



Courtly Exchange and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy in Early Medieval China

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Courtly Exchange and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy in Early Medieval China

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the power of words to fashion state legitimacy in early medieval China (the 4th–7th centuries CE). Known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (*Nanbeichao* 南北朝), this was a period of political division and fragmentation in which several rival states vied for dominance. This dissertation examines the “cultural wars” that were waged among rival court centers and analyzes the writings produced at and for moments of interstate contact—including the exchange of diplomats, gifts, and letters, which formed a highly contentious ground for competing claims of political and cultural supremacy. It discusses how royal power was carefully represented in material and discursive forms to both awe subjects and intimidate enemies in the medieval court culture, and how legitimacy became a problematic concept that was subject to interpretation and contention during this volatile age.

The first chapter focuses on diplomatic visits and court representatives’ verbal banter. It studies both the “discursive battles” between diplomats and the articulation of hospitality and hostility in poetic genres. The second chapter looks at court compositions on foreign gifts and examines the rhetorical devices used to create and domesticate “the foreign” as a way of proclaiming cultural superiority. Epistolary communication is the topic of the third chapter, in which I investigate the “politics of intimacy” in letters sent across dynastic boundaries. In other words, I argue that seemingly “private” letters—for example, those between friends or between a mother and a son—were intended for public consumption and that the individual voices were

subject to states' exploitation for the purpose of political manipulation. The fourth chapter moves to the unified empire of the Sui (581–619) and early Tang (619–907) and continues to examine the negotiation among different cultural groups, this time in the new political context of unification. I use music as a critical lens to demonstrate that, through meticulous debates over what constituted “orthodox,” “decadent,” and “foreign” music for the empire, “sound” became politicized and was used as a tool of mind control and to shape new political identities. Taken together, these chapters discuss the verbal construction and negotiation of essential concepts such as “legitimacy,” “emperorship,” and “cultural orthodoxy” during the early medieval period.

Following previous scholarly attempts to problematize the “constructedness” of the North and South, this dissertation continues to redress the essentialization of the northern and southern cultures as monolithic and static stereotypes and reveal the complexity of cultural exchanges in the context of court culture in early medieval China. Based on detailed textual analysis of a variety of genres, including envoys' recorded conversations, poems, poetic expositions, letters, and other “non-literary” genres, I show how elites in both the north and the south employed a shared cultural repertoire and discourse to negotiate the state's claim to universal authority and fashion different cultural identities. I argue that rhetoric—the adroit manipulation of words and signifying practices—played an active role in constructing “legitimacy,” reconfiguring political reality, and envisioning cultural boundaries. It was through the appropriation of rhetoric and its effects that elites were able to define “self” and “others” and anchor themselves within an imagined cultural lineage.

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Introduction

Emperor Jing [Yuan Shanjian 元善見, r. 534–550] once held a great hunting event in late autumn and ordered all his courtiers to compose poems [to celebrate the occasion]. The ending couplet of Wei Shou's poem reads: "A short letter can subjugate the city of Jianye, / and a half-length bamboo slip will be able to summon [those in the capital of] Chang'an." Gao Cheng, future Emperor Wenxiang [r. 550–559], praised its heroic sentiment. ... Later, when Hou Jing conquered the Palace City [of Jiankang, the capital of the Liang dynasty in the south], the Prince Boyang of the Liang, Xiao Fan, was the governor of Hezhou. Emperor Wenxiang commanded Wei Shou to write a letter to urge Xiao's surrender. Upon receiving the letter, Xiao Fan led his armies to the west [and surrendered]. In Xiao's stead, Cui Shengnian, the governor of [...], was dispatched [by Emperor Wenxiang] to occupy the city. Emperor Wenxiang told Wei Shou: "Now We have pacified one prefecture, to which endeavor you have made a contribution. Yet I still feel regretful that the line 'A short letter can subjugate the city of Jianye' has not been fulfilled."

靜帝曾季秋大射，普令賦詩。收詩末云：尺書徵建鄴，折簡召長安。文襄壯之。... 侯景既陷臺城，衍鄱陽王範時為合州刺史，文襄敕收以書喻之。範得書，乃率部伍西上，□州刺史崔聖念入據其城。文襄謂收曰：今定一州，卿有其力，猶恨“尺書徵建鄴”未效耳。¹

This anecdote took place in the chaotic mid-sixth century China. The main protagonist here, Wei Shou 魏收 (507–572), was a highly lauded courtier of the Eastern Wei dynasty 東魏 (534–550), also a learned man with a hubris sometimes unbearable to others. During a court hunting event, when the emperor solicited poems from his subjects to commemorate the occasion, Wei Shou composed a poem with its ending couplet exalting the power of his words. Jianye (commonly known as Jiankang 建康) and Chang'an were the capitals of the two political rivals of the Eastern Wei. In the poem, Wei Shou unabashedly declares that, without relying on military forces, his short letters and casual messages (written on a half-length bamboo slip)

¹ Wei Shou 魏收 (507–572), *Wei shu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 104.2325-2326.

would be sufficient to subjugate those enemies. This bold claim of conquest with “words” parallels nicely with the demonstration of another kind of power during this hunting occasion—physical strength, martial valor, and violence.

Soon, Wei Shou was blessed with an opportunity to fulfill his promise. After the rebel Hou Jing 侯景 (503–552) toppled the Liang dynasty 梁 (502–557) in the south, the southern land was cast into turmoil, and other states, taking advantage of this anarchy, started expanding their territories. Emperor Wenxiang commanded Wei Shou to write a letter of persuasion to a Liang prince Xiao Fan and to secure the latter’s surrender. The message succeeded. Informed that one more prefecture fell under his control, the emperor was much delighted and acknowledged Wei Shou’s vital role in using a letter to acquire a city. In the meantime, he still remembered the couplet that Wei Shou wrote several years earlier about how his words could be employed as weapons of conquest. The emperor felt regretful and expressed his wish that after this victory, Wei’s claim that “a short letter can subjugate the city of Jianye” could also be realized one day.

This short story raises several interesting questions that this dissertation will further explore through its four chapters. During an age of intense military conflict among several political powers, how did “writings”—for example, Wei Shou’s poetic couplet—participate in the intricate power struggles? How did “words”—both spoken and written—become a force of offense and defense that all states had to reckon with and actively appropriate? How did court elite of the time conceive of the power of rhetoric? How were different rhetorical strategies used; the persuasive power of words explored; meanings manipulated and fashioned, for the states’ self-legitimation and self-glorification programs? In all, why did “rhetoric,” “verbal exchanges,” and “words” matter, and what were their functions during a volatile age of division, fragmentation, and transformation?

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Early medieval China, also known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties or the Six Dynasties, was a period of disunion that saw destructive warfare and large-scale displacement. The north-south division started in the early fourth century when the unified empire, the Western Jin dynasty 西晉 (265–316), swiftly crumbled because of both civil wars and invasions of the ethnically non-Chinese peoples from the north. One member of the Western Jin royal family, the Sima 司馬 family, was forced to flee to the south and established a new regime there in 317, traditionally known as the Eastern Jin dynasty 東晉 (317–420). Many elite families, driven by the social turmoil on the Central Plain, also migrated to the south. The southern land, relatively peaceful, was then ruled consecutively by five Han Chinese states, the Eastern Jin, Song 宋 (420–479), Southern Qi 齊 (479–502), Liang, and Chen 陳 (557–589). The court culture was flourishing and produced many eminent writers who would remain celebrated throughout Chinese literary history.

The north, however, experienced much more chaos and drastic changes. More than a dozen of political regimes—some founded by Chinese and some by ethnic groups—rose and fell in quick succession during the fourth century. Among the political vicissitudes, one group of the Sārbi people, Xianbei 鮮卑 in Chinese, grew militarily powerful and annexed other smaller states.² One tribe of the Xianbei, the Tuoba 拓拔, unified North China in the mid-fifth century.

² Xianbei was a group of non-Chinese people living in the northeastern part of the continent. They spoke a proto Mongolic and Turkish language. For a survey of Xianbei people in early historiography, see Charles Holcombe, “The Xianbei in Chinese History.” *Early Medieval China*, 19 (2013): 1-38. Tian Yuqing 田余慶, *Tuoba shitan* 拓拔史探 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2003).

The Northern Wei dynasty 北魏 (386–534) of the Tuoba family, growing powerful, started exerting great pressure toward its southern neighbor. This north-south confrontation continued for a century until the 530s, when the Northern Wei empire was beset with internal rebellions and collapsed into halves. This tripartite division (two northern states and one southern state) lasted about sixty years, until the Sui dynasty 隋 (581–619), founded by Yang Jian 楊堅 (541–604, r. 581–604), reunified the north and south in 589, thus ending this long period of disunion in Chinese history.³

This almost three hundred years of division was also one of the most culturally vibrant periods in Chinese history, when people, goods, and writings moved back and forth and circulated across borders. Even though there were frequent battles, border skirmishes, and military invasions among those dynasties struggling for dominance, their coexistence and fierce competition augmented interstate communication, cultural exchange, and political negotiation. No states ever existed in isolation, and all political players used whatever strategies—be it marriage alliance, diplomatic maneuvers, or military force—to survive, prevail, or project a vision of authority over other enemies. It should not be surprising that in addition to battlefield confrontations, political powers at the time also waged “cultural wars” against one another. Court centers found it imperative to appropriate all kinds of cultural capital for self-aggrandizement and self-justification. There was a wide spectrum of cultural practices that states cultivated and publicly displayed to harness their symbolic significance, such as the performance

³ For a general history, see Mark Edward Lewis, *China Between Empires: the Northern and Southern Dynasties* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2009). Also Wang Zhongluo 王仲犛, *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi* 魏晉南北朝史 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2003). A brief introduction of this period can be also found in *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook*. See Wendy Swartz, Robert Campany, Yang Lu, and Jessey Choo, eds., *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 1-10.

of solemn rituals, grand court ceremonials, military victory parade, imperial *adventus*, palace/capital construction, and patronage of religion, literature, and art. Royal power needed to be carefully represented in material and discursive forms to both awe its subjects and intimidate rivals. In an age of political fragmentation, concepts such as political legitimacy, state authority, or cultural superiority were not something taken for granted; they were deliberately constructed and subjected to scrutiny and contention.

What brought into the spotlight and intensified these “cultural wars” were the moments of interstate contacts—including the exchange of diplomats, gifts, and letters, which forms the basic structure of this dissertation. Envoys and their hosts often engaged in discursive battles to lay claim to dynastic superiority on behalf of their respective states. Eloquence was a particularly crucial quality for royal representatives, as they were expected to quickly respond to challenging remarks and cite historical precedents or other cultural references to corner their opponents in a disadvantageous position. Meanwhile, diplomats bore gifts to their hosting state. Gifts always carry extra symbolic meanings beyond its immediate pragmatic use. It is clear that all court members were well aware of the implication of gift politics, and instances of gift-exchanging and gift-receiving, being recorded, written about, or eulogized, became a fertile ground for ideological negotiations and manipulations. Lastly, diplomats also brought with them letters during their missions—sometimes a formal state letter supposedly authored by the emperor, sometimes a more “personal” letter to family members or friends living in another state. As diplomatic documents, these epistolary writings, circulating beyond borders, thus read by a wider audience, brought to the fore the question of their political functions vis-à-vis the constructed ideal of “intimacy” and “privacy.”

Indeed, from many recorded instances of cultural exchanges and literary writings that were produced at the moment of contacts, one finds that all the competing dynasties at the time not only cultivated a close connection with political rivals through careful diplomatic communication; they also actively celebrated and explored the power of words to offer impregnable argumentation and proper interpretation. The sending and receiving of diplomats, gifts, and documents remained a public court event, and their “meanings” needed, for all court centers, to be fashioned, displayed, and adequately controlled. Attempts to correctly represent these cultural interactions and gauge their significance formed a highly contentious discursive ground, where legitimacy and state authority became both polemicized and emptied out, substantiated only by rounds and rounds of verbal negotiations. We can conclude that no matter whether it was a southern or northern dynasty, whether a Chinese state or a state with a majority of non-Chinese population, all court societies were fully aware of the rules and implications of the cultural competition. They exploited and harnessed the persuasive power of rhetoric to further each state’s ideological agendas. The fact that these states willingly competed discursively or culturally also testified to a shared cultural legacy among these political players and a shared belief in appropriating that legacy for larger claims. In the following pages, I will discuss two main issues about the field of the Northern and Southern Dynasties literature and delineate my indebtedness to, and departure from, previous scholarship.

North, South, and Their Literature

The first is the issue of geography, cultural differences, and the relationship between “literature” and its social background. Indeed, the problem of the “North” and “South” has long been the focus of scholarly inquiry about this period, and this section will in particular focus on

the Northern Dynasties literature and its relation with the southern counterpart. There has been a prevalent assumption in Chinese scholarship—especially influenced by the Marxist doctrine that economic basis determines cultural productions—that climate, geographical characteristics, and ethnic traits decisively shaped the cultural landscape and literary styles of the north and south. The pioneering, influential monographs in the 90s from mainland China on early medieval and Northern Dynasties literature by, for example, Cao Daoheng 曹道衡, Wu Xianning 吳先寧, and Zhou Jianjiang 周建江, all adopt, with various degrees, this narrative to evaluate the literary output from this period.⁴ According to these scholars, the climate in North China was cold and harsh, and the non-Chinese Xianbei ruling family, with a nomadic lifestyle, did not understand fully Chinese culture. As a result, the northern Chinese elite, facing the ethnically non-Han rulers, devoted themselves to practical matters in writings and conveyed their ideas in a straightforward manner without any investment in literary ornaments. On the contrary, South China was warm and pleasant, and the luxurious, if not “decadent,” court life generated completely different possibility for the development of Chinese literature. Han Chinese in the south paid full attention to the aesthetic qualities of their writings, and their favorite genres were poetry, poetic exposition, and parallel prose, all composed with the authors’ utmost care to literary appeals.⁵ As Xiaofei Tian argues, which will be elaborated more below, this discourse of

⁴ Cao Daoheng 曹道衡 and Shen Yucheng 沈玉成, *Nanbeichao wenxueshi* 南北朝文學史 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991). Wu Xianning 吳先寧, *Beichao wenhua tezhi yu wenxue jincheng* 北朝文化特質與文學進程 (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1997). This book is developed out of Wu’s earlier work. See Wu Xianning, *Beichao wenxue yanjiu* 北朝文學研究 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1993). Zhou Jianjiang 周建江, *Beichao wenxue shi* 北朝文學史 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1997). Cao Daoheng, *Nanchao wenxue yu beichao wenxue yanjiu* 南朝文學與北朝文學研究 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1999).

⁵ For example, Wu summarizes three qualities of the Northern Dynasties literature as a spirit of practicality (*xianshi jingshen* 現實精神), sorrowful tone (*beiliang qingdiao* 悲涼情調), and forceful and unadorned style (*gangjing zhipu fengge* 剛勁質樸風格). Wu, p. 172-180. Zhou Jianjiang argues that the Northern Dynasties literature is noted for its political nature (*zhengzhi xing* 政治性) and ethnic characteristics (*minzu xing* 民族性). Zhou, p. 5-10. Cao Daoheng

dichotomy was already formed during the medieval period and has since exerted much influence on later imaginations of this period. Therefore, even though this framework has been challenged and redressed in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it can still be detected in scholars' research on early medieval culture and literature today, especially those from mainland China.⁶

Meanwhile, in English scholarship, studies on early medieval Chinese literature started to flourish in the late 70s and the 80s. Yet only a few of them from that time have touched on the Northern Dynasties literature. One of the earliest monographs on medieval court poetry and the mechanism behind courtly writings is Stephen Owen's research on early Tang dynasty literature.⁷ In the first and second chapters, Owen discusses the conquest dynasty's (also a northern state) engagement with, and even rejection of, southern literary legacy, which Owen describes as an "opposition poetics." Particularly relevant to this dissertation is Owen's analysis of a northern ruler Yang Guang 楊廣 (569–618, r. 604–618), especially how he was pulled between an opposition poetics and a fascination with the South.⁸ In the meantime, Yu Xin 庾信 (513–581), a celebrated southern court poet detained in the northern state in the latter half of the

makes a good point about scholars' habit of "emphasizing the south and ignoring the north" (*zhongnan qingbei* 重南輕北). He also rightly points out that our impression of the Northern Dynasties literature is determined by its scant textual survival. But still, he generalizes the Northern Dynasties literature as a kind of "realistic literature" (*jishi wenxue* 紀實文學) and argues that northern people's special life style determined the content and form of their literary compositions.

⁶ For example, Gao Renxiong 高人雄 generalizes that the Northern Dynasty literature has a spirit of realism (*xianshi jingshen* 現實精神) whereas its southern counterpart embodies, especially in the fourth century, escapism (*bishi jingshen* 避世精神). She also summarizes the Xianbei literature as practical, realistic, and more rational. See Gao Renxiong, *Beichao minzu wenxue xulun* 北朝民族文學敘論 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), p. 83; 133.

⁷ Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of the Early T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

⁸ Ibid., pp. 1-26. Owen's book on the high Tang poetry in 1981 continues to explore the implication of court poetry (or the capital style) in eighth-century China, when the court style gradually lost its cultural authority. See Stephen Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: the High T'ang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

sixth century, attracted much academic attention in English scholarship.⁹ In the 70s and 80s, Peter Bear, William T. Graham, James R. Hightower, and Kang-i Sun Chang all either translated important works by Yu Xin or offered critical analysis on Yu Xin's poetry.¹⁰ They show how Yu Xin negotiated the personal and historical in his literary writings, which gives a lyrical sensibility to his representation of self and the chaotic world. Even though more English scholarship on the history, culture, religion, and anecdotal writings in the Northern and Southern Dynasties was published in the 90s,¹¹ the first English research exclusively devoted to the Northern Dynasties literature is Xiaorong Zheng's 2002 dissertation, titled "A History of Northern Dynasties Literature."¹² It is commendable to give due attention to the northern literature. However, the author subscribes to the traditional view that the cultural differences determine literary styles,

⁹ In addition to the research done on Yu Xin in English, there is also a plethora of scholarship in Chinese and Japanese on Yu Xin. See, among others, Kōzen Hiroshi 興膳宏, *Yu Shin: Bōkyō shijin* 庾信: 望鄉詩人 (Tōkyō: Sh ūeisha, 1983); Xu Donghai 許東海, *Yu Xin shengpin ji qi fu zhi yanjiu* 庾信生平及其賦之研究 (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1984); Zhong Youmin 鐘優民, *Wangxiang shiren Yu Xin* 望鄉詩人庾信 (Changchun: Jilin daxue chubanshe, 1988); Zhang Zhu 張翥 and Cao Meng 曹盟, *Lishi de Yu Xin yu Yu Xin de wenxue* 歷史的庾信與庾信的文學 (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1989); Lu Tongqun 魯同群, *Yu Xin zhuanlun* 庾信傳論 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1997); Lin Yi 林怡, *Yu Xin yanjiu* 庾信研究 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2000); Mitsuko Yajima 矢嶋美都子, *Yu Shin kenkyū* 庾信研究 (Tōkyō: Meijishoin, 2000); Kuniyasu Katō, *Ekkyō suru Yu Shin: sono kiseki to shiteki hyōshō* 越境する庾信: その軌跡と詩的表象 (Tōkyō: Kenbun Shuppan, 2004). It has been repetitively argued that Yu Xin's drastic life change, namely, his displacement, brings new life to his literary career and that he was transformed from a flattering courtier-panegyricist to a seriously-minded, home-longing recluse filled with poignant emotions.

¹⁰ Peter Bear, "The Lyric Poetry of Yü Hsin." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1974; William T. Graham, trans. and annot., *"The Lament for the South": Yü Hsin's "Ai Chiang-nan fu"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); William T. Graham and James Hightower, "Yü Hsin's 'Songs of Sorrow,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 43 (1) (June, 1983): 5-55; Kang-i Sun Chang, *Six Dynasties Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹¹ See, for example, Albert Dien ed., *State and Society in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Charles Holcombe, *In the Shadow of the Han: Literati Thought and Society at the Beginning of the Southern Dynasties* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994); Robert Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). One may also include Scott Pearce, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey eds., *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm, 200-600* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Asia Center Press, 2001).

¹² Xiaorong Zheng, "A History of Northern Dynasties Literature." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2002.

and that “simplicity, naturalness, and realism” characterize the northern literature. Zheng also argues that the southern literature provided “advanced literary skills and techniques” to the north, a view that seems to regard Han Chinese culture superior to “simplistic” northern culture influenced by non-Chinese elements.¹³

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Xiaofei Tian’s book on the Southern Dynasties culture and literature revises many of the previous misleading assumptions about the northern and southern cultures and complicates the understanding of the “North” and “South.”¹⁴ In the chapter “The Culture Construction of the North and South,” Tian argues that certain stereotypical images of the North and South, “instead of ‘reflecting reality,’ are no more than cultural constructs first formed during the Northern and Southern Dynasties.”¹⁵ The author focuses on four groups of texts that played an important role in shaping the images of the North and South, including “frontier poetry,” “northern *yuefu* poetry,” “poems on lotus picking,” and “southern *yuefu* quatrains,” and discusses the unified empires’ transmission, evaluation, and mediation of the literary legacy of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.¹⁶ In *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* published in 2010, Xiaofei Tian further elaborates on this “constructedness” of the North and South by focusing on their textual survival. She brings to attention the strange phenomenon that while the southern poetry, considered to embody the “decadent” southern culture, was criticized in the conquest dynasties, more literary works from the south were included in the encyclopedias from the unified empires. In comparison, the

¹³ Ibid., p. 410.

¹⁴ Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Asia Center Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 311.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 310-366.

survival of Northern Dynasties literature is scant, and the sources of those writings that have survived are mostly historical accounts. Therefore, it is not simply the case that southerners loved poetry whereas the northerners were more interested in practical writings; it is the sources where a specific kind of texts was preserved have influenced our impression of the literary landscape of a previous age.¹⁷

In recent years, reflecting on former presumptions and later revisions, scholars, writing in both Chinese and English, have started to explore the complexity of the “northern” and “southern” cultures and their complicated interaction. The topics that have become the focus of scholarly attention include diplomatic visits (*jiaopin* 交聘),¹⁸ and, from a larger perspective, cultural/literary interactions (*wenhua hudong* 文化互動 / *wenxue hudong* 文學互動) between the northern and southern states.¹⁹ These studies, instead of regarding the North and South as

¹⁷ Xiaofei Tian, “From the Eastern Jin through the Early Tang (317–649)”, in Kang-i Sun Chang and Stephen Owen eds., *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 199–285. In particular, see the section “the northern court: early fifth through early seventh centuries,” pp. 271–277.

¹⁸ Cai Zongxian’s 蔡宗憲 monograph remains one of the most thorough analysis of diplomatic exchange in early medieval period. Cai Zongxian, *Zhongguo qianqi de jiaopin yu nanbei hudong* 中古前期的交聘與南北互動 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 2008). Zhuang Huiming’s 莊輝明 study on the Southern Dynasties history also devotes one chapter to the “complicated relation between the North and South,” including diplomatic negotiation. Zhuang Huiming, *Nanchao Qi Liang shi* 南朝齊梁史 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015), pp. 248–287. It should also be mentioned that while few English scholarship has focused on the diplomatic exchange in early medieval period, scholars have done research on diplomatic relations between the Northern Song dynasty 北宋 (960–1127) and its non-Chinese neighbor, the Kitan Liao dynasty 遼 (916–1125). See Herbert Franke, *Diplomatic Missions of the Sung State 960–1276* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1981); David Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity in Eleventh-Century China: Sung’s Foreign Relations with Kitan Liao* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Nicolas Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁹ “Cultural interactions” may include many subject matters, such as gift exchanges, religious communications, and studies on important figures who migrated from one culture to another, such as Yu Xin and Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591). Notable Chinese scholarship includes Wang Yunliang’s 王允亮 study on literary communication between the northern and southern states, focusing on protagonists such as envoys, detainees, monks, and migrants. Wang argues that these instances of interaction resulted in the south’s influence on the north in terms of literary composition. Wang Yunliang, *Nanbeichao wenxue jiaoliu yanjiu* 南北朝文學交流研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010). Yu Yong 于涌 interestingly examines the north’s influence on the southern culture. See Yu Yong, *Beichao wenxue nanchuan yanjiu* 北朝文學南傳研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016). For an inspiring article on gift exchange between the northern and southern states, see Horiuchi Junichi 堀内淳一.

monolithic or static, show their intriguing negotiation and subsequent transformation. In addition, early medieval elite, officials, and monks traveled constantly, and “journey” often revealed the porous boundaries between different cultures and provided individuals with materials to fashion the cultural image of “Others.” Xiaofei Tian’s book on early medieval travel writings shows travelers’ encountering with “foreign worlds” and their use of the familiar framework to explain the “alienness.”²⁰ What also deserves mentioning is David Jonathan Felt’s research on early medieval geography and geopolitics. Quite relevant to this dissertation is his recent article, titled “Metageography in the Northern and Southern Dynasties,” which also demonstrates how elite from the period of division conceived of the geography and politics differently from later conquest dynasties.²¹

My dissertation builds on the arguments made by Xiaofei Tian and actively engages in dialogue with the recent trend in scholarship to discuss the “cultural interaction” between the

“Nanbeichao jian de waijiao shijie he jingji jiaoliu: Mapi he ganju” 南北朝間の外交使節和經濟交流: 馬匹和柑橘. In *Wei Jin nanbeichao shi yanjiu: huigu yu tansuo* 魏晉南北朝史研究: 回顧與探索 (Wuhan: Hubeijiao yu chubanshe, 2009), pp. 351-360. It is now included in a new monograph by the author: Horiuchi Junichi, *Hoku chō shakaini okeru nanchō bunka no juyō: gaikō shisetsu to bōmeisha no eikyū* 北朝社会における南朝文化の受容: 外交使節と亡命者の影響 (Tōkyō: Tōhō shoten, 2018). I also benefited much from Xiaofei Tian’s seminar on the “Three Kingdoms” (a period of division in the early third century), in which we discussed the gift politics and the problem of the North and South in the third century. Her work on gift/letter exchange can be found in Antje Richter’s edited volume on pre-modern Chinese epistolary culture. See Xiaofei Tian, “Material and Symbolic Economies: Letters and Gifts in Early Medieval China,” in Antje Richter ed., *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 135-186. Also inspiring is Tamara Chin’s monograph on the literary and cultural exchanges between the Han empire and its nomadic neighbors. Tamara Chin, *Savage Exchange: Han Imperialism, Chinese Literary Style, and the Economic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Asia Center Press, 2014).

²⁰ See Xiaofei Tian, *Visionary Journeys: Travel Writings from Early Medieval and Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Asia Center Press, 2011), pp. 68-119. See also Liu Yuanru’s 劉苑如 edited volume for several studies on the topic of travel. Liu Yuanru ed., *You guan: zuowei shenti jiyi de zhongguo wenxue yu zongjiao* 遊觀: 作為身體技藝的中古文學與宗教 (Taipei: Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu suo, 2009). For a study on how traveler used book knowledge to understand the landscape in front of him, see Stephen Owen, “The Librarian in Exile: Xie Lingyun’s Bookish Landscapes.” *Early Medieval China*, 10-11, no. 1 (2004): 203-226.

²¹ David Jonathan Felt, “Patterns of the Earth: Writing Geography in Early Medieval China.” Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2014; David Jonathan Felt, “The Metageography of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.” *T’oung Pao* 103 (2017): pp. 334-387.

northern and southern states and the “constructedness” of the images of the North and South. I believe it is beneficial to question the established concepts of the “North” and “South,” which was fueled by ideological needs at a specific historical moment, and reveal the complexity of the cultural exchange in the early medieval context. Books, writings, people, and objects circulated across dynastic boundaries that tremendously facilitated information flow. My dissertation provides detailed textual analysis on a variety of genres, including envoys’ recorded conversations, poems, poetic expositions, letters, and others, to demonstrate how court elites employed a shared cultural repertoire and discourse to negotiate a state’s claim of universal authority and to create different kinds of cultural identities. It is imperative to realize this “sharedness” in cultural legacy between the northern and southern court members and the conscious fashioning of certain cultural distinctiveness based on this “shared” legacy.

Court Culture

As “courtly exchange” is part of the title, it is necessary to elaborate on my indebtedness to recent scholarly interests in court culture and court literature of medieval China. Chinese court culture as a research subject increasingly comes to the attention of both Chinese and Western scholars. One of the earliest sinologists who proposed “court” to be studied as an important social institution and cultural center for literary productions is David R. Knechtges. His variorum essay collection *Court Culture and Literature in Early China* in 2002 (with many essays published even earlier) focuses on the Han dynasty court and the literary genre, poetic exposition (*fu* 賦).²² His study on the Liang dynasty culture and literary compilations demonstrates royal patronage and

²² David R. Knechtges, *Court Culture and Literature in Early China* (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2002).

scholarly activities in the early medieval court society.²³ Moreover, Knechtges aims to bring Chinese court culture in conversation with other traditions, as his edited work *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture* saliently shows. However, in this essay collection, the editor does not provide more theoretical discussion about the commensurability of court cultures on which these essays could be brought together.²⁴ Stephen Owen's *Poetry of Early T'ang* is important for any study of medieval Chinese court poetry and court culture. He situates the discussion of early Tang poetry under the context of courtly style and sees the development of poetic voice as individual poets' negotiation with, and revision of, the increasingly stylistic rigidity of court poetry.²⁵ This dissertation continues to conduct literary analysis on poetic conventions, decorum, and stylistic trait of court compositions in the early medieval period.

In recent years, many scholars on medieval China have published works specifically asking questions on court culture and courtly writings. Xiaofei Tian in her book *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star* delineates the cultural landscape of the Liang dynasty, focusing on textual preservation, cataloging and anthologizing, and literary scholarship. It shows the significance of "court" in receiving, transmitting, and mediating the cultural past. Her article on Yu Xin provides a more theoretical discussion on "court poetry" (*gongting shige* 宮廷詩歌) and "court" (*gongting* 宮廷) as the cultural center of the medieval world. She rightly points out that "court poetry" (in contradistinction to "poetry composed at court") should be used "*only when the court is the locus of cultural values, exerting a centripetal pull throughout the empire,*" and she also delineates the

²³ David R. Knechtges, "Culling the Weeds and Selecting Prime Blossoms: The Anthology in Early Medieval China." In Scott Pearce, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey eds., *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm: 200-600*, pp. 200-245.

²⁴ David Knechtges and Eugene Vance eds., *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture: China, Europe, and Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

²⁵ Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of Early T'ang*, pp. 1-76.

special characteristics of the court compositions in the Northern and Southern Dynasties.²⁶ Meanwhile, there are several other studies devoted to medieval court compositions and courtiers' engagement with political power, which are also closely related to my research. For example, Fusheng Wu's *Written at Imperial Command: Panegyric Poetry in Early Medieval China* traces the history of panegyric poetry from the Han dynasty to the end of the Sui. However, the author's persistent search for personal expression in those poems composed for public occasions renders many of his interpretations anachronistic to a medieval poetics.²⁷ Jack W. Chen addresses the issue of representation of imperial sovereignty in the poetry of Taizong of the Tang (Li Shimin 李世民, r. 626–649). He systematically studies the writing rulers from the Qin empire down to Taizong and probes into Taizong's court and the emperor's poetic corpus.²⁸ In the same year, Meow-Hui Goh published her book on fifth-century courtier-poets and their craftsmanship in producing refined court poetry.²⁹ Wang Ping's monograph on the Liang Crown Prince Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531) gives a biographical study, with translations of the poems by the prince and his courtiers.³⁰

²⁶ Xiaofei Tian, "Yu Xin's 'Memory Palace': Writing Trauma and Violence in Early Medieval Aulic Poetry." Unpublished article. Its Chinese version was published. See Xiaofei Tian, "Yu Xin de jiyi gongdian: zhonggu gongting shige zhong de baoli yu chuangshang" 庾信的記憶宮殿：中古宮廷詩歌中的暴力與創傷. *Shanghai daxue xuebao* 上海大學學報, vol.34 (04) (2017): 52-64. In another article, she discusses the cultural/social background of courtly writings in early medieval period and conducts close textual analysis of court poetry to show how poetry could create a sense of "kingship" and "empire." See Xiaofei Tian, "Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire in Southern Dynasties Court Poetry." *T'oung Pao*, 102.1 (3) (2016): 18-73.

²⁷ Fusheng Wu, *Written at Imperial Command: Panegyric Poetry in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

²⁸ Jack W. Chen, *The Poetics of Sovereignty: on Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Asia Center Press, 2010).

²⁹ Meow-Hui Goh, *Sound and Sight: Poetry and Courtier Culture in the Yongming Era (483–493)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

³⁰ Ping Wang, *The Age of Courtly Writings: Wen xuan Compiler Xiao Tong (501–531) and His Circle* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

This dissertation further contributes to the investigation of court culture and courtly writings in early medieval China. Instead of continuing the north/south divide, I argue that both northern and southern literary writings—produced, consumed, and transmitted through the “court” as the cultural center of the time—similarly engaged with their cultural context and court power dynamic. They were carefully crafted to achieve specific social functions; they circulated widely within a court community or even beyond; they were intimately connected to royal power and aspired authority, with “words” invested with heavy symbolic meanings for different ideological agendas. In all, following the footsteps of previous scholars, this dissertation uses “court culture” as the framework to discuss literary writings from both the northern and southern dynasties. I examine the rhetoric of courtly writings in representing state power, sovereignty, and legitimacy. I also contextualize my readings by taking into consideration the process of production, transmission, and mediation of the extant literary writings in a court milieu. Even if the extant northern literature is scant in contrast to the relative abundance of southern sources, this project aims for a balanced treatment and situates the analysis of southern or northern literary pieces within the north/south commonality, mutual understanding, and shared cultural legacy.

To reiterate the central argument of this dissertation in regard to the previous scholarship: this dissertation continues the effort to problematize the essentialization of the northern and southern cultures into stereotypical images. It historicizes the discussion of the north and south (and their literary writings) within the early medieval context and investigates into the negotiation, mutual influence, and intricate cultural exchanges among competing states. By using courtly exchange as a venue of inquiry, my project shows a more complicated dynamic between the northern and southern cultures. Focusing on the diplomatic visits, gift exchanges, epistolary

communication, and unified empires' strategies to represent unification, this dissertation explores the relationship between rhetoric and legitimacy in court writings, specifically, the effective, manipulative use of words in persuading the audience, asserting dynastic legitimacy, and constructing, or shaping people's perception to accept, a new reality.

***Cibian* 辭辯 and Rhetoric**

Some elaborations are also needed for the two keywords in the title: "rhetoric" and "legitimacy." Both English concepts have a long history burdened with different strains of theoretical underpinnings, and a full explanation would be beyond the scope of this research. Here I will mainly situate my brief discussion within China's early medieval historical context.

"Rhetoric," for readers familiar with western literary criticism, will immediately bring to mind great orators or theoreticians imparting skills of public speaking to general audiences, such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, to name only a few. In the Roman Republic, rhetorical theory was central to the elite education, for the ability to discourse well was closely related to the social background of the time, especially the public address at the Senate, legislative assemblies, and courtrooms. Speakers were expected to grasp all the effectively rhetorical strategies to sway the listeners and achieve verbal victory against opponents. As a consequence, textbooks, treatises, and manuals on the subject matter "rhetoric" were produced in a large number from the Roman Empire to the Middle Ages. It remained as one of the seven liberal arts (trivium and quadrivium) in medieval Europe, further systematized and nuanced by the Church to preach and engage in polemic discussions on doctrinal matters.³¹ The modern Chinese

³¹ For a brief introduction of rhetoric and its development from the Roman Republic to the Middle Ages, see George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 98-226.

counterpart for “rhetoric” is *xiuci* 修辭. Though also used in pre-modern China,³² the term *xiuci* came to be the equivalent of the English term “rhetoric” (with its connotations) only in the twentieth century.³³ That said, it does not mean the idea of eloquence, persuasion, and communication, facilitated by the “patterning” of words, which can be translated into the Chinese characters *ci* 辭, *bian* 辯, or *wen* 文, was not important in earlier times. On the contrary, the skillful, effective use of spoken or written words was of paramount importance in Chinese society of any given period, indispensable in many aspects of literati’ life, ranging from officialdom, social networking, education, to even “trivial” household management.

In early medieval court society, verbal eloquence, variably referred to as *cibian*, *koubian* 口辯, *shan zhandui* 善占對 (good at offering responses), *shan ciling* 善辭令 (adept in rhetoric) in historical accounts, was one of the most desired qualities for elite members. Even though there was no systematic treatise on rhetorical devices as those in the western tradition, historical records are replete with narratives about court officials’ witty responses and eloquent speeches, which shows the great value attached to the ability to manipulate words, sentiments, and interpretations. In many cases, the persuasive power of words can transform something supposedly ominous into something glorious. For example, in 537, a great fire burned down the

³² The earliest usage of *xiuci* can be found in the *Classic of Change* (*Yijing* 易經): “A gentleman...can embellish words to promote sincerity. Therefore he can achieve accomplishments” 君子...脩辭立其誠, 所以居業也. *Zhouyi zhushu* 周易注疏, in Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) comp., *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1965), 1.14.

³³ See Chen Wangdao 陳望道, *Xiucixue fafan* 修辭學發凡 (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997). Chen’s monograph was originally published by Shanghai Kaiming Press 開明書店 in 1931. What is particularly interesting is the concluding part of the book, in which the author describes the development of the discipline of “rhetoric” (*xiuci xue* 修辭學) in the early twentieth century. See *Xiucixue fafan*, pp. 284–291. It would be exciting to conduct a research, following Lydia Liu’s “translingual practice,” on the process of using *xiuci* to translate “rhetoric” and the intellectual, political, and cultural negotiations behind this constructed equivalence. For the theory of “translingual practice,” see Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity in China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

“Crimson Sparrow Gate” of the capital of the southern dynasty. Then, Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty (Xiao Yan 蕭衍, r. 501–549) commented: “This gate was narrow and low. I was just about to order its reconstruction; it then encountered this fire from heaven” 此門制卑狹, 我始欲構, 遂遭天火. Hearing this, no officials knew how to respond. Only He Jingrong 何敬容 (d. 549), an erudite courtier, replied, “This exactly shows that Your Majesty can ‘precede heaven and heaven does not defy’” 此所謂陛下先天而天不違.³⁴ This remark should sound gratifying to the imperial ears, as the courtier implied that the emperor had no sooner “thought” about it than “heaven” complied and sent down fire to burn down the gate. Meanwhile, this response on “heaven” is also a quotation from the *Classic of Change* (*Yijing* 易經), one of the Confucian Classics.³⁵ The original quote describes the ultimate phase of self-cultivation a sage can achieve, at which he harmonizes with the heave, earth, four seasons, numinous realms, and ghosts. The cleverness of He’s comment lies in the apt application of an ancient saying to a present circumstance, which casts the ruling emperor into an omnipotent sage. Quick response and creative re-contextualization of classical knowledge, as shown in this case, often won imperial recognition and national (sometimes international) fame. This story was included by historians in He Jingrong’s biography, and the compilers also add that He’s contemporaries considered it a “brilliant response” (*mingdui* 名對) of the time.

Erudition (*boxue* 博學) and eloquence (*cibian*) could hardly be separated. A competent courtier should both have a comprehensive grasp of all the cultural knowledge and the ability to apply it in changed situations. This was, as will be shown in Chapter 1, especially true for a royal

³⁴ Yao Cha 姚察 (533–606) and Yao Silian 姚思廉 (557–637) comps., *Liang shu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 37.531–532.

³⁵ *Zhouyi zhushu*, 1.17.

envoy. Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464–499), the famous court poet at the end of the fifth century, declined the appointment as a state representative because of his “clumsiness in speech” (*koune* 口訥).³⁶ Indeed, during any diplomatic engagement, the failure to give a response or a proper response, often recorded as *shi ci* 失辭, would lead to dire consequence, such as demotion or imprisonment. One southern emissary described his inability to come up with an adequate answer to his opponent’s challenge as being “drowned by words” (*cini* 辭溺).³⁷ We will explore more in Chapter 1 how rhetoric became weapon and shield during rounds of verbal attack between royal envoys. Moreover, rhetorical manipulation and persuasion were also prominent in epistolary communication between states or between friends/family members sojourning in different states. From a world prizing oral delivery to a written world, Chapter 2 examines the use of “beautiful words” (*lici* 麗辭), “sad words” (*aici* 哀辭), “false words” (*guici* 詭辭), and “vulgar words” (*bici* 鄙辭) in publicly exchanged letters, which were at the center of interstate competition and negotiation.

Zhengtong 正統 and Legitimacy

“Legitimacy” is an even thornier concept. The most classical definition of legitimacy would be Max Weber, whose distinctions among “legal authority,” “traditional authority,” and “charismatic authority” are often cited by scholars.³⁸ Simply put, “legitimacy” means the sources

³⁶ Xiao Zixian 蕭子顯 (489–537) comp., *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 47.826.

³⁷ See the verbal exchange between Wang Su 王肅 (464–501) and Cheng Yan 成淹 (fl. late fifth century). *Wei shu*, 79.1753.

³⁸ Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills eds. and trans., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946)

of rightfulness that authority can appropriate and display to exercise the power of governance over its subjects. There are many ways for that authority to manipulate and secure people's support for the power-holder. Weber introduces the judicial principle, cultural inheritance, and personal quality as the basis for three kinds of claim of legitimacy. Hok-lam Chan draws inspiration from Max Weber and other political scientists on legitimacy and applies them to the analysis of legitimation in the Jurchen Jin dynasty 金 (1115–1234).³⁹ Chan points out that in the Chinese context, *zhengtong* 正統 (orthodoxy) was the term closest to the concept of “legitimacy.” From the antiquity, both the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming* 天命) and “Five Agents” (*wuxing* 五行) (and the cycle of their generation and inhibition) were powerful interpretative tools for any dynasty's search for legitimation. In early medieval China, a period of disunion with fierce political competitions, the justification of the right to rule, to invade, to retreat, and to reform became most urgent matters, not only to the ruling elite within a state but also to political rivals. As a consequence, a variety of methods were deployed to either assert or invalidate a state's self-claimed “orthodox” status.

Possession of a sacred object can be a convincing argument in combats over state legitimacy. For example, in the mid-sixth century, when southern envoys came to the north for a visit, they proudly claimed that their dynasty had in possession the imperial seal forged by the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty 秦 (221–207 BCE) in the third century BCE.⁴⁰ An imagined unbroken lineage of cultural or material transmission thus confirms the legitimate inheritance of

³⁹ Hok-lam Chan, *Legitimation in Imperial China: Discussions under the Jurchen-Chin Dynasty (1115–1234)* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1984), pp. 1-124.

⁴⁰ See Yang Xuanzhi 楊銓之 (fl. 550s), *Luoyang qielan ji jiaozhu* 洛陽伽藍記校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), 118.

the authority. What even more opened up the space for negotiation over the issue of legitimacy were different practices of court rituals, which further pertained to various lineages of learning, competing commentaries, or contrasting interpretations of classical knowledge. Diplomats became the vanguard during this battle, as they were often grilled about their state's ritual choices and, in the meantime, also challenged their rivals for any forms of wrongdoing. For example, when the northern envoy Li Hui 李繪 (fl. early sixth century) came to the south, he was demanded to give proper explanation as to why the northern emperor did not observe for his deceased mother three-year mourning as prescribed by Confucius.⁴¹ In the sixth century, another emissary Li Xingye 李興業 (fl. early sixth century) was examined by the southern emperor with a variety of questions, including the procedure to perform the sacrifice at suburb altars (*jiaosi* 郊祀), the most important court ritual of the time in both the north and south. Both the envoy and ruler cited classical texts and exegesis to justify their own opinions.⁴² As rituals are a conduit between the human realm and that of the supernatural, states also created signs and omens to confirm and display heaven's blessing. When an exotic creature arrived from the foreign land or a strange animal was seen, a court would often change the emperor's reign title, with the ruler commanding his courtiers to compose poems, poetic expositions, and eulogies, to commemorate the occasion. Similarly, religions were deliberately appropriated for their numinous and social power. In the early sixth century, rulers of both the Liang dynasty in the south and the Northern Wei dynasty in the north spent tremendous amounts of money to build lavish Buddhist temples, invite famous monks for lectures, and hold extravagant Buddhist events. Both courts tried to

⁴¹ *Wei shu*, 62.1390.

⁴² *Wei shu*, 84.1863.

monopolize religious resources and represent themselves as the true patron and protector of religious causes. There is no surprise that state leaders also competed vehemently to be the spiritual authority of the whole realm.

One particular problem about legitimacy, as one might have already noticed from the previous description, is that the relation between certain phenomenon, decision, or practice and state legitimacy is not self-explanatory. On the contrary, the same event can be interpreted for the opposite effect—for example, a generous royal donor for religious activities can be criticized as an extravagant ruler taxing heavily on his people for personal gains, such as his own salvation. Therefore, “rhetoric” and “legitimacy” are inseparable, as the latter needs careful discursive construction and interpretation—just like in the He Jingrong story, his remark transforms a random fire into a sign of heaven’s submission to the ruling emperor. Hence, as Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 will further examine, a strange occurrence, an odd creature, an exotic gift, or a piece of court music are floating (dangerous) signifiers pointing to many possibilities of interpretations. As a result, the court authority and its loyal officials strove to create “correct” symbolic meanings for them. We will find how diligently-crafted literary representations were able to transform an innocent object into a political omen or translate an aural/visual impression into written forms, thereby fixating the “significance” of the “sound” that inherently defies a single, unanimous interpretation.

Rhetoric and legitimacy thus conspired to produce a totalizing vision of the world subsumed under the shadow of politics. Or, it is the words that create a sense of continuity and the concept of legitimacy to begin with, which has pre-conditioned all the assumptions, expectations, and responses from latecomers, we researchers included—As post-modernists would often claim: there is no outside-text.

Chapter 1

Royal Envoys and the Language of Diplomacy

Court centers frequently dispatched envoys for interstate notification and communication during the period of Northern and Southern Dynasties. On a practical level, the envoys carried out a variety of crucial diplomatic tasks, such as marriage alliance, territorial negotiation, and hostage release. Symbolically, they represented the royal power to which they pledged allegiance. Their words and behaviors were always under the public gaze, both scrutinized by officials from the rival state and recorded by accompanying scribe. It was thus imperative that envoys observe appropriate ritual procedure once they were beyond the border and articulate their intention adequately to their hosts to avoid causing trouble or humiliation for their own state. Success and admirable performance during a diplomatic mission often helped envoys gain international fame. However, failure or any form of misconduct could lead to impeachment even imprisonment when the delegate team returned. The missions were delicate and required envoys to possess eloquence, courage, loyalty, cultural knowledge, and the ability to improvise based on changing situations. Because of the intimate relation between envoys and dynastic power and the fact that the messengers themselves in most cases were highly cultured elite, diplomatic missions were one of the most well-documented venues of interstate communication. They offer an excellent window into the intriguing cultural competition and negotiation among court centers of the time.

This chapter discusses verbal exchanges between envoys and receiving officials and the poems written by royal emissaries. I focus on two issues. The first is concerned with the diplomats' deployment of rhetorical strategies to proclaim political legitimacy and cultural

superiority. Casting a retrospective gaze at this period, later historians often attempted to trace a lineage of dynastic “orthodoxy” (*zhengtong*) to make sense of the rise and fall of a number of states founded in the period. This search for the “rationale” behind historical development also entwines with the issues of ethnicity, state morality, and cultural characteristics between the north and south. However, through reading many contemporary sources relatively free of ideological bias imposed by later dynasties, one can find that legitimacy and “orthodoxy” were by no means something taken for granted.¹ Rather, court members always felt necessary and urgent to marshal evidence and provide convincing argumentation on behalf of their home state to assert dynastic rightfulness. From all the verbal exchanges between northern and southern courtiers recorded in historical accounts, one finds that the claim of legitimacy and authority greatly lies in the manipulation of words and the power of rhetoric.

The second topic that the chapter tackles is the expression of goodwill, respect, and friendship between diplomatic officials from different states. Indeed, rounds of verbal challenge and defense often led to mutual admiration, and sometimes envoys representing different political powers did develop a more intimate relationship that transcended rigid political allegiance. In this section, I ask: How could admiration be articulated in literary exchanges between officials with different political identifications? Could the assertion of political loyalty ever accommodate the articulation of friendship? In particular, the role that poetry played in the process deserves close examination. According to the classical dictum, poetry manifests

¹ Northern and southern officials from the period did debate over the location of state “legitimacy” (*zhengshuo suo zai* 正朔所在). See, for example, a conversation that took place in 529 between a southern general Chen Qingzhi 陳慶之 (484–539) and northern official Yuan Shen 元慎 (fl. 520s) recorded in *An Account of Temples in Luoyang*. The southerner boasted that the imperial seal supposedly forged by the Qin Empire was preserved in the southern court, which proved that the southern dynasty had a true claim of legitimacy. The northerner, however, used geopolitical rhetoric and portrayed the southerners as tattooed barbarians. See *Luoyang qielan ji jiaozhu*, pp. 117–118.

outwardly one's aspiration, and it fulfills crucial social functions that connect the individual to others, to the society, and to the state. As early as the Eastern Zhou period 東周 (770–256 BCE), the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經) was already a reservoir of prerequisite cultural knowledge for emissaries, who should be able to single out a poem or a line of a poem to notify their aim and navigate through the intricate power struggles.² During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the composition, exchange, and evaluation of poetic texts, too, featured prominently during diplomatic visits. I argue that poetry became the ideal literary platform for juxtaposing and reconciling hostility and hospitality. Through the adroit use of literary allusions and their associations with other textual references, poetry composed by and exchanged among diplomatic officials created a certain ambiguity that could both promote state legitimacy and convey interpersonal appreciation.

Both issues outlined above about the envoys' appropriation of the rhetoric of diplomacy is premised on the possibility of "mutual understanding" among states with different regional, ethnic, and cultural orientations. By "mutual understanding," I do not mean the basic, surface-level comprehension of a character or a speech, even though people did speak different languages or one language with different dialects during the time. What I emphasize about this "mutual understanding" is the same body of cultural repertoire shared by both northern and southern elites and the importance that they ascribed to the persuasive power of discourse to

² Instances where diplomats and hosts cited *Shijing* poems to convey political message can be found in the *Zuo Tradition* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳) appended to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), both later canonized as Confucian classics. Confucius once commented on the importance of knowing *Shijing* for diplomatic missions: "Though a man may be able to recite three hundred odes, yet if, when entrusted with a governmental charge, he knows not how to act, or if, when sent to any quarter on a mission, he cannot give his replies unassisted, notwithstanding the extent of his learning, of what practical use is it?" 誦詩三百, 授之以政, 不達. 使於四方, 不能專對. 雖多, 亦奚以為. See *Lunyu zhushu* 論語註疏. In Ruan Yuan, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 13.116. The translation is by James Legge. See James Legge trans., *The Chinese Classics*. Vol. 1. (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1870), p. 129.

appropriate that shared cultural legacy and proclaim imperial authority. As we will see below, during the diplomatic engagement, no matter where they came from, the appointed representatives aptly made use of common cultural lore and textual references for proper communication, which created a discursive space where both hostility and hospitality could be expressed and negotiated.

A Brief Diplomatic History of the Northern and Southern Dynasties

The competing dynasties during the time of division never existed in isolation or only in antagonistic terms. On the contrary, there were communication and cooperation of high frequency, and royal emissaries played a crucial part in conveying messages, shaping political history, and fashioning ethnic and regional identity through envoys' engagement with the cultural "others." To facilitate the discussion in later parts of the chapter, this section offers a brief diplomatic history of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Due to the scope of the dissertation and also the nature of available sources, the examination will be focused primarily on that between the northern and southern states from the fifth century on—when the Northern Wei dynasty gradually became a powerful rival to be seriously reckoned with by the southern dynasties—to the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. While "southern dynasties" mean unequivocally the four states established by Han Chinese royal households in the south,³ by "northern dynasties," I refer to the Northern Wei, Eastern Wei, Western Wei 西魏 (535–557), Northern Qi 北齊 (550–577), Northern Zhou 北周 (557–581), and Sui, and refrain from

³ I leave out those short-lived southern states of minor significance, such as Xiao Ji's 蕭紀 (508–553) reign from 552 to 553 in Shu or Xiao Zhuang's 蕭莊 (548–577) temporary continuation of the Liang at the city of Ying 郢 from 557 to 560.

discussing other contemporary northern states unless it is conducive to the main strain of the narrative.⁴

The period of division started in the early fourth century when the Sima royal family was forced to emigrate to the south and established the Eastern Jin dynasty. The north was then occupied by various ethnic peoples vying with one another for dominance. Being referred to as the period of “Sixteen Kingdoms” (*shiliu guo* 十六國), the northern land was ravaged by warfare and turmoil, and it witnessed a quick succession of more than a dozen states in the course of the century. Diplomacy was practiced among those political powers to form alliance, to notify royal intentions, or to observe, if not spy on, rivals for critical information.

Out of this chaotic disunion, the Northern Wei dynasty, founded by one branch of the Xianbei people, gradually eliminated other enemies and expanded its territory. In the early fifth century, Emperor Taiwu (Tuoba Tao 拓跋燾, r. 423–452), an ambitious and militarily active ruler, consolidated its rule and reunified North China. His reigning years almost overlapped with that of Emperor Wen of the Song dynasty, Liu Yilong 劉義隆 (r. 424–453). Both rulers invested much energy into reclaiming territories, and as can be expected, there were numerous military clashes between the Northern Wei and Song. One of the most severe threats to Emperor Wen and the southern court took place in 450, when Tuoba Tao led armies down to Guabu Mountain 瓜步, to the north of Jiankang, and menaced to besiege the capital. Two representatives, Li Xiaobo 李孝伯 (d. 459) from the Wei and Zhang Chang 張暢 (408–457) from the Song, negotiated the

⁴ For a complete diplomatic history, see Cai Zongxian 蔡宗憲, *Zhongguo qianqi de jiaopin yu nanbei hudong* 中古前期的交聘與南北互動 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 1993).

conditions of Tuoba Tao's withdrawal.⁵ Only a large amount of tribute and promise of marriage satisfied the northern ruler, who returned in contentment, and both Li Xiaobo and Zhang Chang established fame as eloquent diplomats from this incidence. Diplomatic exchange reflected the power struggle between the two states. However, our knowledge of the diplomatic visits during the period comes almost exclusively from a northern historical account, *History of the Wei Dynasty* (*Wei shu*), and it inevitably casts a positive light on the north.⁶

According to Wei Shou, the compiler of *Wei shu*, Liu Yilong's delegates brought "tamed elephants" as tribute to the Northern Wei at least twice and actively sought peace with the north. A few southern envoys are recorded in the "Biographies of Islandic Savages" ("Daoyi zhuan" 島夷傳) of *Wei shu* and none of them has a biography in *Song shu*, which prevents a more systematic, balanced examination. Of the northern diplomats visiting the southern court, two deserve mentioning: Lu Xuan 盧玄 (fl. 430s) and You Minggen 游明根 (417–498). Lu Xuan was the great-grandson of the Western Jin official Lu Chen 盧諶 (285–351), who heroically fought against northern ethnic peoples together with another general Liu Kun 劉琨 (270–318) when the dynasty was beset with revolts and invasions. In 433, Lu Xuan came to the southern capital Jiankang as an envoy and was received by the emperor himself. Emperor Wen conversed with him for a long while, and finally sighed with a nostalgic remark: "The Palace Attendant

⁵ For its translation and discussion, see Albert E. Dien's "The Disputation at Pengcheng: Accounts from the *Wei shu* and the *Song shu*." In *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook*, pp. 32-59.

⁶ Another contemporary historical account, *History of the Song Dynasty* (*Song shu* 宋書), was compiled by a southern courtier Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513) toward the end of the fifth century. However, *Song shu* rarely mentions any diplomatic exchange. In fact, this "defect" was already criticized by a northerner after reading the record: "As for the envoys exchanged during this span of time, their names were not recorded" 前後使人, 不書名字. *Wei shu*, 53.1174. It cautions us the extent that sources may present a skewed view of diplomatic relation.

[i.e., Lu Chen]—he was your great-grandfather” 中郎，卿曾祖也。⁷ You Minggen was also prestigious. He came to the court of Emperor Xiaowu, Liu Jun 劉駿 (r. 454–464), the successor of Emperor Wen, three times, and Liu Jun respected him as an honorable elder (*zhangzhe* 長者).⁸ Even though the last ten years of the Song dynasty was disturbed by civil wars and northern incursions, and also witnessed the rising of Xiao Daocheng 蕭道成 (Emperor Gao of the Southern Qi, r. 479–482), a general of acumen and political foresight, envoys were still exchanged between the northern state and the court of Emperor Ming, Liu Yu 劉彧 (r. 466–472), and his son Liu Yu 劉昱 (r. 472–477), Lord of Cangwu. One Xu Chihu 許赤虎 (fl. 470s), who came to Jiankang in 474 and 475, was commented by the historian as: “His response was swift and clever. Even though it lacked elegance and cultural references, southerners still acclaimed his witticism and resourcefulness” 應對敏捷，雖言不典故，而南人頗稱機辯滑稽焉。⁹

After Xiao Daocheng deposed the last Song emperor and founded the Southern Qi dynasty in 479, the Wei supported one member of Song royal family Liu Chang 劉昶 (426–497), the ninth son of Emperor Wen, and led campaigns against the newly founded dynasty. After two years of military friction, Xiao Daocheng sent an envoy Che Senglang 車僧朗 (d. 481) to the court in Pingcheng, the capital of the Northern Wei, to throw an olive branch and demonstrate

⁷ *Wei shu*, 47.1045. Lu Chen, Lu Xuan’s great-grandfather, once served as the Palace Attendant 中郎 under Liu Kun who was appointed by the Western Jin as the Grand Minister on Works (*sikong* 司空). Even though Lu Chen later ascended to higher positions in other “barbarian” courts, upon his death, Lu admonished to his offspring: “After I die, please refer me as the Palace Attendant to the Grand Minister of Works of the Jin Dynasty” 吾身沒之後，但稱晉司空從事中郎爾。See Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579–648) et al., comps., *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 44.1259. Here Emperor Wen addresses Lu Chen according to the latter’s dying wish—to be remembered as a Western Jin official.

⁸ *Wei shu*, 55.1213.

⁹ *Wei shu*, 46.1038.

his power.¹⁰ The last twenty years of the fifth century was the first “Golden Age” of diplomatic exchange between the north and south. The reasons lie in the facts that, first, there was an increasing focus on cultural competitions between the northern and southern states; second, many of the selected diplomats, equipped with broad cultural knowledge and eloquence, were from prestigious elite families; as a result, third, we have biographies of those diplomats in dynastic histories that provide more detailed accounts of their missions.¹¹

It should be noted that roughly about the same time, the Northern Wei was ruled conjointly by the young Emperor Xiaowen, Yuan Hong 元宏 (r. 471–499), and his grandmother, the Empress Dowager Wenming 文明太后 (441–490) of the Feng 馮 family. The former was famous for a series of cultural reforms that led to an acculturation process of the Xianbei people in adopting Han cultural practices, among which the most influential decision was to move the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang in 494. The latter also showed great interest in southern culture and eminent envoys from the south, and one of her favorites was Liu Zuan 劉纘 (fl. 480s), a member of the famous Liu family from Pengcheng.¹² The changed political and cultural agenda in the northern state greatly boosted cultural communication and negotiation, and it was

¹⁰ Again, *Wei shu* interprets this event as Qi’s willingness to pay tribute to its northern neighbor while *History of the Southern Qi* describes the imperial intention as such: “At the time the emperor had yet to invest much energy in the northern invasion. Also, by then, barbarians had already been defeated, and he wanted to manifest his power and virtue [to those defeated barbarians]. Therefore, he sent the Adjutant of Rear Army, Che Senglang, as an envoy to the north” 上未遑外略，以虜既摧破，且欲示以威懷遣後軍參軍車僧朗北使。See *Nan Qi shu*, 57.998.

¹¹ While *Wei shu* devotes only scant attention to diplomatic visits between the Northern Wei and Song, there is suddenly an increasing amount of anecdotes documenting diplomatic missions between the Wei and Southern Qi. Also, the diplomats from this period, unlike previous times, were often elite members of the prestigious families and thus have biographies in dynastic histories.

¹² Empress Dowager Wenming very much attended to initiating a variety of cultural projects and publicly demonstrating her erudition as a form of propaganda. She composed “Royal Edicts” (“Huanggao” 皇詔) in 18 pieces and commanded her courtier Li Sichong 李思沖 (450–498) to write commentaries on these writings. *Wei shu*, 13.329. The southern source even reveals that Wenming in fact originated from the wealthy city in the south, Jiangdu, to explain her fascination with the southern land. *Nan Qi shu*, 57.986.

well attested in historical records.¹³ According to the southern sources, one of the primary objectives of the Northern Wei envoys' visits was to observe southern culture and bring back southern cultural products such as books, ritual practices, and city-building plans.¹⁴ Meanwhile, northern sources also document occasions of court debate between northerners and southerners over ritual observances and interpretations on classics which always end with a north victory.¹⁵ Concomitant with this competition over cultural authority was also the attention to "recording" those occasions when an envoy or a guest receiver cleverly triumphed, and, as one may also expect, there also rose true admiration toward talented emissaries from a rival state.¹⁶

This "Golden Age" however abruptly ended as Emperor Ming of the Southern Qi, Xiao Luan 蕭鸞 (r. 494–498), the nephew of the founding emperor Xiao Daocheng, took over the throne and later slaughtered almost all the descendants of Xiao Daocheng and his successor Xiao Ze 蕭蹟 (Emperor Wu, r. 482–493). The last Northern Wei envoy sent to the Southern Qi was Lu Chang 盧昶 (456–510) in 494. During Lu Chang's sojourn in Jiankang, Xiao Luan deposed

¹³ It was from this period that we find several court debates in the south about interstate relationship. Rulers and officials from the Southern Qi dynasty discussed issues such as whether to initiate diplomatic relations with the north, whether to promote interstate trade, and whether to lend books to the northern state.

¹⁴ For example, the northern envoy Jiang Shaoyou 蔣少遊 (fl. late fifth century), according to his uncle, who was a southern courtier, came to the south exactly with the intention of memorizing the palace construction of the southern capital. The southern source even claims that the design of the northern palace complex was copied from the south. *Nan Qi shu*, 57.990.

¹⁵ One of the illustrating examples is about Pei Zhaoming's 裴昭明 (fl. late fifth century) visit to the north to pay condolences after Empress Dowager Wenming passed away. Pei and his team came to the northern wearing "auspicious" official garments. Northern officials Cheng Yan and Li Anshi 李安世 (443–493) organized a debate with Pei Zhaoming about the clothes appropriate for a state funeral. Pei ultimately lost the debate and replaced the auspicious official garments with mourning clothes. *Wei shu*, 79.1751–1752.

¹⁶ We can only catch a glimpse of the act of "recording" conversations during diplomatic exchanges. Wang Rong 王融 (466–493), the prestigious courtier of the Southern Qi, composed the *Collection of Words when Receiving Barbarian Envoys* (*Jie lushi yuci* 接虜使語辭) after he acted as a host to receive northern envoys. Liu Hui 劉繪 (458–502), another southern courtier, boasted of his eloquence when he was commanded to write the *Collection of Words* (*yu ci* 語辭) after acting as a host. See *Nan Qi shu*, 47.824; 48.842.

two young emperors and established himself as the new ruler. Upon hearing this, the Northern Wei emperor Yuan Hong dispatched armies to invade the south. Lu Chang's brother, Lu Yuan 盧淵 (454–501), was appointed as the general commanding the vanguard. Lu Chang was imprisoned and abused as a hostage in Jiankang. Instead of showing steadfastness and courage, Lu cried and begged for his life. When Lu ultimately returned to the north, Yuan Hong stripped him of any official titles and rebuked him for a lack of integrity.

The Liang dynasty did not form any diplomatic relation with the Northern Wei until 520. Xiao Yan, Emperor Wu of the Liang, was very keen on expanding territories, and there were several “northward campaigns” right after the founding of the new dynasty in 502. Liu Shanming 劉善明 was the first northern envoy sent to the south since Lu Chang's visit in 494. Shanming, hailed from Pengcheng, was haughty and presumptuous, and questioned the official Zhu Yi 朱异 (483–549) on various ritual matters. His arrogance, however, was changed to veneration after he met and conversed with several erudite courtiers. It was curious, though, that only the *History of the Liang Dynasty* (*Liang shu*) and *History of the Southern Dynasties* (*Nan shi* 南史) record this incident, and Liu Shanming is not attested in any northern histories.¹⁷

Before long, the rebellions of the Six Garrisons broke out in the north, and the Northern Wei power was greatly undermined by rebellious forces. Xiao Yan took advantage of this chaos and even sent a general Chen Qingzhi 陳慶之 (484–539) to help Yuan Hao 元顥 (485–529), one member of the northern royal family displaced in the south, to claim emperorship in Luoyang. They succeeded, though only temporarily, in 529. In 534, the Northern Wei disintegrated into the Western Wei and the Eastern Wei, respectively controlled by Yuwen 宇文 and Gao 高 families.

¹⁷ There is a Liu Shanming recorded in *Nan Qi shu* who died in 480.

Based on *Wei shu* and *Liang shu*, the Liang first formed a diplomatic relation with the Eastern Wei with envoys exchanged starting from 537 up to 549. These 12 years saw another “Golden Age” of diplomatic exchange between the north and south with more detailed accounts available. It is recorded that both Liang and Eastern Wei rulers carefully selected emissaries and sent to the other state their best as the representatives of the royal power. In the meantime, emperors and royal princes also actively engaged with royal envoys in conversations, poetry compositions, and intellectual disputations. At one point, Xiao Yan even tried to mollify the resentment of a northern envoy towards defectors: “Now the two states are on friendly terms and all under the world are one family. How can you still distinguish ‘there’ from ‘here’?” 今二國和好，天下一家，安得復論彼此。¹⁸

There is, however, no mention anywhere about the relation between the Liang and the Western Wei dynasty. Xiao Yan once asked an Eastern Wei envoy Li Hui: “How do you describe Heita [i.e., Yuwen Tai, the general controlling the Western Wei dynasty]? What did Minister Gao [i.e., Gao Huan] have in mind in dealing with him?” 黑獺若為形容，高相作何經略。¹⁹ It seems to suggest that there was no direct communication between the two states. That said, the two states—the Liang and Western Wei—by no means engaged in inimical conflict. Xiao Yan kindly provided a haven for generals from the Western Wei who were defeated during the battles against the Eastern Wei. Later, the emperor even permitted the return of some loyal

¹⁸ Li Baiyao 李百藥 (565–648), comp., *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 42.553.

¹⁹ *Bei Qi shu*, 29.395.

servants to the Western Wei, including Heba Sheng 賀拔勝 (496–544), Dugu Xin 獨孤信 (504–557), and Yang Zhong 楊忠 (507–568).²⁰

The Hou Jing rebellion broke out in 549 and soon toppled the Liang dynasty. Both Western Wei and Eastern Wei participated in the military struggles in the south and took advantage of this political turmoil. Several Liang royal princes such as Xiao Fan 蕭範 (498–549) elicited military helps from the Eastern Wei, whereas the Western Wei supported Xiao Cha 蕭詧 (519–562) as the new king of the Liang. The subjugation of the Hou Jing rebellion and restoration of the Liang sovereignty by Xiao Yi 蕭繹 (r. 552–555), later known as Emperor Yuan, temporarily put an end to the years of tumult. After he claimed emperorship in 552, he sent envoys to both the Western Wei and Northern Qi to announce his new rule.²¹ However, Xiao Yi's Jiangling regime was greatly threatened after Yuchi Jiong 尉遲迥 (516–580), a Western Wei general, vanquished Xiao Ji's 蕭紀 (508–553) regime in Shu. After this victory, Yuwen Tai 宇文泰 (507–556), the *de facto* ruler of the Western Wei, continued to send armies down to Jiangling, which ultimately led to Jiangling's downfall in 554 under a siege. While the invasion to Jiangling was no doubt one part of the military expansion that Yuwen Tai envisioned with his officials, *Nan shi* however interestingly attributes the fall of Jiangling to Xiao Yi's

²⁰ In the biography of Xu Qian 許謙 in the *History of the Zhou Dynasty* (*Zhou shu* 周書), it is recorded that while these generals loyal to the Western Wei dynasty stayed at Jiankang, they entreated multiple times Emperor Wu for Liang's military support. "Even though Emperor Wu of the Liang did not send armies for their sake, he admired the integrity and aspiration of Heba Sheng and others, and permitted them to return to their state. He first allowed Xu Qian to go back to Chang'an, hoping to communicate in the name of neighborly kindness" 梁武帝雖不為出軍, 而嘉勝等志節, 竝許其還國, 乃分謙先還, 且通隣好. See Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 (583–666) et als., comps., *Zhou shu* 周書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 35.612. However, in spite of this "neighborly kindness," there is no record of envoys exchanged between the Liang and Western Wei.

²¹ By then, Emperor Wenxuan, Gao Yang 高洋 (r. 550–559), had already deposed the last Eastern Wei emperor and claimed himself the ruler of a new dynasty, the Northern Qi dynasty.

diplomatic failure and insolence toward the Western Wei envoy Yuwen Renshu 宇文弼.

According to the record, both Yuwen Renshu and Northern Qi envoys arrived at the Jiangling court at the same time, and Xiao Yi did not treat Yuwen with due courtesy; it thus unfortunately incurred the grudge of Yuwen Tai.²²

The establishment of the Chen dynasty in 557 by Chen Baxian 陳霸先 (r. 557–559, known as Emperor Wu) marked the formation of the “three kingdoms” division, namely, Chen in the south, Northern Qi in the northeast, and Northern Zhou in the northwest.²³ From a general observation, the Chen dynasty maintained a rather close and favorable relationship with the Northern Zhou.²⁴ Before the founding of the Chen dynasty, both Chen Chang 陳昌 (537–560), the son of Chen Baxian, and Chen Xu 陳頊 (530–582), the nephew of Chen Baxian, also the future Emperor Xuan, were in Jiangling, and they were taken to Chang’an after Jiangling was vanquished. Because the Northern Zhou held them in hostage, it had a leverage to easily meddle with Chen’s royal succession. Indeed, after Chen Baxian died and his nephew Chen Qian 陳蒨 (Emperor Wen, r. 560–566) was supported as the emperor, the Northern Zhou permitted the return of Chen Chang, the legitimate successor, to create faction in the Chen court. Chen Qian even opted for abdication were it not that Hou Andu 侯安都 (519–563), the loyal general to Chen Qian, conveniently killed Chen Chang on his way back and secured Chen Qian’s rule. The

²² See Li Dashi 李大師 (570–628) and Li Yanshou 李延壽 (fl. early seventh century), comps., *Nan shi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 8.241.

²³ The Western Liang 西梁 (555–587) was a puppet kingdom with the Northern Zhou as its supporter.

²⁴ Except the years from 567 to 569 when Chen Xu 陳頊 (r. 568–582) deposed the emperor Chen Bozong 陳伯宗 (r. 566–568), which led to the rebellion of Hua Jiao 華皎 (fl. 560s). Hua sought alliance with the Western Liang, the state under the control of the Northern Zhou, and the Zhou sent armies to support Hua Jiao. But after several battles, the Zhou and Chen agreed on peace, and the former sent Du Gao 杜杲 (d. 582) to Jiankang to amend the diplomatic relation between the two states.

Northern Zhou and Chen later established friendly terms, as Zhou rulers sent back southern officials and Chen royal family members, such as Yin Buhai 殷不害 (505–589), Mao Xi 毛喜 (516–589), and Chen Xu; in return, the Chen ceded some territories to the Zhou. Meanwhile, envoys also went back and forth between the Chen and Northern Qi since 561, but because of the limitation of sources, we only have names of the diplomats and years of their mission without more information.

In the north, the Northern Qi and Northern Zhou had long been fighting for dominance over the northern land, and their diplomatic relation was initiated quite late, namely, in 568, when the two states started to exchange envoys. The Northern Qi dynasty sent Liu Ti 劉逖 (525–573) to Chang'an, a very knowledgeable courtier, and he debated eloquently with Zhou officials on the appropriate diplomatic ritual. In return, the Zhou also “selected envoys with great care” 盛選行人, and decided on Lu Cheng 陸逞 (527–573), whose “handsome appearance and manner, impressive command of words, and resourcefulness and politeness” 美容止, 善辭令, 敏而有禮,²⁵ was acclaimed by Qi officials.

After the Northern Qi was conquered by the Northern Zhou in 577 as a result of Chen's invasion from the south and Zhou's from the west, the Chen launched military campaigns against the Zhou, which only ended in a fiasco for the Chen armies in 578 that led to the capture of its most famous general Wu Mingche 吳明徹 (512–578). In the following years until its fall in 589, the Chen dynasty continued its diplomacy with the Northern Zhou and later the Sui dynasty, after Yang Jian claimed a new dynasty in 581. But unfortunately, there is no sufficient biographical information in dynastic histories about these diplomats. Some anecdotes seem to be deliberately

²⁵ Li Dashi and Li Yanshou, comps., *Bei shi* 北史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 69.2393.

selected by seventh-century historians to illustrate the weakness and cowardice of the last ruler of the Chen, Chen Shubao 陳叔寶 (r. 582–589). For example, it is recorded that the southern envoy Yuan Yan 袁彥 (fl. 580s) brought back a portrait of Yang Jian to the southern sovereign. Upon seeing it, Chen Shubao was terrified and said: “I will never meet with this man in person.”²⁶ The last delegate team sent to Chang’an from Jiankang included Wang Wan 王琬 and Xu Shanxin 許善心 (558–618). It was in 588, one year before the ultimate fall of the southern dynasty. By then, Yang Jian had already planned a military onslaught against its southern neighbor and thus detained the diplomatic team in Chang’an. After the Chen was vanquished, Xu Shanxin could not help but wail painfully in his guest mansion. Hearing this, Yang Jian praised Xu as follows: “After I vanquished the Chen, the only gain [regarding talented men] is this person. Since he could cherish his old lord, he can surely be my loyal subject” 我平陳國，唯獲此人。既能懷其舊君，即是我誠臣也。²⁷ Xu Shanxin later became a prominent courtier in the Sui. This anecdote shows tellingly the integration of officials from an opposing and conquered dynasty to a new regime.

Verbal Contestations for Dynastic Legitimacy and Authority

Even though envoys often bore tokens of peace and aimed for reconciliation, hostility to and from the other state never disappeared; rather, it was channeled into the verbal realm. It permeated into every facet of the diplomatic journey, affecting matters as serious as debates on dynastic transition and as small as conversations over the dinner table on local weather or food.

²⁶ *Nan shi*, 10.306.

²⁷ Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643) et al., comps., *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 58.1424.

During these occasions, state legitimacy, regional customs, and ethnic traits became contentious grounds in need of explanation and justification. While it is true that military strategies and financial capability, among many other factors, significantly influenced and sometimes even determined the political landscape of the period, the ability to orally assert political and cultural supremacy was equally indispensable. A verbal victory, recorded and disseminated across dynastic boundaries, constituted a significant form of cultural capital for the victorious—the capital that a political power would appropriate to confirm its superiority over other self-proclaimed “legitimate” states.

Indeed, the articulateness of the envoy was so vital to a state that one examination question given by the ruler in the southern court in the late fifth century was about how to select a competent diplomat: “[The emperor asked:] We would make use of rhetoric and eloquence instead of relying on weapons [for conquest]. As for [the one who could] seek the capital region in the north with a few words,²⁸ and pacify the five prefectures with one expression,²⁹ what are the means to achieve this? Who can be appointed?” 無待干戈, 聊用辭辯. 片言而求三輔, 一說而定五州, 斯路何階? 人誰或可?³⁰ As rhetoric is directly connected to political conquest, the conversation between envoys and hosting officials became a metaphorical “battleground,” where outmaneuvering the rival during rounds of verbal exchange was as important as winning a combat in the field.

²⁸ A more literal translation of “the capital region in the north” is “the three posts that assist the capital” (*san fu* 三輔). This phrase refers to the three crucial government positions that were responsible for managing the capital area of the Western Han dynasty 西漢 (202 BCE–8 CE), Chang’an. Later it was used as a general reference to the northern city Chang’an and its environs.

²⁹ Li Shan 李善 (630–689), the commentator on *Wen xuan* 文選 (*The Anthology of Refined Literature*), notes that the whole world was believed to consist of twelve prefectures. The southern dynasty occupied seven of them, and the remaining five were controlled by the northern dynasty.

³⁰ Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–530), comp., *Wen Xuan* 文選 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986), 36.1658.

This section will discuss recorded conversations and poems composed by envoys and their hosts and examine how the royal representatives asserted superiority on behalf of their state through various rhetorical strategies. I will focus on three aspects of the verbal competition, namely, the representation of the state and its ruler, the depiction of the foreign land, and envoys' self-representation. I suggest that during diplomatic encounters, one state's legitimacy was always discursively challenged; its assertion almost entirely depended on the effectiveness of rhetorical manipulation—verbal persuasion, compelling argumentation, and appropriate use of different kinds of literary devices.

Representing the State and the Rightful Ruler

During interstate communication and in the formal edicts promulgated within states, analogies were one of the strategies most frequently used to publicly announce a state's desired status and its relation to its opponents. It was common to see rulers and officials boasted of their state as one of the powerful, unified dynasties in the past, such as the Western Zhou 西周 (1046–771 BCE), Qin, or Han 漢 (202 BCE–220 CE), even though the exaggerated proclamation often appeared incongruous with, or even a contradiction of, political reality. It was also typical for envoys on diplomatic exchanges to invoke historical examples from the Spring and Autumn period 春秋 (770–5th century BCE) or the Warring States period 戰國 (5th century–221 BCE), when kingdoms existed on an equal footing and hegemony was up for grabs.³¹ In this way, a lesser state could often defy, albeit only verbally, the hegemonic influence of a more powerful

³¹ The period from 770 to 221 BCE is also called the Eastern Zhou dynasty 東周. It was a time when the authority of the Zhou household waned and many other princes, dukes, and earls ascended to power and claimed to be “hegemons” (*ba* 霸) of the world.

dynasty. Although the use of cultural and literary references was omnipresent in all kinds of writing in the Chinese literary tradition, the diplomatic context required heightened attention to both their applicability to the current situation and their interpretation. A simple historical example or analogy could be bound up with intricate contemporary politics. This section offers a close reading of two scenarios in which an envoy engaged in a verbal confrontation with the ruler of another state. One can see that both sides attempted to appropriate the “right” historical precedents for self-justification and self-aggrandizement.

In the early fifth century, Murong Chao 慕容超 (385–410, r. 405–410) became the emperor of the Southern Yan dynasty 南燕 (398–410), a state in modern-day Shandong province. Immediately after the enthronement, Murong confronted a thorny situation. His mother had been detained as a hostage in Chang’an, the capital of the Later Qin dynasty 後秦 (384–417). When Murong became a dynastic sovereign, the ruler of the Later Qin, Yao Xing 姚興 (366–416, r. 394–416), took advantage of this situation and used Murong’s mother as leverage to manipulate his political enemy. Yao Xing agreed to Murong’s request to send back his mother only on the condition that Murong Chao give away his court musicians and musical instruments in exchange. Musicians were indispensable for designing and performing court rituals, and musical instruments that had been passed down from the previous dynasties also determined the correct pitch standard. Possessing them allowed the Southern Yan to establish the “right” rituals to support its claim of cultural orthodoxy. There was no mistake that this *quid pro quo* created a predicament for Murong Chao: he was forced to choose between the state’s political capital and his filial attachment (which, of course, can also be transformed into certain political capital). After much debate in court with his officials, Murong Chao prioritized filial piety over his

dynasty and sent the envoy Zhang Hua 張華 (fl. early 5th century), along with a team of 120 musicians, to the Later Qin to negotiate the return of his mother.

In Chang'an, Yao Xing rejoiced to receive them and threw a banquet to celebrate the occasion. During the banquet, the ruler, much delighted, commented on the current event:

In the past, when the Shang dynasty [16th century–11th century BCE] was about to fall, its musicians fled and submitted to the Zhou household. Now the power of the great Qin is flourishing. Therefore, the musicians from the [Southern] Yan have come to our court. The omen of prosperity and demise, one can see it here.

昔殷之將亡，樂師歸周，今皇秦道盛，燕樂來庭，廢興之兆，見于此矣。

The analogy is adequate, effective, and powerful. In the *Historian's Record* (*Shiji* 史記), Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–90 BCE) offers a narrative of the fall of the ancient Shang dynasty. Its last ruler, King Zhòu of Shang 商紂王 (r. 1085–1046 BCE), was cruel and intractable. He was greedy for wine, delicate food, and beautiful women, which made the life of his people miserable. He ordered the loyal official Bigan 比干 be executed by having his heart torn out, and another official Jizi 箕子 too was imprisoned at his command. As this atrocious government continued, *Shiji* records: “Music Masters and Junior Masters of the Shang fled to the Zhou with sacrificial musical instruments. Thereupon, King Wu of the Zhou led other dukes to attack King Zhòu” 殷之大師少師乃持其祭樂器奔周，周武王於是遂率諸侯伐紂.³² The transference of musicians and sacrificial paraphernalia signifies the shift of the Mandate of Heaven. Therefore, even though King Wu had long been preparing for the war, he acted only after receiving the Shang's musicians and sacrificial equipment. Through the force of analogy, Yao Xing explains the current event as an omen of the Southern Yan's downfall and the Later Qin's prosperity.

³² Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 3.108.

Upon hearing this, the envoy Zhang Hua offers a different perspective:

Since antiquity, the ways of emperors and kings [attaining legitimacy] were different. There is the principle of expediency, and it lies in the ultimate accomplishment. Hence Master Laozi once said: “If one wants to seize it, one has first to offer.” Now since [Southern Yan’s] musicians have entered the western land [i.e., Chang’an, which is to the west of the Southern Yan], there has to be one like You Yu returning to the east. As for the manifestation of fortune and disaster, this is truly the omen.

自古帝王，為道不同，權譎之理，會于功成。故老子曰：將欲取之，必先與之。今總章西入，必由余東歸，禍福之驗，此其兆乎。³³

Yao Xing’s explanation of the Mandate of Heaven and its application to the present circumstances are invalidated when Zhang Hua speaks of the disagreement between the surface and hidden meanings. The arrival of the Yan musicians at the Qin court is still an “omen” (*zhao* 兆), but what the exchange signifies can vary with the use of different cultural references for comparison. Zhang Hua first cites the *Laozi* 老子, a philosophical text from the Eastern Zhou period, later categorized as the founding document for Daoism. In the original text, what follows the line “If one wants to seize it, one has first to offer” quoted by Zhang Hua is: “The supple can defeat the hard, and the weak can defeat the strong” 柔勝剛，弱勝強。³⁴ The envoy seems to acknowledge the military inferiority of the Southern Yan, but according to him, the submission is more a deliberate political strategy than an innocent sign of decline. The implication of deliberation is continued as Zhang Hua evokes the historical figure You Yu 由余 (fl. 7th century). You Yu lived in the Spring and Autumn period and was the envoy dispatched by the Rong 戎 tribe to the court of the kingdom of Qin 秦. After conversing with You Yu, Duke Mu of Qin 秦繆公 (d. 621 BCE) greatly admired him and feared that his loyalty to the Rong tribe

³³ *Jin shu*, 128.3180.

³⁴ Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之 ed., *Laozi jiaoshi* 老子校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p. 144.

would ultimately be detrimental to the Qin. One of his courtiers offered a solution: Duke Mu should send alluring music of the central land to the “barbarian” ruler, who, having never experienced it before, would surely indulge himself in the pleasure. If You Yu were to remonstrate, it would create discord between the ruler and his loyal official. The plan worked out well. Because of the Rong ruler’s suspicion and resentment, You Yu fled and joined the Qin court.³⁵ If one relates the story of You Yu to this episode, the act of sending musicians appears as a scheme instead of a concession. Seen from Zhang’s perspective, Yao Xing is a “barbarian ruler” in the west who is incompetent and morally questionable for expressing excitement over the musicians. The state of Southern Yan, then, is compared to the kingdom of Qin in the Spring and Autumn period that would go on to achieve grandeur and to even unite the whole world.³⁶

It is notable that both Yao Xing and Zhang Hua seek to explain the current political situation by offering proper analogies between the present and the past. For the former, the natural course of the dynastic transition from the Shang to Zhou, reflective of the will of Heaven, best captures the present moment; for the latter, the occasion exemplifies an interstate power struggle that resembles those of the Spring and Autumn period, based on intrigue, deceit, and temporary compromise. There is no doubt that historical precedents hold great interpretive power and can lend legitimacy to a state through comparison. After all, political reality is often shaped as a result of the mixture of pure chance, careful calculation, and personal ambition. Framing the current event with a historical example and representing the state and its ruler vis-à-vis models from the past provide a moral rationale for troublesome events—be they military invasion, usurpation, or court massacre. However, the use of “omen” in the above episode showcases both

³⁵ *Shiji*, 5.192-193.

³⁶ In 221 BCE, the Qin conquered all the independent kingdoms in the Warring States period and unified the realm. It thus became the first unified empire in Chinese history.

the anxiety over the gap between an event and its significance and the eagerness of both sides to contain its interpretative possibilities. While past models serve as excellent materials for argumentation, the multifacetedness of classical texts and the deliberate manipulation of exemplars can very well lead to contrasting interpretations.

A long dialogue between a Southern Qi dynasty envoy and a northern emperor aptly illustrates the verbal justification of both military invasion and questionable ascension to the throne. In 494, the Southern Qi official Xiao Luan established and then swiftly deposed two emperors, Xiao Zhaoye 蕭昭業 (472–494) and Xiao Zhaowen 蕭昭文 (480–494). He soon made himself a successor to the throne, known to posterity as Emperor Ming of the Southern Qi. He ordered the execution of nearly all the descendants of the previous Qi rulers. The bloodshed in the southern capital gave Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei good cause for military intervention. The northern ruler led armies down to the south and besieged Shouchun 壽春, which was at the time defended by a southern general Xiao Yaochang 蕭遙昌 (d. 498). Facing a siege, Xiao sent the envoy Cui Qingyuan 崔慶遠 (fl. late 5th century) to negotiate with the northern ruler and inquire the reason of this invasion. After the emperor gave audience to the envoy, Cui Qingyuan articulated:

旂蓋飄飄
遠涉淮泗

風塵慘烈
無乃勞止

Banners and canopies are fluttering,
and you have come from afar to wade across
the Huai and Si rivers.
As wind and dust are bitter and fierce,
would not the people become too tired and miserable?

The emperor responded:

六龍騰躍
儵忽千里
經途未遠
不足為勞

Six dragons soar up to the sky,
and all of a sudden they have traveled thousands of *li*.
The distance they have covered is not long at all,
not enough to make them tired.

