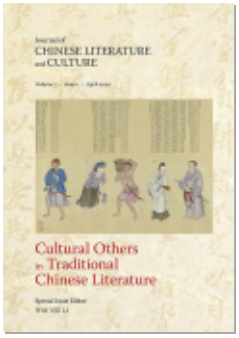
The Epistolary Self and Psychological Warfare: Tuoba Tao's □□□(408–452, r. 423–452) Letters and His Southern Audience



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The Epistolary Self and Psychological Warfare: Tuoba Tao's 拓跋燾 (408–452, r. 423–452) Letters and His Southern Audience

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Abstract The Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) unified north China in the fifth century CE and stood as a powerful rival to the Liu Song dynasty (420–479) in the south. As military campaigns and diplomatic exchange between the two dynasties became more frequent, both courts strove to deploy a variety of strategies to prevail in the competitions of political authority and legitimacy. This article examines the northern emperor Tuoba Tao's (408–452, r. 423–452) self-representation in his letters delivered to the southern audience at the height of the two states' military struggle. Scholars have ascribed the letters' linguistic simplicity to certain unadorned northern style or ethnic characteristics. The author situates the discussion of Tuoba Tao's letters in the context of courtly composition, diplomatic maneuvers, and historiographical intervention and argues that the simple diction was a deliberate rhetorical choice used by the northern court to construct a different imperial image and to exert psychological influence on the intended readers. Moreover, Shen Yue's (441–513) embedding of the letters in a historical narrative as written documents reshapes the reception of the letters and imposes new interpretive frameworks for later readers.

Keywords self-representation, letter, politics of language, kingship, historiography

The Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), founded by one group of the Xianbei 鮮卑 people known as the Tuoba 拓拔, gradually unified north China in the first half of the fifth century.[1] The Wei dynasty thus became a powerful rival to the Liu Song dynasty (420–479) in the south. Under the effective leadership of Tuoba

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Tao 拓跋燾 (408–452, r. 423–452), Emperor Taiwu 太武 of the Northern Wei, the northern armies encroached on the southern territories and even threatened the safety of the southern capital of Jiankang 建康. The reign of Emperor Taiwu, which witnessed the northern dynasty's consolidation and expansion, almost exactly coincided with that of Liu Yilong 劉義隆 (407–453, r. 424–453), Emperor Wen of the Song. In the south, this same thirty-year period also saw economic and cultural prosperity.[2] As the Northern Wei and the Song came to engage more frequently with each other through military campaigns and diplomatic exchange, both states strove to deploy a variety of strategies to prevail in the competitions of authority and legitimacy.

This article examines the northern emperor Tuoba Tao's self-representation in his letters delivered to the southern audience at the height of the two states' military struggle. Previous scholarship on the literature of the Northern Dynasties has often adopted the frameworks of "ethnicity" or "north/south dichotomy." It has been argued that northerners, whether Xianbei nobles or northern Chinese elites, tended to express their ideas directly without literary ornamentation and were more interested in writing about practical matters; the southerners, in contrast, valued the aesthetic qualities of the belletristic genres, such as poetry and parallel prose, and their writings were noted for literary sophistication, elaborate allusions, and rhetorical flair.[3] Thus, the stylistic traits that scholars often associate with northern literature are "realistic" (*xianshi* 現實), "sorrowful" (*beiliang* 悲涼), "vigorous" (*gangjing* 剛勁), and "unadorned" (*zhipu* 質樸).[4] They result from as well as reflect both the "harsh" living conditions in the north and non-Chinese ethnic characteristics.

This article problematizes the assumption that certain ethnic differences determine the content and style of the northern and southern writings. I situate the discussion of Tuoba Tao's letters in the context of courtly composition, diplomatic maneuvers, and historiographical intervention.[5] As I show later, Tuoba Tao's letters intertwine negotiating practical matters with constructing the image of the "speaker," namely, the emperor, as a legitimate and moral ruler. I suggest that stylistic choices—whether in ornamental or plain language, whether formal or personal, whether using a more colloquial *wo* 我 (I, we) or *zhen* 朕 (often translated as the royal *we*) for self-reference—were not ethnically determined but discursive strategies consciously adopted to produce certain rhetorical effects for the intended readers. The carefully composed epistolary documents not only launched a psychological warfare against southern enemies with the aim of influencing contemporary political and military situations but also represented a concept of kingship radically different from the southern counterpart as part of the northern ruler's self-legitimizing program. As the "southern audience" considered here includes both the letters' intended readers

and later historians in the Southern Dynasties, I conclude by demonstrating that embedding the letters in a historical narrative can alter their meanings and create new possibilities of interpretation. Through historical narration and interpretation, the historian Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513) turned the northern ruler's self-promoted "honesty" into a sign of barbarity and salvaged the image of the southern ruler ridiculed by Tuoba Tao in his letters as a feeble, paranoid old man.

Tuoba Tao's Letters and the Politics of Language

In 451, the emperor Tuoba Tao personally led huge armies to invade the south and besieged the city of Xuanhu 懸瓠 (modern Runan 汝南 in Henan Province). After forty days or so of constant attack, the northern ruler withdrew his troops back to the capital of Pingcheng 平城 to recuperate. In the "Biography of Braided Barbarians" 索虜傳 (Suo lu zhuan) of *Song shu* 宋書 (History of the Song Dynasty), where Tuoba Tao's letters are preserved, the compiler Shen Yue introduces the composition and delivery of the northern emperor's first letter: "Even though Tuoba Tao failed to conquer Xuanhu, he did an enormous amount of plundering. 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.[6] According to the historian, the epistolary communication was intended to verbally insult the southern troops.

The letter is written in a straightforward manner, with language in a plain register and devoid of literary allusions. It forms a stark contrast to the ornate parallel prose that came to be the norm of verbal communication in the southern court. The letter's distinctive style has prompted scholars to conclude 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).[7] However, my analysis below suggests that the simple language by no means indicates a lack of rhetorical complexity. In fact, the letter's verbose message and bombastic voice raise interesting questions about justifications (or the lack thereof) for military invasions, calculation of material gains, dissemination and manipulation of gossip, and anxiety over deception and revelation. Moreover, through its distinctive style, the document represents a heroic, candid, self-revealing ruler and fashions a conception of kingship at odds with that of contemporary southerners.

