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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Epistolary Activities in the Early Southern Ming Period (1644–1652)

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This study examines the communicative function, political value, and epistolary stages of letters during the war-filled early Southern Ming period. The term "Southern Ming" was proposed by modern historians to refer to the Ming regimes established in the south after the collapse of the Beijing Ming government in 1644. On the basis of this social context, this study focuses on letters written by Southern Ming supporters between 1644 and 1652, avoiding simply categorising them as Ming or Qing letters. I argue that because of the paralysed Ming postal system, these private letters became an alternative method for the dissemination of Ming or Qing military and political news, effectively liaising with Southern Ming supporters in different territories or regions. Furthermore, the epistolary stages of writing, transmission, reception, preservation, circulation, and dissemination demonstrated dynamic interactions. The understanding of the social situation in the war period and the anticipation of possible variables at different stages of letter exchange prompted Southern Ming correspondents to try to avoid factors that might disrupt their correspondence, even before they began to write. The turbulent social situation caused early Southern Ming letters not only to contain their correspondents' self-representation but also to be involved in the political and military fields in the special era of the Ming-Qing transition.

"南明"一詞特指 1644 年明北京政府覆滅後在南方建立的明朝政權。本文基於這一社會背景，探討南明初年書信的交流功能和政治價值。1644 至 1652 年間南明支持者的書信通常被籠統地歸類為明代或清代書信。在明朝郵驛系統因戰亂癱瘓的情況下，這些私人書信承擔了傳遞明清軍政消息的關鍵角色，有效聯絡了活躍於不同地區的南明支持者。書信的撰寫、傳遞、接收、保存、流通和傳播過程呈現出動態的互動。基於對當時局勢的判斷及對通信過程中可能遇到變數的預測，南明支持者在撰寫書信時試圖規避可能幹擾正常通信的因素。在南明初年動盪的社會環境中，私人書信不僅是通信者的自我呈現，還展現出其在明清易代之際深度介入政治和軍事領域的獨特性。

Keywords: Letters, epistolary activities, the Southern Ming period, the Ming-Qing transition, Ming loyalists

關鍵詞： 書信，書信活動，南明，明清易代，明遺民

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This study investigates the epistolary stages of writing, transmission, reception, preservation, circulation, and dissemination of letters during the war-filled early Southern Ming period (1644–1652). It shows how private letters written by Southern Ming supporters became an alternative to the Ming official postal system for exchanging military and political messages and how the different stages of the epistolary process interacted dynamically. Although the Beijing Ming government collapsed in 1644, Emperors Hongguang 弘光, Longwu 隆武, and Yongli 永曆 established Ming courts in southern China in 1644, 1645, and 1646. In both the Ming and Qing territories, many people still conducted political, military, cultural, and social activities as Ming subjects, which became a strong impediment to the Qing regime's occupation of the Ming territory and subjugation of Ming subjects.[1] Their self-identification with the Ming identity made it difficult to categorise their letters as Ming or Qing. This is partly because, according to official historiography, the Ming dynasty collapsed in 1644,[2] but also because their correspondence was deeply associated with anti-Qing actions, and they never considered themselves to be Qing subjects, even though from 1645 onwards, most of them were technically subject to the Qing. Thus, I examine their epistolary activities in the social context of the Southern Ming period, to distinguish their letters from those of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The "Southern Ming" is a term proposed by modern scholars to distinguish several Ming courts established in the south after 1644.[3] The Beijing Ming government was first broken by the Shun army on April 25, 1644 (Struve, 1984, 15–16). However, after less than two months, on June 6, the Qing army defeated the Shun government, which had ruled China for only one-and-a-half months, and gradually took control of northern China (Gu, 2011, 19, 22, 55–63). This gave the Ming forces, who had fled to the south, the opportunity to maintain Ming rule. On June 19, 1644, Ming officials endorsed the Ming prince, Zhu Yousong 朱由崧 (1607–1646), and established the Hongguang court in Nanjing 南京. However, this court lasted only one year before the Qing army defeated it. Nevertheless, other officials soon supported the accession of another Ming prince, Zhu Yujian 朱聿鍵 (1602–1646), to the throne in Fuzhou 福州 on August 18, 1645. The newly established Longwu court, like its predecessor, lasted for only one year and collapsed on October 6, 1646, after the Qing army killed its emperor (Gu, 2011, 39, 137–143, 183–186, 222–225). However, the Qing army was stuck fighting the Ming army in Jiangxi for the next few years and could not immediately attack the Yongli court established in Zhaoqing 肇慶 on December 24, 1646. This court, led by Zhu Youlang 朱由榔 (1623–1662), a timid and untalented Ming prince, miraculously held out in the southwest for sixteen years (Gu, 2011, 288–291, 342–357). According to historian Qian Haiyue, the Southern Ming period did not end until the Qing regime recovered Taiwan in 1683, because from that year onwards, Yongli, the last Ming reign title, was no longer used publicly (Qian, 2016, 1).