In an obvious way, Cui describes the enemy's military campaign as unjustified and burdensome to the northern people. They have traveled a long way in unfavorable weather. "Tired and miserable" (*laozhi*) alludes to a poem in the *Classic of Poetry* titled "People's Burden" ("Min lao" 民勞). According to its preface, the poem was composed by Duke Shaomu 召穆公 to criticize the harsh rule of King Li of Zhou 周厲王 (890–828 BCE). It starts with these lines: "The people are indeed tired and miserable, / hopefully they could get a little repose" 民亦勞止, 汔可小康.³⁷ This textual reference explicitly portrays Yuan Hong as another callous ruler, like King Li of Zhou, who has purposely brought his people into great misery.

In response, Yuan Hong transforms a military campaign into an imperial excursion across heaven. The Six Dragons were often considered to be the carriers of the sun's chariot, and by extension, also that of the emperor. While the campaign was earthly one in Cui's version, Yuan Hong envisions a heavenly journey without dirt and clamor, let alone remoteness or tired people. The traveling speed also reminds one of the gigantic *peng* bird in the Daoist text *Zhuangzi* 莊子, a mythical creature unbounded by worldly limits.³⁸ While the topics of "far" and "tired" in Cui's original question are picked up in this verbal response, the northern ruler uses the vague term "thousands of *li*" (*qianli* 千里) to describe the territory covered without continuing Cui's naming of the Huai and Si rivers—distinct geographical locales and boundaries. Yuan Hong thus not only presents himself as a legitimate, powerful ruler, but also projects a vision from high in the sky that sees all under heaven in an undistinguished expanse.

³⁷ *Maoshi zhushu* 毛詩注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 17.632.

³⁸ See Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 ed., *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), p. 1.

As if to counter Yuan Hong's imperial voice and his grandiose vision from heaven, Cui Qingyuan answered:

We reside in different realms, and you have troubled the carriages to come from afar. Just as Qu Wan said in the past: "I did not expect you to come into our land, what is the reason?"

川境既殊, 遠勞軒駕. 屈完有言: 不虞君之涉吾地也, 何故?

Qu Wan was an envoy of the kingdom of Chu 楚 in the Spring and Autumn period. When the Qi 齊, another kingdom in the north, invaded the Chu, Qu Wan was assigned to inquire about the reason for the military expedition.³⁹ Cui's reply first brings the northern emperor again "down to earth," as he ignores the "Six Dragons" reference and continues with the phrases "carriages" and "tired." While Yuan Hong does not even try to demarcate dynastic boundaries, Cui emphasizes the "difference" (*shu* 殊) between other realms and "our land" (*wudi* 吾地) by quoting a line by Qu Wan. According to the southern emissary, there *is* a proper boundary, and now the northern emperor "treads," also *she* 涉, into their land. Moreover, by citing the speech of a historical figure from the Spring and Autumn period, Cui places Southern Qi and Northern Wei in an equal position, just like the independent kingdoms in the period of division from the past. In this schema, Yuan Hong is not, as he envisions himself, a god-like emperor inspecting the whole realm under the sun.

After the topic of the military expedition, Yuan Hong changed the subject to the questionable dynastic succession in the southern state. It should be noted that Emperor Ming of the Southern Qi was the nephew of the founding emperor Xiao Daocheng. The two emperors whom Emperor Ming deposed were grandsons of Xiao Daocheng—both were legitimate

³⁹ This event happened in 656 BCE. See *Zuozhuan zhushu* 左傳注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, the fourth year of Lord Xi of Lu, 12.201.

successors. The disruption of proper royal succession and the usurpation of the throne by Emperor Ming, a branching scion of the ruling family, prompted Yuan Hong to pose the following questions:

“I have heard that your lord was able to dispel evil successors while not violating the principle of loyalty and filial piety. Then, why did he not establish a close relative of the royal family [i.e., a direct descendant of the founding emperor] as the ruler, [and assist the throne] just like the Duke of Zhou once helped King Cheng of Zhou?⁴⁰ Instead, he was intent on taking the throne for himself.” Qingyuan answered, “King Cheng had the wisdom that can make him a second sage, and therefore the Duke of Zhou could be his minister and help him. At present, even though those family members [i.e., direct descendants of the founding emperor] did not behave immorally, they also did not show worthiness like King Cheng. In the past, [when a similar situation occurred,] Huo Guang too bypassed close kin and established Emperor Xuan.”⁴¹ Yuan Hong said, “If this is the case, would you call Huo Guang a loyal subject if he had claimed himself as an emperor?” Qingyuan answered, “This is not the right analogy. You could continue by asking what the principle was for establishing or not establishing Emperor Xuan. How could our emperor be compared to Huo Guang? If this is the case, why not just say, ‘After King Wu of Zhou defeated King Zhòu of Shang, why did he not establish the official Weizi as a new ruler and assist him?’⁴² [Since King Wu ultimately became the king of Zhou,] did it mean that he simply coveted the world?”

聽卿主克黜凶嗣，不違忠孝。何以不立近親，如周公輔成王，而苟欲自取？慶遠答曰：成王有亞聖之賢，故周公得輔而相之。今近蕃雖無悖德，未有成王之賢。霍光亦捨漢蕃親而遠立宣帝。宏曰：若爾，霍光嚮自立為君，當復得為忠臣不？慶遠曰：此非其類，乃

⁴⁰ According to historical accounts, the Duke of Zhou 周公 was the fourth son of King Wen of Zhou 周文王. The Duke of Zhou joined his brother King Wu of Zhou to topple the evil rule of the Shang dynasty. After the Zhou dynasty was founded, King Wu died. The Duke of Zhou served as a regent to the young King Cheng of Zhou. The duke was respectful to King Cheng and returned power to the ruler after the latter came of age. He was later enshrined by Confucius and his followers as one of the ancient sages. See *Shiji*, 4.132-133.

⁴¹ Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68 BCE) was an influential statesman in the reign of Emperor Zhao of the Western Han (r. 87–74 BCE). After the emperor died without a successor, officials supported the ruler’s nephew, later known as the Earl of Haihun 海昏侯 (92–59 BCE), in his bid to be the new emperor. However, the emperor’s conduct violated ritual propriety and he did not heed remonstrations. Huo Guang deposed him only 27 days after his enthronement and established Liu Xun 劉詢 (91–48 BCE, r. 74–48 BCE), Emperor Xuan, as the ruler. Liu Xun was the grandson of Liu Ju 劉據 (128–91 BCE) who revolted against the ruling emperor in 91 BCE. After the rebellion, this family branch fell into disgrace, and Liu Xun was even thrown into prison when he was young. Emperor Xuan’s ascension to the imperial throne from obscurity demonstrated the power of Huo Guang. Later, people used “the precedents of Yi Yin and Huo Guang” 伊霍事 to refer to the instance in which a court official attained such great power that he could determine royal succession.

⁴² Weizi was a loyal, virtuous official of the Shang dynasty and also the brother of King Zhòu of Shang. He remonstrated with the ruler constantly, but his advice was not heeded. After King Wu conquered the Shang dynasty, he offered fiefdom to Weizi and allowed him to continue the bloodline of the Shang royal house.

可言宣帝立與不立義當云何。皇上豈得與霍光為匹？若爾，何以不言“武王伐紂，何意不立微子而輔之，苟貪天下？”⁴³

After the death of King Wu of Zhou, the Duke of Zhou served as the regent for the young King Cheng. Evoking this historical example, Yuan Hong exposes Xiao Luan's secret desire for the throne. Unlike the Duke of Zhou, who respected the correct dynastic succession without overreaching for power and status, Xiao Luan eliminated the family members who were descended directly from the founding emperor and proclaimed himself the new ruler of the Southern Qi. The incongruence between the historical example and political reality challenges Emperor Ming's legitimacy. In defense—and also praise—of his lord's ascension, Cui acknowledges the validity of the analogy between Xiao Luan and the sage Duke of Zhou, but adds that Xiao Luan was only upheld as a new ruler because no other family member showed such talent and wisdom as King Cheng of Zhou. To further affirm the right of a distant branch of the royal family to receive the throne, the southern envoy alludes to Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68 BCE), a prestigious Western Han minister who manipulated royal succession. Huo deposed Liu He 劉賀 (92–59 BCE), Earl of Haihun, also the grandson of Emperor Wu of the Western Han (r. 141–87 BCE). In his stead, the minister placed on the throne Emperor Xuan (r. 74–48 BCE), the descendant of a disgraced family line allegedly reared outside the imperial court.

While Cui's use of the Huo Guang example aims to illustrate the appropriateness of supporting a distant relative on the throne, Yuan Hong sees in this story an allusion to the unhindered power of a high official meddling with court affairs. Therefore, while continuing the comparison between Huo Guang and Xiao Luan, Yuan Hong exposes their difference through a

⁴³ Wang Ruoqin 王若欽 (962–1025), Yang Yi 楊億 (974–1020) et al., comps., *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 659.7893. Also *Nan Qi shu*, 5.792–794.

hypothetical scenario: if Huo Guang had made himself an emperor (as the minister Xiao Luan did), would he be called a loyal subject? The dilemma for Cui Qingyuan is quite clear. To refer to Huo Guang as a loyal subject if he had snatched the emperorship would be inappropriate, as the act undoubtedly transgresses the boundary between a ruler and his subject. However, defining him as “disloyal” undermines Xiao Luan’s legitimacy, because Xiao indeed transformed from a subject to a ruler after deposing two young emperors. Without answering the question, Cui shifts to the analogy itself and points out its falsity. According to him, Huo Guang’s case is only intended to show the precedent of enthroning a family member distant from the imperial lineage, and venturing a comparison between Huo Guang and Xiao Luan is nothing but absurd. To further elucidate his point, Cui invalidates the Huo/Xiao analogy by introducing another figure, King Wu of Zhou, and his rise to power. It was already a truism by this time that King Wu of Zhou’s toppling of the Shang dynasty was a just cause, in accordance with the will of the people and Heaven. Therefore, it would defy the Mandate of Heaven if Weizi, though he was a wise minister and a Shang royal family member, were established as the king to continue the Shang dynasty rule. Cui Qingyuan’s brilliant reply challenges the northern emperor’s view that there is a fixed relationship between lord and subject and implies the fluidity of the roles (as King Wu, once an official, could defeat the Shang ruler and establish a new kingdom). Thus, Xiao Luan’s ascension is entirely justifiable when the old royal lineage is considered to have lost its virtue, the people’s support, and Heaven’s blessing. Rhetoric can therefore create an idealized world with properly observed principles and easy-to-understand causal effects that conceal the bloodshed, intrigue, and ambition of the real world.

This conversation between an emperor and envoy shows both an objection to and a justification for unjust warfare and problematic usurpation. “This is not a right analogy” (*ci fei qi*

lei 此非其類) indicates the importance of both finding the right analogy to represent the state and its ruler and making the “correct” interpretation of the analogy. The former requires a thorough grasp of cultural knowledge, while the latter demands eloquence and the ability to respond on the spot with answers that accommodate changed perspectives. In a formal edict issued within a state, the comparison between current dynasty and a glorious one of the past is always a given, but this idealized vision loses its potency when members from another state can use the same historical precedent for opposing purposes or cite other historical references to discredit the analogy. Just as in the anecdote above, the Huo Guang example is a double-edged sword: it serves as an appropriate precedent for establishing a distant royal relative on the throne, but it is also used by the other party to expose an official’s unrestrained transgression. Together, the two episodes show that the verbal exchange between state representatives, through evocation and interpretation of past models and exemplars, negotiates and renegotiates the proper status of a state and its ruler’s rightful position. The abundance of historical examples with malleable textual surroundings provide multiple interpretive angles; as a result, the competition over one state’s superiority becomes—often without a final resolution—purely rhetorical manipulation, and the ultimate success depends heavily on the courtier’s broad knowledge, wit, and eloquence.

Geopolitics and the Depiction of Political Center

State’s legitimacy was inextricably bound with geography and the location of its political center. When envoys traveled to the court of a political rival, they related the landscape in front of their eyes with textual references. Sometimes, an analogy was deliberately created to link the royal residence of the enemy state to certain peripheral locales recorded in books, and thus to humiliate the opponents:

Liu Zuan further pointed at the Fang Mountain and asked, “How far is this mountain to the Yanran Mountain?” Li Anshi answered, “Just as far as the Stone Fortress to Panyu.”

續又指方山曰：此山去燕然遠近？安世曰：亦由石頭之於番禺耳。⁴⁴

This conversation took place when Liu Zuan was dispatched as an envoy from the Southern Qi to the Northern Wei in 483. The northern courtier Li Anshi acted as his host. Both royal representatives engaged in a verbal banter that focused on geography—real or imagined—and its implications. The Fang Mountain was a hill adjacent to the capital of the Northern Wei, Pingcheng. The Yanran Mountain (Khangai Mountain, modern-day Mongolia), a famous site by the early medieval period, evokes a glorified history of the Han empire’s conquest and expansion. In 89 CE, the Eastern Han general Dou Xian 竇憲 (d. 92) defeated the troops of the Xiongnu, a nomadic people exerting great pressure on the Han dynasty’s borders. After the victory, Dou Xian climbed on the Yanran Mountain, which previously belonged to the Xiongnu territories, and commanded his military accomplishments to be inscribed on a stele erected there. In the anecdote above, by enquiring the northern capital’s proximity to the Yanran Mountain, Liu implies that the capital Pingcheng is in fact outside the border of the once unified empire, waiting to be conquered and incorporated into the imperial realm. Li Anshi’s response is a clever repartee *par excellence*. The Stone Fortress, near the capital of the Southern Qi, was an important strategic point for its military defense. Panyu, however, is in the far south (modern-day Guangzhou) and often associated in historiography with the “southwest barbarians” 西南夷. Without providing a definite answer to Liu Zuan’s rather provocative question, Li Anshi turns the table around. He claims that however close Pingcheng was to the Yanran Mountain that southerners might have imagined, Jiankang shares the same distance to the “wild” Panyu land.

⁴⁴ *Wei shu*, 53.1175.

This verbal retaliation makes Liu Zuan's offensive remark tarnish as much the authority of the northern state as his home country. Both envoys actively deployed the discourse of the "civilized center" and "barbarian periphery" and constructed a center/periphery dynamic for further claims on cultural superiority.

The sacredness of the state's capital city needs proper justification and representation, especially when several court centers co-existed and competed as the cultural center of the civilized world. Selecting the site for a capital in an age of division depended on a variety of practical reasons, such as its terrain for military defense, population, cultural heritage, and transportation, and so on. Yet to assert the authority of the chosen capital to political rivals, contingencies and pragmatic concerns were to be put aside. Instead, it was crucial that court members display the undisputable legitimacy of their capital city ordained to be the true political center. The conventional associations between a city and its "royal aura" were often brought up or called into question. In the episode below, a northern and a southern official disputed over the cities of Ye 鄴 and Jiankang—the former being the capital of the Eastern Wei dynasty and the latter, the capital of the Liang in the south. The conversation happened in the 530s when Li Xie 李諧 (496–544), an Eastern Wei diplomat, was sent to the south, and Fan Xu 范胥 (fl. first half of the sixth century) was appointed as his host. Compared with more ancient capitals such as Chang'an and Luoyang, both Ye and Jiankang did not enjoy a long history as political centers.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Jiankang was the political center of the Wu 吳 (222–280) in the Three Kingdoms period. After the brief unification of the Western Jin with Luoyang as its capital, Jiankang again became the capital of Eastern Jin and subsequent southern dynasties. The city of Ye was the headquarters of Cao family in the third century when Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) was the powerful general who controlled the last Eastern Han emperor. The city became famous primarily because the princes of Cao family roamed and wrote about their excursion in the city with their retainers. Later in the fourth century, Ye was the capital of the Later Zhao, and the ruler Shi Hu 石虎 (295–349) constructed and renovated many local landmarks. In the second half of the fourth century, it also became the capital of the Yan 燕.

Hence both state representatives marshaled available evidence and mustered their eloquence to offend and defend:

- Fan Xu “Now it is still warm in the south; I gather the north should be slightly colder than here?”
- Li Xie “The northern region resides at the center with balanced *yin* and *yang* forces. [As a result,] hot and cold [seasons] change according to the time. I thereby do not know whether it is higher or lower [in terms of the temperature compared to the southern land].”
- Fan Xu “I was asking about the capital of Ye. How can it be considered as the land to properly measure the shadow [i.e., the ancient capital Luoyang]?”⁴⁶
- Li Xie “They [Ye and Luoyang] both are the places that house royal residences and imperial palaces, indeed not far from each other. They can be treated together.”
- Fan Xu “Since people have been claiming that Luoyang is a prosperous and grandiose capital, to what end did you move the capital to Ye?”
- Li Xie “[As noted in the classical text,] ‘There is no fixed capital, and we have settled in five cities.’ For a king, there is no land beyond his rule. Wherever he stands, there will naturally be rivers and passes [to mark the territory and his authority]. Why are you surprised?”
- Fan Xu “Because the Shang people encountered hardship and danger, they thus constantly changed their capitals. Why did your state also move the capital?”
- Li Xie “A sage remembers what happened in the past and knows about the future. He acts according to the circumstances. Why is it necessary for him to first wait for prosperity or decline [and then act]?”
- Fan Xu “The royal aura of Jinling [i.e., Jankang] has already been seen in previous ages. The auspicious clouds in shapes of yellow banners and purple canopies originally appeared in the southeast. Hence indeed this is the right place that a lord stands commanding millions of states.”
- Li Xie “With regard to the legitimacy of an emperor, how can the south be compared with the “middle kingdom”? Purple canopies and yellow

⁴⁶ “The land to properly measure the shadow” refers to Luoyang, the capital of the previous unified empires, such as the Eastern Han, Wei, and Western Jin. Since 498, Luoyang was also the capital of the Northern Wei until the northern empire collapsed into halves in the 530s. In ancient time, people measured the shadow cast by the sun to calculate time and seasons. Luoyang had been considered the center of the civilized world; thus the measure of the shadow at this location and subsequent mathematical calculations were considered the norm and orthodoxy.

banners ultimately entered into Luoyang. Isn't it that you ended up undermining your own argument? As for the old saying of 'heaven and mouth,' it is only a piece of jest. How is it worth to be mentioned?"

胥問曰：今猶尚暖，北間當小寒於此？”諸答曰：地居陰陽之正，寒暑適時，不知多少。胥曰：所訪鄴下，豈是測影之地？諸答曰：皆是皇居帝里，相去不遠，可得統而言之。胥曰：洛陽既稱盛美，何事遷鄴？諸答曰：不常厥邑，于茲五邦，王者無外，所在關河，復何所怪？胥曰：殷人否危，故遷相耿，貴朝何為而遷？諸答：聖人藏往知來，相時而動，何必俟於隆替？胥曰：金陵王氣兆於先代，黃旗紫蓋，本出東南，君臨萬邦，故宜在此。諸答曰：帝王符命，豈得與中國比隆？紫蓋黃旗，終於入洛，無乃自害也？有口之說，乃是俳諧，亦何足道！⁴⁷

The whole dialogue revolves around the issue of geopolitics. A seemingly innocent question on weather and temperature at the beginning directly changed into a heated debate over political legitimacy.

By the time that this conversation took place, it had already been established that the cultural center featured the most moderate weather, and the borderlands, even foreign lands, were uninhabitable because of extreme weather, monsters, or barbarians.⁴⁸ Fan Xu's comment therefore places the northern region, being "slightly colder" than the south, closer to the "border." Li Xie rebukes this comment by explicitly stating that the northern state resides right in the middle of the harmonious zone with *yin* and *yang* forces balanced. He himself, an inhabitant there, is so accustomed to the perfect weather that he hardly knows about the temperature difference. There is also the geographical relativity of what people considered to the "center" and

⁴⁷ *Wei shu*, 65.1460-61.

⁴⁸ One of the classical texts is "Summoning the Soul" ("Zhaohun" 招魂) in the *Lyric of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭). In the poem, a shaman summons the soul wandering in the four peripheries back to the center. The east, west, north, and south are dangerous places with horrible weather, monsters, or barbarians. The center, in contrast, is safe and supplied with luxurious banquets. During this time of division, similar verbal banter over weather was quite common. Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–583), a southern envoy, came to the Eastern Wei in 540s on a diplomatic mission. His host Wei Shou, claiming his northern state to be the "middle kingdom," mocked Xu Ling to have brought heat from the south. See Yao Cha and Yao Silian, comps., *Chen shu* 陳書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 26.326.

“periphery,” as northerners could regard the southern state as borderland and southerners were equally able to mock the north as uncivilized territories.

Then, the conversation dwells on the “dynastic capital.” Li Xie’s comment that Ye and Luoyang, because of their vicinity, can be both considered to be “imperial area” brings Fan Xu’s question on the justification of moving the northern capital from Luoyang to Ye. Historical accounts about this period tell that after the Northern Wei collapsed, Luoyang became a warzone between the Eastern and Western Wei, in no likelihood to be suitable as a political center. Moreover, the power base of the Gao family, the *de facto* ruler of the Eastern Wei, was in Hebei area, with the city of Ye being its regional center. It made Ye an ideal headquarter for the Gao household. Granted these pragmatic deliberations, Li Xie offers explanation and justification of the change of capital through a historical analogy.

The saying that “there is no fixed capital, and we have settled in five cities” comes from *Classical Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書), one of the Confucian classical texts, which tells that the ancient Shang dynasty changed its capitals several times. While this comparison to some extent can justify the decision of moving the capital, Li still has to account for the reason why Ye was in particular selected. Probably because the city lacked royal presence in its past history, Li Xie then shifted from the “capital” to the “ruler” in offering his explanation and maintained that location in fact matters less than a legitimate sovereign, whose existence simply marks out geographical boundaries. One can see here the dilemma in legitimating a political center with insufficient cultural capital. On the one hand, Li Xie needs to justify the “harmonious” climate of Ye by emphasizing the proximity between Ye and Luoyang, the ancient capital and royal residence. However, on the other hand, the absence of royal presence in Ye in history also

compels him to make the concession that the physical “capital” does not matter as much as the existence of a rightful sovereign.

The lack of Ye’s political capital prompted Fan Xu to offer a proud remark on Jiankang, the capital of the southern dynasty that he served. According to Fan, in contrast to the city of Ye, the “royal aura” (*wangqi* 王氣) of Jiankang had already been shown in previous ages (*xiandai* 先代). The belief that Jiankang emitted royal aura first appeared in the Three Kingdoms period, another period of tripartite division in the early third century. It is mentioned in a letter written by Sima Hui 司馬徽 (d. 208), the famous Master of Water Mirror 水鏡先生 who recommended the erudite strategist Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234) to Liu Bei 劉備 (161–223). One line in his letter reads: “Clouds in shapes of yellow banners and purple canopies can always be seen in the southeast. Therefore, the one who will ultimately save the world should be a lord from Yangzhou” 黃旗紫蓋, 恆見東南. 終成天下者, 揚州之君乎.⁴⁹ The saying remained popular during the Northern and Southern Dynasties as it was often evoked either to celebrate or to deny the sacredness of Jiankang.⁵⁰ Here Fan Xu appropriates this historical precedent to emphasize the city’s history as an imperial center and thus, by implication, the justified rule of the southern dynasty at this very moment.

⁴⁹ Yan Kejun 嚴可均 (1762–1843) comp., *Quan Hou Han wen* 全後漢文, in his *Quan Shanggu sandai Qin Han Sanguo liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), 86.938-2.

⁵⁰ For example, in 554, a northern courtier Fan Xun 樊遜 (d. 565) provided answers to the court examination questions. At one point, he confidently claims that “[Clouds in the form of] yellow banners and purple canopies have long disappeared in the southeast” 黃旗紫蓋, 已絕東南. See Yan Kejun comp., *Quan Beiqi wen* 全北齊文, 7.3867. Zhang Zuan 張纘 (494–549), a southern courtier, in his “Poetic Exposition on Southward Expedition” (“Nanzheng fu” 南征賦) says the opposite: “Therefore, [clouds in the form of] yellow banners and purple canopies show that the legitimacy resides in the direction of *zhen* [i.e., the southeast]. The rise of Jinling [i.e., the southern capital of Jiankang] indeed befits this auspicious omen” 故黃旗紫蓋, 運在震方, 金陵之兆, 允符厥祥. Yan Kejun, *Quan Liang wen* 全梁文, 64.3330.

To dampen Fan's confidence, Li Xie is then quick to distinguish the "middle kingdom" (*zhongguo* 中國) from the "southeast" (*dongnan* 東南), two phrases implying the distinction between the central and peripheral. He also reminds his opponent Fan Xu that in spite of Jiangkang's alleged royal air, history teaches that the kingdom of Wu (with Jiankang as its capital) was ultimately conquered by the Western Jin dynasty whose power base was at Luoyang. According to him, those "purple canopies and yellow banners," instead of being the forms of auspicious clouds, ultimately entered into Luoyang as spoils. Again, as we saw in the previous section, the change of historical references, in this case, from popular saying to historical knowledge, makes Fan Xu's positive remark vulnerable to his rival's challenge.

In addition, "A lord stood commanding millions of states" (*jun lin wanbang* 君臨萬邦) in the southern envoy's statement alludes to a verbal play invented during the Three Kingdoms period by Xue Zong 薛綜 (d. 243), a Wu courtier. Xue Zong was known for his witticism and clever rebuttal. During a court gathering, he succeeded in insulting the envoy from a rival state and meanwhile affirming the authority of his dynasty. He remarked: "[As for the making of a character,] without a "mouth," then it becomes [the character of] heaven; if there is a "mouth," it is [the character of] Wu. The lord stands commanding a million of states at the capital of the Son of Heaven" 無口為天, 有口為吳, 君臨萬邦, 天子之都.⁵¹ Xue Zong's cleverness lies in the dissection and combination of the three characters *kou* 口, *tian* 天, and *wu* 吳 (its upper half being 口 and lower, 天), with their meanings respectively as "mouth" (or "saying," "proclaiming"), "heaven," and the "Wu kingdom." It implies that the Wu is destined to be the recipient of the Mandate of Heaven: if there is silence (without the "mouth" character), then it is

⁵¹ Chen Shou 陳壽 (233–297), *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 53.1250.

Heaven; but as long as the Heaven speaks up (with the “mouth” character added), it will inevitably become the character Wu. However, according to Li Xie, these are simply “words of a jester,” and he dismisses it for lack of credence or persuasiveness compared to other forms of historical knowledge.

In *Tansou* 談藪 (*Gathered Conversations*), an early seventh-century anecdotal collection compiled by Yang Songjie 陽松玠 (fl. late sixth century), the anecdote ends with the southern official Fan Xu’s embarrassing silence.⁵² Another source that records this anecdote is *Wei shu*; as one can imagine, the northern source highlights Li Xie, the northern envoy, as the protagonist who ultimately won this verbal negotiation. In this conversation, the capital Ye, notwithstanding its absence of “royal aura,” becomes “legitimate” through Li Xie’s association of it with Luoyang, past historical precedents, and ruler’s sagacity. Meanwhile, Jiankang, while having supposedly emitted “royal aura” in the past, is derided as Fan Xu fails to come up with another response to redeem its prestige.

The contestation of a capital’s royal power and cultural prestige can also be found in poetic genres, especially in poems composed by envoys themselves. Yu Xin, one of the most famous courtiers in the sixth century, described the city of Ye with a condescending tone during his diplomatic mission there in the 540s. He sent a poem to his northern host Zu Xiaoyin 祖孝隱 (fl. mid-sixth century) to express his thankfulness, in which two couplets read:⁵³

古碑文字盡
荒城年代迷
被隴文瓜熟

On ancient steles, characters all disappear,
and a deserted city is lost in time.
All over the hills, melons with patterns are ripe,

⁵² Huang Dahong 黃大宏 ed., *Badai tansou jiaojian* 八代談藪校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), p. 49. The anecdote can be also found in Li Xie’s biography in *Wei shu*. *Wei shu*, 65.1460-1461.

⁵³ Lu Qinli 逯欽立, *Bei Zhou shi* 北周詩, in his *Xian Qin Han Wei Jin nanbeichao shi* 先秦漢魏晉南北朝詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 2.2358. The poem was brought to my attention in Xiaofei Tian’s seminar on the sixth-century poetry.

交媵香穗低

in crossing paths, scented grain ears are hanging down.

In his depiction, the capital of Ye becomes a deserted city where written records on the stele, a relatively more durable medium, disappear. A city without past becomes lost in history. In contrast, only melons and grains grow in the northern land, and the patterns (*wen* 文) on melons compensate for the disappearance of characters (*wenzi* 文字).

The prominent presence of the “natural”—instead of the “cultural”—in the landscape also appears in northerner’s description of the southern land. The next poem was composed Lu Sidao 盧思道 (535–586), a Northern Qi official. He parted with his friend Sima Youzhi 司馬幼之 (fl. 560s), who was about to embark on a journey to Jiankang in 567.

贈別司馬幼之南聘詩

故交忽千里
輶車蒞遠盟
幽人重離別
握手送行行
晚霞浮極浦
落景照長亭
拂霧揚龍節
乘風遡鳥旌

楚山百重映
吳江萬仞清
夏雲樓閣起
秋濤帷蓋生

Parting from Sima Youzhi who Embarks on a
Diplomatic Mission to the South⁵⁴

All of a sudden, my old friend will travel thousands of *li*,
and the envoy’s light carriage will reach the faraway ally.
The recluse values the moment of departure,
holding hands, I see you off on the journey ahead.
Rosy evening clouds float over remote isles in the distance,
and setting sun shines over the travelers’ waystations.
Brushing off the fog, the Dragon Tally is held up,⁵⁵
riding on the wind, the bird-image banners
go against the current.

The Chu Mountains, hundreds fold, are reflected [in water],
and the Wu River, ten thousands *ren* deep, becomes clear.
Summer clouds rise like towers and terraces,
autumn waves surge, in resemblance to
canopies and curtains.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Lu Qinli, *Sui shi* 隋詩, 1.2633-1634.

⁵⁵ According to the *Rites of the Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), the Dragon Tally is held by the envoy who would come to a Marsh Kingdom (*zeguó* 澤國).

⁵⁶ The analogy between waves and canopies is first mentioned in Mei Sheng’s 枚乘 (d. 140 BCE) “Seven Stimuli” (“Qifa” 七發): “[The waves] being vast and white, in resemblance to the spreading canopies of funeral carriages led by white horses” 浩浩溔溔，如素車白馬帷蓋之張。Yan Kejun, *Quan Han wen* 全漢文, 20.239.

陸侯持寶劍
終子繫長纓
前脩亦何遠
君其勗令名

An Earl Lu holds in hands his precious sword,⁵⁷
and a Master Zhong tightens up his long rope.⁵⁸
How far from us are these worthies in the past?
I hope you will cultivate your good name.

In the poem, the longing for a friend and the sorrow at the moment of departure shift to the descriptions of the southern landscape, and finally, the poem ends with the poet's exhortation and wish of the diplomat's success. The "faraway ally" (*yuanmeng* 遠盟) in the second line indicates the purpose of the journey: to communicate and cement the covenant with the Chen dynasty. However, instead of representing the southern state in political or cultural terms, Lu Sidao seems to deliberately focus on its natural scenery. In the fifth couplet, Chu 楚 and Wu 吳 denote the general southern region, and here its landscape—layered mountains and deep river—is beautifully serene. *Qing* 清 (clear), besides praising the quality of water, also bears the connotation of political pacification. The tranquility and a strong presence of natural scenery continue in the next couplet. Human-made artifacts—towers, terraces, curtains, and canopies—appear, but only to metaphorically describe the shape of clouds, tides, currents, and their movement. While there is no doubt that Lu Sidao knew numerous allusions and cultural references about the south, such as the Yang Terrace in the Chu area or the Stone Fortress in the vicinity of Jiankang, the "south" in this poem is a place devoid of human activities, cultural past, and political significance. The two historical figures, Lu Jia and Zhong Jun, both of whom the poet compares to his friend Sima Youzhi, drives home the message: the south is nothing more

⁵⁷ "Earl Lu" refers to Lu Jia 陸賈 (240–170 BCE), who was appointed by the emperor as an envoy in 196 BCE to Nanyue 南越 (southwestern borders) to persuade the local kings to submit to the Han dynasty.

⁵⁸ "Master Zhong" refers to Zhong Jun 終軍 (133–112 BCE). He served under the reign of Emperor Wu of the Western Han and volunteered to be an envoy to the kingdom of Nanyue to persuade local leaders' submission. He claimed: "I wish to be bestowed with a long rope with which I will definitely noose the king of Nanyu and bring him to the capital tower" 願受長纓，必羈南越王而致之闕下。Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) comp, *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 64.2821.

than a barbarian kingdom to be assimilated into the centralized empire. With sword and rope in hands, Sima Youzhi should, in high expectation of Lu Sidao, establish his name and reputation as memorable as those past worthies.

As for the city that had a rich history being the political center, envoys also saw it with certain ambivalence when it currently served as the capital of a rival state. The following poem was written again by Lu Sidao for his colleague Liu Ti who went on a diplomatic mission to the Northern Zhou dynasty in 564. The kind wish of a safe, successful trip is ultimately turned into an old trope of “summoning the recluse” back to the political center from a precarious nature.

贈劉儀同西聘詩	For Director Liu who Embarks on a Diplomatic Mission to the West ⁵⁹
開邛昔柔遠	With the imperial realm expanding to the Qiong area, the remote regions were pacified in the past, ⁶⁰
賓越盡招攜	as the Yue was subjugated, all people there were summoned and tamed. ⁶¹
豈若馳天使	How can they compare with this heavenly envoy who is galloping forward,
玉節撫遺黎	holding a jade tally, he will placate the ones remaining behind. ⁶²
五祠臨渭北	The five sacrificial temples face over the north of the Wei River,
雙嶺帶嶠西	and two summits encircle the west of the Xiao Mountain.
故關看金馬	At the old Pass, one looks at the Gate of Golden Horse, ⁶³

⁵⁹ *Sui shi*, 1.2634.

⁶⁰ This refers to Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 (179–117 BCE). Sima was appointed by Emperor Wu of the Western Han as an envoy to visit and negotiate with the independent kingdoms to the southwest of the empire. He successfully pacified (*lueding* 略定) southwestern “barbarians,” and rulers of those ethnic states vied to claim to be the subjects of the Han Empire. *Shiji*, 117. 3046–47.

⁶¹ For Zhong Jun allusion, see note 58 in this chapter.

⁶² The “ones remaining behind” (*yili* 遺黎) refer to the people who lost their country. Here the poet portrays those in the realm of the Northern Zhou as people without political belonging.

⁶³ “Gate of Golden Horse” (*jinma men* 金馬門) was the city gate of the capital Chang’an in the Western Han where officials and scholars awaited for imperial summon. It was thus named because there were bronze horses next to the gate. *Shiji*, 126.3205.

餘壇聽寶雞
垂絲被柳陌
落錦覆桃蹊
分袂俄易慘
離思實難齋
極野雲峯合

遙嶂日輪低
塵暗前旌沒
風長後騎嘶

灞陵行可望
函谷久無泥

須君勞旋罷
春草共萋萋

over the deserted altar, one hears the crowing of roosters.⁶⁴
Silky branches are hanging over the willow lane,
and falling brocade [petals] cover the path of peach trees.
Over departure, one will immediately feel sorrowful,
longing for you afterward is indeed hard to bear.
Over the remote wilderness, clouds merge in the form of
a mountain summit,
beside the distant peak, the sun sets down.
Dust darkens and conceals the banners ahead,
blowing wind carries the neighing of
the riders' horses behind.
You will be able to gaze at the Mound Baling,⁶⁵
yet there has not been stronghold to defend Hangu Pass
for a long time.⁶⁶
I hope your tiresome journey would end soon,
and spring grass are growing thick and luxuriant.

While Sima Xiangru and Zhong Jun both helped subjugate remote “barbarians” for the Han dynasty in the past, Liu Ti, a “heavenly envoy” (*tianshi* 天使), according to Lu Sidao, is now accomplishing even greater achievement as he comes to Chang'an to pacify and comfort the people left behind (*yili* 遺黎) at the old capital region. The Northern Zhou dynasty and the theme

⁶⁴ It alludes to a story about Duke Mu of Qin 秦穆公 (r. 659–621 BCE). During his reign, dwellers at the place Chencang 陳倉 encountered two young children. They were told that these two lads were supernatural beings named rooster treasure (*jibao* 雞寶), and that if the male one is captured, the one who catches it can become a king, and if the female one is captured, the one who catches can become a hegemon. People at Chencang thus started pursuing them, and the two lads were transformed into pheasants and fled into the forest. Later, Duke Mu started a great hunting campaign and finally captured the female one. See Li Fang 李昉 (925–996) et als, comps., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 461.3781.

⁶⁵ “Gazing at the Mound Baling” evokes the poem “Seven Sorrows” (“Qiai” 七哀) by Wang Can 王粲 (177–217), a third-century poet. The poem was composed when the Han capital Chang'an was cast in turmoil by rebels and the poet fled from the capital to the south, which he considered as “barbarian lands.” At the end of the poem, the speaker gazes back at the Mound Baling, which is the tomb of Emperor Wen of the Han dynasty whose reign witnessed prosperity and peace. Lu Qinli, *Wei shi* 魏詩, 2.365-366.

⁶⁶ During the transition period from the Western Han to Eastern Han, Wei Xiao 隗囂 (d. 33) occupied the area in today's Gansu province. When Liu Xiu 劉秀 (r. 25–57), future Emperor Guangwu, rose and started to expanding the territories, Wang Yuan 王元, a subject serving under Wei Xiao, persuaded Wei to resist the invasion. Wang Yuan volunteered to be the general defending against Liu Xiu's expedition. He said, “Please allow me to use one mud pellet to seal the Hangu Pass in the east for my king” 元請以一丸泥為大王東封函谷關. Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445) comp., *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 13.525

of diplomatic exchange between the two states are not even hinted in the poem. In the poet's vision, Liu Ti only travels to an ancient, yet forlorn, capital, a realm that has cultural resonance but no political influence. The traveler can see the Gate of Golden Horse of Chang'an and hear the crowing of roosters, allusions indicative of royal or hegemonic status; but they have long been unheeded. The tone is nostalgic, evoking a sense of historical distance between the glory of the past (implied through "golden" and "precious") and the dereliction of the present (as in "old" and "remaining"). The path is untrodden, as willow branches and petals start covering the walking lanes, concealing the already abandoned cultural landmarks. "Those remaining behind" are thus hard to find, hidden at the end of the road covered by vegetation. After the poet expresses his longing, his gaze toward the distant, disappearing diplomatic team is blurred as clouds merge and the sun sets down. Dust darkens the scene, and all he can hear is horses' neighing carried by the wind. The last two couplets demonstrate the disjunction of Chang'an's past from its present and portray the Chang'an region as an alien space to be escaped from. Liu Ti surely can see Baling, the tomb of Emperor Wen of the Western Han, but the Hangu Pass has long been lacking human presence, such as defending generals or officials in charge. The last line alludes to the "Summoning the Recluse" ("Zhao yinshi" 招隱士) in the *Lyrics of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭), one line of which reads: "Princes roam there and do not return, and spring grass grow thick and luxuriant" 王孫游兮不歸, 春草生兮萋萋. The poem describes a dangerous nature whence those who live in the wilderness should be summoned back. It ends with: "Please, princes, come back, you cannot linger long in the mountains" 王孫兮歸來, 山中兮不可以久留.⁶⁷ This image of recluses living in nature outside the realm of governance harks back to Liu

⁶⁷ Hong Xingzu 洪興祖 (1090–1155) comp., *Chu ci buzhu* 楚辭補注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 12.234.

Ti's responsibility to "placate" people left behind, who are beyond the imperial reach, not yet assimilated into the political order. The Chang'an region thereby becomes a space, alien yet familiar, in a stark opposition to the royal authority that the envoy Liu Ti represents. There, traces of past glory are still detectable, but it has long lost the relevancy to the present.

These examples, whether the conversations between state representatives or the poems for envoys, reveal how flimsy the boundary between "center" and "periphery" was and how malleable those concepts of "center" and "periphery" could be. Again, from those contending remarks on geopolitics, we see the effectiveness of rhetorical manipulation to construct a new reality that redefines interstate relations and reimagines their cultural estrangement/affiliation.

Envoys and Hosts: Self-Representation

Diplomats and hosts were the main protagonists in diplomatic missions. Hence how they decided to represent themselves in relation to their rivals also mattered greatly to the state image. In the poems above, we have seen that Lu Sidao carefully chooses appropriate historical figures to draw analogies between them and the envoys. In the case of Sima Youzhi who came to Jiankang, Lu evokes Lu Jia and Zhong Jun, both figures contributing to the submission of Nanyue kingdom, "barbarian lands" in the south, for the Han empire. Historical figures with which an envoy identifies bespeaks the aspired status of the royal power that he represents. The following conversation is an apt example. Cheng Yan 成淹 (fl. late fifth century) was a southern official from the Song dynasty and then defected to the north. When envoys from the Southern Qi came to the Northern Wei in 492, they enquired the reason that the Wei broke off the alliance with the southern state several years ago. Cheng Yan answered that court politics changed based on new circumstances. According to him, the Wei could invade the south, just like the founding

emperor of the Southern Qi could depose the ruler of the Song and establish a new dynasty.

Upon hearing this comment, all the southern envoys were shocked, as it directly challenges the legitimacy of the new southern dynasty. He Xian 何憲 (fl. late fifth century) thus sighed and said to Cheng Yan: “Why do you choose to be a Lu Su, instead of a Yu Jin?” 卿何為不作于禁, 而作魯肅. Cheng Yan then replied: “I left a dangerous state and now serve at another one that follows the Mandate of Heaven. I want to trace the footprints of Chen Ping and Han Xin. How could you compare me to Yu Jin?! 我捨危効順, 欲追蹤陳韓, 何于禁之有.”⁶⁸

Yu Jin was a general under the leader Cao Cao, a warlord in the Three Kingdoms period in the third century. Yu was defeated in 219 by Liu Bei’s general Guan Yu 關羽 (d. 220) and then surrendered to Liu Bei. After Guan Yu was defeated by the Wu, another kingdom based in the southeast, Yu Jin was transferred to Wu’s capital Jiankang and ultimately released to Cao’s kingdom in 221. The other figure Lu Su originally served under the warlord Yuan Shu 袁術 (d. 199). After he met and became good friend with Zhou Yu 周瑜 (175–210), both defected to support most loyally Sun Ce 孫策 (175–200) and then Sun Quan. By referring to these two figures—Yu Jin and Lu Su, He Xian seemed to suggest that since Cheng Yan was initially from the south, he could have acted more like a Yu Jin, who temporarily served for another political power but ultimately returned to his original state, instead of being a Lu Su, who steadfastly defended the second lord that he chose to serve. The historical figures were both from the Three Kingdoms periods, and, as these southern and northern elites would know, none of the three states finally achieved unification.⁶⁹ Therefore, Cheng Yan was not satisfied with this

⁶⁸ *Wei shu*, 79.1753.

⁶⁹ The Wei dynasty established by the Cao family first annexed the Shu. Then a general of the Cao-Wei dynasty, Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179–251), became powerful and controlled the court. His descendant, Sima Yan 司馬炎 (236–290,

comparison. He identified himself with Chen Ping and Han Xin, two generals who previously served in the camp of Xiang Yu 項羽 (232–202 BCE), one contender in the power struggle after the fall of the Qin empire, and ultimately pledged fealty to Emperor Gaozu of the Han, Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 202–195 BCE). Liu Bang defeated Xiang Yu in 202 BCE and then established the Han dynasty. Cheng Yan’s self-representation rejects the kind of interstate relation perceived by southerners and reconfigures the current political situation as that between Liu Bang, a dynastic founder, and Xiang Yu, a defeated usurper. The implication of this analogy—that is, who would ultimately succeed or fail—is clear to all his contemporaries.

Envoy’s self-representation is more prominent in the poetic genre. When Yu Xin came back to the Liang from his mission to the Northern Qi capital, Ye, he wrote the following poem:

反命河朔入武州詩	Back from a Mission from the North of the Yellow River and Entering Wuzhou ⁷⁰
輕車初逐李 定遠未隨班	Earlier I followed the “General of Light Chariot”—Li [Cai], ⁷¹ and have yet to achieve [the accomplishments] as the “Duke of Pacifying the Remote”—Ban [Chao]. ⁷²
受詔祈連返 申威疎勒還 飛蓬損腰帶 秋鬢落容顏 寄言舊相識	I received an edict and returned from the Qilian Mountain, after demonstrating our power there, I came back from Shule. ⁷³ My hair is like flying tumbleweed, and my belt became loosened, autumnal temple hairs are white, and my appearance is withered. Please send a note to my old acquaintance,

r. 265–290), usurped the throne and established the Western Jin dynasty. In 289, the Jin destroyed the kingdom of Wu and unified China.

⁷⁰ *Bei Zhou shi*, 4.2388.

⁷¹ This refers to the Western Han dynasty general Li Cai 李蔡 (148–118 BCE), the brother of another famous general Li Guang 李廣 (189–119 BCE). Li Cai was appointed as the “General of Light Chariot” in Emperor Wu’s reign. He was dispatched to fight against the Xiongnu force in the north.

⁷² The “Duke of Pacifying the Remote” is Ban Chao 班超 (32–102), who was an Eastern Han envoy visiting many kingdoms in the Western Region. In 95 he was enfeoffed as the “Duke of Pacifying the Remote” (*dingyuan hou* 定遠侯) for his efforts in securing the submission of foreign kingdoms.

⁷³ Both the Qilian Mountain and Shule were places to the west of the Han empire, frequently mentioned in the Han dynasty historical accounts.

知余生入關

let them know that I enter the Pass, still alive.⁷⁴

In the poem, Yu Xin identifies himself with the Western Han dynasty generals and diplomats who crushed barbarian invasions and appeased the distant Western Region. The Qilian Mountain and Shule were both places situated to the west of the old capital Chang'an. Even though Yu Xin's mission was to the northeastern part of the Central Plain, the poet uses the established trope—Qilian Mountain and Shule in the northwest—to describe the “foreign land” that he visits and emphasize its political inferiority. The particularity of the journey is not as important as a generalized representation of the imperial center vis-à-vis its periphery and neighbors. In the next couplet, Yu Xin shifts from the public role as an official to a suffering traveler. The disheveled hair, loosened belt, and withering appearance are common images portraying a longing sojourner in the poetic discourse since the third century. These rather personal emotions—joy, relief, fear, and sorrow—are mixed and intensified in the last couplet, as the poet wishes that his old acquaintances would know that he finally returns, still alive. However, even this seemingly personal sentiment is couched in a literary allusion: Western Han general Ban Chao's wish “of entering the Jade Gate Pass again, alive.” Whether in terms of official duties, personal experiences, or emotional responses, Yu Xin assumes the role of a competent, loyal, and prestigious diplomat to be found throughout “history,” who toils and travels on behalf of a “unified empire.”

While a poet may sound more confident on the returning trip, there is much more struggling when he writes about his experience right in the middle of his journey to the foreign land. The very attempt of glorifying the home state is still present, but uncertainty, danger, and

⁷⁴ In one memorial presented to the throne by Ban Chao, he said, “I wish to be able to enter again the Jade Gate Pass alive” 但願生入玉門關. *Hou Han shu*, 47.1583.

pressure brought about by the mission also complicate poet's self-representation. The poem below is by the same envoy Yu Xin who was on the way to Ye. The trip started from the city of Jiankang. The diplomatic team first headed north, and after they crossed the Yangzi river, they arrived at the county Guabu 瓜步, a city of great importance to the defense of the southern capital. In the vicinity, there were a Guabu Mountain 瓜步山 and Guabu River 瓜步江, one tributary of the Yangzi river. It should be mentioned that about one hundred years earlier, in the Song dynasty, the ruler of the Northern Wei, Emperor Taiwu, led a military campaign against the south. The invincible northern troops were stationed at Guabu and threatened to cross the river to attack the capital. It was one of the most serious threats to Jiankang in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and Emperor Wen of the Song had to send delegates to Guabu to negotiate a marriage alliance and tribute payment for their withdrawal. The event should linger in the mind the southerners, as in Bao Zhao's 鮑照 (ca. 414–466) "Inscriptive Writing on the Guabu Mountain" ("Guabu shan jiewen" 瓜步山楬文), the author envisions this particular place, namely, Guabu Mountain, as a dividing boundary separating the north and south: "To the north one looks at the country of felt yurt, and to the south the kingdom of fire radiates" 北眺氊鄉, 南矚炎國.⁷⁵ Now, Yu Xin's team was about to cross the river.

將命使北始渡瓜步江詩

校尉始辭國

樓船欲渡河

輜軒臨磧岸

旌節映江沱

觀濤想帷蓋

Crossing the Guabu River on a Diplomatic Mission⁷⁶

The Military Commandant bids farewell to his home state,
and towering battleships are about to cross the river.

Carriages come through a muddy road
over rocky banks,

and banners and tallies are reflected in the river.

Looking at the waves, one envisions carriage canopies,⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Yan Kejun, *Quan Song wen* 全宋文, 47.2695.

⁷⁶ *Bei Zhou shi*, 4.2387-88.

⁷⁷ For the association between river tide and canopy, see note 56 of this chapter.

爭長憶干戈
雖同燕市泣

猶聽趙津歌

vying for advancement, one remembers weapons and wars.
Even though it is similar to [Jing Ke's] crying
at the market of Yan,⁷⁸
one can still hear the song at the ford of Zhao.⁷⁹

The poem is filled with tension between hostility and reconciliation, violence and peace, and public, heroic resolution and self-doubt and uncertainty. The opening couplet starts with grandiose military images as “battleships” are about to carry the team over. Through the official title “military commandant” (*xiaowei* 校尉), Yu Xin portrays himself as one general within a system of bureaucratic ranking of his “state” (*guo* 國).

Just on the verge of crossing-over, the poet stops and looks around. He sees carriages on the muddy road stand, facing over the rocky riverbanks, and banners and tallies are being reflected in the river. The river, particularly the historical event happening around the Guabu River, brings his mind to an imaginary domain. Observing the waves, the poet first envisions carriages and canopies hassling around. In the “Seven Stimuli,” to which the line alludes, the comparison between tide and canopy is followed by a description of the power of tide that the

⁷⁸ Jing Ke was an assassin in the Warring States period. Before he set out for the mission to assassinate the Qin emperor, a journey that he thought he would never return alive, he drank at the market of the Yan capital and sang a mournful song that made all soldiers weep in tears. *Shiji*, 86.2534.

⁷⁹ “Song of Ford of Zhao” evokes a story in the Spring and Autumn period about an oarswoman and her admirable eloquence. Zhao Jianzi 趙簡子 was the leader of troops against the southern state Chu. On their way to the south, they needed to cross the river of Zhao 趙河, only to discover that the appointed oarsman was too drunk to ferry them over. Enraged, Jianzi ordered him to be executed. The daughter of the oarsman pleaded to Jianzi and explained that her father only drank too much sacrificial wine so that river and wind deities would be appeased and Jianzi could be safely ferried over. Hearing this, Jianzi pardoned the oarsman. Later, the girl proposed that she herself could help Jianzi cross the river. Jianzi claimed that he was a lord, and it was inappropriate to sit in one boat with a woman. The ferry girl replied that King Tang of the Shang 商湯 and King Wu of Zhou defeated respectively the Xia and Shang with female horses beside them. It is thus not against propriety to have an oarswoman beside a righteous army. Jianzi consented. In the middle of the river, the oarswoman sang “Song of River Wave”: “Ascending on that hill, one faces the clear river, / waves surge, and it is deep and dark. / My father prays for a good fortune, but is drunk in sleep, / the lord will execute him which makes her heart startled. / As he is pardoned, and river becomes clear, / she holds the oars and manages the cords. / The dragon will assist and carry the lord back, / upon being called, I will ferry you across. Please do not hesitate.” 升彼阿兮面觀清, 水揚波兮杳冥冥, 禱求福兮醉不醒, 誅將加兮妾心驚, 罰既釋兮濟乃清, 妾持楫兮操其維, 蛟龍助兮主將歸, 呼來櫂兮行勿疑. See Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE) comp., *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), pp. 124-26.

author further compares to military onset and soldiers' procession. Hence, both "carriage canopies" (*weigai* 帷蓋) and "weapons" (*gange* 干戈) carry an undertone of antagonism and violence. However, this competition and hostility between the northern and southern states are meanwhile also mitigated and displaced into the past through the characters "envision" (*xiang* 想) and "remember" (*yi* 憶). The explicit claim of military conquest at the opening gradually yields to the responsibility of a royal emissary aiming for friendliness and peaceful reconciliation.

The final couplet intriguingly complicates the poet's self-representation. Crossing the Guabu River to the enemy's realm in some way bears a resemblance to Jing Ke's crossing of the Yi River 易水, when the latter, on his way to the assassination, sang mournful tones that saddened his followers. The evocation of Jing Ke seems to illustrate Yu Xin's conflicting emotions: desperation and heroic aspiration. Even though his mission was not to assassinate the Eastern Wei emperor, Yu Xin imagines himself to be a messenger who would encounter life-threatening menace and probably never return. The weeping sound (*qi* 泣), signaling worry, sadness, and fear, is then replaced by the song of the Ford of Zhao. The allusion involves an oarswoman who rescued her father from execution and persuaded a military general to do the right thing through her eloquence and wit. More pertinent here is the song that the oarswomansing, which wishes the safety of the general Zhao Jianzi. One line of the song reads: "Dragon will assist and carry the lord back" 蛟龍助兮主將歸. Still a "general," now Yu Xin hopes to be safely ferried across and return unharmed.

In the poem, there is a gradual transformation of the poet's identifications and his emotional response to the mission. The poet starts out to assert the superiority and authority of his state, but on the brink of crossing the border, we see an image of a staunch military general

venturing to the north is transformed to a wandering assassin who exists at the periphery of the empire. Meanwhile, the confidence and pride illustrated at the beginning also change to a sense of sorrow, hopelessness, and anxiety. Ultimately, the allusion to the anonymous oarswoman who brings a general across a river forms a parallel to the diplomat Yu Xin's crossing of the river. It echoes Yu Xin's self-representation as a general in the beginning couplet, but now, in addition to (or instead of) heroism, the general, facing all the uncertainty ahead, also desperately anticipates a safe return.

The last poem to be discussed in the section was written by Yu Xin after he went through much traumatic experience caused by the Hou Jing rebellion in the mid-sixth century. Yu Xin's home state, the Liang dynasty, was toppled, and he was detained in the Northern Zhou dynasty first as a prisoner and then appointed as an official. In the north, because of his erudition, Yu Xin was commanded to serve as the host to receive envoys from other states. The poem below was composed when he received diplomats from the Northern Qi dynasty. As a diplomatic representative, Yu Xin in the poem acknowledges his service to a new political order; but different from the poems that we have read so far, the affirmation of political belonging brings only an elegiac yearning.

對宴齊使	A Banquet with Envoys from the Northern Qi ⁸⁰
歸軒下賓館	Returning carriages are about to leave the guest mansion,
送蓋出河堤	chariot canopies of those seeing off the guests come out to the river embankment.
酒正離杯促	Ale Server is present, and cups for the imminent departure are hastened,
歌工別曲悽	with singers at the seat, songs of parting are sorrowful.
林寒木皮厚	Forest is cold, and the tree bark is thick, ⁸¹

⁸⁰ *Bei Zhou shi*, 4.2385.

⁸¹ The Western Han official 鼂錯 (200–154 BCE) once offered strategies for Emperor Wen of the Han to defend both the northern and southern borders. At one point in the memorial, he describes the northern land in this way: “As for the land of northern barbarians, it is a place with *yin* force accumulated. Therefore, trees have [thick] bark of three *cun* and river can form ice of six *chi*. Meat is the staple food and milk is the drink. People there have tight

沙迥鴈飛低
故人儻相訪
知余已執珪

sandy beach is extending afar, and geese fly low.⁸²
If my old acquaintances inquire [after me],
let them know that I am already holding up the official tablet.

In the poem, an envoy's identification with the state and proclamation of political allegiance hardly lead to glorification. The moment of departure features a banquet where goblets of wine are exchanged and sad music is played. The return of the diplomatic team from another dynasty reminds Yu Xin of political division and his role as a representative of the Northern Zhou sovereignty. Unexpectedly, right in the middle of the banquet, Yu Xin turns his eyes to the natural world. The Qing dynasty 清 (1616–1912) commentator Ni Fan 倪璠 (1637–1704) offered an informing glossary on the third couplet. According to Ni, the poet uses the images of tree bark and low-flying goose for self-reference. The “thickness” (*hou* 厚) describes not only the “tree's skin” in the northern land but also Yu Xin's “face,” meaning the poet mocks his own brazenness and shamelessness in assuming the post at a new dynasty after his home country fell. Also, according to the popular saying at the time, a goose migrating from the south to north—like Yu Xin—can no longer fly high in the sky. Ni Fan comments that the poet analogizes himself as a wing-clipped bird, who is suffering and never to be free. In the original text in *Gujin zhu* 古今注, the goose that flies low is also likely to encounter traps and arrows from hunters. Hence, readers again detect the fear and worry that pervade in all the three poems by Yu Xin as a

muscles and birds and beasts have fine hairs on their bodies. They by nature can resist the coldness” 夫胡貉之地，積陰之處也，木皮三寸，冰厚六尺，食肉而飲酪。其人密理，鳥獸毳毛，其性能寒。See *Han shu*, 49.2284.

⁸² The story about low-flying goose can be found in Cui Bao's 崔豹 (fl. late third century) *Commentaries on the Present and Past* (*Gujin zhu* 古今注): “When geese fly from the north of the Yellow River to the south of the Yangzi River, they are thin and light, able to fly high. Therefore, they do not fear traps and arrows. To the south of the Yangzi river, the land is fertile. When they return to the north of the Yellow River, they become fat and not able to fly high. Lest the hunters catch them, they often hold in beak reed of several *cun* in length. In this way they can fend off traps and arrows.” 雁自河北渡江南，瘦瘠能高飛，不畏繒繳。江南沃饒，每至還河北，體肥不能高飛。恐為虞人所獲，嘗銜蘆長數寸，以防繒繳焉。Wang Genlin 王根林 ed., *Han Wei liuchao biji xiaoshuo daguan* 漢魏六朝筆記小說大觀 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999) p. 240.

state representative. Finally, similar to the first poem that we have read in the section by Yu Xin, the poet ends this verse with a hope to pass on the information to old acquaintances. While the message in the previous poem of “entering the Pass alive” is optimistic, this poem ends with the poet’s “holding up an official tablet” (*zhigui* 執珪), indicative of his supposed loyalty to a new dynasty. However, this announcement of “service,” instead of convincing the guests of the superiority of the Northern Zhou dynasty, is to be passed on by them to the poet’s former friends. The very politically charged note is connected to the poet’s past, a past associated with loyal friends and hometown that Yu Xin treasures nostalgically. The poem still features the relation between self and state, but the rather simple correspondence between dynastic power and an envoy’s self-representation is complicated by Yu Xin’s experience of chaotic rebellion, dynastic fall, and detainment. There is conflicted loyalty, and the gesture of “holding up of the official tablet” in a different dynasty only brings up the questions of betrayal, compromise, danger, and nostalgia.

Like-mindedness, Mutual Understanding, and the Poetic Expression of Friendship

In spite of the antagonism and competition between envoys and hosting officials, there also appeared to be friendliness and veneration among the elite members coming from different court centers. After all, hostility could easily turn into admiration. In 537, Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty received two northern envoys Li Xie and Lu Yuanming 盧元明 (fl. 530s) in the southern court. The sovereign questioned them on a variety of subjects, including ritual antecedents, interpretations of the classics, and history. The northerners answered fluently and appropriately. Afterward, Xiao Yan whispered to his chief courtier Zhu Yi: “Today I encountered powerful enemies. You often said that there was no talent in the north. [If that is the

case,] where do these people come from?” 朕今日遇勍敵，卿輩常言北間都無人物，此等何處來。⁸³ Although he still refers to the northern diplomats as “enemies,” Emperor Wu’s tone betrays his respect for these learned courtiers. This kind of appreciation for royal envoys from a rival state was only possible because of shared criteria for evaluating the competence of a diplomat or a member of elite in general. Not only eloquence, familiarity with a wide range of past antecedents, easy personality, and other fine qualities were commended, literary talent, more specifically, the ability to write good poems and prose pieces, also became an important yardstick to measure a diplomat’s competence. Hence a diplomatic visit often became a celebrated occasion for court banquets, literary compositions, and casual discussions on a variety of writings and composition skills. In these cases, admiration of talent, sometimes even in the form of friendship, replaced hostility, and it also challenges our assumption of envoys’ “irreconcilable” conflict due to the existence dynastic boundaries and political allegiance.

Reputation traveled internationally, and the encounter between an envoy and his host was one of the places where fame was generated, affirmed, and disseminated. It was common that an envoy came to another state specifically asking to meet with the erudite courtiers that he had heard so much at home. For example, when Liu Shanming arrived at the Jiankang court in 520, he inquired to converse with Zhang Zuan 張纘 (499–549) and Wang Xi 王錫 (fl. early sixth century) whose reputation had long spread in the north. The emperor permitted. After banqueting and conversing with them, Liu sighed: “In one day I got to know two worthies, and they indeed are what I expected. Without such gentlemen, how could a state be built?” 一日見二賢，實副所

⁸³ *Bei shi*, 43.1604.

期, 不有君子, 安能為國.⁸⁴ Liu came to the south to attest the hearsay about southern officials, and skepticism was finally turned into veneration.

Also quite illustrating is Song Bian 宋弁 (451–499), a Northern Wei diplomat who came to Jiankang in 492. The famous courtier-poet Wang Rong 王融 (467–493) was appointed as his host. Song Bian eagerly asked Wang Rong to bring out his “Preface to Poems Composed at the Winding River Bank Banquet on the Third Day of the Third Month” (“Sanyue sanri qushui shi xu” 三月三日曲水詩序), which, according to Song Bian, was regarded by northern people as equally exquisite as the writings of Yan Yanzhi 顏延之 (384–456). Wang Rong agreed. Having finished reading this, Song praised: “In the past when I looked at the documents on *feng* and *shan* rituals by Sima Xiangru, I was able to know the virtue of Emperor Wu of the Han; now as I peruse the poetry preface by Master Wang, I can see the prosperity of the King of Qi” 昔觀相如封禪, 以知漢武之德. 今覽王生詩序, 用見齊王之盛.⁸⁵ Even though Song Bian carefully refers to the Southern Qi emperor as a “king,” the analogy between the Han empire and the Southern Qi does confirm the splendor of the latter. Wang Rong’s piece of writing is upheld as a manifestation of dynastic prosperity. This anecdote showcases the generation, recognition, and circulation of fame during diplomatic missions. Song Bian’s request sought to corroborate what he had known about Wang Rong prior to the visit, and finally, his applause and admiration, recorded and witnessed by people present, would become another source of rumor about Wang Rong’s literary talent circulating in both northern and southern states.

⁸⁴ *Liang shu*, 21.326.

⁸⁵ *Nan Qi shu*, 47.821.

While the broad circulation of words and literary writings contributed to the traveling of fame, face-to-face conversation between envoys and hosting officials led to a more intimate kind of relationship. Theoretically, an envoy was supposed to fulfill his mission while maintaining a certain distance with the officials of another state. As the *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial* (*Yili* 儀禮), one of the Confucian classics about ritual propriety, prescribes: “As a subject, there should not be personal relation with [those from] other states. It is to prevent disloyalty to his lord” 為人臣者無外交, 不敢貳君也.⁸⁶ However, in some cases, political duty notwithstanding, there were convivial moments when courtiers from different states enjoyed each other’s company and formed friendship: they sent and commented on poetry, discussed possible interpretations of cultural references, expressed sorrow over the coming departure, and conversed on music and its significance, in which case their relation can literally be called “[friends who] know the tone” (*zhiyin* 知音).

Many stories give a glimpse of this more personal dimension about diplomatic missions. For instance, Xu Junfang 徐君房 (fl. 540s), a southern host who had little capacity for alcohol, made an exception for his northern guests who were about to leave, and drank up a huge goblet of ale, sighing that after today there might never be a reunion. On the same occasion, Yu Xin too brought out jars of the finest ale that his family had acquired and presented to the northern envoys as gifts. He explained that without his northern friends, he would never drink them alone.⁸⁷ One can see that beneath the public roles of “envoy” or “host,” there was a level of intimacy that could exist between two individuals. Moreover, under the background of social

⁸⁶ *Yili zhushu* 儀禮注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 21.249.

⁸⁷ Duan Chengshi 段成式 (803–863) comp., *Youyang zazu* 酉陽雜俎 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 12.113.

chaos and dislocation, diplomatic experience at another court also engendered complex feelings that mixed joy and sorrow. When Fang Yanxun 房彥詢, the uncle of the future Tang courtier Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578–648), served in the Northern Zhou dynasty, he received as a host the southern envoy Jiang Zong 江總 (519–594), and the two became good friends. By the time the Chen dynasty fell and Jiang was taken to Chang'an, Fang Yanxun had already passed away. Jiang found Yanxun's brother, Fang Yanqian 房彥謙 (547–615), and expressed his regret to hear the news: "In the past, I was on a diplomatic mission, and I had a chance to express [my admiration] in kind words [to him]"昔因將命, 得申言款.⁸⁸ The early seventh-century historians who recorded this anecdote also added that in the literary collection of Jiang Zong, one could still find poems that Fang Yanxun once sent to him. In this case, friendship was commemorated even after death, dynastic fall, and traumatic experience.

The questions that can be asked from these observations are: How did envoys and hosting officials conceive of their mutual admiration and their allegiance to political powers? How could friendship be expressed? How were shared cultural conventions able to contribute to mutual understandings? What role did poetry compositions, citation of poetic lines, and remarks on poetry play in forming and conveying interpersonal appreciation? In this section, I will examine anecdotes on the happy gatherings among officials from different states and poetry composed by them. I suggest that in addition to competition and negotiation of political legitimacy, historical stories, figures, and past examples also provide a discursive space where mutual understandings can be achieved and friendship can be formed.

⁸⁸ *Bei shi*, 39.1416.

Building “Like-mindedness” through Textual References

Dynastic histories are laden with instances where one ruler or courtier offered appreciative remarks on an envoy from another rival state. Sometimes the praise verges on being hyperbolic. In *Wei shu*, for example, it is recorded that Emperor Wu of the Liang commanded his envoy Zhang Gao 張皋 to make a copy of the writings of Wen Zisheng 溫子昇 (496–547), the famous northern talent. Having read the copy, Xiao Yan expressed his wonder: “Cao Zhi and Lu Ji were reborn in the north. I feel regretful that men of letters in our domain suffered from great disaster 曹植陸機復生於北土。恨我辭人，數窮百六.”⁸⁹ Both Lu Ji and Cao Zhi were famous third-century writers who were later canonized as the masters of poetry. In this case and many other, praising remarks bear considerable resemblance to those in *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (*A New Account of the Tales of the World*), where character judgment features prominently as an important elite activity in the period of Northern and Southern Dynasties.⁹⁰ What I am more interested in showing is how poetry was used to express feelings of appreciation.

The Chen dynasty dispatched its Imperial Secretary Zhou Hongzheng [to the Northern Zhou] as an envoy. Zhou Hongzheng had long heard the fame of [Wei] Xiong and thus requested a meeting. The Zhou court permitted. Hongzheng visited Wei Xiong. They conversed for a whole day, regretting that they knew each other this late. Later Hongzheng invited Xiong to the guest house, and Xiong did not come in a timely manner. Hongzheng thus sent a poem, one couplet of which reads: “The Virtuous Star has not yet moved, / and how is the True Carriage willing to come?” Wei was admired by his contemporaries to such an extent.

⁸⁹ *Wei shu*, 85.1876.

⁹⁰ For example, when the Eastern Wei court selected Cui Ling 崔陵 (fl. first half of the sixth century) to be the envoy, he declined by saying that “As for literary refinement and knowledge, I did not claim inferior to Li Xie. But as for eloquence, Li Xie was absolutely superior” 文采與識，陵不推李諧。口頰翩翩，諧乃大勝。Li Xie was then appointed as the Eastern Wei’s diplomat. *Bei shi*, 43.1604. When Wei Shou came to the southern state as an envoy, he and his followers purchased southern maids and brought them to guest house for pleasure. Liang officials were even punished for this. People at the time praised Wei’s talent but disparaged his lack of morality 稱其才而鄙其行. *Bei Qi shu*, 37.485.

陳遣其尚書周弘正來聘，素聞夙名，請與相見。朝廷許之。弘正乃造夙，談謔盈日，恨相遇之晚。後請夙至賓館，夙不時赴。弘正仍贈詩曰：德星猶未動，真車詎肯來。其為時所欽挹如此。⁹¹

Wei Xiong was a semi-recluse figure who was admired by the royal members of the Northern Zhou, including Emperor Ming (Yuwen Yu 宇文毓, r. 557–560), Yuwen Hu 宇文護 (513–572), Emperor Wu (Yuwen Yong 宇文邕, r. 560–578), and Emperor Xuan (Yuwen Yun 宇文贇, r. 578–579). He was bestowed with the honorable title “Duke of Free Roaming” 逍遙公. The “Virtuous Star” was a propitious omen for a prosperous state or a state that would see the coming of worthies. According to *Shiji*, after Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty performed the *feng* and *shan* rituals in 110 BCE, odd stars appeared in the sky. Ritual experts explained the phenomenon as: “Your Majesty initiated *feng* and *shan* rituals for the house of the Han. Therefore Heaven repays you with the Virtuous Star.” 陛下建漢家封禪，天其報德星云。⁹² “True Carriage” should be a Daoist term, referring to the path to the enlightenment.⁹³ The couplet portrays Wei Xiong as a latter-day Virtuous Star that forebodes the existence of worthies in the state, and the poet describes the anticipated visit as the arrival of enlightenment. Probably because of the unreserved praise from an official of a rival state, historians incorporated the anecdote in dynastic history to showcase the widely acknowledged reputation of Wei Xiong.

In addition to sending poetry, envoys and the ruler also quoted poetic lines or couplets by famous poets in earlier times to notify their intentions. The tradition of “reciting poetry” (*fushi*

⁹¹ *Zhou shu*, 31.545.

⁹² *Shiji*, 28.1399.

⁹³ Su Ting 蘇廷 (672–707), a Tang courtier, wrote a poem on visiting a Buddhist temple with a line that reads: “While asking for the ford, I see the bank over there/ when getting lost, I acquire the true carriage” 問津窺彼岸，迷路得真車. *Bi'an* has a variant as “Mirror of Dharma” (*fajing* 法鏡).

賦詩) and making manifest the envoys' intention through quoted poetic lines can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn period. Particularly in the *Zuo Tradition* of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu zuozhuan* 春秋左傳), envoys and their hosts often cited either whole poems or couplets from the *Classic of Poetry* to announce their political vision and negotiate cultural differences.⁹⁴ However in the example below, the act of quoting and interpreting poetry did not serve any grand political purposes; rather, it became a conduit to convey longing and sorrow on a more personal note. Li Biao 李彪 (444–501), a very famous courtier from the Northern Wei, came to Jiankang as an envoy for several times. On the day of the departure:

When Li Biao was about to return to the north, Xiao Ze [i.e., Emperor Wu of the Southern Qi] in person had a conversation with him. Xiao Ze asked, “Last time when you were about to leave, you recited one couplet of Ruan Ji’s poem—“I wish that there will always be leisure and free time, / and I will again return and roam here years later.”⁹⁵ Then, you indeed came back as the couplet indicates. Now you are going to leave again, is there a chance that you will come back?” Li Biao replied: “Please allow me to recite another couplet of Ruan Ji’s poem—“There are grand banquets at the Capital of Purity, / after leaving, I will never come back.”⁹⁶ Xiao Ze became melancholy, saying: “It is acceptable [to call Luoyang, the northern capital] the ‘Capital of Purity,’ but why the ‘after leaving’ line? From this couplet, it seems that there will never be a time for a reunion. We should arrange a special farewell event to see you off.” Xiao Ze thus in person came to the city of Langye and climbed on the mountain while facing the water. He asked all the officials to compose poems to commemorate Li Biao’s departure. The envoy was respected like this. Li Biao had come to the south as an envoy for six times in all, and southerners felt extraordinarily impressed by his frankness and honesty.

⁹⁴ For a recent study, see Wai-ye Li, “Poetry and Diplomacy in the Zuozhuan.” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*, 1 (Nov. 2014): pp. 241–261. See also Mao Zhenhua 毛振華, *Zuozhuan fushi yanjiu* 左傳賦詩研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2011).

⁹⁵ Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263), a third-century poet and eccentric, was upheld as one of the best poets in the literary tradition by readers in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. He was famous for a series of poems titled “Singing My Cares” (“Yonghuai” 詠懷). There were commentaries on his poems in the fifth century. In the early sixth century, Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (ca. 468–518), in his renowned *Grades of Poets* (*Shi pin* 詩品), places Ruan Ji in the first rank. This couplet appears in one of Ruan Ji’s “Singing my Cares.” See *Wei shi*, 10.508. For a brief introduction to Ruan Ji, his poetry, and his time, see Stephen Owen’s “Introduction” in *The Poetry of Ruan Ji and Xi Kang* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 3–25.

⁹⁶ This couplet does not appear in the extant corpus of Ruan Ji.

彪將還, 蹟親謂曰: 卿前使還日, 賦阮詩云: 但願長閑暇, 後歲復來遊, 果如言. 今日卿此還也, 復有來理否? 彪答言: 使臣請重賦阮詩曰: 宴衍清都中, 一去永矣哉. 蹟惘然曰: 清都可爾, 一去何事? 觀卿此言, 似成長闊, 朕當以殊禮相送. 蹟遂親至琅邪城, 登山臨水, 命羣臣賦詩以送別, 其見重如此. 彪前後六度銜命, 南人奇其謇諤.⁹⁷

Ruan Ji's 阮籍 (210–263) poetic corpus, especially his series of “Singing My Cares,” was popular in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Not only did Yan Yanzhi and Shen Yue, both prestigious southern courtiers, write commentaries on Ruan's poems to draw out their implications, but elite members of the time also composed in the voice of Ruan Ji or in imitation of Ruan's poetic style. In the early sixth century, the critic Zhong Rong 鍾嶸 (ca. 468–518) admitted that Ruan Ji's poems were so full of profound meanings and unrestrained feelings that people could no longer understand the truth behind his poetic expression.⁹⁸ There subsequently appeared an interpretive trend that situates each of Ruan Ji's poems in a specific political context of the poet's life. Interestingly, while readers are baffled by the “true” meaning of Ruan's poetry, the anecdote cited above shows that the historical context of Ruan Ji's composition (including the poet's biography), which could supposedly anchor the interpretations, did not matter at all in the diplomatic context. Neither Xiao Ze nor Li Biao saw a problem with fragmenting Ruan's poems and applying them to explain the current situation.

In this anecdote, even though we do not know under what circumstances Li Biao cited Ruan Ji's poem in his previous visit, the ruler Xiao Ze remembers the poetic lines well and brings them up to confirm the consistency between the poetic message and its outcome. Poetry is regarded as a trustworthy sign that foretells future events. Xiao Ze thus inquires the applicability of these lines (“I wish that there will always be leisure and free time, / and I will again return and

⁹⁷ *Wei shu*, 62.1390.

⁹⁸ Cao Xu 曹旭 annot., *Shi pin jizhu* 詩品集注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994), p. 123.

roam here years later”) to the current situation. In response, Li Biao acknowledges the power of the poetic message to augur and confirm the reality, but he cites another couplet from Ruan Ji to explain the altered circumstances. The two lines (“There are grand banquets at the Capital of Purity, / after leaving, I will never come back”) do not appear in the received poetic corpus of Ruan Ji. But based on the poetic images introduced here, the original poem seems to be on the theme of immortal roaming (*youxian* 遊仙), a favorite poetic motif in the third century. In this sub-genre of poetry, the speaker often roams freely in a transcendental realm and leaves behind all his mundane cares. *Qingdu* 清都 (Capital of Purity) indicates an otherworldly space where one can attain a blissfully enlightened state. By the Six Dynasties, it was frequently used to refer to the royal residence.⁹⁹ Li Biao’s message is clear: he will never be able to return to the south, as this was his last mission. In this way, “Capital of Purity” refers to the northern capital of Luoyang, where the envoy aspires to remain for eternal enjoyment (with grand banquets); Jiankang, the southern capital, is the mundane world to be rejected and left behind. Hearing this, the southern emperor sadly acknowledges that it is acceptable for Li Biao to speak of Luoyang as the Capital of Purity (implying Jiankang’s inferiority). But it simply hurt him to know that the honest, erudite envoy would never return for a visit. The ruler’s response, described as *wangran* 惘然 (melancholic), has a variant in *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 as *xuanran* 泫然 (tearful), which indicates even more emotional intensity.¹⁰⁰

In the end, the southerners’ admiration for Li Biao was commemorated by a banquet and poetry composition, in which the ruler, officials, and probably also the diplomatic team

⁹⁹ For example, in one of Xie Tiao’s poems in response to Prince Sui, Xiao Zilong 蕭子隆 (474–494), one couplet reads: “In clear autumn, we roam in the Capital of Purity / maids with tall hairpins serve in the orchid chamber” 肅景遊清都, 脩簪侍蘭室. Lu Qinli, *Qi shi* 齊詩, 4.1446.

¹⁰⁰ *Cefu yuangui*, 660.7897.

participated. While historical accounts like *Zuozhuan* are filled with instances where political legitimacy, ethnic identity, and hegemonic status were negotiated through citing lines from *Shijing*, what makes this anecdote remarkable is both the use and interpretation of Ruan Ji's poetry in a diplomatic context and the rather "personal" sentiment expressed by the southern ruler toward an envoy through this poetic exchange. Xiao Ze's respect for the Li Bian seemed even able to tolerate the latter's somewhat impertinent remark, an indication of Li Biao's "frankness and honesty," (*jian'e* 謇諤)—a characteristic that southerners marveled at.

In addition to poetry citing, interpersonal bonds were also formed through commenting on poetry or literary writings in general, as the episode below shows:

The Liang dynasty sent Ming Shaoxia (Gentleman Attendant at Palace Gate), Xie Zao (Governor of Moling), Wang Zuanchong (Administrator of the Xinwei County), Xiao Kai (Instructor of Prince Xuancheng), Yuan Xia (Senior Recorder), and He Wenfa (Senior Recorder for Comprehensive Duty) to have a banquet with northern envoys, Li Qian and Cui Jie. After casual chats, Shaoxia cited one poem that Li Qian sent to him previously and commented, "[The line] 'Rustling are the wind-blown curtains'—hazily I can visualize in my mind." Li Qian answered: "It is not as good as 'The candlewick [lit., lamp flower] becomes cold and not yet congealed [lit., bearing fruit].' It excellently befits the circumstance." Shaoxia's responding poem contains this line.

梁遣黃門侍郎明少遐, 秣陵令謝藻, 信威長史王纘沖, 宣城王文學蕭愷, 兼散騎常侍袁狎, 兼通直散騎常侍賀文發宴魏使李騫, 崔劼。溫良畢, 少遐詠騫贈其詩曰: 蕭蕭風簾舉, 依依然可想。騫曰: 未若燈花寒不結, 最附時事。少遐報詩中有此語。¹⁰¹

It is unfortunate that only one line survives from both Li Qian's and Ming Shaoxia's poem.

Moreover, this succinct anecdote fails to provide more context for an analysis. We know that the year when the dialogue took place was freezing cold (mentioned in the follow-up conversation that was not cited here), which may explain the focus of the two extant lines being domestic, chilly scenes. Li Qian's line describes wind blowing through the door that raises curtains. The recipient of this poem, Ming Shaoxia, praises its evocative power as he can visualize (*ke xiang*

¹⁰¹ *Youyang zazu*, 12.112.

可想) this scene in mind. To reciprocate this kind remark, Li singles out one line from Ming's responding poem: "The candlewick becomes cold and not yet congealed." This line has a double entendre. A literal understanding of the line would be the lamp flower (*denghua* 燈花) can hardly bear fruit (*bu jie* 不結) under such trying weather; yet through literary references, it describes the candlewick and wax, while remaining cold, are not yet congealed. This line should befit the occasion of a banquet at the moment of conversation, when the wind blows outside and a source of warmth and brightness remains in the chamber. This might be the reason that Li Qian comments that it excellently befits the current circumstance (*zui fu shishi* 最附時事). The two poets applaud poetic lines from different angles. Ming espouses the descriptive generality and a scene's evocative power, whereas Li emphasizes the particularity of an experience captured in a poetic form.

In addition to commenting on poetic lines, northerners and southerners were also engaged in discussions on literary composition in general. Their conversations indicate that not only contemporary famous writings were disseminated and widely known in both north and south, elites from different court communities were also familiar with, and trained in, the shared cultural conventions and the knowledge of literary history.

[Once] Yu Xin composed a poem that used an allusion from *Miscellaneous Accounts from the Western Capital*. Then he swiftly rejected and changed it, saying that, "This is the words of Wu Jun. I am afraid that I cannot use it." Cui Zhaoshi from the [Eastern] Wei said, "There were many cases where the ancients secretly appropriated phrases from elsewhere. As for the 'Poetic Exposition on Parrot,' it is included in the collections of both Mi Heng and Pan Ni. Also, for the 'Poetic Exposition on Playing Chess,' Cao Zhi's shares the language as Zuo Si's. For the intentions of the ancients, how could they be similar like this?" Xu Junfang said, "Writers of verse liked to adopt words and phrases from one another without changing one character. Indeed latecomers would not be able to distinguish them." Wei Jin from the Wei said, "Some also said that the 'Nine Paraphernalia' was in fact composed by Wang Can, and the 'Discourse on the Six Dynasties' might be by Cao Zhi." Yu Xin said, "There is no talented man now in the south. As for the one whom the world praises such as Wen Zisheng, his reputation

prevails in the city of Ye. I often read his verse and prose, and they are worthy of this wide reputation. Recently I acquired several *juan* of stele inscriptions written by Wei Shou. The vocabulary is rich, and the style is unrestrained. Indeed a great talent.”

庾信作詩，用西京雜記事，旋自追改，曰：此吳均語，恐不足用也。魏肇師曰：古人托曲者多矣。然鸚鵡賦，禰衡潘尼二集並載；弈賦，曹植左思之言正同。古人用意，何至於此？君房曰：詞人自是好相采取，一字不異，良是後人莫辯。魏尉瑾曰：九錫或稱王粲，六代亦言曹植。信曰：我江南才士，今日亦無。舉世所推如溫子升，獨擅鄴下，常見其詞筆，亦足稱是遠名。近得魏收數卷碑，制作富逸，特是高才也。¹⁰²

In the early sixth century, Wu Jun’s poetic style was in vogue in the south for its “purity and an air of the ancient” (*qingba you guqi* 清拔有古氣).¹⁰³ This episode provides another piece of evidence that Wu Jun had a hand in compiling the famous *Xijing zaji*, an anecdotal collection about the Western Han capital Chang’an. The authorship or editorship of this collection has been disputed by scholars. There are several hypotheses of the date of compilation of *Xijing zaji*, ranging from the first century to the sixth century CE.¹⁰⁴ Without immersing ourselves in the bibliographical investigation, we can notice that at least in this anecdote Yu Xin considers that this collection is associated with Wu Jun and that he should avoid using either the phrases or allusions found in this collection. He feels compelled to give due credit to Wu Jun’s “originality” and finds other ways to showcase his own poetic voice. Yet the fact that Yu Xin makes this apology in front of northern officials implies that the northerners would, too, know about Wu Jun, a famous southern poet, its stylistic attribute, and the *Xijing zaji* collection circulating in different circles.

¹⁰² *Youyang zaju*, 12.112.

¹⁰³ *Liang shu*, 49.698.

¹⁰⁴ Two candidates are Liu Xin 劉歆 (50 BCE–23 CE) and Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343). See *Xijing zaji jiaozhu* 西京雜記校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991), pp. 1-5.

Yu Xin's self-awareness and "anxiety of influence" incur a discussion about writings by the ancients. The "Poetic Exposition on Parrot" is included in the sixth-century anthology *Wen xuan* 文選 (*The Anthology of Refined Literature*) under the author Mi Heng, and the "Poetic Exposition on Playing Chess," no matter whether it was composed by Zuo Si or Cao Zhi, no longer survives. Cui Zhaoshi admits that authors in the past did imitate, borrow phrases, or even write in another's name, but it is confusing to him that the same piece of writing can be attributed to more than one author. Xu Junfang confirms this observation. In his opinion, "writers of verse" (*ciren* 詞人) often adopt and appropriate lines from each other. If they decide not to change anything, then indeed latecomers would have a hard time assigning authorship. By saying this, Xu also approves Yu Xin's act of revision at the beginning to distinguish Yu's poetic language from Wu Jun's. While Xu mentions "writers of verse," Wei Jin continues and points out that unrhymed composition encounters the same issue. Both the "Nine Imperial Paraphernalia" and "Discourse on Six Dynasties" can now be found in *Wen xuan*, respectively under the authorship of Pan Xu 潘勗 (d. 215) and Cao Jiong 曹冏 (d. 226). But apparently, according to Wei Jin, they were also attributed to Wang Can and Cao Zhi, both third-century writers much praised during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The conversation starts with Yu Xin's apology, then develops to a discussion on stylistic appropriation in past writings, and now to the investigation on textual history.

What prompts Yu Xin to praise northern writers and scorn southern elite is unclear. It might be the case that when Yu Xin speaks of "talent" (*caishi* 才士), he refers to those who can compose both verse (Xu Junfang's *cishi*) and unrhymed prose. In his comments on Wen Zisheng and Wei Shou, both renowned northern courtiers, Yu particularly pays compliment to Wen's "rhymed and plain prose" (*cibi* 詞筆) and Wei's "stele inscription" (*bei* 碑). "Rich and

unrestrained” (*fuyi* 富逸), a phrase Yu Xin uses to praise Wei Shou’s writings, also seems to contrast his own composition at the beginning of the episode. He was confined and cautious, opposite to *yi* (“unrestrained”), due to his awareness of literary precedents and the danger of cliché.

This episode describes a moment, rarely seen in historical records, when northern and southern elite engaged one another in a meaningful discussion on literary writings, both present and past. One can see that not only poetry composition was common during diplomatic visits, their composition could also be evaluated based on the commonly known contemporary literary trends and past canons. Moreover, the judgment on literary talent, at least shown from this episode, is dissociated from the need to assert dynastic pride and a state’s cultural superiority.

In our last example, northern envoys and southern officials enjoyed a banquet together. During the feast, they conversed on music, cited historical and cultural references, and explored their significance. The verbal exchange was intended as a light-hearted competition, as all participants endeavored to outdo others by referring to the appropriate historical examples as witty responses. However, the contestation was ultimately turned into laughter, and the music in the background that initiated the conversation brought about harmony and conviviality to this delightful occasion.

