that the movements of these birds' necks or feet inspired Wang's calligraphic practice. In the 1930s, Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890-1969) countered these assumptions and, based on a read-

¹³⁵ There are countless depictions of Wang Xizhi in early modern popular prints; see, e.g., Weifang shi Hanting qu wenhua ju 濰坊市寒亭區文化局, *Weifang minjian guben nianhua* 濰坊民間孤本年畫 (Ji'nan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 1999), figs. 61.2, 62.2, 63.2, 64.4. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City holds a famous literati painting showing a similar motif, Qian Xuan's 錢選 (1235-1305) "Wang Xizhi Watching Geese" (Wang Xizhi guan e tu 王羲之觀鵝圖). For an exemplary study about the continuum of popular and elite art, see Maggie Bickford, "Three Rams and Three Friends: The Working Lives of Chinese Auspicious Motifs," *Asia Major* 3rd ser., 12 (1999): 127-58.

¹³⁶ The first source is Yu He's 虞赫 (fl. ca. 470) "Lunshu biao" 論書表, which tells an anecdote about Wang trading a copy of the Heshang gong 河上公 recension of the *Daode jing* 道德經 for a flock of geese (*Quan Song wen* 全宋文 55.4a, in *Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen*). Wang's biography in the seventh-century *Jin shu* (80.2100) reiterates an abbreviated form of this anecdote and adds a second one showing Wang disappointed when he discovers that a goose "with a fine honk" 善鳴 was already cooked when he arrived to buy it from its owner. Although Wang's disappointment was sometimes cited as evidence that he was interested in the non-nutritional qualities of geese, it could also have been the disappointment of someone who hopes to acquire live birds for breeding.

ing of select materia medica, proposed that Wang and others appreciated geese for their nutritional value, especially to balance the side-effects of Cold-Food Powder, a claim that has since been challenged.¹³⁷

Treatments in Wang's Letters

The association of Wang Xizhi's family and of other members of his circle with Celestial Masters Daoism (*tianshidao* 天師道) is well-known and documented.¹³⁸ Equally well-established is that Celestial Masters Daoism regarded illness as a punishment for sin and claimed that healing was based on confession and petition of the celestial authorities.¹³⁹ According to Lu Xiuqing's 陸修靜 (406-477) "Lu xiansheng daomen ke lüe" 陸先生道門科略, "the ill were not to take medicines or use the acupuncture needle or moxa. They were only to ingest talismans, drink water [into which the ashes of the burnt talismans had been mixed], and confess all their sins from their first year of life."¹⁴⁰ As the letters quoted so far already prove, Wang and his circle obviously did not feel bound by these precepts. While drugs, acupuncture, and moxibustion appear throughout Wang's letters, basic elements of Celestial Masters' healing—such as talismans (*fu* 符), oratories (lit., quiet rooms, *jingshi* 靜室),

¹³⁷ "Tianshidao yu binhai diyu zhi guanxi" 天師道與濱海地域之關係, *Lishi yuyan yanjiu suo jikan* 3-4 (1933): 464-66. Zhuming Yao, in his unpublished essay "Another Look at Wang Xizhi's Love of Geese" (2015), has recently demonstrated how selective Chen Yinke was in his choice of sources and that other Chinese materia medica literature would also support the opposite view, i.e., that the consumption of geese could actually have harmed Wang Xizhi's health. See also *Zhonghua bencao* 中華本草, ed. Guojia Zhongyi yao guanliju 國家中醫藥管理局 (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu chubanshe, 1998), nos. 9.8499-512.

¹³⁸ See Terry F. Kleeman, *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Asia Center, 2016), esp. 209-18. See also Lothar Ledderose, "Some Taoist Elements in the Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties," *T'oung Pao* 70 (1984): 246-78; Qi Xiaochun, *Mai shi zhi feng*, 505-84.

¹³⁹ See Nathan Sivin, "Health Care and Daoism," *Daoism: Religion, History and Society* 1 (2011): 11-14; and chapter 5 in Jiang Sheng 姜生 and Tang Weixia 湯偉俠, eds., *Zhongguo daojiao kexue jishu shi: Han Wei liang Jin juan* 中國道教科學技術史：漢魏兩晉卷 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2002), esp. 557-92.

¹⁴⁰ This is the translation by Peter Nickerson in his "Abridged Codes of Master Lu for the Daoist Community," in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 353-54.

and kitchens (*chu* 廚)¹⁴¹—are altogether absent, and the same is true for other aspects of the contemporaneous “complex of interacting systems of health care.”¹⁴² Neither do Wang’s letters mention the recitation and visualization practices associated with the Celestial Masters text *Huangting jing* 黃庭經.¹⁴³

There is one non-epistolary text in Wang Xizhi’s oeuvre, however, that shows him participating in Celestial Masters healing rituals, which were based on the idea that one of the reasons for illness was moral transgression—one’s own or that of family members—and that healing could be realized through a written confession addressed to the celestial bureaucracy. Wang wrote the text in question, “Guannu tie” 官奴帖, on behalf of a sick girl in his family, probably a granddaughter. “Guannu tie” is not a petition itself, but a so-called “statement” (*ci* 辭), a type of text that the supplicant would prepare for a priest to use in the “presentation of a petition” (*shangzhang* 上章) to the celestial officials in the hope that they might restore the child’s health.¹⁴⁴ While “Guannu tie” contains a passage that resembles an epistolary health report, it clearly differs in terminology and overall rhetoric from Wang’s letters. Using the submissive self-designation “this citizen” (*min* 民), which is very rare in his letters, and arguing in terms of guilt, repentance, and punishment, which is completely absent from his letters, the text follows the formula of a confession.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ See Kleeman, *Celestial Masters*, passim.

