INTRODUCTION

Figuring Friendship

When I am with others and cannot see you and sit with you daily, you know if my heart is happy or not. Who is there to listen when I speak? Who to match me when I chant poetry? To speak and have no one listen, to chant and have no one match me, to go about alone with no fellows, to have no one to agree with me when discussing right and wrong—you know if my heart is happy or not!

—Han Yu, "Letter to Meng Dongye [Meng Jiao]"

Alas, alas, Weizhi! We began by making friends with poems, and we end by parting with poems. How could it be that today both strings and brushes are broken apart?

—Bai Juyi, "Offering Text for Yuan Zhen"

In the history of Chinese literature, the mid-Tang era stands out as a period of unusual innovation and change. During the years from the 790s through the 820s, mid-Tang writers pushed at the boundaries of medieval literature, experimented with new forms and styles, and

Introduction

explored new problems in their texts. At the same time, they pursued with great enthusiasm something more traditional in medieval culture: close friendships with fellow literati. The renown of these mid-Tang literary friendships spread far and endured through centuries of great social and cultural transformation. The poetic exchanges of Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen became famous throughout China and Japan; scholars in the Song dynasty and beyond praised Han Yu's dedication to Meng Jiao through years of hardship; the long fidelity of Liu Zongyuan and Liu Yuxi during years spent separated from each other is noted even today in studies of the two men's work. The enduring image of mid-Tang friendship is due in part to the survival of more texts from the second half of the Tang dynasty than from the first. In addition to the thousands of poems from the period, the great variety of extant prose works such as letters, prefaces, funerary texts, and essays gives us a more nuanced understanding of ninth-century lives than we have for earlier periods. But the visibility of friendship in mid-Tang literature is neither a trick of the light cast by surviving texts, nor a post-hoc creation that resonated with later readers. Rather, the profusion of writing about and within the context of friendship grew out of critical changes in Tang social and cultural life, and this writing thrived as a dynamic expression of mid-Tang literati interests. Texts of friendship publicized literati relationships, sustained aesthetic and intellectual debates over distance and time, and transmitted them to contemporaries and posterity. At their most powerful, these texts capture the great possibility of the mid-Tang moment, a time when literati sought not only to make reputations but also to revitalize culture for their age.

Mid-Tang literati found close relations with peers politically useful and intellectually stimulating; circles of friends provided assistance in careers and responsive audiences for writing. These instrumental uses of elite male friendship were certainly not new in medieval China. However, changing social and political conditions of the late eighth and early ninth centuries encouraged both the practice of friendship among elite men and its representation in texts. The two most influential changes in this history were the rising participation in Tang government of men from more diverse family backgrounds, particularly men from other than the most prestigious lineages, and the diminishing importance of the imperial court as a center of literary composition. In an era when all potential officials were evaluated on the basis of reputation and proven talent (there
were no blind assessments of candidates in examinations or for offices),
men without powerful kin relations had to build social capital through
many avenues—including the cultivation of patrons, advantageous mar-
rriages, and friendship ties—in order to succeed in the examinations and
to make careers. Horizontal social relations provided support on ladders
that most elite men sought to climb over the course of their lives.

The diversification of literature across the empire paralleled this mid-
Tang expansion of social networks. As the contexts for literary writing
became more numerous and decentralized—flourishing in the courts of
regional military commissioners (jiedushi 節度使)—literati discovered
both opportunities and incentives to cultivate men sympathetic to their
interests.\(^1\) Whether located in Chang’an, in Luoyang, or in the provinces,
these encounters of friends in pairs and larger circles generated lively dis-
cussion and composition. In his study of the writing and thought of Liu
Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), Jo-shui Chen has noted:

It is clear that there were emotional and artistic motives for the formation
of groups of this kind. Their formation often resulted from the mutual
appreciation of their members both as individuals and as writers. In the
area of writing, the members of these assemblages helped, learned from,
and, no less passionately, competed with one another in artistic terms. In
personal life, they held close relationships; their shared moments and ex-
perience frequently constituted the common themes of their works.\(^2\)

As Chen notes, mid-Tang writing about friendship often went be-
yond mere praise of one’s companions or the documentation of a so-
cial encounter and spilled into the realm of private experience. Friends
were also portrayed as “one[s] who know me” (zhiwozhe 知我者), to
use the epithet from the Shi jing 詩經 (Classic of poetry), or those who
would understand one’s inner feelings even in times of distress.\(^3\) Han

\(^1\) David McMullen, *State and Scholars in T’ang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge

\(^2\) Jo-shui Chen, *Liu Tsiung-yüan and Intellectual Change in T’ang China* (Cam-
bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 53.

\(^3\) The phrase zhiwozhe is repeated in Mao 65, “The Wine-Millet Bends” 恤離, from
*The Classic of Poetry*. The pre-Tang and Tang commentaries argue that it refers to
unnamed people (traditionally understood as plural, though not made explicit in the
Yu’s plaintive appeal to Meng Jiao—“you know if my heart is happy or not!”—captures his expectation of being understood and appreciated by his closest friends, which was only heightened by separation. Like Han Yu, many other mid-Tang writers described friendship with literati peers as a source of pleasure and knowledge. The social relation of friendship occupied a space that bridged both the public and private realms, and thus writing about friendship prompted men to reflect on the intersection of their personal and official lives and to debate their perspectives with one another.