The Liang held a banquet for the Wei envoys, Li Qian and Cui Jie. Music was played. Liang’s Court Drafter, He Ji, said, “The sound of the music touches people deeply.” Cui Jie said, “In the past, Shen Xi listened to a song and became sorrowful. He thus knew that it was by his mother.¹⁰⁵ The principle of music indeed is subtle and profound like this.” Liang’s Director of Receptions Wang Ke said, “From listening to the music to observing the custom: one can be called an expert if being able to make the connection.” Cui Jie said, “In the past, Jizha went on a diplomatic mission to the states in the north. Indeed

¹⁰⁵ The story of Shen Xi was recorded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü* (*Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋). Shen Xi lived during the Zhou dynasty. One day, he heard a beggar singing songs outside his house. He was touched by the songs and went out to see the singer. The beggar turned out to be his long-lost mother. See Lü Buwei 吕不伟 comp., *Lüshi chunqiu* (Shanghai: Shanghai buji chubanshe, 2002), p. 508.

people praised him for being able to observe customs.”¹⁰⁶ He Ji said, “Seeing that you made this comment, do you intend a competition?” Li Qian said, “I hope to be allowed to seize whip and bow and perform maneuvers with you.” He Ji said, “[In that case,] I dare not let you first ‘retreat for a distance of three days’ march.”¹⁰⁷ Cui Ji, “I have long benefited from your generals’ several times of flight.”¹⁰⁸ He Ji said, “Your ruts are in disarray and flags are down. I am afraid that you are retreating.”¹⁰⁹ Cui Jie said, “In the Pingyin campaign, there is the one who crows long before the others.”¹¹⁰ Wang Ke then continued, “I was just about to provide substance for the armies with the enemy’s food

¹⁰⁶ It alludes to a famous anecdote in *Zuozhuan* about the Wu prince of Jizha 季札 coming to the Lu court to observe the musical performance of various domains and then make comments on their respective customs. See *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu* 春秋左傳注疏, the twenty-ninth year of Duke Xiang, in *Shisanjingzhushu*, 39. 667-672.

¹⁰⁷ The two remarks revolve around the story about Chong’er 重耳, Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 in the Spring and Autumn period. Before he became the ruler of the Jin, he was ousted from his state because of court intrigues and fled to several kingdoms, including Di 狄, Wei 衛, Qi, Cao 曹, Song 宋, Zheng 鄭, Chu, and Qin. During his stay at Chu, the lord there treated him well and provided him with food and sheltering. The lord then asked Chong’er what he would do to repay Chu’s kindness. Chong’er answered, “If by your numinous power I managed to return to Jin, then when Jin and Chu drill the soldiers and engage one another on the central plain, we will retreat from you for a distance of three days’ march [about thirty miles]. If we do not obtain your command to desist, then, seizing whip and bow in the left hand, and taking up quiver and bow case in the right, I shall perform maneuvers with you, my lord.” 若以君之靈，得反晉國，晉楚治兵，遇於中原，其辟君三舍。若不獲命，其左執鞭弭，右屬櫜鞬，以與君周旋。 See *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu*, the twenty-third year of Lord Xi, 15.249-252. The translation is by Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li, and David Schaberg. See *Zuo Tradition: Zuozhuan, Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* (Seattle: University of Seattle Press, 2016), vol. 1, p. 369.

¹⁰⁸ It alludes to the competition between the Wu and Chu in 584 BCE, both were kingdoms in the south. A Wu official Wuchen 巫臣 helped his king prepare chariot warfare and devise tactics against the Chu. Because of the effective strategies of invasion, Chu defense was crushed. Chu’s generals “Zizhong and Zifan in one year rushed about seven times to fulfill commands to stave off Wu incursions. Man and Yi tribes that had submitted to Chu were all taken over by Wu. That was how Wu began to expand; and relations opened between Wu and the domains above it” 子重子反於是乎一歲七奔命。蠻夷屬於楚者，吳盡取之，是以始大，通吳於上國。 *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhushu*, the seventh year of Lord Cheng, 26.444. *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 2, p. 767.

¹⁰⁹ It refers to the famous discussion on battle between Cao Gui 曹劌, a clever official of Lu, and the Duke of Lu. The kingdom of Qi invaded Lu, and Cao Gui devised strategies and defeated the Qi armies. After Qi troops started retreating, the Duke of Lu wanted to pursue. Cao Gui stopped him and only allowed the pursuit after examining the wheel traces and gazing at their banners. He explained: “Now, a big domain is difficult to fathom. I was afraid there would be an ambush, but I saw that their ruts were in disarray and I observed that their flags were down. That is why we pursued them.” *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu*, the tenth year of Lord Zhuang, 8.146-147. *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 1, p. 161.

¹¹⁰ In 555 BCE, the Duke of Jin, joined by other lords, fought with the Qi at Pingyin, in modern-day Shandong province. In the battle, Jin general Zhou Chuo 州綽 wounded two Qi generals, Zhi Chuo 殖綽 and Guo Zui 郭最. Two years later, Zhou Chuo fled from the Jin to Qi because of court intrigue in the Jin. The Duke of Qi compared Zhi Chuo and Guo Zui to fighting cocks to praise their bravery. Zhou Chuo, who previously defeated these two generals, answered, “If you, my lord, consider them fighting cocks, who would dare to consider them otherwise? However, this subject, for all his lack of talent, crowed before these two at the Pingyin campaign.” 君以為雄，誰敢不雄。然臣不敏，平陰之役，先二子鳴。 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu*, the twenty-first year of Lord Xiang, 34.593. *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 2, p. 1091.

and notify our military accomplishments.”¹¹¹ Li Jian said, “The king is injured, and the army is snuffed out like flames. To whom will they be entrusted?”¹¹² Then they all burst into laughter and stopped. The music was about to end. At the moment there were several tens of horses galloping by, followed by eunuchs. Li Jian asked, “Is it not a transgression of official ranks that eunuchs fulfill the same task as stablemen?” He Ji said, “Their appearance is alike.” Cui Jie said, “If encountering Yuan Shao, they could not possibly escape the misfortune.”

梁宴魏使李騫, 崔劼. 樂作, 梁舍人賀季曰: 音聲感人深也. 劼曰: 昔申喜聽歌, 愴然知其母, 理實精妙然也. 梁主客王克曰: 聽音觀俗, 轉是精者. 劼曰: 延陵昔聘上國, 實有觀風之美. 季曰: 卿發此言, 乃欲挑戰? 騫曰: 請執鞭弭, 與君周旋. 季曰: 未敢三舍. 劼曰: 數奔之事, 久已相謝. 季曰: 車亂旗靡, 恐有所歸. 劼曰: 平陰之役, 先鳴已久. 克曰: 吾方欲館穀而旌武功. 騫曰: 王夷師燿, 將以誰屬? 遂共大笑而止. 樂欲訖, 有馬數十匹馳過, 末有闌人. 騫曰: 巷伯乃同趣馬, 詎非侵官? 季曰: 此乃貌似. 劼曰: 若值袁紹, 恐不能免.¹¹³

Music and one's response to musical tunes start the dialogue. The northern envoy Cui Jie's remark on the subtlety of the music focuses on the accord between a tone and the listener's mental state, as he cites the example of Shen Xi who could recognize the voice of his mother through a mournful melody. From “touching people” (*ganren* 感人) to “observing custom” (*guansu* 觀俗), the southern host Wang Ke expands the function of music from individual to the state. It is also further elaborated by the northerner Cui Jie, who went on to mention the story of the Wu prince of Jizha. In the original story, Jizha traveled to the state of Lu in 544 BCE and “observed,” also *guan*, music and dances from various states. Based on the musical tones, Jizha

¹¹¹ “Building a military monument” (*jing wugong*) refers to the ritual practice of “capital spectacle” (*jingguan* 京觀), that is, to build a giant grave mound for the corpses of the enemy's soldiers. Pan Dang 潘黨, a Chu official, once suggested to the Duke of Chu who just defeated his enemy—the kingdom of Jin: “My lord, why do you not build a military monument by collecting Jin corpses in a grand mound? I have heard that the conquest of our enemies must be displayed for our descendants, so that they will not forget our martial achievement.”君盍築武軍, 而收晉尸以為京觀. 臣聞克敵, 必示子孫, 以無忘武功. *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu*, the twelve year of Lord Xuan, 23.397. *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 1, p. 659.

¹¹² The phrase is articulated by Shengzi 聲子 who commented on the decline of the kingdom of Chu. He discussed how Chu was defeated by Jin in 575 BCE: “The Chu army was roundly defeated. The king was injured, the army was snuffed out like flames, and Zifan died as a result” 楚師大敗, 王夷, 師燿, 子反死之. *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu*, the twenty-six year of Lord Xiang, 37.637. *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 2, p. 1183.

¹¹³ See *Youyang zazu*, 12.113-114.

was able to tell the governance of each state and their politico-moral circumstances. Through this reference to Jizha, the diplomats' conversation shifted from the music's effects on individuals to its functions as an index to state's morality. Henceforth, the implication of "challenge" is clear, as the southern official He Ji inquires whether the northern envoys, similar to Jizha in the past, attempt to judge the rule and fortune of the Liang dynasty through its musical performance.

What then follows is a series of textual quotations from *Zuozhuan* cited by both northern and southern officials, which primarily focus on the subjects of military campaigns, warfare, victory, and catastrophic defeat. The northerner Li Qian first confirms his intention for a competition, albeit verbally, against his southern hosts by alluding to a conversation that took place in 637 BCE between Chong'er in exile, also the future ruler of Jin, and the Lord of Chu. Li Qian claims that, as Chong'er once did, he would gladly hold up whip and bow and perform maneuvers with his opponent. He Ji understands at once the *classicus locus* and further exploits Chong'er's indebtedness to the Chu in the original context. By replying "I dare not let you retreat for a distance of three days march," He Ji admits that he would compete headlong without reservation and also implicitly configures the relation between the Liang and Eastern Wei as that between the Chu and Jin: Wei's (Jin's) future prosperity depends on the hospitality of Liang (Chu).

This reference to Jin-Chu competition in the Spring and Autumn period and He Ji's identification of the Liang dynasty with the Chu prompt the northern envoys to cite another historical event in which Chu was badly defeated by joint forces of Jin and Wu in the sixth century BCE. During the battles between the Chu and Wu (supported by Jin), Chu generals had to rush to save several cities against Wu's incursions, to no avail. Ultimately, the Wu ended up encroaching a large amount of Chu territory and gradually ascended to prominence as a crucial

player during that age of division. If the previous two comments are still at the stage of battle preparation, Cui Jie's remark arrives at the phase of "combat" and implies Chu's, by implication, Liang's, failure in securing its land. From these three brief sentences, one can get a taste of the intricate web of textual quotation and appropriation. With the themes of "competition" and "combat" in mind, each courtier cites historical precedents for self-promotion, and the opponent's response further challenges the previous claim through another textual association.

As the northern envoy continues with the references on "combat," He Ji responds with the anecdote about a military campaign between the kingdom of Lu and Qi. Lu defeated Qi troops, and the Lu strategist Cao Gui only permitted the pursuit after detecting ruts and flags of the retreating enemy. This imagined, verbal battle seems to come to an end, and He Ji, assuming the position of a victor, broods over the withdrawal of the enemy (*kong you suogui* 恐有所歸). The failure of Qi in turn reminds the northerner Cui Jie of another battle—the campaign of Pingyin—that involved Qi. Zhou Chuo was a general originally serving Jin, who wounded two Qi generals during the campaign. Later he fled to Qi and was recognized for his heroism. By identifying with Zhou Chuo, a person who heroically wounded two enemies, Cui Jie boasted of bravery and personal charisma. The topic of triumph is then carried on by the southerner Wang Ke. Wang conveys his intention to provide sustenance for his armies with the enemies' food and build military monument (*guangu er jing wugong* 館穀而旌武功). *Jing wugong* particularly alludes to Chu kings' practice of "capital spectacle," where he piled up the corpses of enemies to impress his subjects and show the accomplishment to posterity. However, triumph can also be turned into fiasco, as Li Qian replies with one more historical event involving the Chu, only about its defeat. Li asks that if the army is destroyed and king wounded, as happened once to the

kingdom of Chu, to whom those sustenance, victory, and remembrance would be entrusted. By this point, all participants burst into laughter and stopped.

There is a complex textual web that weaves together multiple allusions from *Zuozhuan*, one associated with another in a certain way. Readers can see a contrast between their conversation on topics such as military expedition, warfare, and gruesome battle and the background of a happy banquet accompanied with music. There is no mistake that the spirit of competition is present, which is explicitly conveyed through the phrase “challenge” (*tiaozhan* 挑戰). Nevertheless, without an ultimate win or lose, or even the scenario where one participant fails to come up with another answer and stopped with embarrassing silence, the conversation continued seamlessly and ended with laughter that combined joy, respect, and admiration. This verbal practice should be a typical banquet game for the elite members. The premise that the game could be carried on and relished was that all participants possessed the basic understanding of those textual allusions, broad learning, and the capability to respond with appropriate answers.

The ending of this episode is also enigmatic. As northern envoys noticed that servants (in fact, stablemen) came after galloping horses, they mistook them as court eunuchs. Li Qian immediately asked for the reason why eunuchs took care of horses and insinuated the transgression of official duty. He Ji explained that external appearances of eunuchs and stablemen (presumably, their office garments) looked alike. Without finding fault with this confusion or demanding proper distinction, Cui Jie made a witty reply. He alluded to the common knowledge about the general Yuan Shao in the Three Kingdoms period in the early third century. Yuan Shao was a powerful warlord who eradicated evil eunuchs in the central court. Cui Jie commented that if Yuan Shao, a general in need of stablemen for military campaigns, were to live to encounter this, he would commit a mistake by killing them because

their garments resembled those of the eunuchs. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, there were indeed ritualistic differences between northern and southern courts, and one can find many instances where envoys debated over specific ritual procedures and cited ritual precedents for argumentation.¹¹⁴ In this episode, however, instead of being polemic or foretelling the downfall of the state from minor ritual deviance (as both contemporaries and later historians would likely do), Cui Jie offered a hypothetical scenario about wrongful bloodshed. The consequence of this lack of official distinction was still implied, but Cui's articulation was tinged with a comic effect that diluted the seriousness of this accusation.

This anecdote appears in a Tang dynasty miscellaneous collection *Youyang zazhu* 酉陽雜俎 (*Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*) compiled in the ninth century by Duan Chengshi 段成式 (803?–863). Almost three hundred years had passed from the time the event supposedly happened to the time it was chosen by Duan Chengshi in the collection. Hence one can no longer ascertain how the anecdote came down to the compiler and by which state it was recorded in the first place. But regardless of the possible ideological agendas behind, we can see in the episode that the hosts and guests did enjoy each other company and form intimate connection through delightful conversations. The shared cultural knowledge and effective use of that knowledge in all kinds of court activities were of paramount importance in diplomatic visits. The familiarity with textual allusions and employment of those allusions in the appropriate context created a discursive space of “like-mindedness” for those who attended to compete as well as socialize. Based on the mutual understanding and appreciation, intimate friendship was often built, which could even bridge the bifurcating political stances of those state representatives.

¹¹⁴ For example, the cases of Pei Zhaoming and Li Xingye mentioned in the Introduction.

Poetic Expression of State-Alliance and Friendship

The anecdotes above show saliently how the use of and discussion on poems, music, and literary writings could serve as perfect media to consolidate interpersonal relations between officials from different states. This section will then look in particular at poems in which references to *Zuozhuan* and other textual traditions are employed in a subtler manner to articulate state alliance and friendship. In the end, this section also suggests there was no clear-cut boundary between competition and admiration, hostility and hospitality. As we will see in a poem by a northern host Pei Rangzhi 裴讓之 (d. 555), the good-will for the delegate team from the southern capital Jiankang is intertwined with the rhetorical elevation of his own dynasty's glory and legitimacy over its opponent.

To begin with, state alliance can be manifested through allusions to the affinity between royal representatives. The poem below was composed by the famous Sui courtier Yu Shiji 虞世基 (d. 618) when he served as a guest receiver in the Chen dynasty. In the poem, the awareness of political division and spatial distance is changed to the detailed attention to two objects, tokens of enduring friendship recorded in *Zuozhuan*:

在南接北使詩
會玉二嶠至
瑞節三秦歸

林蟬疎欲盡

Receiving Northern Envoys in the South¹¹⁵
A matching jade ensign arrives from the two Xiao summits,
and auspicious tally returns from the Three
Domains of the Qin.¹¹⁶
The sound of cicadas becomes sparse through the forest,

¹¹⁵ *Sui shi*, 6.2713.

¹¹⁶ The Xiao Mountain is located in the northwest of the Central Plain, near the northern capital Chang'an. It had been noted for its perilous terrain, which made it an important military post for defense. "Three Domains of the Qin" also refers to the area around the capital Chang'an. After the Qin empire collapsed in the third century BCE, the warlord Xiang Yu divided the heartland of the Qin empire into three parts. Hence people started to use the "Three Domains of the Qin" to refer to the capital Chang'an and its environs.

江鴈斷還飛	about to disappear,
牆垣崇客館	and the line of river geese, while flying, breaks off.
旌蓋入王畿	Walls make lofty the guest mansion, ¹¹⁷
共此敦封植	and banners and canopies enter the imperial residence.
方欣薦紵衣	At this moment, we earnestly cultivate the fine tree, ¹¹⁸
	and delight in presenting the linen clothes as gifts. ¹¹⁹

Both the “Xiao Mountain” and “Three Domains of the Qin” at the beginning of the poem refer to the area to the northwest of the Central Plain, which should imply that the envoys whom Yu Shiji received were from the Northern Zhou dynasty. The season of their visit was deep autumn when cicadas’ crying started to draw to an end. The waning sound parallels with the “breaking-off” (*duan* 斷) of the geese lines. It is a chilly, grim landscape in nature. In the human realm, however, as shown in the next couplet, high walls are raised up to keep the diplomats safe and comfortable, and the team enters from wild nature into the royal residence. The poet’s vision first stretches to the remote geographical locales, such as the Qin domain and Mountain Xiao, then moves closer to the southern landscape (forest and river), then the capital’s royal residence, and finally focuses on two images in the last couplet. The “fine tree” in the original *Zuozhuan*

¹¹⁷ The line should allude to the envoy Zichan’s 子產 destruction of the Jin guest house. Zichan came to the kingdom of Jin as a diplomat on behalf of the kingdom of Zheng. The Jin ruler showed contempt for the envoy by deferring the meeting and housing him in a very shabby place. Zichan had the walls of the guest house torn down so that his carriage could pass through. Jin official upbraided him, and said, “[our lord] ordered the officers to make the guests’ lodgings perfect, making their doors and gates high and their walls and barriers thick, so as to free the guest envoys from worries.”是以令吏人完客所館，高其閭閥，厚其牆垣，以無憂客使。 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu*, thirty-first year of Lord Xiang, 40.686. *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 2, p. 1279.

¹¹⁸ “Nurturing a fine tree” alludes to one story recorded in *Zuozhuan*. Han Qi (also known as Han Xuanzi 韓宣子) was sent by the Duke of Jin to Lu. During the banquet, they cited *Shijing* poems to notify their political intentions. Han Qi recited “Horn Bow” (“Jiaogong” 角弓) which was to confirm the collaboration between Jin and Lu, and Ji Wuzi 季武子, the prestigious official of the Lu, expressed thankfulness. Later in a private banquet at Ji Wuzi’s residence, there was a fine tree in the courtyard and Han Qi praised it. Ji Wuzi thus said, “Should I dare not cultivate this tree? By this I will never forget ‘Horn Bow.’” 宿敢不封殖此樹以無忘角弓。 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu*, the second year of Lord Zhao, 42.719. *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 3, p. 1337.

¹¹⁹ The Wu prince of Jizha, an envoy from the kingdom of Wu, once came to Zheng on a diplomatic mission. There he met with Zichan, a very erudite official, and the two became good friends. Jizha gave Zichan a broad white-silk sash (*gaodai* 緞帶) as gift and Zichan reciprocated with a robe made from fine hemp (*zhuyi* 紵衣). *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 2, p. 1249.

context serves as a symbol to confirm the friendship between two individuals and the alliance between two states. What is noteworthy is that in the original context, the banquet event took place after the formal reception of the delegate team by the Duke of Lu, and the fine tree grew in the private courtyard of Ji Wuzi's residence. The change from more public domain to private is also indicated in the next line. It alludes to the friendship between Zichan and Jizha, officials from the Zheng and Wu respectively, who exchanged gifts as tokens of mutual admiration. Taken together, both the nurturing of a tree and gift-giving in this poem aim to acknowledge the friendly terms between the two states and the affection between their diplomatic representatives. The allusions themselves—a fine tree and delicate robe—form an interesting contrast with the chilly autumnal weather mentioned earlier in the poem. Things in nature wither and shiver; but respected guests can rest soundly at the guest house, enjoying plants' prosperous growth and material affluence.

Sometimes the familiar poetic tropes of leisurely roaming and court banquet were also adopted to portray a joyful diplomatic visit. The following poem was composed by an official from the Eastern Wei, Pei Nezhi 裴訥之 (fl. 540s), who received southern envoys at the capital of Ye. The poet describes a pleasant excursion in the capital.

鄴館公讌詩
 晉楚敦盟好
 僑札同心賞
 禮成樽俎陳
 樂和金石響
 朝雲駕馬進
 曉日乘龍上
 雙闕表皇居
 三臺映仙掌

Public Banquet at the Guest Mansion at Ye¹²⁰
 Jin and Chu confirm their good alliance,
 Zichan and Jizha were indeed friends of the same rapport.
 The ritual is completed, and wine and meat are displayed,
 music is harmonious, and metal and rock resound.
 Morning clouds advance as if galloping on a horse,
 the sun in dawn ascends like riding on a dragon.
 Twin Towers mark the imperial residence,
 and the Three Terraces reflect the light

¹²⁰ Lu Qinli, *Bei qi shi*, 1.2263.

	on the Immortal's Palm. ¹²¹
當階篁篠密	Over the stairs, bamboo leaves are thick,
約岸荷蕖長	lotuses grow tall, restricting the pool banks.
束帶盡欣娛	Tightening up the clothes, we exhaust the happiness,
誰言驚歸兩	who would want to hasten to return?

“State” and “individual” converge in the first couplet. Jin and Chu, frequently mentioned in the anecdotes in the previous section, refer to the northern and southern state. Jizha and Zichan are evoked to symbolize the mutual admiration between envoys and their hosts. Similar to Yu Shiji's poem, the poet then describes the envoys' solemn entrance into the capital. Proper ritual is meticulously observed, and the team proceeds, accompanied by the musical performance. It is dawn. As clouds and sun are rising, one gradually sees the famous landmarks of the royal residence: Twin Towers, Three Terraces, and the famous Immortal's Palm. The fifth couplet seems to suggest the arrival of the diplomats at the guest house—bamboos and lotus flowers grow thick over the stairs and in the pond. The last couplet ends with a description of the court excursion and participants' merry-making. Leisurely roaming in the city of Ye will remind the contemporaries of the famous Cao princes and their literary retainers in the third century, and there had been strong literary associations between Ye and court excursion since then.¹²²

¹²¹ Three Terraces were the landmarks of the Ye. Cao Cao first built three terraces to the northwest of the city, and they were Terrace of Bronze Sparrow (*tongque tai* 銅雀臺), Terrace of Golden Tiger (*jinhui tai* 金虎臺), and Terrace of Icy Well (*bingjing tai* 冰井臺). Later when the state of Zhao 趙 chose Ye to be the capital in the fourth century, its ruler Shi Hu renovated and expanded the scale of the terraces. They would also be rebuilt in the Northern Qi dynasty in the latter half of the sixth century. “Immortal Palm” refers to the statue of an immortal holding up hands to receive dew. It was built by Emperor Wu of Han. See *Shiji*, 12.459. In the third century, it was moved from the old capital Chang'an to Luoyang at the order of Emperor Ming of the Wei, Cao Rui 曹叡 (r. 226–239). It was broken during the transportation, and the statue stayed at Bacheng 霸城. Cao Rui then ordered a new statue to be built in Ye.

¹²² When contemporaries wrote poems about excursion in Ye, they did use images from the literary group at Ye in the early third century. For example, Lu Sidao's “Excursion at the Ford of River” (“Hequ you” 河曲遊) starts with: “There are many unrestrained spirits in the city of Ye, / also famous outings at the fold of the River” 鄴下盛風流，河曲有名遊。 *Sui shi*, 1.2630. He also composed a poem titled “Banquet at South City Corner” (“Chengnan yu yan” 城南隅宴), which directly appropriates one line from the third-century Cao Zhi's poem. *Sui shi*, 1.2630. Wei Shou ended one of his poems on a banquet at Ye with: “How could only those like Ying Yang and Liu Zhen, / come to the

Because of these cultural conventions, the capital Ye conveniently evokes the image of delightful outing, enjoyable banquet, and companionship. Hence in the poem, according to Pei, even the southern envoys ultimately indulge themselves in the happiness without ever thinking about returning home.

However harmonious the gathering is expected to be, parting is inevitable. The moment of departure becomes the most emotionally charged occasion, on which envoys expressed sorrow, affection, and longing for one another without ever feeling qualms about their political belonging. The poem below was composed by Pan Hui 潘徽 (d. 613), a guest receiver of the Chen dynasty.

贈北使詩
業定三邊靜

時和四海敦

行人仍禮籍
使者接輶軒
賓榮君享燕
客踞我司存
既美齊嬰學
欣逢鄭產言
琴酒時歡會
篇章極討論
迴旌逗隴左

返軸指河源
塞榆行隱路

Poem for Northern Envoys¹²³

The Great Accomplishment has been achieved,
and three sides of the border are pacified,
the time is peaceful, and [people within the] four seas
become friendly with one another.

The envoys act according to the ritual documents,¹²⁴
and the delegates welcome the [diplomats'] light carriages.
Visitors are honored, and the lord holds a grand banquet,
and guests sit down while I manage this court event.
We praise the learning of a Yan Ying from the Qi,
and also delight in hearing the words of a Zichan.¹²⁵
We enjoy the merry gathering with ale and zithers,
and exhaust our discussions on pieces of writings.
The turning banners will linger to the left of the
Mountain Long,
wheels return, pointing to the source of the Yellow River.
Elm trees at the Pass are about to conceal the road,

capital of Ye for delightful roaming” 何必應劉輩，還來遊鄴都。Both Ying Yang and Liu Zhen were literary retainers of the Cao princes. *Bei Qi shi*, 1.2270.

¹²³ *Chen shi* 陳詩, 6.2563.

¹²⁴ In the *Rites of the Zhou*, it is recorded that the minor envoys (*xiao xingren* 小行人) were in charge of the state's ritual documents (*lijì* 禮籍) to receive the representatives from the kingdoms of the four directions.

¹²⁵ Both Yan Ying and Zichan were famous officials during the Spring and Autumn period.

津柳稍垂門
日沈山氣合
漸落水花翻
離情欲寄鳥

別淚不因猿
所可緘懷袖
方以代蘭萱

and willows at the ford are already hanging over the gate.
The sun sets down, and mountain mists permeate,
and water level lowers, and waves splash.
Sadness over departure, I want to convey it through the
flying birds,
tears for separation are not because of the crying of apes.
The thing that can be cherished by you,
I hope will replace the orchid and *xuan* plants.¹²⁶

A peaceful time makes possible diplomatic visits. Pan Hui does not use any state name from *Zuozhuan* to indicate political division; rather, “three sides of the border” and “four seas” imply the harmonious unity of the world. Guests are received with proper rituals and great respect, and the poet in person is in charge of the solemn court event. Northern envoys are compared to Zichan from the kingdom of Zheng and Yan Ying from the Qi, two historical figures from the Spring and Autumn period. What follows is the intellectual exchange between northern and southern representatives, as both parties delight in conversing on pieces of writings over the banquet table. At the middle of the poem (supposing this is the complete poem), the gathering draws to an end. The returning team heads toward the northwest indicated by the phrases of the Mountain Long and the source of the Yellow River. Vision is blocked because of the dim light at dusk, and yearning intensifies, which compels tears to fall and incites the poet to ask the birds to carry his emotions. At last, absence calls for remembrance, and unrequited longing resorts to forgetfulness. If the final couplet refers to the poem itself, which is to be sent to the recipient to ease their sorrow and worry, then poetry also becomes the medium to capture the treasured moment of parting for future commemoration. In all, the poem successfully weaves together political and individual, joy and sadness, and gathering and departure. It starts with a grand statement of universal peace, performance of rituals, and bureaucracy and offices that are

¹²⁶ *Xuan* plant can make people forget their sorrow and worries.

in charge of envoy receptions. Then it moves to semi-public space where banquet, conversation, and music consolidate the friendship and intellectual affinity. The poem ultimately ends with sorrowful parting, unquenchable yearning for equals, and anticipated remembrance.

From the three poems above, one can see that goodwill and appreciation are often conveyed to the delegates from a rival state. Yet furthermore, there is hardly a definite boundary between friendliness and competition. Since diplomatic poetry was often publicly composed for a diverse audience, there was an uneasy juxtaposition of different sentiments, vacillating from admiration for envoys to self-assertion, from glorification of the home state to contempt toward the enemy, from yearning for a reunion to anxiety over the tumultuous time. Indeed, the poem below is a good example illustrating the complexity of an official's "attitudes" toward his guest from another state.

The poem was written by a northern host, Pei Rangzhi, who served as the royal representative of the Eastern Wei dynasty to receive the southern envoy, Xu Ling 徐陵 (507–583), a famous courtier and writer of the time. Xu Ling and his diplomatic team were dispatched by the Liang dynasty in 548. Previously, Xiao Yuanming 蕭淵明 (d. 556), the nephew of Emperor Wu of the Liang, had been defeated in the battle with the Eastern Wei and kept as a hostage in the north. The primary task of this diplomatic mission was to facilitate the release of the prince. Hence behind the composition of this particular poem is a background of military conflict, hostage negotiations, and power struggle.

公館讌酬南使徐陵詩

Poem Composed at the Banquet at the Guest Mansion for
the Southern Envoy Xu Ling¹²⁷

¹²⁷ *Bei Qi shi*, 1.2262. Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641) et al., comps., *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 53.964.

嵩山表京邑	The Mountain Song marks the capital region, ¹²⁸
鍾嶺對江津	and the summit of the Mountain Zhong
	faces over the ford of Yangzi River. ¹²⁹
方域殊風壤	The world features places with
	different customs and cultures,
分野各星辰	and distinct constellations shine over
	the corresponding terrestrial realms.
出境君圖事	Crossing the state border,
	you seek to accomplish a mission,
尋盟我恤鄰	and renewing the alliance, we have compassion
	for our neighbor.
有才稱竹箭	Your talent is as commendable as bamboo from Guiji, ¹³⁰
無用忝絲綸	while I am unworthy to speak on behalf of the king. ¹³¹
列樂歌鐘響	Music performance is arranged,
	and bells are making echoes,
張旂玉帛陳	the envoy's banners are erected, and jade objects and silks
	are presented as gifts.
皇華榮受命	An imperial delegate is honored to receive his order, ¹³²
延譽本無因	without relying on anything, your reputation spreads.
韓宣將聘楚	An able diplomat like Han Qi will leave for the Chu, ¹³³
申胥欲去秦	and the one like Shen Baoxu is about to
	depart from the Qin. ¹³⁴

¹²⁸ The Mountain Song, also called “Central Mountain” (*zhongyue* 中岳), is in the vicinity of Luoyang, the capital of Northern Wei. However, by the time Xu Ling went on a diplomatic mission to the Eastern Wei, the capital had already been moved to the city of Ye. *Biao* can mean “mark,” but also can mean “on the outside of.”

¹²⁹ The Mountain Zhong was on the outskirts of the southern capital of Jiankang. The Yangzi River also flowed past the capital.

¹³⁰ According to the *Erya* 爾雅, the Han dynasty lexicographic work: “As for the exquisite object from the southeastern region, it is the bamboo from Guiji.” 東南之美者，會稽之竹箭焉。 *Erya zhushu* 爾雅註疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 7.111.

¹³¹ A famous analogy between a king's speech and “silk” is mentioned in the *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記). “The king's speech is as thin as silk. When it is articulated, it becomes a thread” 王言如絲，其出如綸。 *Liji zhushu* 禮記注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 55.928.

¹³² There is an interesting variant of *kong* 空 (empty) instead of *rong* 榮 (honor). If one adopts the first variant, then the line means: “An imperial delegate receives his order in vain.” *Huanghua* refers to the poem “Brilliant Flowers” (“Huanghuang zhe hua” 皇皇者華) in the *Classic of Poetry*. It praises the ability of envoys to fulfill their missions.

¹³³ Han Qi 韓起 (d. 514), posthumously known as Han Xuanzi 韓宣子, was an official from the kingdom of Jin in the Spring and Autumn period. In the sixth century BCE, Jin and Chu strived for hegemony and frequently waged wars against each other. In 537 BCE, Han Qi was ordered by the king of Jin to send a princess to Chu to form a marriage alliance in hope of ending the longstanding feud.

¹³⁴ Shen Baoxu 申包胥 was an official from the kingdom of Chu in the Spring and Autumn period. When Chu was vanquished by Wu, Shen Baoxu fled to the kingdom of Qin to ask for help. At first, the king of Qin did not agree to

方期飲河朔	You are just looking forward to the drinks to the north of the Yellow River, ¹³⁵
翻屬臥漳濱	but then you lie down on the bank of the Zhang River. ¹³⁶
禮酒盈三獻	Ritual wine is provided with three toasts,
賓筵盛八珍	and the banquet for the guest is luxuriant with eight delicacies.
歲稔鳴銅雀	It is the season of abundance, and the Bronze Bird sings, ¹³⁷
兵戢坐金人	weapons are withdrawn to make metal figures. ¹³⁸
雲來朝起蓋	Clouds come in the morning, and carriage canopies are raised,
日落晚催輪	and the sun settles down at dusk, and wheels are hastened to return back. ¹³⁹
異國猶兄弟	Though from different states, we are like brothers,
相知無舊新	as long as we know each other, it does not matter if we are old friends or new acquaintances. ¹⁴⁰

send armies to avenge Chu. Shen thus stayed there and cried for seven days and seven nights, which ultimately touched the king. The ruler of Qin thus dispatched troops against Wu and helped restore the Chu kingdom.

¹³⁵ The “drinks to the north of the Yellow River” alludes to a story mentioned by Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226) in his *Discourse on Documents* (*Dianlun* 典論). It describes how drinking reconciled two inimical camps: “After the emperor moved the capital to Xu [in 196], he sent Liu Song, the Grand Master for Splendid Happiness, to defend against the armies of Yuan Shao in the north. Liu drank ale and held banquets together with the younger generations of Yuan Shao every day. In the middle of the summer, their drinking party lasted from day to night, and they were so intoxicated that they lost consciousness. Liu Song commented that by escaping the heat through ale, the two camps become reconciled” 大駕都許, 使光祿大夫劉松北鎮袁紹軍。與紹子弟日共宴飲, 嘗以盛夏三伏之際, 晝夜酣飲極醉, 至於無知。云以避一時之暑, 二方化之。Yan Kejun, *Quan Sanguo wen* 全三國文, 8.1095.

¹³⁶ This seems to be a playful reference to Xu Ling as the third-century talented courtier Liu Zhen. Liu Zhen was one of the attendants of Cao Pi, the patron of the literary coterie at Ye who later became Emperor Wen of the Cao-Wei dynasty. In one poem composed by Liu Zhen for Cao Pi, titled “To the Leader of Court Gentlemen for Miscellaneous Uses” (“Zeng wuguan zhonglang jiang” 贈五官中郎將), the poet says he has fallen ill and can only lie down near the bank of the Zhang river. Cao Pi comes to visit him, and the two converse all day long. Liu Zhen thanks his patron for his kindness. *Wei shi*, 3.369-370.

¹³⁷ The line refers to a song composed by Cao Pi (listed in some sources as anonymous): “On the Twin Towers to the west of Chang’an city, there is a pair of bronze sparrows. Once they sing, five grains start to grow. The second time they sing, five grains are ripe” 長安城西雙員闕, 上有一雙銅雀。一鳴五穀生, 再鳴五穀熟。 *Wei shi*, 4.406.

¹³⁸ Again, it alludes to the Qin empire. After Qin conquered all the state and unified the realm, the first emperor commanded that all weapons be collected and melted to build metal statues.

¹³⁹ I use the *Yiwen leiju* variant *cui* 催 (hasten) instead of *cui* 摧 (destroy), which is preferred by Lu Qinli. If the latter variant is adopted, the meaning of the lines is: “The sun settles down at dusk, and the hardship on the road can destroy the carriage wheels.”

¹⁴⁰ This evokes one couplet of Tao Yuanming’s 陶淵明 (ca. 365–427) poem: “As long as we know each other, there is no need to be old acquaintances, / our carriages meet on the road, and we resume former conversation” 相知何必舊, 傾蓋定前言。Lu Qinli, *Jin shi* 晉詩, 16.977.

The poem traverses the public and personal, as an “envoy” from another state in the end becomes a “brother” of the family. The first three couplets explicitly fashion distinctions. They delineate proper dynastic boundaries, acknowledge that the north and south have different cultures, and distinguish the poet-speaker from the officials sent from another state. The natural landscape is imbued with political significance. While the Mountain Song in the center “marks” the “capital region” (*jingyi* 京邑), namely the northern realm, the Mountain Zhong on the outskirts of the southern capital of Jiankang only faces a ford on the Yangzi River (*jiangjin* 江津). “Capital” signals sovereignty, and the “ford” in the south, in comparison, has no royal aura.

The diplomatic team has crossed the border for a political undertaking, and the northern state that Pei represents decides to show kindness to its neighbor. Xu Ling’s talent is praised in the fourth couplet as a rare kind of bamboo originating in Guiji. In a display of modesty, Pei Rangzhi claims his “unworthiness” (*wuyong* 無用) to assume the appointment as a guest receiver on behalf of the northern sovereign. However, even though Pei concedes his inferiority regarding individual talent, his self-reference as the spokesman of the “king” ends up bolstering the legitimacy of the Eastern Wei ruler; meanwhile, Xu Ling—metaphorically a bamboo plant, a rare object to be desired—stands for no political authority. This showcases the intertwining between royal power and the envoys’ political identification.

In the next several couplets, the poet applauds Xu’s fulfillment of his diplomatic duty and his capability as an envoy by citing two historical figures. Both Han Qi (Han xuanzi 韓宣子) and Shen Baoxu were competent, famous delegates in the Spring and Autumn period. By evoking Han Qi, who helped form a marriage alliance between a northern and a southern state, Pei seems to suggest that the Eastern Wei (referred to here as Jin) will also initiate a friendly relationship

with the Liang (here called Chu) despite their previous military skirmishes. The departure of “Shen Baoxu” in the next line is intriguing. If one applies the historical context to the current situation, Xu Ling becomes a remaining holdover of a fallen southern state who has come to the north asking for military support. This might be an oblique reference to the military fiasco of Xiao Yuanming, whose release was the main purpose of Xu Ling’s mission. More importantly, the allusion confirms the poet’s political vision that the Eastern Wei, like the powerful Qin in the past, is acting as a savior to the Liang dynasty in the south.

The poet next depicts Xu Ling’s sojourn in the north and the reception of the diplomatic team in the capital Ye. The Zhang 漳 River, in the vicinity of the capital, evokes one of the early stories about Liu Zhen 劉楨 (d. 217) and Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226). Liu suffered from a grave illness, and his pain was only allayed by his patron’s visit. The line implies that Xu Ling too is well respected and honored in the northern capital. Instead of isolation and loneliness, hospitality and convivial gathering continue during Xu’s stay, and the guest is provided with three toasts of wine (*san xian* 三獻) and all kinds of delicious food (*ba zhen* 八珍). A bountiful year is observed as the citizens of the Ye celebrate their harvest. Meanwhile, peace prevails, and the Eastern Wei dynasty, in resemblance to the unified Qin empire, collects all its weapons, melts them down, and builds golden statues. According to the poet, throughout the time the team sojourns here, the hosting officials and the diplomats enjoy food, peace, and companionship and roam in happiness from day to night. Interestingly, the last couplet shows proper distinctions but also affinity. Xu Ling and other northern courtiers, such as the author Pei Rangzhi, are still representatives of two different states (*yiguo* 異國), but they have also formed new tie, a more intimate form of kinship: they have become brothers (*xiongdi* 兄弟) who have a deep mutual understanding and appreciation (*xiangzhi* 相知).

In the poem, we see the combination of praising remarks and condescending attitudes. Pei properly honors Xu Ling's talent and his successful diplomatic mission: the envoy is an honored guest in the capital Ye; during his stay, he is provided with abundant food and drink; and by using the discourse of the court roaming and friendship inherited from the previous literary tradition, Xu Ling is portrayed as having participated actively in the gatherings and made new friends. In the meantime, the admiration and intimacy are also juxtaposed with the poet's explicit claim of state superiority over the Liang dynasty, from which Xu Ling came. At one point, Pei envisions the Eastern Wei and Liang as two distinct cultural and political entities, just like the Jin and Chu kingdoms in the Spring and Autumn period. At other points, Pei elevates the status of the Eastern Wei by depicting it as a powerful, "unified," and peaceful empire, like the Qin empire in the past. By representing the Eastern Wei dynasty in these two ways, he casts the southern state in several roles: as a political rival, a possible ally that desperately needs rescue, and a state waiting to be assimilated into the northern empire. In all, the poem represents a foreign "diplomatic mission" seen through the eyes of a hosting official. Here, mutually appreciative friends, or "brothers," revel in each other's company, but they also engage with each other under the larger scheme of diplomacy, politics, and competition over state legitimacy. Ambiguity thus arises, as it is difficult to pin down whether the poet is articulating praise or contempt. The host's remarks on hospitality end up uneasily juxtaposed with the expression of hostile sentiments.

In this chapter, I have discussed verbal exchanges between state representatives during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. The age of disunion witnessed the co-existence of several court centers, each regarding itself as the rightful recipient of the Mandate of Heaven. Aside

from military campaigns, it was crucial for each state to articulate and represent its power in an obvious and persuasive way. Hence, discursive competition among diplomats and officials became a “battleground” for political and cultural superiority. As the analysis of the anecdotes has shown, there was no unanimous agreement on which state was the “legitimate” or the “best” state. Rather, conventional analogies were evoked or cast into doubt; new interpretations were offered to confirm or challenge a state’s dominance. Ultimately, the dynamic between “central” and “peripheral,” between “legitimate” and “insignificant alternative,” between “superiority” and “inferiority” was constantly changing. This dynamic was something to be created, articulated, and vindicated during the cultural communication that occurred among northern and southern emissaries.

Skilled envoys were also able to win admiring audiences and international fame. Friendships were formed among delegates with contrasting political identifications. In addition to the competition over political legitimacy, shared cultural knowledge, such as historical stories, famous figures, and antecedents, provided a discursive space where mutual understanding could be achieved and goodwill could be articulated. Specifically, citing, sending, composing, and commenting on poetry helped consolidate personal ties and convey the desire for affinity. Through the appropriation and reconfiguration of literary allusions, poetry effectively expressed state alliances and personal friendships. In the more complex poems, hostility and cordiality intermingled in the poetic space—reflective of the complicated, tumultuous times.

Chapter 2

“There and Here” (*bi ci* 彼此): Epistolary Communication in the Age of Displacement

Recent English scholarship on the epistolary culture of pre-modern China has drawn scholars' attention to the complex process of letter writing, delivering, and receiving, focusing on a variety of important issues such as materiality, generic conventions, transmission, dissemination, and audiences.¹ In particular, Antje Richter's study offers a systematic treatment of the genre “letter (*shu* 書)” in early medieval China. It explores in detail the material culture, generic formula, and theoretical approaches to letters by medieval elites that shaped the practice of producing and interpreting epistolary texts. This chapter contributes to this ongoing inquiry by examining the letters exchanged between states or individuals identifying with different polities during the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.² More specifically, it studies the writing techniques and rhetorical maneuvers in epistolary genres in the context of interstate competition over political and cultural authority.

As a major form of interstate communication and notification, letters were sent from one state to another as diplomatic documents, often carried by envoys. They covered a broad

¹ On early medieval Chinese letter writing, see Antje Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013). For comprehensive coverage of the pre-modern Chinese epistolary culture with contributions from a team of scholars, see Antje Richter, ed., *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

² In Chinese scholarship, the early medieval letter, as one form of prose writing, has long been a research focus. One can roughly detect two paradigms in approaches to this body of text. The first is genre-focused, as can be found in monographs on topics such as “history of prose” (*sanwen shi* 散文史), “history of parallel-prose” (*pianwen shi* 駢文史), or “prose-writing in the Northern and Southern Dynasties.” The second is period-focused, as the epistolary genre often constitutes one chapter of a monograph on the literature of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. However, Chinese scholarship on early medieval letter writing tends to evaluate literary writings based heavily on certain problematic conceptions of “ethnicity” and its absolute influence on literary style. This fallacy will be further elaborated below.

spectrum of topics to achieve different purposes, ranging from a ruler's public announcement to negotiations of certain practical strategies (alliance formation, military threats, and hostage releases), and to the expressions of longing for friends and family members now separated in different realms. Preserved either in state-sponsored historical accounts or literary encyclopedias, all the texts discussed in the chapter may be characterized as "content-oriented, formal and literary."³ As Richter has rightly pointed out, they were written with the author's anticipation that these writings would circulate beyond the intended receiver, and yet this aim of dissemination did not "undermine [the letters'] personal character."⁴ Relating this observation to our current research, I suggest that the diplomatic context highlights the dual characteristics of letter writing. Delivered across borders to the addressee in another state, the epistolary communication pronounced public claims on state legitimacy, imperial authority, and loyalty, serving ostensibly ideological goals during intense political struggles. Meanwhile, personal feelings such as yearning, sorrow, and nostalgia can also be found in them that testified to the pathos of the chaotic age. The boundary between personal and public in these writings is also fluid, as individual emotions can be used to justify heroic statements, and grand aspirations are likely to be driven by personal interests. To fully appreciate the intricacy of the rhetorical constructs in those epistolary texts and their multi-layered meanings, it is imperative to historicize the

³ Based on the reasons letters were often transmitted—for example, the author's fame, the letters' aesthetic quality, or merely the calligraphy of the copyists—Richter distinguishes two groups of transmitted letters that differ considerably in their content and form: "The first group is content-oriented, formal and literary, while the second group is relationship-oriented, informal and quotidian." In other words, the letters in the first group are more formal, literary, and carefully composed, acclaimed for their aesthetic value. Those in the second group are casual and often colloquial, aiming for ad hoc communication. See Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China*, p. 42.

⁴ Ibid.

production, circulation, and consumption of letters in the early medieval courtly milieu. Below are a few caveats to be emphasized before our close analysis of each text.

The first issue under consideration is the public circulation of letters in court societies, especially when they were exchanged between states, or representatives of states, through diplomatic means.⁵ The genre known as the “state letter” (*guoshu* 國書) was particularly imbued with heavy political connotations, so much so that the change of even one character could have serious repercussions. For instance, Yang Jian, Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty, was infuriated when he received an insolent message from the arrogant southern ruler Chen Shubao. It reads: “I imagine that the domain there under your rule should be all right, and as for here, the realm between the heaven and earth, all is tranquil and peaceful” 想彼統內如宜, 此宇宙清泰. *Yuzhou* 宇宙 (“heaven and earth”), a term now translated as “cosmos” in modern Chinese, indicates universe’s infinite space; it supposedly triumphs over a domain under a specific dynastic rule (*tong nei* 統內). While Chen Shubao regards his northern rival as “following what is suitable to the season and time” (*ruyi* 如宜 in a more literal translation), *qingtai* 清泰 (“tranquil and peaceful”), a phrase of higher register denoting a prosperous and restful era, is used to describe his own dynasty. It is clear that the southern emperor carefully chose a specific wording to both aggrandize his state and tarnish the image of his enemy. According to *The Southern History*, Yang Jian instantly circulated the letter among his court officials. Both Yang Su 楊素 (544–606)

⁵ Letters were not always in public circulation. In some cases, a secret contained in letters—only shared between the writer and receiver—was divulged after a third party found them. After Yuwen Hu 宇文護 (513–572), the powerful regent of the Northern Zhou dynasty, was killed by Emperor Wu (Yuwen Yong 宇文邕, 543–578) through a coup, the emperor ordered Hu’s letters to be sorted through. The sovereign then executed those who had written to Yuwen Hu to encourage his usurpation and praised one official, Yu Jicai 庾季才 (515–603), who tried to dissuade Yuwen Hu from any transgression. *Bei shi*, 89.2948.

and Heruo Bi 賀若弼 (544–607), the ruler’s chief strategists, considered it an outrageous affront and proposed to use it as a pretext for a full-scale invasion.⁶

In another case, when the southern general Zang Zhi 臧質 (400–454) defended the city Xuyi 盱眙 against the siege of the northern leader Tuoba Tao, the latter sent Zang Zhi a threatening letter. It cruelly boasts that the soldiers beleaguering the city at the moment were all dispensable recruits from various tribes, and therefore Zang was welcome to kill them to his satisfaction during the battle confrontation. Upon receiving this, Zang managed to circulate the ruler’s note around the enemy camp to incite a rebellion from within.⁷ Both examples indicate that even though a letter might imply a message from one writer to one recipient, they in fact had a wider circulation, especially when the imperial sovereign was involved in their creation/reception or when these writings were treated as formal diplomatic or military documents. Instead of regarding letters as uncomplicated reflections of two individuals’ mindsets exchanged with the acknowledgment of “privacy,” which derives from our modern notion of epistolary etiquette, one must more accurately historicize the “reception” of letters. We need to ask, for instance, whether the readership was limited to the two figures, or whether there existed a larger community transcending dynastic boundaries that “consumed” the letters.

Another issue pertinent to the public dimension of those letters is the collective process of composition and the consequent problem of authorship. This issue specifically pertains to the letters attributed to dynastic rulers. Even though historical accounts and encyclopedias often credit the “emperor” as the sole author of an edict, letter, or any other kind of royal document, one needs to acknowledge the fact that high-status officials and chief courtiers played a

⁶ *Nan shi*, 10.306.

⁷ *Song shu*, 74.1912–1913.

tremendous role in drafting, completing, and copying those royal messages. It was the norm at the time for courtiers to act as ghost-writers composing “on behalf of” the emperor or royal prince. This practice was so prevalent and taken for granted that when royal members did compose or copy something themselves, historical records would often note that they “in person issued an edict” (*shou zhao* 手詔) or “in person composed a letter” (*shou shu* 手書). One good example to illustrate the problematic authorship of royal epistolary documents is the correspondence that took place in 555 between Xiao Yuanming, a new ruler of the Liang dynasty supported by a northern regime, and general Wang Sengbian 王僧辯 (d. 555), who endorsed another royal member as the Liang emperor in the southern capital Jiankang. The *Fine Blossoms of the Literary Garden* (*Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華), a tenth-century encyclopedia, attributes those letters supposedly composed by Xiao Yuanming to Xu Ling, the major courtier in Xiao’s retinue. Consequently, later readers treat this group of texts as Xu’s compositions “in the voice of Xiao Yuanming.” It is fairly safe to assume that the general Wang Sengbian, with far lesser literary skills, relied heavily on his learned attendants to compose responses. Yet since no source indicates any other possible authorship, those writings are now either grouped under the name of “Wang Sengbian” or marked as “anonymous” in *The Complete Prose of the Liang Dynasty* (*Quan Liang wen* 全梁文) compiled by Yan Kejun 嚴可均 (1762–1843).⁸ This case shows that our knowledge of a letter’s authorship is inevitably subject to the attribution assigned by the sources where they are preserved. As a result, instead of enmeshing ourselves in the question of

⁸ The Wang Sengbian case is convoluted. In fact, in *Wenyuan yinghua*, both the letters composed on behalf of Xiao Yuanming and Wang Sengbian’s replies are grouped under the name of “Xu Ling.” Given that Xu Ling was in the camp of Xiao Yuanming at the time of exchange, the attribution of Wang’s responses to Xu has been considered false. Therefore, modern readers treat them as compositions by “anonymous figures.” However, two memorial notes (*qi* 啟) presented by Wang to Xiao are preserved in dynastic histories. Because of this attribution in the historical accounts, which is judged to be more “reliable,” these two texts are categorized under the name Wang Sengbian by modern compilers.

who wrote which texts, it is better to treat the royal letters as public announcements of certain collective concerns articulated through the “author” as a speaker in the text.

Related to the problem of the sources, there is a third aspect of those letters exchanged between states that deserves our attention. The earliest source of a number of the letters to be discussed in the chapter is historical accounts compiled either contemporaneously or slightly after the circumstance that occasioned the composition. While the texts themselves show a great sense of contingency and expediency—characteristic of the unpredictable interstate struggle and conflict—the embedding of the epistolary exchange in a historical narrative reveals historians’ subtle judgment of characters, events, and consequence. As a result, the causality of events, moral lessons, and sense of determinism that court historians attempt to emphasize through their narratives tend to eclipse the original functions and immediate effects of the letters on contemporary recipients. For example, when a historian from the south incorporated some crudely worded letters by a northern ruler about a military threat in the “Biography of Braided Barbarians” (“Suo lu zhuan” 索虜傳) in his historical project, these letters acquired another dimension of meaning. While the straightforwardness might be a conscious stylistic choice by the northern ruler made to convey a cultural image that distinguished his domain from its southern neighbor, the new narrative frame—a biography of “barbarians”—enhances and reinforces the image of barbarity, manifested as a lack of literary capability. Therefore, one can better gauge the significance of a piece of epistolary writing by taking into consideration its immediate context vis-à-vis new paratextual materials.

These several aspects of early medieval letter writing, which are characteristic of court culture and courtly exchange in medieval China, will inform our reading of complex epistolary exchanges. The following analysis rejects a pervading yet problematic paradigm adopted by

many scholars to evaluate the Northern and Southern Dynasties literature. They claim that the northerners, being ethnically Xianbei people who embodied nomadic simplicity and preferred practicality to verbal adornment, produced more letters (dealing with practical matters) and paid little attention to verbal embellishment. Their southern neighbors, however, being Han Chinese with a long tradition of cultural productions, had a penchant for genres such as poetry or poetic exposition, and their writings (letters included) were full of literary sophistication with heavy allusions and rhetorical flair.⁹ This chapter argues that stylistic choices—whether plain or ornamental, whether public or personal, whether using a more colloquial “wo” 我 (I or we) or the formal “zhen” 朕 (often translated as the royal “We”) for self-reference—were not “ethnically” determined but strategies consciously employed to produce certain rhetorical effects. Without regarding them as the unmediated mirroring of an author’s mentality or the cultural attribute of an “ethnic” group, one must explore the intricate construction and manipulation of “voices” in epistolary genres: the voices of rulers, filial sons, brothers, and old friends. These “voices,” whether addressed to the enemy or close friends, gained political and emotional efficacy as the

⁹ One can find this narrative as far back as the early twentieth century, when Chinese scholars began to write “Chinese literary history” as an academic discipline. For example, Liu Shipai 劉師培 (1884–1919) famously states that the northern people valued practicality (*shiji* 實際), whereas southerners believed in emptiness (*xuwu* 虛無) due to climate, geographical, and cultural differences. This divergence led to distinctive literary characteristics between the north and south. See *Liu Shipai xueshu lunzhu* 劉師培學術論著 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1998), pp. 184–191. This judgment continues in contemporary scholarship. For instance, Cao Daoheng and Shen Yucheng point out that the northern literature was more concerned with Confucian teachings and practical matters than the south. Moreover, northern elites were especially good at writing prose. See Cao Daoheng and Shen Yucheng eds., *Nanbeichao wenxue shi* 南北朝文學史 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991), pp. 349–354. A similar emphasis on ethnicity and its influence on literary production appears in other monographs on Northern Dynasties literature. See, for example, Wu Xianning, *Beichao wenxue yanjiu*, pp. 116–140; Gao Renxiong, *Beichao minzu wenxue xulun*, pp. 349–363. This entrenched view has been revised by Xiaofei Tian. Tian argues that our impression of the Northern Dynasties literature was subject to the biased preservation of northern literary texts in the seventh century. As almost all of the extant texts from the north are culled from *Wei shu*, the generic convention of historiography determines that only those related to policy-making, court debates, laws were included, thus producing the impression of “practicality.” Other historical sources show that northern elites too relished poetry composition and were equally capable of discoursing on literature as their southern neighbors. See Xiaofei Tian, “From the Eastern Jin through the Early Tang,” in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, pp. 271–282.

letters circulated widely as a tool of persuasion and argumentation during the court centers' discursive battles over legitimacy, superiority, and authority.

The chapter consists of two sections. The first section focuses on letters attributed to dynastic rulers. Here, negotiation of practical matters is entwined with the speaker's endeavor to represent himself as a legitimate sovereign. The two sets of epistolary communication analyzed in detail demonstrate how the authoritative imperial voice is carefully constructed to sway the readers, legitimate the authors' rule, and invalidate enemies and potential usurpers. The second section turns to letters exchanged between friends and family members who were forced to live in different states. The descriptions of two individuals' intimately shared moments in the letters reverberate intriguingly with contemporary politics. Two sets of letters are singled out for a closer look, and they show the politics of intimacy and contrasting interpretations of intimacy. The narratives of shared memory, invested with emotional as well as discursive power, are, in one case, used as a rhetorical tactic to assert/undermine the rightfulness of dynastic rule, and, in another, construed by suffering individuals to make sense of their past, present, and future.

The Articulation of the Imperial Voice

From the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, when political division gave rise to fierce competition over legitimacy, there survive a handful of letters "composed" by dynastic sovereigns. Addressed to rulers, generals, or officials from an enemy state, their goals ranged from peace-making to blatant threats of military invasion. As mentioned above, their survival testifies to their circulation and preservation in imperial libraries as crucial documents, and the letters themselves, instead of being single-handedly written by a designated author showcasing his "individuality," were in fact composed by or at least relied on the consultation of

a group of courtiers. This intriguing process of collective composition calls our attention to the discursive construction of authoritative “voice” in the letters and its effects on their intended readers. Meanwhile, the articulation of these imperial voices through letters also intertwines with pragmatic concerns and decisions to influence contemporary political or military development. The following discussion focuses on the rhetoric of imperial letter-writing. The questions this section asks are: How was the imperial voice created to promote an ideological agenda and proclaim universal authority? If there was a “personal” note in those publicly circulating letters, what was the function of “personal” as a rhetorical strategy for persuasion? How do stylistic choices complicate the conveyance of the message? Moreover, if a letter “composed” by a northern emperor is included by a southerner in his historical account, what does this inclusion tell us about the northern ruler’s self-image and the southerner’s revision of that image? The section argues that the assertion of imperial authority is inseparable from the effective verbal representation of the ruler in epistolary communication. The imperial voice is both individualistic and collective, a device deployed to both pragmatically engage with contemporary political changes and substantiate the abstract concepts of rulership and legitimacy.

A Candid, Self-Revealing Northern Emperor

In the “Biography of Braided Barbarians” of the *History of the Song Dynasty*, the compiler Shen Yue details the military friction, alliance, and diplomatic communication between the Song dynasty and its northern rival, the Northern Wei. Writing after the founding of the Southern Qi dynasty and having access to court documents, Shen Yue includes in the “Biography” some important correspondence between the two states. Particularly interesting is one letter attributed to the Northern Wei ruler Tuoba Tao, Emperor Taiwu, delivered to Liu

Yilong, Emperor Wen of the Song, during the height of their military struggle in the 450s. The letter in question is written in a straightforward manner, with language in a low register, and is almost devoid of literary allusions. It forms a stark contrast to the ornate parallel prose that came to be the norm for verbal communication in the southern court. This stylistic difference has prompted a scholar to observe that the letter is “unadorned and easy to understand” (*zhipu tongsu* 質樸通俗) and filled with “impassioned feelings” (*kangkai ji’ang* 慷慨激昂).¹⁰ However, the analysis below suggests that the easy language by no means indicates the letter lacks rhetorical complexity. The verbose, repetitive, bombastic message raises interesting questions about the justification (or the lack thereof) for military invasions, the calculation of material gains, the dissemination and manipulation of gossip, and anxiety over deception and revelation. Moreover, the document, with its distinct writing style, represents a heroic, candid, self-revealing ruler and fashions a conception of emperorship that was at odds with that of contemporary southerners.

According to *Song shu*, Emperor Taiwu in person led huge armies to invade the south in 450 and besieged one of the most crucial strategic points, Xuanhu 懸瓠 (modern Runan 汝南 in He’nan province). However, after forty days or so of fruitless attack, the northern ruler had to withdraw his troops back to the capital Pingcheng for recuperation. Shen Yue frames the historical background of this letter’s composition in the following way: “Even though Tuoba Tao failed to conquer Xuanhu, he did an enormous amount of plundering and pillaging. Meanwhile, the southern armies achieved hardly any military victory, and therefore they were slighted and insulted by Tao” 燾雖不剋懸瓠, 而虜掠甚多, 南師屢無功, 為燾所輕侮.¹¹ The historian treats

¹⁰ Wang Kun 王坤, “Beichao shuxin yanjiu” 北朝書信研究. MA Thesis, Shandong Normal University, 2011, p. 30. A similar view can be found in Xiong Lihui’s 熊禮匯 monograph on pre-Tang prose. Xiong Lihui, *Xian Tang sanwen yishu lun* 先唐散文藝術論 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 1999), pp. 938-939.

¹¹ *Song shu*, 95.2345-2347.

the communication as a verbal insult to the southern troops. Yet we will find below that there is more at stake than what Shen Yue's brief remark can tell us. The long letter starts:

The spies whom you dispatched previously have beguiled and recruited [for you] those villains. I heard of [you winning over] Zhu Xiuzhi and Shen Mo, and recently you even secured [submission from] Hu Chongzhi.¹² They are [your] generals whose armies have been defeated before. A state should implement the established laws for their punishment. However, you have now appointed them as local governors, who are waiting and even congratulating themselves if we ever make lapses. You also captured an insignificant child, Pu Zhongcai [from our camp].¹³ What good or harm will this do? It is no different from capturing all the people in my kingdom and nourishing them with your plentiful sustenance. You also caught one minor general of ours, Wei Ba. You harmed his body by chaining his waist and forced him to do hard toil as a form of humiliation. From the observation of your actions, it is enough to know your main interest—it has always been like this since our confrontation, not just for one morning or one evening.

彼前使間諜，詒略姦人。竊聞朱脩之、申謨，近復得胡崇之。敗軍之將，國有常刑，乃皆用為方州，虞我之隙，以自慰慶。得我普鍾蔡一豎子，何所損益，無異得我舉國之民，厚加奉養。禽我卑將衛拔，非其身，各便鑱腰苦役以辱之。觀此所行，足知彼之大趣，辨校以來，非一朝一夕也。

The letter begins with Emperor Taiwu accusing his opponent of *de* 得 (translated variably as “acquiring,” “capturing,” “securing,” “seizing” or “getting”): the author lashes out at the southern ruler’s “seizing” of people from the northern dynasty, be they those “villains” originally from the south, an insignificant “child,” or a “minor general.” This “acquisition” is morally problematic, the result of a deceitful scheme, as the ruler dispatched spies to woo these subjects with words of manipulation. Liu Yilong even ended up reappointing those turncoats as local governors to fend off northern invasions: they had betrayed the southern state previously, and,

¹² Zhu Xiuzhi 朱脩之 was originally a southern general. He was captured by Northern Wei armies in 431 after Huatai 滑臺, the city where he was stationed, fell to the siege of the Northern Wei. The emperor Tuoba Tao valued his talent and married him to one of the royal princesses. However, Zhu later betrayed the ruler’s trust and fled to the kingdom of Northern Yan 北燕 (407–436) during a military campaign. When the Northern Yan started to form diplomatic relations with the Song, Zhu was allowed back to the South. Shen Mo, too, was originally a southern general captured together with Zhu Xiuzhi after Huatai was conquered. Hu Chongzhi, a southern general, was captured by the Northern Wei in 443 as Qiuchi 仇池 fell to the Wei.

¹³ The figure Pu Zhongcai was otherwise unknown.

after being swayed by spies, once again defected from the northern state. The decision bespeaks the emperor's disregard for proper reward and punishment as part of the state's laws and principles. While the southern ruler recruited and favored these treacherous generals, a northern general was tortured in prison, chained up and humiliated by heavy toil. Lacking a basic idea of right and wrong, the ruler of the Song appears to be injudicious, morally dubious, and even sadistic.

The character “de” 得 recurs several times in the paragraph, and it exposes Tuoba Tao's uneasiness with Song's possession of extra human resources. The question of (un-)justifiable “acquisition” becomes more prominent as Tuoba Tao starts to comment on a recent event:

Not long ago, Gai Wu in the Guanzhong area [near the old capital Chang'an] revolted and incited the rebellion from the Di and Qiang peoples living to the east of the Long area.¹⁴ Again, you sent envoys to approach and allure them [to succumb to you]. Upon men, you bestowed arrows and bows, and upon women, bracelets. This sort of people, arrogant and conceited, hoped to deceive others and seize bribes in the moment. How could they truly surrender to you from afar? Why did you not come in person to get it, following the “principle of the great man”? Instead, you used goods and tricks to beguile my people at the border. Those who surrendered, you exempted from taxes for seven years. This was a reward for villains! Now that I have come to your land [i.e., in his invasion], how is the amount that I have seized comparable to the households you got from me in the past? If you hope to preserve your state altars devoted to the earth and grain gods and keep intact the sacrificial offerings for the Liu clan, you should cede the territories to the north of the Yangzi River to us and order your local governors to cross the Yangzi River to the south. Only in this way will I permit you to live in the Southern Land [i.e., the territory to the south of the Yangzi River]. If not, you can inform your regional generals, prefects, and local governors to make a good preparation for tents, utensils, and the food needed for banquets. I will come and seize the city of Yangzhou in the coming autumn. The grand momentum is unstoppable. I will no longer spare you. Previously, I asked for pearl jewelry from you and you were reluctant to give it. Now, with the bones and skeletons of the men whom I slaughtered, how much pearl jewelry would those skulls and skeletons be worth?

¹⁴ Gai Wu's rebellion broke out in 445 in the Guanzhong area, and the rebels soon took over Chang'an. Pressed by the attack from Northern Wei armies, Gai Wu pledged loyalty to the Song. The revolt was short-lived and soon suppressed by the Wei troops.

頃關中蓋吳反逆，扇動隴右氐羌，彼復使人就而誘勸之。丈夫遺以弓矢，婦人遺以環釧，是曹正欲譎誑取賂，豈有遠相順從。為大丈夫之法，何不自來取之，而以貨詑引誘我邊民，募往者復除七年，是賞姦人也。我今來至此土，所得多少，孰與彼前後得我民戶邪？彼今若欲保全社稷，存劉氏血食者，當割江以北輸之，攝守南度，如此釋江南使彼居之。不然，可善敕方鎮刺史守宰，嚴供張之具，來秋當往取揚州，大勢已至，終不相縱。頃者往索真珠璫，略不相與，今所馘截髑髏，可當幾許珠璫也。

What makes this passage particularly interesting is Emperor Taiwu's apprehension of his rival's material surplus and his ability to use his abundant resources to achieve political and military advantages. In the eyes of the northern ruler, the material goods (*huo* 貨), in the forms of weapons and jewelry, have the power to allure and beguile the common people and bolster bold defiance. The immediate benefits offered by the southern neighbor, such as exemption from taxes for seven years, engenders insecurity at the dynastic borders. The people's allegiance easily shifts in the face of material temptation, and their support seems dependent only on tangible benefits. Even though Tuoba Tao bitterly proclaims that these arrogant rebels defect to the south only because of their avidity, instead of out of true loyalty, the southern state is nevertheless capable of taking advantage of this avidity with its magnanimity and abundance, and thus further guarantees their submission. There seems to be a vicious circle for the Northern Wei: the more these border people "acquire" profit from the south, the more the Song can "acquire" extra resources, which can lead to the "acquisition" of more wavering subjects. Herein lies Tuoba Tao's true anxiety.

To solve this crisis and break the circle, the northern sovereign opts for a rather straightforward stratagem: he should reclaim, through military means, the resources—land, households, or other forms of spoil—that he lost in previous encounters with the Song. One can immediately notice Tuoba Tao's meticulous calculation of the gains and losses incurred during the campaign, and he voices discontentment about how the pillage this time fails to fully compensate for the amount that the Song previously seized from him. Moreover, in contrast to

Liu Yilong, who captivates the common people (*zhangfu* 丈夫) through bribery, the northern ruler portrays himself as a “great man” (*dazhangfu* 大丈夫) who will “come in person to get it” (*zi lai qu zhi* 自來取之). The term “great man” instantly evokes the saying in the book of *Mencius* 孟子: “To be above the power of riches and honors to make a person dissipated, of poverty and mean condition to make a person swerve from principle, and of power and force to make a person bend: these are the characteristics that constitute the great man” 富貴不能淫, 貧賤不能移, 威武不能屈, 此之謂大丈夫.¹⁵ However, ironically, the unwavering stance in the face of poverty and wealth in Mencius’s quotation contradicts the Tuoba Tao represented in the letter. As a ruler, without ever resorting to the moral justification of war, he bases his military conquest entirely on the benefits and materials goods he might attain. That granted, the *dazhangfu* does confirm the image of an honest sovereign who does not harbor duplicitous aims and takes personal responsibility.

The speaker then audaciously requests that the southern state cede territories and confine itself to the south of the Yangzi river. What appears peculiar is that no claim of the northern sovereign’s legitimacy in occupying this area follows this admonition. As we have seen in the first chapter on diplomatic exchange, when the northern emperor Yuan Hong invaded the south several decades later, he conversed with a southern envoy, Cui Qingyuan, about the justification for war. The two figures used classical allusions to negotiate between the autonomy of each state and an all-encompassing imperial vision warranting military incursions. In the letter, however, there is no mention whatsoever of these “familiar” causes for a conquest, such as the transfer of the Mandate of Heaven, resentful people living in misery, or court corruption and decadence. On

¹⁵ *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 6.108. James Legge’s translation with modifications, p. 141.

the contrary, the fact that the menace is articulated immediately after the emperor's dissatisfaction with his material gains this time ("how is the amount that I have seized comparable to the households you got from me in the past") bespeaks his rationale. As far as the northern ruler is concerned, only the possession of the designated territories in the south could adequately compensate for his previous loss.

The ending of the paragraph produces a comical effect. Tuoba Tao's grudge also partly results from Liu Yilong's rejection of his former request for pearl jewelry. Now, the northern emperor asks whether those pieces of pearl jewelry are worth all the southern men killed in the military campaign. The seriousness of the tone is somewhat undermined when readers recall that the author accuses the southern ruler of bestowing jewelry upon women in the preceding paragraph. Interestingly, by showing the same eagerness for jewelry as those deceitful folks at the border, the "great man" becomes tarnished and feminized. This ironically shows that it is not only common people who succumb to the allurements of "goods" (*huo*); an emperor too, charmed by beautiful objects, launches attacks and retaliations to acquire them.

The letter then moves on to discuss military strategies.

Now I am on a northern campaign to vanquish those bandits on horses first. If you do not follow my order, I will come to you in the coming autumn. Because there are not enough horses [for battle] in your land, I have decided not to attack you first. Now that all the other places have been appeased, I will no longer spare you. On the day that I come to the south, what strategies will you adopt for defense? Will you protect yourself by digging a moat around the city? Will you build up a wall as blockage? In your land, if there is even a light rain, water will flood the palace gates. Can you shoot arrows at me while being submerged in water? I will come to seize Yangzhou most overtly, unlike you, who move and travel in the shadow of secrecy. I captured the spy whom you dispatched, and now I release him. You should ask for details about whatever he saw with his eyes here. You sent Pei Fangming to occupy Qiuchi before. After acquiring the territory, you became suspicious of his vigor and accomplishments to the extent that you could no longer tolerate him. With such a great official by your side, you yet decided to execute him. How can you compete with me?

我今北征，先除有足之寇。彼若不從命，來秋當復往取，以彼無足，故不先致討。諸方已定，不復相釋。我往之日，彼作何方計？為塹城自守？為築垣以自障也？彼土小雨，水便迫掖，彼能水中射我也？我顯然往取揚州，不若彼翳行竊步也。彼來偵諜，我已禽之放還。其人目所盡見，委曲善問之。彼前使裴方明取仇池。既得，疾其勇功，不能容。有臣如此，尚殺之，烏得與我校邪？

You are not a proper rival. You often wish to engage in a single battle with me. I am not foolish, nor am I like Fu Jian!¹⁶ If I ever come into a battle with you, I will send riders to circle your armies around when it is daytime, and at night, I will just leave you alone and rest at places a hundred *li* away from you. I will command those who are inclined to surrender to me and kill all who resist. If there is grain stored nearby, we will eat it all. What food will your troops eat? Can you last ten days? You, Wu people [i.e., referring to southerners] are only noted for having the skill of raiding military camps. I know this well. We will set up camp for the night one hundred *li* from you. Even though you place patrol teams every three *li*, and make one team follow the other, your recruited soldiers can only cover fifty *li* before it is daytime. How could it not be the case that their heads are [cut off and] presented to me? You probably imagine when the day of siege comes, I will dig up a moat and besiege the city, and then it will be convenient for you to come out to raid our camps. In fact, I will not even come close to your city to launch a siege. The only thing we are going to do is to build a dam and channel the water into the city. To the northern and southern gates of your city Yangzhou, there are two rivers that I will make good use of. They will indeed agree with my intention. I know that the officials who served you when you were a prince were all killed. If they were still here, despite being in the old age, they could still offer wise strategies. Now that you have had all of them killed, is it not that Heaven is helping me? To seize and capture you, I do not even need to use my weapons. Here I have a Brahmin priest who can cast spells, and he will command ghosts to chain you up and bring you here.

彼非敵也。彼常願欲共我一過交戰。我亦不癡，復不是苻堅。何時與彼交戰，晝則遣騎圍繞，夜則離彼百里宿去。彼人民好降我者驅來，不好者盡刺殺之。近有穀米，我都噉盡。彼軍復欲食噉何物？能過十日邪？彼吳人正有斫營伎。我亦知彼情。離彼百里止宿，雖彼軍三里安邏，使首尾相次。彼募人以來，裁五十里，天自明去。此募人頭何得不輸我也？彼謂我攻城日當掘塹圍守，欲出來斫營。我亦不近城圍彼。止築隄引水，灌城取之。彼揚州城南北門有兩江水，此二水引用，自可如人意也。知彼公時舊臣，都已殺盡。彼臣若在，年幾雖老，猶有智策。今已殺盡，豈不天資我也？取彼亦不須我兵刃。此有能祝婆羅門，使鬼縛彼送來也。

Several months later, when Tuoba Tao again led troops southward to the Yangzi River and threatened to cross the river to the capital Jiankang, the southern envoy Zhang Chang came to

¹⁶ Fu Jian 苻堅 (338–385, r. 357–385), the ruler of the Former Qin dynasty (350–394), launched an attack in 383 against the southern state, the Eastern Jin dynasty. The military campaign ended in a fiasco for the Former Qin. It became a glorious moment for the south that was still remembered in the fifth century.

negotiate the terms of withdrawal with the northern representative Li Xiaobo. In their conversation, the northern diplomat acknowledged: “As for defending a city, that is what you are good at; while fighting in the wild plain is what we are good at 城守, 君之所長; 野戰, 我之所長.¹⁷ While Emperor Taiwu in the letter offers a similar observation in regard to different battle strategies between the north and south, he gives more details about their “hypothetical confrontation” and predicts how his troops will act and how his enemy could respond. These two passages are full of taunts, self-promoting remarks, and moments of revelation, which would surely have created anxiety, worry, and uncertainty in the minds of the contemporary readers.

The speaker prides himself on his military shrewdness. He knows well the military tactics of his rival (*zhi bi qing* 知彼情), a state in the south with a shortage of horses (literally, “without feet”). Lacking sufficient mobility, its military force must depend on the “city” as the base of operation. They build moats and walls for protection and occasionally come out to “raid [the] military camps” of the besieging enemy, which the emperor regards as the southerners’ only notable skill. Because of this limitation, Emperor Taiwu scornfully announces that even a light rain would submerge the citizens who are confined in a closed space. In contrast, the northern armies are active, mobile, and unpredictable. They will circle the enemy in daylight and gallop away for rest at night. They can devour all the grain and rice nearby to cut off the city’s food supply. Avoiding physical confrontation, they will also build a dam to channel rivers into Yangzhou without even getting close to the military target. In all, in Emperor Taiwu’s eyes, the southern state does not stand a chance of resistance and surely is not a proper rival (*fei di* 非敵).

¹⁷ *Song shu*, 59.1601.

While Tuoba Tao's tone of confidence is unmistakable, it is also surely befuddling to its readers, both modern and medieval. Why is this "honest" and "candid" sovereign happily divulging his military plans to the enemy? Is he so confident of victory that it no longer matters whether or not his rival knows his strategy? Or is this self-revelation only another kind of military strategy to further confuse the enemy? One can surely interpret the "transparency" as Tuoba Tao's attempt to set himself apart from his arch-opponent. After all, he is the one who will seize Yangzhou overtly (*xianran* 顯然), whereas the Song emperor is condemned for "moving and traveling in the shadow of secrecy" (*yixing qiebu* 翳行竊步). Moreover, I will argue that this "candidness" also aims to exert a specific influence on its intended readers—if we imagine ourselves to be those who received this note in the middle of an unpredictable military struggle. Tuoba Tao's consciously avowed transparency between intentions and words, between words and actions, and between actions and their meanings encourages his readers to gaze suspiciously on this seemingly harmless boast and at least consider the possibility of an undisclosed stratagem underneath this gesture of revelation. Will he truly come in autumn? Will he indeed channel the rivers to flood our city? If the northerners do decide to follow this plan, why is their ruler revealing it to us? If they choose not to carry it through, what strategies will they adopt instead? Through this rhetoric of self-revelation, the seeds of doubt are planted in the minds of his southern enemies.

In addition, the episode of the "released spy" further complicates the situation and confounds the readers. To exemplify his ingenuousness, Emperor Taiwu decides to release the southern spy back to his home country and exhorts the latter to inform Liu Yilong of all that he saw with his eyes (*mu suo jin jian* 目所盡見) in the northern camp. We may recall that at the beginning of the letter, Tuoba Tao accuses the southerners of shiftiness and exposes their

deployment of spies to beguile and deceive people at the border. Now the northern emperor turns the tables on his rival by also using a spy as a pawn in a political scheme. Oscillating between political camps with his true identity concealed beneath a false guise, a spy naturally invites skepticism about his loyalty, especially when, after his identity exposed, he is pardoned, sent back, and expected (or even encouraged by the enemy) to tell all that he witnessed during captivity. For the southern court, there is no way to ascertain whether the spy is telling lies or the truth, or even conveying a false impression fed by the northern enemies that the spy believes to be true. Moreover, as if to further bewilder the already suspicious minds, Tuoba Tao reminds Liu Yilong of his execution of the honorable general Pei Fangming, which resulted from the ruler's "distrust" of his loyalty after many military accomplishments. If the court wrongly executed Pei Fangming, would they commit the same mistake by disregarding or executing the spy who is in fact on their side? In light of this uncertainty, which Tuoba Tao's keen demonstration of candidness augments, the released spy would torment the southern court in search of a hidden motive and a correct interpretation. In the end, this self-revelation appears to be another strategy to create the ambiguity and concealment that characterize military antagonism.

If "doubt" is the desired effect of most of the paragraphs, then the ending incites dread and terror. Previously, Tuoba Tao self-aggrandizingly calls himself "a great man" who in person seizes what he desires (*zi lai qu zhi* 自來取之) instead of relying on secrecy and intrigue. At the end of the letter, he claims instead that it is not even necessary for him to come in person to capture the southern ruler with weapons (*qu bi yi buxu wo bingren* 取彼亦不須我兵刃). Rather, he will employ magical force for the ultimate "acquisition"—the "acquisition" of the leader of the rival state. It is paradoxical that if curses and spells are truly a dependable recourse, then all the military plans and proclamations detailed above should simply be pointless. However, this

invocation is hardly a hollow threat. Intimidation—whether in the form of military power, arcane force, or hyperbolic verbal threats—is always an effective tactic in the psychological warfare waged between rivals. The threatening message that Liu Yilong will ultimately be tied up (*fu* 縛) by ghosts and brought to the northern land echoes Liu Yilong’s chaining (*suo* 鎖) of a northern general’s waist as a form of humiliation (introduced at the beginning of the letter). Hence the intimidation also signifies some sort of retribution for Liu’s “evil” deeds and the fulfillment of justice.¹⁸

What can we make of this complex, at times contradictory, yet simply worded letter? A naive reading would ascribe the simplicity and garrulousness to the “primitive” northern culture. Lacking proper literary training, Tuoba Tao “wrote” down what he bore in mind without considering structure, allusion, or style.¹⁹ However, this explanation cannot fully account for the social and cultural mechanism of literary production and reception in the context of court culture and inter-court competition. Emperor Taiwu staffed his court with elites from prestigious northern families such as Cui Hao 崔浩 (d. 450), Li Shun 李順, Gao Yun 高允 (390–487), Lu Xuan, and You Ya 遊雅. They were dispatched for diplomatic affairs, entrusted to supervise cultural projects, and consulted by the ruler for a variety of political or military decisions. If Emperor Taiwu’s imperial edicts (drafted by his learned courtiers) preserved in the *History of the Wei Dynasty* are elegantly crafted and hardly distinguishable from the “ornate” southern ruler’s

¹⁸ We modern readers, or the compiler Shen Yue, would probably notice the irony that Liu Yilong did die in the end because of a sorcery case. The emperor’s son Liu Shao 劉劭 (424–453) and another royal prince, Liu Jun 劉浚 (429–453), were involved in sorcery and they made a jade figurine of the emperor to curse and cast spells on him. The evil plot was discovered, and the two princes acted swiftly and assassinated Liu Yilong.

¹⁹ For example, Li Shan 李山 summarizes the characteristics of letter writing in this period in the following way: “They value simplicity and rustiness, and do not pay much attention to literary embellishment. It is typical of a literature that directly expresses the author’s mind”尚質樸，不太注意語言修飾。典型直抒其意。See Li Shan, *Zhongguo sanwen tongshi* 中國散文通史 vol. 3 (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2013), p. 285.

edicts,²⁰ then the simple style of this important letter, a piece that was to be read by members of both courts, must be seen as deliberate choice.

The stylistic plainness and directness corroborate the emperor's self-created image as a frank, moral, and genuine ruler. This image stands in contrast to Liu Yilong as he is portrayed in the letter, a ruler who is blind to the principles of right and wrong, who gains support with material benefits, and who executes heroic generals and wise officials out of jealousy and mistrust. To further distinguish himself from Liu Yilong, who "bought" and "manipulated" his subject's loyalty, the northern emperor claims that he opts for a simple decision regarding captives: he welcomes those who surrender and executes those who defy him. While this gesture could be read as an example of a "barbarian's" cruelty, as southern readers would likely do, its immediate context (especially Liu Yilong's deeds narrated at the beginning) highlights Tuoba Tao's admirable "honesty." Hence two concepts of kingship are implied here. As Xiaofei Tian points out, Liu Yilong's reign witnessed the physical construction of the southern capital in conjunction with an "extensive textual building of Jiankang" through the composition and evaluation poetry. This cultural enterprise was crucial to Liu Yilong's performance of kingship.²¹ The northern emperor, however, seems to act against this symbolic appropriation and representation of sovereignty. In another letter that Emperor Taiwu sent to Liu Yilong, the northern sovereign gives a striking comment: "If you are tired of your palaces, you can come and live in Pingcheng [i.e., the capital of the Northern Wei], and I can go and live in Yangzhou. We can exchange our territories" 若厭其區宇者,可來平城居.我往揚州住.且可博其土地. Here,

²⁰ For example, one can refer to the "Edict on Destroying Buddhism" or the "Edict on Auspicious Omens," where the emperor uses the royal "we" (*zhen* 朕) for self-reference instead of the more colloquial "wo" 我 in the letter. Also in the "Edict on Summoning Lu Xuan, Cui Chuo, and Other Talents," the emperor quotes from the *Classic of Poetry* and *Classic of Change* to illustrate the necessity of promoting talented people and recluses from obscurity.

²¹ Xiaofei Tian, "Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire in Southern Dynasties Court Poetry," pp. 23-39.

Tuoba Tao declares that the capital of a state cannot be the source of a ruler's legitimacy. Moreover, because of the construction of palace compounds, the southern ruler, according to Emperor Taiwu, "while being a man of fifty years old, has never been outside the palace gates. Even if you come [for invasion] relying on your own physical strength, you are merely like a three-year-old child" 彼年已五十, 未嘗出戶. 雖自力而來. 如三歲嬰兒.²² This provocative caricature portrays a weak ruler, fixed at one location, hiding behind layers of palace construction. As a result, the architectural and literary ornaments make his true self nebulous. This contemptuous remark resonates well with the letter we read in which Emperor Taiwu underscores his "honesty" and his enemy's "secrecy," a distinction that is aptly summarized, in his words, as between "transparency" (*xian* 顯) and "shadow" (*yi* 翳). For Tuoba Tao, a true ruler does not wield power through secrecy or by using palatial/literary decorations as a barrier. Instead, he values "spontaneity," "authenticity," and "moral integrity"—a perfect agreement between intention and action. This ideal is portrayed in the letter both conceptually and stylistically.

Lastly, another aspect of the letter that deserves mention is the different "contexts" that shape the meanings of the text. As shown above, in the context of warfare, where intrigues and deceitful plans abound, the letter's seemingly straightforward manner likely baffled its readers. It would have encouraged recipients to seek hidden agendas and generated doubt regarding the relation between rhetoric and meaning, between words and deeds. This was part of the northern state's military strategy: a discursive weapon for a psychological battle. However, the de-contextualization of the letter from its precarious military background and its re-

²² This is another letter sent from Tuoba Tao to Liu Yilong included in *Song shu*. See *Song shu*, 95.2347-2348.

contextualization in a historiographical narrative—a historical project compiled by southerners for southerners—reshape readers’ interpretation of the piece. The letter is included in the “Biography of Braided Barbarians,” and Shen Yue summarizes the compositional context of the piece as follows: the northern *barbarian* wrote the letter as an expression of *contempt* toward the defeated southern armies after *much plundering* (italics mine). In light of this frame, the richness and complexities of the letter—such as Emperor Taiwu’s anxiety over material gain, his self-representation and his representation of political enemy, and his strategy to arouse doubt and fear in his opponents, to name a few—are reduced to “ethnic barbarity.” In the end, Shen Yue launches a verbal retaliation against the northern sovereign through his narratorial device. He reciprocates Emperor Taiwu’s supposed “contempt” for the southern military failure with a southern historian’s “contempt” for the former’s savagery and his rudimentary grasp of the sophisticated literary language.