¹⁴² Cullen, “Patients and Healers in Late Imperial China,” 100. See also Arthur Kleinman’s pioneering work on coexisting systems of health care in 1970s Taiwan, in *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: An Exploration of the Borderland between Anthropology, Medicine, and Psychiatry* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980); and Li Jianmin, “They Shall Expel Demons.”

¹⁴³ See n. 76 above.

¹⁴⁴ The petitioning process is described in Kleeman, *Celestial Masters*, 353–73. That the petition was probably unsuccessful in this case is indicated by two of Wang’s letters, which report the death of two granddaughters within ten days, one of them “Guannu’s little daughter.” See “Yanqi Guannu xiaonü tie” 延期官奴小女帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.13a; *Shokan* #195; and “Er sunnü yaoshang tie” 二孫女夭殤帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.6b; *Shokan* #193.

¹⁴⁵ See also Wang Xianzhi’s confession while critically ill, as transmitted in *Shishuo xinyu* 1.39 and 17.16; and Pei-yi Wu’s study “Self-Examination and Confession of Sins in Traditional China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39 (1979): 5–38.

When Guannu's little daughter, Yurun, fell ill more than ten days ago, nobody let this citizen know. Yesterday she suddenly came down with an intractable illness that is becoming ever more serious. She also suffers from an abscess on her head, but it has burst and is no longer worrying. The intractable illness is hardly improving, though, which worries me intensely, more than I can express in words. There is no good reason for this recent arduous illness. This citizen as head of the family has brought it about, failing to practice self-restraint, to be diligent in self-cultivation, and to transform old and young [in my family] through teaching. I frequently violated the precepts. All this citizen can do now is to faithfully mend his ways and await punishment. These are no empty words and phrases. Because Guannu has already spoken, I won't say more. I have betrayed *dao* and *de* up high and been a disgrace toward my Master down here. What else can I say?

官奴小女玉潤病來十餘日，了不令民知。昨來忽發癩，至今轉篤，又苦頭癰，頭癰以潰，尚不足憂。癩病少有差者，憂之焦心，良不可言。頃者艱疾，未之有良由。民為家長，不能克己勤修，訓化上下，多犯科誡，以至於此。民唯歸誠待罪而（已），此非復常言常辭。想官奴辭以具，不復多白。上負道德，下愧先生，夫復何言。¹⁴⁶

The incidental transmission of this “statement” and the light it throws on an area of treatment that does not appear in Wang’s letters suggests that there may well have been other forms of medical practice, Celestial Masters or otherwise, that do not appear in Wang’s surviving epistolary texts. It is possible, for instance, that the intense misery about the dam-

¹⁴⁶ “Guannu tie” (aka “Yurun tie” 玉潤帖); *Shokan* #191; *Quanji* #127. Chi-tim Lai discusses the text in his article “The Ideas of Illness, Healing, and Morality in Early Heavenly Masters Daoism,” in *Philosophy and Religion in Early Medieval China*, ed. Alan K.L. Chan and Yuet-keung Lo (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2010), 182-83. Lai’s discussion and translation are not free from errors, though. One concerns the identity of “Guannu’s little daughter Yurun.” Although there is no way of knowing who Guannu was, Lai assumes that she was the daughter of Wang’s youngest son Xianzhi. This seems unlikely, since Xianzhi was only seventeen when his father died and, as we know from another letter, was the last of Wang Xizhi’s children to marry (see “Ernü tie” 兒女帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.8a; *Shokan* #188). Lai’s identification of the text’s addressee—the “Master” (*xiansheng* 先生) mentioned toward the end of the text—as Xu Mai is even less convincing, since Xu passed away when Xianzhi was just four years old. For a comprehensive discussion of attempts to identify Guannu, see Qi Xiaochun, *Mai shi zhifeng*, 463-504. Although Morino and Satō do not identify the addressee of “Guannu tie,” they do assume that *xiansheng* refers to Xu Mai when it occurs in three of Wang’s letters (*Shokan* #439, 368, 565)—incidentally never in the context of healing. See also Qi Xiaochun’s suggestion that it was not Xu Mai, as reported in Wang’s *Jin shu* biography, but Xu Xun 許詢 (*zi* Xuandu 玄度, fl. ca. 358), one of the most outstanding authors of *xuanyan shi* 玄言詩 (poetry of arcane words) and Wang’s frequent companion after retirement (*Mai shi zhifeng*, 46-50).

age to his ancestors' tombs, which Wang voiced in two famous letters¹⁴⁷ was not only an expression of filial piety but also of the Celestial Masters belief that such a disturbance might cause illness in one's family.¹⁴⁸

Acupuncture and Moxibustion

Acupuncture and moxibustion are mentioned about half a dozen times in Wang's letters, but only twice in connection with his own health, in particular pain and obstruction:

I have received your letter and gratefully acknowledge your consideration. My hips and [?] are stiff and painful, I can't bend my head back or forth. What could only be the reason for that? I would love to see you right away, but it would not be appropriate before I am fully recovered. If you have good advice, be sure to let me know [?]. It is just that this month is very overcast, so I am afraid I cannot be needed. I don't know what would help. At the moment, I am very worried and exhausted.

Wang Xizhi.

得書。知足下問。吾骯髂□拘痛。俛仰欲不得。此何理耶。願輒與相見。無盡治宜。足下得益使之不疑也。但月又（未）陰沈沈。恐不可針。不知何以救。目前甚憂悴。王羲之。¹⁴⁹

While this letter just brings up “needling” as a therapeutic possibility that is not realized because of a specific climatic proscription,¹⁵⁰ the second letter reports on the results of a moxa treatment Wang actually received:

Your latest letter has arrived. Having received your letter of the 18th, I feel comforted. How has everyone's health been recently in this rainy, steaming weather? Is

¹⁴⁷ “Sang luan tie” 喪亂帖, *Shokan* #151.1; “Jiu jing tie” 舊京帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.9a, *Shokan* #691. See Eugene Y. Wang, “The Taming of the Shrew: Wang Hsi-chih (303-361) and Calligraphic Gentrification in the Seventh Century,” in *Character and Context in Chinese Calligraphy*, ed. Cary Y. Liu et al. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Art Museum, 1999), 132-73.