The long letter starts as follows:

> The spies whom you dispatched previously have beguiled and recruited [for you] those crafty scoundrels. I heard that [you won over] Zhu Xiuzhi and Shen Mo, and recently you also obtained [the submission of] Hu Chongzhi.[8] They are generals of vanquished troops. A state should have constant laws for punishment.[9] However, you appointed

> them as local governors who seek to take advantage of our lapses and to congratulate themselves for being able to do so. You captured a useless fellow, Pu Zhongcai [from our camp].[10] What good or harm will it do? It is no different from seizing 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, chained his waist, and forced him to do hard labor as a form of humiliation. When one observes deeds like these, it is sufficient to know your main intention—it has always been like this since our confrontation, not just for one morning or one evening.
>
> 彼前使間諜，該略姦人。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，各便鑲腰苦役以辱之。觀此所行，足知彼之大趣，辨校以來，非一朝一夕也。[11]

The letter begins with Tuoba Tao accusing his opponent of *de* 得 (translated variably as to "obtain," "capture," or "seize"): the speaker lashes out at the southern ruler's "capture" of people from the Wei dynasty, be they "scoundrels" originally from the south, an insignificant "fellow," or a "minor general." This "acquisition" was also facilitated by deceitful schemes, as Liu Yilong dispatched spies (*jiandie* 間諜) to woo these subjects with manipulative words. What is morally problematic is that Liu Yilong ended up reappointing those turncoats as local governors to fend off northern invasions. They had betrayed the southern state previously and, swayed by spies, again defected from the northern state. This decision bespeaks the southern emperor's disregard for proper reward and punishment as part of the state's abiding laws and principles. While the southern ruler recruited and favored these treacherous men, 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 and morally dubious.

The character *de* 得 recurs several times in the paragraph, and it exposes Tuoba Tao's uneasiness with the Song's possession of extra resources. This issue of (un)justifiable "acquisition" becomes more prominent as Tuoba Tao proceeds to comment on a recent event:

> Not long ago, Gai Wu in the Guanzhong area [near the old capital of Chang'an] revolted and incited the rebellions of the Di and Qiang peoples living to the east of the Long area.[12] Again, you sent envoys to approach and entice them [to submit to you]. Upon men you bestowed bows and arrows, and upon women, rings and bracelets. This sort of people, arrogant and conceited, was hoping to deceive others and seize bribes at the moment. How could they truly surrender to you from afar? Why did you not come in person to obtain it, following the "principle of the great man"? Instead, you

> used goods and tricks to beguile my people at the borders. Those who surrendered, you exempted from taxes for seven years. This was to award crafty scoundrels! Now that I have come to this land [i.e., his invasion], how does the amount that I have seized compare 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 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 well inform your regional generals, prefects, and local governors to prepare tents, utensils, and the food needed for banquets [i.e., to "welcome" his arrival and submit to him]. I will come and seize the city of Yangzhou in the coming autumn. The grand momentum is unstoppable, and 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 those I slaughtered, how much pearl jewelry would those skulls and skeletons be worth?
>
> 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，而以貨該引誘我邊民，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，今所誅截髑髏，可當幾許珠璫也。

What makes this passage particularly remarkable is Tuoba Tao's apprehension of his rival's material surplus and the enemy's ability to use abundant resources to further 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 lure and beguile the common people and encourage bold defiance. The immediate benefits promised by the southern neighbor, such as exemption from taxes for seven years, cause insecurity at the dynastic borders. 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 greed, instead of true loyalty, the southern state is nevertheless capable of taking advantage of this weakness with its abundance and magnanimity 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 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 simple 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 notice Tuoba Tao's meticulous calculation of the gains and losses during the campaign, and he voices discontent about how the pillage this time fails to compensate for the amount that the Song previously seized from him. The speaker then audaciously requests that the southern state should cede territories and confine itself to the south of the Yangzi River. The fact that the menace is articulated immediately after the emperor's pronounced dissatisfaction with his material gains reveals his rationale for the invasion. According to Tuoba Tao, only the possession of the designated territories could adequately compensate for his previous loss. There is, however, no mention of the typical causes for a military venture that one often sees in the genre of war proclamation (*xi* 檄), such as transfer of the Mandate of Heaven, deliverance of resentful people living in misery, or remedy for court corruption and decadence. On the contrary, what drives the emperor's action seems to be an economic equilibrium. Moreover, in contrast to Liu Yilong, who captivated the common people (*zhangfu* 丈夫) through bribery and intermediaries, the northern ruler implies that he acts according to "the principle of the great man" (*da zhangfu zhi fa* 大丈夫之法) who "comes in person to obtain it" 自來取之. The term *great man* evokes the saying of Mencius 孟子: "He cannot be led astray by riches and honor, moved by poverty and privation, or deflected by power or force. This is what I call a great man" 富貴不能淫，貧賤不能移，威武不能屈，此之謂大丈夫.[13] This reference to "great man" and Tuoba Tao's professed honesty confirm the image of a truthful ruler who does not harbor duplicitous thoughts and takes personal responsibility for his rule. Unlike his neighbor, the northern emperor presents himself as a ruler who neither manipulates the surplus of wealth for nefarious plans nor resorts to hackneyed, high-flown causes to justify warfare. He wants only what he has lost and what he deserves.

The end of the paragraph produces a certain comical effect. According to the speaker, his grudge also partly results from Liu Yilong's rejection of his former request for pearl jewelry. The northern emperor hence asks whether those pieces of pearl jewelry were worthy of all the southern soldiers he killed in the military campaign. The seriousness of the question is somewhat mitigated when readers recall that the speaker accused the southern ruler of bestowing jewelry upon women in the preceding paragraph. It shows that not just common people succumb to the allure of material goods; an emperor too, charmed by beautiful objects, launches his attacks to acquire them. The ironic parallel notwithstanding, as the letter was circulating in the court community in the south, this message would certainly also cast a negative light on Liu Yilong and his judgment. The war, at least represented by Tuoba Tao, was not about ideology or dynastic survival; instead, southern soldiers lost their lives for

nothing but pieces of jewelry that their ruler had been reluctant to give away. Liu Yilong would have been wiser to comply with the northern ruler's request in the first place since the southern court has surely ended up spending more on launching campaigns and organizing defense.

Then, the letter moves on to discuss military strategies:

> Now I am on a northern campaign to first get rid of those bandits on horses. If you do not follow my orders, I will come to you in the coming autumn. Because you do not have enough horses [for battle], I have decided not to attack you first. When all the other places are 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 defense? In your land, if there is even a light rain, water will flood the palace gates. Can you shoot arrows at me while submerged in water? I will come to seize Yangzhou most openly, unlike you, who move and travel in the shadow of secrecy. I captured the spy whom you had dispatched, and now I release him. You should ask him for details about whatever he saw with his eyes here. You sent Pei Fangming to occupy Qiuchi before.[14] After acquiring the territory, you became suspicious of his valor and accomplishments to the extent that you could no longer tolerate him. With even such a great official by your side, you still decided to execute him. How can you compete with me?
>
> 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![15] If I ever face a battle with you, I will send riders to circle your armies when it is daytime, and at night, I will merely leave you alone and rest at places a hundred *li* away from you. I will command those who are inclined to surrender and come 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., 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 will be [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 of Yangzhou, there are two rivers that I will make good use of. The situation will indeed unfold according to my plan. I know that you executed all the officials who had served you when you were a prince. If they were here, despite their old age, they could still offer wise strategies. Now that you have had all of them killed, is it not Heaven that 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.