A Southern Ruler with Fraternal Care

In the chaotic years following Hou Jing’s rebellion in 549, the southern capital Jiankang fell and was occupied by ruthless rebels. They killed Emperor Wu of the Liang, Xiao Yan, and his successor Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–551), and established Hou Jing as the emperor of a new dynasty in 551. In the wake of the political anarchy, the Liang royal princes gathered troops and conducted military onslaughts to reclaim the fallen capital. However, their advancement against Hou Jing’s forces was distracted and compromised by internecine strife, as these princes, each seeing himself as the true heir of the Liang royal house, ended up fighting with one another for political dominance. The feud within the royal family was so destructive that Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591), a Liang courtier who survived the turmoil, commented bitterly in his

autobiographical poetic exposition: “They hastily battled for each own territory, / and how could the great accomplishment [i.e., reclaiming the capital] be achieved? / A son died, and the nephew came to attack, / and an elder brother launched a siege and the uncle assaulted” 遽自戰於其地, 豈大勛之暇集, 子既殞而姪攻, 昆亦圍而叔襲.²³ Both the Western Wei and Northern Qi, the two northern states, also became actively involved in the struggle in the south by supporting different princes as the nominal rulers of the Liang dynasty. In this context of political instability, the dissolution of family relations, the involvement of foreign forces, and the transgression (and even abandonment) of ritual propriety, the issues of kingship and state legitimacy were called into contention. Letters authored by state rulers became an active way to solve the immediate crisis, reaffirm royal authority, and persuade potential readers to submit to the right cause.

In the third month of 552, Hou Jing was successfully vanquished by the generals of Xiao Yi, the seventh son of Emperor Wu. In the eleventh month, to continue the Liang sovereignty, Xiao Yi claimed the throne at the city of Jiangling 江陵 to the west of the original southern capital, Jiankang. He also sent notice of his enthronement to both the Northern Qi and the Western Wei dynasties. Meanwhile, the Prince of Wuling (Xiao Ji 蕭紀, 508–553, r. 552–553), Xiao Yi’s younger brother, controlled the territory in the upper stream of the Yangzi River, the modern Sichuan area. Xiao Ji, too, proclaimed himself the emperor of the Liang in the fourth month of the same year and then sent down troops to the east to attack Xiao Yi’s Jiangling regime. The two brothers then engaged with each other in military conflict. In 553, Xiao Ji’s troops started to pose a great threat to Xiao Yi when the latter’s main generals Wang Sengbian

²³ Yan Kejun, *Quan Sui wen* 全隋文, 36.4088-2.

and Chen Baxian were busy securing the reclaimed capital Jiankang and fighting off local rebels in the east. Facing the looming danger to Jiangling, Xiao Yi panicked. He not only implored help from the Western Wei but also promoted from prison the generals of the rebel Hou Jing to lead the counterattack. At this juncture, Xiao Yi sent a letter to Xiao Ji to ask for peace. The text reads:

The Emperor respectfully greets Prince Wuling, the Defender-in-Chief Holding the Golden Battle-Axe:

Ever since the Nine Evils of the Li Tribe assaulted us and the Three Miaos harassed us with raids, Heaven has fomented chaos, and barbarians from the north and others of the same kind have invaded and prevailed.²⁴ They destroyed the imperial gate towers, and the poem “Millet” was chanted to lament [the decline of] the royal house.²⁵ We gazed at the east with halberd placed under Our pillow and sailed on the river to the west weeping blood. Our beloved sons died at two different locations,²⁶ and We did not have eight hundred dukes to gather around Us for support.²⁷ We donned a full set of armor, and [braved the danger of having] stray arrows pierce one’s hand. Before long, We suffered from the cruelty of “wind-blown trees,” and millions of regrets entangled Us.²⁸ We were afflicted with the grief over the “frost and dew,” and hundreds of worries gathered in Our mind.²⁹ We pounded Our chest and tasted the bitter bile. We did not intend to live

²⁴ In mythical antiquity, the Nine Evils of the Li Tribe revolted against the sage-ruler Shaohao 少皞. *Shi ji*, 26.1257. In the reign of the sage-king Yao 堯, the Three Miaos rebelled in the Jing 荊 area, and later they were defeated and sent into exile by Yao’s successor, another sage-king, Shun 舜. Both “Nine Evils of the Li Tribe” and “Three Miaos” refer to the Hou Jing rebellion.

²⁵ “Millet” is one poem in the *Classic of Poetry*. According to its preface, the poem describes the sorrow of a Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) official who lamented the fall of the dynasty when royal temples and palaces were changed to farm fields. See *Maoshi zhushu*, 4.147-148.

²⁶ Xiao Fangdeng 蕭方等 (528–549), the oldest son of Xiao Yi, died during the campaign against Xiao Yi’s cousin Xiao Yu 蕭譽 (519–550), who defied Xiao Yi’s order. Another son, Xiao Fangzhu 蕭方諸 (537–552), was killed by Hou Jing’s forces when Fangzhu was serving as the governor of Yingzhou 郢州.

²⁷ During the reign of the notorious ruler King Zhòu 紂 of the Shang dynasty, King Wu of the Zhou decided to rebel against the current ruler. He came to a place called Mengjin 盟津, and eight hundred dukes gathered to support his cause. See *Shiji*, 3.108.

²⁸ This refers to the death of Xiao Yan, Xiao Yi’s father, who had been cruelly tormented by Hou Jing before his demise in 549. The allusion is to the saying: “The trees hope to stand still but the wind does not stop; a son wishes to nourish his parents, but they cannot abide” 樹欲靜而風不止, 子欲養而親不待. See *Wen xuan*, 18.819.

²⁹ The sorrow of “frost and dew” also refers to the death of loving parents. It originates from the *Liji*: “As frost and dew descend, a noble man must have a sad heart when treading on them. It is not because of the coldness of the weather” 霜露既降, 君子履之, 必有悽愴之心, 非其寒之謂也. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), the second-century commentator on the classical text, glossed this as: “The original text of ‘not because of the coldness of the weather’

anymore. Only because the ancestral temples were in peril and enemies like giant whales had not been defeated, We endured the bitter taste of bile all night till daylight,³⁰ and respectfully carried out the punishment mandated by Heaven. We alone extended Our earshot to the four directions, and yet in vain manipulated eight strategies [to better manage Our subjects]. Even though We set up an altar to wait for generals and lifted up the curtain to welcome strategists, We did not have the plan presented from a Lu Su to resist soldiers at the Red Cliff, nor the visit from a Xu You for the advice of burning military provisions at Crow's Nest.³¹ Our talent and wisdom were about to be exhausted, and Our money and resources were almost used up. There was not one iota of help for Our side, and We experienced all sorts of peril and frustration. Finally, We executed the Chang Di barbarians at the Gate of Ju and defeated Chiyou by the river with maple trees [on the shores].³² Since We have avenged the hatred and humiliation, there is no longer dust in the whole world. We rule and manage the realm extending to the four directions, and Our rule particularly depends on cooperation and union. We are about to enjoy and share this tranquility with Our governor [i.e., Xiao Ji]. The middle of the summer is indeed scorching. How is Our younger brother? Your civil and martial officials should be rather tired. Now We send Zheng Anzhong, the Governor of Guangzhou, Cavalier Attendant-in-ordinary, to announce Our intention.

皇帝敬問假黃鉞太尉武陵王：自九黎侵軼，三苗寇擾。天長喪亂，獯醜憑陵。虔劉象魏，黍離王室。朕枕戈東望，泣血西浮。殞愛子於二方，無諸侯之八百。身被屬甲，手貫流矢。俄而風樹之酷，萬恨始纏。霜露之悲，百憂繼集。扣心飲膽，志不圖全。直以宗社綴旒，鯨鯢未翦。嘗膽待旦，龔行天罰。獨運四聰，坐揮八柄。雖復結壇待將，褰帷納士。拒

means that the sorrow and apprehension stem from one's feeling about the current time and longing for the parents" 非其寒之謂，謂悽愴及惕怵，皆為感時念親也。 *Liji zhushu*, 47.807.

³⁰ This refers to Goujian 勾踐 (r. 496–464 BCE), the ruler of the kingdom of Yue 越 in the Warring States period. After being defeated by the kingdom of Wu 吳 and then released back to his domain, Goujian tasted bitter bile to remind him of his humiliation and kindle his resolution for revenge. *Shiji*, 41.1742.

³¹ The "Red Cliff" battle took place in 208 between the warlord Cao Cao from the north and the allied forces of Liu Bei and Sun Quan in the south. Lu Su, the wise advisor of the Wu, contributed to the alliance between Liu and Sun that ultimately vanquished Cao Cao's troops at the Red Cliff. "Burning military provisions at Crow's Nest" refers to Cao Cao's battle with Yuan Shao, known as the "Battle of Guandu" in 200. Cao Cao would not have easily prevailed over his powerful rival if Xu You 許攸 (d. 204), an advisor of Yuan Shao, had not switched loyalty to Cao and offered the advice to burn Yuan Shao's military supplies at Crow's Nest.

³² According to the *Zuozhuan*, in 616 BCE, the "barbarian" state Souman 鄭瞞 invaded the kingdom of Lu. In the eleventh month, "they [i.e., the Lu army] defeated the Di at Xian and captured Qiaoru of the Chang Di. Fufu Zhongsheng crushed his throat with a dagger-axe and killed him. They buried his head at the Ziju Gate." 敗狄于鹹，獲長狄僑如。富父終甥椿其喉，以戈殺之，埋其首於子駒之門。 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhushu*, the eleventh year of Lord of Wen, 19.328-2. The translation is by Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg. *Zuo Tradition*, vol. 1, p. 523. The association between maple trees and river can be only found in "Summoning the Soul" in the *Lyric of Chu*. The poem ends with: "Oh, on the river's waters roll; above them grow woods of maple. The eye travels on a thousand *li*, and the heart breaks for sorrow. O soul, come back! Alas for the southern Land!" 湛湛江水兮上有楓，目極千里兮傷春心。魂兮歸來哀江南。 *Chuci buzhu*, 9.215. David Hawkes' translation. See David Hawkes trans., *The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 109. Chiyou was the arch-enemy of the Yellow Emperor in legendary antiquity. The two rivals' battle ends with the death of Chiyou.

赤壁之兵, 無謀於魯肅. 燒烏巢之米, 不訪於荀攸. 才智將殫, 金貝殆竭. 傍無寸助, 險阻備嘗. 遂得斬長狄於駒門, 挫蚩尤於楓水. 怨恥既雪, 天下無塵. 經營四方, 專資一力. 方與岳牧, 同茲清靜. 隆暑炎赫, 弟比如何. 文武具僚, 當有勞弊. 今遣散騎常侍光州刺史鄭安忠指宣往懷.³³

The letter represents a lonely, suffering, but nonetheless striving ruler facing great political devastation. The “barbarians,” namely Hou Jing and his followers, are portrayed as ancient ethnic tribes that revolted and were ultimately conquered by sage rulers. Xiao Yi castigates them for rebelling against the Liang royal house, destroying the capital, and turning the whole world into chaos. To respond to the riot in a timely way, Xiao Yi assumes the role of a military leader and a savior of people from the turmoil: he hides his halberd under the pillow, puts on armor, and proceeds forward in the face of flying arrows. However, his devotion to the public cause also implies the sacrifice of “personal” interests. The tension between a guardian of social well-being and a man with affection for his family is particularly accentuated as the speaker mixes the description of his military valor with the deplorable death of his two sons and his beloved father. His portrayal of Xiao Yan not as a former emperor but as a father, through the allusions to “wind-blown trees” and “frost and dew,” no doubt aims to arouse Xiao Ji’s sympathy and thus to amend the relationship between the two brothers. It also highlights the conflict between the role of a royal successor who should “respectfully carry out the punishment mandated by Heaven” (*gongxing tianfa* 恭行天罰) and the role of a bereaved son/father who should simply follow the deceased loved ones to the underworld (*zhibu tuquan* 志不圖全). Xiao Yi chooses the former. The unimaginable mental toll that he suffers and his avowed resolution to rescue the royal house contribute to the honorable image of a restrained ruler who dedicates himself to the restoration of order with perseverance and careful calculation.

³³ *Liang shu*, 55.827.

We also see Xiao Yi's self-portrayal as a "sole" fighter against the massive scale of calamity. The speaker emphasizes his "loneliness" (*du* 獨) by narrating his loss of close family members, his lack of supporting "dukes" and wise advisors, and his financial destitution. He particularly points out that no help ever came to his side (*pang wu cunzhu* 傍無寸助). Xiao Yi's articulation of his mental fluctuation—from heroic resistance, to grief, to resolution, to helplessness, and finally to victory—brings one's attention to the absence of the participation of Xiao Ji, the brother who governed the prefecture next to Jiangling. The sarcastic or accusatory tone is even more prominent when we return to the beginning of the letter, where the writer defines his relation to the recipient as that of an "Emperor" to the "Defender-in-Chief Holding the Golden Battle-Ax" (*jia huangyue taiwei* 假黃鉞太尉). The honorary title "Taiwei" 太尉 originally indicated a military post (*zhang bingshi* 掌兵事),³⁴ the commander of the emperor's forces. The "golden battle-ax" (*huangyue* 黃鉞) is a piece of ritual paraphernalia bestowed by the emperor indicating the permission granted to the receiver to kill on behalf of his lord. *The Southern History* records that when Jiankang fell to the rebels' control, the emperor Xiao Yan entrusted Xiao Shao 蕭韶 with carrying a "secret edict" (*mizhao* 密詔) to Xiao Ji to appoint him the Defender-in-Chief who would rally the forces and rescue the capital.³⁵ Addressing his brother as the "Defender-in-Chief" despite Ji's self-proclaimed status as emperor, Xiao Yi reminds Ji (and also other readers of the letters) of both his betrayal of the deceased ruler's order and his obligations to the new royal authority based on rightful succession.

³⁴ *Song shu*, 39.1218.

³⁵ *Nan shi*, 53.1328.

This defiance of Xiao Ji, however, does not discourage Xiao Yi's fraternal affection and his bestowal of imperial favor. The friction between the two brothers notwithstanding, Xiao Yi acknowledges the peacefulness of the world now that he has dispelled the rebels, and he wishes to share this tranquility (*qingjing* 清靜) with his "local governor" (*yuemu* 岳牧), namely, his younger brother Xiao Ji. The social chaos that they have both experienced has caused the disintegration of central authority as well as the dissolution of familial relations. By the same logic, the restoration of political order—indicated here through the anticipated submission of a local governor to the sovereign—is also in alignment with the regaining of domestic bliss, as Xiao Yi offers greetings at the end of the letter to Xiao Ji as his younger brother (*di* 弟). This kind gesture, in turn, confirms the image that the speaker consistently constructs throughout the letter of himself as a ruler who dedicates himself to the greater good. Just as he previously endured the sorrow of bereavement and family tragedy, now he is willing to again set aside the fraternal dispute and impertinence and propose peace with his disobedient brother. Xiao Yi's successful self-representation makes any objection to his proposal a gesture of defiance against both a legitimate sovereign in the public sphere and a loving brother in the domestic realm.

According to the biography of Xiao Ji in the *History of the Liang Dynasty*, in addition to the letter, the envoy Zheng Anzhong also brought Xiao Ji a more explicit message from Xiao Yi. Xiao Yi stated that if Xiao Ji could withdraw his troops back to Shu, Xiao Yi would recognize his autonomy in the area. However, seeing that the tide of the struggle was in his favor at the moment, Xiao Ji did not obey the command, and instead replied to Xiao Yi's letter with the etiquette that befitted a family member (*jiaren li* 家人禮). Even though Xiao Ji's response is no longer extant, using the epistolary etiquette of a family member apparently was intended as an arrogant disregard of Xiao Yi's political status. While for Xiao Yi, the brotherly relation to be

rectified goes hand in hand with the restoration of political order, Xiao Ji dissociates the more intimate family affair from the public obligation of an emperor and uses it to challenge Xiao Yi's claim to imperial authority.

Xiao Ji's optimism did not last long. Shortly after this exchange, Lu Na 陸納 (fl. mid-sixth century), the rebel to the east of Jiangling, was conquered and recruited by Xiao Yi's generals, and all the rest of the troops there turned around and started gathering to defend themselves against Xiao Ji's invasion. At the same time, the Western Wei armies also distracted Xiao Ji's attention from the north. As Xiao Yi gradually accrued enough power and confidence for the coming triumph, he sent Xiao Ji another letter, which, despite expressing a more intimate sentiment, is tinged with menacing notes:

How Dazhi [i.e., Xiao Ji] has suffered!³⁶ In the scorching and humid last month of summer, metals and stones can melt away.³⁷ A swarm of mosquitos makes their buzzing sound as loud as thunder, and there also lurk giant foxes that can run a hundred *li*.³⁸ With a jade-like body, you toil in the military procession. We “turned out kind regards to the west,” and “how wearied We feel.”³⁹ Ever since the barbarians from the north and others of the kind invaded and prevailed, and savages like the Jie people betrayed and revolted, We are slightly older [than you] and have thus accomplished frequently military achievements in appeasing the rebellions. Hence We embraced the voluntary support from the people, and legitimacy truly befell on the one in front of the jade-disc.⁴⁰ If now

³⁶ The *History of Liang Dynasty* appends a note of explanation that Dazhi is the courtesy name (*biezi* 別字) of Xiao Ji.

³⁷ The line evokes the “Summoning the Soul.” The poem describes a shaman summoning the soul from perilous, bleak peripheries and luring it to the geographical center with abundant sustenance. According to the poem, the soul cannot dwell for long in the East, since “ten suns that come out together, melting metal, dissolving stone” 十日代出, 流金鑠石些. *Chuci buzhu*, 9.199. David Hawkes' translation, p. 104.

³⁸ In the “Summoning the Soul,” the South is dangerous too, as “There are coiling snakes there, and the great fox that can run a hundred leagues” 蝮蛇綦綦, 封狐千里些. Ibid.

³⁹ Both “turning Our kind regards to the west” and “how wearied We feel” are taken verbatim from poems in the *Classic of Poetry* (respectively “Greatness” 皇矣 and “Chirping Birds” 鶉之奔奔). This direct culling of lines from the canonical text elevates the register and tone of the letter.

⁴⁰ This alludes to a story about King Gong of Chu 楚共王 (600–560 BCE). King Gong of Chu had five sons, and none of them were borne by his principal wife. The king thus had trouble establishing an heir and hoped the deities could lend a helping hand. He buried a jade-disc in the courtyard and asked his five sons to fast first and come in to kneel down in the courtyard. Only the future King Ping of Chu 楚平王 (d. 516 BCE), at the time a child held by a

envoys are dispatched from you to Us, it is indeed what We look forward to. But if you decide otherwise, We will just drop the brush now [i.e., will cease the verbal exchanges]. We share fraternal affection as brothers. Although born into different bodies (*xing*), we are endowed with the same essence (*qi*). Even though an older brother may be fat and a younger one slim, there will never be the moment when the former will propose to replace the latter.⁴¹ As for [the days when we enjoyed] the courtesy of “yielding dates” or “offering the bigger pear to siblings,” those moments of happiness have forever gone.⁴² Sitting quietly in the Shanglin Park, We hear the sad crying of four birds;⁴³ We peruse portraits at the Xuan Palace, and sigh over the forever loss of our father.⁴⁴ Our heart harbors affection, and letter cannot exhaust the words.

甚苦大智! 季月煩暑, 流金礫石。聚蚊成雷, 封狐千里。以茲玉體, 辛苦行陣。乃眷西顧, 我勞如何。自獯醜憑陵, 羯胡叛換, 吾年為一日之長, 屬有平亂之功。膺此樂推, 事歸當璧。儻遣使乎, 良所遲也。如曰不然, 於此投筆。友于兄弟, 分形共氣。兄肥弟瘦, 無復相代之期。讓棗推梨, 長罷懽愉之日。上林靜拱, 聞四鳥之哀鳴。宣室披圖, 嗟萬始之長逝。心乎愛矣, 書不盡言。⁴⁵

As if to respond to Xiao Ji's reply with the etiquette of family members, Xiao Yi emphasizes in his second letter his role as a concerned, disappointed brother instead of as a

servant, stopped right above the disc's hole in the center. This showed that the legitimacy of his rule was sanctioned by the deities. See *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhushu*, the thirteenth year of Lord of Zhao, 46.808.

⁴¹ The Eastern Han official Zhao Xiao 趙孝 (fl. first century) was famous for his fraternal care. During the chaotic transition period between the Western Han and the Eastern Han, when people committed cannibalism because of famine, Zhao Xiao's brother, Zhao Li 趙禮, was kidnapped by bandits. When Zhao Xiao was informed, he came to the bandits tied up and proposed to replace his brother. He said, “Zhao Li was weak and thin because of a long time of starvation. He is not as fat and well-fed as me, his brother 禮久餓羸瘦, 不如孝肥飽. *Hou Han shu*, 39.1229.

⁴² The two stories praise brotherly love and humility. When Wang Tai 王泰, a sixth-century Liang courtier, was a young child, he refused to eat the dates scattered on the bed while his other brothers and cousins vied to snatch them. When being asked why, he answered, “If I do not take them, they will surely be bestowed on me” 不取, 自當得賜. *Liang shu*, 21.323. Kong Rong 孔融 (153–208), a third-century elite, yielded the bigger pear to his brother and took the small one. When others asked him the reason, he answered, “I am the youngest son. Therefore, by principle I should take the small pear” 我小兒, 法當取小者. *Hou Han shu*, 70.2261.

⁴³ An old story recounts that when four fledglings grow up and fly away in four different directions, the mother bird cries over their departure. The third-century poet Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303) wrote a poem about his separation from kinsfolk, and one of the couplets reads: “It is delightful that three branches grow out of the same stalk, / yet sad that four birds should depart to different forests.” 三荊歡同株, 四鳥悲異林. *Jin shi*, 5.657.

⁴⁴ Xuan Palace refers to the imperial residence. *Wanshi*, meaning literally “the beginning of a myriad of things,” refers to their father, Xiao Yan. Xiao Yi used the same phrase to describe his father's death in another place: “We were inflicted with the pain of ‘wind-blown trees,’ and could no longer follow the footsteps of Our father [*wanshi*]” 風樹之酷, 萬始不追. *Quan Liang wen*, 16.3041-1.

⁴⁵ *Liang shu*, 55.827.

dynastic ruler. The “intimacy,” however, does not conceal Xiao Yi’s explicitly threatening note, as he claims: “If now envoys are dispatched from you to Us, it is indeed what We look forward to. But If you decide otherwise, We will just drop the brush now.” Throughout the letter, Xiao Yi not only once again professes his authority over his brother who was also supported as an emperor, but also capitalizes on their “familial tie” and insinuates that the collapsing relationship between family members that is beyond repair and will justify his future political decision.

Even though Xiao Yi describes their fraternal relation as “being born into different bodies yet sharing the same essence” (*fenxing gongqi* 分形共氣), he seems to emphasize the brothers’ difference over their similarity. By boasting of his military achievements and evoking the story about King Cheng of the Chu, Xiao Yi portrays himself as the rightful sovereign, a position confirmed both by his subjects who admire his victory against “barbarians” and by numinous powers shown through a jade disc (*bi* 璧). In contrast, Xiao Ji, also a noble royal family member with a “jade-like body” (*yuti* 玉體), toils in the alien, dangerous periphery. In “Summoning the Soul,” whence the letter draws several references, the unbearable heat, which can melt metals and stones, characterizes the climate in the East, and monstrous creatures such as giant foxes linger in the South. Later Xiao Yi expresses his sympathy for Xiao Ji’s tiresome military expedition by “extending kind regards to the west” (*xigu* 西顧), a phrase appropriated verbatim from a poem in the *Classic of Poetry*. While both are the heirs of the royal lineage, Xiao Yi safely resides in the center, the place that the “jade disc” rightly marks and that deities assign; in the meantime, Xiao Ji is described as a besmeared jade traveling in the foreign borderlands.

A detectably nostalgic tone at the end of the letter suggests the permanent loss of domestic happiness. Through textual allusions to Zhao Xiao, Wang Tai, and Kong Rong, paragons of brotherly care, the author indicates that the disintegration of familial responsibility

and intimacy is so destructive and irremediable at the moment that it leaves one with nothing but nostalgia. Insofar as an older brother can (or will) no longer sacrifice himself to protect his sibling, the younger brother, too, stops showing humility and courtesy to his kinsfolk. While sitting in the “Shanglin Park” and “Xuan Palace,” the imperial garden or residence in the central court, the speaker hears only birds crying to lament their separation and bemoans his father’s death when gazing at his portraits. The absence of a father figure accelerates the dissolution of the already loosened family relation: the permanent loss (*changshi* 長逝) of their father echoes the permanent disappearance (*changba* 長罷) of the joyful days in the past. One may recall that in the original framework of the “Summoning the Soul,” the contrast between the perilous periphery and well-furnished center makes the unambiguous statement that the soul should not wander but return to its proper place. In this letter, however, while the periphery remains dangerously uninhabitable, the pleasure of the center is absent or “forever gone.” Xiao Yi is no longer “summoning back” his brother from the periphery. Instead, the “irretrievability” of the delightful past once shared among family members gives Xiao Yi the justification not to salvage it at all. The relinquishment of familial obligation hence further warrants future military expeditions to be waged by Xiao Yi as a political leader against his insubordinate brother, also a defiant subject.

The two letters interestingly show the oscillation between the voice of a sovereign and that of a brother. In the message that seeks a truce and a peaceful reconciliation, Xiao Yi assumes the more serious role of an emperor who has striven to rescue his people from chaos despite his personal sacrifices; in the letter that conveys threats and hostility, Xiao Yi becomes a disappointed, mournful brother deploring the lost household amity. One can see Xiao Yi’s public posture as a legitimate ruler and his domestic role as a brother diverge, and at times converge, in

the two letters to achieve certain intended rhetorical effects. The speaker manipulates different voices and vacillates between them. At one point, the emperor's restoration of social order aligns with the reconstitution of familial ties initiated by an older brother; at another, the emphasis on brotherly disparity maps onto the political realm, and the broken familial tie gives proper justification for imperial conquest.

In this section, we have looked at two sets of epistolary exchanges to examine how imperial voice is constructed in letters attributed to state rulers, where the letters' rhetorical power lies, and what effects they would likely have on their recipients. Tuoba Tao's letter preserved in the *History of the Song Dynasty* represents a self-revealing ruler who writes in a straightforward style. The foregrounding of an imperial self with no duplicitous intention forms a contrast to the "secretive," "paranoid" southern emperor. In a military context, the transparency emphasized in the letter generates doubt and hints at a potential discrepancy between rhetoric and reality. Its embedding in the historical narrative by a southerner, however, results in highlighting the ruler's barbarity and crudeness. In Xiao Yi's letters to his brother Xiao Ji, the speaker vacillates between his role as an emperor and that of an older brother to either seek peaceful reconciliation or justify his future military conquest. In the former case, the restoration of political order conditions the consolidation of familial ties, while in the latter, the domestic relation that is broken beyond repair justifies political annihilation.

The Politics of Intimacy in Epistolary Exchange

The displacement of the elite community in the destructive age caused harrowing separation of close friends and family members. Amidst the vicissitudes of political powers, migration, and forced detainment, the decision of whether to serve a new dynasty, willingly or

reluctantly, raised the contested issue of loyalty and integrity. It prompted people to reflect on the question of political identity, especially when someone serving a new dynasty communicated with friends and families in the home state. In those instances of communication, no matter whether the writer tried to express his yearning for reunion or justified his new political identification, public claims of allegiance were always connected to a more “personal” sphere of kinship and friendship.

The response fell along a spectrum. At one extreme was the belief that loyalty mattered and familial ties should accommodate different political orientations. For example, during the confrontation between the Northern Wei and the Song dynasty in 450 in the city of Pengcheng, the northern ruler commanded the captured southern general Cheng Tianzuo 程天祚 (fl. 450) to be brought to the city gate. He requested the captive’s brother Cheng Tianfu 程天福, who happened to be in Pengcheng as a defending general, to come out and meet with his brother. The northern ruler sent the following message: “Recently at Ruyang, having received nine wounds, he [i.e., Cheng Tianzuo] fell into the Yin River, and We with Our own hands pulled him out. In general when people’s flesh and blood have been separated, they then think to draw together. We have already spoken of it. But his younger brother firmly declines to come. You should now order him to come so that they may see each other.” 近於汝陽身被九創, 落在澱水, 我手牽而出之。凡人骨肉分張, 並思集聚, 輒已語之, 但其弟苦辭。今令與來使相見。Instead of showing gratitude to the northern ruler for “personally” rescuing his brother and offering them a chance to reunite, Cheng Tianfu vehemently refused the proposal. He commented on his brother’s choice: “My elder brother received the command of Ruyang and was unable to carry it to death. We each are in a different state; why this bother to see each other?” 兄受命汝陽, 不能死節, 各在一國,

何煩相見。⁴⁶ Cheng Tianfu's indictment shows that in this politically charged situation, an impasse between two powerful states on the verge of military struggle, loyalty took priority over familial affection.

Meanwhile, kinship and shared memory can also be used as a rhetorical tool for persuasion. During the reign of Xiao Luan, Emperor Ming of the Southern Qi dynasty, the southern ruler ordered the general Cui Huijing 崔惠景 to write a letter to his cousin Cui Sengyuan 崔僧淵, who had previously fled to the northern land and was appointed a court official there. According to the historical account, Huijing's letter aimed to "reproach his [i.e., Cui Sengyuan's] disloyalty for entering another state and persuade him to change his mind" 說以入國之屈, 規令改圖. It is unfortunate that Cui Huijing's letter is no longer extant, but Cui Sengyuan's reply survives in the *History of the Wei Dynasty*.⁴⁷ The responding letter first praises the glory of the northern empire and the virtue of its ruler, especially his fraternal affection. It is followed by the author's denunciation of the southern ruler's "evilness" for massacring royal family members and suspecting the loyalty of nobles and kin (*yiqin caigui* 疑親猜貴). These differing descriptions of the northern ruler's cordiality and the southern ruler's suspicion toward family members pave the way for Sengyuan to ponder his relationship with his cousin. Just like his lord, Sengyuan claims that he has always cherished his cousin out of brotherly love, and yet it is Huijing who has turned his back on Sengyuan by pledging allegiance to the south. This highly political message ends with an interesting remark: "'There' and 'here' are different domains. But our feelings have not changed at all since the past, not to mention [their intensity] today. An

⁴⁶ *Song shu*, 59.1602. Albert Dien's translation. See *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook*, p. 49.

⁴⁷ *Wei shu*, 24.631-32.

older brother can instruct as much as a younger brother can admonish. Changing one's intention should be as easy as turning over one's hand" 彼此為異, 猶昔情不移也, 況於今日哉. 如兄之誨, 如弟之規, 改張易調, 易於反掌. Thus Cui Sengyuan's reply also becomes a document of persuasion exhorting his kinsman to submit. Brotherly love in this letter fulfills explicit ideological goals. According to the author, the northern ruler's benevolence to his kinsfolk serves as a model for his subjects, Sengyuan included, who admires his cousin while claiming loyalty to this state of morality. On the contrary, the southern emperor's depravity and maltreatment of his family members corrupt Huijing and prevent the latter from seeing the true locus of legitimacy. The boundary between familial relation and political cause is blurred, and intimate sentiment becomes a literary device for political persuasion and manipulation.

At the other end of the spectrum, one also sees that different political belongings exerted no pressure on the expression of admiration between friends and kin. Historical records are replete with instances of generals, officials, and courtiers who fled from one state to another and switched their allegiance with few moral qualms. In the latter half of the sixth century, the southern official Xu Ling wrote a reply to his clansman Xu Zhangru 徐長孺, who had asked for Xu Ling's new writings. Xu Zhangru originally hailed from the south but had assumed a post at the Northern Qi dynasty by the time of the correspondence. Xu Ling in the letter expresses gratitude and compliments the talent of his relative: "You are [as cherishable as] a jade from the terrace compound or a pearl in the deep Bo ocean. You will be prized and venerated wherever you are, not necessarily only in your hometown. It has been years since you have lodged yourself in the big state. The eminent talents of your state should indeed respect and admire you highly"

叢臺之壁，少海之珠，何必鄉里，所在為貴。卿託身大國，既已積年，彼朝英彥，理相欽挹。⁴⁸

This piece was likely composed when the Chen and Northern Qi dynasties were on good terms, in contrast to the previous two examples. As can be expected, the changed political environment demands an accommodating articulation of kinship and friendship. In turn, the fashioning of “intimacy” in public epistolary communication also closely engaged with the intricate contemporary politics and even played an active part in influencing political and military developments.

This section discusses letters exchanged between friends and kin who were separated in different states. Despite the intense personal emotions that often pervade these texts, one should not simply regard them as “truthful” reflections of the author’s mindset, but rather a kind of discursive construction in which personal and public, intimacy and politics, and self-representation and persuasion intersect. I will examine two sets of letters exchanged, respectively, between family members and old friends and explore the “politics of intimacy” therein. The analysis focuses on the shared memory and past intimacy narrated in the letters and their political, ideological, and moral implications. The letters are never merely emotionally charged instances of self-expression or recollection. As will be shown later, in the first example, personal feelings come through political dealings and maneuvers, and “intimacy” is effectively appropriated to manipulate readers’ perceptions of political reality. In the second example, the shared blithe moments of the past are evoked by two friends, one detained in a foreign country and the other in the home state, to voice their different visions of the past, present, and future. Whether the intimate moments from their previous life can be regained becomes a contentious

⁴⁸ *Quan Chen wen*, 10.3453-1.

issue, and their interpretation and discursive negotiation with their “intimacy” intensify both individuals’ painful engagement with the disillusionment of reality.

Letter Exchange between a Mother and a Son

The collapse of a state often led to the slaughtering and scattering of the serving elites, and prominent aristocratic families were torn apart or even completely wiped out during dynastic transitions. The fulfillment of filial piety was severely disrupted when parents and children were forced into separation, which compromised the observance of the mourning ritual. The news of the death of a family member sojourning in another state could not reach the family in time or at all if the two states were on hostile terms, not to mention that offspring could not possibly find the remains of many who died during battles. Because of this moral and ritual dilemma, contemporary historical records contain a number of anecdotes that praised the continuous practice of filial piety in chaotic times as a means for historians to discursively amend the collapsing social order. For example, Sima Yanyi 司馬延義 (fl. 550s), a southern courtier who was detained along with his mother in the northern capital Chang’an, suffered greatly when his mother passed away. He then in person brought the coffin with his mother’s body in it back to the southern capital Jiankang for her burial. The cold weather on the road badly wounded his hands.⁴⁹ Another southern courtier Yin Buhai 殷不害 (505–589) was particularly lauded for his filial piety when he searched for the body of his mother in piles of corpses for seven days after the Jiangling debacle.⁵⁰ In addition to outbursts of feelings, the separation of close family

⁴⁹ *Chen shu*, 32.430.

⁵⁰ *Chen shu*, 32.424–425.

members also caused serious ritual consequences. The Chen courtiers Shen Zhu 沈洙 (518–569) and Jiang Dezao 江德藻 (509–565) once engaged in a discussion about a case in which a southerner, Shen Xiaogui 沈孝軌, went to the north to bring back the body of his deceased father but never returned. The two officials proposed to the throne that Shen's family should take off their mourning clothes, since it was possible that Shen Xiaogui had died either on his way there or on the way back. For the sake of the well-functioning of the court with available staff, they hoped that the court would set a limit on the mourning period (*chaoting zi ying weizhi xianzhi* 朝廷自應為之限制), as a way of responding to the expediency of ritual in a changed era (*bian li zhiyi* 變禮之宜).⁵¹

From an interstate perspective, filial attachment was also a kind of moral capital that was used for political agendas. To bolster the image of a state investing significantly in filial piety, a ruler would even pardon a detained official and permit his return to fulfill his filial obligations. For example, Xie Zhen 謝貞 (fl. latter half of the sixth century), the southern courtier displaced in the north who then served Prince Zhao of the Northern Zhou, was allowed to go back when the prince heard that Xie often cried in his house out of longing for his mother in the south.⁵² Filial piety was sometimes treated as leverage during a political bargain that the enemy would exploit for tangible benefits. In the first chapter, we examined the case in which Yao Xing, the ruler of the Later Qin, kept as hostage the mother of Murong Chao, the ruler of the Southern Yan. Yao thus proposed a *quid pro quo* to exchange the mother for Southern Yan's court musical equipment and musicians. Here, filial piety was particularly tested when political legitimacy was

⁵¹ *Chen shu*, 33.437.

⁵² *Chen shu*, 32.428-29.

at stake. Another case that involved a mother and a son reveals more explicitly the exploitation of filial affection. In the early seventh century, Chuluo qaghan 處羅可汗 (fl. early seventh century), the leader of the Abo branch of the Eastern Tujue, defied the authority of the Sui dynasty while his mother was detained in the capital of the Sui. The Sui emperor dispatched the envoy Cui Junsu 崔君肅 to dissuade the qaghan from an open revolt. Seeing that the qaghan was insolent toward his dynasty, Cui gave a speech that helped explain “what would happen” if the qaghan rebelled. At one point, Cui mentioned that the mother of the qaghan in Chang’an had previously guaranteed the Sui emperor that her son would never rebel. Hence now, “If the qaghan declares himself a supporting subject and pays due respect to the imperial edict, then our state will be forever peaceful, and the lifespan of your mother will be extended. Otherwise, Madam Xiang [i.e., the qaghan’s mother] will appear to have tricked the Son of Heaven. [If this is the case,] she will surely be executed, and her head will be sent to the realms of the barbarians.” 可汗若稱藩拜詔, 國乃永安, 而母得延壽. 不然者, 則向夫人為誑天子, 必當取戮而傳首虜庭.⁵³ The message cannot be clearer: the qaghan’s willing subjugation was to be reciprocated with his mother’s precious life.

It is against this backdrop of displacement, political manipulation, and the moral imperative on filial piety that we will read the two letters exchanged between Yuwen Hu 宇文護 (513–572) and his mother Madam Yan 閭氏 in 564. Yuwen Hu was the nephew of the powerful Western Wei general Yuwen Tai. After Yuwen Tai passed away, he entrusted his young sons to Yuwen Hu, and the latter supported the enthronement of Yuwen Jue 宇文覺 (542–557, r. 557) and established the Northern Zhou dynasty of the Yuwen household. Yuwen Hu thus

⁵³ *Sui shu*, 84.1877.

became the regent—the *de facto* ruler of the Northern Zhou dynasty until 572, when Yuwen Yong, Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou, staged a coup and had Hu executed. While Yuwen Hu gradually ascended to the highest position in the Chang'an court, his mother, Madam Yan, was detained in the Northern Qi dynasty capital, Ye. In 564, after a military fiasco, the Northern Qi agreed to return Madam Yan to her son as a token of goodwill but then postponed the release to negotiate terms and benefits. There is no doubt that Madam Yan was used as leverage by the Northern Qi to exert control over its enemy, especially the powerful minister Yuwen Hu. The letters were sent back and forth under these circumstances.

The authorship of Madam Yan's letter has been contested. Yan Kejun, the compiler of the complete prose of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, judges that Madam Yan's letter was composed by an "anonymous" courtier in the Northern Qi. His judgment is likely based on a denunciatory edict issued by Emperor Wu of Northern Zhou to the Northern Qi when the latter kept refusing to send Madam Yan back regardless of its promise. At one point, the edict reads: "You have designed out of nowhere those deceiving words for the mother of Our uncle. Without ever discussing the date of return, you just asked for more verbal correspondence" 方為世母虛設詭詞, 未議言歸, 更徵酬答.⁵⁴ The Northern Zhou ruler clearly believed that the letter supposedly "composed" by Madam Yan was but a court intrigue devised by Northern Qi officials. There was surely intentional manipulation at play from the Northern Qi court. From other sources, we know that one Northern Qi official, Duan Shao 段韶 (d. 571) offered advice to his emperor, stating that Yuwen Hu was a powerful regent king of the enemy state, and it would

⁵⁴ *Zhou shu*, 11.173.

be better to first promise the return of his mother and then postpone the actual release for further negotiations.⁵⁵

To modern readers, the extent to which the historical figures Madame Yan and Yuwen Hu participated in composing the letters, if at all, can no longer be ascertained; nor is it the most pertinent question to ask. Rather, as state documents publicly sent to rivals, and thus subject to the scrutiny of audiences from both courts, the letters created the voices of a longing mother and a filial son only to maintain the illusion of privacy and intimacy. They represent collective court strategies under the guise of individuals' "truthful" self-expression. With interstate negotiation, deception, and compromise as the background, the privately shared moments between two individuals narrated in the letters served acute political purposes. As we will see, at one point, intimacy conspires with political machinations to undermine the image of a minister of the rival state; at another, familial intimacy is set aside as a "personal" affair separate from official duty, and the sacrifice of the former for the public good only reaffirms the minister's moral and political legitimacy.

Madam Yan's letter starts with emotional intensity.⁵⁶ She bewails the separation from her son and her unjust sufferings from all the catastrophes that have fallen upon her and her family. Her attention to the passage of time particularly stresses how unbearable the misfortune was: she married into the Yuwen family at age 19; she endured separation from her family for 30 years; and now she has already arrived at the end of her life, at 80 years old. The torment brought about by the process of aging is more palpably felt as none of her children are still around as a source of comfort. She initially expected to have "one day of restfulness" (*yiri anle* 一日安樂) after her

⁵⁵ *Bei Qi shu*, 16.211.

⁵⁶ For the Chinese and English translation of Madam Yan's letter and Yuwen Hu's reply, see Appendix.

children all grew up, but instead, it was the Northern Qi state that ultimately fulfilled the role of a “family,” by bringing “restfulness” to her in the old age (*cha an chimu* 差安遲暮). Madam Yan then praises the favor and kindness of the Great Qi for ending her anguish and allowing her to reunite with her son. Its benevolence is compared to the “Great Creation” (*ren tong zaohua* 仁同造化). Just as Madam Yan gave birth to Yuwen Hu and thus had the right to demand the latter’s requital of her love, now the Northern Qi endows them with a second chance at life, figuratively speaking. Hence the political and the familial corroborate each other perfectly. Repaying his mother’s nurturing and care by fulfilling the role of a filial son is inseparable from showing gratitude to the Northern Qi state that makes possible the reunion of mother and son.

The letter then goes into the world of memory, nostalgia, and bitter happiness shared by Yuwen Hu and Madam Yan, who are the two main protagonists of the narrative about the past.

When I parted from you, you were very young, and hence you might not entirely know our family affairs. In the past, we lived in the Wuchuan Garrison. I gave birth to you and your brothers. The zodiac animal of my first son is the mouse, the second son, the rabbit, and you, the snake. When Xianyu Xiuli rose up [in 526],⁵⁷ all our family members, whether young or old, were living in Boling county, and we decided to go to the city of Zuoren together. When we proceeded north of the Tang River, we were defeated by the state troops from Dingzhou. Your grandfather [i.e., Yuwen Gong] and your second uncle [i.e., Yuwen Lian] were killed during the battle. Then, the wife of your [second] uncle, Madam Heba, and her son Yuwen Yuanbao, the wife of your [third] uncle, Madam Hegan, and her son Yuwen Puti, and you and I—the six of us—were captured and detained in Dingzhou.⁵⁸ Not for long, you and I were sent [as prisoners] to Yuan Baozhang’s camp, and Heba and Hegan (and their sons) were kept in different places. When Yuan Baozhang saw you, he remarked that he knew your grandfather, and you and he [i.e., the grandfather] looked very much alike. At the time, Baozhang was stationed in the city of Tang, and the troops planned to stay there for three days. The male and female captives whom Baozhang had plundered amounted to sixty or seventy. All of them would

⁵⁷ Xianyu Xiuli revolted in 526. The headquarters of this revolt was the city of Zuoren. The Yuwen family joined the rebellious cause. Yuwen Gong 宇文肱 (d. 526), the grandfather of Yuwen Hu, and Yuwen Lian 宇文連 (d. 526), one of Yuwen Hu’s uncles, died in the battle near the Tang River.

⁵⁸ Yuwen Gong had four sons: Yuwen Hao 宇文顥 (d. 524), Yuwen Lian, Yuwen Luosheng 宇文洛生, and Yuwen Tai. Yuwen Hao was the father of Yuwen Hu and died before Xianyu Xiuli’s rebellion. Yuwen Lian was the father of Yuwen Yuanbao. Yuwen Luosheng was the father of Yuwen Puti.

be sent to the capital Luoyang. You and I too were supposed to be taken there as required. When we arrived on the southern outskirts of Dingzhou city, we spent the night at the home of Jikugen, our fellow townsman. A slave of Rouran origin espied the campfire of Xianyu Xiuli's armies nearby and told me that he would flee and run to our troops on this very night. After he got there, he informed the armies of our location. The next day when the sun rose, your uncle led armies and intercepted, and therefore, you and I were able to return to our camp. At the time you were only twelve years old. You and I shared one horse, and we rode back following the troops. How can you not remember all these? Afterward, you and I lived in Shouyang. At the time, you were classmates with Yuwen Yuanbao, Yuwen Puti, and Helan Shengluo, who is the son of your aunt. Your teacher was a scholar with the surname Cheng who was very strict and cruel. The four of you wanted to kill him. When your aunts and I heard about it, we each seized our son and gave him a beating. Only Helan Shengluo escaped [the punishment] because he no longer had a mother.

汝與吾別之時，年尚幼小。以前家事，或不委曲。昔在武川鎮，生汝兄弟。大者屬鼠，次者屬兔，汝身屬蛇。鮮于修禮起日，吾之闔家大小，先在博陵郡住，相將欲向左人城。行至唐河之北，被定州官軍打敗。汝祖及二叔，時俱戰亡。汝叔母賀拔及兒元寶，汝叔母紇干及兒菩提，并吾與汝六人，同被擒捉入定州城。未幾間，將吾及汝送與元寶掌，賀拔紇干各別分散。寶掌見汝，云我識其祖翁，形狀相似。時寶掌營在唐城內，經停三日。寶掌所掠得男夫婦女可六七十人，悉送向京。吾時與汝同被送限。至定州城南，夜宿同鄉人姬庫根家。茹茹奴望見鮮于修禮營火，語吾云，我今走向至本軍。既至營，遂告吾輩在此。明旦日出，汝叔將兵邀截，吾及汝等還得向營。汝時年十二，共吾竝乘馬隨軍，可不記此事緣由也。于後吾共汝在受陽住。時元寶菩提及汝姑兒賀蘭盛洛并汝身四人同學。博士姓成，為人嚴惡。汝等四人，謀欲加害。吾與汝叔母等聞之，各捉其兒打之。唯盛洛無母，獨不被打。

The recounting of “household affairs” (*jiashi* 家事) gives the letter a personal tone, yet one immediately notices that the “household affairs” narrated here appear to be only a history of household decline in the years of the northern rebellion. The disintegration of the family is specifically underscored through the death and dispersal of its members. In the beginning, the whole family, young and old, lived together (*hejia daxiao* 闔家大小) in Boling county, and then, because of their involvement in Xianyu Xiuli's revolt, they migrated to the city of Zuoren. The family was caught up in battles against state armies. The grandfather and one of Yuwen Hu's uncles died in the confrontation, which led to the capture of Yuwen Hu and his mother, along with two other mother-son pairs, in the hands of the enemy. Then, after they were transferred to

Dingzhou, the other two couples were kept elsewhere, which left only Madam Yan and Yuwen Hu alone and dependent on each other in the world of strangers, peril, and uncertainty.

In the narrative, the mother and son as a pair experience all the frightening episodes, and their bonding is as much physical as verbal, emphasized through the frequently used phrase “you and I” (*wu yu ru* 吾與汝) in the paragraph. Both the mother and son lack any agency in determining their destiny: they are imprisoned, sent away, recognized, and rescued. This sense of helplessness only heightens their desperation and mutual dependence, which has surely left an indelible imprint on Madam Yan’s mind. The speaker’s narration also seems to generate a peculiar tension between the two figures that will continue to grow as the letter unfolds. The narrative from a suffering mother immersed in contemplation and recollection aims to inform and enlighten her son, who “might not entirely know our family affairs in the past” (*yiqian jiashi huo bu weiqu* 以前家事, 或不委曲) and was too young to understand the “reasons” (*yuanyou* 緣由) for all the ordeals.

After the description of the chaotic time, the narrative jumps to another episode that occurred when the son reached the rebellious age. Yuwen Hu and his cousins were harshly beaten by their mothers for devising a plan to kill their stern teacher. Again, we see the emphasis on maternal care, albeit in the form of violence. The figure of “mother” becomes a rectifying force who sets her offspring on the morally correct path. In the case of Helan Shengluo, however, the absence of motherly interference indicates that evil actions go unpunished. The “inadvertent” mentioning of the motherless Helan Shengluo interestingly reminds readers of the current moment when Yuwen Hu, just like Helan Shengluo in the past, is no longer blessed with his mother’s supervision and intervention. Should this powerful minister’s character be called into question since the maternal guidance has been, and is still, missing?

Madam Yan then evokes her memory of the day of their separation:

[On the day of departure,] you wore a robe of red thin-silk with a silver-inlaid belt. Shengluo wore a body-length robe of purple color-watered silk, and its inside was made of yellow silk. You two rode a mule side by side and went away. Shengluo was younger than you. The three of you called me “Amodun” [“mother” in the Xianbei language].⁵⁹ Things like these, surely you should be able to remember clearly? Now with the letter, I also send you one piece of brocade outerwear that you often wore when you were little. You should look at it closely and thus know the sorrow and grief that have haunted me for many years.

汝時著緋綾袍，銀裝帶，盛洛著紫織成纈通身袍，黃綾裏，竝乘驢同去。盛洛小于汝，汝等三人竝呼吾作阿摩敦。如此之事，當分明記之耳。今又寄汝小時所著錦袍表一領。至宜檢看。知吾含悲戚，多歷年祀。

The sartorial details of Yuwen Hu’s and Helan Shengluo’s garments on the day of their departure are entrenched in Madam Yan’s memory as a source of both solace and torment. The recollection is based as much on the visual as on the aural, as she also remembers that these young children, including Helan Shengluo, who was deprived of a mother, cried out “Amodun” to her—“mother” in their own language. The act of remembering is thus paradoxically both delightful and painful: it conjures up joyous moments only to reveal their illusoriness in the face of hard “reality.” As the memory relentlessly revisits her, Madam Yan again asks whether the letter’s recipient, Yuwen Hu, can still recall clearly all of these episodes (*fēnmíng jì zhī* 分明記之). Lest her son forget or be unaware, she sends, along with the letter, a piece of clothing that Yuwen Hu wore when he was a child. The “gift” is invested with emotional poignancy, as it has “witnessed” all these years of Madam Yan’s suffering. The mother instructs Yuwen Hu to “look at it closely” (*jiānkān* 檢看) to understand how memory has become a burden to her, especially when the past that they once intimately shared is both permanently gone and constantly returning to haunt her.

⁵⁹ While Madam Yan focuses only on Yuwen Hu and Helan Shengluo here, it is baffling that a third person appeared who also cried “Amodun” to Madam Yan. It is possible that Madam Yan means the slave Laifu 來福, who, as Madam Yan states in the preceding part, came to escort Yuwen Hu and Helan Shengluo to their uncle in the west.

This outburst of feeling, along with preceding narratives about their misfortune, apparently aims to incite guilt on the part of Yuwen Hu. After this, Madam Yan more explicitly comments on her son's failure to observe filial piety. For her, filial piety is the prerequisite for leading a life of conscience and happiness: "Even if you have great glory and your brightness shines throughout the whole world, what use does it bring to you and what benefits to me?" The dissatisfaction is soon turned into an accusation and a threat:

Before this very day, you failed to nurture and take good care of your mother. But how will I discuss more of what happened in the past? From this very day on, the remaining time of my life will completely depend on you. You stand straight up between the heaven and earth, and in between there are deities and ghosts. Don't think that because these beings are obscure and unknowable, you can thus betray and deceive them.

吾今日之前, 汝既不得申其供養, 事往何論. 今日以後, 吾之殘命, 惟繫于汝. 爾戴天履地, 中有鬼神, 勿云冥昧, 而可欺負.

She invokes deities and ghosts as witnesses to guarantee Yuwen Hu's fulfillment of his filial obligations. Interestingly, while previously stressing her memory's tenaciousness, Madam Yan here decides to forget. Nevertheless, she will forget and forgive only when her remaining life will be forever tied (*ji* 繫) to Yuwen Hu's (translated more loosely above as "the remaining time of my life will completely depend on you"). The son's inability to properly take care of his mother can be only pardoned by his effort to restore, at any cost, their past intimacy, a life of "you and I" (*wu yu ru*). It is here that the main gist of Madam Yan's letter is expressed: her son should comply with the Northern Qi's requests to make possible the ultimate reunion of mother and son.

As we can see, the emotionally powerful and rhetorically complex letter conjoins the personal and public. On a personal level, the speaker Madam Yan bemoans the separation from her children and family and conveys nostalgia for the past, when she and Yuwen Hu depended on each other for survival. She tries to remind Yuwen Hu of their intimate relationship and

expresses eagerness to reunite with her son. However, if we take seriously the Northern Zhou emperor's accusation of the enemy who "designed out of nowhere those deceiving words for the mother of Our uncle," "blackmailed a son to accuse him of insincerity" (*yaozi zecheng* 要子責誠), and "used a family member as leverage to exact repayment" (*zhiqin qiubao* 質親求報), "Madam Yan" as a narrative device also conspires with the specific political agenda of the Northern Qi. In Madam Yan's narrative, the Yuwen family, the reigning family of the Northern Zhou at the moment, is portrayed as having been in decline in the 520s. It showed no prestige indicative of its royal legitimacy or future grandeur, and its support of rebellious causes and engagement with state armies had led to the death of the family patriarch. As for Yuwen Hu, the regent of the Northern Zhou, instead of any praiseworthy qualities such as precocious talent or moral integrity, Madam Yan focuses on unfavorable episodes, including his flight from one place to another, imprisonment, and, worst of all, his evil plan to slaughter his teacher. Moreover, according to the mother, the prominence of Yuwen Hu's status truly means naught if his unfortunate mother lives elsewhere in pain. This raises a tension between domestic obligations and public responsibility. With filial piety prioritized over, and also serving as the basis of, public service, the letter calls the attention of its readers, including Northern Zhou court officials, to Yuwen Hu's failure in fulfilling his filial obligations. In the eyes of his contemporaries, this lapse would have undermined Yuwen Hu's political legitimacy. By the same logic, securing Yuwen Hu's image as a moral leader means assuring his mother's safe return, which depends entirely on Northern Qi's "royal grace." In all, through her evocation of mother-son intimacy, the speaker "Madam Yan" employs her unique "domestic" perspective to cast a special light on the Northern Zhou regent Yuwen Hu. This perspective surely generates

sympathy from the readers, yet it also capitalizes on Yuwen Hu's guilty conscience and pressures him to salvage his public image.

How did Yuwen Hu and his team respond? Yuwen Hu's reply explicitly addresses his mother's concerns as conveyed in the letter. He appropriately empathizes with Madam Yan's unfortunate ordeals, expresses deep anguish regarding her debilitating health, and apologizes for his negligence. Yet more importantly, through careful rhetorical maneuvers, Yuwen Hu also rebuts the Northern Qi agenda, exposes the state interference in his mother's epistolary exchange, and justifies himself as a responsible political figure despite his mother's absence.

At the beginning of the reply, Yuwen Hu too sighs over the misfortune of Madam Yan in this tumultuous time. As his mother only remembers that their separation has lasted "more than thirty years" (*sanshi yu nian* 三十餘年), Yuwen Hu specifically counts it as "thirty-five years" (*sanshiwu nian* 三十五年), as if the grief has tortured him even more unbearably. Even though he acknowledges that he has not perfectly observed his filial duties, Yuwen ascribes the calamity and separation to abstract forces, such as "entanglement" (*wang* 網) and "accumulated sin" (*suyang* 宿殃). Though he too has been afflicted with the hardship, he has established himself in words and deeds without a guilty conscience. In response to Madam Yan's invocation of deities and ghosts to bear witness, Yuwen answers that if they have cognition, they will sympathize with him and his choices. According to the speaker, the one that truly should be held culpable for the mother/son suffering is none other than the Northern Qi state. While Madam Yan praises the benevolence and hospitality of the great Qi, Yuwen Hu claims that his mother has been cast down to the status of a slave (*nuli* 奴隸) while he has ascended to the position of "earl and duke" (*gonghou* 公侯). Echoing the "entanglement" (*wang*) that enmeshed Madam Yan in all kinds of misery, the speaker states that the chance of reunion and happiness can finally arrive only when

the Qi state decides to loosen the net/entanglement (*jie wang* 解網). By implication, Yuwen Hu's familial obligation, namely, fulfilling filial piety, also has urgency in the political realm. To properly attend to his mother, he should have untied the knot and entanglement sooner, that is, he should have defeated the Northern Qi state where his mother is being detained as a "slave."

One of the interesting episodes described in the letter is the moment when Yuwen Hu met with his aunt, whom the Northern Qi decided to release before Madame Yan to show its goodwill. This much-expected reunion with a close relative should have occasioned an outpouring of tears and feelings. However, the narrative only presents an anti-climax, in which proper expressions of emotion seem to be smothered by state interference and supervision:

I was able to attend the formal reception of her [i.e., Yuwen Hu's aunt] on the eighteenth day of this month at Hedong. No sooner had I caught a glimpse of her countenance from a far distance than my heart broke into pieces. It had been many years since the separation, during which time one hardly knew whether the other was alive or dead. We could not bear to speak [of those years] when we first reunited. She only talked about the magnanimity of the Qi state and its great virtue bestowed on you. She mentioned that even though you and she lived in the forbidden palace, you were often treated with great courtesy. Now this journey from Ye manifested that the royal grace of the Qi has become even more prominent. The state was sympathetic to the sad one and allowed Modun [i.e., mother in the Xianbei language] to deliver a letter. [In the letter,] you fully described the cruelty that you suffered and recounted in detail our household affairs. Before I even finished reading it, five emotions, being disturbed, tortured my heart. About those events being narrated in the letter, none of them I dared to forget. Modun was of an old age and had also suffered many hardships. I often imagined that there might be a lack of good care regarding food or sleeping conditions, and it was likely that you would omit and forget things. But then I saw that the narrative was very clear in the proper order. On the one hand, I feel sorrowful, and on the other, happy.

以今月十八日于河東拜見。遙奉顏色，崩動肝腸，但離絕多年，存亡阻隔，相見之始，口未忍言。惟敘齊朝寬弘，每存大德，云與摩敦，雖處宮禁，常蒙優禮。今者來鄴，恩遇彌隆，矜哀聽許，摩敦垂敕，曲盡悲酷，備述家事。伏讀未周，五情屠割。書中所道，無事敢忘。摩敦年尊，又加憂苦。常謂寢膳貶損，或多遺漏，伏奉論述，次第分明，一則以悲，一則以喜。

One should keep in mind while Yuwen Hu's letter is addressed to Madam Yan, it also passes implicit messages to Northern Qi court members who would read this letter while pondering

their reply. The narrative thus intriguingly blurs the public and personal realms. According to the speaker, years of separation have cut off news, and he had no idea whether his aunt was alive or dead. As could be expected, his heart was broken when he caught a glimpse of her. However, this long-anticipated meeting started with silence, as neither could bear to speak of those tumultuous years (*kou wei renyan* 口未忍言). This speechlessness, a result of the pent-up feelings, was then followed by the aunt's praise-filled remarks on the "enemy state": she talked only about (*wei xu* 惟敘) the kindness and virtue of the Northern Qi state and its gracious treatment of her and Yuwen Hu's mother. The "narrator" Yuwen Hu and his narration have curious functions here. It is entirely possible that the aunt and nephew had conversations of a more intimate nature, which could have been incorporated in this "personal" letter to a third family member. Instead, Yuwen Hu emphasizes his aunt's articulation of gratefulness to Northern Qi for her return and its noble permission to pass along Madam Yan's letter. By recording his aunt's comments on the "benignity" of Northern Qi right after their "speechlessness," Yuwen Hu on the one hand acknowledges the benevolent gesture of Northern Qi on which Madam Yan's life depends, and on the other, implies the state's pressure that prevents a political hostage from communicating more freely and spontaneously with her close relative.

Then, as should be expected from a filial son, Yuwen Hu writes about his painful reaction while reading his mother's letter. Madam Yan's explanation of the household affairs caused Yuwen Hu to feel such great emotion that he could not even bear to finish the whole letter. He answers his mother's questions by affirming that he has not at all forgotten these events from his childhood. What strikes Yuwen Hu is the articulateness of Madam Yan in the letter. Without having seen his mother for over thirty years, Yuwen Hu has often imagined (*chang wei* 常謂)

that his mother, suffering from old age and all the other calamities, could hardly be eating or sleeping well. As a result, he expected much “forgetfulness and omission” (*yilou* 遺漏) in Madam Yan’s account. However, the letter turns out to be “clear in the proper order” (*cidi fengming* 次第分明), which seems to confirm her physical and mental health (even though the letter was judged by the Zhou emperor to be “deceiving words” from the Northern Qi). This letter’s narratorial clarity and narrated agony ultimately make our speaker, who is also its intended reader, both joyful and sorrowful.

In the next section, Yuwen Hu starts to refute the “charges” in Madam Yan’s letter, both to him and to his family. Yuwen Hu stresses again that he remembers not only the family disaster but also the maternal instructions before his departure. The reason he has failed to fulfill his obligations of filial piety to his mother is not his insensitivity or oblivion, but his more solemn obligations to other family members, to the entire household, and to the people under the rule of the dynasty:

[At that time,] Heaven fomented chaos, and four oceans overflowed everywhere. Emperor Taizu [i.e., Yuwen Tai] took advantage of the time, and meanwhile, the state of Northern Qi also acted in accordance with the good fortune. Whether based in the area of the Two Rivers or that of the Sanfu,⁶⁰ they each made use of the favorable opportunities. When tracing the roots of their ultimate accomplishments, one finds they did not oppose each other. When Emperor Taizu passed away [in 556], the heavenly blessing was not yet secure.⁶¹ I, Sabao [i.e., Yuwen Hu], as the nephew of the late ruler, was the oldest among the younger generation, and I in person received the command to assist [the new emperor]. Even though I assumed the important post and was entrusted with heavy responsibilities, I felt sorrowful and my heart broke when I saw sons and grandsons fill the courtyard on festival days. I am ashamed to even stand between heaven and earth, and I feel remorseful in front of numinous deities.

⁶⁰ The area around the “Two Rivers” refers to Hebei 河北, where the Northern Qi’s capital Ye was located. “Sanfu” refers to the area near Chang’an, the capital of the Northern Zhou.

⁶¹ Even though Yuwen Tai controlled the Western Wei court, he never claimed emperorship. After his death in 556, Yuwen Hu deposed the last Western Wei ruler, supported Yuwen Tai’s son, Yuwen Ju, as the new emperor, and established the Northern Zhou dynasty.

天長喪亂，四海橫流。太祖乘時，齊朝撫運。兩河三輔，各值神機。原其事跡，非相負背。太祖升遐，未定天保。薩保屬當猶子之長，親受顧命。雖身居重任，職當憂責。至于歲時稱慶，子孫在庭，顧視悲摧，心情斷絕，胡顏履戴，負愧神明。

One may recall that Madam Yan implies the decline of the Yuwen family by describing their involvement with rebellions and the military fiasco when confronting state armies. Here Yuwen Hu parallels the Yuwen family with Gao family, the royal family of the Northern Qi, and confirms that the two states are of equal status regarding political legitimacy. Both took advantage of a precarious situation and founded a new dynasty according to the demands of the time. As if to rebut the narrative of Madam Yan, and thus also the propaganda of the Northern Qi court, the speaker insinuates that as much as the Yuwen household can be labeled rebels, the Gao family, too, should be found reprehensible for revolting and eliminating the weak Wei royal house.

Because of the ascension of the Yuwen family to royal status, Yuwen Hu held the responsibility to the whole household instead of to one person only, his mother. As the oldest nephew of Yuwen Tai, he was entrusted with the task of assisting the court and guaranteeing the continuation of the royal succession. Hence, political commitment and devotion to the Northern Zhou cause prevented him from acting in his personal interests by looking for his mother and helping her return. He was also painfully aware of his mother's absence. Every time the young generations gathered for court festivals, he was reminded of his loneliness without the presence of his close family members. However, his selfless devotion to the public cause at the expense of personal interests also became the very reason the rest of the Yuwen household was able to enjoy this festivity. If Madam Yan, the narrator, obliquely undermines Yuwen Hu as a powerful regent and claims that the fulfillment of filial piety is a necessary condition for a successful, moral leader, then Yuwen Hu thoroughly answers these accusations. His devotion to the family

triumphs over individual benefits, and the separation from his mother and the grief he suffers can be transformed into a kind of political capital that redeems his image.

Toward the end of the letter, Yuwen Hu further debunks the political struggle behind the façade of mother-son intimate dialogue. In Madam Yan's letter, the speaker offers a brief note about her composition to confirm its authenticity: "The Hangu Pass and Yellow River—as blockages—have separated us for many years. A letter must always obey its normative form. Lest you have doubts, I always convey my sincere wishes to you, and also append my name there. You should understand this reason and not see it as peculiar" 關河阻遠, 隔絕多年. 書依常體, 慮汝致惑, 是以每存款質, 兼亦載吾姓名. 當識此理, 勿以為怪. As if to dispel any suspicion (*huo* 惑) that the letter may be a forgery, Madam Yan affirms her authentic composition by emphasizing her sincere wishes (*kuanzhi* 款質) in the letter and attaching her name. To this, Yuwen Hu responds: "We are separated in two states, and in principle, letters should never be exchanged. Our Majesty was moved by your state's bestowed favor regarding the attachment between a mother and a son, and therefore permitted me to reply to the letter." 二國分隔, 理無書信. 主上以彼朝不絕母子之恩, 亦賜許奉荅. The antagonistic terms of the two states forbade any epistolary communication, and what communication there was carried particular political meanings. It is noteworthy that Yuwen mentions the Northern Zhou ruler's sanction of this reply. These self-reflective remarks on the letter composition at the end of the texts, one about its authenticity, the other about imperial sanction, instantly situate the delivery and reception of the letters in the context of court culture fueled by contrasting ideologies. It is clear that the "intimacy" between mother and son is carefully narrated and manipulated in a larger scheme of political negotiation.

To summarize, this section examines the politics of intimacy through a set of epistolary exchanges between Yuwen Hu and his mother, Madam Yan. In Madam Yan's letter, the "memory of intimacy" creates an insurmountable gap between a mother in grief and a son of royal prestige who lacks maternal guidance and commitment to filial piety. Madam Yan as a female narrator offers an account from a domestic point of view that helps tarnish the grand image of the state minister. "Intimacy" thus conspires with politics to downplay the legitimacy of Yuwen Hu and the royal family. In Yuwen's response, the speaker justifies his failure to fulfill his filial duties and exposes the dark politics beneath of veneer of intimacy between family members. "Intimacy" and personal happiness are to be sacrificed in pursuit of the prosperity of the household and the public good. Moreover, the mutual implication of the public and personal also means that the speaker treads carefully when commenting on the involvement of political forces in this rather "private" correspondence. He recognizes the "benevolence" of the enemy state, yet he also gives verbal retaliation and defends himself against the besmirching implications of his mother's message. Ultimately, the self-conscious remarks at the end of both texts about the composition and delivery of these letters attest to the consumption of private feelings by a broader audience.

Negotiating "Intimacy"

The correspondence between Yuwen Hu and Madam Yan is a wonderful example with which to explore the complicated dynamic between intimacy and politics, between the role of a family member and that of a state leader, and between authenticity and deception. This section discusses another set of letters exchanged between two individuals who formerly served together as courtiers in the Liang dynasty in the south and then sojourned in different states after the

dynastic fall. They are Wang Bao 王褒 (513–576) and Zhou Hongrang 周弘讓 (498–577): the former was detained in the Northern Zhou dynasty, and the latter became a recluse in the southern dynasty. Their exchanged letters show nostalgia, regret, and anxiety, conveyed through the two authors' intricate articulation of their memory of the past. I suggest that we read the exchange as one example of “request-for-return letters” that detainees at the time often composed to entreat the authorities to allow their return home. As we will see, through different narratives about their “shared past” and the “present moment,” Wang Bao and Zhou Hongrang raise the question of the “(ir-)retrievability” of their life before the dynastic fall. Their verbal negotiation shows how the articulated “intimacy” can be used both to express a sense of urgency and to offer an ambiguous response.

Historical accounts are replete with instances in which detained officials, generals, and royal members earnestly asked for their release and return. Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty was particularly noted for his “leniency” and once generously sent back some of the most important Western Wei generals, such as Heba Sheng, Dugu Xin, and Yang Zhong. Formal petitions were often brought to the attention of the high officials or emperor, and one often finds the historian's approving remarks on the rhetorical power of those pieces to persuade the royal audience. For example, Sima Gao, a southern courtier taken to the north after the Jiangling state fell, entreated to be allowed to return home and prepare a proper burial for the deceased Liang royal princes. According to his biography, “He [Sima Gao] presented a memorial to the Emperor of the Zhou dynasty and begged to return to Jiangling for the burial. The writing was deeply mournful (*ci shen suanqie* 辭甚酸切).”⁶² Yuan Yu 元彧 (d. 530), a member of the northern royal

⁶² *Chen shu*, 32.429.

family tarrying in the south, was also permitted to return home and take care of his aging mother because the southern ruler found “his words and emotions are most sincere” (*ciqing kenzhi* 辭情懇至).⁶³ Two lengthy “letters of request-for-return” by detainees have survived into our time, even though a thorough analysis of them would require a separate study.⁶⁴ Both authors, Shen Jiong 沈炯 (503–561) and Xu Ling, were southerners who were forced to serve in the northern court and were ultimately allowed back to their home state. Either petitioning the ruler or a high official as an intermediary, they both expressed urgently their “longing to return” (*sigui* 思歸) through emotional outbursts and logical reasoning.

In addition to beseeching the authorities of the state where they currently served, detainees also corresponded with friends in their home state and asked their help in facilitating their return. The letter exchange between Xu Ling and Yin Yishang 尹義尚 (fl. mid sixth century) is exemplary. Yin was originally a southern official who, along with Xu Ling, went on a diplomatic mission to the north in 548. After Hou Jing rebelled in the south, the team was detained there until 555, when some of the Liang courtiers, Xu Ling included, were allowed to come back to the southern capital. The unfortunate Yin Yishang, however, continued to be kept in the north and then became an official of the Northern Qi dynasty. After the Chen and Northern Qi formed favorable diplomatic relations, Yin wrote a letter to Xu Ling, an illustrious official now in the south, hoping that latter could beseech the southern emperor on his behalf for his

⁶³ Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), comp., *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 152.4749.

⁶⁴ They are Shen Jiong’s 沈炯 (503–561) “After I Passed through the Tongtian Terrace of Emperor Wu of the Han, I Presented a Memorial to State My Longing to Return” (“Jing Han Wu tongtian tai wei biao zouchen sigui yi” 經漢武通天臺為表奏陳思歸意) and Xu Ling’s “Letter to Yang Zunyan, Vice Director of the Department of State Affairs of the Northern Qi” (“Yu Qi shangshu puye Yang Zunyan shu” 與齊尚書僕射楊遵彥書). See *Quan Chen wen*, 14.3481, 7.3438–3440.

release. At the end of his letter, he explicitly entreats: “I humbly wish you, the kind one, could take into consideration [what we experienced together in] the past. I hope that, when there is a good opportunity, you could initiate the conversation [reminding the emperor of my situation]” 伏願仁人, 少存疇昔, 承閑之便, 希復開言.⁶⁵ In the letter, Yin provides a logical cause-and-effect narrative to justify his release. It particularly evokes the experience shared between himself and Xu Ling as diplomats in a foreign land to emphasize how different their lives afterward became, and also accuses both states of deceitfulness for failing to escort back detained officials. In his reply, Xu Ling acknowledges that he remembers all these past ordeals that they suffered together. However, Xu Ling also ambivalently responds to Yin’s pressing charge by exposing his logical fallacy, especially considering that Yin, now an official in the Northern Qi, could no longer be counted as a captured prisoner.

With these detainees’ “letters/memorials of request-for-return” as background, we can now turn to the harrowing communication between Wang Bao and Zhou Hongrang. The year 560 marked the beginning of diplomatic relations between the Chen and the Northern Zhou, when Zhou Hongzheng 周弘正 (496–574), a Chen courtier, came to Chang’an on a diplomatic mission. Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou permitted Wang Bao to send messages back to home. According to the *History of the Northern Zhou Dynasty*, Wang Bao wrote a letter to his friend Zhou Hongrang, the envoy’s brother, and along with it he appended a poem. Upon reading the letter sent from his old friend Wang Bao, Zhou Hongrang replied with another letter.

Their correspondence is of course saturated with longing, nostalgia, and reminiscence, as each had undergone a series of traumatic events. However, one may also gain a fresh perspective

⁶⁵ *Quan Bei Qi wen* 全北齊文, 8. 3847.

on the complex meanings of the communication by situating it within a larger historical context, namely, the beginning of the Northern Zhou and Chen alliance, which promised the possibility of the release of detained officials. In fact, several years after the exchange took place, Emperor Xuan of the Chen seized an opportunity to have a conversation with the Northern Zhou envoy Du Gao 杜杲 regarding the southerners in the north. He hoped that the Northern Zhou state could release both Wang Bao and Yu Xin on account of their “longing for the southern branch” (*nanzhi zhi si* 南枝之思). The envoy politely refused this request through a verbal witticism.⁶⁶ Even though we cannot ascertain whether the emperor had read Wang Bao’s letter to Zhou, or whether Zhou, after reading Wang’s letter, implored the southern ruler to help with his friend’s release, it is clear that the southern state never abandoned the idea of acquiring back its most prestigious courtiers. Interestingly, Emperor Xuan expressed his “longing” for the detained officials through imagining the detainees’ “longing” to return home. Considering that the state alliance augmented the likelihood of a detainee’s release and that the detained officials did write letters of request to their former friends, I suggest that these two individuals’ “private” verbal correspondence carries similar political undertones. Instead of merely venting personal feelings, the letters subtly contend with the possibility of a detainee’s return to the home state. What is remarkable about this verbal exchange is that without overt references to politics, the two authors primarily dwell on nostalgic retrospection. By offering diverse interpretations of their shared past and current situations, they negotiate whether they can truly restore and enjoy again their “past intimacy.”

⁶⁶ *Zhou Shu*, 39.703-704.

At the beginning of his letter, Wang Bao speaks with nostalgia to his recluse friend who is now admirably maintaining his distance from the political center. Wang Bao's letter begins thus:⁶⁷

Ruan Ji once stopped at a path's dead end, and Yang Zhu sighed in front of forking paths.⁶⁸ Drifting tumbleweeds have forever gone, and there is no way that river could flow backward. The north is a different region from the south, just as cold and hot weather belongs to different seasons. In the north, tree bark is still thick in spring, while in the south, cassia trees flourish in winter. I imagine that you have taken good care of yourself, and that there is much contentment whether you walk or rest. Your virtuous brother entered the Pass and notified me your feelings over our separation. I came to know that you still reside [in a house] beside the Duling River and also preserve the farmlands by the Eastern Pond.⁶⁹ You got rid of your tracks and hid in deep canyons. You extinguished your voice in the secluded valley. How cheerful you must be. It is indeed fortunate! Indeed fortunate!

嗣宗窮途，楊朱岐路。征蓬長逝，流水不歸。南北殊方，炎涼異節。木皮春厚，桂樹冬榮。想攝衛惟宜，動靜多豫。賢兄入關，敬承闕曲。猶依杜陵之水，尚保東陂之田。鐘跡幽蹊，銷聲窮谷，何其愉樂，幸甚幸甚。

The letter starts with the fashioning of distinctions: in the weather, temperature, geographical locations, the lives of the two friends, and their current mentality. The climates of the north and south are as drastically different as Wang Bao's life is alien to that of Zhou. Analogous to the

⁶⁷ The letters of Wang Bao and Zhou Hongrang can be found in *Yiwen leiju* and *Zhou shu*. *Yiwen leiju*, 30.535-536. *Zhou shu*, 41.731-733. I use primarily the version in *Yiwen leiju*, and will also discuss noteworthy variants.

⁶⁸ Ruan Ji lived in the third century and was often portrayed as an eccentric figure unrestrained by social norms. It is recorded that he often let the horse take him to whatever place it wished. When they arrived at a dead end, he would cry and return. Yang Zhu 楊朱 (fl. the fourth century BCE) was a philosopher in the Spring and Autumn period. He once lamented over forking paths because one might easily digress because of one misstep.

⁶⁹ I agree with the scholar Gao Buying 高步瀛, who reads these two sentences as a reference to Zhou Hongrang's life in the south. "Duling River" alludes to the Eastern Han recluse Jiang Xu 蔣詡 (fl. the first century CE). He returned to Duling on the excuse of sickness and refused to serve Wang Mang 王莽 (46 BC–23 CE), who had usurped the imperial throne. Zhou Hongrang's reply, too, mentions the "path to Jiang's house" (*jiangjing* 蔣徑), which echoes Wang Bao's allusion. "Eastern Pond" may refer to the land in the vicinity of the southern capital Jiankang. It is recorded that the high Liang official, Zhu Yi, had a household built near the "Eastern Pond." "Eastern Pond" (*dongbei*) has a variant of *chiyang* 池陽 in the *Zhou shu*. Gao Buying points out that Chiyang county was close to the capital of the Han dynasty Chang'an. Because the place where Zhou Hongrang lived at the moment, namely, Jurong 句容, was near the southern capital, Jiankang, Wang Bao used these place names associated with the old capital Chang'an as a reference to Zhou's abode. See Gao Buying, *Nanbeichao wen juyao* 南北朝文舉要 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), p. 676-677.

two contemplative historical figures, Ruan Ji and Yang Zhu, Wang suffers from displacement and desperation, while its addressee, in the author's words, maintains his old household estate, continues his reclusive life, and nurtures himself well with few ailments. All of these Zhou Hongrang should relish with contentment and cheerfulness (*yuyue* 愉樂). With the lifestyle before the dynastic fall continued and a reclusive space sustained, Zhou Hongrang can hide his footsteps and disappear into the mountains and valleys without a trace. In contrast, his brother Zhou Hongzheng and friend Wang Bao, both court representatives, have to fulfill public obligations for the sake of state business. The letter, then, is a disturbing pebble that ripples the serenity of a recluse's life: a piece of writing drenched in sorrow and bitterness to a supposedly cheerful, detached recluse.

Because I suffered from recurrent illness in the past, I perused, again and again, the formulas passed down from the Nine Immortals. As I embarked on the road of officialdom later, I still harbored the intention to ascend on the peaks of Five Numinous Mountains [i.e., to abandon public service in pursuit of self-cultivation]. In resemblance to the governor at the Pass, I recognized and sought out this extraordinary man;⁷⁰ and similar to the “guest officials,” I admired and looked up to the nobleman.⁷¹ The Great Classic explains the Way, and we frequently listened to the conversations on the Dark Origin. Mild medicines nurture man's life, and we often followed the teachings on making cinnabar pills. However, not for long, my life is coming to an end. My appearance has faded, and hair has fallen out. “[As the flowers of the bignonia are] withering in a deep yellow color”—in no time I will meet my end.⁷² Then I have cast retrospection on my previous life, and many worries have come to gather in my heart.

⁷⁰ This refers to the governor at the Hangu Pass, Yin Xi 尹喜. When the philosopher Laozi decided to leave the Central Land and roam in the west, he passed by the border passage where Yin Xi was stationed. Yin Xi saw the “aura” above the man and recognized him as the “true one.” Yin thus hoped that Laozi could leave behind his teachings. The philosopher composed the Daoist Classic *Daode jing* 道德經. *Shi ji*, 63.2141.

⁷¹ Gao Buying believes that the “guest officials” (*keqing* 客卿) here refer to Zhang Yi 張儀 (d. 309 BCE) and Su Qin 蘇秦 (d. 284 BCE), two diplomat-persuaders in the Warring States period. They were, respectively, appointed by the kingdom of Qin and kingdom of Qi as “guest officials.” Zhang Yi and Su Qin learned their tactics from Master Guigu 鬼谷子, who was a recluse.

⁷² This refers to a poem in the *Classic of Poetry* titled “Flowers of Bignolia” 苕之華. According to its preface, the poem is interpreted as: “A minister expresses lamentation for his time. At the time of King You of the Zhou dynasty, both the Rong barbarians from the west and Yi from the east invaded the Central Kingdom. Armies and soldiers were mobilized and there was a great famine. The nobleman had sympathy for the inevitable doom of the Zhou

弟昔因多疾, 亟覽九仙之方. 晚涉世途, 猶懷五岳之舉. 同夫關令, 物色異人. 譬彼客卿, 服膺高士. 上經說道, 屢聽玄牝之談. 中藥養人, 每稟丹砂之說. 頃年事邁盡, 容髮衰謝, 芸其黃矣, 零落無時. 還念生涯, 繁憂總集.

The character “qing” 頃 (“not for long”) divides the narrative of the present from that of the past, implying the political turmoil and swift change of the *modus vivendi* since the 550s. Wang Bao represents himself as someone always attentive to self-cultivation, esoteric techniques of life-prolonging, and transcendence of mundane concerns. After he enters officialdom, without the possibility of being truly otherworldly, he instead seeks the “extraordinary one” or “nobleman,” namely, Zhou Hongrang, as his like-minded companion. The southern poet Yu Xin uses the same allusions when reminiscing on his friendship with Zhou Hongrang in a poem lamenting the death of the recluse: “When I donned official garments and rode on the canopy-covered carriage, / it was also the time when you were escaping from the worldly trouble. / By observing the aura, I could seek out the true recluse, / and staying at the Pass, I waited for the unrestrained one” 昔余仕冠蓋, 值子避風塵, 望氣求真隱, 伺關待逸民.⁷³ Here in the letter, the life before the calamity is characterized by the avid quest for the Way, the making of elixirs to alleviate illness and prolong life, and mutual appreciation between the worthy recluse and our author. They were carefree and cheerful. But the good times of old soon comes to an end. The life of transcendence and self-nurturing (*yangren* 養人) then changes drastically to a physical deterioration that coincides with Wang Bao’s detainment in the north. Previously a courtier in eager search of

royal house, and lamented his encounter with this chaotic time. Therefore he composed this poem” 大夫閔時也. 幽王之時, 西戎東夷, 交侵中國. 師旅並起, 因之以饑饉. 君子閔周室之將亡, 傷已逢之, 故作是詩也. The first line is: “Oh, the flowers of the bignonia, / gorgeous is their yellow! / The sorrows of my heart, / how they stab!” 苕之華, 芸其黃矣. 心之憂矣, 維其傷矣. *Maoshi zhushu*, 15.526-527. The translation is Arthur Waley and Joseph R. Allen. See Arthur Waley and Joseph R. Allen, trans., *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), p. 221.

⁷³ *Quan Bei zhou shi*, 3. 2383.

hidden worthies, Wang Bao now assumes the voice of a minister who laments a perished state through the evocation of a *Shi jing* line. With hair falling out and his youthful appearance fading, the process of declining appears all the more unbearable and inevitable as he is tormented by anguish over the fallen dynasty and the lack of a like-minded community for the enterprise of immortality-seeking. All of these sufferings draw readers' attention to the Zhou Hongrang portrayed in the previous section: a cheerful, robust recluse continuing his life of tranquility and self-cultivation. The review of their past (*huan nian shengya* 還念生涯), with its moments of intimacy, only accents how different their current situations appear to be. This recollection and disillusioned reality lead to a sense of anxiety, disappointment, and even vexation on the part of the detainee.

With a bitter note, the letter continues to the darker prospect of imminent death and a wandering ghost.

As time has passed by and days wasted away, I am the same kind as Zhao Meng in his old days;⁷⁴ holding a staff on a walk and chanting at the same time, I resemble Liu Kun, who suffered greatly from grief and worry.⁷⁵ When one traveled to the Heyang County in

⁷⁴ Zhao Wu 趙武 was the high-status minister of the kingdom of Jin in the Spring and Autumn period. Despite his sagacity and good governance, *Zuo zhuan* casts a negative light on him as an old man, exemplified by a number of instances in which people prophesized his coming death based on his behaviors, words, and habits. More pertinent to the letter's intended allusion is one anecdote involving Houzi 后子 (Prince of Zhen) from the kingdom of Qin. Because of slander and persecution, Houzi fled from the Qin to Jin, where Zhao Wu served as a high official. During their conversation, Zhao Wu asked Houzi whether the Qin could still enjoy Heaven's care now that it was ruled by a bad ruler. Houzi answered that Heaven would bless the kingdom with five more years of harvests, after which time it would enact punishment if the wicked ruler still reigned. Hearing this, Zhao Wu expressed his dissatisfaction. Describing himself as an old man who "might not make it to the next morning or the next evening," he was too impatient to wait another five years to see the collapse of the enemy state. Houzi thus commented after this conversation: "Zhao Wu is set to die. When the master of the people finds the years too slow but is alarmed by a single day's passing, how long can he last?" 趙孟將死矣。主民，翫歲而惕日，其與幾何？ *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhushu*, the first year of Lord of Zhao. 41. 704-2. The translation is by Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li, and David Schaberg. *Zuo Tradition*, vol 2, p. 1321.

⁷⁵ Liu Kun was a Western Jin general. During the chaotic years that resulted from the disintegration of the central authority and "barbarian" invasions in the early fourth century, Liu Kun tried to protect the Jin royal house by launching many military expeditions. He was famous for composing the "Songs of Fufeng" ("Fufeng ge" 扶風歌), which express his loyal sentiments and sorrow at having witnessed this tumultuous time.

the north, he could only long for the Gong and Luo areas in vain;⁷⁶ if gazing at the south from Baling, he could see nothing but the capital Chang'an.⁷⁷ What I only hope is that the soul of a scholar can return to his former dwelling;⁷⁸ and the ghost in the archers' camp will not linger regretfully in a foreign land.⁷⁹ Clouds are drifting in the sky, and they are too far to convey the message.⁸⁰ There does not seem to be a time when we will ever reunite again. Holding up my brush and facing the paper, I am flooded with tears.

視陰愒日，類趙孟之徂年。負杖行吟，同劉琨之積慘。河陽北遊，空思鞏洛。霸陵南望，唯見長安。所冀書生之魂，還依舊里，射聲之鬼，無恨他鄉。浮雲在天，邈無由矣。會見之期，長無日矣。援筆攬紙，龍鍾橫集。

Wang Bao further illustrates his misery by using four historical figures and their misfortunes as analogies. The first two examples, in particular, seem to cast a negative light on the northern state and imply the author's unchanged loyalty to the south. After the Western Jin collapsed and the royal family fled to the south, the general Liu Kun 劉琨 (270–318) continued to fight in the northeastern part of the central land against "barbarians," and ultimately died for the cause. His

⁷⁶ Pan Yue was a Western Jin official from a prestigious family. During his career, he was demoted several times to be the governor of local counties or sent on military campaigns away from the capital. In Heyang County (to the north of the capital Luoyang), he composed poems to convey his longing to go back to the central court. In his "Poetic Exposition on Westward Campaign" ("Xizheng fu" 西征賦), there is one line that reads: "Longing for the Gong and Luo areas, I shed my tears" 眷鞏洛而掩涕. *Wen xuan* commentary notes that the tombs of the Pan family members were at the Gong and Luo areas. *Wen xuan*, 10.443.