¹⁴⁸ See Kleeman, *Celestial Masters*, 371.

¹⁴⁹ “Angqia tie” 骯髂帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.10b; *Shokan* #332.

¹⁵⁰ We could not trace this proscription to contemporaneous medical texts. The one weather-related proscription in the *Suwen* concerns needling in cold weather (天寒無刺, 26.222). On other proscriptions of acupuncture and moxa, mostly in Sun Simiao's *Beiji qianjin yaofang* 備急千金要方, see Catherine Despeux, trans., *Prescriptions d'acupuncture valant mille onces d'or: Traité d'acupuncture de Sun Simiao du VIIe siècle* (Paris: Guy Trédaniel, 1987), 58-62 and 171-75.

the Adjutant better? I am concerned about you.¹⁵¹ My shoulder blade hurts intensely and has not responded to moxibustion. I suffer extremely and can hardly write. Despite all my efforts, I cannot put down more than a few words.

近書至也。得十八日書。為慰。雨蒸比各可不。參軍轉差也。懸耿。吾胛痛劇。灸不得力。至患之。〔欲〕不得書。自力數字。¹⁵²

A few more letters mention acupuncture and moxibustion as treatments of other people's illnesses, as does the following letter, which may have been addressed to the same person as the preceding:

Thinking of you at mid-month, I am overwhelmed by an exhaustive longing that I can hardly bear. How is everyone's health in this rainy, humid weather? Did the Adjutant respond to acupuncture and moxibustion? I miss you very much. You should relax profoundly. When the weather clears up, I will call on you. My dispatch is not comprehensive.

[This is what] Wang Xizhi lets you know.

月半。念足下。窮思深至。不可居忍。雨濕。體氣各何如。參軍得針灸力不。甚懸情。當深寬割。晴通省苦。遣不具。王羲之白。¹⁵³

This casual, apparently intimate letter to an equal is exclusively concerned with the health of others: either the recipient, as suggested by our translation, or a third party, if we interpret *canjun* 參軍 not as a form of address. Although we unfortunately do not know what illness was treated, it is not surprising that this type of information is left out for reasons of etiquette or as shared knowledge.

From Wang's letters it may appear that acupuncture and moxibustion were perceived to be of uncertain effectiveness. We have two letters describing needling and/or moxa as unsuccessful and three more letters inquiring about their efficacy, but only one reporting the success of moxibustion.¹⁵⁴ This is not necessarily an expression of a particular lack

¹⁵¹) Our translation of this and the following letter assumes *canjun* 參軍 to be a form of address. However, it could as well refer to a third party and not the recipient.

¹⁵²) "Jin shu zhi ye tie" 近書至也帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.11a; *Shokan* #217. It might have been revealing to see if Wang's sore shoulder had any influence on the letter's calligraphy, but unfortunately no copies of this letter survive.

¹⁵³) "Yueban nian zuxia tie" 月半念足下帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.8a; *Shokan* #278.

¹⁵⁴) See "Taichang tie" 太常帖 (*Quan Jin wen* 25.10a; *Shokan* #31): "The old shoulder ailment of the Chamberlain for Ceremonials [i.e., Wang Biaozi 王彪之 (305-370) improved after moxibustion and he is fairly well now" 太常故患胛。灸愈。體中可可耳。 See *Quanji* #96 for a brief commentary on the letter's historical context.

of confidence in this type of treatment, however, as inquiries after the effectiveness of drugs or other treatments also feature in other letters.¹⁵⁵

Grain Abstention

Grain abstention (*bi gu* 避/辟穀, *duan gu* 斷穀, or similar terms) can refer to a variety of complex practices from avoiding grains to complementing one's diet with certain herbs and physical techniques to fasting, that is the abstention from all foods.¹⁵⁶ As the best-known dietary restriction practiced in Han and Six Dynasties China, grain abstention also appears in Wang Xizhi's letters:

I hope all my letters have arrived. Have you, sir, been fairly well recently? Your servant has lately suffered from a diarrhea that continued for many days. I was feeling a malaise and my swelling worsened. While it repeatedly waxed and waned, my worry about it deepened. I also did not know how to cure it. The diarrhea was caused by eating grains. When I started eating grains I added a bit of flesh, but my *qi* and strength did not recover, and on top of that I developed other ailments. Since I stopped eating grains and flour at the end of last month, I am in fairly good health again.

累書想至。君比各可不。僕近下數日。勿勿。腫劇數爾進退。憂之轉深。亦不知當復何治。下由食穀也。自食穀。小有肌肉。氣力不勝。更生餘患。去月盡來。停穀噉麵。復平平耳。¹⁵⁷

While grain abstention is often associated with the quest for transcendence (*xian* 仙), Wang's letters provide little evidence for this aspiration on his part. Instead of the systematic application of a grain abstention regime, we see Wang experimenting with adding and removing grain from his diet as a means to deal with his gastrointestinal complaints. Given that the most frequent complaint about eating in Wang's correspondence is his lack of appetite, he certainly does not seem to be fasting.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ On needling and moxa during the Six Dynasties period see also Li Jingwei and Lin Zhao-geng, *Zhongguo yixue tongshi: Gudai juan*, 184-87.

¹⁵⁶ See Robert Ford Company, "The Meaning of Cuisines of Transcendence in Late Classical and Early Medieval China," *T'oung Pao* 91 (2005): 1-57 and *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 62-87.