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？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，不好者盡剌殺之。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。彼募人以来，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, threatening to cross and occupy the capital Jiankang, southern envoy Zhang Chang 張暢 (408–457) came to negotiate the terms of withdrawal with the northern representative Li Xiaobo 李孝伯 (d. 459).[16] In their conversation, the northern diplomat admitted: "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 offers a similar observation regarding different battle strategies between the north and south in his letter, he elaborates more on their "hypothetical confrontation" and predicts how his troops would act and how his enemy might respond.

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 short of horses (lit., 無足 "without feet"). Lacking sufficient mobility, its military force must depend on the city as its 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. Noting this limitation, Tuoba Tao scornfully announces that even a light rain would submerge the soldiers confined within the city walls. In contrast, the northern armies are active, mobile, and unpredictable. They can encircle 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. Without requiring physical confrontation, they can even build a dam to channel rivers into Yangzhou. In Tuoba Tao's eyes, the southern state does not stand a chance of resisting and surely is not a worthy rival (*fei di* 非敵).

While Tuoba Tao's tone of confidence is unmistakable, the content of the letter is also surely befuddling to its readers, both modern and medieval. Why is this "honest" 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? If we imagine ourselves to be those who received this note in the middle of an unpredictable military struggle, how would this question-and-answer format affect our understanding and judgment of the emperor's intention? I suggest that this "candidness" is one strategy aiming to exert psychological influence on its intended readers. Tuoba Tao's consciously avowed transparency between intentions and words, between words and actions, and between actions and their meanings would end up encouraging his audience to suspiciously consider this seemingly toothless boast and at least contemplate 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 tactics 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" may further confound the readers of this letter. To exemplify his ingenuousness, Tuoba Tao 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 borders. 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 their true identity concealed beneath a false guise, spies naturally invite skepticism about their loyalty, especially when, after their identity is exposed, they are pardoned, sent back, and expected (or even encouraged by the enemy) to tell all they witnessed during their captivity. For the southern court, there is no way to ascertain whether the spy tells lies or the truth, or even conveys a false impression fed to him by the northern enemies. Furthermore, as if to bewilder already suspicious minds, Tuoba Tao reminds Liu Yilong of his execution of the honorable general Pei Fangming and his distrust of the general's loyalty even 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? Tuoba Tao's candid posturing would augment uncertainty about the released spy and torment the southern court to search for the northern ruler's hidden motives. In the end, this self-revelation appears to be another strategy to create the kind of ambiguity that characterizes military antagonism.

If doubt is the desired effect of most of the paragraphs in the letter, then the ending incites terror. Previously, Tuoba Tao self-aggrandizingly called himself a "great man" who seizes what he desires in person (*zi lai qu zhi* 自來取之) instead of relying on bribery and intrigues. At the end of the letter, he claims 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 supernatural force for the ultimate "acquisition"—that of the leader of the rival state. If curses and spells were truly a dependable recourse, then ironically, all the military plans and proclamations articulated above would 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 political rivals. The threatening message that ghosts will tie up (*fu* 縛) Liu Yilong and bring him to the northern land echoes the chains (*suo* 鏁) that Liu Yilong had tied around a northern general's waist as a form of humiliation (referenced at the beginning of the letter). Hence, the use of intimidation at the end of the letter also signifies certain retribution for Liu's "evil" deeds as well as the final fulfillment of justice.[18]

What can we make of this complex, at times contradictory, yet simply worded letter? A naive and biased reading would ascribe the simplicity and garrulousness to a "primitive" northern culture. Lacking proper literary training, Tuoba Tao wrote down directly 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 interstate competition.

As scholars have pointed out, starting from the early fifth century Emperor Taiwu staffed his court with elites from prestigious northern Chinese families, such as Lu Xuan 盧玄 (fl. mid-fifth century), Cui Hao 崔皓 (d. 450), Li Ling 李靈 (390–452), Li Shun 李順 (d. 442), Gao Yun 高允 (390–487), and You Ya 遊雅 (406–461).[20] According to Xiaorong Zheng, "The Pingcheng era of the Northern Wei saw a difficult growth of literature heavily influenced by politics. The only prosperous period in the literature of this era was roughly from 408 to 450."[21] These elite members of the court played an important part in accomplishing diplomatic missions, supervising cultural projects, compiling dynastic histories, and consulting on a variety of political and military affairs. In the oeuvre of Emperor Taiwu, several imperial edicts have survived. Drafted by his courtiers, these edicts are elegantly crafted and hardly distinguishable from the ornate southern ruler's edicts. One edict issued in 431 to promote Lu Xuan, Cui Chuo 崔綽 (fl. 431), and some other northern elite court members reads:

> Is it not recorded in the *Classic of Poetry* that "When a crane cries at the Nine Swamps, / Its voice is heard in Heaven"?[22] If the right people are acquired and entrusted with state affairs, indeed they can help achieve prosperity and peace for the realm. According to the *Classic of Change*, "I have a good goblet. I will share it with you."[23] For those who are comparable to Lu Xuan, who hide their traces at a shabby hut and do not flaunt their fame, I now order all the prefectures and counties to have them sent [to the central court] according to ritual propriety.
>
> 《詩》不云乎：「鶴鳴九皋，聲聞於天」。庶得其人，任之政事，共臻邕熙之美。《易》曰：「我有好爵，吾與爾靡之」。如玄之比，隱跡衡門，不耀名譽者，盡敕州郡，以禮發遣。[24]

Both this edict and the letter discussed above dwell on the "acquisition" (*de*) of people, but the language used is sharply different. In the part that precedes this quotation, the emperor first concedes that political chaos and warfare in previous years prevented him from searching for worthies. With bandits now defeated, he hopes to build a world of peace and safety. His eagerness to find worthy recluses and talented officials is "no less than the ruler of the Shang dynasty who dreamed about Fu Yue" 雖殷宗之夢板筑，罔以加也.[25] One sees that in this and many other edicts, the emperor-speaker demonstrates his cultural knowledge by citing classical texts such as *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of Poetry), *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Change), and *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects). He also, without exception, uses *zhen* (the royal *we*) in self-reference instead of the more colloquial *wu* 吾 or *wo* 我. Granted that the imperial edict (*zhao* 詔) and letter (*shu* 書) are two separate genres, the fact that the letter, sent across borders and read by both courts as an important diplomatic document, could have been written in a more elevated style, but was surprisingly not, demonstrates that its "simplicity" must be a deliberate choice.