In this book, I study the literary innovations and social values of writing about friendship in the mid-Tang, a body of work that I define to include texts representing friendship explicitly, either in a prescriptive, idealized form or as a description of a specific relationship, and also texts such as letters and poetic exchanges that invoke friendship as an essential condition for their composition. These texts on friendship shed new light on two critical questions about mid-Tang literature that scholars have considered for centuries: why so many writers of the period experimented so energetically with literary topics, styles, and forms; and why they turned so often to writing about personal experience. On the one hand, instrumentality is everywhere evident in mid-Tang writing about friendship: the texts show how writers used their circles to advance themselves and their friends in the political hierarchy. But beyond the social and political utility of this literary advertising, the texts also demonstrate the ways that a circle of trusted peers provided a safe environment for testing new styles and ideas. In writing about friendship, mid-Tang literati echoed one another’s interests, engaged in debate, and revised their opinions in different literary forms, whether through the play of collaborative and responsive verse, the exchange of letters on philosophical matters, or the circulation of eulogies for shared friends. Their texts also reveal the ways that friendship could change over time, as turns of fortune strained or sometimes strengthened ties made in youth. Playful, competitive relationships could deepen into more reflective, compassionate bonds—or could weaken from years of separation and divergent paths. Intellectual and aesthetic commitments that writers defended in their younger days
Introduction

could shift over time, an evolution that these texts sometimes painfully revealed.

The record of engaged collegial play and debate found in mid-Tang texts of friendship illuminates an important turn in the medieval literary tradition. The dialogic and dialectical qualities of friendship exchanges forced certain writers to consider more seriously the contingencies of experience—not just the proprieties of occasion—in crafting literary texts. In that process, they refashioned the inherited genres of medieval literature in order to make their literary work (wenzhang 文章) appear individual and authentic. Finally, mid-Tang writers claimed that friendship created a bond of trust and knowledge that made possible the disclosure of personal feelings or events that in the context of other, more distant social relationships would be inappropriate. Those personal matters could include topics as sensitive as guilt over an illicit love affair, as Yuan Zhen recounted to Bai Juyi, or petulant anger and bitterness about one’s struggles, as Han Yu expressed to his closest correspondents. Mid-Tang writers were deeply concerned to convey sincerity in literary composition; by incorporating such experiences in writing to friends, they guaranteed that their work would be specific, original, and powerful.

Despite the growing scholarship on the representation of social relations in Chinese literature and the impact of social and political change on mid-Tang writing, this is the first book-length exploration of friendship in the Chinese tradition. It asks a question that is literary historical in nature: how did writing on friendship both reflect and shape broader transformations in mid-Tang literary culture? But it situates its answer in the context of the larger historical processes at work in the period.4

---

4. Some important studies of the relationship of mid-Tang literary change to contemporary political and social developments, including the influence of the examination system on literature, include Fu Xuancong 傅璇琮, Tangdai keju yu wenxue 唐代科舉與文學 (Xi’an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 1986); Wu Zongguo 吳宗國, Tangdai keju zhidu yanjiu 唐代科舉制度研究 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2010); Li Hao 李皓, Tangdai shizhu yu wenxue 唐代士族與文學 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001); Chen Fei 陳飛, Tangdai shize kao shu 唐代試策考述 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002); Dai Weihua 戴偉華, Tangdai mufu yu wenxue 唐代幕府與文學 (Beijing: Xiandai chubanshe, 1990); Mao Wei 毛雲, Tangdai Hanlin xueshi 唐代翰林學士 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000); Ma Zili 马自力, Zhong Tang wenren zhi shenhui jiaoxue yu wenxue huodong 中唐文人之社會角色與文學活動 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005).
Literati friendship was certainly a scaffold for individual career advancement, but at the same time, new habits of writing within and about close friendships raised unexpected questions about the relationship between personal commitments and larger cultural values. What did it mean to “seek to be known” (qiuzhi 求知) or to “know others” (zhiren 知人) in the context of the lateral social relation of friendship, as opposed to the hierarchical relations of patronage? How was the canonical model of literary composition as the individual’s response to circumstances complicated when one wrote dialogically, in exchanges with other writers? Given the new value that literati found in the understanding of friendship, what other kinds of social, intellectual, or philosophical knowledge could they acquire from its model? And finally, what did it mean to write about friendship after the death of friends? In sum, as they became more aware of the ways in which their writing was embedded in particular relationships and social contexts, mid-Tang literati began to reflect the dynamic, intersubjective nature of friendship in their compositions.

The temporal boundaries of this study are narrow. My central account focuses on the decades of the 790s to the 820s (roughly from the late reign of emperor Dezong 德宗 [r. 780–805], through the entire reign of Xianzong 宦宗 [r. 805–20], to the end of Jingzong’s 敬宗’s brief reign [r. 825–26]). I also follow a few long-lived writers up into the 830s and 840s.5 The texts I examine come from the two largest collections of the mid-Tang, those of Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), and from the collections of other literati described by these two men as different kinds of “friend” (you 友) over the years (I discuss this and other friendship terms in chapter 1). For Han Yu, those literati included Meng Jiao 孟郊 (751–814), Li Ao 李翱 (774–836), Zhang Ji 張籍 (ca. 768–ca. 830), and Liu Zongyuan, as well as other men such as Zhang Shu 張署 (758–817), Hou Xi 侯喜 (d. 823), and Fan Zongshi 范宗師 (d. 824). In Bai Juyi’s corpus, the friendships invoked most frequently were those with Yuan Zhen (779–831) and Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842), but as we will see, a core group of other men appears with some frequency

5. As Ma Zili notes, different scholars locate the end of the mid-Tang at different moments, but the two most common end-dates are 826/827 (either the year before or the year of Wenzong’s accession) and 835, the year of the failed “Sweet Dew” uprising of officials against court eunuchs. Ma, Zhong Tang wenren, 6.
in his texts, complicating the narrow view of the “Yuan-Bai” dyad. The literati in this study are therefore all roughly of the same generation, even though their career paths were not aligned precisely. Meng Jiao was the eldest member, but he passed the jinshi 进士 examination alongside men twenty years his junior in 796; Bai, Han, Liu Zongyuan, and Liu Yuxi were all born between 768 and 773 and passed the jinshi in 799, 793, and 792 respectively; Li Ao, born in 772, passed the jinshi somewhat later in 798; and Zhang Ji, born in the late 760s or early 770s, passed the jinshi in 799, while Yuan Zhen, the youngest of this group, was born in 779 but passed the mingjing 明经 examination in 793 at the precocious age of fourteen.6 The literati life course is essential here, through its great influence on the formation and maintenance of friendships and thus on their depiction; in the chapters that follow, I begin with youth and examinations and conclude with death and portraits of friendship in funerary writing.