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[1] Although it was the Shun army that directly contributed to the fall of the Beijing Ming government, this regime lasted only a year, and its remnants defected to the Ming army in the summer of 1645. Therefore, the main rival forces in the early Southern Ming period were the Ming and the Qing. See *Dashun shigao*, pp. 120 to 174.

[2] See *Zhuanglie di zhuan er* 莊烈帝傳二 (Biography of Zhu Youjian Ⅱ) and *Zhu Yousong zhuan* 朱由崧傳 (Biography of Zhu Yousong) in *Mingshi* 明史 (History of the Ming) (*Mingshi*, 2000, 224, 2417).

[3] See historians Lynn A. Struve's *The Southern Ming 1644-1662*, Qian Haiyue's *Nanming shi*, and Gu Cheng's *Nanming shi*.

During this period, two other Ming princes also tried to act as southern Ming emperors. On September 7, 1645, Zhu Yihai 朱以海 (1618–1662), the Prince of Lu 魯王, was endorsed by some Southern Ming supporters as Regent Lu 魯監國 in Shaoxing 紹興, Zhejiang. They gathered military forces to fight against the Qing army while struggling for power with Emperor Longwu. However, a year later, with the Qing army's occupation of eastern Zhejiang, Zhu Yihai had to flee the mainland and continue his anti-Qing action along the southeast coast of Zhejiang and Fujian (Gu, 2011, 189–197, 214, 275–281). Another Ming prince, Zhu Yuyu 朱聿鐭 (1605–1647), with the support of the Southern Ming official Su Guansheng 蘇觀生 (?–1647), hastily proclaimed himself emperor in Guangzhou on December 11, 1646. Unlike Regent Lu, Zhu Yuyu did not fully participate in the conflict with the Qing army but was busy fighting with Emperor Yongli, who established a new Ming court in the same month, for control of the Ming forces in the south. However, a month later (January 1647), Guangzhou was occupied by the Qing army, prompting Zhu Yuyu and some of his supporters to choose martyrdom, and his reign title of "Shaowu 紹武" was never used (Gu, 2011, 286–290).

This study focuses on the early Southern Ming period from 1644 to 1652. I assume the end of the early period was 1652 because the Yongli regime was the key node of the Ming forces from its establishment and operation to its decline: the actual controller of the Yongli court changed. In 1652, Emperor Yongli was welcomed by Sun Kewang 孫可望, former general of the Daxi army 大西軍[4], to Anlong 安隆 in Guizhou. Thereafter, Sun controlled the Yongli court, turning Emperor Yongli into his puppet (Gu, 2011, 479–483). The impact of this time point on the activities of the Southern Ming letter-writers was enormous. Letter exchanges between correspondents were closely related to the stability of the societies in which they lived. During the early Southern Ming period, when society was in turmoil, questions that deserve further exploration include whether the topics discussed in letters were different from those during peacetime, how private letters were transmitted and received, whether they could be preserved, or whether they could to a certain extent be circulated and disseminated, how the different stages of the epistolary process interacted with the complex political situation, and whether such interactions, in turn, affected the epistolary process.

Although epistolary activities in the Southern Ming period have not yet been examined, studies on the epistolary process have focused on specific periods and correspondents, contributing to illuminating discussions on changes in epistolary processes and the function of private letters. Letter writing is a mechanism of self-representation. As Matthew Wells argues, in early China (the Han and early medieval periods), the elaborate images presented in autobiographical letters were rhetorical strategies used by writers to shape the self at critical moments in their lives (Wells, 2015, 621–642). Similarly, Zhao Shugong believes that, in the Tang dynasty (618–701), letters written requesting a meeting with people in authority (*ganyeshu* 干謁書) were a manifestation of the writers' desire for a political career (Zhao, 1999, 197). Nonetheless, letter writers are not always free to choose their topics. In her exploration of women's letters in the late Ming and early Qing period, Ellen Widmer suggests that some of the taboos imposed on female correspondents probably limited the topics of their letters (Widmer, 2015, 744).

[4] This military force was originally established in the southwest by Zhang Xianzhong 張獻忠 (1606-1647) to overthrow the Ming regime.