It is thus important to examine the politics of language in Tuoba Tao's letter, especially how the choice of style can convey additional layers of meaning. The stylistic plainness and directness corroborate the emperor's self-image as a frank, moral, and genuine ruler. If Liu Yilong, the northern emperor's archrival, is portrayed as someone who has material surplus, secret agents, and a suspicious mind that misreads loyalty as betrayal, then Tuoba Tao is an "honorable" great man (*da zhangfu* 大丈夫) who speaks earnestly and directly and whose words always reflect his thoughts. If he knows something, he tells his readers that he knows it. If he invades, he lays bare the obvious reason, namely, material compensation, instead of resorting to more abstract concepts such as the Mandate of Heaven. Unlike Liu Yilong, who stealthily manipulates his subjects' loyalty, the northern emperor even 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 the "barbarian's" cruelty, as southern readers would likely do, its immediate context (especially compared to Liu Yilong's deeds narrated at the beginning) highlights Tuoba Tao's admirable honesty. In all, the style, just like the represented self, is direct and transparent even though, as argued above, it also purposefully leaves room for ambiguity to confuse the letter recipients.

Similar characteristics can be detected in Tuoba Tao's second letter, delivered soon after the first one. This time, the northern ruler received the news that Liu Yilong would soon launch a northward expedition. He mocked the southern ruler by saying:

> Ever since heaven and earth were divided, those who vied and are still vying to conquer the world are not limited to only you and me. I have heard that you will come here in person. If you were able to arrive at Zhongshan and the River of Sanggan, feel free to come and go as you like it. Neither will there be a welcome if you come, nor a farewell when you leave. If you are tired of your palaces, you can come and live in Pingcheng, and I can go and live in Yangzhou. We can exchange our territories. You are already a man of fifty years old, and yet you have barely ever been outside the palace gates. Even if you come [to invade] relying on your own physical strength, you are merely like a three-year-old child. How could you know the life of the Xianbei who are always on their horses in the mountains?
>
> 自天地啟闢已來，爭天下者，非唯我二人而已。今聞彼自來，設能至中山及桑乾川，隨意而行，來亦不迎，去亦不送。若厭其區宇者，可來平城居。我往揚州住，且可博其土地。彼年已五十，未嘗出戶。雖自力而來，如三歲嬰兒，復何知我鮮卑常馬背中領上生活？[26]

Because of the construction of palace compounds, the southern ruler, as Tuoba Tao ridicules him, has "barely ever been outside the palace gates," with physical strength "like a three-year-old child." This provocative caricature portrays a weak ruler, fixed in one location, hidden behind layers of palace walls. Relating this remark to the style of the letters, we see the emphasis that both architectural and literary ornaments make a true self nebulous. A legitimate, powerful ruler for Tuoba Tao does not wield power through secrecy or use palatial/literary decorations as a barrier. While Liu Yilong travels in shadows and favors concealment (*yi* 翳), the northern emperor values spontaneity, authenticity, and moral integrity—a perfect agreement between intention and action; in other words, he is a person of "transparency" (*xian* 顯). This ideal is portrayed in the letter both conceptually and stylistically.

The boldest claim in this second letter is an offer to exchange capitals and territories between the two dynasties. 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 of poetry. This cultural enterprise was crucial to Liu Yilong's performance of kingship.[27] The northern emperor, however, rejects this symbolic representation of kingship by declaring that the dynastic capital is hardly the source of a ruler's legitimacy and that he would be glad to switch lands with his archrival. As Tuoba Tao uses the ethnic marker *Xianbei* here, readers may hasten to regard this "outlandish" claim as a reflection of ethnically Xianbei culture. However, other sources also show that Tuoba Tao was able to debate with his officials about the importance of an imperial capital by referring to classical texts and historical antecedents. According to *Wei shu* 魏書 (History of the Wei Dynasty), the emperor was once encouraged by his officials to expand the scale of Pingcheng and renovate old palace buildings. The courtiers cited both *Yijing* and past examples to present their case, including the famous sentences articulated by the Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE) statesman Xiao He 蕭何 (257–193 BCE): "Though the Son of Heaven regards the four seas as his home, if the capital is not imposing and magnificent, his power will not be revered" 天子以四海為家，不壯不麗，無以重威. Hearing this, the emperor responded by first resorting to the authority of antiquity: "The ancients had a saying that 'What matters is moral influence rather than dangerous terrain.'" 古人有言：「在德不在險」. This is a line articulated by Wu Qi 吳起 (440–381 BCE) when he conversed with Earl Wu of the Wei 魏武侯 (d. 370 BCE) about the defense of the capital city and a ruler's moral influence.[28] Tuoba Tao then continued: "Now, the world has yet to be pacified, and the strength of people is needed. As for affairs related to building and constructing, it is not something that We would want to do. Xiao He's answer is not appropriate" 今天下未平，方須民力，土功之事，朕所未為。蕭何之對，非雅言也.[29]

Even though Tuoba Tao expresses an idea similar to that in his letter, that the grandiose capital may not bolster legitimacy, this example nevertheless demonstrates that the northern ruler is aware and capable of appropriating received discourses on dynastic "capital" to justify its expanding or diminishing scale. Hence Tuoba Tao and his courtiers could have used high-sounding words to denounce their enemy, such as superior morality versus wasteful construction, and yet they decided not to. Instead, they fashioned radical, ethnic differences—the mobile, vigorous Xianbei leader compared to the feeble, child-like southern ruler—as a rhetorical strategy, meant not to reflect reality but to actively affect the southern audience and their decision making through this discursive exaggeration. If the first letter stirs doubt and paranoia, the second letter incurs indignation, which presumably would lead to a rash eagerness to retaliate. The delivery of the letter was also opportune, as Liu Yilong received

this contemptuous remark right in the middle of war preparation. Shen Yue the historian seems to imply the success of the agenda behind this epistolary communication. After citing this "arrogant" message, the historian writes immediately: "On this year, the grand northern expedition was launched" 其年，大舉北討. The historian later emphasizes the fact that Liu Yilong initiated this campaign despite a lack of human resources and financial support, to the extent that all the imperial subjects, from royal princes to commoners, had to donate to the campaign and many more were conscripted in the armies. This decision ultimately led to a military fiasco for the south: the northern armies occupied Guabu 瓜步, a city to the north of the southern capital, and announced their intent to cross the Yangzi to take over Jiankang. Behind this most damaging military failure of the south, therefore, loom the two letters delivered by the northern emperor: two letters written in simple language that nonetheless contain weighty ideological connotations and well-designed manipulations to assail the enemy as a discursive weapon.