⁷⁷ This appropriates one couplet from Wang Can's "Seven Sorrows." Because of the destruction of the capital Chang'an at the end of the second century, Wang Can had to travel to the south. On his way there, he composed "Seven Sorrows" with one couplet that reads: "Embarking the southern bank of the Baling, / turning my head, I gaze at Chang'an" 南登霸陵岸，回首望長安. *Wei shi*, 2.365. Here in the letter, Wang Bao seems to use Chang'an to refer to the southern capital, Jiankang, and conveys his yearning for it.

⁷⁸ Several stories from early medieval China tell how a dead scholar's soul returns to his homeland. One of them is a story recorded in the *Biographies of the Extraordinary* (*Lieyi zhuan* 列異傳) in *Yiwen leiju*. Bao Zidu 鮑子都 once traveled to his official post and met a scholar on his way there. They kept each other company for a while until the scholar died of a heart attack. Without knowing his name or where he came from, Zidu buried him beside the road. Before leaving to continue his journey, Zidu cried and spoke in front of the tomb: "If your soul has consciousness, it should let your family know where you are buried" 若子魂靈有智，當令子家知子在此. See *Yiwen leiju*, 83.1425.

⁷⁹ When Cao Bao 曹褒 (d. 102), an Eastern Han official, was appointed as the Commandant of Archers, he saw many coffins left unburied in the archers' camp. He enquired about this, and his subjects answered that the deceased no longer had family to give them proper burials. Cao Bao then purchased unused land, buried them, and offered the appropriate sacrificial ritual to set them at peace. *Hou Han shu*, 35.1204-1205.

⁸⁰ This derives from a third-century poem that has lines that read: "How expansive the drifting clouds, and I hope that they can help carry my message" 浮雲何洋洋，願因通我辭. *Wei shi*, 3.377.

unwavering allegiance to the Han Chinese state, especially exemplified through his famous “Songs of Fufeng,” was much praised in the subsequent centuries. The next allusion concerns Zhao Wu’s conversation with Houzi on the destiny of the kingdom of Qin. When Houzi prophesized that the Qin could still manage to survive for five more years despite an incompetent ruler, Zhao Wu showed dissatisfaction and impatience. Zhao was upbraided by Houzi for this response, which Houzi interpreted as indicating Zhao’s imminent death as an old man. In sixth-century poetic discourse, especially in poetic texts by the detainee Yu Xin, the Qin was often used to refer to the Northern Zhou dynasty as opposed to Chu, a reference to the southern state.⁸¹ By using the figure of Zhao Wu, who was too old to see the crumbling of the Qin, Wang Bao likely seeks to convey both lingering loyalty and terror about the unforeseeable future.

After the expression of nostalgia and yearning, Wang Bao dwells more explicitly on his “request.” He hopes (*ji* 冀) that his wandering soul may return its proper place, namely, his homeland, the south. For Wang Bao, the radical change in his life prevents him from making and imbibing immortality pills and seeking longevity, and this leads to the looming threat of mortality. But the addressee Zhou Hongrang maintains their lifestyle of the past and cultivates both his physical and mental well-being. As in Madam Yan’s message to Yuwen Hu, the allusion to divergent life tracks, one characterized by sorrow, longing, and fear and the other by tranquility and contentment, will induce a sense of guilt in the recipient. Moreover, in both textual allusions to rescued spirits, the deceased depend on a certain intermediary to finally rest in peace, and the mediator, unlike Zhou Hongrang’s close relation with Wang Bao, did not even

⁸¹ For example, Yu Xin obliquely describes the contemporary political situation as “The king of the Zhou dynasty encounters the anger of the ruler of the Zheng, / and the lord of Chu meets with the rancor of that from Qin” 周王逢鄭忿，楚后值秦冤。 *Bei Zhou shi*, 3.2368. Also, “The armies of Chu were sieging Gong, / when the troops of Qin had not come down from the Xiao Mountains” 楚師正圍鞏，秦兵未下嶠。 *Bei Zhou shi*, 3.2369.

know the deceased very well in the first place. Even though Wang Bao does not explicitly announce his “demand,” this amalgamation of complicated feelings—happiness, desperation, yearning, fear, and hope, and the mental torment that he underwent when reminiscing on their past—will surely generate emotional poignancy and elicit impassioned responses from its recipient. The issue of intimacy in the letter has an ambiguous effect. The narrative of intimately shared moments in the past highlights their friendship, but it is also uneasily juxtaposed with the author’s deliberate fashioning of their difference and bifurcation. The bipolarity between the two friends produces the conclusion that Wang Bao will die with his soul forever outcast in the foreign land, whereas Zhou will enjoy longevity as a recluse in his safe homeland. The longing for an old friend who now lives a far happier life than does the detainee leads to bitterness and even resentment.

In the poem that Wang Bao appended to the letter, one can see the same concerns about dislocation, death, and the possibility of regaining their previous life expressed in a poetic genre.

贈周處士詩	A Poem sent to Zhou [Hongrang], the Recluse ⁸²
我行無歲月	One can no longer tell how many years and months have passed since my journey,
征馬屢盤桓	my horse often lingers and paces back and forth.
崢嶸三危峴	The road to the Xiao Mountains is tortuous, and the Mountain Sanwei, jutting and jagged,
關重九折難	Passes are numerous, and the Nine Bends are hard to get across. ⁸³
猶持漢使節	I still hold in hand the tally of a Han envoy,
尚服楚臣冠	and also don the hat belonging to an official of the Chu. ⁸⁴

⁸² *Bei zhou shi*, 1.2336.

⁸³ These landmarks are often used in poetic language to describe hardship during travel or military campaigns in the northwest.

⁸⁴ The first line refers to Su Wu 蘇武 (140–60 BCE), a Western Han envoy dispatched to Xiongnu “barbarians.” He was detained there for nineteen years and remained loyal to his state. The allusion to the “captive of Chu,” as already pointed out in the previous chapter, describes Zhong Yi 鐘儀 (fl. sixth century BCE), a southerner captured and brought in front of the ruler of the kingdom of Jin.

巢禽疑上幕	When making nests, birds are cautious not to choose a canopy, ⁸⁵
驚羽畏虛彈	and once alarmed, they dread even the twang of the bow-string. ⁸⁶
飛蓬去不已	The tumbleweed is flying away without stopping,
客思漸無端	and a guest's longing is even more boundless.
壯志與時歇	Heroic aspiration subsides as time progresses,
生年隨事闌	and life will come to an end as things have also changed.
百齡悲促命	For a hundred years of the lifespan, one feels sorrow over its swiftness,
數刻念餘歡	one counts on the remaining happiness that can last only a few moments.
雲生隴坻黑	Clouds arise, and the Long Mountain becomes darkened,
桑疎薊北寒	and mulberry tree leaves are sparse, and the north of Ji is cold.
鳥道無蹊徑	There is no path on the bird's way,
清溪有波瀾	and there are waves and torrents in the clear creek.
思君化羽翮	I imagine you could transform into a feathered being,
要我鑄金丹	and come to invite me to make immortality pills again.

Wang Bao portrays his displacement and the detainment as a protracted military campaign—he is always on the move without rest. The loyal sentiment is more prominent in the poem when Wang Bao depicts himself as a Su Wu who still holds a Han tally and a Chu prisoner who insists on wearing a southern-style hat. However steadfast his allegiance appears to be, he is in a precarious situation. Like birds nesting on a canopy or birds that have previously been wounded, he is constantly disturbed by anxiety and fear that prevent any possibility of peacefulness. Similar to the implied author of the letter, the speaker conspicuously feels the progression of time and realizes that life and his heroic aspirations are coming to an end. The poetic scene then

⁸⁵ “Swallow nestling on a canopy” (*yan chao mushang* 燕巢幕上) denotes a very precarious situation. It originates from the comment of the Wu prince of Jizha on the political situation and culture of other states. See the twenty-ninth year of Lord of Xiang in *Zuozhuan*.

⁸⁶ This refers to the story that a bird, after having been startled and wounded by an arrow, will fall down upon hearing the twang of the bow. Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE) comp., *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978), 17.571.

becomes a darkened, cold northern landscape, and torrential rivers and narrow paths block the journey back. The poet consistently uses images of birds for self-representation and self-expression. While comparing himself to a terrified bird or a bird without a safe resting place, he now cannot even find a bird's path (*niao dao* 鳥道) in the mountains to fly back. Just at the juncture when all is hopeless and destined to perish, the poem arrives at its last couplet: "I imagine you could transform into a feathered being, / and come to invite me to make immortality pills again."

The ending is quite abrupt. From the poetic context, readers are not prepared to see either the appearance of the second person "you" (*jun* 君) or "immortality pills" (*jindan* 金丹). The monologue of a poetic speaker on his sufferings suddenly changes into an "invitation" to the addressee. The "immortality pill," the symbol of longevity, while unexpected in the poetic context, actually resonates with one part of the letter in which Wang Bao describes their past life: "We often followed the teaching on making cinnabar pills" (*mei bing dansha zhi shuo* 每稟丹砂之說). Wang Bao relates that in youth he was afflicted with illness and often took medicines and pills to improve his health. In the poem, when the poetic speaker's life is about to draw to an end, he wishes the addressee could again invite him to concoct elixirs to prolong his life. One should still remember that in the letter, Wang contrasts his physical deterioration with Zhou Hongrang's continued reclusive life and unaltered commitment to seeking immortality. The poem again accentuates their difference as Wang experiences relentless temporal progression and pays the price of mortality, while Zhou Hongrang, through the cultivation that both of them once practiced, could "transform" (*hua* 化) into a feathered being (continuing the bird imagery) to rescue Wang.

If the letter stops at narrating the two friends' previous intimacy and different life trajectories, the poem more explicitly announces Wang's entreaty by relating the past to the future. The anticipated invitation from Zhou to make immortality pills means a reenactment of the activity that the two friends once shared and relished. Zhou's spiritual power derives from the uninterrupted continuity of his effort at self-cultivation, yet the traumatic rupture of Wang's life leaves him only nostalgia and supplication. Hence to Wang Bao, their intimately shared moments in the past not only reveal current differences but also call urgently for the restoration of those "intimate moments" in the foreseeable future.

Zhou Hongrang's reply adequately responds to Wang Bao's concerns by bringing relief to his friend beset with emotional agitation and offers optimism to counter Wang's pessimistic perspective. But at the same time, he also redresses Wang's portrayal of these two individuals, thus reconfiguring their relationship and the space of intimacy. According to Zhou Hongrang, political disaster influences Wang Bao as much as it does him, if not more. Zhou's life is hardly a continuation of the past; on the contrary, their good days in the past are forever gone whither neither of them could ever return.

How sad it is, our separation! Clouds fly away while mud sinks deep beneath. Metal is melted down and the orchids wither.⁸⁷ Your precious message cannot reach here, and hoping to send you jade-white flowers, I find no means.⁸⁸ My elder brother came back from the Western Capital Haojing [i.e., Chang'an] and brought your letter to the deserted valley. Seeing this verbal trace of an old friend, it was as if you were just in front of me. I opened the seal and unfolded the paper, and tears flowed down the cheeks and moistened my knees. To the south of the [Yangzi] River, it is quite hot and humid, and therefore, the tangerine and grapefruit trees are green even in winter. Meanwhile, to the north of the

⁸⁷ This derives from a saying in the *Classic of Change* about two individuals' mutual understanding: "If two individuals have mutual understanding, the sharpness can cut metal into pieces. As for the word that comes out of the shared understanding, its smell is like that of the orchid" 兩人同心，其利斷金。同心之言，其臭如蘭。 *Zhouyi zhushu*, 7.151.

⁸⁸ See *Chuci*: "I plucked sparse hemp and jade-white flowers, and I will send them to the one living in seclusion" 折疏麻兮瑤華，將以遺兮離居。 *Chuci buzhu*, 2.70.

Wei River it is cold, and poplar and elm trees only start growing leaves quite late in the year. While climate and weather differ according to locations, one should find ease in the place one is staying. I hope that you will take care of yourself as well, have meals according to the season, and find much contentment sleeping or awake. That would be good! That would be good!

甚矣悲哉，此之為別也。雲飛泥沈，金鑠蘭滅。玉音不嗣，瑤華莫因。家兄至自鎬京，致來書于窮谷。故人之跡，有如對面。開題申紙，流臉沾膝。江南燠熱，橘柚冬青。渭北沍寒，楊榆晚葉。土風氣候，各集所安。餐衛適時，寢興多福。甚善甚善。

To properly reciprocate Wang Bao's impassioned yearning at the beginning of the letter, Zhou Hongrang too expresses his anguish over the unfortunate separation that has blocked their communication. The precious letter, sent from a "capital" (*jing* 京) to a secluded valley (*qiongg* 窮谷), substitutes as a trace (*ji* 跡) for a reunion with the old friend. It also echoes Wang Bao's description of Zhou as a recluse who "gets rid of traces" and hides in the "secluded valley" (also *qiongg*). Between a hermit withdrawn into the mountains and a detainee held in a foreign land, the letter becomes the only means of simulating a conversation. Zhou then moves on to commenting on climate differences between the north and south. However, contrary to Wang Bao's description of the dire northern weather and his "envisioning" (*xiang* 想) that Zhou must live a happy life, Zhou hopes that they each find rest where they are (*ge ji suo an* 各集所安). As elaborated later, Zhou rejects Wang's judgment that only the detainee endures hardship while the recluse takes delight in his unperturbed life:

After I parted from you at the West of the Shan area, I returned to the east domain.⁸⁹
Even though the Zhou family's pond was preserved,⁹⁰ I returned and stayed at the end of

⁸⁹ This refers to the fall of the Jiangling state. Wang Bao was taken to Chang'an and Zhou Hongrang escaped back to the southern capital Jiankang, which was to the east of Jiangling.

⁹⁰ The "Zhou family's pond" echoes the "preservation of the farmland of the Eastern Pond" (*bao dongbei zhi tian* 保東陂之田) in Wang Bao's letter. Gao Buying offers another possibility. The Eastern Han recluse Zhou Xie 周燮 enjoyed a peaceful, self-sufficient life. It is recorded that "his ancestors had built a thatched hut at the edge of a mountain ridge. There was farmland and pond beneath. He [Zhou Xie] often diligently labored there to support himself" 有先人草廬結于岡畔，下有陂田，常肆勤以自給. *Hou Han shu*, 80. 1742.

the path to Jiang's house.⁹¹ The three Jiang brothers were separated,⁹² and the two Zhong friends would no longer return.⁹³ I have only moose and deer as my companions, which makes me even sadder. Even though I hold the classics on making cinnabar pills in my hand, my poverty and defects cannot help me achieve [what I intended].⁹⁴ Since one is able to find *zhi* mushrooms and *zhu* herbs, I will just try to pick and gather for the moment. In the past, when I was in my prime, and you too were young, we both lived in a peaceful time and enjoyed together the reclusive life.⁹⁵ There were performances of elegant music such as the "Southern Wind," and also extraordinary tunes accompanied by goblets of pure wine. We sat close to each other and plucked the zither, and there was no lack of cheerful days.⁹⁶ With jade ointment and metal essence as medicines [both for consumption], we hoped to obtain immortality. No one expected that in a single morning, all would be destroyed and turned upside down. I came to old age, and you too are not in your prime. In spite of our friendship like that between Xiang Chang and Qin Qing, we are separated at different ends of the world.⁹⁷ I always think about our life before, and I cannot bear it in my heart.

與弟分袂西陝，言反東區。雖保周陂，還依蔣徑。三姜離圻，二仲不歸。麋鹿為曹，更多悲緒。丹經在握，貧病莫諧。芝朮可求，聊因采掇。昔吾壯日，及弟富年，俱值邕熙，竝歡

⁹¹ As can be found in note 69 of this chapter, "the path to the Jiang's house" refers to the Eastern Han official Jiang Xu. After Wang Mang usurped the throne, Jiang lived in seclusion. There were only three paths that could lead to his house, and only two friends, Yang Zhong 羊仲 and Qiu Zhong 求仲, interacted with him. See *Wen xuan*, 30.1397.

⁹² Following Gao Buying, I adopt the *Zhou shu* variant here instead of *sanjing* 三荊 ("three branches") in *Yiwen leiju*. The Eastern Han scholar Jiang Gong 姜肱, and his two brothers Jiang Zhonghai 姜仲海 and Jiang Jijiang 姜季江, were all famous for filial piety. The three brothers also showed great fraternal affection, so much so that they were always together no matter whether it was daytime or at night. *Hou Han shu*, 53.1749.

⁹³ See note 91.

⁹⁴ The fourth-century Daoist adept Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) recounts in his work *Master of Embracing Simplicity* (*Baopuzi* 抱樸子) how his ancestors received the art of elixir-making and how the techniques had been transmitted to him. He sighed that even though he had learned the skills, he had no money to buy the required medicines because of his poverty. Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱樸子內篇校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), p. 62. Yuan Xian 原憲, one of Confucius's disciples, once remarked that "A lack of material wealth can be called poverty. The inability to apply what one has learned to practice can be called a defect" 無財之謂貧，學而不能行之謂病. *Yiwen leiju*, 35.626.

⁹⁵ This alludes to the *Shijing* poem "The Tow-Gate" 衡門: "Down below the town-gate, / it is easy to idle time away. / Where the spring flows by, / it is easy to satisfy one's desires." 衡門之下，可以棲遲。泌之洋洋，可以樂饑. *Maoshi zhushu*, 7.252. The translation is by Arthur Waley. See *The Book of Songs*, p. 108. *Hengbi* thus refers to a hermitage.

⁹⁶ I adopt the *Zhou shu* variant here instead of *xichen* 夕晨 (duck and dawn) in *Yiwen leiju*. *Mingchen* 名晨 (cheerful days) seems to evoke one couplet in Bao Zhao's poem: "I reminiscence about the time when I was a young man, / I pursued [fame] and cherished those cheerful days" 憶昔少年時，馳逐好名晨. *Song shi* 宋詩, 7.2168.

⁹⁷ Xiang Chang 向長 and Qin Qing 禽慶 were both recluses living through Wang Mang's usurpation in the first century. They escaped from political service and roamed together in the mountains. See *Hou Han shu*, 83.2758-59.

衡泌。南風雅操，清觴妙曲。弦琴促坐，無乏名晨。玉瀝金華，冀獲難老。不虞一旦，翻覆波瀾。吾已惕陰，弟非茂齒。禽尚之契，各在天涯。永念生平，難為胸臆。

Zhou Hongrang claims that even though he has managed to preserve the household land and returned to his reclusive space, he suffers from even more affliction (*geng duo beixu* 更多悲緒). While Wang Bao may have unfortunately set foot on a completely strange land, Zhou has returned to familiar surroundings without any familiar companions. Family members are torn apart, and so are close, like-minded friends. In their stead, only animals linger as silent companions. Even though he holds the classic work on making cinnabar pills in his hand, poverty prevents him from pursuing further the mystery of longevity. With neither fellow companions nor material supplies, he can only try to pick up mushrooms and herbs in the attempt to maintain good health.

Moreover, Zhou shows his disenchantment with the promise of immortality. Wang Bao considers that Zhou Hongrang has continued his previous pursuit of transcendence to the extent of attaining the ultimate enlightenment (transformation into a feathered being). But Zhou admits that his own life, like his old friend's, has drastically altered. As much Wang fears aging and his looming demise, Zhou is likewise tossed in the torrent of temporal development. Death threatens on the horizon. This anxiety over death prompts both Wang and Zhou to cast a retrospective gaze on their previous life (*huan nian shengya* 還念生涯 in Wang's letter and *yong nian shengping* 永念生平 in Zhou's). In Zhou's memory, what exemplifies the past life that the two shared and enjoyed is the freedom to realize their reclusive sentiments in the age of peacefulness. They are truly like-minded friends, "ones who know the tones" (*zhiyin* 知音), as they played instruments, harmonized with each other, and savored musical performances in those cheerful days. They also ingested the "medicine" of longevity in the hope that they could perpetuate the time of

happiness. But at this moment, when both have aged and have endured and witnessed much, Zhou realizes that their wish to attain “immortality” (*nan lao* 難老) through pills and elixirs was but an illusory, overly optimistic vision that would be betrayed by the unpredictable future. Zhou thus responds to Wang Bao’s “pill-making invitation” with a sense of pessimistic powerlessness. If Wang wishes for the continuation of the intimate past, Zhou implies its irrevocable loss.

In the end, the letter suddenly assumes a more optimistic tone, and Zhou, offering comfort to Wang Bao, recapitulates what he said before about “each resting at peace where he stays.” It is not the case that Wang Bao suffers and Zhou enjoys his current life; both suffer the calamity and disruption, and yet both should try to find “delight” in the situation:

Now is exactly the time when we should observe the movement of the sun and count the marks on the water clock, and dispel our worries and stop our tears. Life is about happiness, what good does it serve if we always feel sorrowful? How could you rashly bemoan like a Wen Xu whose drifting soul might not return?⁹⁸ Why do you trouble yourself to worry like a Jin Yan who could entrust no one with his bones in the coffin?⁹⁹ I only wish that you could cherish your jade-like body, treasure your brilliant form, live a life-span of one hundred years, and enjoy old age. I also hope the gray goose and crimson carp can at times carry your message to me. I only lodge my longing for you in the clear wind and bright moon. Ziyuan, Ziyuan [courtesy name of Wang Bao]! How long our separation has been! While holding the brush and writing this letter, I choke on my tears.

⁹⁸ Wen Xu 溫序 (d. 30) was a general who lived through the transition from the Western Han to the Eastern Han. He was captured by Gou Yu 苟宇, a general under the command of the local warlord Wei Xiao. Gou Yu tried to persuade Wen Xu to surrender, but Wen refused and killed many of Gou’s soldiers. Enraged, the troops demanded that Wen Xu be executed on sight. Gou, admiring his integrity, gave Wen Xu a sword and allowed him to commit suicide. Later, when Emperor Guangwu 光武帝 (5 BCE–57 CE, r. 25–57) heard of Wen Xu’s story, he bestowed a reward on Wen’s offspring and permitted the general to be reburied in Luoyang. Soon, the first son of Wen Xu dreamed of his father saying to him, “I have long been a guest [in a foreign land], and hope to return to my hometown” 久客思鄉里. The son thus presented a memorial to the throne, and the emperor sanctioned the relocation of Wen Xu’s remains to the household tomb. *Hou Han shu*, 81.2672-73.

⁹⁹ Wang Tun 王惲, an Eastern Han official, was once on his way to the capital, Luoyang, and encountered in the trip a sick scholar. The scholar died soon without telling Wang his name, but entreated the latter to give him a proper burial. Wang buried the scholar and continued his journey. Several years later when Wang was transferred to a provincial post, a horse halted at his government house, and a bed coverlet mysteriously fell in front of him. When Wang rode on the horse, the animal took him to a household, and it turned out to be the family of Jin Yan, the scholar whom Wang had buried in the past. Knowing the whereabouts of the deceased, the family thus could properly perform the burial ritual. See *Hou han shu*, 81.2680-81.

正當視陰數箭，排愁破涕，人生樂耳，憂戚何為。豈能遽悲次房，游魂不返；遠傷金彥，骸柩無託。但願愛五體，珍金相，保期頤，享黃髮。猶冀蒼雁蘋鯉，時傳尺素。清風朗月，但寄相思。子淵子淵，長為別矣。搦管操觚，聲淚俱咽。

The ending appears both an appropriate and an ambivalent response to Wang Bao's request.

Zhou Hongrang simply wishes that Wang Bao may maintain an upbeat spirit, take care of himself, and find, to his best ability, comfort in his current life. The words of solace pale when one recollects the intense pathos and terror conveyed in Wang's letter and poem—his homesickness, fear of his precarious situation, alienation from the foreign land, loss of heroic aspirations, and anxiety over death. To dispel Wang's distress over his wandering soul, Zhou cites two more historical examples in which the spirit of the deceased ultimately finds its way home: one thanks to the imperial interference and the other to an uncanny force that is left unexplained. Zhou makes it clear that his friend should not worry as these figures did. Is Zhou Hongrang voicing a certain promise? Or does he suggest to Wang Bao a *carpe diem* sentiment (seize the day without worrying about the future) because of a hopeless future? Does he expect Wang to live so long a life that he will ultimately see the day of return? Or is he politely expressing good wishes between friends who might never see each other again? Without a definite conclusion, the letter ends with tears and the speaker's inability to carry on the narrative.

Reading the letter in conjunction with Wang Bao's writings, one can see different approaches to the issue of "intimacy" between the two close friends. Wang uses shared intimate moments in the past to emphasize their current differences and capitalizes on this "disparity" in life experiences to request Zhou's mediation—his "invitation" to Wang to make immortality pills again. Zhou Hongrang, however, offers consolatory and yet ambivalent responses. He revises Wang's unfair judgment that Zhou maintains his old cheerful life while Wang suffers acutely. From Zhou's perspective, intimacy and their previous life have become a source of recollection

and nostalgia, inaccessible to both. The crystallized past forms a sharp contrast to the present moment, when both friends have come to the threshold of demise having experienced so many atrocious events. Both are powerless in the face of traumatic historical change. With an ambiguous attitude to the future and their possible reunion, Zhou's greetings, good wishes, and solace in the letter, acting metonymically as "traces" that replace a face-to-face conversation, become the only kind of intimacy that the two friends, now separated by dynastic borders, can cherish.

In conclusion, this chapter analyzes a series of letters between rulers, family members, and friends, delivered from one state to another. Historicizing their composition, transmission, and reception, I have examined the significance of epistolary exchange in the context of court culture, in which letters, when destined to be sent beyond state borders as diplomatic documents, were composed (or revised) collectively, aimed at a wide audience and serving various political functions. In the first section, several letters attributed to dynastic sovereigns are discussed to explore the rhetorical strategies deployed to fashion royal identity and construct an imperial voice and vision. With the "ruler" used as a narratorial device, these letters represent dynastic authority and justify state legitimacy through rhetorical tactics to both practically accommodate shifting political circumstances and ideologically efface historical contingencies. The second section focuses on the manipulation and interpretation of "intimacy" in letters exchanged between family members and friends separated in different states. It particularly calls the reader's attention to the politics of intimacy in epistolary exchanges. The "authors" use the intimately shared moments between two individuals as a rhetorical device to, in one case, affect immediate political maneuvers, and in another, to negotiate the recuperability of their past in the

future. They testify to the dilemma, pathos, contemplation, and struggle of those who witnessed and lived through this fluctuating, dangerous age.

Chapter 3

“Foreign” Gifts and Problematic Reciprocity

In the preceding chapter, we have analyzed the northern ruler Tuoba Tao’s taunting letters delivered to the southern emperor Liu Yilong. In one of the messages, the northern sovereign boasts of his military prowess and contemptuously compares Liu Yilong, who hides behind layers of palace complex, to a three-year-old child. At the end of that particular letter, Tuoba Tao condescendingly brings up the gifts that accompanied the letter and further elaborates on their meanings:

There is no surplus of things that I can give to you. [With that being said,] I am sending you 12 horses used to hunt white deer and also felt rugs, medicine, and so on. If the horses that you ride to come here are not strong enough, you are welcome to use these horses. The distance is far, and if you cannot well adjust to the [northern] climate, those medicines can help cure your illness.

更無餘物可以相與。今送獵白鹿馬十二匹并氈藥等物。彼來馬力不足，可乘之。道里來遠，或不服水土，藥自可療。¹

Tuoba Tao hurls his insults at the southern state not only through verbal derision but also a seemingly “considerate” gesture of gift-giving. As the speaker tells, the northern life is not that of excess and extravagance, and yet, even so, he decides to generously bestow horses and medicines on the southerners that will “facilitate” their future military campaigns. Instead of signifying genuine good wishes, the act of gift-giving aims to mock the frail southern army and flaunt the northerner’s confidence. This brief comment interestingly shows that gift-giving, especially the meanings of those gifts assigned either by the givers or receivers, becomes an issue of contention and manipulation during interstate negotiation.

¹ *Song shu*, 95.2348.

Indeed, gift-giving or gift exchange was one of the most common practices in early medieval Chinese court culture. It operated on all levels of society, ranging from the most solemn, public gift bestowal as a form of royal grace to the more intimate and private “bonding ritual” between two individuals. What interests us in this chapter is the moment when a “gift,” being too important or too problematic, demanded careful appropriation and interpretation. After all, as modern anthropologists have saliently argued, gift-giving is hardly an innocent activity. A gift gains extra symbolic meanings during exchange and circulation, and these imbued symbolic meanings, open to a variety of interpretations, greatly outweigh its practical utility.² Based on this conclusion, this chapter discusses the instances in which the “significance” of a gift has to be created, “tamed,” appropriated, or interpreted during courtly exchanges.

Gifts became problematic especially when they originated from “other” places and thus were considered “foreign.” By “foreign,” I mean both the exotic, bizarre objects that one has hardly seen on the native soil and everyday objects, such as horse, yet from a politically foreign state. As objects were exchanged between dynasties, thus endowed with political significance, much was at stake when the giver and receiver offered different explanations of the gift’s meanings. One example can aptly illustrate. During the first half of the fourth century, Shi Hu 石虎 (295–349, r. 334–349) ruled powerfully in the northeast of the Central Plain. He held a grudge against Li Shou 李壽 (300–343, r. 338–343), the ruler of a kingdom in the southwest, who, in a formal letter exchanged between these two leaders, addressed to Shi insolently. Shi Hu’s courtier suggested sending “crude arrows” (*kushi* 楛矢) to Li so that “[Li] Shou could know that those

² For one of the most influential researches on gift and social implication of gift-exchange, see Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967).

who from remote areas would arrive [and surrender to our court]” 使壽知我遐荒必臻也。³ There is a cultural allusion behind the “crude arrows.” Confucius once inculcated that after King Wu of the Zhou dynasty established a new regime, he required all the peoples in four directions to present tribute. The Sushen 肅慎 barbarian tribe from the north presented arrows and crossbows as gift/tribute to acknowledge the Zhou dynasty’s legitimacy.⁴ By using this reference, Shi Hu made clear that being a latter-day King Wu of the Zhou, he intimidated other tribes into willing submission. However, when Li Shou received the gift, he defined the present as: “The envoys from the Jie barbarian [i.e., Shi Hu’s state] came to our court, and presented their crude arrows as a tribute [to us]” 羯使來庭, 獻其桡矢. Continuing to use this allusion, Li Shou, however, drew an analogy between himself and King Wu of the Zhou and cast Shi Hu as one of the barbarian tribes from the north. Informed of this, Shi Hu was furious and demoted the courtier who offered the advice. In this case, both rulers tried to pin down the connotation of the gift through a cultural association and publicly display its meanings to their own advantage, especially in regard to the distinction between the “barbarian tribe” and the “legitimate state.”

In addition to geographical “foreignness” of a gift, one can also understand “foreign” as a sense of alienation, especially from the recipient toward the bestowed gift and his benefactor. In other words, tension may occur when the recipient rejects the implication, value, and meanings of the gift bestowed upon him from a higher authority. This kind of scenario became prominent especially when the large-scale displacement took place, and political detainees were forced to live, serve, and even strive to prosper in a state culturally and political foreign to them. To win captives’ loyalty, a state leader often conferred gifts on them as a political investment. It was

³ *Jin shu*, 106.2771.

⁴ One can find the story in the biography of Confucius in *Shiji*. See *Shiji*, 47.1922.

recorded that Yuwen Tai, the *de facto* ruler of the Western Wei dynasty in the north, provided the newly acquired southern elite Yu Jicai 庾季才 (515–603) with much sustenance, including a large mansion, farmland, slaves, and livestock. The northern leader did not forget to add: “You are a southerner and surely will have a hard time relocating to the north. The reason that I bestow on you these is to cut off your longing for the south. You should serve me most honestly, and I would repay you with riches and honor” 卿是南人, 未安北土, 故有此賜者, 欲絕卿南望之心, 宜盡誠事我, 當以富貴相答.⁵ The message is quite clear. The gift was to make a political detainee forget his hometown and guarantee his allegiance. In turn, true loyalty would anticipate more wealth and honor rewarded by the authority. Displaced elite might have different responses to this “purchase” of fealty. According to the *History of the Zhou Dynasty*, some southern courtiers, having been taken to the north after the Jiangling state collapsed, Wang Bao included, “forgot about their being sojourners because of royal patronage” 并荷恩眄, 忘其羈旅焉.⁶ Yet other detainees might have a rather ambiguous attitude toward the gift offered by the ruler of a “foreign” state.

Informed by these observations, this chapter explores the representation of foreign gifts in early medieval China. It consists of two sections. While a gift from a foreign state was often referred to generally as “tribute” (*gong* 貢) in contemporary historical discourse, the first section shows how courtiers employed conventionalized language and familiar literary allusions to both construct and domesticate the alienness of a foreign object, and how they imbued the gift with different meanings while extolling dynastic grandeur of their home state. Instead of a “tribute” in

⁵ *Sui shu*, 78.1765.

⁶ *Zhou shu*, 41.731.

an abstract sense, a foreign gift was often reconfigured as an auspicious omen that signified the cultural legitimacy of the recipient. The issue became more complicated when a ruler decided to bestow a gift from the foreign land on his favorite courtier, who, in turn, needed to compose a piece of writing to express his thankfulness. The twice transference of ownership endowed the gift with both royal aura and foreign attribute, which the courtier had to properly acknowledge and articulate. Through analyzing the rhetorical strategies to represent the gifts' "foreignness" in different genres, I suggest that the malleability of gifts in their literary representations makes them subject to artful manipulation in support of contrasting political agendas.

If the first section discusses the interpretation of "foreign" gifts, then the second section focuses on a "foreigner's" response to royal gifts. The person in question is Yu Xin, a southerner detained and appointed as an official in the northern state after the Liang dynasty that he previously served fell. In Yu Xin's case, gift reciprocity became problematic because of a southerner's displacement in a foreign land, his acute cultural and ethnic identification, and alienation from the current political order. The burden of royal grace and his self-perceived unworthiness give an ironic twist to the generic conveyance of the eulogistic message. Moreover, the dense literary allusions and the textual background of those references also generate ambiguity regarding the author's attitude toward the royal gift. Yu Xin's literary representation of royal gifts serves as an excellent example to showcase a state's attempt of assimilating individual into the empire through gift bestowal and an individual's ambivalent response—especially a foreigner like Yu Xin who lacks a sense of belonging.

The Appropriation of the Gifts' "Foreignness"

Gift exchange between states, seemingly an innocent token of peace and reconciliation, can be maneuvered for various political ends, and the object, whether exotic or commonly seen, was often invested with complex ideological connotations. On the most basic level, it was not at all rare to see that gifts were described as "tribute" by the state that received the gifts to claim its superiority by downgrading the giving state as subordinate or peripheral. However, the term "tribute" by this time had already become part of the rhetoric to describe the acceptance of a foreign gift that hardly reflected the "reality." On a more complicated level, in the court society, the arrival of foreign envoys and goods was always a public event, and the emperor and royal princes often commanded courtiers to compose literary pieces to commemorate the occasion and praise the reception of gifts. In their literary compositions, it was not enough to simply praise the exoticness of the gift; courtiers were also required to give correct "interpretations" of this object and draw out its "hidden" meanings that should gratify the imperial ego. More importantly, its "foreignness" had to be properly assimilated into the familiar cultural framework in the process of writing, and no matter how "trivial" or "mundane" the gift was, they should portend something much grander. In the following discussion, I will use examples in four genres to show how gifts with an alien nature were closely connected to the state's ideological programs. They demonstrate that the origin of the gift is hardly as important as its relevancy to the receiving state, and gifts themselves are inextricably linked to the state's self-image and its articulation of cultural "others."

Numinous Beast or Ordinary Beast

To better illustrate the intricate intertwinement between a foreign gift and politics, we can first read one anecdote in *A Record of Buddhist Temples of Luoyang* written by a northern official Yang Xuanzhi. According to the preface, the *Record* was written when the author revisited the former capital, Luoyang, in 547, a ruined city by this time after years of military campaigns between the Eastern and Western Wei dynasties. The desertedness reminded him of the urban center's past glory, especially when it was the splendid capital of the Northern Wei dynasty and Yang himself served as a courtier in the Luoyang court from 528 to 529. His is thus a record of nostalgia and remembrance, yet also replete with sharp moral and political judgments. It is noteworthy that the memory and retrospective account of the past events are woven into the author's political insight to explain the dynastic fall and vindicate political legitimacy. In this elaborate story appended to his introduction of the "Quarters of White Elephant and Lion" (*baixiang shizi er fang* 白象獅子二坊), the life of an innocent animal is involved in the political turmoil and dynastic succession in the 520s and 530s:

As for the lion, it was presented by the "barbarian" king of Persia and was captured by the rebel Moqi Chounu and retained in the territories lost to bandits. Toward the end of Yong'an era [528–530], with the downfall of [Moqi] Chounu, it [the lion] finally reached the capital. Emperor Zhuang said to Li Yu, the Chief Palace Attendant: "We have heard that when a tiger sees a lion, it will always lay prostrate. Let's get a tiger and try to find out whether this is true." Accordingly, commanderies and prefectures in districts close to the mountains were ordered to capture tigers and then send them on to the capital. Gongxian and Shanyang both shipped two tigers and one leopard, which the emperor watched in the Hualin Park. Then, as soon as the tigers and leopard saw the lion, all of them closed their eyes and dared not to look upward. In the park, there had been a blind bear which was very tame. The emperor ordered them to fetch it to test [its reaction]. When the keeper led the blind bear in, as soon as it smelled the odor [of the lion], it became terrified and agitated, and ran away dragging its chain. The emperor burst into laughter. In the first year of the Putai era [531 CE], upon the ascension of the Prince of Guangling, an edict was issued which reads: "It is against the nature of birds and animals to be caged. It is therefore appropriate to release them back into mountains and forests." The lion, too, was ordered to be taken back to its country of origin. The barbarian who had received the order to take the lion home, thinking that Persia was too far away and inaccessible, killed it en route and returned. The authority in charge suggested in a reprimand that the man be punished for the crime of violating an imperial order. The

Prince of Guangling said: “How can a human creature be punished because of a lion?” Thereupon the man was pardoned.

獅子者，波斯國胡王所獻也，為逆賊萬俟醜奴所獲，留於寇中。永安末，醜奴破，始達京師。莊帝謂侍中李彧曰，“朕聞虎見獅子必伏，可覓試之。”於是詔近山郡縣捕虎以送。鞏縣，山陽並送二虎一豹，帝在華林園觀之。於是虎豹見獅子，悉皆瞑目，不敢仰視。園中素有一盲熊，性甚馴，帝令取試之。虞人牽盲熊至，聞獅子氣，驚怖跳踉，曳鎖而走，帝大笑。普泰元年，廣陵王即位，詔曰：“禽獸囚之，則違其性，宜放還山林。獅子亦令送歸本國。送獅子胡以波斯道遠，不可送達，遂在路殺獅子而返。有司糾劾，罪以違旨論，廣陵王曰：“豈以獅子而罪人也？”遂赦之。⁷

Taking advantage of the chaos induced by the Rebellion of the Six Garrisons (*liuzhen zhi luan* 六鎮之亂) in the north, Moqi Chounu revolted in 528, claimed himself as the Son of Heaven, and started to organize his own government. According to the *History of the Wei Dynasty*, when Persia sent this valuable gift, namely, a lion, to the Northern Wei court in Luoyang, Moqi Chounu intercepted it.⁸ Upon acquiring this lion, he changed the reign title of his newly established state to “Numinous Beast” (*shenshou* 神獸).⁹ In early medieval China, even throughout pre-modern China for that matter, the designation/change of the reign title bespeaks a polity’s professed ideology, as it signifies how the court envisions itself politically, culturally, and religiously, to solicit blessing from heaven and influence its subjects.¹⁰ It was not uncommon

⁷ Yi-t’ung Wang trans. *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 152-153. Wang’s translation is adopted here with modifications. For primary source, see *Luoyang qielan ji jiaozhu*, p. 162.

⁸ For a brief introduction of “lion” as foreign gift from the Han dynasty to late imperial times, see Ren Hao 任浩, *Zhongguo gudai gongshi yanjiu* 中國古代貢獅研究. MA Thesis, Northwest Agriculture and Forestry University, 2016.

⁹ *Bei shi*, 48.1774; *Zizhi tongjian*, 152.4750.

¹⁰ For a study of “reign title,” see Xin Deyong 辛德勇, *Jianyuan yu gaiyuan: Xi Han Xinmang nianhao yanjiu* 建元與改元：西漢新莽年號研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013). For a study on the appropriations of prophecies, religions, special expertise in claiming legitimacy, see Sun Yinggang 孫英剛, *Shenwen shidai: Chenwei shushu yu zhongguo zhengzhi yanjiu* 神文時代：讖緯、數術與中古政治研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014). Empress Wu (r. 690–705) in the Tang dynasty, the only female emperor in Chinese history, has been noted for her frequent change of reign titles to legitimate her rule. See Denis Twitchett et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of China, vol 3 Sui and T’ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 244-273; 290-332.

that era name was changed due to the occurrence of a certain strange phenomenon that was interpreted to be an auspicious “omen.” One example for a good comparison is the year 518 when a turtle was found in the Pool of Magical Mushrooms in the Palace of Nine Dragons in Luoyang. The Northern Wei subsequently changed the reign title to “Numinous Turtle” (*shengui* 神龜) to acknowledge this occasion and create specific meanings for this otherwise “random” event.¹¹ In our scenario, Moqi Chounu’s court exploited the foreign gift from Persia and elevated its importance from a tribute to an omen by describing the lion as “numinous beast.” There thus occurs a correspondence between the animal and polity. While the state, the interpretive agent, construes the lion as “numinous,” the “numinous beast” in turn confirms the former’s political and cultural legitimacy when being used as the name of an auspicious era. However, from the perspective of Yang Xuanzhi, who upheld the Wei royal house as the true ruling family, he clearly denounces Moqi’s reign by using derogative terms such as “rebel” (*nizei* 逆賊) and “territory lost to bandits” (*kouzhong* 寇中) in the narrative. Ultimately, the lion’s arrival in the capital of Luoyang indicates more than Northern Wei’s military success against local usurpers. It also signifies, in the author’s eyes, the illegitimate nature of Moqi’s reign, as the lion’s constructed “numinous nature” failed to bless the state.

The political meaning of the lion, the gift from Persia, continued to be employed when it reached the capital. Emperor Xiaozhuang 孝莊 (507–531, r. 528–531), the ruler whom the author of the account once served and venerated, was fascinated with the lion and ordered tigers to be brought into the court to test a hearsay. It turned out that all those ordinary animals shuddered when getting close to the lion. It is not difficult to detect certain intended analogy between the

¹¹ *Wei shu*, 112.2927.

lion and the emperor. The two tigers and one leopard were sent from the local counties close to the mountains (*jinshan* 近山) to the political center at the command of the emperor, and they were brought to face the lion—also at the imperial presence. Terrified, those beasts could not “look up” (*yangshi* 仰視) to the lion, a term customarily used to describe inferiors’ submission to the royal authority. Also, the blind bear turned to flight when he smelled the “odor” (*qi* 氣) of the lion, which reminds of the “royal air” (*wangqi* 王氣) of the ruling family or person. The emperor’s laughter toward the end shows satisfaction and pleasure in seeing the submission and terror of the beasts, especially those sent from local counties. The awe that the lion incites in ordinary predators parallels the expected reverence of the officials to imperial power.

Soon, Emperor Xiaozhuang plotted to have the general Erzhu Rong 爾朱榮 (493–530) killed, but then swiftly met his own death in 531. The lion well lived into the reign of Yuan Gong 元恭 (498–532, r. 531–532), Prince of Guangling, also known as Emperor Jiemin 節愍, who was established by the cousin of Erzhu Rong, Erzhu Shilong 爾朱世隆 (500–532). According to the *Luoyang qielan ji* and dynastic histories, before his ascension to the throne, Prince Guangling had lived in a Buddhist monastery and refused to speak for about ten years to avoid potential calamity.¹² The emperor, forced into enthronement, seemed to express his wish for freedom through this edict of releasing caged animals back to nature. However, this rather *Zhuangzi* sentiment (pursuit of carefree spirit unrestrained by social regulations) contrasts sharply with a certain vision of emperorship. If not an “omen,” the lion was at least seen by the contemporaries as “tribute” to the Northern Wei dynasty from foreign countries, indicative of the royal influence to remote places such as Persia. By using the phrase “bird and beast” (*qinshou* 禽

¹² *Luoyang qielan ji jiaozhu*, pp. 105-108; *Wei shu*, 11.273.

獸), instead of, as we have seen earlier in Moqi Chounu's court, "numinous beast" (*shenshou*) to describe the lion and also sending it back to the country of origin, Prince Guangling strips the lion of any political significance. After the envoy slaughtered the lion on the road, the emperor showed leniency and kindly put human life above the life of an animal. But at the same time, it also implies that the defiance of the ruler's command went unpunished.

The miserable creature, transferred from hands to hands, died on its way back home. Both the author and we modern readers are aware that only three years later, the Northern Wei disintegrated into the Western and Eastern Wei controlled respectively by Yuwen and Gao families, and that Luoyang at once became the deserted battleground. It is difficult to pinpoint the author's judgment, if any, in regard to this anecdote on a foreign gift. But there is no doubt that Yang Xuanzhi wrote from a hindsight with the knowledge of the dynastic fate, which afforded him to look for signs that might foretell, albeit vaguely, the coming doom.¹³ Is the lion really an "omen," which means, its death in fact already seals the fate of the Northern Wei? Does the author praise the generosity and leniency of Prince Guangling for setting free the lion? Or, does he lament and express regret over the Prince's failure to preserve the life of the lion—the omen itself? In contrast to his concise section on the "Quarter of the White Elephant," in which Yang Xuanzhi introduces the topic and explains the reason why the quarter gets its name, the author focuses more on establishing and exploring the correlation between the lion and the Northern Wei royal power so much so he does not even bother to tell why this particular quarter is named after the lion. In the end, no matter what the author's judgment might be, we see the

¹³ In *Luoyang qielanji*, the author narrates several miraculous phenomena that once happened in Luoyang and offers his interpretation of those signs. For example, the three-time weeping of the Buddha statue in the Temple of Equality is interpreted by the author to portend large-scale slaughter in the future. See *Luoyang qielan ji jiaozhu*, p. 105.

meanings of a foreign gift are layered and shifting according to different political circumstances. In this case, the place of origin of the lion matters less than its symbolic values—as a tribute, spoils, omen, or just a caged animal—to be defined and displayed for various purposes.

Literary “Domestication” of an Exotic Horse

In early medieval China, the genre most prominently associated with lengthy, detailed description of an object was poetic exposition (*fu* 賦). *Fu* originated in the Western Han dynasty when courtiers offered verbal elaborations on topics such as hunting, banquet, and Imperial Park to augment royal prestige and glorify imperial power. As the topics for *fu* expanded in the early medieval period, there appeared the sub-genre of “*fu* on things” (*yongwu fu* 詠物賦), in which courtiers, even together with their lords, composed *fu* on more mundane objects such as candle, gemstone, bird, brush, and so on.¹⁴ Generic conventions dictate that when writing a *fu* on things, the author should depict the chosen topic methodically and thoroughly, with all the cultural allusions amassed, starting from its origin, to practical use, and finally, to the embedded moral message. A foreign gift or foreign object was also one of the topics being spilled ink on by early medieval writers. When providing a literary representation, the author has to adequately acknowledge its “alien” origin and explain its arrival and function in a new cultural context.

Before turning our attention to court-centered literary composition in the fifth and sixth centuries, I will first examine one poetic exposition on a bizarre object composed in 281, one

¹⁴ For a study of poetry and poetic expositions on “things” in early medieval China, see Liao Guodong 廖國棟, *Wei Jin yongwu fu yanjiu* 魏晉詠物賦研究 (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1990). Qi Lifeng 祈立峰 also discusses the “topics” for poetry composition in the Southern Dynasties. See Qi Lifeng, *Youxi yu youxi yiwai: Nanchao wenxue ticaixinlun* 遊戲與遊戲以外: 南朝文學題材新論 (Taipei: Zhengda chubanshe, 2015).

year after the Western Jin dynasty unified China through a final victory over the Wu kingdom in the south. In this year, a group of delegates from the Roman Empire arrived in Guangzhou, the southern border of the Jin empire.¹⁵ Yin Ju 殷巨 (fl. last quarter of the third century), the official who took up a post there, welcomed the envoys and examined the gifts that the latter brought to the Jin emperor. Among many exotica, the peculiar “asbestos cloth” (*huohuan bu* 火浣布) impressed Yin Ju the most because, according to his description, the cloth was made of incombustible material and could be cleaned through fire-burning. Yin Ju subsequently composed a “Poetic Exposition on the Extraordinary Cloth” (“Qi bu fu” 奇布賦) to commemorate the occasion and praise the unusual present. What is particularly interesting about the piece is that the extraordinariness of the alien object intriguingly resists the assimilation of it into a Han-centered political and cultural system. The piece starts with a preface:¹⁶

In the second year of the Taikang era [280–289], General of Appeasing the South, Governor of Guangzhou, Lord Teng [i.e., Teng Xiu 滕脩] was stationed in the south. At the time I myself filled the vacancy and served under him as a low-rank official. Not for long, the kingdom of Grand Qin [i.e., the Roman Empire] [dispatched envoys to] present tribute [to our dynasty], and the diplomatic team passed through the prefecture. All the precious gifts were dazzling, and the fire cloth was particularly extraordinary. Thus I composed this *fu*:

惟泰康二年，安南將軍廣州牧滕侯作鎮南方。余時承乏，忝備下僚。俄而大秦國奉獻琛，來經于州。衆寶既麗，火布尤奇。乃作賦曰：

The brief compositional background is followed by a description of the relationship between the Western Jin and Roman Empire in the *fu* text proper. It is not surprising to see that the author blatantly portrays the foreign state as subordinate and claims that their gifts are nothing but tribute paid to the Jin empire:

伊荒服之外國

There is a foreign country situated in faraway lands,

¹⁵ The Roman Empire was called in Chinese sources as “Grand Qin” (“Da qin” 大秦).

¹⁶ *Quan Jin wen*, 81.1929-1; *Yiwen leiju*, 85.1463-1464.

逮大秦以為名	and it adopts “Grand Qin” as its name.
仰皇風而悅化	It admires the royal influence [of our state] and rejoices the enlightenment [by us],
超重譯而來庭	and has come to pay homage to our ruler overcoming [the difficulty of] manifold translations.
貢方物之綺麗	The objects that the state presents are indeed extraordinary,
亦受氣於妙靈	and they receive the breath [<i>qi</i>] from numinous power.
美斯布之出類	I am impressed that this cloth stands out from the rest,
稟太陽之純精	as it has received the pure essence from the sun.

Both the preface and the opening of the *fu* emphasize the civilizing influence of the Western Jin as a powerful empire and the eagerness of the Roman Empire to pledge as a subjugated state. The specific era name, two official titles of Yin Ju’s superior (general and governor), and Yin’s own position in this bureaucratic system as “low-rank official” (*xialiao* 下僚) in the preface effectively subsume the “southern land” (*nanfang* 南方) into the centralized government, when only one year ago, the south still maintained its independent status. Yet now, this peripheral realm encounters an even more alien “Other,” a “foreign state” (*waiguo* 外國) in faraway lands (*huangfu* 荒服). The cultural and political supremacy of the Jin is confirmed not only through efficient governance of its borderland, but also the voluntary submission of other peoples who undergo such trouble to present their tribute. However, this unequivocal assertion of the Jin dominance is interestingly compromised when the author, following the generic convention of *fu*, starts to commend the peculiarity of the asbestos cloth.

森森豐林	There is a forest with trees dense and luxuriant,
在海之洲	and it is on an island surrounded by the ocean.
煌煌烈火	Brightly are the raging flames [on the island],
禁焉靡休	and it [the fire] never stops even if being restrained.
天性固然	The place is [strange] just like this, designed by nature,
滋殖是由	from here, things breed and flourish.
芽萌炭中	Sprouts shoot forth from the [burning] coals,
穎發燼隅	and the ears of grain grow in the corners of ashes.
葉因燭潔	Leaves become clean because of the blazing fire,
翹與炎敷	bird’s tail feathers spread out in hot temperature.

焱榮華實
焚灼萼珠
丹輝電近
彤炯星流
飛耀衝霄
光赫天區

Flame makes prosper both flowers and fruit,
and it burns and scorches petals and dew [on flowers].
Crimson light emits as if the lightning strikes near,
and red glowing fire seems like shooting stars.
Its dazzling light shoots up into the sky,
and the brightness lights up all the world.

To explain its origin, Yin Ju first envisions an ocean-surrounded island. On the island, we see a forest where fire constantly scorches. The extreme habitat is, however, by nature's design, an ideal place for growth and prosperity. Sprouts shoot from burning coals; leaves, branches, flowers, and fruit, thanks to the flames, become even more luxuriant and flourishing. The "asbestos cloth" is thus made of trees from this eternally burning forest. We do not know whence Yin Ju acquired the information about this fantastic place; it might sound so outlandish and fascinating to Yin that he decided to include it in this *fu* for his readers. Then, the author ponders on the reason of this peculiar phenomenon and ventures his explanation regarding this wonder:

惟造化之所陶
理萬端而難察
燎無爍而不焦
在茲林而獨昵
火焚木而弗枯
木吐火而無竭
同五行而並在
與大椿其相率

As for the Great Creation's process of making and molding,
there are ten thousands principles that make it
hard to understand.
[As we know,] nothing under the fire will not be
scorched and melted,
yet only in this forest, fire is welcomed.
Fire burns trees, but trees do not wither,
trees can spit out the fire without exhaustion.
Similar to [the principle of] the "Five Agents,"
yet the fire and wood can co-exist,
it also resembles the Giant Chun tree in the antiquity.¹⁷

The Great Creation is enigmatic, and one can hardly fathom its law of operation. Insofar as it can create a world familiar to Yin Ju, it is also capable of bringing into existence an island of burning forest that defies the very principle that governs Yin's world. The common sense teaches that fire

¹⁷ In the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, the Great Chun tree is a huge tree existing in mythical antiquity which regards eight thousands years as the season spring and another eight thousands years as autumn. See *Zhuangzi jishi*, p.11.

can scorch and destroy things that it encounters; yet there, fire and wood reconcile and complement each other—bringing forth lives and making them prosper. Yin Ju particularly mentions the “Five Agents” as a point of reference. By the end of the third century, the theory of the “Five Agents” had already been firmly established as a basic framework to understand the cosmology and also, in the political realm, dynastic transition. Just as one element can either generate (*sheng* 生) or restrain (*ke* 克) another, such as “earth” restrains “water” and “water” generates “wood,” people interpreted dynastic succession as one state representing the virtue of one element replacing the state that represents the virtue of another. For example, it was believed that the Han dynasty, showing the virtue of “fire,” “gave birth to” the Cao-Wei dynasty (220–265) with the virtue of “earth.”¹⁸ Here in the *fu*, however, the material of the asbestos cloth comes into being only because fire and wood co-exist; in other words, the birth of the cloth indicates a cosmological system of life and death that disregards the rule of the central land.

Yin Ju is engrossed by the strangeness of the land so much so that the asbestos cloth as a “tribute” no longer remains as the main focus of the *fu*. Instead, the praise of the nonflammable cloth couched in *Zhuangzi*-like mythical and cosmological terms contrasts the temporality of dynastic existence evinced in the preface and the beginning of the *fu*. For Yin Ju, a quick succession of dynasties and annexation of inimical royal houses have not yet receded into history. Shu, Wei, and Wu were respectively extinguished in 263, 265, and 280, and the Western Jin dynasty only came into existence one year ago, as the Sima clan ascended to the throne through carefully devised coup d’état and military maneuverings. The ephemerality of political regimes and even the avowed legitimacy of the dynasty that Yin Ju currently served become

¹⁸ For this reason, the first emperor of the Cao-Wei dynasty, Cao Pi, named his reign title as “Beginning of Yellow” (*huangchu* 黄初), with the yellow being the color of the “earth.”

inconsequential in comparison to the “history” of the eternally burning island that Yin analogizes to the “Giant Chun tree” in *Zhuangzi*. There appears a disjunction between the “cloth” as a tribute confirming Jin’s political power and the “cloth” as an exotica implying the existence of a parallel “universe” entirely alien, ancient, yet equally legitimate by nature’s design.

Yin Ju composed this piece in the far south, Guangdong Prefecture, and probably to a limited audience without the involvement of royal family. As such, he could afford the “personal” expression of admiration, which, to some extent, dilutes, if not completely undermines, the magnificence of the Jin empire and its power. The author follows the convention of “*fu* on things” and tries to give a comprehensive description of the subject from its origin to quotidian use. However, his awe and engrossment regarding the exotic object carry the narrator away from the focus of “tribute” and “royal influence” brought up at the beginning and dwell entirely on the “strangeness” of its land of birth. When it came to the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the cultural mechanism behind literary composition drastically changed, when royal patronage featured prominently for courtly writings. In the following pages, we will be able to see a more nuanced negotiation between applauding an alien object and relating it directly to dynastic grandeur.

In 505, four years after the founding of the Liang dynasty, the kingdom of Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 (a proto-Tibetan kingdom in the southwest of the Central Land) presented to Emperor Wu a “dancing horse” (*wuma* 舞馬).¹⁹ The gift was a horse trained to perform complicated movements, and from the text, we know it could circle around the stage and “bow” to the

¹⁹ For the presentations of “dancing horse” to the Tang emperors and particularly those in Emperor Xuanzong’s 玄宗 (r. 712–756) reign, see Paul W. Kroll, “The Dancing Horse of T’ang,” *T’oung Pao* vol. 67 (3) (1981, Jan): 240–268.

audience. The emperor subsequently organized a grand banquet that featured the horse's performance. On this occasion, he commanded Zhang Shuai 張率 (475–527), Zhou Xingsi 周興嗣 (d. 521), and Dao Qia 到洽 (477–527) to compose a poetic exposition on the gift. Among them, Zhang's "Poetic Exposition on Dancing Horse, to the Imperial Command" ("Wuma fu yingzhao" 舞馬賦應詔) was praised by Xiao Yan as the most "skillful" (*gong* 工). The text is included in Zhang's biography in the *History of the Liang Dynasty*.²⁰ This kind of activity was not at all novel. Several decades earlier, in the Song dynasty, a "dancing horse" was also presented to the reigning emperor, and the courtier Xie Zhuang 謝莊 (421–466) was commanded to compose a "Poetic Exposition on Dancing Horse." Along with the poetic exposition, Xie also produced musical lyrics on the same topic that were included in the court musical repertoire for performance.²¹ Similarly, Zhang Shuai's piece served explicit ideological agenda. He carefully described the relationship between the Liang polity and this newly arrived gift and articulated a grand vision for the empire through manipulating the images of a "dancing" horse.

One can already see the different strategy adopted by Zhang Shuai in comparison to Yin Ju's composition at the beginning of the *fu*. Without dwelling in detail on the alien land and foreign people's "submission," Zhang's focus is to politicize the dancing horse and imbue it with meanings that signify something weightier than a one-time tribute as a peace token. For Zhang, it is more important to represent the gift as a crucial link between the Liang dynasty and ancient models, which forms an unbroken lineage of cultural transmission.

維梁受命四載 元符既臻	It has been four years since the Liang received the Mandate of Heaven, and great omens have already arrived.
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²⁰ Not, however, in *Yiwen leiju*. See *Liang shu*, 33.475–78.

²¹ *Song shu*, 85.2175–76.

協律之事具舉	Matters that accord with pitch-standards
膠庠之教必陳	and yearly calendar have been promoted,
檀輿之用已偃	and teachings have all properly laid out at imperial schools.
玉輅之御方巡	The use of war chariots has been abandoned
	and imperial carriages [decorated with jade pendants]
	are used for realm-inspections.
考帝文而率通	When examining the prophecies and prognostications,
	[one finds] they are all clearly conveyed and understood,
披皇圖以大觀	and perusing the sacred patterns [emerging from the Yellow River]
	one faces a grand sight.
慶惟道而必先	Blessings must come only after the Way is first achieved,
靈匪聖其誰贊	and what should be praised if not the sagely numen?
見河龍之瑞唐	We have seen the propitious reign of [sage-ruler] Yao
	with dragon-horse coming out of the Yellow River, ²²
矚天馬之禎漢	and also the favorable Han dynasty with the arrival of
	“Heavenly Horse.” ²³
既叶符而比德	Our dynasty also confirms to the auspicious token and
	shares the same virtue [as those sages],
且同條而共貫	with the principles inherited and lineage continued.
詢國美於斯今	When searching for the splendor of a kingdom,
	one can find it right here and right now,
邁皇王於曩昔	and our state surpasses all the emperors and kings in the past.
散大明以燭幽	Great Brightness is emitted to enlighten those hidden,
揚義聲而遠斥	and the sound of virtue is raised to those far and near.
固施之於不窮	Indeed what can be given [by our state] is inexhaustible,
諒無所乎朝夕	and [we offer it to others] no matter whether it is day or night.
竝承流以請吏	They [other states] all receive favor and cultivation,
	and pledge to be a subject,
咸向風而率職	and they all submit to our virtuous influence
	and ask for an appointment.
納奇貢於絕區	We have received extraordinary tribute from remote areas,
致龍媒於殊域	and made arrive the Dragon’s Decoy from alien realms. ²⁴

²² It was believed that during the reign of sage-rulers, dragon-horse (*longma* 龍馬) (a kind of mythical beast with a dragon head and horse body) came out of the Yellow River and carried a turtle shell in its mouth. On it were sacred patterns (*tu* 圖) as an omen to confirm and celebrate the peace and prosperity. *Yiwen leiju*, 11.213.

²³ In the Western Han dynasty, with the opening of the trade route to Central Asia, kingdoms in the west sent gifts to the capital of the Han, Chang’an. Among them, the Blood-Sweat Horse (*Hanxue ma* 汗血馬) from the kingdom of Dayuan 大宛 was the most famous, and it was deemed the descendant of “Heavenly Horse.” Emperor Wu of the Western Han commanded the composition of “Songs of Heavenly Horse” to be incorporated in the court performance repertoire. *Han shu*, 6.184; 22.1060-1061.

²⁴ As was pointed out earlier, in 101 BCE, Emperor Wu of the Western Han received Blood-Sweat Horse as a gift and commissioned the composition of Songs of Heavenly Horse. One line of the song reads: “The Heavenly Horse arrives, and it is the Dragon’s Decoy” 天馬來，龍之媒。The third-century elite Ying Shao 應劭 (ca. 153–196)

伊況古而赤文	As for the sacred patterns in red color once seen in the far antiquity,
爰在茲而朱翼	they are now appearing again on the crimson wings. ²⁵
既效德於炎運	It emulates the state with the virtue of fire, ²⁶
亦表祥於尚色	and the auspices are manifested in its esteemed color.
資皎月而載生	It was born from the essence of the bright moon; ²⁷
祖河房而挺授	and it stands out with the “Dragon-Horse” as the ancestor.
種北唐之絕類	Its origin is the extinct kind from the North Tang, ²⁸
嗣西宛之鴻胥	and it is a remarkable descendant of the Dayuan horse from the west.

In the opening, Tuyuhun is portrayed abstractly as “remote areas” (*juequ* 絕區) or “alien realms” (*shuyu* 殊域). Instead of geographical concreteness or descriptive details of a foreign land, Zhang Shuai emphasizes the glorious Liang dynasty and its admirable achievement at the “present moment,” indicated by the counting of the reign years and the phrases such as “now” (*si jin* 斯今) and “here” (*zai zi* 在茲). An analogy is drawn between the Liang and previous regimes eulogized in Chinese historical tradition, and the author proudly claims, as part of the court propagandistic message, that the Liang parallels, even surpasses, the rules of sapient emperors and sage-rulers in antiquity. Since all those halcyon and prosperous reigns saw the existence of

commented as: “Heavenly Horse is the same kind as dragon. Now the Heavenly Horse has arrived, it is a sure sign that dragon will also ultimately come” 天馬者乃神龍之類。今天馬已來，此龍必致之效也。 *Han shu*, 22.1061.

²⁵ In *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年, a text excavated in 281, it is recorded that during the rule of the sage-king Yao, “dragon-horse [emerging from the Yellow River] carries in mouth a turtle shell. The shell is green in color with crimson patterns” 龍馬銜甲，赤文綠色。 *Yiwen leiju*, 11.213.

²⁶ The Liang dynasty represents the virtue of fire (*huo* 火) that replaced its predecessor, the Southern Qi dynasty, a state of wood (*mu* 木). In Shen Yue’s “Songs of Drum and Fife of the Liang Dynasty”—part of the Liang dynasty court ritual music, there is one song titled “The Era of Wood Declines” (“Mu ji xie” 木紀謝). Its opening couplet is: “The era of wood declines, / and the fortune of fire flourishes” 木紀謝，火運昌。 *Liang shi*, 30.2179.

²⁷ See Zhang Xie’s 張協 (d. 307) “Seven Destinies” (“Qi ming” 七命): “As for the steed from heaven, its carefree posture surpasses those ordinary horses. It contains the air from the profound abyss, and receives essence from the bright moon” 天驥之駿，逸態超越。稟氣靈淵，受精皎月。 *Quan Jin wen*, 167.1953.

²⁸ In the legendary reign of King Mu of Zhou, Northern Tang, the “barbarian state,” sent its envoys to bring a dappled horse to the Zhou court. It later gave birth to “Green Ear” (one of the eight steeds of King Mu of Zhou): 北唐來賓，獻一驪馬，是生驪耳。 *Shiji*, 5.175.

auspices either conforming or foretelling future greatness, such as dragon-horse emerging from the Yellow River or Heavenly Horse arriving from the west, the Liang dynasty would likewise produce auspicious signs. Hence the dancing horse from Tuyuhun, which was given to the Liang dynasty four years after its founding, serves conveniently this ideological program.

The horse is thus introduced more as an “auspicious sign” than a curious, exotic gift that incites amazement. Unlike Yin Ju’s asbestos cloth that exists outside the familiar cosmological structure, this particular dancing horse evokes a tradition of propitious signs in Chinese history: “Writings in crimson color were once seen in the far antiquity, and they are now appearing again on the crimson wings.” The dancing horse, especially the “numinous” patterns on it, can well link the present moment to antiquity (*kuang gu* 況古), demonstrating that “their adopted principles are inherited and lineage continued.” The last sentence of the paragraph also envisions a “family line” and genealogy of foreign horses serving as tribute gift to pay respect to the Han-Chinese regimes. In so doing, Zhang Shuai describes the “unfamiliarity” of the horse-omen not as geographical but as historical: the “horizontal” relation between Liang and Tuyuhun, or Han-Chinese and “barbarian,” gives way to the reemergence of a much-yearned wonder at the present moment.

Because the “dancing horse” symbolizes the grandeur of the dynasty, Zhang Shuai then starts to diligently detail the appearance of the horse and lavishly extol it to a most superior position. “Horse” has always been a favorite topic for poetry, poetic exposition, inscription, and eulogy, and Zhang assembles a variety of literary allusions for its portrayal that is followed by a claim that this horse eclipses all the known predecessors.²⁹ However at this point, as if feeling

²⁹ For example, one can find “Inscription on Horse Sash” (“An ming” 鞍銘), “Poetic Exposition on Horse” (“Ma fu” 馬賦), “Poetic Exposition on Carriage Horse” (“Chengyu ma fu” 乘輿馬賦), “Poetic Exposition on Horse for Riding and Shooting” (“Chishe ma fu” 馳射馬賦), “Poetic Exposition on Fine Horse” (“Liang ma fu” 良馬賦),

uneasy about assigning too much agency and praise to a foreign gift, the narrative gives a sharp turn:

可以迹章亥之所未遊	It can leave traces on the lands where Zhang and Hai had not been to, ³⁰
踰禹益之所未至	and travel further than the territories that Yu and Yi had trodden on. ³¹
將不得而屈指	Yet without doing so, our emperor will only count [the land] with His fingers,
亦何暇以理轡	and indeed how does His Majesty have the leisure to manage horse reins?
若跡遍而忘反	If one roams throughout the domain and forgets to return,
非我皇之所事	this surely is not what our emperor would do.

Zhuang Shuai is careful with moderation. The first sentence of the above-cited paragraph is the culmination of a series of applauding remarks on the horse in superlative terms, and Zhang now boldly imagines that this foreign steed will be able to carry the emperor to the realm beyond the known civilization. At this juncture in the narrative, the foreign animal not only surmounts all the famous steeds already conventionalized as cultural lore, it also, being alien in nature, threatens to allure the emperor and bear him to the unknown. It is on the verge of what Yin Ju had done: picturing an alien land that is beyond the accustomed universe. However, Zhang Shuai reverses his narrative abruptly and admits that while the horse indeed *can* carry the emperor across the boundary, it is the emperor's self-discipline and discretion that will curb both his admiration and the use of this foreign beast. This narrative shift is not unfamiliar to *fu* readers, as

"Poetic Exposition on Dragon-Horse" ("Longma fu" 龍馬賦), and so on. One of the famous pieces, which is also included in the anthology *Wen xuan*, is Yan Yanzhi's "Poetic Exposition on White Horse with Crimson Pattern" ("Zhe baima fu" 赭白馬賦).

³⁰ Taizhang 太章 and Shuhai 豎亥 (abbreviated as Zhang and Hai) are two mythical figures who were allegedly good at running (*shan zou zhe* 善走者). The sage-ruler Yu 禹 once appropriated their skill to measure the length and width of the world. See *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 4.132.

³¹ Legend has it that both the sage-ruler Yu and Boyi 伯益 managed the flood and charted the known territory of the world.

a number of Western Han *fu* writers often conclude a description of hunting with an admonition or the emperor's conscious rejection of the excess. But here what the emperor dismisses is both morally problematic indulgence in traveling and over-fascination with a foreign object.

Instead of letting the horse gallop free, Zhang Shuai in the following section begins to stage its performance. The horse dances in a circle, a limited space, and the emperor safely appreciates its exoticness in the court circle.

言右牽之已來	It has come with the trainer holding [the rein] in his right hand, ³²
寧執樸而後進	and how would it [wait for] the whipping rod before advancing?
既傾首於律同	It lowers its head in accordance with the tunes,
又蹠足於鼓振	and again stamps on its foot as the drums strike.
擢龍首, 回鹿軀	It lifts its dragon-like head, and turns back the deer-formed body.
睨兩鏡, 蹙雙鳧	It looks askance with a pair of mirror-like eyes, and its chest bones cramp [due to the movement]. ³³
既就場而雅拜	Having approached the stage, it elegantly bows,
時赴曲而徐趨	at times it follows the musical melodies and slowly moves forward.

The stableman controls the entrance of the horse, and its performance strictly responds to the tunes and drums. The “dancing,” the only exotic characteristic of the horse that makes it stand out from the ordinary, ultimately manifests as an “elegant bow” (*yabai* 雅拜) to the authority. After the description of the performance, the author arrives at the central message of the *fu*. The horse's energetic spirit and what it portends prompt Zhang Shuai to exhort the emperor to once again perform the *feng* and *shan* rituals at Mountain Tai (modern-day Shandong Province, at the

³² See the prescription in the *Li ji*: “For those who present goat and horse, they should hold the rein of the animals with their right hand” 效馬效羊者右牽之. *Li ji zhushu*, 2.44.

³³ Ma Yuan 馬援 (14 BCE–49 CE), an Eastern Han general, left a document introducing how to mold a bronze horse statue. The author describes: “Its chest bones should be straight as if to come out [of the skin]” 胸欲直而出, and “when seen from afar, they should look like a pair of ducks.” 望視之如雙鳧. *Quan Hou Han wen*, 106.561.

time occupied by the Northern Wei dynasty), traditionally considered one of the most important rituals carried out by a legitimate ruler of a unified empire.³⁴ The dancing horse is ultimately turned into an auspicious sign that Emperor Wu should consider seriously instead of modestly declining to acknowledge its significance:

若彼符瑞之富	As the abundance of the auspicious signs can tell,
可以臻介丘而昭卒業	we should be able to arrive at Grand Mount [i.e., Mountain Tai] and declare our great accomplishment. ³⁵
搢紳羣后, 誠希末光	Court officials all sincerely hope to be blessed with the lingering ray of your royal brightness.
天子深穆為度	Yet the Son of Heaven takes solemnity and moderation as regulation,
未之訪也. 何則?	and has not visited [this site, or the <i>feng</i> and <i>shan</i> matters]. Why is that?
進讓殊事	Advancement and humility accord with different circumstances,
豈非帝者之彌文哉?	how could we disapprove the [later] emperors' increased embellishment? ³⁶
今四衛外封	At the present, the supporting kingdoms extending to the four directions have been enfeoffed,
五岳內郡	and the Five Numinous Mountains become counties within our territory.
宜弘下禪之規	It would seem appropriate to disseminate downward the regulations of the <i>shan</i> ritual,
增上封之訓	and emphasize upward the instructions of the <i>feng</i> ritual.
背清都而日行	[It would be expected that] His Majesty leaves behind

³⁴ Sima Qian starts his “Treatise on *Feng* and *Shan* Rituals” with: “Were there any emperors and kings since antiquity who had received the Mandate of Heaven and yet did not perform the *feng* and *shan* rituals?” 自古受命帝王, 曷嘗不封禪. When a prosperous age occurs, the ruler should perform the rituals to repay the blessing from heaven. *Shiji*, 28.1355. For a discussion of the *feng* and *shan* rituals and their performance in the Tang dynasty, see Howard Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk: Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the T'ang Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 170-195.

³⁵ This line echoes Sima Qian's remark that “there is not any [ruler] who has witnessed auspicious omens yet not arrived at the Mountain Tai [for the *feng* and *shan* rituals]” 未有睹符瑞見而不臻乎泰山者也. *Ibid*.

³⁶ This almost adopts verbatim one sentence from Yang Xiong's 楊雄 (53 BCE–18CE) “Poetic Exposition on Plume Hunting” (“Yulie fu” 羽獵賦), in which Yang Xiong describes Emperor Cheng's (51–7 BCE) extravagant hunting activity. Yang Xiong employs an interlocutor to ask the question, “As one often cites the ancient times of Fuxi and Shennong [and praises their simplicity], does it mean that the increased embellishment of later emperors should be disapproved?” 或稱羲農, 豈或帝王之彌文哉. The imagined speaker offers a negative answer, as rituals developed according to the demands of the time. Here, Zhang Shuai too encourages the emperor to take on the journey to the north and act based on the changing situations.

指云郊而玄運	the Pure City [i.e., the capital Jiankang] and proceeds forward each day, and points to the remotest areas and [fulfills] the Mandate of Heaven.
將絕塵而弭轍	His Majesty will travel at lightening speed and extend further the wheels' traces,
類飛鳥與駑驢	in resemblance to the "Flying Bird" or the <i>juxu</i> beast. ³⁷
總三才而驅騫	He will gallop forward, gathering the [numen] from Heaven, Earth, and Humanity,
案五御而超摠	and examine the five skills of horsemanship and prance head.
翳卿雲於華蓋	We will take the shadow cast by the auspicious clouds as chariot canopies,
翼條風於屬車	and take the east wind as the wings of the imperial carriage.
無逸御於玉軫	Neither [would there be] unrestrained driving of the jade-decorated vehicle,
不泛駕於金輿	nor extensive travels on the golden chariot.
飭中岳之絕軌	[Instead,] we will restore the Central Mountain where [our] wheel tracks have long been missing, ³⁸
營奉高之舊墟	and renovate and manage the former abode at Fenggao. ³⁹
訓厚況於人神	We will administer bountiful sacrifices to ancestors and gods,
弘施育於黎獻	and disseminate education widely to the common folks.
垂景炎於長世	Brightness will be transmitted to posterity through many generations,
集繁祉於斯萬	and much blessing will be gathered for millions of years to come.
在庸臣之方剛	Your subject with mediocre talent is in his prime age,
有從軍之大願	and harbors the grand wish of following the army.
必自茲而展采	I will surely take this opportunity and dutifully serve [the kingdom],
將同昇於庖燀	and it will be just like entrusting myself to the

³⁷ "Flying birds" should be the name of a famous steed in ancient times. *Quxu* is a legendary beast that is good at running. See Mei Sheng's "Seven Stimuli": "Those [carriages] in front resemble the 'Flying Bird,' and those behind are like *quxu* beasts" 前似飛鳥，後類距虛. *Quan Han wen*, 20.238. When Li Shan commented on this line, he pointed out that people in the past often used bird's names for their horses, such as "Morning Wind" (*chenfeng* 晨風) and "Yellow Crane" (*huanghu* 黃鵠). *Wen xuan*, 34.1564.

³⁸ "Central Mountain," also known as the Mountain Song, was located near Luoyang in modern He'nan province. It had been occupied by northern states since the beginning of the fourth century.

³⁹ Fenggao was the name of county within the jurisdiction of the Mountain Tai region. Emperor Wu of the Han performed the *feng* and *shan* rituals at Fenggao.

	glory of Fuxi. ⁴⁰
悼長卿之遺書	One can lament the writings left behind by Sima Xiangru, ⁴¹
憫周南之留恨	and take pity on the lingering regret at Zhounan. ⁴²

In the end, the courtier expresses his exhortation to the emperor for a military campaign against the north and his resolution of joining the armies to reclaim the lost land. The dancing horse here is explicitly referred to as an “auspicious omen” (*furui* 符瑞) that augurs the performance of the *feng* and *shan* rituals for the southern dynasty. One also sees a very ingenious twist to the conventional *fu* ending. As mentioned earlier, according to the generic tradition, *fu* on hunting often ends with the writer’s emphasis on restraint, frugality, and moderation. But here, the emperor already takes “solemnity and moderation” (*shenmu* 深穆) as a principle and refuses to excessively use the horse for traveling. Therefore, the “remonstration” in this particular piece is to ask the emperor to come into action and perform the *sheng* and *shan* rituals again in the north. As the author claims, advancement and humility should be conducted based on changed situations, and no one should find fault with the “increased embellishment” of rituals and processions. However, we can imagine this “criticism” only sounds gratifying to the ears of the emperor and other members of the royal family. Finally, the horse does carry the emperor to new territories: “we will restore the Central Mountain where [our] wheel tracks have long been missing, / and renovate and manage the former abode at Fenggao.” But the places where the horse leads the emperor to are not those beyond the known civilization; nor will the retinue travel

⁴⁰ *Pao* here refers to Paoxi 庖犧, also known as Fuxi, a legendary sage-king in ancient China.

⁴¹ After Sima Xiangru, the courtier of the Emperor Wu of the Han, passed away, the emperor sent envoys to Xiangru’s home to fetch his writings. Xiangru’s wife reported that Sima Xiangru left one volume of writing behind and asked her to present it to the throne. This particular volume turned out to be a discussion on the *feng* and *shan* rituals. See *Han shu*, 57.2600.

⁴² It refers to Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 BCE), the father of the great historian Sima Qian. When Emperor Wu performed the *feng* and *shan* rituals at Mountain Tai, Sima Tan was not permitted to follow and only stayed in the Zhounan area. He was despondent because of this and later passed away. See *Shi ji*, 130.3295.

for the purpose of journey itself (“No unrestrained roaming for the jade carriages, and no expansive traveling for the golden chariots”). The goal is to restore the realm customarily holding imperial sacrifices yet having fallen into disuse and “barbarian” occupation.

Interestingly, toward the end of the *fu*, the dancing horse, a foreign gift, also becomes a war horse, as the author conveys his grand wish to join the expedition. Instead of experiencing the regrets of Sima Xiangru and Sima Tan, Zhang Shuai hopes to devote himself to the cause of territorial expansion and cultural restoration.

Throughout the *fu* text, the dancing horse demonstrates several layers of symbolic meanings through the author’s careful manipulation of its images. It is an animal with a foreign origin, but also an omen that has a cultural lineage familiar to the author and his audience; it is a sight of entertainment, but also a submissive creature bowing to the authority; it is a tool of transportation, but only used by the emperor with caution. Finally, if the emperor heeds the courtier’s advice and becomes bolder in claiming his authority, the horse will then lead the armies forward and take back the land lost to northern enemies. Through depicting this foreign horse, Zhang Shuai negotiates the known and unknown boundaries of the political influence. Unlike Yin Ju who focuses on an imaginary realm, Zhang Shuai “domesticates” the foreignness by situating it within the “history” of tribute-presentation to the Chinese empires. In the end, the gift is written into an omen that symbolizes the empire’s cultural ambition, even though the Liang dominance never reached to the Mountain Tai during its fifty years of existence.

An Emperor’s Thank-you Letter

In the mid-sixth century, much social chaos and political struggle caused disintegration of central authority in both the north and south. With the powerful southern dynasty, the Liang,

collapsing, many contenders vied for political and cultural dominance. From the turmoil and instability, Xiao Yi, the seventh son of Emperor Wu, restored the Liang dynasty in Jiangling in the 550s. Xiao Yi's generals effectively appeased Hou Jing rebellion in 552, and shortly after, the ruler claimed the throne as the new southern emperor. It was only two years later when the Western Wei troops came down and vanquished the regime. Xiao Yi was also executed after the violent conquest. In spite of later ages' repudiation of Xiao Yi's rule and even his personality, he was a diligent writer and a book lover. From extant texts, there is one letter written by Xiao Yi to express his gratitude for receiving the gifts sent from the Northern Qi dynasty: horse. It is preserved in *Yiwen leiju*, an early seventh-century encyclopedia, and titled "Letter Replying to Northern Qi's Bestowal of Horses" ("Da Qiguo xiang ma shu" 答齊國饗馬書).⁴³ Even though the exact date of composition cannot be ascertained, based on the title, which refers to the northern state as "Qi state" founded in 550, the piece of writing should be composed when Xiao Yi either reigned in Jiangling as a royal prince or emperor—in either case, the leader of the Jiangling regime. Hence this piece of writing is one of the rare cases in which a ruler conveys his appreciation for the gift given by another political power. The questions that can be asked regarding this letter are: How can Xiao Yi, a political leader, describe his reception of this "foreign" gift, or more specifically, a gift from another rival state? How does he envision his royal power in relation to the formidable Northern Qi? How does he express gratitude without sounding flattery and meanwhile maintain dignity without offending northern readers? Finally, how does he use complicated literary allusions laden with intertextual references and rich implications to assert his superiority and engage in the contemporary power struggles?

⁴³ The title is changed to "Letter Replying to Northern Qi's Bestowal of Two Horses" ("Da Qiguo shuangma shu" 答齊國雙馬書) in Yan Kejun's *Quan Liang wen*. *Quan Liang wen*, 17.3047-3048.

The text survives in two fragments, and below is the first segment:⁴⁴

[The horse's] fame is as high as the "Cassia Branch,"⁴⁵ and its shape is copied from that in the "Willow Valley."⁴⁶ The grotto in Xiangyang, though nearby, is not easy to reach;⁴⁷ and as for the Dian pool [in Shu], to visit that far is truly difficult.⁴⁸ Its value is equal to the "Dragon's Decoy," and its reputation is the same as the steed Jizi.⁴⁹ [It is] the numen in the Yellow River that brings brightness, resembling the bronze horse-statue forged by the General Fubo.⁵⁰ [It shows] the image of *zhen* with the flying pattern,⁵¹ and one can

⁴⁴ *Quan Liang wen*, 17.3047-2.

⁴⁵ "Cassia Branch" should be the name of a famous steed. However, judging from all the texts we have, Xiao Yi seems to be the first to use this allusion and associate "Cassia Branch" with a horse. I cannot find an earlier precedent. One other instance in which "Cassia Branch" refers to a horse is one Yu Xin's poem: "The golden sash is put on the 'Cassia Branch' steed" 金鞍被桂條. *Bei Zhou shi*, 4.2395.

⁴⁶ "Willow Valley" refers to a horse-shaped omen discovered in the third and fourth century. It will be discussed below.

⁴⁷ According to Xi Zuochi's 習鑿齒 (d. 383) *Xiangyang qijiu ji* 襄陽耆舊記 (*An Account of Respectable Elders of Xiangyang*), fine horses were once found in a grotto near Xiangyang: "There is one grotto in the Mountain Zhonglu. In the Han dynasty, several hundreds of horses once came out of it. Therefore it was named 'Horse Grotto.' Lu Xun [183–245], [the general] of the Wu kingdom, also knew about this cave. He acquired a dozen of horses coming from the grotto" 中廬山有一地穴，漢時嘗有數百疋馬出，遂因名馬穴。吳時陸遜亦知此穴，馬出得數十疋. *Yiwen leiju*, 93.1619. The city of Jiangling was in the vicinity of Xiangyang, but the latter was within the territory of the Western Wei when Xiao Yi composed the letter.

⁴⁸ Dian Pool was in the area of Shu, and it was also famous for producing good horses. *The Account of the Huayang State* (*Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志), a fourth-century historical account of the Shu, gives an explanation of the name "Dian Pool," and further provides legendary tales about the place: "The elders passed down the rumor that in the [Dian] Pool there are horses with numinous power. When they reproduced with domestic horses, they gave birth to outstanding steeds. The world has been calling them 'Dian Pool Horses.' They can travel five hundred *li* within a day" 長老傳言，池中有神馬。與家馬交，則生駿駒。世稱滇池駒。日行五百里. *Yiwen leiju*, 9.171. The association between the Dian Pool and Xiangyang can be also found in one anecdote recorded in the *Commentary on The Classic of Water* (*Shuijing zhu* 水經注): "In the period of Three Kingdoms, Lu Xun led a campaign against the city of Xiangyang. He acquired a dozen of horses from the cave [i.e., Horse Grotto]. He sent them back to Jianye [the capital of the Wu]. When an envoy from the Shu arrived, whose family was near the Dian Pool, he recognized one horse from the herd because of color of its mane. He said the horse was once the ride of his father. Facing the horse, he shed tears" 三國時，陸遜攻襄陽，于此穴又得馬數十匹，送建業。蜀使至，有家在滇池者，識其馬毛色，云其父所乘馬，對之流涕. Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (472–527) annot., *Shuijing zhu shu* 水經注疏 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1989), 28.2386.

⁴⁹ Both allusions will be elaborated below.

⁵⁰ When Eastern Han general Ma Yuan, the general Fubo, conquered Jiaozhi 交趾 (modern-day Vietnam), he destroyed bronze drums from the local society and used the material to make a horse statue. He then sent this statue back to the capital Chang'an. The court praised it as an ideal model for fine horse and placed it in front of the Palace of Propagating Virtue. See *Hou Han shu*, 24.840-41.