In contrast, the transmission, reception, and preservation of letters were flexible and varied. Scholars have found that official and private correspondence did not travel through the same postal system. As Antje Richter points out, in early medieval China, most private letters were delivered by private messengers. She argues that although the official postal system was prohibited from transmitting private letters, the illegal use of this network may have been common (Richter, 2013, 30–32). Timothy Brook believes that this phenomenon was equally prevalent during the Ming dynasty (Brook, 1998, 640). In most cases, the received letters would be preserved by the recipients because of their value in demonstrating the nature of the relationship and in order to appreciate the calligraphy. However, in the late Northern Song to early Southern Song periods, as well as in the late Ming and early Qing periods, received letters were often compiled in letter collections, preserving them in the form of commercial publications (Widmer, 1989, 1–43; Widmer, 1996, 77–122; Zhao, 1999, 73; Pattinson, 2006, 125–157). This resulted in a letter originally addressed to a single recipient reaching a broader readership. Both Wells and Suyoung Son have argued that the readership of private letters was not always private. They were not only read by contemporaries but also made available for circulation among the public or future readers (Wells, 2015, 621–622; Son, 2015, 879–899).[5]

Most of the above epistolary studies are focused on stable social environments. In the early Southern Ming period, however, the wars and territorial divisions brought about by the Ming-Qing transition seriously disrupted official and private epistolary processes. I argue that although the exchange of private Southern Ming letters was not always successful, they became an alternative to the paralysed Ming official postal system because of their more flexible and secretive delivery methods. Private letters played an important role in transmitting governmental information and liaising with scattered Southern Ming supporters in different regions and territories. These letters were no longer merely aimed at exchanging personal messages but were endowed with political value through their deep involvement with the changeable social situation between 1644 and 1652. Furthermore, during this period, the different stages of the epistolary process showed dynamic interactions. Familiarity with the social turmoil and the difficulty of message exchanges, as well as forecasting of the possible circumstances that might arise throughout the epistolary process, would motivate correspondents to attempt, even before their letters were written, to solve the internal and external factors occurring in the stages of transmission, reception, preservation, circulation, and dissemination that could disrupt their epistolary activities. The anticipation of difficulties in letter transmission led correspondents to choose, as far as possible, bearers who would be able to deliver their letters successfully and to use special material methods to compose their letters. A foreknowledge that their letters might be circulated among Southern Ming supporters who wanted to understand the relevant news would, in turn, motivate senders to consider writing on more than one topic in a single letter. Southern Ming correspondents also used their letters

[5] By examining the letters written by the publisher Zhang Chao 張潮 (ca. 1650-1707), Son suggests that letters are sometimes not only written to specific recipients but also to draw the attention of the public so that writers can defend their rights.

to reshape or reinforce a particular image—as loyalists of the Ming dynasty—among a broader readership, thereby defending their reputation, which might have suffered from the transmission of inaccurate information.

The letters examined in this study were written by Huang Daozhou 黃道周 (1585–1646), Qu Shisi 瞿式耜 (1590–1650), Fang Yizhi 方以智 (1611–1671), Hou Tongzeng 侯峒曾 (1591–1645), and Hou Qizeng 侯岐曾 (1595–1647) between 1644 and 1652. Most of these letters were sent to relatives and friends and survive as printed versions preserved in their collected works, diaries, and calligraphy collections.[6]

Huang Daozhou was from Zhangzhou 漳州 in Fujian. After the establishment of the Longwu court, he was appointed Grand Secretary 大學士 and Minister of Personnel 吏部尚書. However, in 1646, he was captured by the Qing army and executed on April 20 of the same year because he failed in an anti-Qing action (Hong, 1999, 29–37). Both Qu Shisi and Fang Yizhi travelled from the southeast to the southwest to support the Ming forces. Qu was a Southern Ming official appointed by Emperor Hongguang and had been stationed in Guilin 桂林 since the summer of 1645 (Qu, 1987, 55–58). In contrast, after arriving in the southwest, Fang became an official of the Yongli court for only a short period and returned to the southeast as a monk after Qu's death in 1650 (Fang, 2018, 102–168). Hou Tongzeng and Hou Qizeng were brothers who both supported the Ming forces in the southeast. In 1645, their hometown, Jiading 嘉定 in Songjiang 松江, fell under Qing control (Dennerline, 1981, 297–298).[7]

Between 1644 and 1652, these correspondents lived in different territories and regions, had different identities, and had different purposes in carrying out letter exchanges; thus their letters illuminate the epistolary activities of this period from various angles, including, but not limited to, geography, identity, materiality, and writing skills. It should be noted that because of the frequent wars during this period, the transmission and preservation of letters were extremely difficult. The correspondents discussed in this study must have written more letters than those we can currently read. Nonetheless, their preserved letters still provide us with a window into how the different stages of the epistolary process were maintained and interacted during the tumultuous war period of the early Southern Ming.