¹⁵⁷ "Lei shu xiang zhi tie" 累書想至帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.5a; *Shokan* #352.

¹⁵⁸ Apart from the letters translated throughout our article see also "Min yi qin qing shi tie"

Although other elements of the “transcendent’s cultural repertoire”¹⁵⁹ are absent from Wang Xizhi’s letters, there is one mention of transcendence:

Among the people who gather medicinal drugs in the village some [say they] find this drug after they had a dream about it. Do you happen to know about this? They also say that whoever takes it becomes a transcendent. I don’t know if anyone can verify this. Its shape and color are slightly unusual. Nobody had ever seen it before. ...

鄉里人擇藥。有發（簡）〔夢〕而得此藥者。足下豈識之不。乃云服之令人仙。不知誰能試者。形色故小異。莫（與）〔即〕嘗見者。...¹⁶⁰

This text differs from the letters we have seen above, some of which also lack a frame, by consisting of a straightforward inquiry, unadorned by epistolary phrases or topoi of any kind. Rather than being a complete piece of written communication, it could well be an excerpt from a longer letter—another reminder of the fragmentary character of Wang’s transmitted oeuvre. That Wang Xizhi makes inquiries about a curious herb “nobody had seen before” is also a reminder of the fact that at the time these letters were written, in the middle of the fourth century, much of the local, southern flora must still have been new to the immigrants from the North, including regionally recognized medicinal plants. Other inquiries about the efficacy of certain materia medica that we see in Wang’s letters may also relate to regional medical knowledge and attempts to incorporate it into current practices.

Materia Medica

Wang Xizhi mentions medicinal plants, animal parts, minerals, and composite formulas in his letters, in a variety of situations from gift-giving and -receiving to the discussion of their use in the treatment of his

民以頃情事帖 (*Quan Jin wen* 24.1b; *Shokan* #382), in which Wang explicitly reminds himself to eat (勤以食噉為意), probably in connection with a period of mourning.

¹⁵⁹ See the chapter by the same name in Campany’s *Making Transcendents*, 39–61.

¹⁶⁰ “Xiang li ren ze yao tie” 鄉里人擇藥帖, *Quan Jin wen* 25.11a; *Shokan* #370. The last three characters (謝二侯) are suspected to be an interpolation from another letter (*Quanji* #100). It is unclear if they refer to one or two persons and who that might be. To interpret this letter as “clearly showing” that the “Daoist believer Wang Xizhi” was possessed by “conflicting ideas about longevity,” as Liu Tao did (*Quanji* #100), apparently in an attempt to salvage Wang’s rationality, misses more than one point.

or other people's illnesses. The substances he writes about come from what today appear to be distinct traditions of materia medica—or even traditions that we can no longer identify—and thus again prove how precarious it is to project ideas of a central or canonical tradition onto the medical practices of Wang and his circle. In the following overview, we focus on select substances to illustrate the diversity of materia medica and the communicative patterns in which they occur.¹⁶¹

In the first letter we consider in this regard, a treatment for diarrhea follows Wang's health report:

I know that you are grieving and not well. I am concerned about you. My diarrhea and belly ache are a little better. I need to take *nüwei* pills. When I get them, I should respond very rapidly.

知足下哀感不佳。耿耿。吾下勢腹痛小差。須用女萎丸。得應甚速也。¹⁶²

Nüwei pills are mentioned in *Maijing* for the treatment of diarrhea. Although medical texts from the Tang onward describe different variations of their formula, there are no contemporaneous records about what other ingredients the pills that Wang took might have contained.¹⁶³ Given the persistence of this complaint, it is not surprising that Wang writes about other cures for diarrhea, too, as in the following letter, where he describes a plan of treatment based on a connection between deep stagnation and diarrhea that is familiar from medical literature.¹⁶⁴

... I suffer from a deep stagnation and accompanying diarrhea. This has been going on for many days without the slightest sign of improvement. Yesterday I started to take *zhili* pills again. I don't know if they will stop the diarrhea or not. ...

... 吾遂沈滯兼下。如近數日。分無復理。昨來增服陟釐丸。得下不知遂斷不。...¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ For additional information see Toita Manabu (?) 戸井田学, "Ō Gishi to honzō" 王羲之と本草 (B.A. thesis, Ibaraki Univ., Mito, 1999). For an overview of materia medica during the Six Dynasties period, see also Li Jingwei and Lin Zhaogeng, *Zhongguo yixue tongshi: Gudai juan*, 193-99.

¹⁶² "Ai gan tie" 哀感帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.9b; *Shokan* #331.

¹⁶³ See *Maijing* 2.26; Sun Simiao, *Beiji qianjin yaofang* (Taipei: Guoli Zhongguo yiyao yanjisu, 1990), 15b.281b, and elsewhere. See also *Zhongyi fangji dacidian*, vol. 1, no. 08702. For the main ingredient of *nüwei* 女萎, see *Zhonghua bencao*, no. 3.1783 (*Clematis apiifolia*) and, possibly, no. 8.7199 (s.v. *yuzhu* 玉竹, *Polygonatum odoratum*).

¹⁶⁴ See, e.g., *Jingui yaolie* 17.513.

¹⁶⁵ "Yu Anshi ju jia tie" 與安石俱佳帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.5b; *Shokan* #126.

Another letter mentions *zhili* pills along with two other drugs used in the treatment of diarrhea:

On the 27th day of the 5th month the citizen of this prefecture Wang Xizhi deserves death punishment once and again:

Half of this summer is already over again. [?] Thinking about our separation, I am beset by a multitude of feelings. Time only increases my grief. I don't know if it has been raining recently? I am not cognizant of the state of your venerable body. Has your illness been cured? I have not received any news lately. I am eagerly awaiting [your letter]. Since this citizen has been taking ground *xiang*, my diarrhea has stopped and I have become healthier and stronger. This substance helps to stop diarrhea and is said to be far better than *zhili* and *jiefan*.¹⁶⁶ It is an effective drug. Wherever it originates, it is really [effective]. Sincerely submitted from Qingzhou. My letter is not complete.