⁵¹ *Zhen* is one of the eight basic trigrams in the *Classic of Change*, and these eight trigrams, through different combinations, form the sixty-four hexagrams. In "Elucidating Trigrams," the trigram *zhen* is explained to signify "thunderbolt." Because of the "visibility" and "audibility" of thunderbolt, *zhen* can symbolize the horses that neigh loudly, or those with white furs on their hooves, or those with white mane on the forehead, and so on, because they

indeed laugh at the carved jade discovered by the Duke of Dongying.⁵² Moreover, it is controlled with silver-inlaid reins, and the golden bit is sharpened. Its bridle is the famous *louqu* bridle, and light in eyes resemble that of two moons. The reins are decorated with purple threads, and their color surpasses that of the “double silk.”⁵³ One now can mock the ruler of Jin, who always rode on horses from the kingdom of Zheng.⁵⁴ One will also despise the lord Cao, who often received horses as tribute from the king of Shu.⁵⁵

名重桂條，形圖柳谷。襄陽地穴，近求未易。滇池水裏，遠訪猶難。價疋龍媒，聲齊驥子。河精曜采，似伏波之鑄銅。震象飛文，笑東瀛之刻玉。加以控斯銀勒，利此金銜。鞍揭鏤衢，光含兩月。繮縈紫縷，色麗雙絲。方嗤晉后，恒乘鄭國之駟。更鄙曹君，經餉蜀王之馬。

will surely be noticed (just as thunderbolt) when galloping. Meanwhile, *zhen* also signifies dragon, by extension, the imperial aura of a ruler.

⁵² One anecdote in the fifth-century *The Garden of the Strange* (*Yiyuan* 異苑) tells: “Duke Dongying of the Jin, Sima Teng, whose courtesy name was Yuanmai, was stationed in the city of Ye in the first year of Yongjia era [307]. Heavy snow fell at the time. However, the snow was melting into liquid around the area several paces in front of his mansion’s door. Teng felt curious and started digging. He found a jade horse with several *chi* height, and yet it lost all its teeth. Sima Teng thought that “horse” (*ma*) was [part of] the name of the royal family (*sima*), and therefore he considered it an auspicious omen. However, someone commented that without teeth a horse was not able to eat. Before long, the Jin dynasty was cast in chaos” 晉東瀛公騰，字元邁，以永嘉元年鎮鄴。時大雪，當其門前方十數步。獨液不積，騰怪而掘之。得玉馬，高尺許。齒皆缺。騰以為馬者國姓，稱吉祥焉。或謂馬無齒則不食。未幾，晉大亂。 *Han Wei liuchao biji xiaoshuo da guan*, 4.623-624.

⁵³ “Double silk” was one kind of local silk product from the city of Ye.

⁵⁴ It refers to Duke Hui of Jin 晉惠公 (d. 637) and his official Qing Zheng 慶鄭 (d. 645) in the Spring and Autumn period. In 645 BCE, the kingdom of Qin fought against Jin. The Duke of Jin rode on the small horses from the kingdom of Zheng. Qing Zheng remonstrated: “For great affairs like the present one, the ancients were sure to put in harness those sired within the domain. Raised upon local waters and lands, the horses understood what their masters had in mind. Comfortable with their instructions and commands, they were familiar with the local roads. Whatsoever one might direct them to do, the steeds never failed to comply. But now you put in harness those sired in another domain and use them to engage in warfare. When afraid, they will become uncontrollable and will turn against their masters. With their life force confused, perverse, and irritated, their dark blood will surge throughout them. With swelling veins, bubbling and bursting, they will appear strong but be drained within. Unwilling to advance or to retreat, they will be unable to perform proper maneuvers. And you, my lord, will surely regret it.” 古者大事，必乘其產。生其水土，而知其人心。安其教訓，而服習其道。唯所納之，無不如志。今乘異產以從戎事。及懼而變，將與人易。亂氣狡憤，陰血周作。張脈憤興，外彊中乾。進退不可，周旋不能。君必悔之。 The lord did not listen, and encountered fiasco. Duke Hui was defeated and caught as a captive by Qin armies. See *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhushu*, the fifteenth year of Lord Xi, 230-2. The translation is by Stephen Durant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg. *Zuozhuan*, vol.1, p. 319.

⁵⁵ The exact reference is unclear. Based on the “lord of Cao” and “king of Shu,” this sentence is likely to refer to the Three Kingdoms period. However, there is no record of the Cao regime receiving horses from the Shu area. On the contrary, as horses were relatively more abundant in the north, the Cao regime did send horses to the Wu kingdom as gifts. Meanwhile, there is one other anecdote about a Shu envoy’s visit to Wu that involves “horse.” Sun Quan, the ruler of the Wu, made a demand to the envoy that the Shu should send horses to Wu as gifts. The Wu courtier Zhuge Ke 諸葛恪 (203–253) also claimed that Shu should be seen as Wu’s horse stable outside the palace (*waijiu* 外廄). See *Sanguo zhi*, 64.129-1430.

On the surface, the highly conventionalized precedents and cultural lore on horses make the piece seem another hollow eulogy to the Northern Qi's gift. However, upon close examination, we find many allusions here are somewhat "problematic," as Xiao Yi also shifts his focus from the horse as a gift to the horse as a political omen with specifically intended meanings. While giving due compliment to the generosity of the Northern Qi, Xiao Yi endows this gift with much symbolism to pronounce his authority as a political leader.

Even though the *locus classicus* of "Cassia Branch" is uncertain, the political significance of the gift is explicitly brought up by the phrase "Willow Valley." In the *History of the Song Dynasty* compiled by the prominent courtier Shen Yue toward the end of the fifth century, the "Monograph on Ominous Auspices" ("Furen zhi" 符瑞志) records an omen occurrence in the course of the third century at the place named "Willow Valley" (*liugu* 柳谷):

There was a rock in the Willow Valley of Gold Mountain, the County of Shandan, Zhangye area. Its circumference was seven *xun*, and its height was one *ren*. It had dark green color with white patterns on it. It showed images of five horses, *lin* unicorn, deer, phoenix, and immortals. They were first seen in the Jian'an era [196–220]; their shape was formed in the Huangchu era [220–226]; the patterns became complete in the Taihe era [227–233].

張掖刪丹縣金山柳谷有石生焉，周圍七尋，中高一仞，蒼質素章，有五馬，麟，鹿，鳳皇，仙人之象。始見於建安，形成於黃初，文備於太和。

According to the compiler Shen Yue and also one story in a fourth-century anecdotal account, *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (*An Account of Searching for the Supernatural*), the growth of the rock pattern fulfilled the prophecy once articulated by far-sighted men in the Han dynasty that: "There would a certain 'He' reign during the Wei [dynasty]. When it is the time, there will be a rock split open at a place three thousands *li* to the west. It will be tied to five horses, and have these characters 'attacking Cao' appearing on it" 魏年有和，當有開石於西三千餘里，繫五馬，文曰討

曹.⁵⁶ Because “horse” (*ma*) is part of the surname Sima of the Western Jin royal family and “Cao” certainly means the royal house of the Cao-Wei dynasty, this phenomenon was interpreted as the sign of Wei’s collapse and Jin’s rise as a new dynasty. The gradual formation of this omen during the Jian’an, Huangchu, and Taihe reigns (all Wei dynasty reign titles) culminated in the early Jin dynasty. According to Xi Zuochi’s *Han Jin chunqiu* 漢晉春秋 (*Spring and Autumn of the Han and Jin*): “In the early Jin dynasty, its patterns became more prominent. The image of horses was shining forth like jade” 至晉初, 其文愈明, 馬象皆煥徹如玉焉.⁵⁷ After the Jin replaced the Wei, this omen was officially acknowledged in the central court, as the Jin official Cheng Yi 程猗 (fl. second half of the third century) composed an encomium on it. Part of the writing reads:

After the dark stone appeared, the characters in white were complete. Auspicious tiger befits benevolence, and white unicorn shows its numen. The image of numinous horse forms naturally by itself, and gold is the color of its shape. Embodying correctness, He has become a ruler; being just and fair, He can illuminate all [things under Heaven]. May He enjoy longevity without limit, and may His age extend to millions of years.

玄石既表, 素文以成. 瑞虎合仁, 白麟耀精. 神馬自圖, 金言其形. 體正而王, 中允克明. 關壽無疆, 於萬斯齡.⁵⁸

Considering that this encomium is included in *Song shu*, discussed by northern courtiers in the court,⁵⁹ and cited by Li Shan when he commented on the *Wen xuan*, it is highly likely that Xiao Yi was familiar with Cheng Yi’s writings. Not to mention that “its shape is copied from that in

⁵⁶ *Han Wei liuchao biji xiaoshuo daguan*, p. 334.

⁵⁷ *Sanguo zhi*, 3.106.

⁵⁸ *Song shu*, 27.781; *Quan Jin wen*, 72.1874-2.

⁵⁹ It is interesting that in 444, the fifth year of the reign of Taiping zhenjun (“True Lord of Grant Peace”) of the Northern Wei, stones with characters again appeared in the Willow Valley. Officials presented this omen to the Wei emperor Tuoba Tao. See *Quan Hou Wei wen* 全後魏文, 16.3591-1.

the Willow Valley” (*xingtu liugu* 形圖柳谷) in Xiao Yi’s letter resonates with Cheng Yi’s “the image of numinous horse forms naturally by itself” (*shenma zitu* 神馬自圖). This particular allusion can be read as a laudatory note to the Northern Qi which just replaced the Eastern Wei dynasty. The fall of Cao-Wei in the allusion’s original context reminds one of the fall of Tuoba-Wei to the Gao family, the royal house of Northern Qi. Xiao Yi makes the horse-gift an object highly politically charged that signifies the rise and fall of dynastic power.

The next two lines, “The grotto in Xiangyang, though nearby, is not easy to reach; and as for the Dian pool [in Shu], to visit that far is truly difficult,” concede the limit of Xiao Yi’s regime, as it failed to acquire horses near Xiangyang or seek them from the distant Shu realm. Not only does this claim acknowledge the occupation of Xiangyang by the Western Wei forces, it also refers to the military struggle between Xiao Yi and his brother Xiao Ji, who occupied the upper stream of the Yangzi river. The reduced territory of the Liang regime prevented Xiao Yi from acquiring horses from those places famous for fine steeds. However, in spite of this inconvenience, Xiao imagines the Liang’s political influence is still “far-reaching,” since now, horses like “Dragon’s Decoy” and “Jizi steed” have arrived at the court of Jiangling.

As mentioned earlier, “Dragon’s Decoy” evokes the Western Han court lyric, “Song of Heavenly Horse from the West Extreme” (“*Xiji tianma zhi ge*” 西極天馬之歌). It was composed when the heroic general Li Guangli 李廣利 (d. 88 BCE) killed the king of Dayuan, a kingdom in Central Asia, and obtained its famous Blood-Sweat Horse. The beginning and end of the lyric read: “The Heavenly Horse arrives, and it comes from the West extreme. It treads through the flowing sand, and the nine ethnic peoples all submitted. ... The Heavenly Horse arrives, and it is the dragon’s decoy. It roams in the Heaven’s Gate and observes the Jade Terrace” 天馬徠, 從西

極, 涉流沙, 九夷服. ... 天馬徠, 龍之媒, 游閭闔, 觀玉臺.⁶⁰ Ying Shao 應劭 (ca.153–196) glossed that both “Heaven’s Gate” and “Jade Terrace” are “dwellings of the Heavenly Emperor” (*tiandi suo ju* 天帝所居). As for the relation between the Heavenly Horse and dragon, he noted: “Its meaning is that the Heavenly Horse is the same kind of dragon. Now that the Heavenly Horse has arrived here, it is a sure sign that dragon will also ultimately come.” 言天馬者乃神龍之類, 今天馬已來, 此龍必至之效也. The term “Dragon’s Decoy” thus, on the one hand, praises the pure breed of the horse and its superior quality, but on the other hand, also implies a parallel between the Jiangling regime and Western Han dynasty and asserts the former’s political power in making arrive a “dragon.” “Jizi” is also the name of a famous horse. Searching its textual origin, one finds that in Huan Tan’s 桓譚 (23 BCE–56 CE) *New Discourse* (*Xinlun* 新論), a horse connoisseur in Chang’an, the capital of the dynasty, “found a steed at border county. Its appearance is ugly, but it runs in straight course. Its name is Jizi” 于邊郡求得駿馬. 惡貌而正走, 名驥子.⁶¹ The “border county” (*bianju* 邊郡) in this textual reference is noteworthy, and it poses us, modern readers, a difficult question to determine the implication of allusions. Could it be the case that Jizi by the time had already become a set phrase to refer to a fine horse, so much so that the original context was irrelevant? Or, another possibility is that Xiao Yi deliberately chose this allusion to indicate the horse’s origin—the Northern Qi dynasty—as a “border county,” peripheral to the Jiangling court.

Indeed, the topic of “border/periphery” is continued in the next two lines:

⁶⁰ *Han shu*, 22.1060.

⁶¹ *Quan Hou Han wen* 全後漢文, 106.538-2.

[It is] the numen in the Yellow River that brings brightness, resembling the bronze horse-statue forged by the General Fubo.

[It shows] the image of *zhen* with the flying pattern, and one can indeed laugh at the carved jade discovered by the Duke of Dongying.

Here Xiao Yi most explicitly marks his imperial identity. The “numen of the Yellow River” refers to the mythical creature with a dragon’s head and horse’s body. It emerged from the Yellow River and came to the legendary ruler Fuxi, who then designed the eight hexagrams based on the patterns on the creature.⁶² Xiao Yi compares the gift to the numinous essence of the Yellow River that now appears again and bears patterns to a legitimate emperor. One of the hexagrams, the *zhen*, symbolizes thunderbolt and, by extension, fast-running horses as well as the imperial aura. There is a clear mutual implication and correspondence between the gift and its new owner: the gift, as an omen, testifies to the legitimacy of the emperor Xiao Yi; meanwhile, the imperial status of its recipient endows the gift with more symbolic weight.

In addition to the royal “center,” the reference on “bronze horse statue” denotes the conquest of the periphery. Ma Yuan, the Eastern Han dynasty General Fubo (a literal translation being the General of Taming the Waves), conquered the southern ethnic groups in the first century CE. Upon the appeasement, he destroyed the drums played by the people there, used the local materials to forge a bronze horse statue, and sent it back to the capital. Through the analogy, the arrival of this gift at the Jiangling court, just like the “bronze horse statue” sent to the imperial center hundreds of years ago, insinuates the submission of the dynastic periphery, in this case, the Northern Qi dynasty.

The most intriguing allusion in this short passage is that on “jade horse” and “Duke of Dongying,” the original context of which involves the city of Ye, the capital of the Northern Qi

⁶² *Wen xuan*, 3.101.

at the moment. The story is about the inadequate interpretation of an omen. Sima Teng, one member of the royal family, discovered a jade horse buried in the ground and considered it auspicious. However, the horse's lack of teeth in fact portended something more grim and sinister. The omen was fulfilled in the end, and the Western Jin collapsed under the rebellions of royal family members and invasion of northern ethnic peoples. Even though the author "laughs at" (*xiao* 笑) this instance to emphasize the superiority of the present gift in comparison to the previous example, the deployment of this allusion itself deserves further pondering. The meanings of a sign can be multivalent, and whether an interpretation is right or wrong is also judged retrospectively. From the textual allusions used in this letter, we find that the "Willow Valley" horse images foretell the rise of Sima clan, and the jade horse without teeth augurs its demise. Both horse omens were adequately fulfilled in the past. Do we read too much into the text if we detect Xiao Yi's dark insinuations here? That is, both being a dynasty toppling a certain "Wei dynasty," the Western Jin and Northern Qi would likely share the same fate—this horse gift from the city of Ye that Xiao Yi received, just like the jade horse discovered there once upon a time, adumbrates the northern state's disastrous collapse looming over the horizon. The thank-you letter thus combines explicit gratitude and implicit animosity, with their boundaries hard to draw. Benefited from hindsight, we modern readers may also find ironic that only one or two years after Xiao Yi received this gift, his Jiangling regime was extinguished by the Western Wei dynasty. He thus also becomes an inadequate interpreter of omen, like Sima Teng—both beguiled themselves with a false optimism.

Expressing Gratitude to Royal Gifts

Toward the end of the section, we will turn to another genre that involves describing gifts and their reception, namely, “thank-you notes” (*qi* 啟). This form of writing on gift-receiving became increasingly popular in the late Northern and Southern Dynasties. As Xiaofei Tian points out, the genre originally was a “simple, straightforward communiqué about official business.” Then, its function as a thank-you note became prominent, and the genre became “more and more refined and flowery, culminating in a well-crafted piece of parallel prose in the first half of the sixth century.”⁶³ The thank-you note was often sent by a courtier to reciprocate the gift bestowed upon him from a superior, often a member of the royal family. The gift being given could be quite mundane, such as meat, rice, shrimp sauce, even coins; but they also included non-indigenous objects such as foreign cloth, cheese (“foreign” to southerners), fruit or vegetable imported from another state. Similar to the thank-you letter written by Xiao Yi or poetic exposition on objects examined above, the generic convention prescribes that in the description of a gift in *qi*, allusions and cultural lore on the object should be assembled for an effect of analogy, and the piece itself often ends with the author’s claim that the present gift outshines all its predecessors recorded in history. Unreserved extolment is expected if the gift is from the emperor himself as a manifestation of the imperial grace. Therefore, when expressing gratitude for receiving a “foreign” object from the emperor, the gift’s foreignness becomes entangled with the articulation of imperial aura, and the courtier has to devise an appropriate way to both account for its “alien” and “royal” attributes.

The thank-you note below was written by Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), the Crown Prince of the Liang. He received a gift—a kind of edible vegetable from the kingdom of Tuyuhun—

⁶³ See Xiaofei Tian, “Material and Symbolic Economies: Letters and Gifts in Early Medieval China,” in Antje Richter ed., *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, p. 171.

from the Liang ruler, also his father, and thus wrote a thank-you note for reciprocation. It is unfortunate that due to the encyclopedic sources, most of the extant thank-you notes appear to be an excerpt, and Xiao Tong's piece has only a few lines left. However, despite its fragmentariness, one can still detect the strategy of incorporating foreignness into the known cultural knowledge and meanwhile confirming imperial authority.

Thank-you Note on Receiving Vegetables from Tuyuhun

There is no turbulence in the ocean, and it [i.e., the gift] arrives through nine-fold translations. On the plain of the Zhou, the land is fertile and bountiful,⁶⁴ and it is well supplied with food of all kinds of tastes. [As for this vegetable from Tuyuhun,] the chives of the sage Yao cannot be a pair,⁶⁵ and the sedge favored by King of the Zhou cannot compete.⁶⁶

謝敕河南菜啟

海水無波，來因九譯。周原澤洽，味備百羞。堯韭未儔，姬歎非喻。⁶⁷

Similar to the “dancing horse”— a foreign object and an omen announcing the dynastic glory, the gift here also acquires a two-fold nature during the process of exchange. On the one hand, it is an unfamiliar edible vegetable from a foreign kingdom; on the other, it is also a royal gift conferred by the emperor. To explain something foreign, Xiao Tong has to “translate” (yi 譯) this strange vegetable through analogies that make it comprehensible to his audience. Therefore, he uses the allusions to herbs favored by ancient sages Yao and King Wen of the Zhou for a

⁶⁴ This evokes one poem titled “Spreading” 緜 in the *Classic of Poetry*: “The plain of Zhou was very fertile, / Its celery and sowthistle sweet as rice-cakes.” 周原膴膴，堇荼如飴。 *Maoshi zhushu*, 16.547. The translation is by Arthur Waley. See *The Book of Songs*, p. 232.

⁶⁵ *Yao jiu* (chives of the sage Yao) refers to *changpu* 菖蒲, a kind of edible vegetable. Even though it is unknown how this herb is connected to Yao, later literati gave an explanation: “As for a sage whose accomplishment has saved the world, it is none other than Yao. With heaven moved, it casts down essence to the courtyard and it becomes chives. Covered by shades, it is moved and becomes sedge. That is why we call *changpu* today” 聖人之功濟天下者，堯也，天心降精于庭為韭，感百陰為菖蒲，為今菖蒲是也。

⁶⁶ This refers to King Wen of the Zhou and his love for sedge sauce. “King Wen of the Zhou loved sedge sauce. When Confucius learned about it, he tried. He ate it with his brow frowned. Only after three years could he get used to it” 文王嗜昌蒲菹，孔子聞而服之，縮頰而食之，三年然後勝之。 *Lü shi chunqiu*, 14.816.

⁶⁷ *Quan Liang wen*, 19.3061-1.

comparison, and these two references also befit the status of the intended reader, namely, the emperor himself. Xiao Tong drives home the eulogistic message by implying that the Liang dynasty, in resemblance to the ancient Zhou dynasty, is now experiencing peaceful rule, and the gift from the emperor is superior to those in the antiquity.

What appears interesting, however, is that, according to the author, the plain of the Zhou, the Central Plain, has already been comprehensively supplied (*bei* 備) with all kinds of herbs, and that this vegetable from Tuyuhun, the kingdom to the southwest of the Liang dynasty, arrives after layers of translation and at once eclipses all of those indigenously growing on the China plain. Nevertheless, this claim of superiority of a foreign taste does not sound problematic, since the gift-giving process implies the emperor's ownership. By enacting his ownership and transferring it to the Crown Prince, it shows the emperor's ability to dispose, distribute, and control this foreign object. The vegetable also offers evidence of the expanded reach of the dynasty to more distant domains: after all, both the sage-king Yao and King Wen of the Zhou, those ancient sages, did not have the chance to taste this delicious vegetable because of the limited influence of their states.

While the vegetable from Tuyuhun can be regarded as a foreign gift, courtiers also wrote on familiar food yet from the peripheral regions of the dynasty. The courtier Zhou Hongzheng once received salted purple fishes as a gift, not at all a rare object.⁶⁸ It is a seafood delicacy from the south; but based on the thank-you note below, these preserved fishes that Zhou Hongzheng received should be the "tribute" from the states to the south of the dynasty.

Thank-you Note on Receiving Purple Salted Fishes

The treasure is hidden in the river and isle, and its taste tops the delicacies from famous rivers. I heard in the past the king harvested the grain near the black water after eight

⁶⁸ See category on "jellyfish" in *Yiwen leiju*. *Yiwen leiju*, 72.1243-1244.

steeds had come to the east for a campaign;⁶⁹ and only after seven horses had galloped to the west, he then acquired the vegetable from the Bitter Mountain.⁷⁰ How can it be compared to the situation in which on both western and eastern sides of the stairs, military dance is performed⁷¹ and states from the four directions arrive for a visit? Facing his court, His Majesty puts hands together and remains silent, letting those states vie to present their tribute.

謝敕賚紫鮮啟

珍韜江浦，味越名川。昔聞八駿東征，上收黑水之麥。七華西討，才獲苦山之菜。豈如兩階干舞，四方來格。臨朝拱默，任土爭貢。⁷²

Unlike Xiao Tong who makes the analogy between the Tuyuhun vegetable and sages' favorite herbs, Zhou Hongzheng focuses on the manners through which the tribute comes to the central court. In the past, King Mu of Zhou had to "attack" and "invade" certain areas so that local food, with its best hidden in the river, could be obtained. In contrast, at the present moment, the court abandoned military enterprise and enacted non-action in imperial rule. Military expeditions are changed to the performance of a ritual simulating the violent venture. Those who fiercely vie (*zheng* 爭) with one another are subordinate states from the four directions to present their tribute, with this salted fishes being one of them.

At the end of the section, we will look at another thank-you letter in which a small thing is deemed to signify something grander:

⁶⁹ This refers to the Son of Heaven, King Mu of Zhou, who once rode his famous horses and led an eastward military campaign. Certain Chongyong 重鬻 tribe dwelled at the black water, and they harvested and protected local products and mountains. Having defeated them, the Son of Heaven marked the territory as his. He acquired local products and asked Chongyong people to use the stones from the local mountains to forge a vessel. See *The Biography of Son of Heaven Mu* 穆天子傳, in *Han Wei liuchao biji xiaoshuo daguan*, p. 16.

⁷⁰ This may also allude to King Mu of Zhou. In the *Mu tianzi zhuan*, there is an account: "He [i.e., the Son of Heaven] arrived at the Bitter Mountain, which people from the west desert call the 'Garden of Flourish.' The Son of Heaven therefore ceased hunting and ate bitter vegetables" 至於苦山，西膜之所謂茂苑。天子於是休獵，於是食苦。 The allusion to *qihua* 七華 is unclear. I surmise it is also a reference to horses.

⁷¹ "Two stairs" are the pathway in front of the palace leading to the imperial throne. It is divided by the "east stairs," on which the hosts walk, and the "west stairs" reserved for the guests.

⁷² *Quan Chen wen*, 5.3427-1.

Thank-you Note on Receiving Walnuts from Leyou Park, Written on Behalf of Liu Shilong

It grows straight up in the forbidden garden; its favor surpasses those produced in Jingluo. Things are moved and earth god lingers, and surely a response can be seen on small things. This is truly the omen foreboding the flight of *jie* barbarians.

為柳世隆謝賜樂遊胡桃啟

挺自禁園，味逾井絡。動物迴祇，在微必應。此乃胡羯奔逃，吉之先見者也。⁷³

The author of this piece is Shen Yue who composed the thank-you note on behalf of Liu Shilong 柳世隆 (442–491), a general who served the Song and then Southern Qi dynasties. The aim of the letter was to thank the emperor for giving Liu the gift “walnut,” literally, “barbarian peach.” As shown by the title, the gift here is not technically a “foreign” object, since the “walnuts” under discussion are the product of the imperial garden in the capital of Jiankang. But historical record tells us that the species originated from the Western Region (*xiyu* 西域) and was brought to the Han dynasty by Zhang Qian 張騫 (164–114 BCE). This writing thus, first of all, shows the “domestication” of a foreign object in an agricultural sense, that is, a “barbarian” product now grows on the Chinese soil.

The association between walnut and Jingluo, a place customarily referring to Mountain Min in Shu, is unclear.⁷⁴ It is possible that Jingluo is the place that yields tasty walnuts, but now, according to the author, the forbidden garden (*jinyuan* 禁園) grows better ones. Because of their immersion in the royal aura, objects respond to numinous and mysterious forces, which manifests as an omen through insignificant things (*wei* 微), such as a walnut. By interpreting the name of the walnut as “barbarian fleeing,” with *tao* 桃 (“peach”) punning on *tao* 逃 (“flee”),

⁷³ *Quan Liang wen*, 28.3114-2.

⁷⁴ There is no association between walnut and Jingluo recorded in later encyclopedias, such as *Yiwen leiju*, *Chuxue ji*, and *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽.

Shen Yue deliberately distorts the meaning of the gift and its significance. While pun and wordplay are characteristic of Southern Dynasties lyrics such as the so-called “Songs of Wu” (*wuge* 吳歌) and “Western Tunes” (*xiqu* 西曲), here we see the conscious employment of puns for an ideological goal. The author connects the gift to imperial power and makes an originally “barbarian” object into an omen of “barbarian’s” own defeat.

Problematic Reciprocity: Yu Xin’s Responses to Royal Gifts

The public bestowal of royal gift was one of the most common forms of reward in court society. As a token of approval and commendation, a gift from the superior signals the acknowledgment of the recipient’s merits, virtues, or accomplishments. In cases where the ruling family members, especially the emperor himself, acted as donors, a gift acquires royal aura and thus forces upon the recipient great pressure to contemplate his or her worthiness in receiving this gift and give appropriate reciprocation. We mentioned earlier that the courtier’s composition of a “thank-you note” demonstrates complex dynamics of reciprocity and negotiation of values. To properly compose a thank-you note and gratify the intended reader, the courtier has to carefully contemplate his deservedness in regard to the bestowed gift, verbally represent the gift in superlative terms to pay homage to the imperial authority, and also strike a subtle balance between displaying his modesty and affirming worthiness.

The intertwinement between literary talent, gift, and the articulation of gratitude can be most excellently seen in Xu Ling’s “Thank-you Note for Receiving the Gift of a Candle Holder, Rewarded for Composing a Verbal Reply to the Military Proclamation of the Qi State” (“Xie chi lai zhupan shang da Qiguo yiwen qi” 謝勅賚燭盤賞答齊國移文啟). It is clear from the title that a gift—a candle holder—was bestowed to reward Xu Ling for writing a “response” to Northern

Qi's military proclamation. In return, Xu reciprocated the gift with a thank-you letter expressing his gratitude for the imperial recognition meanwhile further showcasing his literary talent. The text reads:

In the past, Ban Biao drafted declamations,⁷⁵ and Ruan Yu produced polished letters.⁷⁶ The reputation of both galloped in their own times, and yet there was no particular reward conferred to them. As for the extraordinary bestowal, it only started with the imperial grace today! In comparison to those cases about Jia Kui eulogizing on the numinous sparrow,⁷⁷ Dou You responding [to the emperor's question] with the answer of "leopard squirrel,"⁷⁸ an Han official [i.e., Dongfang Shuo] articulating the words of speculation during the *shetu* games,⁷⁹ or a Wei elite member [i.e., Handan Chun] composing the "Poetic Exposition on Pitch-Pot Game,"⁸⁰ in terms of the favor and grace, the current brightness alone outshines all the previous antecedents. The state-supplied candles are burning, which even more incurs the shame of a good governor. While I can still read

⁷⁵ During the chaotic years at the end of the Western Han, Ban Biao 班彪 (3–54) served as a literary staff for the general Dou Rong 竇融 (16 BCE–62 CE) to support the Han cause and fight against the local rebel Wei Xiao. After the Eastern Han dynasty was founded, Emperor Guangwu enquired Dou Rong the writer who composed those memorials and proclamations on his behalf. Dou Rong recommended Ban Biao to the emperor. *Hou Han shu*, 40.1324.

⁷⁶ Ruan Yu 阮瑀 (d. 212), one of the so-called "Seven Masters of Jian'an," was good at writing military proclamations. According to the *Sanguo zhi*, after Chen Lin 陳琳 (d. 217) and Ruan Yu joined Cao Cao's retinue, they were responsible for drafting letters and war proclamations. During the campaign against Han Sui 韓遂 (d. 215), Ruan Yu swiftly finished a proclamation on horseback. The writing was so perfect that Cao Cao could not change one word after reading it. *Sanguo zhi*, 21.600.

⁷⁷ Jia Kui 賈逵 (30–101) was a knowledgeable official in the Eastern Han dynasty. Once a peculiar sparrow arrived in the palace courtyard. Not knowing what it was, the emperor asked his subjects about this creature, and no one could come up with an answer. Jia Kui, because of his encyclopedic knowledge, was recommended to the emperor. By citing precedents, Jia Kui interpreted this bird's arrival as an omen of barbarians' surrender. Then he composed "Eulogy on Numinous Sparrow" ("Shenque song" 神雀頌). *Hou Han shu*, 36.1235.

⁷⁸ Dou You 竇攸 (fl. the first century) was, too, an official in the Eastern Han, also an expert on *Erya*, a lexicographical work later canonized as one of the Confucian classics. The emperor once held a banquet with his subjects and displayed a squirrel with fur patterns like those on leopard. The ruler asked what this was. Only Dou You could provide an answer and informed the emperor that it was called "Leopard squirrel" (*tingshu* 鼯鼠), because the creature was recorded in *Erya*.

⁷⁹ This refers to Emperor Wu of the Western Han and his favorite courtier Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (154–93 BCE). *Shetu* was a game where an object was hidden under a bowl and participants, not knowing what the object was, ventured a guess. Dongfang Shuo, an expert on the *Book of Change*, could often guess correctly from divination through hexagrams.

⁸⁰ Handan Chun 邯鄲淳 (ca.132–221), one of the courtiers in Cao Cao's court, composed "Poetic Exposition on Pitch-Pot Game" ("Touhu fu" 投壺賦). "Pitch-Pot Game" was a popular court activity, during which court members tried to throw arrows from distance into a pot.

under the moonlight,⁸¹ I have already arrived at an old age. Your subject has assumed a position at the History Bureau, and he in person has taken charge of the imperial library. I humbly describe my personal honor (*sirong*) here and hope to transmit it to posterity through writings.

昔班彪草移, 阮瑀裁書, 馳譽當年, 遂無加賞. 非常大賚, 始自今恩. 雖賈逵之頌神雀, 竇攸之對鰥鼠, 漢臣射覆之言, 魏士投壺之賦, 方其寵錫, 獨有光前. 官燭斯然, 更慙良吏, 霄光可學, 乃會耆年. 臣職居南史, 身典東觀. 謹述私榮, 傳之方策.⁸²

Following generic conventions, Xu Ling adds himself in the litany of famous proclamation writers in history such as Ban Biao and Ruan Yu and authors who gave public verbal articulations with the imperial presence, such as Jia Kui, Dou You, Dongfang Shuo, and Handan Chun. The royal grace, manifested through this “extraordinary bestowal” (*dalai* 大賚) to Xu Ling, is then emphasized with the previous authors posed as a negative contrast whose writings, though brilliant, were never aptly rewarded. The brightness (*guang* 光) that Xu Ling faces refers to both the candle and the royal aura that bathes the courtier. The gift from the emperor also causes disquiet to the recipient: as we can see, Xu Ling, claiming himself a senior official, feels “ashamed” in front of the state-supplied candle and its holder. However, the author’s identification as an “imperial librarian” and “court official” also to some extent mitigates this feeling of “inferiority” and implies his deservedness. Xu Ling is, after all, an honorable official in the bureaucratic system of the dynasty, and the gift, based on sound royal judgment, is granted according to a proper gauge of his talent and worth. There is an interesting dynamic between

⁸¹ The modern commentator Xu Yimin 許逸民 cites the story about Duke Ping of Jin 晉平公 (d. 532 BCE) and his official Shi Kuang 師曠. The duke once asked Shi Kuang, “I am already seventy years old. I do want to pursue learning, but I am also afraid of my old age [preventing me from doing it].” Shi Kuang answered, “I heard that those who keep pursuing learning at an old age are like holding a bright candle. If one holds up a bright candle, how can he ever descend into darkness?” The Duke responded, “Indeed!” See Xu Yimin annot. *Xu Ling ji jiaojian* 徐陵集校箋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), p. 1035. Here Xu Ling seems to express his appreciation of the gift: even though it is still possible for him to read under the moonlight, his old age, accompanied by poor eye-sight, makes him really in need of, thus appreciate, the candles.

⁸² *Quan Chen wen*, 7.3438-1.

“public” and “personal” in this short piece of writings. Both the state-supplied candle (*guanzhu* 官燭) and the candle holder as a royal gift demonstrate the public acknowledgment of the courtier’s worth; this brings to Xu Ling personal pride (*sirong* 私榮) that he hopes to transmit to posterity. This dynamic plays out through a balanced reciprocation. Xu’s individual talent and service helped promote the authority of the state to which he pledged allegiance, and the state’s appreciation of his talent, in the form of gift-giving, is requited with a further verbal demonstration of Xu Ling’s literary competence.

In many ways, Xu Ling and his letter serve as a perfect contrast to Yu Xin, once a colleague of Xu Ling, also a famous courtier of the time. While Xu Ling continued to serve the Chen dynasty in the south after the mid-century chaos, Yu Xin embarked on an entirely different life trajectory. After Xiao Yi claimed as the Liang emperor at Jiangling, Yu Xin was dispatched to the Western Wei capital Chang’an as an envoy in 554. He was later detained in the northern land. Soon, the Jiangling regime fell. Yu Xin was appointed as an official serving in the northern state. Even though the northern rulers later permitted some southern courtiers to return, Yu Xin, a widely acclaimed writer, was never allowed back to the south. He stayed in the foreign land until his death in 581. The poet assumed several posts during the last thirty years of his life, including serving as the tutor of two Northern Zhou princes. Yuwen You 宇文逌 (556–581), one of the princes under Yu’s tutelage, compiled a literary collection of Yu Xin and penned a preface to it.

As was pointed out in the introduction, there were indeed cultural differences between the north and south during this time, which were even deliberately appropriated by northern and southern states for identity-fashioning. While Yu Xin enjoyed prestige and veneration in the northern court, one can imagine that a sense of alienation from the surrounding environment

would certainly be part of Yu Xin's existential struggle. Many aspects of everyday life, including dressing style, language, dialects, dietary habit, among many others, would constantly remind him of his southern, Han Chinese identity. His home-longing and nostalgia for the fallen Liang dynasty are the subjects of his poetry and poetic expositions in the north, which have been the focus of substantial heavy scholarly inquiry. In addition to this estrangement and yearning for home, what also appears prominent in Yu Xin's writings, especially in his thank-you letters, is the acute awareness of his indebtedness to the "royal grace" of northern rulers for his life and the very survival of his family. After all, prior to his appointment in the north, he was first an envoy from the southern state and then a captive who lost his country. With all of these considered, there was a strong tension between Yu Xin as a displaced southerner and the ubiquitous royal power of the northern state.

This cultural identification and his changed *modus vivendi* give intriguing twists to Yu Xin's thank-you letters and poems responding to the imperial gift given by the northern royal princes or emperor. While Yu Xin still followed the basic generic requirements, such as analogy, dense allusion, the discourse of humbleness, and the rhetoric of the superiority of the current occasion in comparison to the past, his thank-you letters are drastically different from those from the same period by authors who did not go through this displacement. As we will see, Yu Xin's frequent self-identification as a "recluse" (*yinshi* 隱士), "southern prisoner" (*nanguan* 南冠), "a native of Wu" (*wuren* 吳人), "the one from a former dynasty" and "decrepit old man" ends up emphasizing his unworthiness of receiving the gift and unexpectedly subverting the purpose of the genre to the extent that the author even claims his rejection of those gifts. In his thank-you notes, the burden of royal grace and his self-perceived unworthiness problematize the

implication of gift-giving and intriguingly foregrounds the image of an outsider in a painful negotiation with the imperial power.

Moreover, as is often the case with Yu Xin, his use of a variety of literary allusions with complicated textual background poses interpretive difficulty. One may still remember the northern ruler Yuwen Tai once gave a remark to a detained southerner Yu Jicai that the gifts that the state lavishly offered were to cut off his longing for the south and secure his loyalty. If this kind of gift politics was explicitly acknowledged in the northern court circle, then every time southerners received royal gifts and were obligated to write a note of appreciation, they had to come to terms with the gift's "assimilation" function intended by the northern benefactors and their identity as displaced sojourners serving a new dynasty. Indeed, after investigating thoroughly those allusions and their usage, one cannot help but wonder whether there are almost undetectable ironic remarks toward the northern sovereignty lurking behind Yu Xin "unreserved" praise of the royal grace.

The first thank-you note that we analyze was written by Yu Xin to convey his gratitude to the Prince of Zhao 趙王, Yuwen Zhao 宇文招 (d. 580), who bestowed gifts, specifically, an ornately decorated belt and coins, to our poet. There are familiar rhetorical strategies here that can be easily detected as part of the generic conventions. Yet one can also notice that the appreciation of the gifts is interestingly turned into a kind of anxiety.

Your subject informs: upon the order from the royal prince, a belt decorated with rhinoceros' horn and ten strings of coins are bestowed upon me. [In the past,] the precious belt of the Wei lord was particularly conferred to Liu Zhen;⁸³ the revenue of the

⁸³ It is recorded that Cao Pi once bestowed a precious belt to his literary attendant Liu Zhen. Later, Cao Pi wanted to borrow the belt from Liu Zhen to paint a portrait for his teacher. Therefore, he wrote a note slightly mocking Liu Zhen, an official in an inferior position, in possession of a treasure. Liu Zhen wrote a witty reply. *Quan Sanguo wen*, 7.1089; 65.829.

kingdom of Zhao was solely used to provide for Pei Kai.⁸⁴ The coins contain the image of horses, and their brightness resembles the burnished silver of Anxi;⁸⁵ there is a hollow rhinoceros horn inserted on the belt, as if the beasts from Yunnan have been hunted down. The man from the city's northern suburb endures long years of poverty, but this is what he feels at ease with;⁸⁶ as for Nangong Jingshu who carried the treasures to the court, indeed it is not my intention.⁸⁷ Flowers blossom, and their brightness shines forth everywhere—I can see their prosperity. The turtle carries on its back three [immortal] mountains, and indeed it knows the gravity. In the past, when Shen Xi was about to die, he came back to life when encountering the god in charge of the fate;⁸⁸ when Shi Xie was soon to be buried, he lived again after coming across the immortals.⁸⁹ Your Highness' kindness and favor are truly like this! The horse proceeds forward and guides the way, as if it knows the one who bestows favor; a rooster crows to make the Pass gate open before dawn—one can only repay the lord in this way.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Pei Kai 裴愷 (237–291) was a Western Jin official. According to *Shishuo xinyu*, each year he would request financial assistance from the Prince of Zhao and Prince of Liang and use it to help his poor relatives. When being asked the reason, he answered that it is the way of heaven to diminish those with surplus and supplement those in shortage. Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫 annot., *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 1.21.

⁸⁵ The coins from Anxi, a kingdom in Central Asia, were known to have images on them. *Shiji* records that the portrait of the king, sometimes even the queen, can be found on their coins.

⁸⁶ This refers to a story in the Warring States period. An “old man from the city's northern suburb” (*beiguo sao* 北郭騷) lived in extreme poverty. Even though he worked hard, what he earned was not sufficient to support his family, especially his aging mother. Then he came to Yanzi 晏子, the wise minister of the kingdom of Qi, to ask for help. Yanzi asked his servants to offer him grain and money. The old man refused money and only took the grain. Later, when Yanzi was forced to flee the state because of the ruler's suspicion, the old man chose to die to remonstrate with the ruler and pointed out the mistake of sending away Yanzi. See Wu Zeyu 吳則虞 ed., *Yanzi chunqiu jishi* 晏子春秋集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 5.361–362.

⁸⁷ Nangong Jingshu 南宮敬叔 was a disciple of Confucius. He lost his appointment in the kingdom of Lu and left the state. Later, he carried treasures back to the Lu court, hoping to regain his position. Confucius commented that: “If he wanted to trade like this, then losing the post is no better than a quick fall to poverty” 若是其貨也喪不如速貧之愈也. See *Liji zhushu*, 8.145.

⁸⁸ Shen Xi 沈羲 from the Wu area was a Daoist adept in early medieval period. He learned Daoist doctrines and practices in Shu and devoted his life to helping common people. His kind behaviors touched goddesses. Goddesses descended from Heaven to meet with Shen Xi on the road. They prolonged the life span of Shen Xi and also made him an immortal. See Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343) comp., *Shenxian zhuan* 神仙傳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), pp. 69–70.

⁸⁹ Shi Xie 士燮 was a governor of Jiaozhi at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty, and his family was the local magnate. It was recorded in Ge Hong's *Shenxian zhuan* that after Shi Xie died, the immortal Dong Feng 董奉 presented him with a pill. After taking it, Shi Xie was resuscitated. *Ibid.*, pp. 333–334.

⁹⁰ This refers to the Lord Mengchang 孟嘗君 in the Warring States period and his guests known for different talents. When the lord tried to flee from the kingdom of Qin and back to Qi at night, the gate of the Pass was closed. One of his guests imitated the crowing of rooster, and the general of the Pass, thinking it might be dawn soon, opened the gate. The team thus successfully escaped the control of Qin.

某啟：奉教垂賚犀裝帶，錢十貫。魏君寶帶，特賜劉楨。趙王國租，偏資裴楷。貫藏文馬，如燒安息之銀。帶插通犀，似獵雲南之獸。北郭騷之長貧，是所甘愜。南宮敬之載寶，殊非念望。花開四照，唯見其榮。鼈戴三山，深知其重。昔沈羲將盡，逢司命而還生。士燮行埋，值仙人而更活。今日慈矜，斯之謂矣。馬前驅而導路，或似識恩。雞未曉而開關，容能報主。⁹¹

Similar to Xu Ling's piece, the thank-you letter here starts in a conventional way:

drawing analogies between the author and previous historical figures. Both belt and coins find their predecessors in the case of Liu Zhen and Pei Kai, and the benefactors in the references, Cao Pi and the Prince of Zhao, befit the status of the gift donor in the present case—a royal member. Then, Yu Xin notices the foreign elements in the gifts. The image of horses appears on the coins, which implies the value attached to the nomadic lifestyle on horseback and even military ventures. Yu Xin brings up Anxi for a comparison, a kingdom in Central Asia recorded in previous historical accounts. In the eyes of a Han Chinese, there is a curious affinity between the Northern Zhou dynasty and the foreign kingdoms in the West Region. Meanwhile, the exotic belt with rhinoceros' horn as decoration also impresses Yu Xin, and the author imagines that the treasure is acquired after the royal team hunted and slaughtered wild beasts in the far south. The gifts from Anxi in the west and Yunnan 雲南, literally, “the south of clouds,” celebrate the empire's expanded territorial occupation; but these allusions to “foreign culture” also demonstrates Yu Xin's sense of alienation from the northern state.

In the next lines, this feeling of wonder, appreciation, or maybe alienation is changed into a gesture of denial of the gifts. The “old man from the city's northern suburb” once lived in destitution. Even so, he refused the coins and only received grain to take care of his mother and raise the family. In the other reference, Nangong Jingshu carried treasures to the court of Lu in

⁹¹ *Quan Hou Zhou wen*, 10.3932.

an attempt to regain official post. Yu Xin states that this is truly not his (Yu Xin's) intention. The two stories again elaborate on the two gifts: coins and belt (one kind of treasure), but Yu Xin's self-representation through these two historical figures is noteworthy. Interestingly, the "old man" *refused* the coins, and the exiled official carried treasure to curry favor, which Yu Xin claimed not to be his aim. The appreciation of the gifts thus becomes a kind of rejection. If Xu Ling's official post can affirm his worthiness in spite of the discourse of modesty, then Yu Xin, an "impoverished" man outside the political structure, is in no position to deserve the gifts in the first place and, as a result, he acutely suffers from the burden of the royal gifts.

Further on, we see one of the frequently adopted rhetorical moves in Yu Xin's thank-you notes, namely, describing the miraculous effect of the gift as bringing back to life the dead or the dying ones. Immortals or immortal realm were often references to the imperial household and central court. Here, Yu Xin emphasizes the marvelous consequence of the royal gifts as being able to restore or prolong the life of an ordinary man. However, the gift's gravity and his indebtedness generate ambivalent attitude towards royal grace. The turtle, just like Yu Xin, carries the three immortal mountains in the eastern ocean, and only it itself (like the one who receives gifts) can know the heaviness that weighs it down. Meanwhile, immortals also seem not so benign, as they continuously extend the life of ordinary human beings, in this case, the gift recipients, so that the latter can keep on bearing the burden of the gift. Hence, what we see here is not the discourse of modesty combined with self-congratulatory remarks as in Xu Ling's thank-you letter. Rather, the indebtedness of Yu Xin, an outsider, a foreigner, a person with no "worthiness" to receive any reward, creates great anxiety for him when being showered with the royal magnanimity. In the end, Yu Xin can do nothing but be "resurrected" again and again, and always be ready to pay gratitude for the mountain-like "burden."

The “undeservedness” and royal members’ imposition of grace give tremendous pressure to the gift recipient. It becomes even more prominent in the next thank-you letter, which was written by Yu Xin to reciprocate gifts from Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou dynasty. If one’s being alive was already a “gift,” so to speak, from the rulers (especially for people like Yu Xin, a holdover of a fallen dynasty), then how does he respond to their material gifts, more grace bestowed? Also, if the emperor can bestow gifts at will, does it not mean that he can also withdraw favor unexpectedly? In the latter case, how can an individual reckon with the “arbitrary” display of imperial power and a sense of uncertainty, even danger, that results from it? The thank-you letter reads:

Your subject informs: upon the imperial order, thirty sections of multi-colored silk, hemp cloth, cotton and brocade, and two hundred pieces of silver coin were bestowed upon me. In recent years, I have particularly suffered from destitution. Within the Baishe, I was able to see only ice after brushing away weeds;⁹² at the Numinous Terrace, I looked at an empty jar after breathing away dust.⁹³ Resentful wife and bitter concubine sighed and hated me; my children are frail, and grandson-children weak: they only feigned respect but in fact harbored rancor. Suddenly the king’s envoy descended, and great rewards preceded him. Even when the Heavenly God allotted more years to live, the happiness derived from it [i.e., life-prolonging] cannot be more than that from this moment [of receiving the gift]. Even if the immortal lads gave pills of longevity, the delight could not be equal to [what I experience] now. When I dance with my sleeves stretched, the dark cranes are about to arrive; I sing following the beat, which can make the moving clouds almost stop and break off.⁹⁴ It is as if: a vessel sees no sight of shore, but then the Sea

⁹² This alludes to a Western Jin recluse Dong Wei 董威. He was an eccentric, often roaming in Luoyang with his hair loosened. Impoverished, he lived in the place called Baishe. The official Sun Chu 孫楚 (d. 293) often visited him. Once Sun Chu sent him a letter asking for his service for the government. Dong responded with a poem and disappeared afterward. *Jin shu*, 94.2427.

⁹³ This refers to the Eastern Han official Diwu Jie 第五頴. Diwu Jie lived in poverty. “He had no patron in Luoyang, nor farming land or houses in his hometown. Therefore, he stayed temporarily at the Numinous Terrace, sometimes without cooking for ten days” 洛陽無主人，鄉里無田宅。寄止靈臺中，或十日不炊。 *Hou Han shu*, 41.1402.

⁹⁴ The dark cranes are considered auspicious omen. With the topic of “song” in the second half of the sentence, the “dark crane” may evoke the story about the famous musician Shi Kuang. Legend has it that when he played zither once, there were sixteen dark cranes gathered; twice, they formed into lines; thrice, they stretched their wings and cried. The song that could stop the movement of clouds alludes to the fictional figure Qin Qing 秦青 in Daoist text *Liezi* 列子. Xue Tan 薛譚 learned the art of singing from Qin Qing. After a while, Xue considered that he mastered all the skills from his master and decided to leave. Without stopping him, Qin departed with his disciple. At this point, he “strutted the beat and sang a sad song. The sound shook the forest and its echo stopped the moving clouds”

Deity blows wind for its return; the *ji* herb and wheat are about to wither, but the mountain god brings out rain for their nourishment. They [silk] are all spun from white cocoons, and one suspects that they form a snowy slope. Grey ducks descend, as though the Silver Mountain has been moved [to me].⁹⁵ Then I know that the Daoist on grey ox can extend the life that is about to perish;⁹⁶ the True Man on white deer can bring life to bones that are rotten.⁹⁷ Even if one can uproot a mountain and cross the ocean, he cannot bear this huge favor. Even being adept at the calligraphic styles of “dropping dew” and “hanging needle,” one cannot completely articulate and describe the grace.⁹⁸ The sparrow at Penglai expresses its thankfulness with four pieces of white jade discs;⁹⁹ the snake at the Han River repays the kindness with a pearl of one *cun*.¹⁰⁰ Hence when your subject looks at these examples, how could he not feel ashamed? It is just that the living creatures receive their life from Heaven, and so they do not thank Heaven.

臣某啟：奉敕垂賜雜色絲布綿絹等三十段，銀錢二百文。某比年以來，殊有闕乏。白社之內，拂草看冰。靈臺之中，吹塵視甌。懟妻恨妾，既嗟且憎。瘠子羸孫，虛恭實怨。王人忽降，大賚先臨。天帝錫年，無踰此樂。仙童贈藥，未均斯喜。張袖而舞，玄鶴欲來。撫節

撫節悲歌，聲振林木，響遏行雲。Xue Tan apologized, and “for all his life, he dare not speak again about returning” 終身不敢言歸。 *Liezi jishi* 列子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonoghua shuju, 1979), 5.177.

⁹⁵ “Grey ducks” refer to coins from a story recorded in the anecdotal collection, *Han Wu dongming ji* 漢武洞冥記. Three grey ducks once arrived in front of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty. Then, they changed into three young children and each held five coins with the image of whale on them. They placed the coins on the desk in front of the emperor. The coins were called “Light Shadow Coin” (*qingying qian* 輕影錢). *Han Wei liuchao biji xiaoshuo da guan*, 4.136. “Silver Mountain” is recorded in *Shenyi jing* 神異經 attributed to Dongfang Shuo. According to the record, the Silver Mountain does not grow grass or trees. There is only “white gold” on it. *Yiwen leiju*, 83.1425.

⁹⁶ “Daoist on a grey ox” refers to Feng Junda 封君達 in the Western Han. He imbibed mercury for hundreds of years and maintained the appearance of his twenties. He often rode on a gray ox, thus called “Grey Ox Daoist.” Whenever he heard someone was ill, he would cure him whether he knew the patient or not.

⁹⁷ “The True Man on white deer” may refer to Wei Shuqing 衛叔卿, a legendary immortal living in the time of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty. He once rode on cloudy carriage led by white deer and came to meet with the emperor. The emperor wanted him to be his official, but Wei Shuqing left without a word. *Taiping guangji*, 4.29

⁹⁸ Cao Xi 曹喜 from the Han dynasty was famous for these two calligraphic styles. “Hanging needle” refers to the style where the vertical line of a character is as sharp as a needle. “Dropping dew” also describes the style of vertical line. But instead of being sharp, the calligrapher would return the brush when the line is about to finish and thus create a shape of dew-drop at the bottom of the line.

⁹⁹ Yang Bao 楊寶 from the Eastern Han once saw a sparrow being pecked by eagle and beset by ants after falling on the ground. Yang saved the bird and nurtured it for a hundred days. Later the bird flew away. After a while, one night, when Yang Bao was reading books, there was a young lad coming to visit him. The young man told him that he was the messenger of the Queen Mother of the West. He was sent to Penglai, an immortal isle in the ocean, but encountered predators on the way there. To thank Yang Bao for rescuing him, he gave him four pieces of jade discs as gifts.

¹⁰⁰ The Marquis of Sui once saw a snake being dried up on the road. He then helped the snake and put it back into water. Later when the Marquis returned from his journey and passed by the same place, he met a young child who proposed to give him a white pearl as gift. The child admitted that he was the snake that the Marquis formerly rescued.

而歌，行雲幾斷。所謂舟楫無岸，海若為之反風。薺麥將枯，山靈為之出雨。況復全抽素繭，雪坂疑傾。併落青鳧，銀山或動。是知青牛道士，更延將盡之命。白鹿真人，能生已枯之骨。雖復拔山超海，負德未勝。垂露懸針，書恩不盡。蓬萊謝恩之雀，白玉四環。漢水報德之蛇，明珠一寸。某之觀此，寧無愧心。直以物受其生，于天不謝。¹⁰¹

In comparison to many other thank-you letters composed in the Southern Dynasties, several aspects unique to this particular *qi* deserve pointing out. First, this quite lengthy letter features concise description the gifts themselves. Yu Xin only uses two sentences to give laudatory remarks on the silk and silver coins, and he does not cite historical precedents like in the previous thank-you letters. Second, in contrast to this stinginess on gift description, Yu Xin repeatedly announces the effect of the imperial gift on the recipient: they can rekindle the almost-extinguished life or bring back to life those who have already perished. Third, as if to emphasize the timeliness and magnificence of the gifts, Yu Xin also, rarely seen in other *qi* produced in the south, depicts his extremely “miserable” life before the arrival of the gifts. Poverty drives the family to the brink of breaking down. Not only the household lacks necessary sustenance for survival, but the family members also turn against one another. All of these seem to become resolved after the arrival of the imperial gifts which brings peace to the family.

At first sight, the encomiastic tone is unmistakable, as Yu Xin diligently praises the bestowal as an act of grace that can breathe life into a dying man. Yet again, in contrast to Xu Ling’s thank-you letter, in which the author states his worthiness by aligning himself with past precedents, Yu Xin’s self-representation as a poor recluse in dire need of material goods for survival lacks any political or cultural capital to deserve the opulent gifts and bear their symbolic meanings. This problematic reciprocation is particularly demonstrated in his usage of two examples for self-comparison, namely, the sparrow of Penglai and snake at the Han River. In the

¹⁰¹ *Quan Hou Zhou wen*, 10.3931-2.

original context, both Yang Bao and the Marquis of Sui were mortals. They accidentally saved an immortal being (in the form of animals) from harm, and later, to repay their kindness, the immortal beings bring gifts as a token of gratitude. The “four white jade discs” and “pearl of one *cun*” thus can be seen as an exchange for their rescued life. But here in Yu Xin’s case, there is no favor from the ordinary man. In his description, the indigent poet is already troubled by family issues, and their very survival is threatened by poverty. It is the immortal, or Heaven, who rescues him for no reason, and consequently, a mortal is supposed to repay the heavenly grace. The only agent here is “Heaven” or, the will of the emperor: it can choose to give or not, and when it does, its subject is obligated to reciprocate its “heavy” gifts with a thank-you note.

What makes this gift giving and reciprocating problematic is that “Heaven” can give, but it can also destroy, or, simply, be disinterested. Moreover, “Heaven” cannot be fathomed or anticipated. The narrative structure of this thank-you note betrays the fortuitousness of this imperial grace. The term “recent years” (*bi’nian* 比年), implying a duration of time, describes long-time suffering. It forms a contrast to the time marker “suddenly” (*hu* 忽) when the emperor’s envoy comes to announce the gifts. The family is subject to the unpredictability of the royal decision. This huge indebtedness and the total subjection to the choice from “Heaven” bring the text to an interesting end, where Yu Xin refuses to say “thank you”: “It is just that the living creatures receive their life from Heaven, and so they do not thank Heaven.” One can see here the disintegration of the proper transaction because of Yu Xin’s inability to reciprocate or articulate his gratitude. This negative gesture, on the one hand, shows the recipient’s humble appreciation of the royal gifts by acknowledging his failure to discursively repay them in this particular genre. On the other hand, it also creates an image of an awesome “Heaven” exerting

pressure and unpredictable burden to an anxious individual, who desperately seeks a proper reciprocation within the generic convention.

The piece above also touches on the potential incongruence between “internal” and “external.” At the beginning of the thank-you letter, Yu Xin portrays his children and grandchildren as “feigning respect, yet harboring in fact rancor” (*xugong shiyuan* 虛恭實怨), when he himself, being the “father” of the household, fails to provide sustenance for the family. Even though Yu Xin probably did not intend this, it offers the possibility of a reading that regards what appears on the surface not as a transparent reflection of what is inside. We then are tempted to ask: what might be hidden behind the eulogy of Yu Xin’s thank-you letter? Could he also “feign respect, yet harbor in fact rancor” when the emperor, the “father” of the dynastic state, fails to provide his family with enough sustenance to secure their living?

This ironic reading and the disjunction between the internal and external are further complicated by Yu Xin’s use of dense allusions, which makes the literary language even more opaque and obscure. To better illustrate the point, we will conduct a close reading of one of the most intriguing thank-you notes that Yu Xin wrote. It was delivered to the Prince of Zhao who gave several pieces of silk as gift to Yu Xin’s son.

Your subject informs: the son of your subject, Gouniang [or Xunniang], was summoned by Your Highness yesterday, and you kindly bestowed on him five sections of silk cloth.

¹⁰² The one wearing the southern cap was pardoned,¹⁰³ and he has been treated with respect and ritual propriety. The young child comes to adulthood, and he is allowed to pay respect at the court. It [i.e., the gift] is like being produced from the weaving [technique] of the Pass’s supervisor and by the one who bridges to enlightenment, in

¹⁰² According to the speculation of Ni Fan, Gouniang might be the baby name of Yu Xin’s son, Yu Li 庾立.

¹⁰³ This alludes to Zhong Yi 鐘儀, a court musician from the kingdom of Chu in the Spring and Autumn period. During the war between the Chu and Zheng, Zhong Yi was captured by the rival state and the Zheng later presented this prisoner to the kingdom of Jin. When Zhong Yi was brought to the Duke of Jin, the ruler asked, “Who was the one tied up, wearing a southern cap?” 南冠而縶者誰也. The court official answered: “It was the prisoner from the Chu whom the people of Zheng presented.” 鄭人所獻楚囚也. See *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhushu*, the ninth year of Lord Cheng, 26.448-1.

resemblance to the double-silk of the city of Ye.¹⁰⁴ [It is also like the product from] the loom from Fufeng that spins colorful silk from a single cocoon in the immortal garden.¹⁰⁵ It is right to don the blue-grey lapel, so that scholars would not cite the poem of criticizing abandoned learning;¹⁰⁶ since the spring outfit is ready, the young ones can dance at the altar at the Yi river.¹⁰⁷ Not to mention: the roosting crow with its nestlings protected under wings all know the favor of the cassia tree;¹⁰⁸ the swamp pheasant is leading its fledglings, and they all delight in the spring season.¹⁰⁹ Once root and stalk are moistened, branches and leaves can flourish.

某啟: 某息苟娘昨蒙恩引, 曲賜絲布等五段。南冠獲宥, 既預禮延。稚子勝衣, 還蒙拜謁。關尹津梁之織, 鄴地雙絲。扶風彩文之機, 仙園獨繭。青衿宜襲, 書生無廢學之詩。春服既成, 童子得雩沂之舞。況復栖鳥挾子, 同知桂樹之恩。澤雉將雛, 共喜行春之令。根株一潤, 枝葉俱榮。¹¹⁰

Outward appearance, specifically, clothes, marks one's identity and status. The "southern cap" unequivocally reveals Yu Xin's self-image as both a "southerner" and "captive," even though the

¹⁰⁴ The city of Ye was famous for its double silk. I have yet to find the exact association between "fabric" and *guanyin* and *jinliang*. "Governor of the Pass" evokes Yin Xi whom Laozi allegedly met when the latter decided to go beyond the Pass to the west. As a character, Yin Xi appears in both *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*. *Jinliang* simply means bridge. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties, it was also used to describe Buddha's enlightenment. Yu Liang 庾亮 (289–340), the fourth century statesman, once saw a reclining Buddha statue in a monastery and he commented: "This one is getting tired because he is busying bridging people to enlightenment" 此子疲於津梁. It became a famous dictum of the time. See *Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, 2.102.

¹⁰⁵ This refers to very fine, thin silk spun from one large cocoon. See *Liezi jishi*, 5.172.

¹⁰⁶ This alludes to the *Shijing* poem "Lapel" ("Zi jin" 子衿). According to the "small preface," the poem was composed to criticize the abandonment of schools at the kingdom of Zheng.

¹⁰⁷ This allusion is from the *Analects*. Confucius once asked his disciples to articulate their aspirations. The master finally agreed with Zeng Xi, who gave the answer: "In the last month of spring, with the dress of the season all complete, along with five or six young men who have assumed the cap, and six or seven boys, I would wash in the Yi river, enjoy the breeze among the rain altars, and return home singing" 莫春者, 春服既成, 冠者五六人, 童子六七人, 浴乎沂, 風乎舞雩, 詠而歸. *Lunyu zhushu*, 11.100. James Legge's translation with modifications, p. 112.

¹⁰⁸ Ni Fan identifies the textual origin as a Han lyric "A Crow Gives Birth to Eight or Nine Fledglings" ("Wu sheng ba jiu zi" 烏生八九子). Its first line reads, "A crow gives birth to eight or nine nestlings, and they sit straight on the cassia tree branch of the Qin household" 烏生八九子, 端坐秦氏桂樹間. *Han shi* 漢詩, 9.258.

¹⁰⁹ Lu Gong 魯恭, an Eastern Han official, was the governor of Zhongmou 中牟. When his superior found that locusts never entered his county, they sent an envoy, Fei Qin 肥親, to investigate. When Fei arrived at the county, Lu accompanied him for an inspection. They sat under a mulberry tree to rest, when suddenly they saw a pheasant lingering about with its younglings. There was also a lad walking around. Fei Qin asked the lad why he did not try to capture the pheasants. The lad answered, "It is a pheasant followed by its younglings." Fei Qin then became admiring of the custom of the county under the rule of Lu Gong. See *Hou Han shu*, 25.874.

¹¹⁰ *Quan Hou Zhou wen*, 3931-2 – 3932-1.

poet is now permitted to serve as a “pardoned prisoner” thanks to the rulers’ clemency.

Meanwhile, the royal grace extends to his descendants. Just as the father obtains amnesty, the son is granted with five sections of silk cloth when he comes to the age of adulthood, which is described in the thank-you note as “donning clothes” (*shengyi* 勝衣). The silks are to make a new outfit for the promising young man. Interestingly, in Yu Xin’s elaboration on the gift, we see a prominent contrast between his old, stigmatic “southern” (*nan* 南) cap and new materials originated from the northern domains such as the Pass (through a reference to Yi Yin), the city of Ye, and Fufeng. There is also an emphasis on the royal household as the gift donor when Yu Xin refers to the silk as the product from the cocoon in the “immortal garden.” It is clear that Yu Xin’s son belongs to the second generation of the immigrant family. While his father still retains the blemish as a “southern prisoner,” the son will, much indebted to the court, wear clothes made from the weaving technique, decorated loom, and delicate silk of the northern state.

In the next two sentences, Yu Xin turns the silk into the garment befitting a scholar (*shusheng* 書生) who learns classical poetry and ancient sages’ wisdom. The allusion to the *Analects* and Zeng Xi seems to advocate a detached lifestyle for his son, a life away from the perilous political center. Indeed, toward the end of the thank-you letter, an uneasy sense of danger looms over, especially implied through the intricate use of textual allusions and their meanings.

There is no mistake that Yu Xin tries to convey his appreciation by depicting his family as crows and pheasants that survive because of resting branch and benign governance. However, when one looks closely at the alluded texts and their contexts, ambiguity emerges. “Roosting crows” evokes the ancient lyric “A Crow Gives Birth to Eight or Nine Fledglings” which Ni Fan has already identified. The lyric was recorded in the *Song shu*, and when we read it in its

entirety, the poem hardly describes a peaceful rest.¹¹¹ A lad from the Qin household in fact lingers underneath the cassia tree and uses pellets to shoot those crows: “One pellet is shot and hits the body of the crow, / the crow dies, and its spirits fly up into the Heaven” 一丸即發中鳥身, 鳥死魂魄飛揚上天. In the end, the poem expresses a rather pessimistic view of life and destiny that brings into conflict individual freedom and state’s control: “Alas! The yellow goose can fly high close to the sky, / but the inner palace can still acquire it and cook it for food. / The carp can swim in the abyss of the Luo River, / but the fish-hook will still impale the fish’s mouth. / Alas! Each’s life has its own time and span, / as for life and death, why bothers to argue who dies first or later” 嗟我黃鵠摩天極高飛, 後宮尚復得烹煮之. 鯉魚乃在洛水深淵中, 釣鉤尚得鯉魚口. 嗟我人民生各各有壽命, 死生何須復道前後. These images of dead birds, hunting, and consumption in the alluded text seem to add an ironic light to Yu Xin’s praise of imperial favor.

The next literary reference also invites speculation. Yu Xin tells its readers that just as in the county where young lads would not hurt a pheasant followed by its younglings, his family, too, is safe because of the good government. However, in the story of Lu Gong, there is no mention of the “swamp” (*ze* 澤). Instead, what “swamp pheasant” will probably bring to the mind of a medieval reader should be the passage from *Zhuangzi*. It is in the chapter of “The Secret of Taking Care of Life” (“Yangsheng zhu” 養生主). “The swamp pheasant has to walk ten paces for one peck and a hundred paces for one drink, but it does not want to be kept in a cage. Its spirit is upbeat and thriving, and it does not know that it is a good thing.” 澤雉十步一

¹¹¹ *Song shu*, 21.607.

啄，百步一飲。不斲畜乎樊中。神雖王，不善也。¹¹² It depicts a pheasant in nature so getting used to the life of freedom that it knows not how a life should be good or bad. Connecting this story about an “unfettered” pheasant with the “southern cap” (“prisoner”) at the beginning of the thank-you note, we see the poet’s subtle negotiation with “freedom” and “restraint.” We wonder: at which level and with what kind of association did Yu Xin intend his allusions to be understood or would his contemporaries understand? It may sound far-fetched a reading to suggest that Yu Xin deliberately represents himself in the thank-you letter as a caged man released, who can no longer get used to the new life and also constantly fears the imminent danger. However, what we see here is the subtexts of those literary allusions do engender certain cacophony that undermines the main eulogistic message.

Yu Xin’s piece is to thank the prince for his gift and celebrate the coming-of-age of his son. However, the gift only reminds Yu Xin of his status as the “remaining one” from a previous dynasty and forces him to ponder the prospect of his son and his family in a new state. In this exchange, Yu Xin’s careful “manipulation” of the images of silk, clothes, and outfit ultimately ends with an ambivalent tone toward the royal gift. Can or will the change of clothes alter one’s identity? Does the silk from the north, while intensifying Yu Xin’s awareness of his southern identity, conspires with the state’s cultural assimilation? Is it possible that a “sincere” eulogy can be turned into a note of anxiety, peril, and worry in the hands of a foreigner sojourning in an alien state? Even though we may never know the intention behind the composition, Yu Xin’s claimed unworthiness, the gravity of imperial gift, and his status as a pardoned southerner indeed bring unique features into the writing of thank-you letters. Nowhere else do we see such an

¹¹² *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 126. Burton Watson’s translation with modifications, p. 52. For the second part of the sentence, I followed Guo Xiang’s commentary.

obsession with life and death in a note of gratitude that involves dying/dead man, resuscitation, and birds caged, hunted, and eaten.

This sense of anxiety and irony and even the gesture of rejection can also be found in some of Yu Xin's poems. In the poem below, Yu Xin again thanks his patron, the Prince of Zhao, for giving him ale as gift. The poet portrays himself as a recluse struck by poverty, and the recluse in the poem, however, is always exposed to the supervision of the court and its influence.

奉報趙王惠酒
梁王修竹園
冠蓋風塵喧
行人忽枉道
直進桃花源
稚子還羞出
驚妻到閉門
始聞傳上命
定是賜中樽
野鑪然樹葉

山杯捧竹根
風池還更暖
寒谷遂長暄
未知稻梁鴈

Poem Thanking Prince of Zhao's Bestowal of Ale¹¹³
In the garden of the Prince of Liang, tall bamboos grow,¹¹⁴
caps and canopies—boisterous with wind and dust.
The envoy suddenly takes a detour,
straight ahead he enters the Peach Blossom Spring.¹¹⁵
The young child, feeling shy, refuses to come out,
and the wife, startled, closes the door behind.
Then I know it is an order from the above,
it must be the bestowal of ale.
A stove in the wilderness burns up tree leaves
[to warm the ale],
and in the mountains the bamboo root forms into a cup.
A wind cave then again becomes warmer,¹¹⁶
and the chilly valley can be balmy for a long time.
I know not that when the wild goose,

¹¹³ *Bei zhou shi*, 3.2378.

¹¹⁴ Prince Xiao of Liang of the Western Han was famous for his gatherings with learned courtiers. One of his literary attendants, Mei Sheng, composed a "Poetic Exposition of Rabbit Garden of the Prince of Liang" ("Liang wang tuyuan fu" 梁王兔園賦), and the first line starts with "flourishing are those tall bamboos" 脩竹檀樂. *Yiwen leiju*, 65.1162.

¹¹⁵ "The Account of Peach Blossom Spring" is a short prose account authored by the fourth-century poet Tao Yuanming. The story tells that a fisherman, when fishing on the river, went astray and accidentally discovered a community hidden behind the mountains. The dwellers in the Peach Blossom Spring were happy, self-reliant, and warm-hearted. They told the fisherman that they had lived here for generations, and then invited him for dinner. On the next day, the fisherman was about to leave, and the dwellers of the community asked him not to tell anyone the location of the community. However, the fisherman left marks on the way back home so that he could regain the entrance to this place. But his effort failed, and the utopian realm was never found. *Quan Jin wen* 全晉文, 111.2098.

¹¹⁶ Ni Fan interprets *fengchi* as "windy well" (*fengjing* 風井). It refers to caves in the mountains whence wind is blown out.

何時報君恩 after being fed with rice and millet,¹¹⁷
can repay the kindness of the lord.

At the beginning, Yu Xin appropriately acknowledges the princely status of his intended reader by analogizing the Prince Zhao to Prince Liang in the Western Han dynasty, who allegedly had spectacular gardens built and gathered there with his courtiers for literary compositions.

“Canopies and officials hats” (*guangai* 冠蓋) and “wind and dust” (*fengchen* 風塵) customarily describe the busy capital scene, and now, the prince’s garden becomes “boisterous” (*xuan* 喧) with crowds. These all form a contrast to the poet’s dwelling and his rather “indigent” life introduced in the following couplets. As one may notice, Yu Xin portrays himself as a recluse by heavily alluding to Tao Yuanming’s “Account of Peach Blossom Spring” written in the fourth century. However, after looking closely at the verbal echoes between Yu Xin’s poem and Tao’s original text, it is not hard to detect the poet’s subtle reworking of the original text and his struggle between this recluse *persona* and his forced involvement in the polity.

A prince’s envoy suddenly comes to the poet’s home on behalf of the royal member. As we can recall in the original text of the “Peach Blossom Spring,” the fisherman was first “lost in his way” (*wang lu zhi yuanjin* 忘路之遠近), and “suddenly encountered” (*hu feng* 忽逢) a forest of peach blossoms. It then took great effort and daring for the fisherman to enter the small cave and discover another hidden world. But here in the poem, instead of a curious and bewildered fisherman, what “suddenly” (*hu* 忽) arrives is the prince’s envoy with a clear mission. Moreover, without any hindrance, he “straight ahead” enters (*zhijin* 直進) this reclusive space. The

¹¹⁷ This may allude to one Ying Yang’s 應陽 (d. 217) poem to Cao Pi that describes a suffering goose finally finding a resting place near the prince (*gongzi* 公子). *Wei shi*, 3.383.

supposedly hidden area for recluses who try to escape from political chaos now becomes exposed to outside influence and penetration.

The envoy clearly startles the speaker's family. Contrary to the hospitality of the dwellers in the "Peach Blossom Spring," the kid and wife in the poem return home, remain inside, and close the door behind. The arrival of the imperial envoy could portend either good or bad news to the family. Only after a while the poet comes to realize (*shiwēn* 始聞) that it is an "order from the above" (*shangmìng* 上命) reaching down, and along with it is the ale for him as a gift. The poet subsequently starts to warm the drink and enjoy the imperial bestowal. The contrast between the recluse's life of destitution and prince's luxuriant garden is most explicitly brought out here. While the prince can appreciate tall bamboos growing lushly in his park (*xiuzhu* 修竹), the recluse-poet uses burning leaves as a source of warmth and the root of bamboos (*zhugen* 竹根) to make a wine cup. What one does not see here is the tranquility, joy, and material surplus described in the "Peach Blossom Spring."

The next couplet shows the influence of the royal grace to this otherwise otherworldly realm. "Wind caves" (*fengchi* 風池) become warm, and it recalls the "wind and dust" (*fengchen* 風塵) in the second line describing the prince's assembly. The cold valley is too getting more and more pleasant. *Xuan* 暄, with the meaning of "warm," brings our attention to another *xuan* 喧, "boisterous," in the second line. Through these verbal echoes, the poet seems to establish a connection between the reclusive space and the kingly realm and also hint at the influence of the latter on the former. The ending couplet expresses the poet's resolution to repay the royal magnanimity by portraying himself as a wild goose kindly fed. Now, the once self-sufficient Peach Blossom Spring is changed to a place bleak and miserable, in need of royal support for its

sustenance. Meanwhile, it is always exposed to unexpected visit and can hardly maintain its reclusive nature, as royal influence will always reach here and can transform the space through the bestowal of a gift.

In conclusion, gift-giving often exerts pressure on the recipient. It initiates a dynamic process where the recipient has to decode the meaning of the gift, reflects on his or her worthiness in receiving this particular gift, and sometimes is obligated to reciprocate with another gift of equal value. It is also imperative to give proper interpretations of the gifts. Their symbolic meanings are often created and negotiated between the giver and receiver. In early medieval China, gift politics was part of the interstate competition. Gifts were not only exchanged between members within a community but also traveled beyond dynastic boundaries. They can be friendly, hostile, or puzzling—as their floating meanings are always waiting to be pinned down and publicly displayed.

In the first section, we have discussed the delicate verbal manipulations of foreign gift in different genres in medieval court societies. When being exchanged and circulated, a gift gains extra symbolic meanings, to be invested, interpreted and even challenged, especially when it moves back and forth among various political powers. In many of the cases examined here, a gift is articulated as sacred omen within the cultural lineage of auspicious objects in purpose of legitimizing the receiving state. The “foreignness,” instead of simply being rejected, is to be assimilated into the familiar cultural structure and even appropriated to claim the state’s political and cultural supremacy. This intimate relation between the foreign gift and the state’s self-image and the gift’s highly charged political connotations provide us a background against which to further examine individual’s responses to royal gifts and state power.

In the second section, we have used Yu Xin as an example to see how reciprocity went problematic when a southerner was displaced in the north with his self-identity clashing with royal grace and imperial control. In his description of the royal gift, the self-imposed unworthiness reminds Yu Xin of his status in the north as a southerner, a “prisoner” pardoned, whenever a “heavy” imperial grace arrives. The discourse of undeservedness brings ironic effect to the expression of gratitude. Moreover, the complexity of the literary allusions employed in his thank-you letters and poems are also open to interpretations. While one can see the most clearly announced panegyric message, the possible disjunction between the surface and hidden meanings and the multifacetedness of those allusions’ textual context generate ambiguity in terms of the import of his writings and the author’s ultimate intention. In all, Yu Xin’s responses to imperial gift offer an interesting case to examine an individual’s negotiation with the burdensome royal grace, and by implication, the omnipresent imperial power.

Chapter 4

The Power of “Sounds”: Polemics on Music in the Sui Dynasty

Yang Jian, also known as Emperor Wen of the Sui, founded the Sui dynasty in 581 after forcing the abdication of the last emperor of the Northern Zhou, Yuwen Chan 宇文闡 (573–581, r. 579–581). Eight years later, with the northern borders consolidated, the emperor dispatched armies of a large scale to the south against the Chen dynasty, the last of the Southern Dynasties. The Chen was established in 557 by the general Chen Baxian, and it had been enjoying some degree of prosperity, both culturally and militarily, during its thirty years of existence. As was shown in the first chapter, the Chen also engaged in successful diplomatic negotiations with the northern states. However, the prowess of the Sui troops and strategic mistakes of the Chen ruler led to a rapid breakdown of the southern defense, which resulted in the northern regime's complete conquest of the Chen within months. This event marked the Sui's unification of both the north and south after almost three hundred years of division.

The Sui thus became another empire that ruled a vast territory featuring distinct regional cultures and customs. Facing such a formidable challenge of maintaining political unity, the Sui court initiated a series of bureaucratic reforms to efficiently implement central control over remote regions and reconcile interests of different cultural groups. As previous scholarship on Sui history has saliently pointed out, many state projects, such as reorganization of central government, simplification of administrative levels, reform of elite recruitment, construction of canals that linked imperial center to dynastic peripheries, have far-reaching influence to later

dynasties and lay a foundation for centuries of peace and prosperity to come.¹ More importantly, the newly founded empire also launched various cultural projects to symbolically represent and justify its “unification” and “imperial authority.” Noteworthy ones included the building of two capitals, Daxing City and Luoyang, regularization of ritual and penal codes, reconstitution of imperial library, and systematic concocting and interpreting omens.² In so doing, the legitimacy of the unified empire was to be firmly established in both in reality and people’s mentality.

Among these crucial enterprises, the concept of, and controversy over, “music” became prominent at the end of the sixth and early seventh centuries, as it formed a discursive arena in which imperial power, regional differences, and moral judgment converged and were contested. Indeed, elites in early medieval period deeply believed in the link between musical sound and politics, and one can trace their correlation back to the authoritative “Great Preface” of the *Classic of Poetry*. It succinctly inculcates: “The tone of a well-managed age are at rest and happy; its government is balanced. The tones of an age of turmoil are bitter and full of anger; its government is perverse. The tones of a ruined state are filled with lament and brooding; its

¹ There is quite a number of works on Sui dynasty history. For a brief summary of the problems that the Sui confronted and its political achievement, see Arthur Wright’s chapter, “The Sui Dynasty,” in Denis Twitchett ed., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol.3 Sui and T’ang China, 589–906, Part I, pp. 73-115. Also see Cen Zhongmian 岑仲勉, *Sui Tang shi* 隋唐史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), pp. 1-75. Chōfū Nunome 布目潮風, *Zui Tō shi kenkyū: Tōchō Seiken no keisei* 隋唐史研究: 唐朝政權の形成 (Tōkyō: Tōyōshi kenkyūkai, 1968).

² The construction of the Sui Tang capital Chang’an is thoroughly researched by Victor Xiong. See Victor Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang’an: A Study in the Urban History of Medieval China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000). Niu Hong 牛弘 (545–610), the chief courtier of the Sui, presented a memorial in the early Sui about the importance of rebuilding the imperial library. In 583, the emperor issued an edict about a state-wide search of lost and rare books. In 585, new ritual protocols revised by Niu Hong were implemented. In 594, one courtier Wang Shao 王劼 gathered all the “auspicious omens” that supposedly augured the grandeur of the Sui into a collection and presented it to the throne. It was titled *The Account of Numinous Responses Manifesting the Royal Power of the Sui Dynasty* (*Sui huang linggan zhi* 隋皇靈感志) in 30 *juan*.

people are in difficulty” 治世之音安以樂, 其政和. 亂世之音怨以怒, 其政乖. 亡國之音哀以思其民困.³ Acoustic attributes thus can offer valid clues to political or moral conditions of a state.

For the imperial court, one area that can directly show the state’s musical achievement, thus political power, is court ritual music and lyrics composed for ritual performances. Ritual music was always one crucial part of the state ritual apparatus, and it constituted an essential form of cultural capital for a claim of imperial authority and legitimacy. Not only were lyrics purposefully produced to glorify the splendor of the ruling dynasty, the musical sounds and tunes—with concomitant discussions on pitch-standard, the making of appropriate musical instruments, and orthodox ritual paraphernalia—were intimately connected to other fields of knowledge, such as metrology, harmonics, calentrics, and astrology, thus forming a discursive space of cultural negotiation.⁴ In a study on the emerging discourse on music in ancient times, Erica Brindley shows that as correlative cosmology developed in the Warring States period, aural harmony became a means and metaphor of cosmic control, state management, imperial assimilation, and self-cultivation.⁵ This symbolic power of music continued to exert influence in the medieval era. As a result, court performance, musical tunes, and even the high and low of one sound often bore cosmological, political, cultural, and moral significance that a state strove to explain and appropriate for different ideological ends. In the Sui dynasty, with the fierce debates over what constituted “orthodox,” “foreign,” “ancient” or “decadent” music, the

³ *Maoshi zhushu*, 1.14. Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 43.

⁴ Howard Goodman gives a detailed discussion of early medieval court music and its relation to other fields of knowledge. See Howard Goodman, *Xun Xu and the Politics of Precision in Third Century AD China* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 161-214.

⁵ Erica Fox Brindley, *Music, Cosmology, and the Politics of Harmony in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), pp. 1-21.

multifaceted discourses on music became a tool of interpretation and manipulation to represent its power and legitimate unification.

The previous three chapters focus on the exchange, communication, and negotiation—whether regarding personnel, epistolary writings, or gifts—among autonomous polities, and discuss various rhetorical tactics that were used to promote state authority. This chapter, through the lens of “sound” and “music,” continues to dwell on the intricate negotiation between different regions, cultures, and traditions, albeit under a new political context: a unified empire. Before laying out the argument and organization of the chapter, a few words are in order to delineate several levels of “cacophony” of the Sui court, where serving officials were recruited to the central government from different regions with diverse cultural backgrounds.

On the level of sheer communication, different dialects and even languages spoken by southerners, north-westerners, and easterners impeded smooth comprehension. One of the most frequently cited comments on regional accents from the period is Yan Zhitui’s *Family Instruction of the Yan Clan*. Yan originally hailed from the south who later became an official in the northern states. In the chapter “Sound and Word” (“Yinci” 音辭), the author uses examples to illustrate the different attributes of northern and southern accents and concisely describes the former as “deep and thick” (*shenzhuo* 沈濁) and the latter as “clear and raised” (*qingju* 清舉).⁶ This characterization was based on, respectively, the dialect around the Luoyang area, once the capital of the Northern Wei dynasty, and that around the southern capital, Jiankang. However, using the capital region to represent and essentialize certain regional pronunciation already reveals that neither the northern nor southern dialect was homogeneous or fixated. In southern

⁶ Yan Zhitui, *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), 473.

historical accounts, one finds that elites from the eastern part of the southern dynasty were often described to have the Wu accent whereas people in the west were speaking with a Chu accent. Meanwhile, in the northern dynasties, the ruling non-Han family spoke both Chinese and its own Xianbei language, and the imperial library in the mid-seventh century still preserved a dozen of books written in Xianbei.⁷ As can be expected, the bi-lingual environment would generate different variations of spoken Chinese. Meow-hui Goh in her research shows that this confusion of accents and dialects led to the compilation of rhyme books during the period that aimed to guide cultural elites into correct pronunciation. It culminated in Sui official Lu Fayan's 陸法言 (fl. early seventh century) collaboration with both northern and southern elites in compiling *Spelling Rhymes* (*Qieyun* 切韻). According to Goh, these rhyme book projects show both great disagreements among scholars about the "correct sound" and the lack of an authoritative standard.⁸

Second, the "cacophony" within the unified empire also manifested in northern and southern elites' diverse lineages of learning.⁹ The reason why elite learning was vital to the constitution of "music" is, as was mentioned earlier, court music was part of court ritual, and it was closely related to other fields of expertise, such as harmonics, metrology, astronomy, numerology and so on. The establishment of "correct" ritual apparatus depended on the knowledge of ritual antecedents, commentarial traditions on classical texts, and their their applications to changing situations. Different lineages of elite learning gave rise to disputations.

⁷ *Sui shu*, 32.945.

⁸ Meow-hui Goh, "The Rhyme Book Culture of Pre-Tang China." *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*. Nov vol.2 (2) 2015: 419-443.

⁹ For a thorough research on the different traditions of classical learning between north and south, see Jiao Guimei 焦桂美, *Nanbeichao jingxueshi* 南北朝經學史 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009), pp. 17-79.

The fact that the northern and southern states had conflicts regarding details of ritual performance is well testified in diplomatic visits recorded in historical accounts. In 491, a southern envoy Pei Zhaoming and his northern host Cheng Yan engaged in verbal contestation about the appropriate mourning rituals for the deceased royal member of the enemy state. At one point during the conversation, Pei argued that there should not be a standard ritual protocol between the north and south, since “The three kings [in ancient times] did not implement the same kind of ritual. Who could claim to know the advantage and disadvantage of each of their rule?” 三王不同禮, 孰能知其得失.¹⁰ In the Sui dynasty, ritual/musical orthodoxy became polemicized. Courtiers from the northwest, northeast, and south launched heated debates about the correct pitch-standard, musical instruments, and textual traditions. It even led to factionalism that disturbed the well-functioning of central government. The empire saw the urgency in regularizing ritual protocols and reconstituting an authoritative court musical repertoire that was able to legitimize sovereignty and reconcile different opinions.