[6] It should be noted that these printed letters were edited, but changes to the texts caused by the editing process have a minimal impact on the findings of this study. This is because a letter is chosen for publication as the compilers, editors, or other people who are involved in the publishing process believe that its content is inherently of some value. In this case, they are bound to retain most of the text or what they consider to be significant, editing only minor details—correcting orthographical errors or deleting a few lengthy and meaningless expressions—to present the content more accurately and clearly.

[7] Hou Tongzeng committed suicide after his anti-Qing action in Jiading failed, and Hou Qizeng was executed by the Qing army a year later for harbouring Chen Zilong 陳子龍 (1608-1647), a Southern Ming supporter. ("Hou qizeng riji" 侯岐曾日記, 482).

The Transmission of Private Letters: An Alternative to the Official Postal System

The information conveyed in private letters is usually centred on the daily lives of the senders and recipients. Although the spectrum of topics can be broader, from greetings and health to governmental decrees and literary discussions, the content generally revolves around personal life experiences and social activities, and the communicative function of the letters is largely confined to conveying the latest news on behalf of individuals. However, in contrast to peacetime, because of the turbulence between 1644 and 1652, private letters were no longer limited to sharing personal information. While the wars disrupted the Ming postal system, the flexibility and secrecy of delivering private letters made it possible to exchange military and political news across territories and regions and to bring Southern Ming supporters into contact.

The Ming postal system had already started to break down well before the Ming actually collapsed. Many postmen who were made redundant joined the rebels. After the fall of the Ming dynasty, competition between different regimes over the Ming territory seriously hampered the operation of this official postal system. According to the diary of the Ming official Qi Biaojia 祁彪佳 (1603–1645) for June 1, 1644, the news of Emperor Chongzhen's 崇禎 suicide and the collapse of the Beijing government on April 25 did not reach the southeastern area until late May, more than a month later ("Jiashen rili" 甲申日曆, 740).[8] Even after the Hongguang court had been established, the blocked or delayed transmission of official news remained unresolved. Li Qing 李清 (1602–1683), a Southern Ming official, recorded the situation after the Qing army had captured Yangzhou in 1645:

> There were no boats crossing the [Yangtze] river, and the news between the north and the south was cut off. It was not until the twenty-ninth day that the Ministry of War received the news [of the Yangzhou massacre], but the ordinary people still knew nothing about it.
>
> 大江中無一舟渡，南北聲絕，遲至二十九日，兵部始得報，民間猶未知也。
>
> (*Nandu lu* 南渡錄, 274)

Similarly, in a letter to his family members written on October 28, 1646, Qu Shisi, as a Southern Ming official stationed in the southwest, complained about the slow delivery of notifications of government appointments during the winter of 1645.[9] Between 1644 and 1652, when confrontation between regimes was fierce, cutting off normal official post routes was a common approach to preventing the

[8] See Kishimoto Mio's study for more details on the transmission of information about Beijing from Beijing to the Jiangnan area (Kishimoto, 1999, 25-32).

[9] It took two and a half months for Qu to receive from the southeast orders for the appointment of officials. According to his records in the same letter, on April 26, 1645, he set off from his hometown Changshu 常熟 in Nanzhili 南直隸 (the area of modern Jiangsu, Anhui, and Shanghai), and on June 26 of the same year, he took office in Wuzhou 梧州 in Guangxi. In other words, his entire trip took less than two months. Qu's wife and mother went to Guangxi with him, and they stayed in Hangzhou 杭州 for seven days in May, which may have contributed to slowing down his journey. However, the government appointment delivered through the official postal system took longer

exchange of information among hostile regimes. The Ming and Qing armies set up garrison troops and checkpoints on their territories, which cut off transmission, and one would hardly expect the Qing to allow the Ming postal system to operate in its territory. As Southern Ming official Peng Qisheng 彭期生 (1614–1646), who was stationed in Ganzhou 贛州 in Jiangxi, mentioned in a letter written on May 22, 1646:

> When the messenger [who delivered the report to Emperor Longwu] was leaving [to return to Wulin], I asked him to take a letter to my family, ... Unexpectedly, when he arrived in Wulin, my hometown had been occupied by the Qing army, [so] this letter was not delivered.
>
> 奏事人去。曾附以家書。……不謂信使赴武林而吾鄉已陷(逆虜)矣。此信亦遂不得達。
>
> ("Peng Qisheng" 彭期生, 201 – 202)

On May 5, 1649, Qu Shisi, who wanted to send a letter from Ming territory to his hometown, which had become Qing territory, was also worried that:

> Since Jiangxi reverted to [Ming] allegiance in the first month of 1648, the route [to my hometown] has become even difficult and [Qing] interrogation is more strict.
>
> 況自戊子正月。西江反正之後。途路益難。盤詰益緊。
>
> ("Qu Shisi" 瞿式耜, 148)

Such circumstances made it impossible for military and political news to be successfully delivered to different territories or regions through the official postal system. Poor official delivery prompted Southern Ming correspondents to rely more on private letter exchanges for information transmission.