Rather than placing Han and Bai at the center of circles or “schools” (pai 派) and tracing their relations to others radiating outward, I follow the lead of the texts themselves, which sketch more open networks, shifting status hierarchies, social asymmetries, and overlapping roles within circles than the more static and traditional “schools” approach to the period suggests.7 The prominence of Han Yu and Bai Juyi in this account

6. The jinshi (presented scholar) examination, which required composition in different genres, was seen as demanding greater literary talent than the mingjing (explaining the classics) examination, which emphasized rote memorization of passages from the classics. See McMullen, State and Scholars, 23–25.

7. The body of social network analysis from the past several decades offers good models for examining relational patterns and tracing cultural exchange, and I draw upon some of this work, including some of its vocabulary, in this study. However, unlike sociologists or anthropologists who study guanxi, for whom instrumental uses of social relations are central, I focus less on instrumentality than on the literariness of these mid-Tang texts, including their affective content, rhetorical strategies, and intellectual debates. For some important studies of the role of guanxi in Chinese society, see Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, Gifts, Favors and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Yunxiang Yan, The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Andrew Kipnis, Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North Chinese Village (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); and Thomas Gold, Douglas Guthrie, and David Wank, eds., Social Connections in China: Institutions, Culture and the Changing Nature of Guanxi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
Introduction

...stems not only from their large corpora but also from other significant similarities in their lives that led them to form many diverse social relationships: they both began their careers without fathers, and were both relatively long-lived for Tang men (Han died at the age of fifty-six, Bai at seventy-four); they were consistently gregarious, generally successful in their offices (though each suffered a serious demotion in political office at least once), financially responsible for large families, and very well-connected, despite the fact that neither man began his career with the benefit of influential kin. Their contemporary reputations were radically different: Han Yu remained a very engaged, even polemical official until his death, while Bai Juyi chose to step away from court politics in his forties and spent his last decades enjoying a series of sinecures. Yet between them, they seem to have known every important political and literary figure of the Zhenyuan, Yuanhe, and Changqing reign periods.

When we juxtapose the texts of Bai and Han against the compositions of others in their circles, the agency of those other members emerges as well; their active voices in the exchanges help us in turn to understand shifts and inflections in the texts exchanged within a dyadic friendship or a larger circle. For example, Han Yu often assumed the roles of both junior scholar and close friend in poems addressed to Meng Jiao, who was Han’s student but also his elder by seventeen years. Bai Juyi adapted his dual role of “friend in prose” (wen you 文友) and “adversary in poetry” (shi di 詩敵), originally developed with Yuan Zhen, in his later writing with Liu Yuxi after Yuan’s death. The model of fluid, evolving networks sketched out by the texts also allows for the effect of time and separation on friendships and for the fact that literati cultivated more than one strong friendship relation or circle over the course of a lifetime. Zhang Ji, for example, known for his early attachment to Han Yu, later formed an important friendship with the poet Wang Jian 王建 (jinshi 775, d. ca. 830); and Liu Yuxi, friend of Liu Zongyuan and Lü Wen 吕温 (772–811), two men who like him were punished for their actions as officials during the emperor Shunzong’s reign, became Bai’s literary companion in later years. Poems, prefaces, letters, and funerary writings reveal the flexible and creative ways that mid-Tang literati used texts to negotiate changing relationships over time.

As I argue in chapter 1, the discourse of friendship in early medieval China is fragmentary and inconsistent in many ways, and there
are many aspects of friendship, particularly the more private dimensions, that its texts elide. Silences and omissions in the texts of friendship certainly stem in part from their use as cultural capital in the literati community, and the concomitant need for decorum.8 Because mid-Tang writers intended their literary writing to demonstrate both creative talent and competence in navigating elite social relations, we rarely find stark conflict, negative emotions, or ritual violations in the texts. More common are words of praise, collegial negotiation, and the rhetorical performance of generic or ritual expectations. The accidents of textual transmission also leave gaps. For example, the loss of perhaps 30 to 40 percent of Yuan Zhen’s collected works—including perhaps many of his letters and all of his poetry from after 825—gives Bai Juyi’s voluminous writing on his friendship with Yuan greater weight.9 Han Yu’s relations with Meng Jiao are represented in Han’s poems and other prose texts, but Meng Jiao’s perspective on that friendship or others is documented only by poems. Therefore the texts we have must be used with caution, with awareness of the kinds of writing absent from individual corpora, and with close attention to the conventions of particular forms. Because mid-Tang writers explored their interests in a wide range of genres and were especially attentive to the creative potential of prose, I consider texts of friendship in many forms, focusing on those that emphasized direct communication and response. I limit my analyses to texts that present themselves as overtly autobiographical, such as letters, poetic exchanges, farewell prefaces (song xu 送序), and funerary texts intended for performance or inscription, leaving for future study the representation of friendship in Tang anecdotal literature and “tales” (chuanqi 传奇).

8. My use of “cultural capital,” as well as the associated concept of “field” in this and later chapters, draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu in The Forms of Capital (1986) and elaborated in Distinction.