The Southern Historian's "Retaliations"

While Tuoba Tao's letters were delivered in the middle of the Wei-Song military struggles and aimed to interfere with the contemporary military and political affairs as argued above, the letters are preserved in *Song shu*, a historical record presented to the throne of Southern Qi dynasty (479–502) in 488 by Shen Yue. Shen Yue's compilation also relied heavily on materials prepared by his predecessors.[30] Thus, the reading strategy changes when the letters are embedded in a historical narrative: later readers access the written texts as documents, when the original audience interpreted the letters in the context of military confrontation and diplomatic maneuvers. The decontextualization of the letters from their immediate background and recontextualization in a retrospective historical narrative inevitably reshape readers' interpretations of the pieces. One of the obvious consequences is the lens of barbarity, as the letters are included in the "Biography of Braided Barbarians" in *Song shu*. Hence, while the plain language may be a deliberate choice of the northern court, the *Song shu* chapter title evokes the image of an uncultured, "barbarian" ruler without appropriate literary training to compose an elegant letter.

Shen Yue also uses other narrative strategies to salvage the image of Liu Yilong and tarnish the reputation of the northern emperor Tuoba Tao. In the short section that records the political struggles between Liu Yilong and Tuoba Tao, Shen Yue includes not only the northern ruler's letters but also writings by Liu Yilong, especially his poems. Of the three extant poems by the southern emperor, one survives in fragments in *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (Classified Extracts of Literature), an early seventh-century encyclopedia. The other two poems are

complete, and their earliest source is Shen Yue's *Song shu*, "Biography of Braided Barbarians." Both poems express the ruler's thoughts and feelings when facing the military campaigns between the Song dynasty and its northern enemy. The first one was composed after Liu Yilong was informed that the city of Huatai had been breached and conquered by the northerners. The poem portrays a striving ruler ruminating on the dynastic fate. He "carries a sword with impassioned feelings in the heart, / with lofty aspirations soaring like floating clouds" 撫劍懷感激，志氣若雲浮. The poem ends: "With melancholic thoughts I fear the passage of time, / and while I gaze to the north, my tears stream down" 惆悵懼遷逝，北顧涕交流.[31] Liu Yilong's second poem is incorporated in an edict issued to his officials and generals, and deserves to be quoted in full:[32]

> I have been engaged in reading since youth, and am quite fond of literary writings. Roaming in the metaphysical principles and enjoy elegant phrasing, I was unable to put books away. Since I became entangled in worldly affairs [i.e., becoming the emperor], my feelings are devoted to family and state. Although I feel the urgency to live up to the example of "toiling until the sun starts to set," ultimately I am beleaguered by regret and shame [about my lack of accomplishments].[33] Still, the land is not yet united, and military campaigns and famines occur in turn. I chant of such miserable ailments, which ever more occupy my thoughts. In addition, my illness from fatigue progressively increases, and my aspirations are waning with the passage of time. With all these happenings, the effort of composing my thoughts [for literary works] has been discontinued. Now the wicked and cruel are wandering about like ghouls, and the common folk are mired in mud and trapped by fire. Thereupon I look back on the north with concern, and never for a moment forget about extending succor and relief to the people of the north. I desire to bring together all different counsels offered to me and make a clean sweep of the fleeing rebels. Overwhelmed by my passion, I have composed a short rhyme. My dear sirs: you all have deep feelings about the state, and will surely feel an intensified sense of righteousness in your hearts. The poem reads:
>
> 吾少覽篇籍，頗愛文義，遊玄翫采，未能息卷。自纓紼世務，情兼家國，徒存日昃，終有慚德。而區宇未一，師饉代有，永言斯瘼，彌干其慮。加疲疾稍增，志隨時往，屬思之功，與事而廢。殘虐遊魂，齊民塗炭，乃眷北顧，無忘弘拯。思總羣謀，掃清逋逆，感慨之來，遂成短韻。卿等體國情深，亦當義篤其懷也。詩曰：
>
> Father Ji had foreseen the disaster before it happened; 季父鑒禍先
> Master Xin recognized the crisis from the beginning.[34] 辛生識機始

	Prosperity and decline do not lack omens;	崇替非無徵
4	Rise and fall ultimately have their reasons.	興廢要有以
	Ever since the loss of the Central Domain,	自昔淪中畿
6	Suddenly it has been over a hundred years.	儵焉盈百祀
	One no longer sees southern clouds rain,	不覩南雲陰
8	Only the Tatar wind blowing.	但見胡風起
	When chaos is extreme, peace takes shape;	亂極治必形
10	A smooth road follows accumulated hardships.[35]	塗泰由積否
	I am about to cleanse the remaining miasma,	方欲滌遺氛
12	Not to mention those now defiling the frontier.	矧乃穢邊鄙
	Looking back, I grieve for the common folk,	眷言悼斯民
14	The duty of "saving them from ditches" truly lies with me.[36]	納隍良在己
	I vow to raise the great net,	逝將振宏羅
16	With a single shake unify scripts and wagon tracks.	一麾同文軌
	Will the good opportunity ever arrive again?	時乎豈再來
18	One cannot wait so long for the clearing of the River.	河清難久俟
	While nags are content with confined steps,	駘驕安局步
20	A handsome steed aspires to go a thousand *li*.	騏驥志千里
	The tutor of Liang cherished righteous intent;	梁傅畜義心
22	Minister Yi harbored profound shame.[37]	伊相抱深恥
	Where should such intimate understanding be found?	賞契將誰寄
24	It must be sought among the various gentlemen.	要之二三子
	Do not let the courts of Qi or Jin,	無令齊晉朝
26	Make scholars of Zou and Lu feel ashamed.[38]	取愧鄒魯士

As one would expect, the Liu Yilong portrayed in the northerner's letters and Liu Yilong's self-representation in the edict cannot be more different. If the former conducts business in secrecy, the latter actively expresses his thoughts and aspirations through poetry writing. If the former is ruthless and paranoid, the latter takes great care of his people and builds mutual trust with his officials. If the former is frail, hiding behind palace walls, the latter, though restrained by worldly affairs, strives to conquer and make all under heaven unified. As Xiaofei Tian points out, Liu Yilong hints at what one may call a body politic: as his physical illness is aggravated, the state also suffers from the incursions of the enemies, which results in his people living in great misery. One also sees an "exhortation of the courtiers to feel as the emperor feels and to intimately

incorporate (*ti* 體) the suffering of the body politic, which is embodied by the emperor's suffering person."[39] With the common folk, officials, ruler, and the state becoming one, the poem at the end links the poet with other understanding kindred spirits. Contrary to the Liu Yilong in Tuoba's letter, who alienates himself by executing his generals or purchasing loyalty with material benefits, the Liu Yilong here fosters an affective community of mutually appreciative minds. They share the sentiments of "grief" (*dao* 悼), "righteousness" (*yi* 義), and "shame" (*kui* 愧 or *can* 慚), which drive further their grand aspiration (*zhi* 志) to reunite the realm.