Compared with official postal methods, the way in which private letters were materially constituted and delivered had a higher likelihood of success. The use of the official postal system was governed by specific regulations regarding the selection of personnel, use of transport, verification of the courier's identity, and authenticity of the information. Couriers of the Ming postal system used horses or boats of various sizes (depending on the route) to transmit governmental documents, messages, or items. When delivering urgent messages, horses were required to be harnessed with bronze bells, so that the horsemen at the next post station would have a replacement horse ready as soon as they heard the bell ring. In addition, couriers were required to carry an officially issued "*fuyan* 符驗": a certificate verifying the identity of the courier and the authenticity of the documents (*Daming huidian* 大明會典, 145.1a, 5a – 6a). These regulations made it easier for official couriers who were performing delivery tasks to be recognised and distinguished from ordinary travellers. Perhaps couriers in the Southern Ming period did not always strictly follow the regulations to avoid the danger of interception, but the

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than his trip from the southeast to the southwest ("Bingxu jiuyue er'shi ri shuji" 丙戌九月二十日書寄, 251-252; Qu, 1987, 58).

inability to avoid delivery restrictions and the difficulty of concealing official status would inevitably make their efforts useless. In contrast, the transmission of private letters could be more secretive and flexible, in both material composition and delivery methods. To transmit letters between Ming and Qing territories, Southern Ming correspondents focused on methods of hiding letters, looking for reliable delivery routes, and selecting bearers who could deliver letters successfully.[10] The checks on those who would travel from one territory to another might be extremely strict, driving private letters that originally would have only needed to be sealed in paper envelopes to be hidden in unpredictable ways. In 1647, a letter sent by Qu Shisi's family was tucked into an umbrella handle by the bearer ("Qu Shisi", 149). Similarly, one of Qu's family letters, written between October and November 1648, was sealed in a ball of wax ("Wuzi jiuyue shuji" 戊子九月書寄, 263 – 265).[11] The purpose for which the letter was concealed was not merely to avoid loss but, more importantly, to avoid its being discovered or destroyed during delivery. A wax ball sealed the stationery on all sides, and wax provided surer protection than a paper envelope from water or fire. In addition, using hot wax to crush the stationery into a ball might make letters easier to carry because of their small size. The umbrella handle was even more useful for evading searches, as it would be unlikely for the searcher to expect a letter to be hidden that way. According to Qu Shisi, his letter to his family, hidden in the handle of the bearer's umbrella, was not found by the person who intercepted it but was removed by the bearer himself when his life was threatened ("Qu Shisi", 149).

It was relatively difficult to intercept letters being delivered privately. According to the Ming regulations, whether for officials or ordinary people, private letters should be delivered by unofficial bearers such as relatives, friends, travellers, or monks.[12] These people, having different identities, did not always choose the same routes when travelling between Ming and Qing territories. On November 27, 1648, Qu Shisi wrote a letter to his friend Gu Yushu 顧玉書, mentioning that his bearer planned a delivery route that might allow him to travel smoothly from Guangdong to his hometown Changshu:

> Because of two actions of Jin Shenghuan and Wang Deren, [the Yongli court] has regained control of Jiangxi. A Jiangxi man [has found] a by-way to Guangdong, so [I will] give him this

[10] Richter suggests that, from early medieval China, the trustworthiness of bearers became extremely important. By comparison, the requirements for bearers in the early Southern Ming period were not only a matter of trust, but more importantly, of whether they could pass the Ming or Qing checkpoints (Richter, 2013, 41).

[11] Using wax balls to seal letters was not Qu Shisi's invention; the material composition of such letters was an important method in the wartime. As early as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, a period of war and turmoil, there was a precedent of using wax ball letters to exchange secrets between generals. See *Sun Sheng zhuan* 孫晟傳 (Biography of Sun Sheng) in *Xin wudai shi* 新五代史 (A Newly Written History of the Five Dynasties) ("Sun Sheng zhuan", 241).