[Wang] Xizhi deserves death punishment once and again.

五月二十七日州民王羲之死罪死罪。此夏復便半□惟違離。眾情兼至。時增傷悼。頃水雨未(之)〔知〕有。不審尊體如何。得疾除也。不承近問。馳企。民自服橡屑。下斷。體氣便自差強。此物益人斷下。云陟釐劫樊遠也。以為良方。出何是真。此之謂謹及因青州。白牒不備。羲之死罪死罪。¹⁶⁷

It is interesting to see Wang Xizhi bringing up his digestive trouble in a letter to a superior again. The relatively detailed comment on his treatment includes a comparison between different medicinals to cure diarrhea and an outright recommendation of one drug, which makes one wonder whether the addressee, to whose illness Wang obliquely refers at the beginning of his letter, suffered from a similar complaint and had solicited Wang's opinion about treatment options, perhaps about a locally available herb.

While the term *xiang xie*, "ground/shaved *xiang*," is unfamiliar in received literature, *xiang* alone occurs frequently in medical and other texts, referring to a type of oak tree (*quercus*). Both the husks of the acorns and the tree's bark were common materia medica used in the treatment of diarrhea.¹⁶⁸ We cannot be sure about the composition of the *zhili* pills that Wang took, as their formulation varies considerably in

¹⁶⁶) The identity of *jiefan* 劫樊 is unclear. Toita Manabu ("Ō Gishi to honzō," 13) suggests that it could refer to burnt or Potassium alum (*fanshi* 礬石).

¹⁶⁷) "Wu yue ershiqi ri tie" 五月二十七日帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.10b–11a; *Shokan* #122.

¹⁶⁸) See *Zhonghua bencao*, no. 2.0956–57.

the historical record.¹⁶⁹ That they may have had warming properties is suggested by a second letter, probably addressed to one of Wang Xizhi's in-laws, which mentions *zhili* (pills) together with Cold-Food Powder:

I hope everyone, old and young, is in good health. I know that Bin¹⁷⁰ is still bedridden. I am concerned about him. I hope he will get better once it is summer. I am thinking of you, sir, with a weary heart. The virtuous elder sister [i.e., Wang Xizhi's wife] is more or less recovered, although she still has periodic bouts of incessant vomiting. Being an illness of old age makes it even more unlikely that it will be [cured] soon. That she has taken a general turn for the better is a comfort to me. Because I have not been taking Cold-Food Powder [*fu san*] recently, I will take *zhili* [pills?].¹⁷¹ This medicine is beneficial, just as you, sir, advised.

想大小皆佳。知賓猶伏爾。耿耿。想得夏節佳也。念君勞心。賢姊大都轉差。然以故有時嘔食不已。是老年衰疾。更亦非可倉卒。大都轉差為慰。以大近不復服散。當將陟釐也。此藥為益。如君告。¹⁷²

It is not clear whether Wang implied a connection between the two drugs in this letter. If he did, the switch from Cold-Food Powder to *zhili* pills could have been a move from one medicinal to cure diarrhea to another; he could also have wanted to say that he was too ill to consume Cold-Food Powder; or that he believed that Cold-Food Powder did not agree with *zhili* (pills).

Cold-Food Powder (*hanshi san* 寒食散), also known as Five-Stone Powder (*wushi san* 五石散), was popular from the late Han throughout the Tang dynasty. Its varying composition probably included arsenic, which could have been responsible for the frequently described toxic side-effects of the drug.¹⁷³ Cold-Food Powder—so named because it cre-

¹⁶⁹ Although *zhili* itself was classified as warming since at least the Tang, the other ingredients are both warming and cooling. Modern reference works (e.g., *Zhonghua bencao*, no. 1.0129) list *zhili* 陟釐 under an alternative name, *shuimian* 水綿 (spirogyra, water silk, a type of alga), which makes it difficult to assess if Wang was talking about the same drug. *Zhili wan* 陟釐丸 are described in Tang-dynasty texts, such as *Beiji qianjin yaofang*, 15b.278a; and Wang Tao 王燾 (670-755), *Waitai miyao* 外臺秘要 (752) (Taipei: Guoli Zhongguo yiyao yanjiusuo, 1964), 1.73a. See also *Zhongyi fangji dacidian*, vol. 7, nos. 66161-63.

¹⁷⁰ Probably a reference to Wang's nephew Xi Chao 郗超 (*zi* Jiabin 嘉賓), son of Xi Yin 郗愔 (313-84, *zi* Fanghui 方回), a younger brother of Wang's wife Xi Xuan 郗璠 (ca. 315-405, *zi* Zifang 子房).

¹⁷¹ It is impossible to say whether this sentence refers to Wang or his wife.

¹⁷² "Xiang daxiao jie jia tie" 想大小皆佳帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.6b; *Shokan* #552.

¹⁷³ See Wang Kuike 王奎克, "Wushi san xinkao" 五石散新考, in *Zhongguo gudai huaxue*

ated such heat in those who ingested it that all they could eat was cold food—has not only been the subject of substantial scholarly work,¹⁷⁴ but also gained prominence in the popular imagination, especially following Lu Xun's 魯迅 (1881-1936) essay "The Style and the Literature of the Wei and Jin Periods and Their Connection to Drugs and Wine" in 1927.¹⁷⁵ As a result, Cold-Food Powder is mostly discussed as psychoactive, aphrodisiac, addictive stimulant. Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫 (1883-1955), for instance, compares it with opium and, discussing the letters of Wang Xizhi, attributes all of his ailments to this drug.¹⁷⁶ Although there is no way of knowing why Wang Xizhi took Cold-Food Powder, based on the surviving letters it would make perfect sense to assume medicinal rather than "recreational" use. One does of course not preclude the other, but, based on our reading, the letters rather support medicinal use. The properties of Cold-Food Powder, which is described as warming, de-stagnating, and vitalizing the *qi*, are consistent with many of Wang's health complaints as we have described them above.