Across the genres, these texts articulate the many shared pleasures and values of friendship. Han Yu’s letter to Meng Jiao cited at the opening of the chapter tells us that Han saw the social communion of friendship as necessary to his own happiness: “To speak and have no one listen, to chant and have no one match me, to go about alone with no fellows, to have no one to agree with me when [discussing] right and wrong—you know if my heart is happy or not!” But as Han’s words demonstrate, the frequent separations men experienced in the course of political careers often jeopardized this pleasure. Literary texts such as letters and poems thus functioned as both the medium of friendship—the means by which it was performed and sustained, intellectually, emotionally, and materially—and its necessary currency, the gifts with which one fulfilled social obligations to others. Bai Juyi’s body of texts exchanged with Yuan Zhen exemplifies the importance of writing to maintaining a friendship, even serving as its boundaries, as Bai claimed in his offering text after Yuan’s death: “We began by making friends with poems, and we end by parting with poems.” Although the men seem to have spent much time in the period between 800 and 806 together on social occasions, remarkably, during the two decades between 810 and 831, the year of Yuan Zhen’s death, they spent no more than a few months in toto in one another’s company. Bai Juyi’s reference elsewhere in his offering text for Yuan Zhen to the “nine hundred” poems the two men had exchanged over the thirty years they had known one another shows us the potential of texts to embody a friendship, not merely serve as its medium. The evolving relationship of Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan offers a different but equally powerful model for the use of texts in friendship: there, the two men’s intellectual debate and personal familiarity emerged in an engaged series of discussions conducted in letters and essays over a fourteen-year period that began only after Liu’s political downfall physically separated them. What we find in these diverse compositions is not a uniform vision of successful, enduring friendship, but rather many possible relationships and ways of sustaining them through texts.

In the manuscript culture of China before the Song dynasty (960–1279), friendship networks also served as critical channels for sharing works as they were copied and recopied; this in turn affected both style and content of the circulated texts, as writers contemplated the multiple
potential readers of their work. Although they addressed their works to specific recipients, writers expected their compositions to be viewed by others beyond the immediate addressees, an assumption that paratextual evidence—such as prefaces or colophons to poems and postscripts to letters—documents clearly. In contrast to diaries or autograph letters from later dynasties, which may or may not have been circulated after the writer’s death, we should assume that the Tang works that have survived in individual collections or in anthologies, as most of the texts examined here have, were intended to be seen by a wide range of audiences, including posterity. They could certainly be used to flatter and fawn; yet when they drew rhetorically on the values of trust (xin) and knowledge (zhi) that ideally existed between friends, such texts constructed a framework for articulating values and desires. When using their compositions to interact with trusted peers, writers portrayed themselves as both the subject and object of knowledge, both the knower and the person known. As they shared their work, they opened their interpretations and self-representations to view by a wider community of readers. Writing about chosen friends and in the context of close circles in the mid-Tang thus became an important way to write about oneself.

In order to introduce the elements of the discourse that mid-Tang writers often invoked when writing about friendship, let us briefly consider two texts. The first is a poetic lament by Bai Juyi, a late-life reflection on the death of close companions; the second is a vitriolic digression by Han Yu embedded in his epitaph for Liu Zongyuan, an attack on hypocrisy and falsehood in public manifestations of friendship. Bai’s poem is an introspective account of “being moved,” a quiet reckoning of what had been lost and what remained, and a work to be included in his collected works


11. The poetic subgenre of “moved by thinking on the past,” ganjiu 感舊, in which “the past” refers to “old friends,” dated to the early medieval period; see chapter 3 for a longer discussion.
for posterity. Han Yu’s epitaph, in contrast, was intended to be inscribed on a mortuary stele, would have been widely circulated in manuscript form to his contemporaries (Han Yu was already well known for his excellence in funerary writing), and would also have been submitted to the History Bureau to become part of Liu Zongyuan’s official biographical record. 12

Moved by [Thinking of] Old Friends 感舊

Bai Juyi

My old friends Attendant Gentleman Li Biaozhi [Jian] passed away in the spring of the first year of the Changqing reign (821); Grand Councilor Yuan Weizhi [Zhen] passed away in the autumn of the sixth year of the Taihe reign (831); Attendant Gentleman Cui Huishu [Xuanliang] passed away in the summer of the seventh year of the Taihe reign (833); Minister Liu Mengde [Yuxi] passed away in the autumn of the second year of the Huichang reign (842). These four gentlemen were my fast friends, but over the past twenty years, they have all withered away one by one, till only I, aging and ill, survive. And so I sing out my feelings of grief, calling this poem “Moved by [Thinking of] Old Friends.” 13

故李侍郞約之，長慶元年春薨。元相公徵之，大和六年秋薨。崔侍郞晦叔，大和七年夏薨。劉尚書審得，會昌二年秋薨。四君子，予之歡友也。二十年間，凋零共盡，唯予衰病，至今獨存，因詠悲哀，題為感舊。

晦叔墟荒草已陳
夢得墓壇土猶新
微之棺賻將一紀
杓之歸丘二十春
城中雖有故第宅
庭蔬園廢生荊榛

Wild grass is already arrayed on Huishu’s gravesite; the wet earth is still fresh on Mengde’s mound. Since Weizhi “gave up his post,” it’s been almost twelve years; twenty springs it’s been since Biaozhi was committed to earth. Though their old mansions still stand inside city walls,

13. Zhu Jincheng (4:2495) notes that of the official titles given here, the one for Cui Xuanliang is incorrect—Cui never served in this post—but all extant editions contain the error. Unless otherwise noted, I adopt the translation of titles found in Charles O. Hucker, A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).
Introduction

In my boxes I still have their old letters, words and pages pierced by insects, becoming ashy dust.

When making firm ties in life, one chooses just a few: counting mine up, only five of us knew each other truly.

Four men have gone before, I remain behind: a lone branch of black willow, an aging, decrepit body.

How could it be that in these later years I didn’t have new acquaintances?

But with acquaintances, you’re only familiar with faces, not familiar with their hearts.