The inclusion of the letters and poems by the two rulers in the very short section in the "Biography of Braided Barbarians" is striking, even though one can only wonder whether this was Shen Yue's deliberate decision. Regardless, readers could immediately perceive the letters as "crudely" written after perusing the sophisticated, allusive poems by Liu Yilong. Thus, just as Tuoba Tao represented Liu Yilong as the inferior "other," Shen Yue's citation and juxtaposition of the letters and poems end up fashioning contrasts between the two emperors, but with the opposite agenda. The sense of contingency in Tuoba Tao's letters is now juxtaposed with a certain kind of historical, even cosmological, determinism in Liu Yilong's poem, as the southern ruler notes that things happen according to the principle of the universe. While the northern emperor claims that he and Liu are only two among many who compete to conquer the world, Liu Yilong interprets his dynastic mission as reclaiming the Central Land lost more than a hundred years ago. For Liu Yilong, the key of the competition is not a battle won or defeated, people acquired or abandoned; rather, it is to detect and follow a pattern of historical development. While the northern ruler prides himself on transparency, Liu Yilong advocates seeing through sometimes misleading phenomena to understand the larger trend, just like King Ji 王季 (fl. twelfth century BCE) or Master Xin (Xin You 辛有, fl. eighth century BCE). The body politic thus conveys an additional meaning: the current age might be a time, one hundred years after the fall of the Central Land, when the emperor suffers from illness and the people live in hardship, but as Liu Yilong's poem narrates, the trend will reverse itself once arriving at its extreme. The emperor's bodily weakness and the state's ailments will in time turn into strength and progression. With the same logic applied to Tuoba Tao's letters, the northern ruler's extreme confidence of his physical strength and firm belief in his coming triumph should also portend something more ominous, which Liu Yilong's officials and other readers of the poem should be able to recognize.

A final "retaliation" by Shen Yue against the "barbarians" appears in his implied causality. According to Shen's narrative, after receiving the two letters by Tuoba Tao, Liu Yilong swiftly launched the northern expedition. As

mentioned earlier, the expedition was not successful, and the northern troops vanquished the attack and occupied Guabu, north of Jiankang. Tuoba Tao agreed to retreat only after receiving many gifts and securing a marriage with the southern royal family. This event turns out to be the most serious threat to the Song dynasty. Shen Yue writes that right after this large-scale invasion,

> Tuoba Tao defeated the resistance from altogether six prefectures, including Nan Yanzhou, Xuzhou, Yanzhou, Yuzhou, Qingzhou, and Jizhou. One cannot count how many people he slaughtered and how much he plundered. More than half of his soldiers and horses also died during the campaign. His subjects all blamed him for it. In the same year, Tuoba Tao died of illness.
> 燾凡破南兗、徐、兗、豫、青、冀六州，殺略不可稱計，而其士馬死傷過半，國人並尤之。是歲，燾病死。[40]

While Tuoba Tao indeed came to invade the south as promised in the letter, Shen Yue reveals that the pillaged amount could hardly be calculated, in contrast to how Tuoba Tao envisioned his campaign's goal: to justly gain what he had lost before. The prominent epistolary *I* in Tuoba Tao's letters presents a candid, honest self, but Shen Yue portrays a ruler estranged by his people, which interestingly resembles the image of Liu Yilong in the letters. In the end, Tuoba Tao died in 452, the same year this victorious campaign took place. One can only speculate on what Shen Yue implies regarding the causality of these events. Is Tuoba Tao's death related to his people's censure and his guilty conscience? Is it the result of certain karmic retribution? As Tuoba Tao indeed died after much plundering and a great victory, does it mean that history, at least seen by Shen Yue, somehow fulfills the prophecy articulated in Liu Yilong's poem, that the tide will ultimately reverse directions once reaching the extreme?

Conclusion

In *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, Erich Auerbach offers an insightful analysis of the *sermo humilis*, speech in a humble style, in European late antiquity. Mainly favored by church fathers, this kind of speech was written in a simple diction, drastically different from those written by the classical Latin authors. As Auerbach argues, Christian writers, instead of signaling the decline of Latin writing, deliberately reinvented this style, especially shown through the Latin Bible, to cater to their audience and to demonstrate how stylistic "lowliness" could contain profound sublimity. As the church fathers at the time knew by heart the classical authors, such as Horace and Virgil, the prose's plainness was thus a careful construction.[41] In a similar vein, this article examines the *sermo simplex* of Tuoba Tao's letters. Rather than

extending the argument that ethnicity determined the content and style of northern writings, I examine how letter writing became a strategy to participate in contemporary interstate negotiations about legitimacy and authority.

Whereas the *sermo humilis* is closely related to the religious background of early medieval Europe, I situate my discussion of Tuoba Tao's letters in the context of military struggles, diplomatic maneuvers, and historiographical interpretations. If both courts would scrutinize the letters authored by an emperor and sent across dynastic borders, I ask: How was a distinctive imperial voice created to assert his authority? If there was a personal note in the publicly circulating letters, what was the function of "personal" as a rhetorical strategy for persuasion? How do such stylistic choices complicate the conveyance of message? If a letter composed by a northerner is included in a southern historical account, what can the same letter tell us about the northerner's self-image and the southerner's revision of that image? Tuoba Tao's letters and their source, the *Song shu*, aptly illuminate this discussion. Tuoba Tao's simple language fashions an imperial voice that is "authentic" and "truthful," in contradistinction to the southern ruler portrayed as hiding behind literary and palatial decorations. The simple diction also has pragmatic functions. The seeming transparency between words and deeds would sow doubt and paranoia in a southern audience; its histrionic, direct provocations could goad southerners into rash actions. These choices and functions granted, the meanings of the letters are also subject to reinterpretation as they are positioned in a historical narrative. Even though Shen Yue does not offer direct comments on Tuoba Tao's letters, the parallel citation of Liu Yilong's poems, the overall narrative frame, and the implied causation of Tuoba Tao's death reduce the complexity of the letters to a sign of barbarity. It ultimately conveys a moral lesson on how an egotistic ruler meets his demise while wallowing in a false vision of dynastic glory and personal power.

