Xue Tao Stationery: Delivering Love for a Thousand Years

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Invented by the Tang-era poetess Xue Tao 薛濤 (770–832), so-called “Xue Tao Stationery” (“Xue Tao jian” 薛濤箋) was a marvel of technical skill that earned the praise of generations of literati. The stationery was intended as a mere medium, but it became a locus of cultural meaning in its own right and the focus of a rich metaphorical tradition. This piece examines the origin and cultural meaning of the greatest and most famous stationery in the history of China.

Xue Tao’s 薛濤 invention of personal stationery was a breakthrough in the history of paper making in China.¹ She reduced the size of each sheet to suit short poems and dyed her paper with bright colors for use as stationery, whereas poem- and letter-writers had previously used whatever paper was at hand.² Her stationery was called “Xue Tao Stationery” (“Xue Tao jian” 薛濤箋) in honor of her contributions. Xue Tao (770–832),³ whose courtesy name was Hongdu 洪度, was a famous poetess during the mid-Tang era.⁴ She befriended and exchanged poetry with many famous poets of the era, such as Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), Wang Jian 王建 (ca. 767–831), and Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842).⁵ These exchanges of poetry motivated Xue Tao to improve the “Pine-Flower Stationery” (Songhua Jian 松花箋) popular in the Sichuan area by reducing its size and making it more suitable to letter writing.⁶ She designed her famous stationery and presumably hired craftsmen to undertake production; the work was carried out in the famous paper manufacturing area along the Wanhua River 浣花溪 in Sichuan. The famous Northern Song poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) records in his miscellaneous note “On Hemp Paper of Liuhe” (“Shu Liuhe Mazhi” 書六合麻紙) included in the anthology of his inscriptions titled Inscriptions by Su Shi (Dongpo Tiba 東坡題跋):

The water of Wanhua River is unusually clear and clean. Due to the technique of retting, [the paper] is a lovely white. If you go even a dozen of miles the wa-
The paper produced along the river was for general or unspecified use; the Xue Tao Stationery was the first designed specifically for personal correspondence. Xue Tao is thus usually credited with having invented stationery and with generally elevating the quality of Chinese paper.\(^7\)

There is no extant example of the Xue Tao Stationery, so its actual size, color, and design are matters of speculation.\(^8\) In *The Catalogue of Sichuan Stationery (Shujian Pu 蜀箋譜)*, the Yuan scholar Fei Zhu 費著 provides some clues:

> Materials for making paper must be pounded soft and washed clean, then made into paper of different widths and lengths. Pressing the paper produces the cloth pattern, the brocade pattern, human figures, flowers and plants, bugs and birds, pots and ritual vessels. There are many varieties, all designed according to the needs of the era. . . . Those products named for their inventors are Lord Xie and Xue Tao. . . . Those made by [Xue] Tao are exclusively in red color. (Fei 1966, 1–2)

This record indicates that there were many different pattern designs and that Xue Tao’s famous stationery was exclusively red, which is attested by Xue Tao’s own poetry.

Xue Tao mentions her red stationery in her poetry, demonstrating that she used her red stationery to communicate with other poets. In a poem of 821 addressed to her lover Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831),\(^9\) who had just been promoted from the vice director of the Catering Bureau to secretariat drafter and Hanlin academician recipient of edicts, Xue Tao indicates clearly that she wrote her poetry on the red stationery she produced for herself and typically recorded her poems on red stationery, carrying her work with her at all times. In old age, she was afraid that her poetry would be lost and copied all of her poems on red stationery and mailed them to Yuan Zhen. She explained herself in a poem functioning as a cover letter:

> Poets have different themes and meters,  
> But only I know the subtle manner of my own poetry.  
> Praising the flowers on a moon-lit night, I pity the darkness;  
> Moved by their bending gesture, I inscribe the willows on a rainy day.  
> I hide these jades in a deep place,  
> And commit them to the red stationery that I always carry with me.  
> I am old now and cannot keep them tidy.  
> Like a good man, I give them to you. (Peng et al. 1979, 803.9045–46)\(^{10}\)

In his *Idle Talk of Mushu (Mushu Xiantan 牧豎閑談)*, Jing Huan 景渙, a tenth-century literati, notes that Yuan Zhen sent a poem called “A Missive
for Xue Tao” (“Jizeng Xue Tao” 寄贈薛濤) on the Xue Tao Stationery given by her (Tao 1988, 19.949). The red stationery functioned as a metaphor of Xue Tao and a metaphor for their continued companionship.