[12] See the stipulations in *Daming huidian* 大明會典 (Code of the Ming): "Regulations in the twenty-sixth year of the Hongwu reign period stipulate that all official horse watering stations and delivery offices are only for transferring official travellers, rapid reporting on military information, and transporting military supplies. 洪武二十六年定，凡天下水馬驛、遞運所，專一遞送使客、飛報軍情、轉運軍需等項。" However, Peng Qisheng, mentioned earlier, was someone who unsuccessfully asked an official courier to deliver a letter to his family. Nonetheless, among the ways of letter transmission during the early Southern Ming period, transmission by official courier was rare, because it was difficult to carry out this delivery method, and most private letters were delivered through unofficial means (*Daming huidian*, 145.1a).

letter and [ask him] to have a go at delivering it to you. If [this post method succeeds and] we can frequently exchange letters, we can continue to send letters in this way.

茲因金、王兩動，西江反正，江人以間道入粵，遂附之同行，姑且試之。此後若可頻通往來，當續寄也。

("Yu Gu Yushu shouzha sifeng (si)" 與顧玉書手箚四封(四), 277)

Although several similar attempts by Qu had failed, we can still observe his efforts in selecting routes and bearers. He dispatched servants (or subordinates) Zhang Ying 張英 and Zhou Yi 周誼, monks, and travellers such as Luo Zhiyu 羅之煜 to carry letters ("Qu Shisi", 148–150). All of these people were carefully selected by Qu because bearers with diverse identities could provide different degrees of possibility for the successful delivery of letters. Servants or subordinates were loyal to him and would try their best to deliver letters, as we can see by the fact that Qu's servant, Zhou Yi, stayed where the route was blocked, waiting for the least opportunity to travel into Qing territory ("Qu Shisi", 148). As a group detached from political restraints, monks had a special status that would gain respect from people in all positions, allowing them to be checked less frequently when travelling from one territory to another. Luo Zhiyu's hometown was in Jiangxi; therefore, he may have been able to pass the check-points more successfully by saying he was returning home.

This variety of methods made it comparatively difficult for the Qing government to block the transmission of all private letters, while, for the Southern Ming correspondents, their letters became a mechanism to achieve the cross-territory or cross-regional delivery of Ming military and political information. Since Southern Ming supporters did not always live in Ming territory, they relied heavily on private letter exchanges to deliver Ming news and contact other supporters in different places. In the summer of 1645, as the Qing army occupied the southeastern region, it was dangerous to take action against the Qing regime. As Ming loyalist Hou Qizeng wrote in his diary on February 28, 1646:

Now [people who secretly supported the Ming force] were worried that their whereabouts would be exposed, [so they] only wrote letters on a small piece of bamboo paper to exchange information secretly at any time.

時惟恐聲跡少露，朝夕密通往來，止裁竹紙一小幅。

("Hou Qizeng riji", 486)

From 1645 onwards, with the occupation of the Ming territory from the southeast to the southwest, the Qing court regarded the southern Ming courts as "*weichao* 偽朝 (illegitimate courts)" (Yin, 2016, 319). To avoid possible political persecution from the Qing regime, people no longer publicly supported the Ming forces. The channels through which they could obtain Ming news were extremely limited, prompting private letters conveying Ming affairs to become irreplaceable communication tools. Between 1644 and 1652 in particular, many Southern Ming supporters were scattered throughout

China, and their letters carried significant information on whether the courts established in the south could continue the Ming rule. In 1647, Xia Wanchun 夏完淳 (1631–1647), Hou Xuanjing 侯玄瀞, and Gu Xianzheng 顧鹹正 handed over letters to Xie Yaowen 謝堯文 and Sun Long 孫龍, who specialised in secret contact with other Southern Ming supporters in the eastern sea area of Zhejiang (Gu, 2011, 332). Their collective action had a high probability of being completed under the combined effects of their letters. A letter that conveyed information about contacting the Ming forces could help to gather anti-Qing fighters and update Ming news in a timely manner, because it functioned as a crucial medium for political communication among Southern Ming supporters who lived in Qing territory.