Among the surviving texts from the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, one can hardly find another lengthy epistolary communication authored by an emperor and directly addressed to the ruler of the rival state. But it is clear from historical records that formal correspondences between states, sometimes described as the "state letter" (*guoshu* 國書), were frequent, and they were imbued with heavy political connotations—so much so that the change of even one character could have serious repercussions. It is recorded in *Nan shi* 南史 (History of the Southern Dynasties) that Yang Jian 楊堅 (541–604, r. 581–604), Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty, received a letter from the southern ruler Chen Shubao 陳叔寶 (553–604, r. 582–589) in the year 589. The latter insolently concluded the message with: "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, refers to the universe's infinite space; it triumphs over a domain limited to 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), he uses *qingtai* 清泰 (tranquil and peaceful), a phrase of higher register denoting a prosperous and restful era, to describe his own dynasty. After receiving this message, Yang Jian was offended and instantly circulated the letter among his court officials. Both Yang Su 楊素 (544–606) 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.[42] Albeit only one sentence survived, we find here, similar to Tuoba Tao's case, a ruler's self-promotion and pragmatic use of epistolary communication, as well as historiographical bias as the anecdote is recorded in *Nan shi* compiled by northerners instead of in the more sympathetic *Chen shu* 陳書 (History of the Chen Dynasty). While the Wei and Song confrontation continued after Tuoba Tao's letters and his psychological manipulation, this instance of epistolary impertinence from the Chen ruler, who according to the northern historians became increasingly arrogant (*yijiao* 益驕), portended a larger, irreversible shift in momentum that ultimately caused the fall of the South.

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Notes

1. The Xianbei was a group of non-Chinese people who spoke a proto-Mongolic and Turkish language. For a survey of the Xianbei people in early historiography, see Holcombe, "Xianbei in Chinese History."
2. Later historians have described this period as "the good government of Yuanjia" (*Yuanjia zhi zhi* 元嘉之治). Yuanjia was the era name when Liu Yilong reigned as the emperor. Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), the compiler of *Song shu* 宋書 (History of the Song Dynasty), noted that the thirty years when Liu Yilong presided as the ruler were the "utmost prosperous period of the Song dynasty" 宋世之極盛. Shen, *Song shu*, 92.2261.
3. The cultural construction of the North and South began in the late Northern and Southern Dynasties and further consolidated in the Sui (581–618) and early Tang (618–907) dynasties. It has subsequently influenced the writing of literary history of this period. For example, Liu Shipei 劉師培 (1884–1919), one of the earliest modern scholars to recount the cultural history of this period, stated that due to climate, geographical, and cultural differences between the north and south, northern people valued practicality (*shiji* 實際), compared to southerners, who believed in emptiness (*xuwu* 虛無). This

divergence thus led to distinctive literary characteristics between the north and south. See Liu, *Liu Shipei xueshu lunzhu*, 184–91. In recent years, scholars have attempted to redress this received discourse. Xiaofei Tian analyzes the constructedness of the images of the North and South and argues that later readers' impression of the Northern Dynasties literature was subject to the biased preservation of northern literary texts in seventh-century encyclopedias. See Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star*, 310–66; and Tian, "From the Eastern Jin through the Early Tang," 274–77. David Jonathan Felt examines the conceptualization of geopolitical landscape in the Northern and Southern Dynasties and points out how the idea of the North and South as equal and complementary halves was created in the Sui and Tang dynasties. See Felt, "Metageography of the Northern and Southern Dynasties."

4. For example, Wu Xianning lists three qualities of the Northern Dynasties literature: realist spirit (*xianshi jingshen* 現實精神), sorrowful tones (*beiliang qingdiao* 悲涼情調), and forceful and unadorned style (*gangjing zhipu fengge* 剛勁質樸風格). Wu, *Beichao wenhua tezhi yu wenxue jincheng*, 172–80.
5. In her seminal monograph on the epistolary culture in early medieval China, Antje Richter rightly notes the "problematic nature" of this corpus of early medieval letters and draws attention to the difficulty of their contextualization, as modern readers can hardly know fully the original communicative background of those letters. Building on her research and fully acknowledging this difficulty, I explore how different contexts in which the letters were delivered and read may create disparate meanings, thus complicating our interpretations of the literary texts. See Richter, *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China*, 7–10.
6. Shen, *Song shu*, 95.2345.
7. Wang, "Beichao shuxin yanjiu," 30. A similar view can be found in Xiong Lihui's monograph on pre-Tang prose: *Xian Tang sanwen yishu lun*, 2: 938–39. Tuoba Tao's two letters have hardly been the focus of scholarly attention. In his trailblazing monograph on Northern Dynasties literature, *Beichao wenxue shi*, Zhou Jianjiang does not mention the two letters in the chapters "Literature of the Royal Family of the Northern Dynasties" and "Literature of the Earlier Period of the Northern Wei." More recently, the two-volume *Beichao minzu wenxue xulun* by Gao Renxiong skips Tuoba Tao's letters, too, even though the author devotes one chapter to the prose of the Xianbei of the Northern Wei Dynasty.
8. Zhu Xiuzhi 朱脩之 (d. 464) was originally a southern general. He was captured by the enemies 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 Northern Yan dynasty (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, *Song shu*, 76.1969–71. Shen Mo 申謨 (fl. mid-fifth century), too, was originally a southern general captured together with Zhu Xiuzhi after Huatai was conquered. Shen, *Song shu*, 65.1723. Hu Chongzhi 胡崇之 (fl. mid-fifth century), a southern general, was captured in 443 as Qiuchi 仇池 fell to the Northern Wei. Sima G., *Zizhi tongjian*, 124.3899.
9. The *locus classicus* of the phrase *guo you changxing* 國有常刑 (A state should have constant laws for punishment) is *Zhou li* 周禮 (The Rites of the Zhou). As *Zhou li* records, in the first month of the Xia calendar, the junior grand minister (*xiaozai* 小宰) would lead all the officials to inspect the laws of government. Then he would strike a bell and

announce that "if one fails to obey the regulations, a state has its constant laws for punishment" 不用法者，國有常刑. *Zhouli zhushu*, 3.1409. By the early medieval period, *guo you changxing* had already become a common phrase to refer to the implementation of state laws to punish wrongdoings.