In this life, never envy those ill-destined to live long: in recalling old friends, those who live long have much bitter grief.14

In the texts of his extant corpus, Bai Juyi named different sets of men as dao you (friends on the same “Way,” indicating a life path defined by shared religious or intellectual convictions) or shengyou (friends made in youth, during the examinations, sometimes used in place of tongnian 同年, “same-year” examination cohort member), but here and elsewhere Bai deemed only these four men to be zhiyou.15 Composed only months after Liu Yuxi’s death, the preface carefully situates the four deceased friends in political history: each man is given his highest official title—the loftiest rank of “grand councilor” (xiang 相) for Yuan and “minister” (shangshu 尚書) for Liu16—and each death is

15. See his “Fifteen Poems Composed while Sick” 病中詩十五首, which gives a list of three (Yuan, Liu, Li, but not Cui Xuanliang) as zhiyou; but in his entombed epitaph for Cui, Bai calls him a zhiyou, and in his funerary stele inscription (mubei 墓碑) for Li Jian, Bai refers again to this group as lifelong close friends. Bai Juyi ji jianjiao 4:2389, 6:3751, and 5:2666.
16. Yuan Zhen served as grand councilor for a mere four months in 822 (Bian, Yuan Zhen nianpu, 403–10); Liu Yuxi was given an honorary appointment as minister of the Ministry of Rites (lihu shangshu 禮部尚書), and he was also posthumously awarded the title of minister of the Ministry of Revenue (hubu shangshu 戶部尚書); see Qu Tuiyuan
marked in the reign year of three different emperors. This formal mode of signification, however, gives way to the familiar, even intimate tone of the poem. Bai underscores his singularity in the preface by defining himself as the lone survivor of two decades of political turmoil and, in the poem, by reflecting on images of decay, loss, and the meaning of “firm ties” over the course of a lifetime. His honesty about the material reality of their deaths deflects sentimentality; the images of burial and decay in the first half of the poem—fresh dirt on graves, overgrown abandoned gardens, and letters in chests, like bodies in coffins, being consumed by insects—give concrete shape to the pain of the second half. At the heart of the poem, the simple gesture of “counting up” his chosen close friends on one hand understates the loss. Bai Juyi here defines the greatest value of friendship as mutual knowledge or understanding (xiangzhi 相知), the knowledge of another’s heart and mind, which he contrasts with mere acquaintance (xiangshi 相識). The final couplet’s inversion of common values—lamenting the bitter gift of long life—expresses Bai’s grief as advice to readers, without overburdening the poem. Like the coffins and boxes of letters it describes, Bai’s poem retains more feeling than it discloses.

In poems, letters, and other texts, Bai Juyi often praised the mutual knowledge of friendship. In the texts of other writers, however, we find trust—the match of words and actions, observable by others—to be the value more salient than understanding. The obverse of trust was hypocrisy and betrayal. In a world where gossip and inside influence made reputations and shattered careers, slander and back-stabbing were constant threats; models of faithful friendship could thus become platforms from which to critique these social ills. In his epitaph for Liu Zongyuan, Han Yu praised the fidelity of Liu Yuxi and Liu Zongyuan through the worst conditions of both men’s lives. The two had been sent to distant posts in 805 for their roles in the government of the brief Yongzhen reign of the emperor Shunzong. In 815, when emperor Xianzong recalled them to the capital and then demoted them once again, Liu Zongyuan pleaded with the emperor to give him the more difficult post, hoping to spare Liu Yuxi’s mother from the perils of posting in an uncivilized location.

In a passionate digression unusual for the genre of the entombed epitaph inscription (muzhiming 墓志铭), Han Yu seizes upon this extraordinary act as proof of Liu Zongyuan’s character, and he contrasts it with what he sees around him:

Alas, alas! Only when a scholar is in great hardship are his integrity and rightness revealed. But nowadays, people profess their admiration for one another as they meet on the streets; they run around with each other, dining and drinking and reveling, confidently faking smiles and laughter to win one another over, clasping their hands to their chests to show one another, pointing to the sun above and weeping, swearing never to turn their backs on one another in life or death—it all seems so trustworthy. But if one day the slightest hint of advantage might appear, be it as small as a hair, they avert their eyes as if they don’t know one another. If one man were to fall into a pit, the other would not extend a hand to help him, but would push him farther in, and would even throw stones down on him—it’s like this everywhere. This is something that even beasts or barbarians would not bear to do, and yet such people view themselves as having planned well. When they hear of Zihou’s [Liu Zongyuan’s] conduct, may they indeed be somewhat ashamed!

nięǎ! 士窮乃見節義, 今夫平居里巷相慕悦, 酒食遊戲相徧逐, 談誇強笑語以相取下, 握手出肺肝相示, 指天日涕泣, 萬生死不相背負, 真若可信, 一旦臨小利害, 僅如毛髮比, 反眼若不相識, 落阱穿不一引手救, 反擠之, 又下石焉者, 皆是也。此宜禽獸夷狄所不為, 而人自視以為得計。聞子厚之風, 亦可以少愧矣!{17}

Han Yu wrote the epitaph in 820, less than a year after the public humiliation of being demoted for submitting the “Memorial on the Bone of the Buddha” that criticized emperor Xianzong’s veneration of a Buddhist relic. He had frequently written about falseness and hypocrisy in social relations in the years prior to that event, however.His attack here gives us a vivid picture of the kinds of ritual and social behavior that elite friendship entailed: aside from going about together in company, Han Yu depicts men gesturing to one another to signal their steadfastness, swearing vows and pointing to emblems of fidelity. The emptiness of these gestures when “the hint of advantage” arose was compounded by the threat of violence; the stark image of pushing a person into a pit and stoning him mercilessly may seem extreme, but the dangerous consequences of betrayal were real. Given that political maneuvering and slander of an enemy to the emperor could end with dismissal, demotion, and even execution for highly placed officials, Han’s words evoke the disaster that could ensue if one’s sworn defenders failed in their duty. Han Yu, writing the epitaph in political disgrace, would have keenly understood the danger of faithless friends, since his own life had been spared in 819 only through the strenuous intervention of his allies Pei Du and Cui Qun. In a case of life or death, the companionship and knowledge of friendship paled beside its moral imperative to live up to one’s promises, which Han Yu points to as the true manifestation of “integrity and rightness.”