The third issue related to “cacophony” is the gradual fixation of cultural stereotypes about the north and south, particularly through *yuefu* songs. Xiaofei Tian makes a case in her book *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star* that in the sixth century, the cultural construction of the North as masculine and the South as feminine gradually took shape and musical tunes were effective in representing and perpetuating these two different cultural images. The north was associated with soldiers’ songs in military campaigns or at borders, while the south featured girls’ singing of lotus-picking.¹¹ One can see this stereotypical portrayal of the north and south was intensified after the Sui’s unification. Southern courtiers displaced in the north would write

¹⁰ *Wei shu*, 79.1751-1752. The three kings refer to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties.

¹¹ Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star*, pp. 310-366.

about the absence of “songs of picking lotus” to express their longing for the south as well as the past.¹² A northern emperor Yang Guang, known as Emperor Yang 煬帝, purposefully fashioned himself as a traveling emperor, always inspecting borders and eager to launch military onslaught. This bifurcation between the northern and southern culture and their corresponding musical characteristics had a profound impact to subsequent dynasties and continued to be exploited in the Tang empire. *Yuefu* tunes associated with different regions were evoked to express either nostalgia or moral criticism.

Music, as a simple definition has it, is the beautiful symphony of notes of different musical qualities, and it most aptly symbolizes the effort of the Sui in transforming cultural discords into a harmonious whole. With these discords over pronunciations, ritual/music apparatus, regional musical traditions, among other subjects, the Sui court started a process of rectifying and vilifying sounds, that is, to establish both a unanimously agreed-upon court musical repertoire and a moral lesson extracted from the “decadent” music of the fallen dynasties. The chapter discusses how the discourse of music was utilized in the Sui court to create and justify the state’s unification and legitimacy. I will also analyze how aural and visual spectacle became a powerful tool in shaping a new political and cultural identity.

The chapter consists of four sections. The first section focusses on historical narratives and discusses how officials in both the period of division and unified empire offered accounts about the transmission of musical legacy from previous ages to their own times. While courtiers

¹² For example, Wang Bao once wrote a poem to his friend Yu Xin, both southerners displaced in the north. The poem was to praise Yu Xin’s accomplishment as a local governor who had a bridge built over a river. The poet imagined that even if it was finished, what Yu Xin heard, however, “would no longer be the song of lotus-picking” 非復採蓮謠. *Bei Zhou shi*, 1.2338. The southern courtier Jiang Zong too was taken to the northern capital Chang’an after the Chen dynasty fell. In a poem about an outing in autumn, Jiang Zong ends the poem with: “At this moment I sigh in front of water, / indeed there is no longer song of lotus picking” 此詩臨水歎, 非復採蓮歌. *Chen shi*, 8.2579.

in the Northern and Southern Dynasties supported either a southern or northern genealogy of cultural inheritance, in the Sui, “unification” factored into the argument on orthodoxy, forming a new narrative vindicating musical/political legitimacy. The second section examines poems composed by Sui courtiers to describe their experience of watching “orthodox” ritual musical performance. By transforming aural and visual experiences into verbal articulation, the poems demonstrate the ideological function of imperial music in manipulating the subjects’ mind and their perception of the empire. The third section examines Emperor Yang’s musical project, especially through his *yuefu* songs, in creating a new southern center, Yangzhou, also known as Jiangdu. In his songs, the South becomes a legitimate part of the empire under the sovereign’s direct control, and it no longer evokes the “lasciviousness” associated with the old southern capital, Jiankang. The fourth section looks at the gradual formation of the discourse around the “tones of a ruined state” in the early seventh century, especially regarding the court of the Last Ruler of the Chen, Chen Shubao. It traces his infamous song “Jade Trees and Flowers in the Rear Courtyard” (“Yushu houting hua” 玉樹後庭花) and demonstrates an intriguing process of moralization in the seventh century that singled out tune titles as an emblem of the last ruler’s “decadence” responsible for dynastic fall. In all, the chapter suggests that what one hears in music matters not as much as the political, moral, and cultural meanings that people impose through discursive packaging. The Sui dynasty made use of the aural/visual configuration, rectification, and vilification as ways to manipulate people’s mind and create a new political and cultural identity.

The Lineage of Musical Transmission and Unification

The period of division witnessed warfare, displacement, and destruction that brought great mayhem to the transmission of cultural legacy. The volatile political situation in these centuries made musicians and musical equipment particularly vulnerable to extinction. Court officials, including those skillful in ritual conventions, would be slaughtered during brutal dynastic transitions, and musical instruments, along with other kinds of ritual paraphernalia, were either destroyed or fell into disuse. The difficulty in reinstituting court music challenges a state's claim of legitimacy—especially it was believed that musical orthodoxy and state legitimacy were closely entwined. In the “Treatise on Music” in *History of the Sui Dynasty*, the historian properly summarizes their relation as: “As long as the supreme court music does not fall into disorder, the Way of king's rule is there”大樂不紊, 則王政在焉.¹³ In order to profess rightful rule, a state has to publically declare, and convince its subjects and political rivals of, its musical orthodoxy manifested through the correct ritual/musical performance.

One of the most efficient rhetorical strategies to propagate musical legitimacy was to assert a continuity between the past practices, however nebulous they were, and present situation. One can see this attempt in multiple scenarios: ritual experts cited authoritative texts and commentarial traditions to argue their ritual choices; music specialists investigated “ancient” musical instruments to devise the pitch-standard; historians offered narratives of how musicians (and their knowledge) and ritual equipment being transmitted from the previous dynasties. It exemplifies what Peter Bol has characterized as the medieval learning. Court elites believed that “the new had been built upon the old in a cumulative fashion to create a tradition that stretched

¹³ *Sui shu*, 13.287.

back to the beginning of civilization,” and they sought to justify the present achievement by tracing its origin to the past antecedents and models.¹⁴ As a result, the term “orthodox music” (*zhengyue* 正樂) was in many cases synonymous with “ancient music” (*guyue* 古樂). The logic is quite clear: an empire’s capability to—through courtiers’ discussions, research, and investigations—reinstitute the ancient/orthodox musical repertoire can be seen as the proof of its political legitimacy.

Without exceptions, all the states during the Northern and Southern Dynasties and the unified Sui Empire felt compelled to assert musical legitimacy by representing themselves as the true heirs to the tradition. After the collapse of the Western Jin dynasty in the early fourth century, the old northern capitals, Chang’an and Luoyang, were sacked and occupied by nomadic peoples from the north. Most of the ritual equipment was wrecked in the chaos. The newly founded Eastern Jin dynasty in the south lacked ritual experts and proper guidelines for conducting state rituals. In the subsequent centuries, the Northern Wei and four southern dynasties all strove to create correct ritual apparatus that could show an unbroken lineage of transmission from the unified Western Jin dynasty. It is no surprise that historians in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, whose projects were part of the state propaganda, offered different accounts of how musical legacy was transmitted. It should be emphasized that the “continuity” was more discursively asserted than accomplished “in reality.” That a sound, a tone, or a piece of musical performance could be called “orthodox” was based almost entirely on experts’ verbal argumentation and textual corroboration. Moreover, the “ancient music” that medieval courts painstakingly tried to restore only existed in textual forms to begin with,

¹⁴ Peter Bol, *“This Culture of Ours”: Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 76-107.

particularly coming down to medieval ritualists through “Treatise of Music” in previous historical accounts. Thus to trace the musical development since ancient times was to sort out various rhetorical representations. As much to the courtiers in the medieval era as to us modern readers, the “historical truth,” in other words, the question such as what the ancient music was truly like, was already subject to textual mediation.

This section analyzes historical narratives on the transmission of ritual music in the early medieval period offered by courtier-cum-historians in the period of division and the unified empire. I will focus on three accounts, respectively by a southern courtier Shen Yue, a northern historian Wei Shou, and Niu Hong 牛弘 (545–610), an official in the Sui dynasty who supervised ritual restoration projects. These documents represent different visions of imperial power through creating a genealogy of musical legacy. While historians in the period of division believed in either a northern or a southern lineage of cultural inheritance, the Sui courtiers tried to reconcile the assertion of musical legitimacy with the new political situation that was “unification.” I argue that the transmission of musical tradition from ancient times to the present moment is a narrative discursively constructed no less than state legitimacy was a result of rhetorical configuration.

Shen Yue’s “Treatise on Music” is part of his historical account the *History of the Song Dynasty*, a dynasty lasting from 420 to 479 after the Eastern Jin. The project was finished and presented in 488 to Emperor Wu of the Southern Qi, Xiao Ze. The compilation itself was the accumulative work of several officials spanning decades. It was started by the Song dynasty official He Chengtian 何承天 (370–447) in the early fifth century, who composed fifteen treatises which Shen Yue adopted and expanded. Both He and Shen situated their compilation in a lineage of historical writing that started with Sima Qian and continued with Ban Gu of the

Eastern Han dynasty. As Shen Yue claims in the preface to those treatises, fully aware of what had been thoroughly written by his predecessors and what was lacking, he decided to supplement the account on music with detailed introductions on various kinds of musical equipment, and, more significant to later readers, lyrics of court performance from the Cao-Wei, Western Jin, Eastern Jin, and Song dynasties that he had access to.

Despite his thoroughness in recording court lyrics, Shen's account of the transmission of musicians and musical instruments during the fourth century, the century of great turmoil and division, is rather terse and south-focused.¹⁵ The first comment concerning the southern state in the fourth century regards one memorial by He Xun 賀循 (260–319), the Chamberlain for Ceremonials 太常 of the early Eastern Jin, who responded to the emperor's inquiry about the court's sacrificial music. At one point in the memorial, the official deplores: "The former capital was deserted and lay in ruins, and it [sacrificial music] has been dispersed and lost. Considering that sounds and tunes are intricate, and there is no one at the moment skillful enough to know the matter, it is hard to articulate their meanings" 舊京荒廢, 今既散亡, 音韻曲折, 又無識者, 則於今難以意言. According to Shen Yue, after the Sima royal house fled to the south, there were neither available ritual musical repertoires nor capable musicians at the Jiankang court. The situation became so dire that the posts "Director of the Imperial Music Office" (*taiyue* 太樂) and "Director of Drums and Fifes" (*guchui ling* 鼓吹令) had to be abandoned. Around 325, the Eastern Jin emperor ordered Ruan Fu 阮孚 (278–326) to expand musical repertoires. It was only in the reign of Xianhe 咸和 (326–334) that the Imperial Music Office was reinstated. The

¹⁵ The primary source can be found in *Song shu*. See *Song shu*, 19.540.

officials in the office were in charge of “gathering what was lost and scattered” 鳩集遺逸, yet still, the court lacked musical instruments such as bells and chime stones (*jinshi* 金石).

Shen’s narrative then moves to another powerful minister-cum-general of the Eastern Jin Yu Liang 庾亮 (289–340) who served as the governor of Jingzhou in 334. During his time there, Yu Liang and Xie Shang 謝尚 (308–357), another elite member with broad musical knowledge, helped design the Elegant Court Music (*yayue* 雅樂). But before long, Yu Liang passed away in 340, and this enterprise was held in abeyance. Then, Shen Yue offers a critical remark to upbraid Eastern Jin generals’ obsession with military affairs at the expense of rebuilding court ritual: “Yu Yi and Huan Wen solely engaged in military affairs. Musical instruments were kept in storage to the extent that they were rotten and could no longer be used” 庾翼桓溫專事軍旅, 樂器在庫, 遂至朽壞焉. Both Yu Yi 庾翼 (305–345) and Huan Wen 桓溫 (312–373) were ambitious generals bent on reclaiming northern territories, and the latter, harboring the intention to usurp the throne, even temporarily reclaimed Luoyang, the former capital of the Western Jin, as a means to bolster his legitimacy. It is interesting to see that Shen Yue disapproves of their military expeditions even though, as will be shown later, northern campaigns with the former capital cities reclaimed often meant the acquisition of ritual, also musical, equipment. Shen’s last comment on the Eastern Jin musical restoration involves the interaction between the north and south:

After the Western Jin dynasty was cast into chaos, all court musicians were captured by the northern barbarians. After the barbarian state [i.e., the Later Zhao] fell, many musicians in the city of Ye [i.e., capital of the Later Zhao] came to our court. At the time Xie Shang was the Vice Director of the Department of State Affairs, and with the newly acquired resources, he helped create and equip the court with bells and chime stones. In the Taiyuan era [376–396], Fu Jian was defeated. We acquired back the musician Yang Shu and others [musical personnel]. They were very well familiar with the ancient musical tradition. Therefore, the court was provided with the bells and chime stones for the Court Ensemble Performance.

晉氏之亂也, 樂人悉沒戎虜, 及胡亡, 鄴下樂人, 頗有來者. 謝尚時為尚書僕射, 因之以具鍾磬. 太元中, 破苻堅, 又獲樂工楊蜀等, 閑練舊樂, 於是四箱金石始備焉.

Wei Shou's northern account to be discussed in a moment gives a more nuanced narrative of the northern situation in the fourth century, and here Shen Yue generalizes the complexity of its political history as "barbarian's" occupation. The powerful state Later Zhao 後趙 (319–350) was toppled by Ran Min 冉閔 (d. 352, r. 350–352), who claimed to be the emperor at Ye in 350. His short-lived dynasty was soon crushed by Murong Jun 慕容儁 (319–360, r. 348–360), the Xianbei ruler of the Former Yan 前燕 (337–370). During the chaos, as Shen tells, many of the musicians who served in the city of Ye fled to the south, and thanks to their knowledge, the musical adept Xie Shang could depend on them for devising new musical instruments. Later in the 380s the battle with Fu Jian 苻堅 (338–385, r. 357–385), the ruler of the Former Qin 前秦 (350–394), ended with an Eastern Jin victory. According to the historian, some musical practitioners such as Yang Shu who knew well about "old music" (*jiuyue* 舊樂), were reacquired by the Jiankang court, thus equipping the southern court with sufficient musical capital. Thus ends Shen's narrative of the turbulent fourth century.

What is lacking in the narrative, however, is the accomplishment of Liu Yu 劉裕 (363–422, r. 420–422), the founding emperor of the Song dynasty. He led troops and conquered Luoyang and Chang'an, and subsequently brought back many musicians and musical equipment from the north in the early fifth century.¹⁶ The silence appears particularly noteworthy as the treatise is one part of the historical project on the Song dynasty, and Liu Yu's achievement for restoring musical tradition to the south would later be used in the seventh century by court

¹⁶ Xiaofei Tian speculates that this acquisition of northern musical tradition unknown in the south generated interests in *yuefu* composition. See Xiaofei Tian, "From the Eastern Jin through the Early Tang (317-649)," pp. 228-229.

officials to assert that the southern dynasties indeed retained musical orthodoxy. Shen Yue, instead, remains reticent all along and, without dwelling much on the “restoration” of musical tradition in the south, jumps to the year 432 and later, when the Song dynasty started to further adjust and rectify court musical ritual.

Several observations can be made about Shen Yue’s narrative. First of all, Shen’s account of the south’s acquisition of musicians and instruments in the fourth century is rather terse. It is possible that Shen did not have much information about the north and only noted down those instances when the southern court’s musical repertoire was radically changed by newly acquired resources. Even so, one cannot help but wonder why the founding emperor Liu Yu’s notable accomplishment is left unmentioned by the historian. Second, it seems that for Shen Yue, the transmission of musical orthodoxy, by implication, state legitimacy, from the Han dynasty, to Cao-Wei, to Western Jin, to Eastern Jin, to Song and finally to the Southern Qi, was very much taken for granted. Despite the deplorable situation at the beginning of the southern rule, the state witnessed the gradual recuperation from the loss, which was the result of both internal reform by scholars knowledgeable in past antecedents and external procurement of the “old music” (*jiuyue*). Moreover, the fact that Shen models himself on Sima Qian and Ban Gu and juxtaposes the Song ritual lyrics with those from the Cao-Wei, Western Jin, and Eastern Jin further confirm that the southern dynasties continued the musical/ritual/cultural legacy from the previous empires.¹⁷

¹⁷ Shen Yue’s narrative should have been received as standard at the time, and yet it also encountered objection in the mid-fifth century. The music expert Wang Sengqian 王僧虔 (425–485) bemoaned the meager condition of court music in the south. He wrote a letter to his cousin Wang Jian 王儉 (452–489), in which he expresses the need for the southern envoys to learn about the northern musical tradition. He said: “As for the claim that ‘After Fu Jian was defeated, the Eastern Jin was equipped with complete set of bells and chime stones,’ one indeed cannot completely regard it [i.e., this claim] as false” 苻堅敗後，東晉始備金石樂。故知不可全誣也。 But still, he continued, it was important to learn from the north since “the northern state may have retained the past musical tradition” 北國或有遺樂. *Nan Qi shu*, 33.595-596.

Wei Shou's compilation of the history of the Northern Wei started about sixty years after Shen Yue's historical account. When Wei finished his project, that is, in the 550s, the Liang dynasty in the south was destroyed by the Hou Jing rebellion, and a new dynasty, the Chen dynasty, was founded. As several political powers competed for dominance, the emphasis on the state authority was particularly brought to the fore. Wei Shou claimed blatantly the propagandistic function of his work. As his introduction to the *Treatises* makes clear, the historical account, while also continuing the historical writing from previous ages, was to put an end to the dissemination of false information and discredit those "insignificant books compiled by peripheral and illegitimate states" (*bianwei xiao shu* 邊偽小書), namely, accounts produced by the southern states. The "Treatise on Music" in *Wei shu* shows excellently the vision and voice of a historian who ostentatiously promotes the northern state's legitimacy but also shows his anxiety and uncertainty about this rhetorical construct of legitimacy.

Unlike Shen Yue's account, Wei Shou's does not incorporate any lyrics but instead offers detailed description about the transmission of musical tradition from the Han dynasty to the Northern Wei (hence also to the Northern Qi that Wei Shou served when finishing the history). The compiler extensively cites imperial edicts, memorials, and court discussions in the Northern Wei to show the process that the northern state established its ritual protocol. Its narrative of the tumultuous fourth century goes as:¹⁸

Ever since the Yongjia reign [307–313], the whole world was in chaos. Musicians and musical instruments were all seized by Liu Cong [r. 310–318] and Shi Le [r. 319–333]. After Murong Jun conquered Ran Min, he [Murong] acquired them. Then, as Wang Meng [and armies of Former Qin] entered the capital city of Ye, they [musicians and instruments] were brought to the west of the Pass [i.e., Chang'an, the capital of Former Qin]. After Fu Jian was defeated, Chang'an was in chaos. As Murong Yong [r. 386–394] fled to the east, ritual and musical paraphernalia were mostly taken to the city of Zhangzi.

¹⁸ *Wei shu*, 109.2827.

When Murong Chui [r. 386–394] conquered Murong Yong, they were transported to the city of Zhongshan.

Ever since the time when the ancestors of the future Northern Wei dynasty peacefully interacted with the Cao-Wei and [Western] Jin dynasties, these two empires sent musicians and performers [to the Tuoba tribe]. When Emperor Mu [Tuoba Yilu 拓跋猗盧 (d. 316)] became the King of Dai, Emperor Min of the Western Jin [Sima Ye 司馬鄴 (300–318, r. 313–316)] again presented musical instruments. Even though the bells and chime stones were not fully instated, they had full sets of strings and pipes. When Emperor Taizu [Tuoba Gui 拓拔珪 (371–409, r. 386–409)] conquered Zhongshan, he acquired the hanging bells and drums for court ritual music. However, at the time the emperor was just starting to bring order out of chaos, and he did not have time for ritual reform. He only used them according to the need of time.

永嘉已下，海內分崩。伶官樂器，皆為劉聰，石勒所獲。慕容儁平冉閔，遂克之。王猛平鄴，入於關右。苻堅既敗，長安紛擾，慕容永之東也，禮樂器用多歸長子。及垂平永，並入中山。自始祖內和魏晉，二代更致音伎。穆帝為代王，愍帝又進以樂物。金石之器雖有未周，而絃管具矣。逮太祖定中山，獲其樂縣。既初撥亂，未遑創改，因時所行而用之。

A small paragraph on musical transmission summarizes the complicated political history in the fourth century. According to the historian, after the Western Jin collapsed, ritual apparatus and musical specialists were either taken by Liu Cong 劉聰 (d. 318, r. 310–318), the ruler of Former Zhao 前趙 (304–329) with Chang'an as its capital, or Shi Le 石勒 (274–333, r. 319–333), the founder of the Later Zhao. After Shi's powerful state fell, Murong Jun seized all Shi Le's ritual apparatus from its capital Ye. One may recall that Shen Yue particularly points out that the chaos in Ye made possible the flight of court musicians to the south, which Wei Shou does not acknowledge at all. Afterward, Wang Meng 王猛 (325–375), the chief courtier of Fu Jian of the Former Qin, conquered the Ye and was stationed there, and all the ritual-related equipment was taken to Chang'an. Fu Jian's dynasty was vanquished in the 380s, which, according to Shen Yue, led to the southern state's acquisition of adepts such as Yang Shu. Wei Shou narrates, however, that Murong Yong 慕容永 (d. 394, r. 386–394), Fu Jian's prisoner in Chang'an, fled from the capital to Zhangzi, bringing along all the ritual paraphernalia. In 394, Murong Chui 慕容垂

(326–396, r. 384–396), the ruler of the Later Yan 後燕 (384–407), defeated and annexed Murong Yong’s state, and those musical instruments were taken to Murong’s new headquarter Zhongshan.

At this juncture in the narrative, the historian shifts to Tuoba’s ancestors and their interaction with Cao-Wei and Western Jin dynasties in the third century. Wei Shou points out that both unified empires had sent ritual equipment and imparted musical knowledge to the Tuoba group. The historian makes clear that even before the official founding of the Northern Wei in 386, the Tuoba state had already inherited an orthodox musical legacy from these politically and culturally legitimate empires. Hence the historical event that Tuoba Gui, Emperor Daowu of the Northern Wei, conquered Zhongshan in 397 signifies that the Northern Wei brought two lineages of transmission together: those musicians and instruments handed over through various competing states during the fourth century and those already possessed by the Tuoba due to its earlier interaction with the unified empires.

This narrative of the transmission of musical legacy from the early third century to the early fifth century is offered by a historian who wrote in the mid-sixth century. When reading the memorials and edicts that predated Wei Shou’s compilation, which the historian also includes in this *Treatise of Music*, we find that the court members of the Northern Wei were far less optimistic about the musical establishment. It should be pointed out that the officials in charge of court music (*yueguan* 樂官) of the Northern Wei were only established in 491 at the initiation of Emperor Xiaowen, who was fascinated with the southern culture. In the next year, he commissioned Gao Lü 高閭 (d. 502) to regularize court musical performance. In both the emperor’s edict and his courtiers’ responses, one sees the constant complaint and worry about the lack of specialists to devise an “orthodox” ritual music. Even until 504, the official Li Chong

李崇 (454–525) admitted that the principle of sound and music was too profound to be understood by ordinary people, and he proposed that all the court scholars should convene again for a thorough discussion. In 510, scholar Liu Fang 劉芳 presented to the throne his revised musical repertoire, and in the memorial, the official, too, gives a concise narrative of the fourth century.

After the government of the Western Jin failed, the Central Plain was in turmoil. The Lius and Shis, heroic opportunists of the time, prevailed the Wei and Zhao areas with forces. The Fus and Yaos, leaders of the local magnates and powerful families, tarried at the Pass and northwestern regions. Therefore, ritual and music were destroyed, and none could restore them from disuse. The Great Wei [dynasty] acted in accordance with the time and claimed the mandate. It incorporated the whole realm under its control. Even though [the ruler] was fully occupied every day, he always prioritized [the restoration of] ritual and music. However, the ancient music had been lost, and nowhere was one able to seek it. Therefore, for many years the production of [correct ritual music] was not unanimously agreed. When one investigated into the Classics and historical accounts, they [i.e., those attempts of creating the correct court music] often violated the laws and principles.

晉氏失政, 中原紛蕩。劉石以一時姦雄, 跋扈魏趙; 苻姚以部帥強豪, 趙趙關輔。於是禮壞樂隳, 廢而莫理。大魏應期啟運, 奄有萬方, 雖日不暇給, 常以禮樂為先。古樂虧闕, 詢求靡所, 故頃年以來, 創造非一, 考之經史, 每乖典制。¹⁹

Even though Liu Fang might have exaggerated the dire situation to underscore his achievement, what troubles the official was the destruction of the ritual and music during the fourth century because of the encroachment of the ethnic states. Liu notes that the Northern Wei prioritized the restoration of ritual and music, but the ancient music (*guyue*), already lost, was nowhere to be sought.

As this kind of pessimistic attitude about musical revival can be seen in many Northern Wei officials' documents, Wei Shou also adds sporadic explanations to account for the incongruence between his “confident” narrative of musical transmission and later courtiers'

¹⁹ *Wei shu*, 109.2832-2833.

predicament. According to him, even though musical legitimacy had always resided in the northern land, “the world underwent turmoil for several generations, and most of them were lost” 世歷分崩, 頗有遺失. Also, rulers before Emperor Xiaowen did not heed much cultural accomplishment. “The system of the ancient music was hardly studied and transmitted. Then artisans from the old times passed away, and tunes and sounds were mostly lost” 古樂音制, 罕復傳習, 舊工更盡, 聲曲多亡.

Wei Shou’s narrative poses to us an interesting question. If the musical tradition was ultimately disrupted in the north, and Northern Wei courtiers were perplexed by a lack of relevant knowledge, why does Wei Shou start the treatise with a meticulous description of the unbroken transmission of the cultural lineage from the previous empires to the early Northern Wei? It is here that one sees the deliberate “constructedness” of Wei Shou’s account on the musical transmission in the tumultuous fourth century. The function of the narrative is to create a northern lineage of ritual transmission that affirms the cultural legitimacy of subsequent northern states. Indeed, the Northern Wei might have failed to revive the orthodox music, but it does not mean that its successor Northern Qi, the state where Wei Shou served, was unable to successfully restore the ritual orthodoxy that was always in the northern land since the collapse of the previous unified empires. Wei Shou’s strategy is different from Shen Yue’s. For the latter, a brief account is followed by a litany of ceremonial lyrics from previous dynasties, which contributes to a sense of cultural continuity. Wei Shou resorts to historical narration. Nevertheless, the more scrupulous his description is regarding how musical tradition was seamlessly passed down from one state to another, the more it shows the historian’s anxiety about the possible gap between the present and past and complete disruption of cultural legacy.

One last remark on Wei Shou's account is the historian's articulation of the all-inclusive imperial power through its musical display. According to Wei Shou, in the early Northern Wei dynasty, the court banquet featured "the full set of the solemn ritual music, supplemented with sounds of Yan, Zhao, Qin and Wu, tunes of five directions of different cultures" 備列宮懸正樂, 兼奏燕趙秦吳之音, 五方殊俗之曲. More importantly, the court performed the songs of Dai region (*dai ge* 代歌) in the Xianbei language to narrate both the foundation of the Wei dynasty in the past and the rise and fall of Wei's rulers and officials. It is not surprising to find that the southern music was included in the Northern Wei court as only one kind of regional songs to demonstrate its inclusiveness:

Previously, when Emperor Gaozu [i.e., Yuan Hong, r. 471–499] invaded the Huai and Han rivers and Emperor Shizong [Yuan Ke 元恪 (483–515, r. 499–515)] conquered the city of Shouchun, they acquired singers and musicians from the south. There were old tunes of the Central Plain that had passed down in the south, such as "Wise Lord," "Sage Ruler," "Sir, Do not [cross the river]," and "White Turtledoves," as well as songs of Wu in the southern land and four tunes of Jing and Chu areas. All of these were categorized as "Songs of Clear *Shang* Tunes." They were also played at court gatherings and banquets.

初, 高祖討淮漢, 世宗定壽春, 收其聲伎. 江左所傳中原舊曲, 明君, 聖主, 公莫, 白鳩之屬, 及江南吳歌, 荊楚四聲, 總謂清商. 至於殿庭饗宴兼奏之.

Using "old tunes" (*jiuqu* 舊曲), instead of, for example, the "orthodox sound," to refer to the music from the Central Plain carried on in the Southern Dynasties, Wei Shou does not acknowledge the legitimate status of the southern musical tradition. Moreover, along with these "old tunes" were the new songs from the Wu and Chu areas, which had been considered peripheral within a "unified empire." With these musical tunes categorized as one type of music and presumably played alongside with those from other domains, Wei Shou portrays the musical spectacle of the Northern Wei dynasty as one both inheriting the orthodox court music and assimilating regional and foreign sounds.

The preceding two examples show how a northern and a southern historian describe the transmission of musical legacy since the unified Western Jin dynasty through the tumultuous age. Shen Yue and Wei Shou supported either a southern or northern lineage and intimate a close link between musical orthodoxy and state cultural legitimacy. A new attempt at musical restoration happened in the Sui dynasty. Emperor Wen of the Sui commanded the reinstitution of the court music as early as 582. Knowledgeable courtiers involved were Zheng Yi 鄭譯 (540–591), Niu Hong, Xin Yanzhi 辛彥之 (d. 591), Sui Kui 蘇夔 (542–623), Wan Changbao 萬常寶 (fl. early seventh century), and He Tuo 何妥 (fl. early seventh century).²⁰ The first five officials hailed from the north, and only He Tuo was a southerner recruited by the northern regime. It was recorded that each of these musical adepts had a different view about the “correct” ritual music, and it led to severe factional dispute. The emperor even decided that each of them could design their own court ritual music and then demonstrate their finished projects publicly for a competition.²¹ After the conquest of the Chen dynasty in 589, many musicians, performers, and instruments were brought to the northern capital Chang’an from the south. The emperor again ordered a revision of ritual music, and this time he commissioned Niu Hong, Yao Cha 姚察 (533–606), Xu Shanxin, and Yu Shiji to take charge of the project. As one can see, different from the previous time, three of the officials were southerners and Niu Hong, a northerner notwithstanding, “did not know much about musical principle.”²² Meanwhile, the Grand Director of Music 太樂令 of the Chen such as Cai Ziyuan 蔡子元 and Yu Puming 于普明 were again

²⁰ *Sui shu*, 14.345-348.

²¹ See biographies of Su Wei, He Tuo, and Lu Kai 盧愷 in *Sui shu*. *Sui shu*, 41.1186-1187; 56.1384; 75.1710-1715.

²² *Sui shu*, 15. 349-360.

given their original posts in the Sui and continued to supervise musical performance. It is a team with prominent southern orientation. To convince the emperor of the necessity to revise ritual music after the unification, Niu Hong and his team presented a memorial to the throne. The account interestingly combines the claim of musical legitimacy and rhetoric of unification.²³

According to Niu Hong, ritual music started in the ancient Six Epochs and it was passed down, with variation, revision, and transformation, to later ages.²⁴ As for the fourth century, Niu Hong first follows the narrative offered by Shen Yue: that is, the south at the beginning lacked any ritual/musical equipment, yet scholars gradually established a court musical repertoire through their knowledge and acquisition of adepts and instruments who fled from the north. The Eastern Jin thus adequately resumed a proper musical tradition. What is different, however, is how Niu Hong describes the situation in the north. One may recall that in Wei Shou's account, ritual paraphernalia were transported among several states and ultimately obtained by the Northern Wei dynasty after its conquest of Zhongshan, the headquarter of the Murong state. But Niu Hong's account does not just stop here:

After Murong Chui conquered Murong Yong at Zhangzi, the former acquired all the musical apparatus of Fu Jian's regime. Soon, Murong Chui was defeated by the Northern Wei, and Li Fo, the Director of Bells and Pipes, together with lowly musicians in the Department of Music, fled to Murong De's [r. 398–405] headquarters at the city of Ye. Then, Murong De moved the capital to Guanggu. When Murong Chao [r. 405–410] succeeded the throne, his mother had been detained by Yao Xing [r. 394–416] in the city of Chang'an. Murong Chao thus used 120 musicians from the Department of Music to ransom back his mother. When Emperor Wu of the Song entered the Pass [i.e., Liu Yu's northern campaign in 417 that reclaimed the capital Chang'an], he took all of them [i.e., personnel and equipment related to court music] and brought them back to the south.

²³ Ibid. *Quan Sui wen* 全隋文, 24.4159-4160.

²⁴ The "Six Epochs" refer to the periods when the Yellow Emperor, Sage-king Yao, Sage-king Shun, Xia dynasty, Shang dynasty, and Zhou dynasty ruled, in other words, the ancient glorious civilizations.

慕容垂破慕容永於長子，盡獲苻氏舊樂。垂息為魏所敗，其鍾律令李佛等，將太樂細伎，奔慕容德於鄴。德遷都廣固。子超嗣立。其母先沒姚興，超以太樂伎一百二十人詣興贖母。及宋武帝入關，悉收南渡。

Indeed, Murong Chui was defeated by the Northern Wei, which Wei Shou emphasizes as the moment when the Wei obtained musical paraphernalia from the previous dynasties. Niu Hong, however, supplements several more episodes of flight and acquisition. Instead of being possessed by the Northern Wei, court musicians submitted to Murong De 慕容德 (336–405, r. 398–405) who established the Southern Yan 南燕 (398–410) at Ye. Upon the enthronement of his son Murong Chao 慕容超 (385–410, r. 405–410), the ruler forsook musicians and instruments to exchange his detained mother, and all the equipment was again taken to Chang'an. While Shen Yue does not mention at all the significance of Liu Yu's northern expedition in reclaiming Luoyang and Chang'an, Niu Hong regards it as a great accomplishment signifying the lineage of musical legacy was broken in the north and continued in the Southern Dynasties. The south thus manifested musical orthodoxy with traceable genealogy to the Western Jin and, further, ancient civilizations. Then, the narrative moves to recent history:

Previously when Jingzhou was conquered,²⁵ we acquired the elegant court music of the Liang dynasty. Now that have appeased Jiangzhou [i.e., the Chen dynasty], we gained the orthodox music of the Chen dynasty. Their proper transmission is recorded in histories and commentaries, and indeed they accord to [those performed in] ancient times. When observing the style of their music, its use of sounds is orderly. Your subject hopes to revise and rectify it so that our state can be equipped with [the correct] ritual music. As for the tunes of Luoyang of the Northern Wei, according to Wei Shou's historical account, they were "acquired after Emperor Taiwu conquered Helian Chang [r. 425–428]."²⁶ There lacks any further proof about this. As for the music used by the Northern Zhou, they were all newly invented, mixed with the sounds from border regions.

²⁵ This refers to the fall of the Western Liang dynasty. The Western Liang was a puppet state controlled by the Northern Zhou, and its ruling family was the Xiao family of the Liang dynasty. The Sui peacefully integrated the Western Liang in 587.

²⁶ *Wei shu*, 109.2828. Helian Chang was the ruler of the Xia dynasty 夏, and its capital was Tongwan 統萬 (in modern-day Inner Mongolia). It was conquered by the Northern Wei in 427. According to Wei Shou, "Emperor Shizu [i.e., Tuoba Tao] defeated Helian Chang and acquired ancient elegant court music" 世祖破赫連昌，獲古雅樂。

Barbarian tunes could cast into chaos the state in the central land. They all should be abandoned. Your subject hopes to stop their performance.

前克荊州, 得梁家雅曲, 今平蔣州, 又得陳氏正樂. 史傳相承, 以為合古. 且觀其曲體, 用聲有次, 請修緝之, 以備雅樂. 其後魏洛陽之曲, 據魏史云太武平赫連昌所得, 更無明證. 後周所用者, 皆是新造, 雜有邊裔之聲. 戎音亂華, 皆不可用. 請悉停之.

There is clear distinction between orthodox music and barbarian tones, between those ancient and newly invented. Niu Hong first refuses to accept Wei Shou's opinion that Northern Wei had musical legitimacy all along. He considers the connection between the court music of Northern Wei (tune of Luoyang) and the orthodox tradition is tenuous without much textual corroboration. In contrast, the Liang and Chen musical repertoires are well attested in histories and commentaries, thus following what had been practiced since ancient times (*he gu* 合古). What is also found fault with is the newly invented (*xin zao* 新造) music of the Northern Zhou, the dynasty preceded the Sui. More questionable about this invention is the incorporation of sounds from border regions foreign to the central land. The idea that "barbarians" could "cast into chaos the state on the Central Plain" would easily evoke the calamity that the Western Jin dynasty, also a unified empire, had suffered. The courtier thus urgently calls for a stop of this unorthodox musical tradition. Niu Hong's account is drastically different from Wei Shou's portrayal of the Northern Wei that professes (northern) cultural continuity and assimilation. The ideology behind Niu Hong's musical vision is both a rejection of the legacy of its immediate predecessor, the Northern Zhou, or even all the previous northern states, and the obliteration of any foreign elements.

The Sui, in essence, was a northern regime. If it did not achieve unification but confronted another southern dynasty, one could imagine that those northern courtiers tasked with musical restoration in the early Sui would promote, again, a northern lineage of cultural transmission in opposition to its southern neighbor. However, the unification and what it

signified utterly changed the way for the empire to claim ritual/musical legitimacy. In a similar memorial presented by the team, the fourth century is depicted as a disaster for civilization: “After Yongjia period, the whole world collapsed in turmoil. The states founded by the Murong, Shi, Fu, and Yao occupied the Central Plain one after another. Past models and old doctrines came to an end at this moment” 永嘉之後, 九服崩離, 燕石符姚, 遞據華土, 前言往式, 于斯而盡. However, it was the south that preserved the remaining cultural legacy and now contributed to the glory of the new empire:

When a new dynasty was founded at Jinling [i.e., southern capital Jiankang], court officials fled to the south. The royal principles and imperial precepts were flourishing and preserved intact in the south. They had been separated from the Central Plain for three hundred years. The wise sage acted in accordance with time, and the grand auspices indicated rightful prosperity. Now the musicians of the Liang and the Chen that were acquired from southern expeditions, along with other ritual equipment from the Jin and Song dynasties, have all arrived here. Those who did not submit in the previous ages have now all submitted to us. As for those that were not acquired by former dynasties, we have obtained them all. It is here and now that one sees the harmonious transformation and ultimate accomplishment.

金陵建社, 朝士南奔, 帝則皇規, 粲然更備. 與內原隔絕, 三百年于茲矣. 伏惟明聖膺期, 會昌在運. 今南征所獲梁陳樂人, 及晉宋旗章, 宛然俱至. 曩代所不服者, 今悉服之. 前朝所未得者, 今悉得之. 化洽功成, 于是乎在.²⁷

Similar to the account above, the southern capital Jiankang contained all the ritual knowledge, exemplars and models, and learned experts, and all of them had been cast outside (*wai* 外) of the Central Plain (*neiyuan* 內原) for three hundred years. As a result of the migration and turmoil in the north, the northern land featured no “past models and old doctrines” (*qianyan wangshi* 前言往式). The great accomplishment of the Sui was its unification and incorporation of the south again in the imperial territory. Thanks to the conquest, all those musicians, ritual equipment, and courtiers, which could indeed trace back to Song, Jin, and even earlier, came to the Sui, and the

²⁷ *Sui shu*, 15.359.

empire achieved what the previous states could not possibly achieve. The brief account nicely integrates both the old and new: the continuity of past cultural traditions was only possible because of this “unprecedented” (at least within these three hundred years) achievement of unification.

Unlike the Sui, the next unified empire, the Tang, neither inherited the throne from a regional regime in the northwest nor newly assimilated the south into the unified empire. It thus had another vision of how to represent the imperial power through musical terms. In the early Tang, Zu Xiaosun 祖孝孫 (fl. early seventh century), originally from the northeast, was commissioned to create the Tang court music. According to the historical record, “Xiaosun considered that the old tunes of the Chen and Liang were mixed the sounds of Wu and Chu areas, and those of the Zhou and Qi mostly incorporated ‘barbarian’ techniques. He thus ruminated on [the advantage and disadvantage of] the northern and southern traditions, investigated on the ancient tunes, and finally created the elegant court ritual music of the Great Tang” 孝孫又以陳梁舊樂雜用吳楚之音, 周齊舊樂多涉胡戎之伎, 於是斟酌南北, 考以古音, 作大唐雅樂. The Tang’s was thus an organic assimilation of both the south and north, which implies that neither could monopolize the claim of cultural orthodoxy.

In conclusion, the section discusses three historical narratives on how musical tradition was handed down since the collapse of the Western Jin to the sixth century. Tracing a lineage was crucial for all the political powers, as musical orthodoxy bore a direct connection to a state’s claim of political legitimacy. Shen Yue and Wei Shou both articulated this unbroken continuum of cultural transmission, and their accounts competed with each other as to whether the past legacy was received and continued through the northern or southern states. The unified Sui empire too urgently needed justification of its musical legitimacy. However, the eagerness to

distinguish itself from the predecessor Northern Zhou dynasty, a dynasty in the northwest ruled by ethnically Xianbei people, and to account for the incorporation of the southern land into the imperial realm gives new perspective on the claim of musical orthodoxy. For Sui royal members and officials, the “unification” ultimately brought into fruition the true cultural continuity between the Sui and previous glorious civilizations. These different documents aptly show the rhetorical construction of musical genealogy and its ideological functions as part of the state’s political and cultural agendas.

Listening to the Newly Made “Ancient” Music

The Sui dynasty’s grand project of revising “orthodox” ritual music was accomplished in 594, and Emperor Wen celebrated the memorable occasion with a public performance of the rectified musical repertoire. This kind of ceremony to commemorate state musical achievement was not without precedent.²⁸ Yet it is from the Sui dynasty that several poems on “observing musical performance” (*guanyue* 觀樂) survived. Composed by participating officials, musicians, and newly recruited courtiers from the south, they, as verbal realizations of the aural/visual experience, articulate what the contemporary considered to be the relationship between a unified empire and its musical spectacle.

For medieval writers and readers, the phrase *guanyue* (“observing musical performance”) was laden with cultural associations, and it would evoke the archetypal concert-observer Jizha in the Spring and Autumn period. Jizha was an envoy representing the kingdom of Wu in the south who came to the kingdom of Lu in 544 BCE as a diplomat. During his stay there, Jizha

²⁸ For example, in 573, scholars of the Northern Zhou dynasty accomplished their design of court music. The emperor ordered a public display and asked his officials to participate in the event. *Zhou shu*, 5.83.

“observed” the musical performance (sound, lyrics, and dance) of the grand Zhou dynasty, including the “Airs” of each domain of the Zhou dynasty, the Zhou Odes, and Hymn.

Knowledgeable in ritual precedents and history and savvy in political judgment, Jizha was able to give perceptive comments on the accomplishment or deficiency of each domain based on the “sounds” of that region. The validity of Jizha’s interpretation on politics through sound is, as was shown at the beginning of the chapter, based on the time-honored belief that the songs of a region reflect the sentiment of the people living there, thus serving as an index to the ruler’s governance.

The concept of music in the medieval period was not only complicated but also polemical, encompassing a variety of issues, opinions, and stances, all of which could be corroborated with quotations from ancient texts. Observing a court concert of the revised ritual music and representing the experience in verbal form bring into contention all the available associations of musical performance. Whether the poet was a music expert, a lay listener without any music-related expertise, or someone in between, these poems on “observing performance” translate aural/visual experience into its poetic articulation that negotiates with the ideas of imperial power, regional differences, cultural identification, and moral urgency. Through reading those sophisticated poems composed in a court context, the section seeks to answer the following questions: What did the courtiers see and hear from the performance and how did they describe their experience? What kind of relation between the musical performance and state legitimacy, between sound and politics, between musical restoration and innovation, was envisioned and expressed? Finally, how could the aural experience shape and transform a subject’s political and cultural identity?

To begin with, the newly accomplished ritual music was, without doubt, a part of the empire's cultural enterprise to consolidate and aggrandize state power. Moreover, the emperor's order that all court officials should gather for the final concert purposefully made the musical project visible and audible to a broader audience beyond the selected few who were in charge of the project and knowledgeable in ritual matters. Propagated to the empire's subjects, it aimed to aurally arouse admiration, awe, and submission to the grandiose imperial order. The aforementioned He Tuo was one of the Sui ritual experts responsible for creating the new court musical repertoire. It is likely that he composed the poem titled "Observing Musical Performance at the Imperial Music Office" ("Yuebu cao guanyue" 樂部曹觀樂) while he was on the mission. By using the character *guanyue* in the title, He Tuo, originally from the south, fashioned himself as a later day Jizha who currently inspected the state-sanctioned music. But what is markedly different in He Tuo's case is that instead of a diplomat on an interstate mission as Jizha, He was a court official within the newly established bureaucratic system. A Jizha who once passed on judgments on various regions is transformed into a loyal courtier observing the ceremonious ritual performance in the Music Office and celebrating the imperial order. In addition to reverence and wholehearted devotion, He Tuo particularly emphasizes the function of the imperial music in manipulating and controlling listener's mind.

樂部曹觀樂

東海餘風大
陶唐遺思深

Observing Musical Performance at the
Imperial Music Office²⁹

The lingering influence is strong near the eastern sea,
and the longing for the sage-king Yao in the
Tang domain was profound.³⁰

²⁹ *Sui shi*, 2.2658.

³⁰ The two couplets evoke Jizha's observation of musical performances, known as the "Airs" of different locales, and his comments on the "Airs of Qi" and "Airs of Tang." When the "Airs of Qi" were played, he commented: "Beautiful indeed! How expansive! Great Airs indeed! Exemplar of the states by the eastern sea—surely this is the state of Taigong! Its greatness cannot yet be fathomed" 美哉, 泱泱乎! 大風也哉! 表東海者, 其大公乎? 國未可量也. Taigong refers to Taigong Wang, also known as Jiang Shang 姜尚, who was enfeoffed by King Wu of the Zhou

何如觀徧舞	[But] how can they compare to [the one observing] the musical performance of the Six Epochs: ³¹
奏鼓間撝金	the sound of beating drums is mingled with that of struck metal gongs.
清管調絲竹 朱絃韻雅琴	Clear pipes are attuned to bamboo-made instruments, and crimson strings harmonize with the elegant sounds of zithers.
八行陳樹羽	With dancers forming into eight lines [and eight rows], five-color plumes are displayed [in their hands], ³²
六德審知音	with the Six Virtues illustrated [through the music], the one who knows the sound examines it. ³³
至道兼韶濩	The Great Way combines [the musical repertoires of] Shao and Hu, ³⁴
充庭總韎任	and at the court ceremony, Mo and Ren tunes

(ca. 11th century BCE) at the Qi area, thus becoming the “ancestor” of later regimes established at the domain. Jizha also made judgment of the songs and culture of the Tang 唐, the region around Jinyang 晉陽 (modern-day Taiyuan): “Profound longing indeed! These are probably descendants of the people ruled by the house of Tao and Tang. Otherwise, why would their concerns reach so far back? If they are not descended from [the line of] prime virtue, how can they be capable of this?” 思深哉! 其陶唐氏之遺民乎? 不然, 何憂之遠也? 非令德之後, 誰能若是? The house of Tao and Tang refers to the sage-king Yao 堯. See *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhushu*, the twenty-ninth year of Lord of Xiang, 38.669-670. The translation is by Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg. *Zuozhuan* translation, vol. 2, p. 1243.

³¹ “Bianwu” 徧舞 is a term generally alluding to “musical performance of the Six Epochs” including that of the Yellow Emperor, Sage-king Yao, Sage-king Shun, Xia dynasty, Shang dynasty, and Zhou dynasty.

³² “Eight lines” (*bahang* 八行) should mean *bayi* 八佾, a musical/dancing repertoire featuring altogether 64 dancers divided into eight lines and eight rows. The scale of the ritual befits the status of the Son of Heaven. In the *Analects*, Confucius criticizes the transgression of the Household Ji of the Lu because the family practiced this *bayi* ritual. The “erected banners” in the line alludes to one poem in the section of “Zhou Hymn” in the *Classic of Poetry*. “Blind men, blind men, / in the courtyard of Zhou. / We have set up the cross-board, the stand, / with the upright hooks, the standing plumes.” 有瞽有瞽, 在周之庭。設業設虞, 崇牙樹羽。 *Maoshi zhushu*, 19.731. The translation is by Arthur Waley. See *The Book of Songs*, p. 297. According Zheng Xuan’s interpretation, the main point of the poem is thus: “After a king pacifies the realm he implements ritual; when achievement is accomplished he creates music.” 王者治定制禮, 功成作樂。 *Maoshi zhushu*, 19.731-732.

³³ According to the *Zhouli*, “Six Virtues” refer to “Wisdom,” “Benevolence,” “Sageliness,” “Righteousness,” “Loyalty,” and “Harmony.” See *Zhouli zhushu*, 10.160. Elsewhere in the *Zhouli*, it is also recorded that the state musical officers manage court music based on Six Virtues and create sounds based on Six Pitches 以六德為之本, 以六律為之音。 *Zhouli zhushu*, 23.356.

³⁴ Shao 韶, also referred to as Xiaoshao 蕭韶, is the musical performance accomplished in the reign of sage-king Shun. It is believed that after the music was played, phoenixes arrived. Hu was the music allegedly created by King Tang of the Shang dynasty 商湯 (fl. the 17th century BCE), the legendary founder of the Shang dynasty.

高天度流火	are gathered. ³⁵
落日廣城陰	Through the high sky travels the Fire Star, ³⁶
	and the shadow of the city is expanding
	as the sun sets down.
百神諧景福	Hundred deities harmonize to produce the great auspice,
萬國仰君臨	and ten thousands kingdoms look up to the ruling lord.
大樂非鐘鼓	The supreme music is hardly about bells or drums, ³⁷
且用戒民心	its function lies in warning the mind of those who hear it.

At the beginning of the poem, He Tuo cites the laudatory comments made by Jizha on the “Airs of Qi” and “Airs of Tang.” The “lingering influence” of the Qi region can trace its lineage to Jiang Shang, the wise minister who assisted the kings of the Zhou. The Qi songs are noted to have the attribute of being “expansive,” and in likeliness to the boundless ocean, their depth cannot be measured. Meanwhile, the people at Tang were descendants of the sage-ruler Yao, and the sentiment that Jizha detected in the songs of Tang appears to be their longing for the sage’s virtue. After introducing these two examples, He Tuo employs a familiar rhetorical strategy characteristic of court composition to eulogize the current situation against precedents. The poet regards the musical performance that he enjoys at the moment, the “musical performance from the Six Epochs” (*bianwu* 徧舞), outstrips those from the two domains—one in the east and the other in the northwest, one characteristic of spatial unboundedness and the other, moral profundity. Hence the Sui’s musical achievement is extolled for its ability to both reach the remote areas and transform listeners with its moral quality.

³⁵ Li Shan in his commentary on *Wen xuan* cites one *Poetic Exegesis* by Mao Chang (*Mao Chang shizhuan* 毛萇詩傳) which defines that “The music of the eastern barbarians is called Mo; the music of the southern barbarians is called Ren” 東夷之樂曰昧, 南夷之樂曰任. *Wen xuan*, 1.37.

³⁶ “Fire Star” appears in the poem “Seventh Month” (“Qiyue” 七月) in the *Classic of Poetry*: “Fire Star appears in the seventh month, and in the ninth month, we start preparing winter clothes” 七月流火, 九月授衣. “Fire Star” augurs that the chilly months will begin.

³⁷ In “Record on Music” (“Yue ji” 樂記) in *Liji*, there is a dictum that says: “The supreme music must be easy; the supreme rites must be simple” 大樂必易, 大禮必簡. See Owen, *Readings*, p. 55.

The very act of “observing” prompts the poet to describe what he sees and hears in the next lines. The harmonious symphony of musical instruments features drums and bells being played alongside with attuned strings and pipes to make beautiful sounds. The arrangement of the dancing troupe, with eight dancers in each line and row—amounting to sixty-four participants in total, properly accounts for the status of the intended audience as the “Son of Heaven.” Meanwhile, the descriptive vocabularies used here such as “five-color plumes” (*shuyu* 樹羽) and “Six Virtues” (*liude* 六德) can trace their textual provenances to the classical texts about the rites of the ancient Zhou civilization. One of the praiseworthy characteristics of this musical display is its inclusiveness. As He Tuo remarks in the fifth couplet, the presentation not only combines two sagely musical repertoires inherited from the past, but also assimilates peripheral “ethnic” sounds at the central court ceremony. Whether He Tuo, a music specialist himself, truly observed in the performance this great “restoration” and “integration” is beside the point. What matters is by referring it as Shao, Hu, Mo or Ren mixed together—old musical tunes already textualized as literary allusions by He’s time, the Sui concert being represented does gain orthodox and mighty status through this careful selection of appropriate references. As a result, the empire’s musical legitimacy is substantiated as much through sensory effect as through textual configuration.

In the sixth couplet, however, the poet makes a surprising shift to describing natural surroundings and environment. With the Fire Star traveling across the sky, the days will be getting cooler, and the shadow of the city expands while the sun is setting over the city. This liminal moment of dusk seems to parallel with the coda of the performance since the gradually dimmed light will likewise put an end to the “observation.” With the concert completed, the poet starts to ponder over the expected effect of this imperial performance. As he sees it, in the

spiritual realm, gratified deities will bestow blessing, and in the realm of the secular, all kingdoms in the world pledge submission to new empire—all because of the power manifested through the spectacle. As the numinous auspice and loyalty are secured, He Tuo explicitly articulates the ideology of court music in the last couplet: “The supreme music is hardly about drums or bells, / and its function lies in warning the mind of those who hear it.”

He Tuo apparently tries to move beyond “trivial” technicality and brood on the more profound significance of the state’s ritual music. He identifies himself as a musical expert different from a common listener and sees the manipulative power of imperial music in molding commoner’s mind and sentiment. He Tuo as a musician should very well know the pivotal importance of a set of “correctly tuned” musical instruments in determining the standard pitch based on which the state ritual music was founded. As Howard Goodman meticulously demonstrates, Xu Xun’s 荀勗 (d. 289) musical rectification in the Western Jin court very much depended on his design of a new flute to set the “right” pitch and the discovery of musical instruments in ancient tombs to corroborate the new standard.³⁸ Moreover, the fact that the Sui dynasty could launch its musical project resulted from the acquisition of the Chen dynasty experts and ritual equipment. Hence instruments like “bells and drums” not only give the “music” an audible form but also crucially form the basis for further debate over musical principles and orthodoxy. However, for laypersons, or commoners (*min* 民), as He Tuo suggests, it in truth does not matter whether the musical instruments indeed come down from the Han dynasty or even the ancient times, insofar as the people, awestruck by the solemnity and the sense of authority conveyed through the performance, believe in the musical continuum.

³⁸ Howard Goodman, *Xun Xu*, pp. 161-279.

It is interesting how He Tuo twists the usage of *jie* 戒 (warning) in the last line. In the canonical statement about the function of poems/songs in the *Classic of Poetry*, it is prescribed that poems/songs can be used for subtle criticism. When it happens, “the one who speaks it has no culpability, yet it remains adequate to warn those who hear it” 言之者無罪, 聞之者足以戒.³⁹ The saying justifies that poetic articulation is a conduit whereby people below can criticize those above as a way to express their rancor. In the poem, however, instead of the claim that the one in a superior position should heed the warning, the imperial music is to warn the mind of listeners, harness their sentiments, and regulate their behaviors. If Jizha’s observation indicates the “sound” as a reflection of people’s opinions toward a domain’s political climate, for He Tuo, then, court ritual music becomes a tool of manipulation that creates the image of unbroken cultural inheritance as well as affects people’s perception of the empire through aural/visual grandeur.

He Tuo’s self-conscious identification as a performance observer as well as music expert (instead of a lay listener) brings interesting perspective to his poetic articulation of imperial musical performance. After all, he is not one member of the audience who merely extols the spectacle with lavish verbal ornament but the one who sees the ideological impact of music on the audience. As his role as an “observer” completely shifts to that of a “musical expert,” He Tuo offers an ambiguous view toward the musical accomplishment of the Sui dynasty, a state that was separated from the Gold Age of antiquity for thousands of years. This is shown in his poem titled “Revising and Rectifying Ancient Music at Imperial Music Office under Imperial Commission” (“Fengchi yu taichang xiuzheng guyue” 奉敕於太常修正古樂). As the ancient

³⁹ Owen, *Readings*, p. 46.

music “naturally” emerged at the dawn of human civilization and was artificially imitated by the Sui dynasty, the poem ends up implying the inevitable inferiority of the present in comparison to the past.

奉敕於太常修正古樂

Revising and Rectifying Ancient Music
at the Music Office under Imperial Commission⁴⁰

大樂遺鐘鼓
至樂貴忘情
俗久淳和變
年深禮教生
嶰谷調孤管
崑山學鳳鳴

Supreme music dispenses with bells and drums,
and the perfect music values the oblivion of emotions.⁴¹
After a custom had last long, simplicity altered,
as many years had passed, the teaching of rites arose.
At the Xie valley, a single bamboo pipe was attuned,
and at the Kunlun Mountain, the crying of phoenixes
was imitated [to decide the pitch standard].⁴²

浮雲成舞曲
白雪作歌名
聞詩六義辨

“Floating Clouds” became the musical tune for a dance,
and “White Snow” was used as the name of a song.⁴³
When the poems from the *Classics of Poetry* were heard,
the Six Principles were distinguished,⁴⁴

觀漏八風平

And with waterclock observed,
the Eight Winds were leveled.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Sui shi*, 2.2658.

⁴¹ The couplet recapitulates what is described in the “Record on Music” in the *Liji* about ritual and music. “Since music comes from within, it belongs to genuine affections; since rites are formed without, they have patterning. The supreme music must be easy; the supreme rites must be simple. When music is perfect, there is no rancor; when rites are perfect, there is no contention.” 樂由中出故靜，禮自外作故文。大樂必易，大禮必簡。樂至則無怨，禮至則不爭。 *Liji zhushu*, 37.667-668. Owen, *Readings*, p. 55.

⁴² Linglun 伶倫 was a musician commissioned by the mythical Yellow Emperor to establish pitch-standard. Legend has it that he came to the Xie valley and made the bamboo there into a flute. Once he blew it, the pitch-standard was finalized. It is also recorded that Linglun distinguished the twelve pitch-standards (*lü* 律) based on the sounds of female and male phoenixes.

⁴³ In the *Shangshu dazhuan* 尚書大傳, which likely came into being in the Han dynasty, it mentions: “[In the age of the sage-king Shun,] there were hundreds of talented artisans, and they harmonized with one another to sing of the auspicious clouds. The ruler Shun initiated the singing of the song. 於時俊乂百工，相和而歌卿雲。帝乃倡之。 *Yiwen leiju*, 98.1696. “White Snow” is the name of a musical performance and it appears in Song Yu’s 宋玉 (fl. the third century BCE) “Reply to the King of Chu’s Questions” anthologized in *Wen xuan*. According to the author, both “Spring” and “White Snow” were musical tunes that only the elite members in the city knew and could properly harmonize. See *Wen xuan*, 45.1999.

⁴⁴ The “Great Preface” to the *Classic of Poetry* introduces that poetic canon has six principles (*liu yi* 六義): Airs (*feng* 風), exposition (*fu* 賦), comparison (*bi* 比), affective image (*xing* 興), Odes (*ya* 雅), and Hymns (*song* 頌). *Maoshi zhushu*, 1.12. Owen, *Readings*, p. 45.

⁴⁵ There is a double-entendre intended here. When Jizha commented on various kinds of musical performance during his stay in the kingdom of Lu, the diplomat praised highly the Zhou dynasty hymn and he described it as:

肅穆皇威暢	Solemn and respectful, the royal power prevails unobstructed,
淪漣河水清	and the Yellow River, with fluctuating waves, becomes clear.
鈞天動絲竹	To harmonize with the Heaven, strings and bamboo pipes move, ⁴⁶
聒地響鐃鉦	and to shake the Earth, the <i>chun</i> and <i>zheng</i> bells echo.
盡美兼韶濩	The absolute beauty combines [the musical repertoires of] Shao and Hu,
盛德總咸英	the splendid virtue brings together the Xian and Ying music. ⁴⁷
寥亮晷鍾徹	Loud and clear the Fu-style bells resonate, ⁴⁸
飄揚翟羽輕	and fluttering in the wind, pheasant feathers are light. ⁴⁹
小臣屬千載	This minor official, looking upon thousands of years,
時幸預簪纓	is fortunate enough to participate in state government.
行欣負蒼璧	He is delighted, holding the grey jade disc, ⁵⁰
衢壇聽九成	to hear the final accomplishment of the music at the ritual altar. ⁵¹

As the title suggests, the task that He Tuo was assigned was to “revise and rectify”
(*xiuzheng* 修正) the “ancient music” (*guyue* 古樂). As a result, the poet’s narrative starts with

“The Five Sounds harmonize; the Eight Winds are even” 五聲和，八風平。 “Eight winds” are glossed as “eight tones” (*bayin* 八音). Meanwhile, the “eight winds” can literally mean the winds coming from the eight directions.

⁴⁶ *Juntian* 鈞天, often appearing as *juntian zhi yue* 鈞天之樂, was used as a compound to refer to the Heavenly Music. But to preserve the effect of parallelism, I translate *jun* as a verb and *tian* as its object: to harmonize with Heaven.

⁴⁷ As noted above, Shao is the musical repertoire of the sage-king Shun and Hu is the Shang dynasty music. Xian alludes to Xianchi 咸池, the music associated with the sage-king Yao. *Liuying* 六英, abbreviated here as *ying*, is the music played during the rule of the mythical king Ku 嚳.

⁴⁸ In *Zhouli*, it is recorded that an artisan with the family Fu invented bells (*Fu shi wei zhong* 晷氏為鐘). Yet *fu* can also mean “duck.”

⁴⁹ Pheasant feathers were used in court ritual dance to promote “cultural accomplishment.” Zheng Xuan commented that in the dance, “shield” and “ax” could be used to praise the martial accomplishment (*wu* 武) whereas “pheasant feathers” and “tails of yak” were used to promote the cultural accomplishment (*wen* 文).

⁵⁰ *Zhouli* prescribes the correct use of ritual paraphernalia according to different occasions and official status. “Jade can be made into six kinds of vessels to honor the Heaven, Earth, and the four directions. The grey jade disc is used to honor the Heaven. 以玉作六器，以禮天地四方，蒼璧禮天。 *Zhouli zhushu*, 18.281.

⁵¹ In *Shangshu*, it is said that when the nine sections of the Xiaoshao music came to a conclusion, phoenixes, attracted by the sound, arrived. 蕭韶九成，鳳凰來儀。 *Wen xuan*, 6.284.

musical simplicity in the antiquity and ends with the creation of contemporary musical and ritual program that He Tuo claims to have supervised to see its final accomplishment. However, as He Tuo remarks in the poem that the Sui was separate from the antiquity for thousands of years, one cannot help but wonder: Is the music that He Tuo at the moment finishes the true “ancient music”? What exactly constitutes “ancient music” and how is it imagined? How is the current musical accomplishment described in relation to that articulated “ancientness”?

According to the poet, there once was an age in antiquity when the supreme music and perfect music existed without dependence on human-made instruments or expression for human emotions. As years accumulated and customs developed, pristine simplicity dissipated, to the extent that the teaching of rites (*lijiao* 禮教) came into being. With the intention to properly educate and guide his people with the right sound, the Yellow Emperor, as the poet narrates, ordered his musician Linglun to standardize the musical pitch. Linglun’s establishment of the “correct” sound was based on the flute made of the Xie valley bamboo and the crying of male and female phoenixes—things found in nature. Nature thus became the source of human invention. Now that instruments were created and basic principle was established, harmonious arrangement of notes gave rise to songs and dances, and their tune titles, again, appropriated natural phenomena such as “floating clouds” and “white snow.” As “culture” continued to progress, songs became gradually codified and canonized. The *Classic of Poetry*, the “Airs” of which Jizha once observed and gave judgment on, taught people to distinguish (*bian* 辨) the “six principles” based on the aesthetic and generic characteristics. Meanwhile, one also realized the crucial link between pitch and calendric, between musical accordance and cosmological harmony. With the expertise on metrology, harmonics, and astrology, humans could observe water-clock (*lou* 漏) and make consonant all the constituent parts of the universe. Music was

changed from the sounds in imitation of nature to a kind of principle making sense of the world and giving structure and meaning to human activity.

Feng 風 is a loaded term in classical Chinese with its meanings ranging from “wind,” the “Airs” of a domain, “moral influence,” to “criticism.”⁵² The “eight winds” in the tenth line can mean the harmony of both the “eight sounds” and the winds from the eight directions, which bespeak a peaceful era. He Tuo later makes a smooth transition from the leveled “winds,” indicative cosmological concord, to the unobstructed (*chang* 暢) “influence” of imperial authority in the eleventh line. While “wind” creates fluctuating waves in the Yellow River, the royal power guarantees its clarity (*qing* 清)—a halcyon world ruled by a legitimate ruler.

The next three couplets then focus on describing the court music that He Tuo was commissioned to rectify. The repertoire relies on specific musical instruments, such as strings, bamboos, bells, and drums, to harmonize with (*jun* 鈞) the Heaven and shake (*guo* 聒) the Earth. Also, the current age is to be judged against “history,” namely, the lineage of musical tradition. Similar to the previous poem, the musical restoration shows the inheritance and integration of sage musical repertoires such as Shao 韶, Hu 護, Xianchi 咸池, and Liuying 六英. Furthermore, He Tuo stresses the sophistication of ritual paraphernalia accompanying the musical performance. The Fu-style bells (*fuzhong* 甬鐘), which a more literal translation can render as “duck bells,” give the sound that is loud and clear; meanwhile, the dancing troupe wields pheasant feathers light in mid-air. These two animal images, duck and pheasant, are noteworthy, as they interestingly echo the creation of musical tunes narrated several couplets earlier. If music in ancient times came into being through inspiration from natural objects, such as bamboo,

⁵² Stephen Owen, *Readings*, p.586-587.

phoenix, floating clouds, or white snow, the Sui music too aspires to show its inheritance to nature for its musical project. Nevertheless, the restoration of the “ancient music” in the Sui court features only a later-day ritualized, symbolic imitation burdened with heavy cultural legacy and conventions. It is already several layers separated from the “simplicity” of the ancient time before “culture” progressed.

The speaker, as an official in charge of the musical program, appears at the end of the poem. Just as the musical tradition had been passed down from the ancient times, He Tuo at the moment served in the Sui court after thousands of years (*qianzai* 千載), hoping to restore “ancient music.” A sharp contrast between He Tuo and Linglun—both musicians commissioned by the authority to establish musical orthodoxy—occurs. Linglun once picked the ideal bamboo from the Xie Valley and listened to the crying of phoenixes at Kunlun Mountain for the pitch-standard. He Tuo, however, carries “gray jade disc,” another piece of ritual equipment, and wears a ribbon-tied official hat that marks his status as a state bureaucrat. He feels “delighted” (*xin* 欣) and fortunate (*xing* 幸) to be able to reside at the designated ritual space—the ritual altar—to supervise the accomplishment of the imperial musical project.

There is no mistake that the poem aims to honor the Sui’s musical achievement and He Tuo’s efforts in reinstituting the ancient music. However, something seems to be amiss, and there are contradictions that cannot be properly reconciled. He Tuo’s attitude is ambivalent. If the “supreme music” and “perfect music” involve no musical instruments and value no human emotions, how about the Sui court ritual music which does rely on a whole set of ritual paraphernalia and incite the musicologist’s delight in its accomplishment? Does it mean that the Sui music is hardly “supreme” or “perfect”? Also, how can we understand the narrative of the dissipation of simplicity and progression of culture in the poem? If cultural sophistication is

praised in the poem as the new empire rebuilt its cultural achievement on past legacy, the poet seems also to hint a nostalgic sentiment to the age where human and nature had a more direct connection—especially if we consider the implicit comparison between Linglun and the poet. While the legendary musician observed the nature for musical inspiration, our poet He Tuo peruses the record about Linglun’s legend and oversees the performance at the ritual altar. The “thousand years” gap between the present and ancient finally casts an ironic light on the whole enterprise of “revising and rectifying ancient music.” There is an irrevocable loss of the ancient music that occurred during thousands of years of change, development, and transmission. Or, there is never an “ancient music” to begin with but a retrospective envision and invention of that origin. The poem demonstrates that instead of restoring a “true” ancient tune, the Sui court ritual music features the articulated ancientness as a guise of Sui musicologists’ dilemma, compromise, and new creation. This highly eulogistic poem on Sui’s musical ambition then paradoxically reveals its unattainability.

As we can see, He Tuo’s self-identification as an expert on musicology gives fresh opinions on imperial court music in his poems. He detects the ideological function of court music that may escape the mind of ordinary listeners. Two poems below, however, are more standard praise poems on court musical performance, and they were written by court officials who did not seem to obtain specialized knowledge on music. The occasion of composition was the public performance of the newly rectified court music in 594. Kong Deshao 孔德紹, a courtier originally from Guiji in the south, wrote one poem titled “Observing the Newly Made Music Performed by Chamberlains for Ceremonials” (“Guan taichang zou xinyue” 觀太常奏新樂), to which another official Bian Bin 卞斌 wrote a companion piece. It is likely that Kong’s composition described his actual witness of the musical concert, while Bian’s was a verbal

response to Kong's poem without the poet ever participating in the event. In both texts, the poets lavishly praise the new project and the imperial power without reservation, which serves as an apt embodiment of He Tuo's comment about the effect of imperial music—"The supreme music is hardly about drums or bells, / and its function lies in warning the mind of those who hear it." More interestingly, the two poems revolve around a curious tension between restored continuity and innovative creation.

觀太常奏新樂	Observing the Newly Made Music Performed by Chamberlains for Ceremonials ⁵³
大君膺寶曆 出豫表功成	The Son of Heaven has assumed the imperial throne, as shown through the hexagram of "Contentment," his accomplishments are duly manifested. ⁵⁴
鈞天金石響	The Music of Heavenly Harmony features the echoing resonance of metals and chime stones,
洞庭弦管清	and [similar to the performance] at Dongting, pipes and strings give clear sounds. ⁵⁵
八音動繁會 九變叶希聲	Eight sounds move fast and form harmonious symphony, and after Nine Changes, it arrives at extraordinary soundlessness. ⁵⁶
和雲留睿賞	Tender clouds make his wisely appreciation linger,

⁵³ *Sui shi*, 6.2722.

⁵⁴ "Contentment" (*yu* 豫) is one of the sixty-four hexagrams in the *Book of Change*. The "Commentary on Image" explains the implication of the Yu hexagram as: "The previous lords composed music to propound their virtue" 先王以作樂崇德. *Zhouyi zhushu*, 2.48.

⁵⁵ Zhao Jianzi 趙簡子, a minister of the kingdom of Jin in the fifth century BCE, once fell into a coma. He was awake after two days and related what he experienced during the trance: "I came to the the place of the Ruler of Heaven, being greatly delightful. I roamed with hundreds of deities in heaven. The nine pieces of the immortal music was played along with dancing performance. They are not like the musical performance of the Three Epochs. Its sound moves one's heart" 我之帝所甚樂, 與百神游於鈞天, 廣樂九奏萬舞, 不類三代之樂, 其聲動人心. *Shiji*, 43.1787. The Music of Heavenly Harmony (*juntian zhiyue* 鈞天之樂) thus has been used to refer to immortal music or imperial music. It is related in the *Zhuangzi* that the Yellow Emperor played the Xianchi music at the wilderness of Dongting near the Heavenly Mountain. *Zhuangzi jishi*, p. 501.

⁵⁶ "Nine Changes" (*jiubian* 九變), similar to *jiucheng* 九成 in He Tuo's poem above, refers to the conclusion of the musical performance. "Extraordinary Soundlessness" comes from one passage in the Daoist text *Laozi*, which tells that: "The Great Image does not have a form, and the Great Tune lacks sound" 大象無形, 大音希聲. *Laozi jiaoshi*, p. 171.

薰風悅聖情	and warm breeze delights the sagely sentiment. ⁵⁷
盛烈光韶濩	Regarding the grandness of the achievement,
	it is brighter than the
	[musical repertoires of] Shao and Hu,
易俗邁咸英	as for transforming customs, it reaches farther than
	the [influence of] Xianchi and Liuying music.
竊吹良無取	My own singing indeed has nothing to contribute,
率舞抃輕生	this insignificant creature only dances while
	clapping his hands. ⁵⁸

A cascade of allusion is employed in the poem to praise both the musical performance and imperial power that it embodies. It first asserts the legitimacy of the rule of the Son of Heaven and justifies the new musical project undertaken to manifest his great achievements. Next, metals, chime stones, pipes, and strings produce the melody that resembles both the Music of Heavenly Harmony and that performed by the Yellow Emperor at Dongting. The third couplet dwells on the climax and coda of the musical performance: different musical notes move faster and faster, and with several turns and twists, it comes to a grand finale. Finally, it subsides. Similar to He Tuo's first poem, as the musical performance draws to an end, the poet ponders on the effect of the concert. Kong describes the satisfaction of the ruler who is engrossed by the performance. One also sees an almost identical couplet to He Tuo's, which remarks that the music being observed integrates the previous sagely repertoires in terms of both its grandeur and the ability to transform customs.

⁵⁷ The effect of songs performed by a true master is famously described in a story in the *Liezi* as being able to shake the woods and make linger moving clouds. In the "Song of Southern Wind" ("Nanfeng ge" 南風歌) allegedly sung by the sage-king Shun, there is a line that describes "How warm the wind from the south is!" 南風之熏兮. Later "Warm Breeze" was used to refer to the songs played by sage-rulers.

⁵⁸ The sage-king Shun once ordered his musician-official Kui 夔 to take charge of musical performance so that his subjects can be educated and deities and humans can interact in harmony. Kui answered, "Alas! When I beat and stroke the rocks, hundred kinds of beasts dance together" 於予擊石拊石,百獸率舞. *Shuangshu zhushu*, 3.46.

The poem is full of admiration and praise. What is particularly noteworthy is that Kong Deshao never portrays himself as a Jizha, the music expert, even though he himself, like He Tuo, “observes the musical performance” (*guanyue*). Instead, Kong portrays himself merely as an admirer being fascinated by the spectacle without ever, like He Tuo, stepping outside the visual/aural enchantment to contemplate the meaning of the imperial music. In the end, the poet claims that the court ritual music appears so perfect that his singing, namely, this one poem, can contribute nothing to its grandness. In contrast to the “sage-king” and Kui, the former commissioned the task and the latter helped realize it, our listener is but a “mindless beast.” He dances and claps hands as the melody moves, articulates his wonder at this court event, and wholeheartedly believes in the imperial power being manifested through the visual/aural splendor.

Perhaps Kong Deshao was so fascinated by the musical performance and so eager to extol the court accomplishment that he hardly accounted for the “newness” of the music (*xinyue* 新樂) marked in the title. The allusions that he uses, such as the Yellow Emperor’s Dongting music, Shao, Hu, Xianchi, and Liuying, all point to the continuity of the Sui’s musical performance to the former traditions. Did the Sui musical project achieve something new? Even though it cannot be ascertained whether the courtier Bian Bin also attended this court event, Bian’s poem is first of all a companion piece to Kong’s: a textual response to another poetic text. Bian Bin’s poem sticks more closely to the title of Kong Deshao’s piece and elaborates on the “newness” of the Sui achievement that Kong failed to explicitly bring out.

和孔侍郎觀太常新奏樂詩 Companion Piece to Vice Director Kong’s
“Observing the Newly Made Music Performed
by Chamberlain for Ceremonials”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Sui shi*, 7.2728.

昔人夢上帝	The one in the past dreamed of the Ruler of Heaven,
尚喜預鈞天	and he delighted in witnessing the performance of the Music of Heavenly Harmony. ⁶⁰
況茲開景業	[How could it be compared to] now,
作樂武功宣	when grand enterprise has been founded,
大雅廢還理	and music has been created to propagate the military accomplishment.
乘風毀更懸	The “Greater Odes” have been abandoned but are then rearranged, ⁶¹
中和誠易擬	and the bird-shaped bell frames were once destroyed and now restored.
韶夏詎相沿	The inner harmony is indeed easy to imitate, ⁶²
犍為磬響徹	and how is it that the music played in the Xia dynasty continued that of the Shun?
嶰谷管聲傳	The chiming stones from Jianwei still give clear echo, ⁶³
小臣濫清耳	the sound produced by the pipe of the Xie Valley has been passed down.
長奉南風弦	The minor subject is not worthy to have listened to the music,
	hopefully he could stand in attendance on the performance of the Southern Wind.

It is noteworthy that Bian does not give any detailed description of the musical performance and instead dwells more on the “significance” of the Sui musical program. Right at the beginning, the poet juxtaposes the past with the present through the same textual allusion on Zhao Jianzi’s roaming in heaven and his witnessing of the “Music of Heavenly Harmony” (*juntian zhi yue* 鈞

⁶⁰ For the allusion on Zhao Jianzi and his roaming in Heaven, see note 55.

⁶¹ The “Greater Odes” is one section in the *Classics of Poetry*.

⁶² The chapter of “Doctrine of Mean” in *Li ji* gives an explanation of “Inner Harmony” (*zhonghe* 中和): “When emotions such as happiness, anger, sadness, and joy are held within absent of outward expression, it is called *zhong* (inner); when they are expressed and yet agree to proper regulation, it is called *he* (harmony). *Zhong* is the great foundation of the world; *he* is the universally acknowledged principle in the world. When *zhonghe* is achieved, the Heaven and Earth are properly positioned, and myriads of things are nurtured” 喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中，發而皆中節謂之和。中也者，天下之大本也。和也者，天下之達道也。致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。 *Liji zhushu*, 52.879.

⁶³ In Emperor Cheng’s reign of the Western Han dynasty, sixteen ancient chime stones were discovered near the river in the Jianwei county 犍為郡於水濱得古磬十六枚。The court considered it as an auspicious omen. *Han shu*, 22.1033.

天之樂). The use of “the one in the past” (*xiren* 昔人) without specifying the historical person contrasts rhetorically *zi* 茲 (now and here) in the third line. Interestingly, Bian draws a comparison between Jianzi and Kong Deshao—both have experienced the “Heavenly Music”: whereas the former only “dreamt” of it, the latter does experience it in “reality.” The phrase *zuoyue* 作樂 (creating music) is a loaded term, and it was frequently associated with the political achievement of a legitimate king. For example, *Liji* inculcates that a king creates music after achieving accomplishments (*gongcheng zuoyue* 功成作樂). Bian Bin particularly notes the Sui music is created to propagate the military achievement (*wugong* 武功), that is, the successful employment of (violent) forces to attain peace and unification.

As *wugong* implies both destruction and restoration, Bian Bin in the following couplets elaborates more on the “newness” of the Sui Empire and its musical project. The poet emphasizes the rupture of cultural transmission. “Greater Odes” were once lost, so were destroyed the “bird-shaped bell frames,” the court musical equipment. It is, however, the Sui dynasty that salvaged and reinstituted the solemn musical tradition. Moreover, Bian Bin further distinguishes the Sui musical achievement from its immediate predecessor. Just as the Xia dynasty did not carry on (*yan* 沿) the musical tradition of its predecessor, namely, the sage-king Shun, the poet seems to suggest that the Sui hardly modeled on the Northern Zhou dynasty for music inspiration. The “inner harmony,” however, the principle of music and rulership, remains intact. In the end, the “novelty” of the Sui music lies in the court’s rejection of the immediate dynastic ritual precedents, and yet, this new kind of musical performance also demonstrates “inner harmony” through the old sounds, such as the chime stones discovered at Jianwei and piping of the Xie Valley. If Kong Deshao’s poem focuses on the specific moment of performance, Bian’s has a temporal and historical dimension. He situates the Sui musical project

in the history of loss and recovery and describes it as both novel and conventional. It is the *creation* a kind of music (*zuoyue*) to befit the political achievement of the Sui's unification, and in the meantime, it is redolent of *ancient* harmonious sounds and principle.

Indeed, dynastic rise and fall could be explained in musical terms, and the extinction of a state generated as much moral judgment as nostalgic retrospect. The last poem that this section will examine about listening to (*ting* 聽) the orthodox musical performance further complicates the articulation of musical experience. After the Chen dynasty was conquered, Emperor Wen of the Sui ordered the performance of some Chen musical repertoires in the Sui court, including a type of song called "Songs of Pure Shang Tune" (*qingshang yue* 清商樂). This set of musical performance originated from the Han dynasty, and it became popular in the early third century, especially at the court of Cao family, the founder of the Cao-Wei dynasty. However, after the fall of the Western Jin, this kind of music was lost in the north but preserved in the south. *Sui shu* records the incidence about Emperor Wen hearing this long-lost music and offering his comments:

The Sui court acquired it [i.e., southern musical tradition] after the Chen dynasty was conquered. When Emperor Gaozu [i.e., Yang Jian, Emperor Wen] listened to its performance, he approved the rhythm and regulation. He remarked: "It is indeed the sound of the orthodoxy of the central land. It was outcast to the south of the Yangzi River in the past because of the Yongjia chaos. Now We have received the Mandate of Heaven and again can gather it at the court. Even though the criteria of evaluation changed along with the time, it still displays ancient principle. This music can be the foundation [for the state's musical program]. [Concerned officials should] slightly reduce [the bad] and promote [the good], get rid of the sadness and rancor, and supplement it [with other traditions] after research. Based on it, one should once again regularize pitch-standards and design musical instruments accordingly."

及平陳後獲之。高祖聽之，善其節奏，曰：此華夏正聲也。昔因永嘉，流於江外，我受天明命，今復會同。雖賞逐時遷，而古致猶在。可以此為本，微更損益，去其哀怨，考而補之，以新定律呂，更造樂器。⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Sui shu*, 15.377.

The emperor gives an interesting view toward the southern musical tradition. First, this type of music from the Chen illustrates the “sound of the orthodoxy of the central land” (*huaxia zhengsheng* 華夏正聲) that could form the basis for the Sui pitch-standards and musical restoration. Also, it is his achievement that this musical tradition was finally brought back to the central domain. However, this sound should be adopted with a critical eye. As it belonged to the fallen state, the music was considered morally problematic. According to the ruler, despite its “ancient principle” (*guzhi* 古致), it contained the sentiment of “sadness and rancor” (*aiyuan* 哀怨) that reflected the political failure of the former dynasty. It needs to be deleted, revised, and supplemented with other musical traditions.

This public display of the Chen music and the emperor’s comments likely occasioned Xu Shanxin, originally a southerner then serving in the Sui court, to compose the poem titled “Listening to the Music of Orthodox Sound at the Office of Ceremonial, Corrected by Cai Ziyuan from the Chen Dynasty” (“Yu taichang si ting Chenguo Cai Ziyan suo jiao zhengsheng yue shi” 於太常寺聽陳國蔡子元所校正聲樂詩).⁶⁵ The poem has several verbal echoes with Emperor Wen’s comments, including “the sound of the orthodoxy,” “[being] outcast to the South of the Yangzi River,” and “sadness and rancor.” This music must be familiar to Xu as he once served in the Chen dynasty; now, the poet listened to the music of his former home state in a radically changed situation. In the poem, the poet points out the accomplishment and failure of

⁶⁵ The composition of the poem cannot be accurately dated, nor do we know much about the Chen musician Cai Ziyuan, who once served in the southern dynasty and was reappointed to manage Sui court music after the Chen was conquered. Based on the phrase “Chen state” (*chen guo* 陳國) in the title, the “sound of a fallen kingdom” (*wangguo yin* 亡國音) in the poem, and other verbal echoes between the poem and Emperor Wen’s remarks, I date Xu Shanxin’s poem to this occasion.

the Southern Dynasties, especially the Chen, and mingles his nostalgia with obligated articulation of moral judgment.

於太常寺聽陳國蔡子元所校正聲樂詩	Listening to the Music of Orthodox Sound at the Office of Ceremonials, Corrected by Cai Ziyuan from the Chen Dynasty ⁶⁶
維陽成禮樂	Rituals and music were once established in the southern land, ⁶⁷
治定昔君臨	and the realm was appeased and well-governed by previous lords. ⁶⁸
充庭觀樹羽 之帝仰撝金	In the court ceremony, one observed five-color plumes, ⁶⁹ [Similar to the situation where one came] to the Ruler of Heaven, they struck the metal instrument while lifting their head up [to the lord]. ⁷⁰
既因鍾石變	Then, music changed as the sound of bells and stones altered,
將隨河海沈 湛露廢還序	and it sank down along with the river into the ocean. After the poem “Dense Dew” had been abandoned, it was restored, ⁷¹
乘風絕復尋	the bird-shaped bell frames, having been lost, were found again.
袞章無舊迹 韶夏有餘音	There was no longer the trace of ancient imperial garments, and yet the sound of the Shao and Xia musical traditions remained.
澤竭英莖散	The [royal] grace was exhausted,

⁶⁶ *Sui shi*, 6.2708.

⁶⁷ *Weiyang* 維陽 should be emended to *weiyang* 維揚, the name of the wealthy, flourishing city of Yangzhou in the south. Xiao Yi once aggrandized the political achievement of the Liang dynasty as: “Now the emperor achieved great enterprise in the south [*weiyang*], and the achievement is propagated to influence the whole world” 今則帝業維揚, 功施天下. *Quan Liang wen*, 17.3051.

⁶⁸ The “Record of Music” in *Li ji* notes that “A king creates music after achieving accomplishment, and establishes rituals after the realm is peaceful and well-governed” 王者功成作樂, 治定制禮. *Liji zhushu*, 67.370.

⁶⁹ For the allusion to “five-color feathers,” see note 49 in this chapter.

⁷⁰ This uses the allusion to Zhao Jianzi, who dreamt of roaming in Heaven and enjoying Heavenly Music.

⁷¹ “Zhanlu” (“Dense Dew”) is the title of a poem in the “Lesser Odes” in the *Classic of Poetry*. It is interpreted by the Mao preface as: “[It is played when] the Son of Heaven holds a banquet for his supporting dukes” 天子燕諸侯. In the preface to the poem “The Sixth Month” (“Liuyue” 六月), it is also noted that “if the song of ‘Dense Dew’ is abandoned, myriads of states will fall apart” 湛露廢則萬國離矣. *Maoshi zhushu*, 10.357.

人遺憂思深	and Ying and Jing music were dispersed, ⁷²
悲來未減瑟	people were left behind, and their longing was profound. ⁷³
淚下正聞琴	Sorrow comes, and sound of <i>se</i> zither does not slow down,
詎似文侯睡	and tears drop while one hears the <i>qin</i> zither playing.
	How does it [i.e., the music] sound like the one that
	made drowsy the Earl Wen, ⁷⁴
聊同微子吟	and it is the same as the chanting of Weizi. ⁷⁵
鍾奏殊南北	As for the playing of bells, there is a difference
	between the north and south,
商聲異古今	and the sounds of <i>shang</i> tune differ as of now and past.
獨有延州聽	Only when there is a Jizha who listens to the music,
應知亡國音	then one should know it is the sound of a falling state.

Xu Shanxin offers a judgment of the Chen ritual music that he is now observing, a retrospective contemplation of what the Chen court music could have portended that none of them had noticed before. In the beginning, the poet introduces a southern ritual/musical tradition that could be traced back to antiquity when previous lords' successfully ruled. The age of peace was celebrated by musical concert featuring metal bells and five-color feathers as ritual

⁷² In the preface of Ban Gu's "Poetic Exposition on the Two Capitals" ("Liangdu fu" 兩都賦), the author writes: "After King Cheng and King Kang passed away, the [composition of] eulogy stopped. After the kingly grace was exhausted, no poem was ever composed" 昔成康沒而頌聲寢, 王澤竭而詩不作. *Wen xuan*, 1.1-2. Ying and Jing music generally refer to ancient elegant music.