How little evidence there is to support the claim that Wang Xizhi abused Cold-Food Powder becomes clear when we look at the letters that supposedly mention the drug. "Xiang daxiao jie jia tie," the letter quoted above, demonstrates that it is not always clear whether it was Wang or someone else who took the drug (and the same is true for the following letter). A second area of ambiguity concerns Wang's terminology. He never uses the terms Cold-Food or Five-Stone Powder, although "Cold-Food Wine" (*hanshi jiu* 寒食酒) and "Five-Color Stone Paste Powder" (*wuseshi gaosan* 五色石膏散) do occur once each.¹⁷⁷ The phrases *fu*

shi yanjiu 中國古代化學史研究, ed. Zhao Kuanghua 趙匡華 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1985), 80-87.

¹⁷⁴ Studies include Wang Yao 王瑤 (1914-1989), *Zhonggu wenren shenghuo* 中古人生活 (Shanghai: Tangdi chubanshe, 1951), esp. 1-43; Rudolf G. Wagner, "Lebensstil und Drogen im Chinesischen Mittelalter," *T'oung Pao* 59 (1973): 79-178; Li Ling 李零, "Wushi kao" 五石考, *Xueren* 13 (1998): 397-404; Vivienne Lo, "Lithic Therapy in Early Chinese Body Practices," in *New Approaches to Medical Anthropology and Archaeology*, ed. Patricia Ann Baker and Gillian Carr (Oxford: Oxbow, 2002), 195-220.

¹⁷⁵ "Wei Jin fengdu ji wenzhang yu yao ji jiu zhi guanxi" 魏晉風度及文章與藥及酒之關係 (1927), in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 (Shanghai: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1973), vol. 4, 486-507.

¹⁷⁶ "Han shi san kao" 寒食散考 (1938), in *Yu Jiaxi lunxue zazhu* 余嘉錫論學雜著 (Taipei: He Luo tushu chubanshe, 1976), 181 and 197-98.

¹⁷⁷ See "Shiyi yue san ri tie" 十一月三日帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.11b; *Shokan* #557 ("I am in fairly good health. Lately I have been taking Cold-Food Wine, which seems to make me better")

shisan 服石散 and *fu san* 服散 are also used once each, which yields just two or three letters that clearly report Wang's use of Cold-Food Powder.¹⁷⁸ It has been suggested, perhaps in an attempt to broaden the evidence for Wang's "drug habit," that *fu shi* 服食, which is found in five letters, also denotes the use of Cold-Food Powder, although the phrase more generally refers to "taking elixirs" or even any medicine (including Cold-Food Powder) as part of the Daoist pursuit of longevity.¹⁷⁹ The following letter suggests that an "elixir" could have had cooling qualities, quite unlike Cold-Food Powder, and that Wang was writing with regard to his correspondent's use of "elixir":

If taking elixirs [*fu shi*] is still not possible, you might take other cooling medicinals. Right now, your servant has again been the one to be hit. My intestines and stomach have been hit by a cold, I can hardly express how badly. That's why one must always heed spring and autumn, because then one often suffers from a belly that is not well-regulated. You, sir, should take this to heart. ...

服食故不可。乃將冷藥。僕即復是中之者。腸胃中一冷。不可如何。是以要春秋輒大起。多腹中不調適。君宜深以為意。...¹⁸⁰

The other letters that mention *fu shi* are less specific as to the nature of the "elixir," and it is quite possible that they refer to Cold-Food Powder:

I have received the sandalwood (?), the walnuts, and the two kinds of medicine from you.¹⁸¹ I gratefully acknowledge your great [consideration for me]. Turkestan

吾平平。比服寒食酒。如似為佳); and "Wuseshi gaosan tie" 五色石膏散帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.9a; *Shokan* #377 ("After I took your Five-Color Stone Paste Powder, my body felt so light that moving around was like flying" 服足下五色石膏散。身輕。行動如飛也).

¹⁷⁸) While *fu san* could refer to Wang's own use of the drug (see "Xiang daxiao jie jia tie" translated above), *fu shisan* is used in reference to someone else (see "Huran xiazhong tie" mentioned above).

¹⁷⁹) See, e.g., the interpretations of Morino and Satō in *Shokan* #338, 229, 125, 421. Wagner understands *fu shi* as including, but not being restricted to the use of Cold-Food Powder, see "Lebensstil und Drogen," 117 n. 110. Other scholars do not differentiate between *fu shi* and *fu san*; e.g., Wang Yao in *Zhongguo wenren shenghuo*; see also Jiang and Tang, *Zhongguo dao jiao kexue jishu shi*, 300-312.

¹⁸⁰) "Fu shi gu bu ke tie" 服食故不可帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.1b; *Shokan* #338.

¹⁸¹) While our rendering assumes four gifts (*zhanji*, *hutao*, and two kinds of medicine), "two kinds of medicine" could also refer to *zhanji* (conceivably *tan* 檀, santalum or sandalwood tree, *Zhonghua bencao*, no. 2.1230-35) and *hutao* (juglans regia or walnut, *Zhonghua bencao*, no. 2.0855-66).

salt is another thing I require. I need it when I take elixirs.¹⁸² I know that you approve of elixirs. Lately, Fanghui [i.e., Wang's brother-in-law Xi Yin] did not want to allow me this view. "Few are those who know me"—this has become a saying.¹⁸³ There is no opportunity to see you, whereby we might share a laugh.