How did Xue Tao conceive the red stationery of her own invention? According to a note included in The Complete Anthology of Tang Poetry (Quan Tangshi 全唐詩), Yuan Zhen and Xue Tao quarreled, after which Yuan kept his distance from her. Xue thus wrote “Ten Poems on Separation” (“Shili shi” 十離詩) as a peace offering. In the poem titled “Hand Without a Brush” (“Bi li shou” 筆離手), Xue Tao refers to her red stationery:

The bamboo shaft from Yue fitted with hair from Xuan began to speak of love
By spreading flower buds on the red stationery.
Lengthy usage made the tip dull,
And it fell from Xizhi’s hand. (Peng et al. 1979, 803.9034–35).

This poem establishes the red stationery’s association with love: writing on the red stationery, the brush “speaks of love.” In his 1626 preface to Trumpetvine Pavilion’s Stationery Catalogue (Luoxuan Biangu Jianpu 蘿軒變古箋譜), Yan Jizu 颜繼祖 reiterates this association, writing about the production of stationery generally: “He gave up writing and became an artist, he decorates to engender love, he grasps the scene to reproduce it on the stationery” (Wu 1981, preface).

The red stationery became the embodiment of the love between Xue Tao and Yuan Zhen and their mutual longing when parted, as Xue Tao expresses in the poem “The Peony” (“Mudan” 杜丹), which she addresses to Yuan Zhen:

As last spring came to an end,
My tears wet the red stationery, lamenting our separation.
I never cease fearing exile from the Wu Gorge.
Why do we reunite at Wuling?
I always find the words for my love among fragrances.
Even without words, we know each other.
I want only to rest on the bed by the balustrade,
And speak endearments deep into the night. (Peng et al. 1979, 803.9037)

Xue Tao’s poetry suggests that the red stationery has enormous sentimental meaning. It is the symbol of her emotion as she suffers the trials of a difficult love affair.

Xue Tao Stationery has been highly celebrated since its creation and has figured in countless affairs of the heart, both literary and actual. As Xue
Tao was active in the Chengdu area of Sichuan, her red stationery was from the start associated with Sichuan. In his poem “Seeing Cui Jue Off to Sichuan” (“Song Cui Jiu wang Xichuan” 送崔珏往西川), for example, the renowned late Tang poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 (ca. 831–ca. 858) encourages his friend, the poet Cui Jue 崔珏 (active ninth century), to send him letters on the Xue Tao Stationery, presumably in recognition of his destination: “Wanhua Stationery is peach-red color. / Make good use of it to inscribe poems that sing the praises of the new moon” (Peng et al. 1979, 539.6150–51). “Wanhua” was, of course, the river where Xue Tao produced her stationery.

Xue Tao’s color stationery became the quintessential medium of the love letter. The Qing dynasty poet Han Xizhi’s 韓錫之 poem “Wenlan, Fangbo, Qiuping, and Lianfang at the Xue Tao Well: A Wall Inscription,” (“Wenlan Fangbo Qiuping Lianfang Yueyou Xue Tao Jing Tibi” 文瀾方伯秋坪廉訪約游薛濤井題壁), included in his poetry anthology Random Recitations in the Cart to Sichuan (Shuyao Ouyin 蜀軺偶吟), epitomizes this meaning of the stationery:

> The editor Xue Tao has long been worshiped as a goddess of the female temple, So beautifully her poems speak of love. She left us her wonderful color stationery So we may convey words of love for a thousand years to come. (Han 2001)

The Xue Tao Stationery’s rich romantic meaning led the famous poet Wei Zhuang 韋莊 (ca. 836–910) to beg a supply of the color stationery from Xue Tao’s ghost, as detailed in his poem “Begging for Color Stationery: A Song” (“Qi caijian ge” 乞彩箋歌):