Paralysis of the Ming postal system and the Qing's occupation of the former Ming territory were undoubtedly key motivations whereby the use of private letters assumed an important role in transmitting military and political news at the time. Surprisingly, however, before 1646, when the Ming forces were in control of much of the south, Southern Ming correspondents still used private letters as the main means of delivering news and contacting Southern Ming supporters. From 1645 to 1646, Southern Ming official Huang Daozhou sent at least twelve letters to Ni Yuanzan 倪元瓚, Huang Chunyao 黃淳耀 (1605–1645), Zhongqiu 仲球, Shushi 叔實, Zu Tai 祖臺, Cao Yuansi 曹遠思, Meng Changmin 孟長民, Du Muyou 堵牧游, and Yin Minxing 尹民興.[13] With Huang's letters at the centre, these correspondents, sharing the ambition of reviving Ming rule, were connected. They shared mutual political demands and goals and exchanged messages about in-fighting within the Longwu court and the problem of military expenses. They discussed and formulated counter-measures according to the political situation, thus making an effort to support the Ming forces. Huang Daozhou is only one example in the southeastern region. Other correspondents, such as Xia Yunyi 夏允彝 (1696–1645), also wrote letters to their friends, relatives, and colleagues—for example, Hou Tongzeng and Chen Zilong—to convey Ming or Qing military and political news (Qian, 2016, 1638). However, because of the frequent wars in this area between 1644 and 1652, not all of their letters were preserved.

Huang Daozhou's example implies more than just a deep interaction between private letters and Ming news. Although some letters were addressed to a wider audience, it cannot be ignored that in the early Southern Ming period, there was still a portion of correspondence that needed to be exchanged in secret because it contained confidential government information. The private nature of epistolary writing undoubtedly became the best choice for correspondents to pass on essential news and to communicate with specific readers. In composing such letters, the writers not only aimed to convey certain military or political events that had taken place but also the results of these events and the likely adjustments in strategic planning that would follow. Between the autumn and winter of 1645, Huang Daozhou wrote a letter to friends whom we know only by their courtesy names, Zhongqiu and Shushi, focusing on an analysis of the current war situation, the preparation of military expenses, and the

[13] The writing dates of the letters to Zhongqiu, Shushi, Meng Changmin, Du Muyou, and Yin Minxing, as well as one letter to Ni Yuanzan, cannot be accurately verified ("Zhi Yunsheng shouzha" 致蘊生手札, 106; "Yu Xianru shu" 與獻汝書, 957-960; "Zhi Zhongqiu Shushi zha" 致仲球叔實札 and "Zhi Zu Tai zha" 致祖臺札, 239-245; "Da Cao Yuansi shu" 答曹遠思書, "Da Meng Changmin shu" 答孟長民書, "Da Du Muyou shu" 答堵牧遊書, and "Da Yin Minxing shu" 答尹民興書, 5.13a-16b).

strategic deployment of the Ming army ("Zhi Zhongqiu Shushi zha", 239–242). On December 14, 1645, he sent another letter to his friend Ni Yuanzan mentioning the forces of the Prince of Lu, Zhu Yihai, whose activities worried Emperor Longwu ("Yu Xianru shu", 960). On January 12, 1646, the Jiangxi official Zu Tai (mentioned above as a correspondent of Huang Daozhou) received a letter from Huang. In this letter, Huang proposed a military deployment method ("Zhi Zu Tai zha", 244–245). Similarly, in the southwestern region, Qu Shisi used letters to deliver news from the Yongli court, linking local Southern Ming officials and supporters. In 1646, Emperor Yongli dispatched Peng Yao 彭耀, an official of the Ministry of War, to Guangzhou to promulgate an imperial edict, but he was killed by the official Su Guansheng. Su sent troops to Zhaoqing to attack Emperor Yongli. To solve this political crisis, Chen Zizhuang 陳子壯, the Grand Secretary and concurrently Minister of War, wrote a letter to Qu Shisi requesting that Su be killed ("Yongli jinian shang" 永曆紀年上, 61). Personal letters provided Huang Daozhou and Qu Shisi, who served as significant ministers in the Longwu and Yongli courts, with the possibility of passing on government secrets and decrees. When the social situation was rapidly changing, official decrees, messages, and news, which required many rounds of scrutiny before they could be issued or disclosed through the official postal system, were probably far less rapid than those transmitted through private letters.