得足下旃闕胡桃藥二種。知足下至。戎鹽乃要也。是服食所須。知足下謂須服食。方回近之未許吾此志。知我者希。此有成言。無緣見卿。以當一笑。¹⁸⁴

Although we cannot be sure about the exact properties of the particular type of Cold-Food Powder that Wang Xizhi took (let alone the even more obscure elixirs) and at what times in his life, it is worth mentioning a remark found in *Zhubing yuanhou lun*, where Chao Yuanfang warns that Cold-Food Powder may harm those who suffer from unresolved "Wind due to exhaustion," leaving them more exhausted and frail.¹⁸⁵ Since, by his own account, Wang suffered from "Wind due to exhaustion" as we have seen above, taking the powder may well have compounded this complaint.

The "Turkestan salt" letter is one of several to illustrate that the exchange among friends and acquaintances not only included medical advice and sympathy, but also medicinals. If the casualness of this and other extant notes are any indication at all, the giving of and asking for medicinal gifts in Wang's circle was an everyday matter.

I need *langdu*. I tried to buy it, but it was not available. Should you have some, could you grant me three *liang* [ca. 40g]? I don't have it anymore, but need it (?), that's why I am writing to you.

須狼毒。市求不可得。足下或有者。分三兩。停須故示。¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² For Turkestan salt (*Rong yan* 戎鹽, also known as halite or rock salt), see *Zhonghua bencao*, no. 1.0003, s.v. *daqing yan* 大青鹽; and Nathan Sivin, *Chinese Alchemy: Preliminary Studies* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), 280.

¹⁸³ See *Laozi* 70: "Few are those who know me. / Noble are those who emulate me" 知我者希, 則我者貴. D.C. Lau and Chen Fong Ching, eds., *A Concordance to the Laozi* (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1996).

¹⁸⁴ "Zhan ji (hu tao) tie" 旃闕(胡桃)帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.7a; *Shokan* #15. The term *fu shi* also occurs in "Ji xue ning han tie" 積雪凝寒帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.6b-7a; *Shokan* #229; "Qian de jun shu tie" 前得君書帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.7a; *Shokan* #125; and "Fu shi tie" 服食帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.6a; *Shokan* #421.

¹⁸⁵ *Zhubing yuanhou lun* 6.215 (本患風勞, 而服散石, 風勞未盡, 石勢因發, 解石之後, 體尚虛羸, 故猶挾風勞也).

¹⁸⁶ "Langdu tie" 狼毒帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.2a; *Shokan* #371; *Quanji* #115.

Lacking any context, we cannot be sure from this brief note whether Wang needed *langdu*, which can refer to several plants, for himself or someone close, for instance in his family, and what condition the drug was supposed to remedy.¹⁸⁷ Since *langdu* was used to cure both gastrointestinal problems and chest complaints, Wang could well have been seeking the drug for himself.¹⁸⁸

The following letter or letter fragment does name an illness, but is again ambiguous as to who is suffering from it:

Sky-mouse ointment is supposed to cure deafness: is it efficacious at all? If it is efficacious, then this is an important drug.

天鼠膏治耳聾。有驗否。有驗者乃是要藥。¹⁸⁹

The term “sky mouse ointment” is not found outside of this letter, so either the term has fallen out of usage or the substance itself has.¹⁹⁰ Whether Wang himself suffered from deafness is doubtful. He could well have made this inquiry on behalf of a friend, perhaps the same person whom he addressed in another letter to ask whether his deafness had gotten better.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ According to Fu Weikang et al., *Zhongguo yixue tongshi: Wenwu tupu juan*, 409, it was Chinese Wolfbane root, “Radix Euphobia Ebracteolatae” [sic]. For Radix Euphorbiae ebracteolatae, see *bai langdu* 白狼毒 in *Zhonghua bencao*, no. 4.3569.

¹⁸⁸ *Qianjin yifang*, 3.34. Another letter or fragment describes a formula for hemorrhoids without saying who was suffering from this complaint, it could also have been used by Wang, whose history of persistent diarrhea would make him prone to the condition. See “Yingzui tie” 鷹嘴帖, *Quan Jin wen* 26.7b; *Shokan* #375.

¹⁸⁹ “Tianshu gao tie” 天鼠膏帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.7b; *Shokan* #17. The addressee of this letters is assumed to be Zhou Fu 周撫 (?–365), a military official who became Regional Inspector (*cishi* 刺史) of Yizhou 益州 prefecture (in modern Sichuan province). See *Jin shu* 58.1582–83; and Cao Damin 曹大民 and Cao Zhizhan 曹之瞻, *Wang Xizhi shiqi tie jixi* 王羲之十七帖解析 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2005), 24–25.

¹⁹⁰ “Sky-mouse ointment” might be an alternative name for “bat dung” (*tianshu shi* 天鼠屎). See *Shennong bencao jing* 2.230.295; *Zhonghua bencao*, no. 9.8653, s.v. *yemingsha* 夜明砂. In Li Shizhen’s 李時珍 (1518–93) *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (1578), bat dung is mentioned as a component in a formula to cure ear discharge (otorrhea, *er chu ye* 耳出汁). See *Bencao gangmu* (Beijing: Renmin weisheng chubanshe, 1975), 48.2640.

¹⁹¹ “Bu de Dongyang wen tie” 不得東陽問帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.7b–8a; *Shokan* #588 (聾佳不).