> Nobody recognized the visitor to the Wanhua River As a flower amid the green and red [of the courtesan’s life]. She captured the green waves of the river And splashed them into red. She cleaved the colorful clouds with golden scissors, And sometimes cut through the green autumn sky. She does not make the colors of the rainbow fly one by one, But drives them at once to the wall of red cloud. The guests of Shu were so prolific that she could not keep them in dye. Drunken, Zhuo Wenjun had no energy to man the shop. The peacock carries [the stationery] in its beak and flies toward the sun, Until the bird’s beating golden wings break. I have a thousand poems
As polished as the constellations hovering about the mountains.
Whenever a scroll is opened, it amazes even the thunders,
Whenever a brush is brandished, even the dragon is abashed.
Many of these poems were spread mouth by mouth,
I have full sleeves of stationery but not Pine-Flower Stationery.
There is no place to buy such misty clouds in this world;
It must be obtained from the hands of the immortals.
I know the price is high as the jade that is worth many cities.
For one piece, I would pay ten-thousand in gold.
Xue Tao visited my dreams last night.
She advised, “Seek it from yourself.” (Peng et al. 1979, 700.8043–44)

Xue Tao Stationery was both rare and highly desirable, and it became an extravagant gift for poets who were not engaged or married. The Song dynasty poet Han Pu 韓浦 gave his younger brother a set of newly acquired Xue Tao Stationery in order to help him secure a beautiful wife. Han Pu accompanied the gift with a poem. Referring to Sichuan by its alternate names of Shu and Yizhou 益州, Han titled the poem “Sending Old Shu Stationery to a Younger Brother” (“Ji Di Jiu Shu Jian” 寄弟舊蜀箋) and wrote:

There are ten kinds of color stationery from Yizhou,
Newly arrived from the Wan River.
Your older brother has no use for these
And hopes they will help you build your Phoenix Tower.
(Li 1971, 2.14b)

The allusion to “ten kinds of color stationery” is an inescapable ambiguity. It is not clear whether Xue Tao produced ten varieties of stationery, each a different color, or whether her stationery was elaborately multicolored. The phrase shise jian 十色箋 – “ten color stationery” – can be interpreted in either way.

After Xue Tao died, many imitators tried to reproduce her stationery, but none were able to reproduce the quality of the original, and the stationery’s metaphoric meaning began to fade. A poem titled “Xue Tao” 薛濤 by the Qing dynasty poet Yin Yi 殷彝 included in his lyric-poetry anthology The Accidental Traces of Geese on the Snow (Hongxue oucun 鴻雪偶存) elegizes this lost tradition:

The splendor of a generation enters the great void,
To this day [Xue Tao’s] door and road are oblique.
The Editress’ virtues died with her,
None of the newly cut stationery can compare.
This tower is higher for those old poems,
And vainly elicits the thoughts of poets who visit now.
The Editress is peerless.
Who do you fool with inscriptions on the bridge? (Yin 2001)

This poem indicates the unique and inimitable significance of Xue Tao Stationery. Xue Tao’s craftsmanship and poetic talent endowed her stationery with a meaning beyond the words committed to it. Xue Tao Stationery became not the loftiest medium of love letters and love poetry, but a metaphor for love itself.

Notes

1 The Chinese scholar Chen Zhenlian argues that Xue Tao’s stationery had much influence in Japan, where writing lyrics on small colored paper has been popular since the end of China’s Five Dynasties era (Chen 74–76). Deng Jianming 邓剑鸣 discusses Xue Tao’s contributions to the development of paper productions in Sichuan during the Tang dynasty (Deng 1993, 62–65).

2 Li Shi 李石, a Northern Song literati, notes in his miscellany Sequel to the Records of Miscellaneous Things (Xu Bowu Zhi 續博物志): “During the Yuanhe reign, Yuan Zhen was sent to Shu [i.e., Sichuan]. The courtesan Xue Tao made him ‘ten-color’ stationery. Yuan Zhen wrote Xue poetry on this stationery. The Pine-Flower Stationery, Multicolored Drifting-Sand Stationery, and Cloud-Radiant Golden-Powder Dragon-Phoenix Stationery have all been abandoned in recent years. Only the Ten-Color Circle-Pattern Stationery is still used” (Deng 1993, 62).

3 The dates of Xue Tao’s birth and death are not certain. Several scholars have attempted to pin them down. Zhang Pengzhou proposes that she was born in 770 and died in 832 (Zhang 1982, 152–54), while Liu Tianwen argues that her birth year should be 781 (Liu 1992, 112–15).

4 Xue Tao has attracted much academic attention in the last several decades. Chen Yuan summarizes research concerning the dates of her birth and death, and the debate concerning her relationship with Yuan Zhen (Chen 1987, 127–28), while Liu Tianwen describes trends in Xue Tao studies during the past one hundred years. He indicates a surge of interest in Xue Tao during the 1990s (Liu 2004, 136–39).