⁷³ This alludes to Jizha's comment on the "Air of Tang." See note 30 of this chapter.

⁷⁴ Earl Wen of the Wei once asked Zixia 子夏, the disciple of Confucius, about the difference between "ancient music" and "new music." The earl described his experience as: "When I [wear] solemn black robe and official hat and listen to the ancient music, I would not choose to lie down [so that I fall asleep]. When I listen to the sounds from Zheng or Wei [i.e., new music], then I do not know weariness" 吾端冕而聽古樂則唯恐臥, 聽鄭衛之音則不知倦. *Liji zhushu*, 38.686.

⁷⁵ Weizi 微子 was loyal official of the Shang dynasty. After King Wu of the Zhou conquered the Shang, Weizi was pardoned and reappointed as the official of the new dynasty. There are two allusions associating with Weizi and his songs. The first is in *Shangshu dazhuan* 尚書大傳. "Weizi was about to serve in the Zhou court and passed by the ruins of [the capital of] the former Shang dynasty. He saw grain growing with ears coming up. It once was his home state [lit., state of his parents], and his mind was stirred and heart was broken. He thus composed an elegant tune" 微子將朝周, 過殷之故墟, 見麥秀之蕪蕪. 此父母之國, 志動心悲. 作雅聲曰. *Wen xuan*, 16.721. Similar story appears *Shi ji*, but the protagonist becomes another Shang official Jizi 箕子. The second possible reference is about "Weizi's Tune" (Weizi cao 微子操). "Weizi's Tune: Weizi lamented the looming collapse of the Shang dynasty and yet there was nothing that he could do. He saw swans flying high in the sky and plucked the zither for a song" 微子操, 微子傷殷之將亡, 終不可奈何, 見鴻鵠高飛, 援琴作操. *Wen xuan*, 18.842.

paraphernalia. Then came, however, the dispersal and decline. Emperor Wen remarked that after the Yongjia chaos in the early fourth century, the orthodox sound of the central land was dislocated to the south of the Yangzi River (*liu yu jiangwai* 流於江外). Xu Shanxin too describes that musical notes altered along with the changing sounds of bells and stones, and musical tradition sank down in the river and ocean (*jianghai* 江海). What happened next is the restoration of that tradition in the Sui dynasty. Even though certain ritual objects bespeaking cultural continuity, such as official robes and hats, could no longer be restored, the sound of Shao and Xia music (*shaoxia* 韶夏) can still be heard now in the central court. It echoes Emperor Wen's self-aggrandizing comment that the unified empire once again retains the sound of orthodoxy of the Central Land (*huaxia zheng sheng* 華夏正聲).

The ascension of the Sui dynasty means the Southern Dynasties' lack of cultural legitimacy. In the sixth couplet, Xu Shanxin claims the "exhaustion" of royal grace in the south that caused the dispersal of sagely musical repertoires. What was left behind is people's longing for the Golden Age in the past, just as the people at the Tang yearned for the sage-ruler Yao in Jizha's comments. As a former southern official who now serves in a unified empire, Xu Shanxin then describes his emotional response to the southern court music. It induces "sadness" (*bei lai* 悲來) and makes "tears drop" (*lei xia* 淚下), befitting Emperor Wen's comment on the southern music as full of "sadness and rancor" (*aiyuan* 哀怨). However, it is difficult to ascertain, for our poet Xu Shanxin, or other southern officials for that matter, whether the sadness and tears are the expected response to the sound of a fallen state, which is believed to be full of its people's rancor, or a response of a more personal note, namely, to the ultimate collapse of *their* home state. Listening to the music of their former country generates complex emotions that traverse political and personal realms.

The motif of sorrow continues in the next couplet. Xu Shanxin admits that the Chen music surely is not the “ancient music” that could make drowsy the Earl Wen. Rather, it resembles the sad chanting of Weizi. The two possible allusions about Weizi’s chanting again complicate our understanding of Xu Shanxin’s attitude. One reference tells that before the Shang dynasty fell, Weizi composed songs to lament the inevitable doom of the dynasty. In this case, the Chen music, similar to Weizi’s composition, acquires a political dimension that foretells the future dynastic fall. The other reference, however, emphasizes the moment when the Shang already extinguished, and Weizi was stirred when passing by its former capital and composed a song to express his grief. It resonates with the situation that Xu Shanxin found himself in, who listened to the music from his home state while being an official of a new dynasty. In this case, the Chen music evokes nostalgia. The boundary between an inherently sad music (because it is from the fallen state) and a listener’s sorrowful response is blurred.

Music is complex and enigmatic, and court performances differ both geographically and historically. As Xu Shanxin points out toward the end of the poem, north, south, present, and past feature different kinds of musical characteristics that are hard to clearly distinguish. Only a musical expert such as Jizha can see through all the complexities and should know (*yingzhi* 應知), even before the fall of a dynasty, that its music conveyed the sound of a collapsing state. But our poet Xu Shanxin never sees himself as a Jizha, the savvy observer and fortune-teller. He did not see the Chen ritual music as a prediction of the coming doom when he held an appointment in the Chen; he only realizes that it is the “sound of a fallen state” in hindsight after the dynastic fall. Even though the whole poem seems an elaboration on Emperor Wen’s comments about the good and bad of the Chen music, the claim that *only* a Jizha can tell the relationship between music and politics makes Xu Shanxin merely a listener not skillful in detecting the hidden

implication of music. Maybe in the end what Xu truly hears from the Chen ritual music is never the moral lesson, cultural continuity, or even ancient traditions—as Jizha would likely grasp. Maybe for Xu Shanxin, what he hears is just the old music that he used to admire at his former home state, but would probably never hear again.

In this section, we have examined several poems on observing imperial musical performance by music specialist, lay listeners, and the official who previously served a different state. For some audience, grand spectacle fascinates them, and they fully identify with and celebrate the imperial power shown through the musical achievement. For a music expert such as He Tuo, he soberly exposes the ideological function of the imperial music in influencing people's perception of the empire. Ultimately, refusing an analogy between himself and a music expert such as Jizha, Xu Shanxin tries to create a personal dimension within the highly politicized musical discourse. It is a space of sadness, tears, and nostalgia. Through an analysis of these poems, we see how the poetic articulation of visual/aural experience of court music negotiated imperial power, ideological agenda, and political identity.

Legitimizing the South: Emperor Yang's Musical Vision

Emperor Yang, the son of Emperor Wen of the Sui, claimed the throne in 604. A ruler of vision and vigor, his fourteen-year reign witnessed several large-scale public events that were as much beneficial as detrimental to the empire. There were ostentatious displays of luxury, treasure, and riches at the capital to impress and intimidate foreigners; journeys to the new southern capital Yangzhou with huge fleets and retinues; military inspection to the northwest

border; three-time invasion into Koguryŏ (in modern-day Korean peninsula).⁷⁶ Starting from the year 613, rebellions broke out in the northern part of the empire. In 616, the emperor, against all admonitions, decided to again tour around the south. As the situation gradually became dire and out of control with bandits, mutinies, and revolts defying the central government, Yangdi even entertained the possibility of abandoning the north and, just like previous Southern Dynasties, establishing a new regime to the south of the Yangzi River. This decision caused anger and dread from his northern generals, and in 618, they conspired together and committed regicide. Yangdi died in the city of Yangzhou, also known as Jiangdu, the city that he always cherished. The Sui empire collapsed right afterward; in the meantime, the Li family from the northwest controlled the northern capital Chang'an and ultimately unified again the realm under the Tang dynasty that would last three hundred years.

Yangdi the person and his reign have become the center of interest to scholars and readers, both pre-modern and modern. It puzzles all the latecomers with questions that demand explanation and rationalization. Why did the Sui empire, so wealthy, organized, and powerful, collapse at such speed? Where did the ruler err in his government? These kinds of enquires were already pursued in the first half of the seventh century in the court of Emperor Taizong (Li Shimin 李世民, r. 626–649). The very self-conscious ruler persistently represented himself as a virtuous emperor in opposite to previous rulers who were responsible for dynastic fall, Yangdi included. At one point, after reading Yangdi's literary collection, Emperor Taizong asked his courtier why Yangdi's deeds were like those of King Jie and King Zhou, evil rulers in history,

⁷⁶ For a good survey of Yangdi's reign, see Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty: His Life, Times, and Legacy* (New York: State University of New York, 2006) pp. 29-49. The Introduction of Xiong's book also provides a summary of past scholarship on Emperor Yang. See *Emperor Yang*, pp. 3-8.

while his writings, being extensive and profound (*aobo* 奧博), seemed to be produced by someone like sage-ruler Yao and Shun. The upright official Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643) did not let slip the opportunity to inculcate a moral lesson. He answered that Yangdi's literary talent made conceited the ruler, whose judgment was beclouded by his hubris to the extent that no officials would offer thoughtful suggestions. Hearing this, Emperor Taizong sighed: "These things happened not long ago, and they should indeed be the 'teacher' for us" 前事不遠, 吾屬之師也.⁷⁷

Following Wei Zhou's comment, subsequent ages often find fault with Yangdi's personality and blame solely the ruler for dynastic fall. Accusations include the sovereign's lascivious lifestyle, his arrogance (which led to several campaigns against Koguryō), whimsicality in exacting punishment and offering reward, distrust and brutal execution of his loyal officials, and so on. One of the most frequently repeated allegations against Yangdi was his "excessive" fascination with the southern land and southern culture, which resulted in extravagant aquatic trips and was even partly responsible for his murder.⁷⁸ It was likely that Yangdi developed his passion for the south before the unification, when he was stationed in the city of Yangzhou, a city located on the northern bank of the Yangzi River bordering with the Chen. His wife, later Empress Xiao, was from the royal household of the Liang dynasty. It was recorded that Yangdi treated well southerners, and even once chastised court historians for naming southerners as "eastern barbarians" (*dongyi* 東夷). In his opinion, the south was replete

⁷⁷ *Zizhi tongjian*, 192.6053.

⁷⁸ See Woodridge Bingham, *The Founding of the T'ang Dynasteis: The Fall of Sui and Rise of T'ang. A Preliminary Survey* (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), 37-81. Arthur Wright, *The Sui Dynasty* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1978), 182-197. Victor Xiong, *Emperor Yang*, 29-71.

with scholars and talents with extensive and comprehensive learning (*shuoxue tongru wenren caizi* 碩學通儒, 文人才子).⁷⁹ During his reign, he went on luxury journeys to the south three times. For these trips, giant boats for sightseeing and transportation were built with human resources employed without restraint. To serious-minded scholars, Yangdi's excessiveness in travel, whether to his beloved south, to the northwest border, or to the northeast for military campaigns, exhausted the financial limit of the empire, incurred people's resentment and rebellion, and ultimately accelerated the collapse of the empire.

However, granted that the ruler's tireless traveling might pose a burden for the empire, this image of moving sovereign and the manifestation of the imperial power at different regions were in fact the Sui court's ideological agenda. Yangdi consciously fashioned himself as an emperor using "travel" as a means of control and power display. He once asked his courtier Cai Zheng 蔡徵: "Ever since ancient times, the Son of Heaven practiced the ritual of inspection. However, the rulers to the east of the Yangzi River [i.e., Southern Dynasties] applied rouge and powder [to their face] and sat deep within the palace compound. They did not come out to meet with their people. What is the reason of this?" 自古天子有巡狩之禮, 而江東諸帝多傅脂粉, 坐深宮, 不與百姓相見, 此何理也. Cai answered succinctly: "This is the reason why [their states] could not last long" 此所以不能長世.⁸⁰ To perpetuate the imperial rule, the sovereign has to be visible to his people, or, to make visible his power.⁸¹ In this sense, the journey to Yangzhou

⁷⁹ *Quan Sui wen*, 5.4043.

⁸⁰ *Zizhi tongjian*, 181.5644.

⁸¹ Jack Chen analyzes Yangdi's pleasure excursions. See Jack W. Chen, *The Poetics of Sovereignty: On Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty*, 318-328. Stephen Owen also discusses how Yangdi's poetry illustrates an emperor's self-representation, self-glorification, and fascination with the southern culture. See Owen, *The Poetry of Early T'ang*, pp 20-26.

indeed carried political purpose. The south was a newly integrated territory, and its old capital Jiankang, which was located to the south of the Yangzi River, was sacked and lay in ruins after the Chen dynasty fell. Clinging to the ideology that the south was an independent region, many southerners resisted the domination of the new government in the early years of the Sui dynasty. Yangdi's agenda was to elevate the significance of Yangzhou, another city in the southern land, as a symbol of the new South to replace the old capital Jiankang. The imperial presence in the city, a cultural and political center sanctioned by the state, confirmed the south as a legitimate, crucial part of the empire.

How did Yangdi envision Yangzhou, by extension, the south? In this section, I will examine song lyrics composed by Yangdi portraying his sojourn in the city of Yangzhou. I argue that different from *shi* poetry that Yangdi composed with his courtiers about the visit to Yangzhou, which is highly panegyric within the tradition of writing imperial inspection,⁸² *yuefu* offers an alternative way to represent and legitimate the south. Through selecting specific tune titles, writings lyrics, and appropriating the stereotype of the south as “singing female,” Yangdi made Yangzhou the third principal capital of the empire, after Chang'an and Luoyang in the north, thus legitimately integral to the imperial whole. Also, Yangdi fashions a new image of the south with Yangzhou as its center that stands in opposition to the old Southern Dynasties and their cultural image.⁸³

⁸² Several poems by Yangdi's courtiers about the ruler's roaming in the south are extant, and they were composed to the “imperial command” (*yingzhi* 應制). They were written in highly ornate, formal language with the employment of many literary allusions. They evoke the poetry composition by Yan Yanzhi, a fifth century court poet. Xiaofei Tian argues that Yan Yanzhi's poems about imperial inspection in the southern capital Jiankang helped verbally construct the mightiness of the southern empire. Xiaofei Tian, “Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire in Southern Dynasties Court Poetry,” *T'oung Pao*, 102-1-3 (2016): 23-52.

⁸³ This argument is based on Stephen Owen's observation that Yangdi experienced “conflicting pull between the opposition poetics and the alluring poetry of the south.” Also, according to Owen, the image of the “south” in his poetry betrayed the emperor's conscious observation of the locale as an outsider. See Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of*

To begin with, where is Yangzhou? Geographically, it was located on the northern bank of the Yangzi River, and to the east of the old Southern Dynasties capital Jiankang. In a song under the tune title “Excursion on Dragon Boats” (“Fan longzhou” 泛龍舟), which was created by the emperor himself during his sojourn in the city, Yangdi situates Yangzhou in natural landscape but also within the reach of imperial power.

泛龍舟	Excursion on Dragon Boats ⁸⁴
舳艫千里泛歸舟	A convoy of ships, stretching thousands of <i>li</i> , sail on a trip for return,
言旋舊鎮下揚州	returning to Our former post, streaming down to the city of Yangzhou.
借問揚州在何處	If one asks where the city of Yangzhou is located?
淮南江北海西頭	It is to the south of the Huai River, the north of the Yangzi River, and the west of the ocean.
六轡聊停御百丈	Six reins [for horses] are dropped, and ropes [for pulling the boats] are managed,
暫罷開山歌棹謳	we stop the enterprise of opening the mountains, and start to sing the songs of oars.
詎似江東掌間地	How could [our journey] be compared to [that] around the palm-size region to the east of the Yangzi River,
獨自稱言鑑裏遊	they only prized themselves for a journey in [a pool resembling the shape of] a mirror.

Yangzhou is not at all a strange land to Yangdi. The sovereign has embarked on a journey of return (*gui* 歸) to the place of his former post (*jiuzhen* 舊鎮). Employing the frequently seen question-answer rhetoric, Yangdi tells the city’s “exact” location. It is a city surrounded by water: Huai River to the north, Yangzi River to the south, and ocean to the east. One can hardly reach this land through horses, chariots, and a team prepared to open up the mountains. Instead, carriages must be set aside, and the retinue starts managing boat ropes for an aquatic journey.

the Early T'ang, pp. 20-26. I emphasize more the political functions of the *yuefu* songs to reconfigure or even to reinvent an image of the South as part of the imperial territory.

⁸⁴ *Sui shi*, 3.2644.

The procession abandons for the moment their heavy labor on land, and one starts hearing the songs of oars. As Xiaofei Tian points out, “songs of oars” (*zhao ou* 棹謳 or *zhaoge* 櫂歌) started in the third century as songs about southward military campaigns. But in the fifth and sixth centuries, it became a favorite musical title among the southern elite. They “saw the possibility of conflating it with other southern motifs: picking lotus or water-chestnuts, washing silk, or just pleasure boating in general.”⁸⁵ The famous southern poet He Xun 何遜 (480–520), for example, describes a journey that he undertook as: “The traveler sighed over the tiresome journey, / with the boat moored to the bank, I sat on an isle in spring. / At dusk, river wind became quiet, / and from the middle of the stream, one could hear the song of oars” 旅人嗟倦遊，結纜坐春洲。日暮江風靜，中川聞棹謳。⁸⁶ The “songs of oars” in the sixth line of Yangdi’s *yuefu* will likely evoke in mind of the poet and its readers (or listeners) this image of the south—water-borne journey, singing girls, and sensual pleasure. But in the next couplet, the ruler explicitly distinguishes himself from his predecessors

Yangdi first emphasizes the territorial reduction and geographical limitation of the Southern Dynasties—in his words, only the size of a palm. The phrase “palm” seems to contain a double entendre here. Yangdi’s contemporary would be familiar with the saying that a legitimate emperor rules the whole world as if it is in his palm. It originates from Mencius who inculcated to a king that as long as he could maintain his innate heart of benevolence and extend it to others, he could manage the world easily. “By treating the elders in one’s own family as elders should

⁸⁵ Xiaofei Tian, “Fan Writing: Lu Ji, Lu Yun and the Cultural Transactions between North and South.” In Ping Wang and Nicholas Morrow Williams, eds., *Southern Identity and Southern Estrangement in Medieval Chinese Poetry* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015), p. 76

⁸⁶ *Liang shi*, 8.1691.

be treated and extending this to the elders of other families, and by treating the young of one's own family as the young ought to be treated and extending this to the young of other people's families, the empire can be turned around on the palm of one's hand" 老吾老, 以及人之老. 幼吾幼, 以及人之幼, 天下可運於掌.⁸⁷ Hence in addition to the analogy between the diminished territory and palm, the line can also be understood as the south is within grasp, or inside the palm, of a legitimate ruler who can visit it whenever, and in whatever manners, he can. While the world (*tianxia* 天下), for an imperial ruler with a grand vision, can be obtained easily in hand, the last line interestingly exposes the Southern Dynasties' self-absorption and a false sense of security. In the poet's eyes, the southerners esteemed themselves (*duzi chengyan* 獨自稱言) for journeys on a clear pond in resemblance to a mirror (*jian* 鑒). This sense of self-importance, implied through the images of "mirror" and "reflection," indicates a southern state that is short-sighted, complacent, and oblivious to the outside world. The rulers and their subjects celebrate brief excursions within the boundary of the mirror-like pond. What forms a contrast is Yangdi, an outsider and imperial sovereign, who penetrates the southern land with his naval fleet and settles at Yangzhou, the new southern center of the realm. Moreover, the image "mirror" also carries the meaning of self-reflection based on historical examples, as in the saying that latecomers should use history as a mirror for lessons (*yishi weijian* 以史為鑒). Hence as much narcissistically the southerners gazed themselves in the water, Yangdi purposefully contemplates on their self-absorption for a moral lesson. As we can see, Yangzhou is the familiar place to the ruler while the south is new for the empire. The song then becomes not only a celebration of the

⁸⁷ *Mengzi zhushu*, 1.22. Irene Bloom trans., *Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 9.

emperor's visit to his former post, it also displays, audibly and verbally, the power of the state and its sovereign over the acquired territories and conquered political enemies.

In addition to lyrics, the tunes that Yangdi selected for song composition also have profound meanings in representing imperial power. I will examine one particular set of tunes called "Song of White Linen: Four Seasons" ("Sishi baizhu ge" 四時白紵歌).⁸⁸ This tune title was popular in the south during the period of division and it first appeared in the Eastern Jin dynasty. Three old lyrics are included in Shen Yue's *Song shu*, and the historian explains its origin as: "The Dance of White Linen: [it is named thus because] the lyrics contain lines about kerchief and robe [made of white linen]. Linen is from the Wu area [i.e., southeast of China]. Thus this dance performance should originate from the Wu area" 白紵舞, 按舞辭有巾袍之言, 紵本吳地所出. 宜是吳舞也.⁸⁹ Shen Yue points out that since the cloth material that the lyrics describe was indigenous to the south, the dance should also represent local culture. One can find these four lines that Shen Yue refers to in the original lyrics: "Its substance resembles the light clouds and color like silver, / I am fond of it, yet to whom I should give? To the fair one, indeed. / It can be made into a robe, and the rest [of the cloth] for a kerchief, / robe brightens one's body, and kerchief wipes away dust" 質如輕雲色如銀, 愛之遺誰贈佳人. 制以為袍餘作巾, 袍以光軀巾拂塵.⁹⁰ It describes the affection between two individuals with white linen as gift for exchange. Moreover, it is very likely that these old lyrics were performed in the Eastern Jin court, as it also includes lines such as: "Dance is to fully express one's spirit and how can it be

⁸⁸ For a brief introduction, see Tian Caixian 田彩仙, *Han Wei liuchao wenxue yu yuewu guanxi yanjiu* 漢魏六朝文學與樂舞關係研究 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2006), pp. 82-96.

⁸⁹ *Song shu*, 19.552.

⁹⁰ *Jin shi*, 10.847; *Song shu*, 22.636.

forgotten? / The rule of Jin dynasty is flourishing, and there is no end of happiness” 舞以盡神安可忘, 晉世方昌樂未央. The original lyrics combine romantic emotion and political propaganda.

Aside from these “old lyrics” preserved in *Song shu*, Shen Yue himself was later commissioned by Emperor Wu of Liang to compose new lyrics for this set of tunes in the sixth century. In Shen Yue’s collection, one can find five lyrics under the tune title, and they are “Song of White Linen: Spring” (“Baizhu chun” 白紵春), “Song of White Linen: Summer” (“Baizhu xia” 白紵夏), “Song of White Linen: Autumn” (“Baizhu qiu” 白紵秋), “Song of White Linen: Winter” (“Baizhu dong” 白紵冬), and “Song of White Linen: Night” (“Baizhu ye” 白紵夜). These dancing lyrics were presumably performed in the Liang court according to specific seasons and occasions. All five of them consist of four couplets in seven-syllable line, and the last two couplets of the five poems are identical, which suggests their function as a refrain. The first two couplets of each lyric are about female beauty, longing, and entertainment. The following poem is “Song of White Linen: Summer”:⁹¹

朱光灼爍照佳人	The crimson sunlight, bright and radiant, shines upon the fair one,
含情送意遙相親	with feelings contained inside, I convey my intentions and affection despite we being afar.
嫣然一轉亂心神	A beautiful glance as she turns back perturbs my mind,
非子之故欲誰因	after whom I wish to follow if not you?
翡翠群飛飛不息	A flock of kingfishers fly up and never rest,
願在雲間長比翼	they hope that they could forever fly side-by-side in the clouds.
佩服瑤草駐容色	Fragrant herbs decorated on garments can preserve one’s countenance,
舜日堯年歡無極	our days, similar to those when sage-kings Shun and Yao ruled, see happiness of no end.

⁹¹ *Liang shi*, 6.1626.

The crimson sunlight (*zhuguang* 朱光) indicates summer, and its radiance makes glow the fair one. Following the original lyrics, the poem describes the physical separation between two protagonists despite the intense longing that connects them together. The power of beauty prevails. When she turns around, with one glance, the speaker's mind is agitated and charmed to the extent that he would involuntarily follow after the fair one. While the vignette of romance implies momentary enchantment, the two couplets of refrain dwell on the endurance of pleasure. The lyric expresses the hope that kingfishers will always fly together in pair, human countenance never fades, and the happy days, just like under a sage rule, will last forever. The topic of love then changes into the eulogy of political vision. The lyric most aptly exemplifies entertainment in a courtly milieu: it promises temporary escape into the world of pleasure, and yet hopes the enjoyment can be prolonged to eternity.

After one hundred years, Yangdi appropriated this tune title and composed new lyrics. The ruler followed the frame of Shen Yue's composition, that is, associating each verse with a specific season. But what is different is that Yangdi also assigned "capital cities" to each of the seasons. In his extant poetic corpus, we find "Jiangdu in Summer" ("Jiangdu xia" 江都夏) and "East Palace [i.e., Luoyang] in Spring" ("Donggong chun" 東宮春) under the title "Song of White Linen: Four Seasons." One of his courtiers, Yu Shiji, composed a "Jiangdu in Summer" and "Chang'an in Autumn" ("Chang'an qiu" 長安秋). Even though we do not find a correspondence between winter and a city in the north in the extant texts, there is no mistake that the tune set, originally a southern song about a kind of local linen, is purposefully endowed with a cosmological dimension that responds to imperial rule. Below is Yangdi's "Jiangdu in Summer."

江都夏

Jiangdu in Summer

黃梅雨細麥秋輕	In the plum-ripe season, drizzling rain falls, and wheat's autumn season is delicate, ⁹²
楓葉蕭蕭江水平	maple-tree leaves rustle, and the Yangzi River is level.
飛樓綺觀軒若驚	High buildings and exquisite towers are lofty and startling [to people's eyes],
花簾羅幃當夜清	and blossom-decorated bamboo mats and gauze curtains make a night of coolness.
菱潭落日雙鳧舫	At sunset, on the pool with water-chestnuts float conjoined barges with painted twin ducks,
綠水紅粧兩搖淥	green water, red makeup, and oars on both sides [of the boat] over the clear river.
還似扶桑碧海上	It resembles [an excursion] near Fusang tree, on the sapphire ocean, ⁹³
誰肯空歌採蓮唱	who would want to in vain sing the song of picking lotus?

The song starts with a distant vista. The extended landscape features a field of grain ready for harvest, and it appears misty in the drizzling rain. The wind blows, which gives a rustling sound of maple tree leaves over the Yangzi River; yet the river is quiet. What comes into our sight next is human-made architecture, soaring up high with delicate decorations. As night falls, bamboo mats are spread; the curtains fall; one can enjoy a pleasant night even though it is in the middle of summer. A journey in the south is not complete without aquatic pleasure. In the third couplet, Yangdi describes boats moving slowly in the pond at dusk, and maids with rouge makeup paddling the oars on the green water. At this juncture when boating, water-chestnuts, and oarswomen appear together, readers anticipate hearing the songs that the girls sing: the song of lotus-picking.

However, contrary to our expectation, the final couplet gives a surprising twist that again accentuates the imperial vision about the south. Yangdi analogizes his Yangzhou excursion to one on the sapphire ocean and near the Fusang Tree, the mythical place in the unknown east

⁹² "Autumn" (*qiu* 秋) describes the time that grain is ripe for harvest. Since wheat can be harvested in the mid-summer, the phrase "autumn" here in fact refers to the season "summer."

⁹³ "Fusang Tree" refers to the place in the far east where people believed that the sun rises.

where the sun supposedly rises every day. It is not a journey of limited scale, but an imperial inspection that arrives at the border of the world, which is, through this poetic articulation, incorporated as part of the Sui's territory. Moreover, Yangdi decouples the connection between the familiar trope of "song of lotus-picking" and Yangzhou, the empire's new south. As Yangdi embarks on a grand journey in his cherished city instead of the former capital Jiankang, he asks in the last line: "Who would want to sing in vain the songs of lotus picking?" The negation and rejection of a kind of song to be associated with a place, indicated through the word "in vain" (*kong* 空), is particularly interesting. Both "East Palace [Luoyang] in Spring" and "Chang'an in Autumn" contain motifs on songs, performance, and female singers. The Luoyang poem ends with: "Long sleeves are stretching and folding delicately, and pearls and jade pendants dangle, / in a thousand and ten thousands years will last the tunes of spring" 長袖逶迤動珠玉, 千年萬歲陽春曲.⁹⁴ The Chang'an poem describes: "Jade-like beauty sings a song and plays a clear tune, / and the affection of Lady Consort is hurt but then continues" 玉人當歌理清曲, 婕妤恩情斷還續.⁹⁵ The Consort Lady refers to Lady Ban, consort of Emperor Cheng of the Han dynasty. After she lost favor from the emperor, Lady Ban composed a poem on "round fan" (*tuanshan* 團扇) to convey her longing for the ruler.⁹⁶ For these two capitals, Yangdi associates the performance of songs with each city positively, which makes quite prominent the poet's *dissociation* of the song of lotus-picking from Yangzhou.

⁹⁴ *Sui shu*, 3.2665.

⁹⁵ *Sui shu*, 6.2711.

⁹⁶ *Wen xuan*, 27.1280.

It is clear that through writing *yuefu* lyrics, the emperor tries to reconfigure the topography of the south and redefine its cultural characteristics. The South is no longer “the east of the Yangzi River,” a palm-sized region. It is now represented by Yangzhou, a city connected to other parts of the empire and even to the ocean and the remote east. Moreover, the “song of lotus-picking,” emblem of the culture of the old Southern Dynasties, finds no place in this new cultural center. It is also worth considering the use of “White Linen: Four Seasons” in fashioning the image of the South. Assigning Chang’an, Luoyang, and Yangzhou to different seasons already elevates the status of Yangzhou to one of the imperial centers corresponding to a proper cosmological order. However, the tune itself was originated as a local dancing tune from the Wu area and was developed in the southern courts. Yangdi interestingly appropriated the southern musical tradition, which he was fascinated with, and re-envisioned the imperial order through lyric composition and entertaining performance.

The last *yuefu* tune this section examines is “Moonlit Night, Flowers and River in Spring” (“Chunjiang hua yueye” 春江花月夜, henceforth “Spring River”). The Tang poet Zhang Ruoxu 張若虛 in the late seventh century composed a poem under the same title, and the poem became so famous to later readers that it has been considered one of the best poems in the early Tang dynasty. However, “Spring River” is originally a *yuefu* song that first appeared in the period of division. According to the *Old History of the Tang Dynasty* (*Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書), “Spring River,” along with “Jade Trees and Flowers in the Rear Courtyard” to be discussed in the next section, was created by the last ruler of the Chen dynasty, Chen Shubao.⁹⁷ Even though no lyrics of “Spring River” have survived to us from the Chen dynasty, the morally concerned

⁹⁷ Liu Xu 劉昫 (888–947) et al., comps., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 29.1067.

historian of the *Jiu Tang shu* gives a hint of what kind of lyrics were composed at the time: “Chen Shubao often composed poems together with his female scholars and other male officials in the court. He Xu, the Director of the Imperial Music Office, was also good at poetry composition. He selected those most flowery and ornate to be the lyrics for these tunes” 叔寶常與宮中女學士及朝臣相和為詩, 太樂令何胥又善於文詠, 採其尤豔麗者以為此曲.⁹⁸ These “flowery and ornate” (*yanli* 豔麗) lyrics particularly alarmed moralists in the seventh century, as they showcase the “excessive” music of the fallen state. However, while we no longer have the lyrics composed by the Chen ruler and his courtiers, we do find two poems extant under the tune title “Spring River” by Yangdi. Both are five-syllable line quatrains. In these two poems, not only there is no “flowery and ornate” diction, Yangdi also celebrates female virtue and morality in this tune set supposedly once performed by female scholars in the “decadent” Chen court.

The first quatrain reads:⁹⁹

暮江平不動	At dusk, the river is still without any movement,
春花滿正開	flowers in spring are just about to bloom.
流波將月去	Waves in flux carry the moon away,
潮水帶星來	and tides come, bringing stars close.

The poem portrays nature in both its stillness and motion, in “reality” and reflection. The first couplet brings up a tension between the tranquil river and blooming flowers. The water appears to be motionless because of the river’s vastness and remaining daylight, and the blooming flowers draw the poet’s attention. As dusk sets in and night falls, the only source of light is from the moon and stars, and he now observes the reflection of moonlight and starlight through the fluctuation of the river. The second couplet captures the moment of false perception. Despite the

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ *Sui shi*, 3.2663.

stillness of moon and stars in the sky, the river in flux seems to take the former away and bring the latter closer.

A couplet with one line about “leaving” and one line “coming” is, in fact, one of the poetic techniques favored by the last ruler Chen Shubao. For example, in his poem on the seventh day of the seventh month, a festival celebrating the romantic reunion between two lovers—“Weaving Girl” and “Ox Herd” in sky (also two constellations), the poet describes the movement of heavenly carriage, the arrival of the “Weaving Girl,” and the short time of reunion. One couplet reads: “The [face with] colored makeup leaves, along with the stars, / and the shadow [of the one with] coiled hair comes in the midst of clouds” 靨色隨星去, 髻影雜雲來.¹⁰⁰ The image of “cloud” and Weaving Girl evoke the fickle goddess in the poetic exposition by Song Yu, who describes the goddess’s visit to the King of Chu and her transformation into morning clouds and evening rain.¹⁰¹ Another poem by the Last Ruler about an alluring dancing girl also employs the same technique. One couplet reads: “The one with a fair complexion comes out timidly, / then golden carriages have come here nights after nights” 玉面含羞出, 金鞍排夜來.¹⁰² It was likely that Yangdi was aware of these two poems written by Chen Shubao, as his couplet is similarly structured, not to mention that the tune was invented by Chen Shubao. But Yangdi’s poem is solely about natural landscape, and it is devoid of any sensual enticement.

The second poem does involve women, but the poet’s “encounter” with them only emphasizes his moral concern as a ruler. It reads:¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ *Chen shi*, 4.2517.

¹⁰¹ See the “Poetic Exposition on Gaotang” in *Wen xuan*. See *Wen xuan*, 19.875-882.

¹⁰² *Chen shi*, 4.2509.

¹⁰³ *Sui shi*, 3.2663.

夜露含花氣
春潭漾月暉
漢水逢遊女
湘川值兩妃

Night dew contains the scent of the flowers,
spring pool makes fluctuate the halo of the moon.
At the Han river, one encounters the lady who walks by,¹⁰⁴
at the Xiang river, one meets the two royal consorts.

The essential elements as prescribed by the tune title—night, flower, spring, water, and moon—appear in the first couplet. What reflects the moonlight, however, is a pool (*tan* 潭) instead of a river. The image of “river” in this poem elicits female exemplars from the past, indicative of a well-governed realm. The Mao commentary explains the meaning of the poem “The Han is Broad” as: “[it means] the place where the virtue reaches is broad and far. The Way of King Wen of Zhou was implemented in the southern state, and the moral influence prevailed in the realm near the Yangzi river and Han river. People did not think about violating ritual propriety. Despite the intention of seeking her, he was not able to get her” 德廣所及也。文王之道被于南國，美化行乎江漢之域。無思犯禮，求而不可得也。 The “two royal consorts” refer to sage-king Shun’s two concubines, E Huang 娥皇 and Nüying 女英, both being modest, chaste, and adherent to proper conduct. After Shun passed away, the two ladies also died out of grief at the Xiang river.¹⁰⁵ The “encounter” with the legendary virtuous women no doubt signals the arrival of halcyon age when Yangdi ruled as the emperor. Just as King Wen of the Zhou in the past, Yangdi’s moral influence now reaches to the southern land, as all people behave according to ritual propriety. The appearance of Shun’s royal consorts confirms the harmony of the emperor’s harem. Whatever “flowery and ornate” diction or “lascivious” lyrics that Chen Shubao and his

¹⁰⁴ This allusion refers to a poem titled “The Han is Broad” (“Han guang” 漢廣) in *Shi jing*. The first two couplets are: “In the south is an upturning tree, / one cannot shelter under it. / Beyond the Han a lady walks, / one cannot seek her” 南有喬木，不可休息。漢有游女，不可求思。 *Maoshi zhushu*, 1.42. The translation is by Arthur Waley. See *The Book of Songs*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁵ Liu Xiang comp., *Lienü zhuan*, 1-3.

courtiers might have composed for this tune title, Yangdi repurposed it to celebrate natural beauty, virtue, and the arrival of a peaceful era.

Through the analysis of *yuefu* songs composed by Yangdi about Yangzhou, one can see that the emperor-cum-poet raised the city to the position of one of the imperial capitals. He fashioned it as a new center of the south dissociated with the cultural image of the old Southern Dynasties. Finally, Yangdi also discursively integrated the south into the imperial territory and showed his direct dominance over this newly acquired domain.

Songs from the “Decadent” Court

The correspondence between the music of a state and its political/moral condition had been an age-long truism by the seventh century. As was mentioned above, the “Great Preface” of the *Classic of Poetry* dictates that “the tones of a ruined state are filled with lament and brooding; its people are in difficulty.” The sound thus became an interpretive tool to account for the collapse of previous dynasties and the final ascension of the unified empire. He Tuo’s memorial about revising the Sui court musical repertoire particularly asserts that there are only two categories of music: “orthodox sound” (*zhengsheng* 正聲) and “evil sound” (*jiansheng* 姦聲). The former indicates the peacefulness of the world whereas the latter augurs the doom of the state. Indeed, Emperor Wen of the Sui believed in the moral dimension of the music and the association between sound and dynastic fate. At the beginning of the newly founded dynasty, the official Yan Zhitui suggested revising the court music according to the Liang dynasty’s ritual

protocol. The emperor rejected immediately and asked: “[The music of] the Liang features the sound of a fallen state. How could it be used by Us?” 梁樂亡國之音，奈何遣我用邪？¹⁰⁶

What is noteworthy about the development of musical discourse in the first half of the seventh century was the explicit affiliation between the “last ruler” (*houzhu* 後主) of the fallen state and certain sensual melodies that his court supposedly relished excessively. For example, in the “Treaties of Music” in *Sui shu*, the last ruler of the Northern Qi dynasty, Gao Wei 高緯 (557–577, r. 565–577), is described to admire “barbarian musical performance” without restraint. Abetted by his sycophantic servants, the ruler would “compose musical tunes by himself, in person play musical instruments, enjoy the entertainment without ever getting tired, and sing songs along with the strings” 自能度曲，親執樂器，悅玩無倦，倚絃而歌。Also, he was specifically famous for composing a tune named “Songs of No Worries.”

He also adopted new tones from elsewhere and composed the “Songs of No Worries.” The sound and rhythm were gentle and pleasant, and they conveyed the most sorrowful sentiments. The emperor asked Turkish lads and eunuchs to sing together in harmony. After the song came to an end and music stopped, everyone would weep. Even though he was traveling, he would at times have the music played on horseback. Soon, happiness was gone, and sorrow came, which ultimately caused the fall of his state.

別採新聲，為無愁曲，音韻窈窕，極於哀思，使胡兒闖官之輩，齊唱和之，曲終樂闋，莫不殞涕。雖行幸道路，或時馬上奏之，樂往哀來，竟以亡國。¹⁰⁷

The song that the last ruler reveled in was based on invented new tones (*xinsheng* 新聲) instead of old tradition. Even though the tune is called the “Songs of No Worries,” paradoxically it incites nothing but sad thoughts and tears from the performers and listeners. The emperor was surrounded by eunuchs and Turkish servants and was obsessed with this particular song to the

¹⁰⁶ *Sui shu*, 14.345.

¹⁰⁷ *Sui shu*, 14.331.

extent that he would even play it on horseback. The moral lesson is added toward the end: as happiness passed away, sorrow came. The music portended and finally brought the demise of the state. To readers in the subsequent centuries, the last ruler of the Northern Qi was pejoratively named as the Son of Heaven with No Worries (*wuchou tianzi* 無愁天子).

The term “Houzhu” (Last Ruler) had been used before in political discourse to refer to the last sovereign of a state before its being conquered, and it often implies the ruler’s incompetence, cruelty, extravagance, among other characters that might cause the fall.¹⁰⁸ However, it was in the late sixth and early seventh centuries that we see the formation of a paradigm that judges the “last ruler” in musical terms and associates him with specific “lascivious” songs. In this last section, I will use the last ruler of the Chen dynasty, Chen Shubao, as a case study to demonstrate the intriguing intertwinement of political, moral, and musical discourses. I suggest that only after the conquest and unification that southern songs started to bear explanatory weight to account for the dynastic fall. Specific tunes were singled out to inculcate moral lessons or incorporated into historical narratives for judgment. In the case of “Jade Trees and Flowers in the Rear Courtyard,” the notorious song that supposedly exemplifies the decadence of Chen Shubao’s court, there is uncertainty whether the seventh-century historical account about the fallen Chen dynasty was written as an elaboration of the sensual lyric or the lyric was in fact composed much later based on moralists’ historical account to reimagine the “decadent” southern court.

¹⁰⁸ Houzhu was used when a ruler’s state was conquered by force, not when a ruler abdicated to the founder of a new dynasty. The latter was the standard pattern of dynastic change in the Southern Dynasties. It also means that after the ruler died, there was no longer the ancestral temple to house his spiritual tablet and thus no posthumous title. Houzhu was used by Chen Shou in his *Sanguo zhi* to refer to Liu Shan 劉禪 (207–271, r. 223–263), who was the last ruler of the Shu kingdom engulfed by Cao-Wei dynasty in 263.

The negative portrayal of the Chen court started when it engaged in military campaigns with other northern states. Especially pertinent to our investigation is the genre “war proclamation” (*xi* 檄) written by enemy states as part of the political propaganda. By its generic convention, war proclamation usually gives a graphic, exaggerating description of the “evil” rule of its military target and in so doing justifies its military campaign against the rival state. *Xi* had a long tradition that could trace to its famous writers in the third century, and it was also one of the literary genres in the *Anthology of Refined Literature*, which implies the literary value people assigned to this kind of writing.¹⁰⁹ However, their literary merits and effective persuasions played an important part in conveying ideological messages. A piece of *xi* text was always aimed for public, broad circulation, and a variety of rhetorical tactics were employed to justify the military expedition against a “corrupted” state.

There are three war proclamations composed by the Sui courtiers against the Chen dynasty. Lu Sidao, the official first serving the Northern Qi and then Sui, composed the “War Proclamation against the Chen on Behalf of the Sui Dynasty” (“Wei Sui xi Chen wen” 為隋檄陳文). Two royal princes participating in the expedition against the Chen, Yang Jun 楊俊 (571–600) and Yang Guang (later Emperor Yang), composed proclamations against the Chen generals and its minister Jiang Zong. In addition to these three, Gao Mai 高勣 (544–599), who also hailed from the Northern Qi and then served in the Sui, composed “Memorial to Exhort an Invasion into the Chen Dynasty” (“Qing fa Chen biao” 請伐陳表). The most authoritative portrayal of the Chen should be Emperor Wen’s “Edict of Invading the Chen” (“Fa Chen zhao” 伐陳詔), which

¹⁰⁹ One of the famous *xi* writers in the third century was Chen Lin. When he served as a literary retainer of Yuan Shao, the rival of warlord Cao Cao, he wrote a proclamation against Cao that was caustic and defamatory. Cao Cao was ill at the time; but when he read the piece, sweat suddenly came out, which miraculously cured his illness. *Wen xuan* includes five pieces under the category of “War Proclamation.”

signals the inception of the large-scale military invasion to the south. Interestingly, none of the documents emphasize the Chen court's "decadence" in relation to musical tunes.

Yang Guang in his proclamation, for example, lists four reasons that "the Chen can no longer exist." The first is cosmological principle based on one prediction by Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324), a fourth-century diviner, that the world would be unified again after three hundred years of division. It means the Sui will indeed unify the whole realm to fulfill this prediction. The second reason lies in Sui's military power and Chen's weakness. The third is about people's resentment in the realm of the Chen because of its emperor's extravagant lifestyle, such as luxurious banquets, palace constructions, and obsession with fine clothes and jewelry. The fourth is concerned with the ruler's personality: his jealousy, suspicion, and cruel treatment of loyal officials, in other words, his political incompetence.¹¹⁰ Indeed, in all of these texts, one can find recurrent themes of accusations, such as the ruler's indulgence in carnal pleasure, extravagant construction projects, cruelty, harsh punishment, and omens portending future doom. Yang Jun describes Chen Shubao's "unprecedented" corruption as:

After Shubao ascended to the throne of the illegitimate state, he became even more ruthless and brutal. He was increasingly addicted to wine as days went by, and his country became extremely barren and destitute. By building decorated walls and high eaves, he imposed brocade and silk to earth and trees. With harsh laws and cruel punishment, he put people in great misery. The upright men who remonstrated lost their lives and the Crown Prince held his tongue [from providing opposing opinions]. It is the extremity of a state without the Way, and it has been unheard of since antiquity.

叔寶嗣偽，彌復忍虐。沈酗日增，內荒愈甚。雕牆峻宇，加錦繡于土木。嚴刑酷法，陷人物于塗炭。諫士喪身，元良箝口。無道之極，自古罕聞。¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *Quan Sui wen*, 6.4046-4047.

¹¹¹ *Quan Sui wen*, 8.4058.

At one place in Emperor Wei's edict, the ruler mentions that Chen Shubao enjoyed performance: "songs and dances filled the boulevard, and he was intoxicated in the inner palace" 歌舞衢路, 酣醉宮闈.¹¹² However, many of the accusations were standard in the genre of war proclamation. Specific musical tunes are never brought up in these documents as one allegation against Chen Shubao's reign.

The conquest of the Chen opened a new horizon for Sui courtiers. Royal family members (including the emperor), officials, books, ritual paraphernalia, and valuable treasure were all taken from the Chen capital Jiankang to the northern capital Chang'an. We mentioned before the public display of the "Pure Shang Tune" that the Chen inherited from the previous dynasties. The emperor ordered its revision to be the basis of Sui ritual music.

In addition, Emperor Wen also ordered the performance of Chen "female music" (*nǚyue* 女樂), the enticing music performed by female retainers. In this case, the issue of morality is brought to the fore:

He [i.e., Emperor Wen] also commanded the display of the female musical performance of the conquered Chen dynasty. He remarked to his officials: "This sound is like weeping. We are not delighted when hearing the sound. Therefore, We and Our officials should together listen to the tones of the ruined state this one time, and use it to be an eternal mirror for caution."

又設亡陳女樂, 謂公卿等曰: 此聲似啼, 朕聞之甚不喜, 故與公等一聽亡國之音, 俱為永鑒焉。¹¹³

The judgment is preconditioned by and further justifies historical development. The emperor detects the "weeping" sound because the music belongs to a fallen state, and the seemingly excessive emotion, emblem of "tone of a ruined state," indicates the incompetent government of

¹¹² *Quan Sui wen*, 2.4021.

¹¹³ *Bei shi*, 11.415.

the Chen that led to political collapse. The most explicit connection between Chen Shubao and musical tune started to form in the Tang dynasty, especially in *Sui shu* compiled by Wei Zheng and other collaborators. The “Treatise on Music” of *Sui shu* starts to systematically associate Houzhu with musical tunes, and below is the description of the reign of Chen Shubao.

After Houzhu [of the Chen dynasty] ascended to the throne, he wantonly submerged himself in wine. Any time that he did not hold court gatherings, he would be at banquets. He particularly valued sound and music. He asked female retainers to learn *xiao* flute and drum-beating of the northern style, and called it the “Song of Dai Region in the North.” When he was tipsy, he would play the music. Within the category of clear *shang* tune, he also invented the songs “Yellow Oriole,” “Jade Trees and Flowers in the Rear Courtyard,” and “Golden Hairpins Dangling from Sideburns.” He composed lyrics with his courtiers. They were utmost flowery and ornate, and extremely frivolous. Male and female singers harmonized, and its sound is very sorrowful.

及後主嗣位,耽荒於酒,視朝之外,多在宴筵.尤重聲樂,遣宮女習北方簫鼓,謂之代北,酒酣則奏之.又於清樂中造黃鸝鷗及玉樹後庭花金釵兩鬢垂等曲,與幸臣等製其歌詞,綺豔相高,極於輕薄.男女唱和,其音甚哀.¹¹⁴

The historians stress Chen Shubao’s obsession with “sound and music” (*shengyue* 聲樂). A sense of transgression is prominent throughout this little passage. The last ruler was fond of northern music and sent female retainers to learn “*xiao* flute and drum-beating” for performance. Wines and banquets are frequent in his court, and Chen Shubao showed fascination with the imagined northern culture through appreciating its music and songs. Three specific tune titles are marked as the emperor’s new inventions: “Yellow Orioles,” “Jade Trees and Flowers in the Rear Courtyard,” and “Golden Hairpins Dangling at Sideburns.” The lyrics that the ruler and his officials composed were too lascivious and frivolous. Moreover, the proper segregation between gender is blurred, as male and female voices mingled together. “Sorrow” (*ai* 哀) again appears, which is the historian’s judgment that these kinds of song belong to a state that is soon going to fall.

¹¹⁴ *Sui shu*, 13.309.

Among the three tunes, only the title “Jade Trees” has extant lyrics, and the title has caught people’s imagination in later periods about the licentious Southern Dynasties court and its last glow. However, where does one find the lyric of “Jade Trees”? Where does the lyric first appear in the textual record? What can it tell us about moral judgment, textual transmission, and historiographical representation? Interestingly, even though Sui and Tang courtiers were familiar with this musical tune and even had read the lyrics of “Jade Trees,” no Sui and Tang sources preserved the entire lyric of “Jade Trees” by the last ruler or his courtiers. In fact, *Sui shu*’s “Bibliography” records that a 39 *juan* of Chen Shubao’s collection survived in the imperial library in the mid-seventh century.¹¹⁵ However, seventh-century sources only include two Chen Shubao’s poems: one Buddhism-related poem in *Guang Hongming ji* 廣弘明集 (*Collection of Expanded Brightness*) and one poem in *Nan shi* that expresses the last ruler’s eagerness to serve in the new dynasty. The majority of Chen Shubao’s extant poetic texts comes from *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華, *Gujin suishi zaying* 古今歲時雜詠, and *Yuefu shiji* 樂府詩集, all coming into being after the tenth century. The scant inclusion of poetic texts of Chen Shubao in seventh-century sources sharply contrasts both the relatively large collection of Chen that survived in the seventh century and Sui dynasty judgment of Chen Shubao’s court as full of lyric/poetry composition.

As for the “Jade Trees,” there are only two fragments extant from the early seventh century. The first appears in “Treatise on Five Agents” of *Sui shu* to explain the category “Poetry Evil” (*shiyao* 詩妖). Entries in the section of “Poetry Evil” cite poetic lines or couplets as an omen for future political downfall. One item reads:

¹¹⁵ *Sui shu*, 35.1080. Among the Southern Dynasties rulers, the volume number of Chen Shubao’s literary collection ranks the fourth, coming after the Liang rulers Xiao Yan, Xiao Gang, and Xiao Yi.

In the early Zhenming era [587–589], the Last Ruler composed new songs, and their lyrics were sad and full of rancor. The emperor ordered beautiful ladies of the harem to practice and sing the songs. Its lyric reads: “Jade trees and flowers in the rear courtyard, / after blooming they will not last long.” People at the time considered it as a bad omen, a sign that the dynasty would not last long.

禎明初，後主作新歌，詞甚哀怨。令後宮美人習而歌之。其辭曰：玉樹後庭花，花開不復久。時人以歌讖，此其不久兆也。¹¹⁶

This one couplet of “Jade Trees” only appears in *Sui shu*, and based on the narrative, the song was “newly invented” and performed by palace ladies in the southern court. The first line of the couplet is identical with the tune title. As blooming flowers will soon wither, the historians (as well as “people at the time”) explain it as a sign that the dynasty would not endure. This couplet focuses more on the impermanence of both beauty and political power. Another fragment appears in both *Chen Shu* and *Nan shi*. In the biography of Zhang Lihua 張麗華 (559–589), Chen Shubao’s most favorite consort, the narrative describes the musical life in the southern court.

There were tunes such as “Jade Trees and Flowers in the Rear Courtyard” and “Song of Spring’s Arrival.” Its lyric reads like: “The moon, like a jade disc, becomes full night after night, / and trees made of jade appear new again day after day.” Those lyrics are in general like this—to praise the beautiful appearance of the Honored Consort Lady Zhang and Honored Concubine Lady Kong.

其曲有玉樹後庭花，臨春樂等。其略云：璧月夜夜滿，瓊樹朝朝新。大抵所歸，皆美張貴妃，孔貴嬪之容色。¹¹⁷

Interestingly, while the poetic fragment above emphasizes ephemerality, this couplet celebrates immutability. The moon becomes full every night, and trees made of jade appear renewed day after day. The lyric is to praise the looks of Houzhu’s consort and concubine. It is a wish that beauty, pleasure, and the world of enchantment can last forever, even though it is only a willful

¹¹⁶ *Sui shu*, 22.637.

¹¹⁷ *Chen shu*, 7.132; *Nan shi*, 12.348.

fantasy seen from hindsight, especially to the seventh-century officials who witnessed the state's fall. The images of “jade” and “flower” in the tune title, one being hard and the other fragile, imply both permanence and momentariness and can accommodate two opposite views toward pleasure, beauty, and politics.

The entire lyric of “Jade Trees,” while being considered the exemplary “decadent” song of the Chen dynasty, is only to be found in the eleventh-century anthology, *Yuefu shiji*, more than four hundred years after the tune's existence. As we have seen, both fragments above from the seventh century were in five-syllable line, decontextualized from its original musical context and used as historical evidence for criticism on Houzhu's reign. The poem in *Yuefu shiji* is, surprisingly, seven-syllable line, and there are more detailed descriptions of court life, female beauty, and entertainment:¹¹⁸

麗宇芳林對高閣	Magnificent buildings over the grove of fragrant plants, they stand to face the high towers,
新粧豔質本傾城	she puts on new makeup and shows her beauty, indeed able to topple a city. ¹¹⁹
映戶凝嬌乍不進	As if charm condensed, she glows with brightness over the door, yet suddenly not stepping in,
出帷含態笑相迎	coming out of the curtains, with lovely demeanor, she greets with a smile.
妖姬臉似花含露	The beautiful lady's face resembles a flower containing dew,
玉樹流光照後庭	moving radiance on the jade trees shines in the rear courtyard.

In the poem, one can find “jade trees” (*yushu* 玉樹), “rear courtyard” (*houting* 後庭), and flowers (*hua* 花), images that also show in the tune title. The poem unmistakably describes a beautiful lady on the top of a high tower. She is tantalizing the view's patience, as she moves

¹¹⁸ *Chen shi*, 4.2511.

¹¹⁹ This evokes a song by the Western Han singer Li Yannian 李延年 (d. 82 BCE) that praises a beautiful lady: “In the north country there is a lady fair, / she stands along beyond compare. / She glances once, a city falls; / a kingdom falls when she glances again” 北方有佳人，絕世而獨立，一顧傾人城，再顧傾人國。 The translation is by Stephen Owen. See Stephen Owen, *Anthology*, p. 215. *Han shu*, 97.3951.

forward, captures her audience with charm, and then stops. Soon, she comes out of the curtain and welcomes people with a beguiling smile. Her countenance is described as the flowers with dew, and together with the jade trees in the courtyard, they shine (*zhao* 照) and reflect (*ying* 映), making brilliant the whole poetic scene.

Uncannily, this *yuefu* song and its many images bear considerable resemblance to a prose narrative offered by a historian in the early seventh century about the Chen court. The narrative is in the biography of Zhang Lihua in the *History of the Chen Dynasty* (*Chen shu* 陳書). *Chen shu* was a historical record compiled by southerners Yao Cha 姚察 (533–606) and his son Yao Silian 姚思廉 (557–637). The project often paints a rather positive picture of the Chen ruling family, especially the cultural achievement of the last ruler. For example, at one point, the historians praise the prosperity of learning in Houzhu's reign: "After Houzhu inherited the throne, he delighted in literary composition and widely sought men of knowledge and skillful in arts. All eminent courtiers gathered around him." 後主嗣業, 雅尚文辭, 傍求學藝, 煥乎俱集.¹²⁰ However, at the end of Zhang Lihua's biography in *Chen shu*, the early Tang historian Wei Zheng appends his own comments about the Chen dynasty and its ruler. Probably seeing that the section does not appropriately pinpoint the Last Ruler's vice and drive home the lesson, Wei supplements the biography with the information that he himself found: "Wei Zheng, the historian, Palace Attendant, and Duke of the Kingdom of Zheng, investigated and perused records and thoroughly interviewed those from the former dynasty" 史臣侍中鄭國公魏徵考覽

¹²⁰ *Chen shu*, 34.453.

記書, 參詳故老.¹²¹ Based on the records and hearsay that he had access to, Wei Shou adds more information about Chen Shubao and his favorite consorts:

In the second year of Zhide era [584], three towers were constructed in front of the Palace of Shining Light, and they are the “Tower of Facing Spring,” the “Tower of Weaving Gauze,” and the “Tower of Gazing Immortals.” Their height was several *zhang*, and they consisted of a dozen of chambers. As for the windows, supporting woods, beams, and railings, they were all made of fragrant eaglewood and sandalwood. In addition, they were decorated with gold and jade, sprinkled with pearls and jewels. Seeing from the outside, one sees the pearl-strung shade, and inside there were precious beds and beautiful curtains. The clothes, utensils, objects for pleasure were all magnificent and precious, and no one had seen them since ancient times. Whenever a gentle breeze blew through, the scent wafted for several *li*. When the morning sun just started to shine, its light was reflected in the rear courtyard. Beneath them [i.e., the towers], rocks were piled up to form mountain and water was channeled into a pond. Extraordinary trees were planted, mixed with flowers and herbs. The Last Ruler himself lived in the “Tower of Facing Spring,” whereas the Honored Consort Lady Zhang lived in the “Tower of Weaving Gauze,” and Honored Concubine Lady Kong and Lady Gong lived in the “Tower of Gazing Immortals.” They used the tunnel in the air that connected the towers to visit one another.

至德二年, 乃於光照殿前起臨春, 結綺, 望仙三閣. 閣高數丈, 竝數十間. 其窗牖, 壁帶, 懸楣, 欄檻之類, 竝以沈檀香木為之. 又飾以金玉, 間以珠翠. 外施珠簾, 內有寶牀寶帳, 其服玩之屬, 瑰奇珍麗, 近古所未有. 每微風暫至, 香聞數里. 朝日初照, 光暎後庭. 其下積石為山, 引水為池, 植以奇樹, 雜以花藥. 後主自居臨春閣, 張貴妃居結綺閣, 龔孔二貴嬪居望仙閣, 竝複道交相往來.

Afterward, Wei Shou particularly focuses on the beauty of Zhang Lihua:

She was exceptionally smart and witty, with pleasant demeanor. Whether advancing or halting, she showed leisure and grace, and her countenance was graceful. Whenever she cast a glance or turned her sight, brightness exuded from her eyes and shone upon those around her. She often put up makeup on the tower and faced people down leaning on the railing. When seen from afar in the palace, she seemed to float there as if a goddess.

特聰惠, 有神采. 進止閑暇, 容色端麗. 每瞻視盼睞, 光采溢目, 照暎左右. 常於閣上靚粧, 臨于軒檻, 宮中遙望, 飄若神仙.

Multiple verbal echoes appear between the lyric “Jade Trees” and Wei Shou’s account, to the extent that almost every image in the lyric can find correspondence in the narrative. Just as the

¹²¹ *Chen shu*, 7.131.

poem starts with the high tower (*gaoge* 高閣) and magnificent buildings (*liyu* 麗宇), the narrative first introduces the construction of three towers that amounted to several *zhang* of height (*ge gao shu zhang* 閣高數丈). They were also made from scented wood and lavishly decorated with gold, jade, and pearls. The “grove of fragrant plants” (*fanglin* 芳林) in the poem echoes Wei Zheng’s description of the wafting scent (*xiang* 香) when the breeze blows through the towers. Then the poem zooms in to this beautiful lady who puts new makeup (*xinzhuang* 新粧). Again, Zhang Lihua, as the historian tells us, also “applies her makeup on the tower” (*geshang liangzhuang* 閣上靚粧). Zhang Lihua was extremely charming, and when she ascended on high, people would mistake her as a goddess. The image of female immortal will evoke the whimsical goddess in the poetic exposition by Song Yu. She visited the King of Chu for the night but then left in the morning, able to transform into morning clouds and evening rain. In the poem, too, the lady allures her audience by appearing either in the door or outside the curtain, manipulating audience’s expectation. In the last couplet of the poem, the rear courtyard is brightened by the sunlight reflected on the jade trees (*yushu liuguang zhao houting* 玉樹流光照後庭). In the narrative, too, the narrator talks about “light shining over the rear courtyard” (*guang ying houting* 光映後庭) and the light from the lady’s eyes always shines upon those around her (*guang ying zuoyou* 光映左右). Even though we do not see the image “jade tree” in Wei Zheng’s narrative, the historian does point out that “extraordinary trees were planted” (*zhi yi qishu* 植以奇樹) and the buildings were decorated with “gold and jade” (*jinyu* 金玉).

Hence, it is easy to detect the verbal resonance between these two texts: One is a seventh-century historical narrative offered by Wei Zheng who consulted former officials and court documents for a portrayal of Chen’s court life, and the other is a lyric in an eleventh-century

anthology supposedly composed by a sixth-century ruler, the last emperor of the Chen. The similarities between them appear too extensive to be mere coincidence, and they show certain textual affinity. If the lyric was indeed composed by Chen Shubao and was accessible to Wei Zheng, the historian no doubt based his narrative on the lyrical representation and supplemented it with other available materials. There is also an alternative possibility: the “Jade Trees” that we have from *Yuefu shiji* was a later composition, since it appeared four hundred years after the Chen dynasty and its seven-syllable line format contravenes the seventh-century fragments of “Jade Trees,” which are in five-syllable line. If this is the case, then the author of the poem seemed to have largely depended on Wei Zheng’s narrative to represent the Chen dynasty court life in a poetic genre. In either case, one can see the intertwinement and mutual corroboration between musical lyric and historical judgment. Tracing the “decadent” tune “Jade Trees” demonstrates the formation and appropriation of musical discourse in the unified empires for moral judgment and justification of political conquest.

In this section, we have examined lyrics for entertainment and later historical representations of the last ruler of the Chen. Prior to then Chen’s fall, criticism on the Chen polity, exemplified by the genre “war proclamation,” hardly featured music. Only after the dynastic collapse that the issue of the “tone of a ruined state” was established to legitimate the conquest. Specifically, in the case of Chen Shubao, the “decadent” lyrics composed by the ruler and his courtiers were hardly included in any Tang encyclopedias and anthologies unless some couplets were conducive to moral judgment. The infamous “Jade Trees and Flowers in the Rear Courtyard” would only survive to us as two fragments if not for *Yuefu shiji*, an eleventh-century anthology of *yuefu* songs. However, as the poem in *Yuefu shiji* resonates with a prose narrative given by Wei Zheng in the seventh century, it shows how songs of entertainment—vignettes of

momentary pleasure-seeking—could be used to create an elaborate narrative to explain historical causality.

This chapter analyzes the “power of sounds” in the unified empires of Sui and Tang. The association between music and politics, which had been an entrenched belief in the Chinese literary tradition, attained new urgency at the moment when political disunion shifted to unification. The unified empires utilized the multi-faceted discourses on music to justify its unification and legitimacy. Scholars and historians strove to offer a narrative of how musical legacy was transmitted from the past through the period of division and ultimately received by the unified empire. Musical legitimacy became tantamount to political legitimacy, both subject to rhetorical manipulation. Also, the public display of the “orthodox” music in the Sui dynasty generated several poetic responses. In those poems by music experts, lay listeners, and new member of the dynasty, the writers translated the aural and visual spectacle into verbal representation and negotiated the relationship between musical grandeur and state power. In Yangdi’s reign, the second emperor of the Sui dynasty, the ruler used *yuefu* songs to describe his favorite southern city, Yangzhou. He not only elevated the importance of the city to one of the imperial centers, the ruler also showed his absolute power over this territory. Yangzhou became the new symbol of the south, distinguishing itself from the morally ambiguous image of the old south, such as young girls singing the song about lotus-picking. Aside from this attempt to reconfigure the south into the unified realm, another trend was the moral judgment on the “tone of a fallen state.” The last rulers of the previously conquered states were linked to specific tunes signifying their excessive indulgence in sensual music. The case of Chen Shubao, the last ruler of the Chen dynasty, served as a good example to show the formation of critical discourse

centering on music and the intriguing relationship between moral judgment and textual transmission. In all, through analyzing discourses on “ancient music,” “orthodox music,” “new music,” and “decadent music” in the unified empires, I argue that music generated a discursive arena, in which “sound” became politicized, negotiating with issues such as imperial power, regional differences, political identifications, and moral judgment.

Conclusion

The dissertation examines the verbal fashioning of state power in early medieval China, a period of division when several rival states vied for dominance. Two basic questions thread together each chapter: how could court elite use words to prove—to themselves and others—that their state was the legitimate, superior state? Why did this verbal representation of state power matter in this age of intense military conflict? To address these questions, I focus on various forms of cultural exchange among court centers and analyze the competing claims of legitimacy at the moments of interstate contact. Specifically, I look at diplomatic visits, gift exchange, epistolary communications, and unified empires' strategies of assimilation. I find that rhetoric—the manipulation of signs and signifying practices—constructed and problematized those central concepts, such as legitimacy, ethnicity, and cultural orthodoxy. Harnessing the persuasive power of words and displaying it in different interstate communication contexts played an active role in shaping people's perception of political reality and fashioning different kinds of cultural identity.

The first chapter focuses on diplomatic visits and court representatives' verbal banter. It studies both the “discursive battles” between diplomats and the articulation of hospitality and hostility in poetic genres. The second chapter looks at court compositions on foreign gifts and examines rhetorical devices used to create and domesticate “the foreign” as a way of proclaiming cultural superiority. It also analyzes the case of Yu Xin—his sojourn in the foreign land and responses to the imperial gifts—to illustrate the empire's assimilation of individuals through gift politics and a “foreigner's” ambiguous responses to the royal power. Epistolary communication is the topic of the third chapter, in which I investigate the “politics of intimacy” in the letters sent across dynastic boundaries. In other words, I research how seemingly “private” letters—for

example, those between friends or between a mother and a son—were intended for public consumption and that the individual voices were subject to states’ exploitation for the purpose of political manipulation. The fourth chapter moves to the unified empire of the Sui and Tang and continues to examine the negotiation among different cultural groups, this time in the new political context of unification. I use music as a critical lens to demonstrate that, through meticulous debates over what constituted “orthodox,” “decadent,” “ancient,” and “foreign” music for the empire, “sound” became politicized and was used as a tool of mind control and justification. Taken together, these chapters discuss the verbal construction and negotiation of essential concepts such as “legitimacy,” “emperorship,” and “cultural orthodoxy.”

The project corrects one of the most ingrained and problematic beliefs about the period of division. Based on a sinocentric idea of ethnic interaction, it has been argued that the north and south represent two drastically opposing cultural values: the Han Chinese in the south were culturally sophisticated in all kinds of artistic creation, whereas the “nomadic” (even “barbarian”) northerners paid barely any attention to cultural cultivation. Scholars have perpetuated this evaluative paradigm by either treating the north and south in separate studies or emphasizing exclusively the south’s “civilizing” influence on the northern culture. By using courtly exchange as a venue of inquiry, my project shows a more complicated dynamic between the northern and southern cultures. I demonstrate that each state’s fashioning of its distinct political and cultural identity was based on the same cultural repertoire and a shared belief in the effective use of discourse to construct a new reality. I conclude that it was through the appropriations of the persuasive power of rhetoric that elite members were able to define “self” and “others” and situate themselves within an imagined cultural lineage. This project contributes to both a deeper understanding of the court culture in early medieval China and to a reflection on

our abiding interests in the relationship between words and power—the power to conquer, the power to construct, and the power to transform.

In a broader sense, my research focuses on medieval texts and the contexts from which they emerged; it also examines subsequent mediations of early medieval Chinese literature and the power that was at work creating these mediations. Issues such as political legitimacy and rhetoric, which my project addresses through the Chinese case, resonate strongly with the current political climate of our world. Moreover, the dissertation is also inspired by the parallels between early medieval China and the European early Middle Ages. Similar to the period of division in Chinese history, in the wake of the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century CE, both Byzantium and “barbarian” states strove to claim *romanitas*, the Roman legacy embodied in a broad spectrum of practices, as a source of legitimation. Hence, my research not only aims to contribute to a new understanding of Chinese medieval culture and the social functions of courtly writings; the comparative scope that I will further develop in the book manuscript situates my project in a transcultural context and enables it to address a broader audience of literary scholars, medievalists, and humanists.

Appendix

為閻姬與子宇文護書

天地隔塞，子母異所。三十餘年，存亡斷絕。肝腸之痛，不能自勝。想汝悲思之懷，復何可處。吾自念十九入汝家，今已八十矣。既逢喪亂，備嘗艱阻。恆冀汝等長成，得見一日安樂。何期罪釁深重，存歿分離。吾凡生汝輩三男三女。今日目下，不覩一人。興言及此，悲纏肌骨。賴皇齊恩卹，差安衰暮。又得汝楊氏姑、及汝叔母紇干、汝嫂劉新婦等同居，頗亦自適。但為微有耳疾，大語方聞。行動飲食，幸無多恙。今大齊聖德遠被，特降鴻慈。既許歸吾于汝，又聽先致音耗。積稔長悲，豁然獲展。此乃仁侔造化，將何報德。

汝與吾別之時，年尚幼小。以前家事，或不委曲。昔在武川鎮，生汝兄弟。大者屬鼠，次者屬兔，汝身屬蛇。鮮于修禮起日，吾之闔家大小，先在博陵郡住，相將欲向左人城。行至唐河之北，被定州官軍打敗。汝祖及二叔，時俱戰亡。汝叔母賀拔及兒元寶，汝叔母紇干及兒菩提，并吾與汝六人，同被擒捉入定州城。未幾間，將吾及汝送與元寶掌，賀拔紇干各別分散。寶掌見汝，云我識其祖翁，形狀相似。時寶掌營在唐城內，經停三日。寶掌所掠得男夫婦女可六七十人，悉送向京。吾時與汝同被送限。至定州城南，夜宿同鄉人姬庫根家。茹茹奴望見鮮于修禮營火，語吾云，我今走向至本軍。既至營，遂告吾輩在此。明旦日出，汝叔將兵邀截，吾及汝等還得向營。汝時年十二，共吾竝乘馬隨軍，可不記此事緣由也。

于後吾共汝在受陽住。時元寶菩提及汝姑兒賀蘭盛洛并汝身四人同學。博士姓成，為人嚴惡。汝等四人，謀欲加害。吾與汝叔母等聞之，各捉其兒打之。唯盛洛無母，獨不被打。其後爾朱天柱亡歲，賀拔阿斗泥在關西，遣人迎家累。時汝叔亦遣奴來富迎汝及盛洛等。汝時著緋綾袍，銀裝帶，盛洛著紫織成纈通身袍，黃綾裏，竝乘驪同去。盛洛小于汝，汝等三人竝呼吾作阿摩敦。如此之事，當分明記之耳。今又寄汝小時所著錦袍表一領。至宜檢看。知吾含悲戚，多歷年祀。

屬千載之運，逢大齊之德。矜老開恩，許得相見。一聞此言，死猶不朽，況如今者，勢必聚集。禽獸草木，母子相依。吾有何罪，與汝分離。今復何福，還望見汝。言此悲喜，死而更蘇。世間所有，求皆可得。母子異國，何處可求。假汝位極王公，富過山海，有一老母，八十之年，飄然千里，死亡旦夕。不得一朝暫見，不得一日同處。寒不得汝衣，飢不得汝食。汝雖窮榮極盛，光耀世間，汝何用為，于吾何益。吾今日之前，汝既不得申其供養，事往何論。今日以後，吾之殘命，惟繫于汝。爾戴天履地，中有鬼神，勿云冥昧，而可欺負。汝楊氏姑，今雖炎暑，猶能先發。關河阻遠，隔絕多年。書依常體，慮汝致惑，是以每存款質，兼亦載吾姓名。當識此理，勿以為怪。

“Letter Composed on behalf of Madam Yan to Her Son Yuwen Hu”¹

Just as Heaven is forever separated from Earth, a mother and her son, in separation, dwell in different domains. It has been more than thirty years, and news about whether you are alive or dead has been cut off. The heartbreaking pain is indeed not something that one can endure. When I envision your sorrowful longing, how will I be able to rest at peace? I remember when I first married into your household [i.e., the Yuwen family], I was nineteen years old. Now, I am already eighty! I have encountered tragic disasters and tasted much bitterness and hardship. I have always hoped that after you all grew up, I could enjoy at least one day of peace and happiness. How could I expect that my sins would be so grave and profound that I have been separated from you like the dead from the living? I gave birth to three sons and three daughters.² Yet at the moment, I see none of you beside me. Whenever I think about this, sadness entangles my heart. Thanks to the royal grace and benevolence of the Northern Qi, I am now more or less settled in peace at an old age. In addition, I am allowed to live together with your aunt Madam Yang, Madam Hegan (your uncle’s wife), and your sister-in-law, the newly wed Madam Liu.³ I indeed feel quite contented and comfortable. But there is only minor ailment with my hearing—I can only hear clearly when someone speaks in a loud voice. I fortunately have little illness that affects moving about or eating. Now the sagely virtue of the Great Qi has been extended to distant areas, and the royal grace especially falls on me. It permits my return to you, and also allows me to send a message to you [before our final reunion]. The long-accumulated sorrow is suddenly relieved and disappears. This indeed is the kindness that resembles the Great Creation. How can we repay their favor?

When I parted from you, you were very young, and hence might not entirely know our family affairs. In the past, we lived in the Wuchuan Garrison. I gave birth to you and your brothers. The zodiac animal of my first son is the mouse, the second son, the rabbit, and you, the snake. When Xianyu Xiuli rose up [in 526],⁴ all our family members, whether young or old, were living in Boling county, and we decided to go to the city of Zuoren together. When we proceeded to the north of the Tang river, we were defeated by the state troops from Dingzhou. Your grandfather [i.e., Yuwen Gong] and your second uncle [i.e., Yuwen Lian] were killed during the battle. Then, the wife of your [second] uncle, Madam Heba, and her son Yuwen Yuanbao, the wife your [third] uncle, Madam Hegan, and her son Yuwen Puti, and you and I—the six of us—were

¹ The text can be found in *Zhou shu* and *Bei shi*. *Zhou shu*, 11.169-171. *Bei shi*, 57.2062-2064.

² The *Bei shi* version is “Three sons and two daughters.”

³ The *Bei shi* version is: “I am able to live together with your aunt Madam Yang, Madam Hegan (the wife of your uncle), your brother-in-law Madam Liu, and your newly-wed wife” 又得與汝楊氏姑, 及汝叔母紇干, 汝嫂劉及汝新婦等同居. *Bei shi*, 57.2062.

⁴ Xianyu Xiuli revolted in 526. The headquarters of this revolt was the city Zuoren. The Yuwen family joined the rebellious cause. Yuwen Gong 宇文肱 (d. 526), the grandfather of Yuwen Hu, and Yuwen Lian 宇文連 (d. 526), one of Yuwen Hu’s uncles, died in the battle near the Tang river.

captured and detained in Dingzhou.⁵ Not for long, you and I were sent to Yuan Baozhang's camp, and Heba and Hegan (and their sons) were kept in different places. When Yuan Baozhang saw you, he remarked that he knew your grandfather, and you and he looked very much alike. At the time Baozhang was stationed in the city of Tang, and the troops planned to stay there for three days. The male and female captives whom Baozhang had plundered amounted to sixty or seventy. All of them would be sent to the capital Luoyang. You and I too were supposed to be taken there as required. When we arrived on the southern outskirts of Dingzhou city, we spent the night at the home of Jikugen, our fellow townsman. A slave of Rouran origin espied the camp fire of Xianyu Xiuli's armies nearby and told me that he would flee and run to our troops on this very night. After he got there, he informed the armies of our location. The next day when sun rose, your uncle led armies and intercepted, and therefore, you and I were able to return to our camp. At the time, you were only twelve years old. You and I shared one horse, and we rode back following the troops. How can you not remember all this?

Afterwards, you and I lived in Shouyang. At the time, Yunwen Yuanbao, Yuwen Puti, Helan Shengluo, who is the son of your aunt, and you were classmates. Your teacher was a scholar with the surname Cheng who was very strict and cruel. The four of you wanted to kill him. When your aunts and I heard about it, we each seized our son and gave him a beating. Only Helan Shengluo escaped [the punishment] because he no longer had a mother. Then in the year when the Heavenly Pillar Erzhu Tianguang died [in 532], Heba Adouni [i.e., Heba Yue 賀拔岳] was stationed to the west of the Pass and sent people to escort his family members to the west. Your uncle, too, sent a slave, Laifu, to bring you and Yuwen Shengluo to him. On the day of departure, you wore a robe of red thin-silk with a silver-inlaid belt. Shengluo wore a body-length robe of purple color-watered silk, and its inside was made of yellow silk. You two rode a mule side by side and went away. Shengluo was younger than you. The three of you called me "Amodun" ["mother" in the Xianbei language].⁶ Things like these, surely you should be able to remember clearly? Now with the letter, I also send you one piece of brocade outerwear that you often wore when you were little. You should look at it closely and thus know the sorrow and grief that have haunted me for many years.

[Finally,] we have encountered the good fortune that happens only once in a thousand years and benefited from the virtue of the great Qi. It shows compassion to the old one by bestowing grace, and permits us to meet again. Once I learned the news about the reunion, I felt I would not even become rotten if I were dead. Not to mention now [when I am still alive], we will surely be able to see each other again. No matter whether it is birds, beasts, grass or trees, a mother and a son depend on each other. What crime did I commit so that I have to suffer this separation from you? Now what blessings have I accumulated so that I can hope to see you again? Even talking about

⁵ Yuwen Gong had four sons: Yuwen Hao 宇文顥 (d. 524), Yuwen Lian, Yuwen Luosheng 宇文洛生, and Yuwen Tai. Yunwe Hao was the father of Yuwen Hu and died before Xianyu Xiuli's rebellion. Yuwen Lian was the father of Yuwen Yuanbao. Yuwen Luosheng was the father of Yuwen Puti.

⁶ While Madam Yan focuses only on Yuwen Hu and Helan Shengluo here, it is baffling that a third person appeared who also cried "Amodun" to Madam Yan. It is possible that Madam Yan means the slave, Laifu 來福, who came to escort Yuwen Hu and Helan Shengluo to their uncle in the west.

this makes me both sad and happy, as if I had been brought back from death. As for all the things in the world, as long as you seek them, you can get them. But when a mother and a son dwell in different states, where can you find her? Even if you attain a prestigious status, like that of a king or a duke, and the amount of your wealth exceeds the mountains and ocean, [what use would they be when] your mother of over eighty years old is drifting thousands of *li* away from you and will die in only a matter of time? You could neither see her only for a brief morning nor stay with her for a day. When she is cold, she cannot get clothes from you. When she is hungry, she cannot get food from you either. Even if you have great glory and your brightness shines throughout the whole world, what good does it do to you and what benefits to me? Before this very day, you failed to nurture and take good care of your mother. But how will I discuss more of what happened in the past? From this very day on, the remaining time of my life will completely depend on you. You stand straight up between Heaven and Earth, and in between there are deities and ghosts. Don't think that because these beings are obscure and unknowable, you can thus betray and deceive them. The summer is hot, but your aunt Madam Yang could first depart and come to you. The Hangu Pass and Yellow River—as blockages—have separated us for many years. A letter must always obey its normative form. Lest you have doubts, I often convey my sincere wishes to you, and also append my name here. You should understand this reason and not see it as peculiar.

報母閭姬書

區宇分崩，遭遇災禍。違離膝下，三十五年。受形稟氣，皆知母子。誰同薩保，如此不孝。宿殃積戾，惟應賜鍾。豈悟網羅，上嬰慈母。但立身立行，不負一物。明神有識，宜見哀憐。而子為公侯，母為俘隸。熱不見母熱，寒不見母寒。衣不知有無，食不知飢飽。泯如天地之外，無由暫聞。晝夜悲號，繼之以血。分懷冤酷，終此一生。死若有知，冀奉見于泉下爾。

不謂齊朝解網，惠以德音。摩敦四姑，竝許矜放。初聞此旨，魂爽飛越，號天叩地，不能自勝。四姑即蒙禮送，平安入境。以今月十八日于河東拜見。遙奉顏色，崩動肝腸，但離絕多年，存亡阻隔，相見之始，口未忍言。惟敘齊朝寬弘，每存大德，云與摩敦，雖處宮禁，常蒙優禮。今者來鄴，恩遇彌隆，矜哀聽許摩敦垂敕，曲盡悲酷，備述家事。伏讀未周，五情屠割。書中所道，無事敢忘。摩敦年尊，又加憂苦。常謂寢膳貶損，或多遺漏，伏奉論述，次第分明，一則以悲，一則以喜。當鄉里破敗之日，薩保年已十餘歲。鄰曲舊事，猶自記憶。況家門禍難，親戚流離，奉辭時節，先後慈訓，刻肌刻骨，常纏心腑。

天長喪亂，四海橫流。太祖乘時，齊朝撫運。兩河三輔，各值神機。原其事跡，非相負背。太祖升遐，未定天保。薩保屬當猶子之長，親受顧命。雖身居重任，職當憂責。至于歲時稱慶，子孫在庭，顧視悲摧，心情斷絕。胡顏履戴，負愧神明。霑然之恩，既以霑洽。愛敬之至，施及傍人。草木有心，禽魚感澤，況在人倫，而不銘戴。有家有國，信義為本。伏度來期，已應有日。一得奉見慈顏，永畢生願。生死肉骨，豈過今恩。負山戴岳，未足勝荷。二國分隔，理無書信。主上以彼朝不絕母子之恩，亦賜許奉荅。不期今日，得通家問。伏紙嗚咽，言不宣心。蒙寄薩保別時所留錦袍表，年歲雖久，宛然猶識。抱此悲泣。至于拜見，事歸忍死，知復何心。

“Letter Replying to Mother Yan”

Ever since the world was cast into chaos, we have encountered many calamities. It has been thirty-five years since I left you. As long as an object is endowed with a bodily form and able to breathe, it knows about [the attachment between] a mother and a son. Who is like Sabao [i.e., Yuwen Hu]—a son without filial piety? Predestined disasters accumulate because of sins, and they should all befall on me. How could one expect the net of punishment to have ensnared my kind mother from above? But in establishing myself and my deeds, I have not failed anyone. If the numinous deities have cognizance, hopefully they will be sympathetic to me. [But still, it is lamentable that] a son becomes a duke or an earl while his mother is a slave. I cannot know whether my mother suffers from cold/hot weather, whether she has enough clothes, or whether she is hungry or full. She is drifting as if beyond this world, and I have no means of hearing about her condition. I cry and wail day and night, and I weep blood after the tears dry up. The separation has inflicted on us this cruelty until the end of our lives. If one has consciousness after death, then I hope to take good care of you in the underworld.

I did not expect the Northern Qi state to decide to loosen its entangling net and kindly deliver the news. Modun mother and my fourth aunt were both pardoned and permitted to return. When I first heard this message, my spirit soared up to the sky. I cried to the heaven and hit the ground with my head, and I could not restrain myself. Then, my aunt was sent back according to the appropriate ritual and she crossed the border safely. I was able to attend her formal reception on the eighteenth day of this month at Hedong. I only saw her countenance from a far distance, and my heart broke into pieces. It has been many years since the separation, during which time one hardly knew whether the other was alive or dead. We could not bear to speak [of those years] when we first reunited. She only talked about the magnanimity of the Qi state and its great virtue bestowed on them. She mentioned that even though you and she lived in the forbidden palace, you were often treated with great courtesy. Now this journey from Ye demonstrated that the royal grace of the Qi had become even more prominent. The state was sympathetic to the sad ones and allowed Modun to deliver a letter. [In the letter,] you fully described the cruelty that you have suffered and recounted in detail our household affairs. Before I even finished reading it, five emotions, being disturbed, tortured my heart. About those events narrated in the letter, none of them I have dared to forget. Modun is of an old age and has also suffered from much hardship. I have often thought that there might be a lack of good care regarding food or sleeping conditions, and it would be likely for you to omit and forget things. But I then saw that the narrative was very clear and in the proper order. On the one hand, I feel sorrowful, and on the other, happy. At the time when our hometown was wrecked, I, Sabao, was already in my teens. I could well remember the past events that took place in the neighborhood. Our household underwent disasters and the family members were dispersed. On the day of our departure, you gave many kind instructions. As though carved on my bones and sinews, they often entwine with my heart.

Heaven fomented chaos, and four oceans overflowed everywhere. Emperor Taizu [i.e., Yuwen Tai] took advantage of the time, and meanwhile, the state of Northern Qi also acted in

accordance with fortune. Whether based in the areas of the Two Rivers or those of the Sanfu,⁷ they each made use of favorable opportunities. When tracing the roots of their ultimate accomplishments, one finds they did not oppose each other. When Emperor Taizu passed away [in 556], the heavenly blessing was not yet secure.⁸ I, Sabao, as the nephew of the late ruler, was the oldest among the younger generation, and I in person received the command to assist [the new emperor]. Even though I assumed the important post and was entrusted with heavy responsibilities, I felt sorrowful and my heart broke when I saw sons and grandsons fill the court yard on days of festivals. I am ashamed to even stand in between Heaven and Earth, and I feel remorseful in front of numinous deities. At present, the royal grace, like rain falling from the sky, has moistened and nourished [all]. The expressions of sympathy and affection influence others. Grass and trees could even have hearts, and birds and fishes are thankful for the water. How much more should feel deeply grateful [for the favor]? As for a household or a state, it depends on faith and honor [for action]. I humbly calculate the date of your arrival; it should be soon. As long as I could once again see your kind face, I would give up my life. How could bringing back the dead or enfleshing bones exceed the royal grace bestowed today? And how could carrying a mountain and shouldering a peak be comparable to this great indebtedness? The two states are separated, and in principle, letters should not be exchanged. Our Majesty was moved by your state's favor regarding the attachment between a mother and son, and therefore permitted me to reply to the letter. I did not expect that today I would be able to receive greetings from my family. Facing the paper, I started weeping, and my words could not fully express what was in my mind. I also received the brocade outerwear that Sabao left behind. Even though it has been long since I last saw it, I could still recognize it. Holding this fabric, I started crying. As for finally receiving and formally meeting you, I would strive with my last breath to ensure the return. On what other matters should my mind dwell?

⁷ The area around the "Two Rivers" refers to Hebei 河北, where the Northern Qi's capital Ye was. "Sanfu" refers to the area near Chang'an, the capital of the Northern Zhou.

⁸ Even though Yuwen Tai controlled the Western Wei court, he never claimed emperorship. After his death in 556, Yuwen Hu deposed the last Western Wei ruler, supported Yuwen Tai's son, Yuwen Ju 宇文覺, as the new emperor, and established the Northern Zhou dynasty.

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