The Calligrapher's Body: Conclusion

The letters of Wang Xizhi as the first figure in Chinese history of whom such a rich body of self-narratives about illness survives, give us insight into an epistolary community, “or rather a number of overlapping epistolary communities,”¹⁹² for whom medical matters were essential. They shed light on how Wang’s circle communicated about the medical knowledge that was, at least theoretically, available during that time and how they practiced medicine from diagnosis to treatment. Like any patient seeking relief from his suffering, Wang was interested in medical hearsay, and traded medical lore with others who were presumably not physicians trained in classical medicine. Most remarkably, he never mentions having consulted anyone who was a medical authority, nor does he bring up any medical texts. Wang’s use of words such as “Cold Damage” suggests that they were part of a larger vernacular that was not limited to the more specific and technical meanings attributed to them in transmitted medical texts. Although acupuncture, moxibustion, and drugs hold prominent positions in the medical repertoire of this circle, it is evident that they were utilized in ways that are often vague approximations or completely foreign to the received medical ideas from that age. Wang’s letters thus help to complicate our understanding of medical history by drawing attention to discourses and practices that cannot be fully appreciated within any singular conceptual model, be it classical medicine or Celestial Masters healing.

Wang’s letters show that many lives were impaired and often enough cut short by illness, and that the exchange of knowledge, active assistance (e.g., in the procurement of drugs), and consolation played an important role in creating a sense of community and personal well-being for the correspondents. Although that hypothetical community largely remains in the shadows of the past, a surprisingly complex and layered image of the ailing Wang Xizhi emerges. His letters show him not only as suffering himself, but also so deeply connected with friends and family that their weal and woe had a direct impact on his well-being. We might take it lightly when Wang time and again asserts that he is “comforted” to learn of a correspondent’s recovery or “weary” when thinking about

¹⁹² Stanley, “The Epistolarium,” 203.

their affliction, and dismiss such words as epistolary flourishes or, worse, platitudes. One reason to check this impulse is the great accumulation of such assertions in his letters. Another reason is that there are many pieces that shatter genre conventions through the stark evocation of the writer's failing body, which makes it difficult to dismiss them as formulaic. Wang Xizhi's letters about his ill, possibly dying friend, the poet Xu Xun, are a good example. Writing to his nephew, Wang Yanqi, Wang Xizhi described in one of those letters how his friend's suffering affected him not only in mind but physically, "in body": "I am in fairly good health, but since I started thinking of Xuandu yesterday, I can hardly bear it in my body" 吾平平。但昨來念玄度。體中便不堪之。¹⁹³ The affirmation of the deep bond that connected Wang and his friend epitomizes the multitude of close relationships that emerge in his correspondence.

Even if we have been able to answer many of the questions that we brought to our investigation, plenty of questions remain open. Given the problematic nature of these sources and the difficulties they present for interpretation, we are sure that ours is not the last word about Wang's medical narratives and hope that this study may lead to further inquiries into this fascinating material.

If Wang Xizhi's life was so determined by illness, one of the most intriguing open questions concerns the relationship between his maladies and his art. Similar to music and dance but unlike poetry, Chinese calligraphy is a profoundly physical art. Many impairments of the artist's health would register in his performance and product: the potential of calligraphy to reveal the writer's body and mind was, after all, at the heart of Chinese calligraphy appreciation. This means that Wang's handwriting would have betrayed much more than just the obvious problems with his hands and shoulders that he mentioned in his letter, but also other complaints, including worry and distress.¹⁹⁴ It is tempting

¹⁹³ "Qi ri gao Qi tie" 七日告期帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.11a; *Shokan* #116. Wang Yanqi 王延期 was the son of Wang Xizhi's elder brother Wang Jizhi 王籍之. Xu Xun is mentioned in more than a dozen letters, including several that refer to his ill health, e.g. "Qin wang wei nai tie" 親往為慰帖, *Quan Jin wen* 24.9a; *Shokan* #113; "Wei de Anxi wen tie" 未得安西帖, *Quan Jin wen* 23.5b; *Shokan* #114; "Xuandu xian nai ke er tie" 玄度先乃可耳帖, *Quan Jin wen* 22.8a; *Shokan* #115.

¹⁹⁴ See Eugene Wang's "The Taming of the Shrew," an analysis of the calligraphy in "Sang

to speculate about the role physical suffering may have played for Wang Xizhi's art: did he achieve mastery despite persistent ill health or did his genius depend on it, at least in part? Were some of the most admired features of Wang Xizhi's handwriting—such as the “sudden changes of speed and brush direction” that Robert Harrist has observed¹⁹⁵—owing to his suffering, perhaps even a particular condition? Similar questions have been fruitfully pursued in Chinese art history of the early modern period¹⁹⁶ and in Western art-historical scholarship, where the well-documented biographies of certain painters allow the reconstruction of their medical histories. A prominent case is that of J.M. William Turner (1775-1851), whose illnesses, especially vision disorders, have been shown to have had a decisive impact on his art.¹⁹⁷ Even if we cannot speak with the same certainty about the much earlier and much more elusive Wang Xizhi, it is worthwhile posing these questions. By allowing us to get closer to the calligrapher's body, the illness narratives Wang left behind help us not only to expand our understanding of fourth-century medical and epistolary practices, but also to heighten our awareness of the circumstances that shape the artistic process.

luan tie” as reflecting Wang Xizhi's distress learning about the destruction of his family's ancestral tombs. We are not aware of any studies on the relationship between Wang Xizhi's illnesses and his calligraphy.

¹⁹⁵) “Reading Chinese Calligraphy,” 5.

¹⁹⁶) See Bai Qianshen's “Illness, Disability, and Deformity in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Art,” in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 147-170 and 391-395.

¹⁹⁷) Studies include Sibylle Scholz and Gerd U. Auffarth, “William Turner,” in *The Eye in History*, ed. Frank Joseph Goes (London: Jaypee Brothers Medical Publishers, 2013), 269-71. See also the British ophthalmologist Patrick Trevor-Roper's seminal study, *The World Through Blunted Sight: An Inquiry into the Influence of Defective Vision on Art and Character* (London: Souvenir Press, 1997).