6 Li Kuangyi 李匡義 (alternate name Li Jiweng 李濟翁), a Tang-era literati, notes in his Random Notes to Pass the Time (Zixia Ji 資暇集): “Pine-Flower Stationery has been considered Xue Tao Stationery for generations. This is a mistake. Pine-Flower Stationery originated long ago. At the beginning of the Yuanhe era, Xue Tao loved the color of the Pine-Flower Stationery, and she also loved to compose shorter poems. But the Pine-Flower Stationery was large. She thus asked the craftsmen to narrow and shorten it. Writers in the Shu region [i.e., Sichuan] thought that her product was very convenient. They asked for similar stationery and named this style of paper Xue Tao Stationery. Now all kinds of stationery appear in this small size, which is no longer specific to Pine-Flower Stationery” (Li 2000, 961).

began with Xue Tao. [Xue] Tao loved to compose short poems, and felt that the paper was typically too large and long. She asked craftsmen to shrink it. Her contemporaries thought her stationery was appealing, and it became popular. Her stationery featured ten different colors. Thus the poets called it Ten Phoenix Stationery⁸ (Hu 2003, 675).

⁸Gu Guanyuan and Cheng Xianghong propose that Xue Tao Stationery featured not only many colors but also many patterns (Gu and Cheng 1992).


¹⁰The Complete Anthology of Tang Poetry places this poem last in the section devoted Xue Tao’s work, noting that “this poem is not recorded in the anthology.” The “anthology” in this context probably refers to the Wanli-era anthology of Xue Tao’s poetry titled Xue Tao’s Poems (Xue Tao Shi 薛濤詩), which includes eighty-five poems and remains extant. The first collection of Xue Tao’s poetry was called Anthology of Jin River (Jinjiang Ji 錦江集), which included more than five hundred poems. Unfortunately, it has been lost. At the end of the Qing dynasty, an anthology of Xue Tao’s poetry was published under the title of Anthology of Hongdu (Hongdu Ji 洪度集). Both the Complete Anthology of Tang Poetry and the Anthology of Hongdu base their texts on the Wanli-era edition of Xue Tao Shi. The editors of The Complete Anthology added material from other resources but failed to note them (Peng et al., 803.9045–46).

¹¹Jing Huan records in Idle Talk of Mushu: “People along the Wanhua River mostly made Ten-Color Stationery. Xue Tao offered smaller sheets with new designs. She used it mostly for poetry, and sent Yuan Zhen more than a hundred sheets. In turn, Yuan sent her a poem written on Pine-Flower Stationery…” (Tao 1988, 19.949).

¹²Some scholars believe that Xue Tao addressed these ten poems on separation to her earlier love Wei Gao 韋皋 (746–806). Scholars Liu Tianwen and An Yiru take this view, for example (Liu 2003, 71–73; Liu 2004, 65–68; An, 80–81). Li Minxing argues that there should be only five rather than ten poems on separation, and he agrees with Liu Tianwen and An Yiru that the poems were for Wei Gao (2006, 95–98). This piece adopts the view stated in The Complete Anthology of Tang poetry: “Yuan Zhen was sent to Shu [i.e., Sichuan]. Minister of Works Yan sent [Xue] Tao to serve him. Yuan was dissatisfied with her and dismissed her. [Xue] Tao composed her ‘Ten poems on separation’ and sent them to Yuan. They thus reconciled” (Peng, et al. 1979, 803.9043). The scholar Zhang Weiguang proposes that the ten poems embody Xue Tao’s struggle against her fate (2009, 40–41).

¹³The whole poem reads: “Why does the young traveler worry? / Because he wants to travel east and west at once. / A wave of snow roars at the Wu Gorge, / The thousand-mile flame-like cloud engulfs Yizhou. / Today, the fortune-telling shops are desolate. / Since ancient days the wine shops have dominated the fashion. / Wanhua Stationery is peach-red. / Well use it to inscribe poems that praise the new moon” (Peng et al., 539.6150–51).

¹⁴Xue Tao is known by the honorific “Jiaoshu” 校書 or “Editress.” Zhu Deci investigates the origin of this title (1997, 33–38). Liu Tiefeng argues that Xue Tao was known
as “Editress” because she served as a literal editor, while rejecting the idea that she was a courtesan (2007, 107–9).

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