10. Both Pu Zhongcai 普鐘蔡 (fl. mid-fifth century) and Wei Ba 衛拔 (fl. mid-fifth century) mentioned later were otherwise unknown.
11. Shen, *Song shu*, 95.2345–47; *Quan hou Wei wen*, 1.3517.
12. Gai Wu's 蓋吳 (417–446) rebellion broke out in 445 in the Guanzhong area, and the rebels soon rallied much support. Pressed by the attack from Northern Wei armies, Gai Wu pledged loyalty to the Song. The revolt was short-lived and was soon suppressed by the Wei troops.
13. *Mengzi zhushu*, 6.5894; Bloom, *Mencius*, 62.
14. Pei Fangming 裴方明 (d. 443), a Song dynasty general, was dispatched in 442 to invade Qiuchi, a kingdom founded by the Di 氐 people and at the time ruled by Yang Nandang 楊難當 (r. 429–442). The Qiuchi region was in the southeast of modern-day Gansu Province, adjacent to the Shu area in the south, which was part of the Song territories, and the Northern Wei in the north. After Pei successfully expelled the local ruler and occupied the area, he was executed in the next year for corruption. Sima G., *Zizhi tongjian*, 124.3896–97; 124.3900.
15. 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 (317–420). The military campaign ended in a fiasco for the Former Qin. It became a glorious moment for the south still very much remembered in the fifth century.
16. For an examination of this event in different historical accounts, see Dien, "Disputation at Pengcheng."
17. Shen, *Song shu*, 59.1601.
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 劉濬 (429–453), were involved in sorcery. They made a jade figurine of the emperor to curse and cast spells on him. After the plot was discovered, the two princes acted swiftly and assassinated Liu Yilong.
19. For example, Li Shan summarizes the characteristics of letter writing in the north in the following way: "They valued simplicity and rustiness, and did 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, *Zhongguo sanwen tongshi*, 285.
20. Zhou, *Beichao wenxue shi*, 84–95. The most important moment is the year 431. According to the biography of Lu Xuan in *Wei shu* 魏書 (History of the Wei Dynasty), "In the fourth year of the Shenjia era, Emperor Taiwu summoned eminent scholars in the world. Lu Xuan was regarded as the first among them" 神䴥四年，太武辟召天下儒俊，以玄為首. Wei, *Wei shu*, 47.1045.
21. Zheng, "History of Northern Dynasties Literature," 20.
22. The poem is "Crane's Cries" 鶴鳴 (He Ming). *Maoshi zhushu*, 11.927; Waley and Allen, *Book of Songs*, 158.
23. *Zhouyi zhushu*, 6.146; Wilhelm, *I Ching or Book of Changes*, 237.
24. *Quan hou Wei wen*, 1.3513.

25. Wu Ding 武丁 (r. ca. 1250–1192 BCE), the king of the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE), once had a dream about a sage who would come and assist him. One day he passed by a place called Fuyan and saw a worker named Fu Yue 傅說 building city walls. The king found he looked exactly like the one in his dream. The king thus appointed Fu Yue as his minister, and the Shang dynasty became prosperous. Sima Q., *Shi ji*, 3.102.
26. Shen, *Song shu*, 95.2347.
27. Tian, "Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire," 23–39.
28. Ouyang, *Yiwen leiju*, 23.415. The issue of morality and wasteful construction also harks back to a conversation between Ru Qi 女齊 and the Jin ruler that happened in 538 BCE. The lord of Jin firmly believed that his state was rich in horses and protected by natural defenses, which made his kingdom more powerful than his rivals. Ru Qi objected and said: "Since ancient times it has been true that one cannot achieve true security by relying on natural defenses and horses. For this reason the former kings cultivated their reputation for virtue in order to bring ritual entertainment to the spirits and the human ancestors. One never hears of their having devoted themselves to natural defenses and horses" 恃險與馬，不可以為固也，從古以然。是以先王務脩德音以亨神、人，不聞其務險與馬也. *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhushu*, the first year of Lord Zhao, 42.4415; translation from Durrant, Li, and Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition*, 3:1365.
29. Wei, *Wei shu*, 4.107.
30. Shen, *Song shu*, 100.2466–468.
31. Ibid., 95.2334; *Song shi*, 1.1136.
32. Shen, *Song shu*, 95.2341. Xiaofei Tian translates this edict and the poem in "Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire" (at 34–38), which discusses Liu Yilong's imperial voice and his performance of kingship. I adopt her translation with slight modifications.
33. King Wen of Zhou 周文王 (1152–1056 BCE) was a diligent ruler. He devoted himself to managing state affairs and caring for his people so much so that "from the time he began court audience till the sun started to set in the west, he did not have time to eat" 自朝至于日中昃，不遑暇食. *Shangshu zhushu*, 16.472. Here Liu Yilong refers to the illness that prevented him from being an exemplary ruler.
34. *Jifu* 季父 refers to King Ji 王季 (Jili 季歷, fl. twelfth century BCE) of the Zhou. His two older brothers fled to Wu to avoid contending with King Ji for power. Master Xin refers to Xin You 辛有 (fl. eighth century BCE), a Zhou official. When he passed by Yichuan 伊川, he saw someone with unbound hair offering a sacrifice in the countryside. He said, "Within one hundred years, this likely will be the Rong's! Ritual propriety has been lost here already!" See *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhushu*, the twenty-second year of Lord Xi, 15.3936; and Durrant, Li, and Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition*, 1:353.
35. The two lines express the idea that situations will turn into their opposite when reaching the extreme.
36. According to Mencius, Yi Yin 伊尹 (fl. sixteenth century BCE), the minister of the Shang dynasty, deeply cared for his people. "He thought that, if among the people of the world, there was a common man or a common woman who did not share in the benefits bestowed by Yao and Shun, it was as if he himself had pushed them into a ditch" 思天下之民，匹夫匹婦，有不與被堯舜之澤者，如己推而內之溝中. *Mengzi zhushu*, 10.5962; Bloom, *Mencius*, 110.
37. Jia Yi 賈誼 (d. 168 BCE) was an early Han dynasty statesman and scholar. He was appointed as the Grand Mentor of Liu Yi 劉揖 (d. 169), King Huai of Liang, also the

beloved son of Emperor Wen of the Han. Before Yi Yin was recognized as a talented official, he carried a tripod full of food to meet with the king of Shang and elucidated on the current affairs with the tastes of food as a metaphor. Later Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (160–93 BCE) in his *Discourse on Master of Non-being* cites the example of Yi Yin: "Therefore, Yi Yin suffered from humiliation and carried a tripod of food. He harmonized five tastes and [used this as an excuse] to meet with King Tang of Shang" 故伊尹蒙恥辱，負鼎俎，和五味，以干湯. *Quan Han wen*, 25.266. As Tian notes, both allusions also involve interstate negotiation and competition, as Jia Yi once presented a memorial to the throne to discuss affairs with Xiongnu tribes and Yi Yin devised a plan for King Tang of the Shang to test the power of the Xia.

38. Scholars from Lu and Zou refer to those who adhere to Confucian teachings and ritual propriety. In the Warring States period, the opinions of scholars of Lu and Zou were often used as rhetoric to uphold the cultural authority of the Zhou and to curb the power of hegemonic states, such as Qi, Jin, or Chu. Liu Yilong seems to suggest that the Song dynasty will uphold cultural orthodoxy and expel barbarians so that the scholars of Zou and Lu would not feel ashamed.
39. Tian, "Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire," 36.
40. Tuoba Tao was in fact killed by his courtier Zong Ai 宗愛 (401–452) through a coup. It is possible that Shen Yue did not know the details of the court intrigue in the north and recorded only what the southern dynasty was told about the death of Tuoba Tao. Sima G., *Zizhi tongjian*, 126.3973–74.
41. Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public*, 27–66.
42. Li and Li, *Nan shi*, 10.306.

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