Bai Juyi’s poem and Han Yu’s epitaph reveal very different ways that writing about friendship could provoke reflection on literati identity and values. Both men are prescriptive, even idealistic, in their assessment of friendship, and each draws on personal experience to flesh out his portrait. Bai Juyi defends his reckoning from the viewpoint of a long-lived sage; Han Yu sketches an anonymous, satirical vignette of betrayal and reveals his own familiarity with elite mores without pointing at

18. See Han Yu quanji jiaozhu, 4:2364, for traditional commentators’ dating of this text and their linking it to Han’s recent demotion. Hu Kexian argues that this document reveals Han’s final acceptance of Liu Zongyuan’s talent years after the Shunzong reign, but he also sees Han to be primarily writing about himself here. Hu Kexian 胡可先, Zhong Tang zhengzhi yu wenxue: yi Yongzhen gexin wei yanjiu zhongxin 中唐政治與文學: 以永貞革新為研究中心 (Hefei: Anhui daxue chubanshe, 2000), 259–60.
19. JTS 160.4200.
specific targets. But the texts differ significantly in their relationship to the two men’s earlier texts and their biographies. Bai Juyi’s poem echoes and confirms statements made in other poems about his own writing (his scrolls piled up in boxes) and the loss of men known to him (whose empty gardens provoked sadness).20 It extends but in no way complicates our vision of Bai Juyi as poet or friend to others. Han Yu’s epitaph, however, presents a greater challenge. Han Yu here strongly affirms the value of Liu Yuxi’s relationship with Liu Zongyuan, yet he himself had no similar relationship to Liu Zongyuan. Indeed, he had been highly critical of the actions of Liu and others who rose to prominence as officials in Shunzong’s reign and were punished upon Xianzong’s death for their policies, which were opposed by many in the bureaucracy.21 While defending Liu Zongyuan’s steadfastness implicitly places Han Yu in the role of Liu’s friend, the extant texts that capture their relationship in Liu’s final years suggest a combative, engaged, and purely text-based connection. Yet no matter what Han Yu’s feelings towards Liu were by the time of Liu’s death, his documented performance of the responsibilities assigned to him after that death—assuming financial responsibility for Liu’s children, composing the epitaph, writing an offering text for Liu—were consistent with the obligations of friendship, and Liu Yuxi included Han in the circle of you 他 described in his own offering text for Zongyuan. It is unwise to read too much into the appellation of

20. See, for example, two quatrains Bai composed in 833 under the title “Weizhi, Dunshi [Cui Qun] and Huishu followed one another in passing away; feeling sorrowful and pained, I composed two quatrains” (Bai Juyi ji jianjiao 4:2119), or “Moved by Past Friends’ Scrolls of Poems” (4:2113). Bai used this same garden metaphor in his poem about Cui Qun after Cui’s death (4:2289). For an insightful discussion of Bai’s interest in gardens as spaces and representatives of their inhabitants, see Xiaoshan Yang, *Metamorphosis of the Private Sphere: Gardens and Objects in Tang-Song Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 11–50.

21. For an overview of the Shunzong officials and the events that led to their punishment, see Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and Tang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 601–7. The leader, Wang Shuwen 王叔文 (d. 806), was demoted and then ordered to commit suicide, and the rest of the officials associated with the group, which included Liu Yuxi, Liu Zongyuan, and their friend Lü Wen, were punished with demotion to difficult, remote posts; with the important exception of Liu Yuxi, most died without ever returning to capital office.
Introduction

*wangyou* 亡友, “deceased friend,” with which Han opens Liu’s epitaph (I discuss the use of this term in other funerary texts in chapter 9), but Han Yu certainly understood that his own integrity, as well as his own grasp of the duties of friendship, was on display in this text. For Bai and Han, writing about friendship was essential to fully performing the role of a friend in the literati community.

In the following chapters, I examine mid-Tang writing about friendship according to its most pressing concerns, considering in each chapter the relationship of texts on friendship to specific mid-Tang literary trends, genres, and intellectual problems. The Tang literati life-course provides the order for the analyses, as I begin with early writing for patrons and examinations and conclude with funerary compositions on the death of friends.

Chapter 1, “Contexts for Friendship in Mid-Tang Literary Culture,” examines the theoretical discourse and historical trends that fueled the new interest in writing about friendship. Beyond their awareness of the instrumentality of friendship, mid-Tang literati also made conscious use of the discourse of friendship, particularly its Confucian terms, to defend their social practice. In the first part of the chapter, I offer a preliminary survey of the key terms and values of friendship developed in the texts from the pre-Han period through the Tang that resonated powerfully with mid-Tang writers. Despite the fragmentary, diffuse nature of the early discourse, certain terms and moral associations persisted through the Tang—in particular, the pleasure of camaraderie, the value of trust, and the importance of knowing and being known to others through friendship. The fact that the early Ru, or “classicist,” texts included friendship as the fifth and only non-hierarchical relation of the five normative social relations (*wu lun* 五倫), was both a promise and a problem for later writers, who sought to defend the importance of non-familial close social ties in a medieval world that valued filiality and hierarchy. As we discover in some notable prescriptive and theoretical texts on friendship, however, the relative looseness of the medieval discourse allowed mid-Tang writers to select the elements from it that best suited their needs, and to define friendship as they chose.

In the second part of the chapter, I examine the social and political shifts of the late eighth and early ninth centuries that laid the foundation...
for the epochal transformations of the Tang-Song transition—in particular, the post-Tang collapse of the great clan aristocracy, the emergence of the scholar-official stratum, and the rise in the cultural stature of the examination system. Friendship circles played a critical role in these developments during the mid-Tang period. Literati with fewer familial or financial resources used their friendship networks as social capital, and their literary talent as negotiable currency. Although the quest for examination success and offices fueled fierce competition among individuals, certain mid-Tang literati also recognized that there could be strength in numbers, and that new ideological positions or literary styles were better defended by a collective than an individual voice, as we see most prominently in the group of literati affiliated with Han Yu. The negative face of this trend was factionalism, a political threat endemic to mid- and late Tang culture; but against that threat, others sought to stake out positions from which they could wield influence for the benefit of polity and society. Fueled by the reformist, energetic political spirit sparked by emperor Xianzong’s ascent to the throne in 805, some literati chose to adopt more assertive literary or intellectual stances and find like-minded men with whom to advocate them.

In chapter 2, “Building Networks: Friendship, Patronage, and Celebrity,” I examine the connections between writing for patrons and writing for peers in the early years of literati careers. Both kinds of writing were central to the quest for celebrity and success in the “arena of literature,” and they contributed to the identities that literati sought to establish for themselves and for their close friends in the competition for prestige. Differentiating oneself by adopting an outsider position, as Han Yu often did, could provide the ground for an intellectually aggressive critique of society and its mores. However, when addressing prospective patrons, Han Yu sometimes exchanged that outsider identity for other credentials, such as privileged knowledge of the tradition, innovative literary talent, or examination success. Han Yu, Li Ao, and Meng Jiao all provide intriguing examples of the ways that mid-Tang writers could use intellectual and personal knowledge of others to persuade prospective patrons of their own merit and that of their peers in the absence of influential relatives or mentors. Their shared iconoclastic interest in “antiquity” as a topic and a stylistic inspiration became a byword in their texts to one another and to influential men, and it provided them with a recognizable literary identity. Conversely, identifying oneself with a
Introduction

prestigious group, such as that of the celebrated new jinshi degree-holders or young office-holders in a prestigious bureau, could be an equally powerful stance from which to write. Bai Juyi and Yuan Zhen both publicized themselves in poems written to men in their examination cohorts (which, after three triumphs on different, ever more prestigious exams, were substantial) and they parlayed celebrity into official success, at least for the first decade of their careers. Their early literary experiments with “new yuefu” and other forms were, I argue, prompted by their success in Chang’an; they confidently adopted the role of social critic because they had been acclaimed as men of talent and perspicuity. Whether they positioned themselves as outsiders or insiders to what they defined as the dominant literati culture of the capital, these men transformed the friendship circle into a critical source of identity and, increasingly, of literary creativity.

Chapter 3, “Responding in Kind: Friendship and Poetic Exchange,” explores the mid-Tang taste for responsive and collaborative poetry composition in mid-Tang forms of verse exchange. Strong bibliographical evidence demonstrates the widespread popularity in the period for composing and collecting poetry in groups, whether those groups were loosely associated and socially asymmetrical or tightly linked and intimate. The practice of creating these poetry collections and circulating them among peers and patrons illustrates the new visibility of non-kin social relations during the period. Further, the fact that literati compiled most of these collections outside the imperial court or even the capital, in provincial capitals or in private lodgings, reveals that they conceived of friendship as a sociocultural space that was increasingly independent of imperial scrutiny or approval. The high-ranking official Quan Deyu’s prefaces to group poetry compositions help us understand the social and political weight that could be given to such collections: in one, Quan points to the disparate levels of status of the men whose poems formed the collection as a sign of their true understanding of an unjustly demoted official. In another, Quan uses his preface to reaffirm the aristocratic backgrounds and refined sensibilities of the authors, and draws on canonical and literary precedents to defend the practice of changhe as the quintessential literati pursuit.

The social burden of these collections did not entirely outweigh their literary potential, however, as we learn in Bai Juyi’s 811 “Preface to the...
Poems of Matching and Answering,” written to Yuan Zhen as Yuan was leaving Chang’an in disgrace. There, Bai Juyi lays out his arguments for the nature of poetic inspiration and response between two well-matched friends and poets, and the poems that followed exemplify the deep reading that each poet was supposed to pursue before “answering” (da 答) or “matching [harmonizing with]” (he 和) one another. The art of changhe verse could be played out in a poem-by-poem sequence or within the body of a poem, as in the lianju 聯句, or “linked verse,” form, in which each participant provided a line or couplet at a time to the evolving poem, and which was also popular in the early ninth century. The closer poetic engagement of lianju inspired Han Yu, Meng Jiao, Li Ao, and Zhang Ji in a series of groundbreaking long linked-verse poems in 806. These poems showcase the competition and collaboration of poets eager to experiment with difficult, obscure styles, and they represent a turning point in Han Yu’s literary development. Finally, I examine a series of changhe exchanges between Bai and Yuan on a difficult topic—their respective readings of their own past as they left the years of career success for the hardships of humble posts in far-flung places. In their evolving nostalgic dialogue, the two men moved from youthful boasting to fond sentimentality, and as the memories of their successes faded, they began to diverge in their views.

In chapter 4, “To Know and Be Known: The Epistemology of Friendship,” I turn to the genre of letters to friends in order to explore the social and intellectual implications of “knowledge” claimed by different mid-Tang writers of their friends. Scholars have long recognized that prose letters (shu 书) matured as a powerful form in the hands of mid-Tang literati; this is in part because the extant texts demonstrate an unprecedented range of personal feeling and intellectual inquiry, most prominently in letters addressed to close associates. In some of these letters, the writers take an epistemological turn when the theoretical topic of knowing arises out of discussions of the relationship between writer and addressee. On the one hand, the assumption of epistemological continuity between social and discursive knowing was not new in the Chinese tradition; as early Confucian texts such as the Da xue 大學 (Great learning) and the Zhongyong 中庸 (The mean) argued, achieving moral order in the human realm depended on fulfilling the connections between “knowing others,” including friends, and “knowing Heaven.”
On the other hand, these writers were charting new territory in their attempts to reason in such detail and consistency across their social and intellectual worlds, and sometimes their texts show the strain of this labor. Here I focus on letters that foreground the problem of understanding and misunderstanding, or knowing and not being known, between writer and recipient.

In texts that argue for full understanding between writer and reader, such as letters by Bai Juyi to his friends Yang Yuqing (jinshi 810, d. after 835), Cui Qun, and Yuan Zhen, and by Han Yu to Cui Qun, we see an extraordinary confidence in the writer’s ability to know not only the recipient but also himself. These texts position the writer as both the subject and object of knowledge in friendship. In texts that highlight conflict and criticism, such as letters by Han Yu to Li Ao, Liu Zongyuan to Han Yu, and Li Ao to his friend Hou Gao, however, the gap of understanding between writer and reader seems unbridgeable. These portraits of conflict between friends add a new, personal dimension to a larger problem of mid-Tang intellectual culture—the lack of either a methodology or a cultural space in which informed disagreement about shared values could lead to consensus or change. In the context of epistemological questions, in other words, these writers’ exploration of individual experience in friendship was sometimes more frustrating than illuminating.

Finally, in chapter 5, “For the Dead and the Living: Performing Friendship after Death,” I conclude by studying forms of mid-Tang funerary writing for deceased friends, from inscriptional genres such as the entombed epitaph and spirit path stele inscriptions (shendao bei), to performative and lyric genres such as the elegy (lei) and offering text (jiwen). Funerary texts offered mid-Tang literati a unique opportunity to comment on the lives of deceased companions, and they reaffirmed discursively and ritually the existence of the circle for the community. The range of funerary genres also gave writers many voices in which to speak. The performative nature of offering texts and poetic laments made those genres potentially more emotionally powerful than inscriptional or biographical genres, because they allowed the mourners to speak their feelings directly to the deceased. Conversely, the seriousness and historical importance of inscriptional forms could disguise the novelty of claims made in those genres (a fact that Bai Juyi himself criti-
Introduction

cized, in attacks on overblown praise in inscriptions), and lent authority
to even the most personal of assessments.

I begin by surveying some examples of funerary texts that in their
narratives commemorate the friendship between writer and deceased—
such as Liu Zongyuan’s epitaph for Dugu Shenshu (775–802) and Han Yu’s epitaph for Meng Jiao—as an overview of the ways literati could contextualize the lives of men well known to them. These texts rhetorically summon the community of zhihe—here, “those who knew [the deceased]”—to attest to the deceased’s achievements and moral character. As it related to the duties of composing funerary texts and performing burial rites, the friendship circle could thus serve as an important substitute for or extension of the deceased’s family. Turning to the genre of offering texts, I consider its performative nature of direct communication with both the dead and the living and show why this genre became such a powerful and innovative voice in mid-Tang funerary writing on friendship. I focus on three distinctly different approaches to the offering text as a site for public and private mourning: the political and polemic offering text for Lü Wen by his friend Liu Zongyuan in 811; the more personal, mournful offering text for Liu Zongyuan by Liu Yuxi in 819; and Bai Juyi’s comprehensive, poem-filled, exhaustive offering text for Yuan Zhen in 831. Finally, I examine the complementary portraits of the life of Han Yu as Li Ao, Huangfu Shi (777–ca. 830), and Zhang Ji portrayed it in their respective writings upon Han’s death in 824, to demonstrate the power of funerary texts to shape the deceased’s reputation for posterity.

In the conclusion, I consider the impact that mid-Tang writing on friendship had on the broader literary culture, and I raise some additional questions for future research. With respect to the history of the discourse, these writers brought values of friendship more fully into public life than earlier writers had dared; they confronted the challenge of translating personal commitments into action and reflected on how to make the “knowing” of friendship a model for other kinds of understanding. In the process, however, they also discovered the limitations of bringing the private to bear on public life and also perceived the ephemerality of their flourishing historical moment. The political and social changes that fostered literati friendships in the decades of the mid-Tang gave way to a tumultuous era of weak imperial rule, increasingly bitter factionalism,
and political decline. The political maneuvering and hypocrisy that Han Yu so often attacked were of course present in the Yuanhe reign, but the later battles of the cliques of the 820s and 830s put a rapid end to the reformist idealism of the mid-Tang generation, perhaps also to the notion of friendship as a social relation that could be negotiated with integrity in the context of competing allegiances.

The impact of friendship on Tang literary history was profound. Clearly, writing about friendship was a significant component of the turn towards private life that characterized mid-Tang literary change. And yet the particular character of friendship as a shared experience pushed writers outside the realm of the merely personal, a move with important consequences. Although the medieval discourse emphasized likeness in friendship in figures such as tongxin 同心, “shared hearts and minds,” mid-Tang writers discovered the power of difference in friendship to stimulate competition and creativity in literature. By the same token, the canonical theory of literary composition privileged the individual writer, who responded to the circumstances and phenomena of the world with texts. The dyadic and collaborative models of literary composition that friendship popularized, however, forced the most perceptive literati to wrestle with others’ emotional and intellectual responses and thus their subjectivity. By reconstructing and examining the dynamics of their literary interactions, therefore, we are able to see past the hard boundaries of individual collections and perceive literary history in motion. Mid-Tang writing on friendship survived as a unique artifact of a reformist age, and persisted as a cultural and literary influence on the literati stratum that emerged in the Song dynasty. Mid-Tang writers offered in their poems, letters, and laments some ideals of “true friendship” for future readers and also models of engaged, responsive writing that wrestled with the complex and irreducible experiences of others.