The official status of Huang Daozhou and Qu Shisi, as well as their choices of writing letters to convey Ming news, made the transmission of private letters crucial in periods of frequent war. Nonetheless, private letters were chosen for more Southern Ming supporters because they were ordinary people with no official positions at the time of the Ming collapse. As Huang Daozhou said in a letter written to Huang Chunyao in 1644, when he had not yet entered the Longwu court: "I am a person of low status and do not know any news of the court. 僕身處於五未。無緣知中朝動靜。" ("Zhi Yunsheng shouzha", 106) Despite the fact that these people even gave their lives in support of the restoration of Ming rule, it was essentially difficult for them to see official documents. Most of the anti-Qing actions they undertook were organised voluntarily (Su and Xu, 2018, 141–150).[14] At the end of July 1645, for example, Hou Tongzeng spent all his money recruiting thousands of people to fight against the Qing army in his hometown, Jiading ("Hou zhongjie gong quanji-nianpu xia" 侯忠節公全集-年譜下, 3.5b – 15b). Therefore, even if the Ming postal system continued to operate, they could not use official channels to contact other supporters or be informed accurately of anti-Qing actions. Instead, private letters helped them avoid the many limitations of official deliveries. In particular, when the successive failures of the Hongguang and Longwu courts left supporters of the Ming forces without a reliably strong government, the information provided to them by private letters may not have come entirely from within the imperial court but effectively supported their desire to resist the Qing army and enabled them to engage in attempting the restoration of Ming rule as loyal and righteous men.

[14] See the present author's and Xu Dajun's work on Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646). From 1634 to 1638, Feng was a Ming county magistrate of Shouning 壽寧 in Fujian but then retired. In 1644, when he was seventy years old, he left his hometown and travelled around Zhejiang and Fujian, following the Ming forces. However, despite the fact that he wrote several proposals dedicated to helping to restore Ming rule, they were never adopted, and it is doubtful whether they were even read by the Southern Ming monarchs, because he was never an important official of any Ming court established in the south.

Political Value of Private Letters

Although the transmission of private letters showed a higher possibility of success than the paralysed Ming postal system, the difficulty of passing the Ming or Qing checkpoints, as Qu Shisi complained in the fourteen letters written to his family between 1645 and 1650, still caused serious disruptions to delivery. However, the division of territory was only one symptom of the difficulties that led to this. The internal cause lies in the contents of these letters, because the information they contained was not as simple as greetings, health, or daily life. Like Qu, many Southern Ming correspondents chose to write about military or political news, which made their letters crucial at the political level, but also created trouble for their epistolary communication.

Although sending a letter from Ming territory to Qing territory only constituted a normal stage of delivery, the motivation to exchange Ming news would put this letter at risk of being confiscated after entering Qing territory. A case in point was that of Qu Shisi. His letters to his family were probably intercepted by the Qing government. Between 1644 and 1650, he lost at least three family letters in Qing territory. In one of his letters, Qu expressed his doubts on the subject:

> On April 3 this year, there was a person called Pan Zhong from Wugang who arrived from Changshu. According to what he said, you told him that a monk carried my letter, but this letter was taken away. I do not believe it! How could anything go wrong [in the short distance] between Nanjing and my hometown when this letter had been handed over to Xing Kun?
>
> 乃今年二月廿二日。有武岡人潘忠者。自常熟來。據雲。汝曾語彼。僧人寄書被人搶去。吾不信也。豈有書既交邢坤之手。只南京到家。反有差池之理乎。
>
> ("Qu Shisi", 149)

Qu was a key figure in the Yongli court who had led the army to defeat the Qing's offensive three times in 1647 (Qu, 1987, 79, 86, 93). Nanjing and Qu's hometown, Changshu, were in the same province and had become Qing territories in the summer of 1645 (Struve, 1984, 19). The Qing government could not capture Qu immediately but could monitor or even threaten his family members living in its territory. In September 1648, Qu's house in Changshu was searched by Qing soldiers, and his family members were intimidated (Qu, 1987, 109–110).[15] It is reasonable to speculate that the Qing government secretly monitored the delivery of his family letters. Once his letters, which might record the military and political secrets of the Yongli court, entered Qing territory, they would probably be intercepted. This speculation can be confirmed in a letter sent on April 7, 1646, from Hou Qizeng to his friend Yang Tingshu 楊廷樞 (1595–1647). Hou told Yang about the living conditions and literary works of some of the Southern Ming supporters. Before finishing this letter, he specifically added: "These words must not be circulated in writing, and you must immediately destroy this letter as soon

[15] Qu Shisi's family members were eventually secretly protected by the Qing official Hong Chengchou 洪承疇 (1593-1665), who passed the imperial examination in the same year as Qu in the late Ming period.

as you have read it. 此等語不敢浪傳筆墨，一見即毀之。” (“Hou Qizeng riji”, 498) After the Qing regime took control of Hou’s hometown of Songjiang in 1645, Hou secretly supported the Longwu court and opposed the Qing regime. He asked Yang, who was also involved in actions against the Qing, to burn the letter because he knew that their letters might be intercepted by the Qing government.

Letters written by Southern Ming supporters living in Qing territory would likewise encounter some censorship after entering Ming territory. For the Ming forces, letters from areas ruled by the Qing regime were likely to contain the latest or secret Qing military and political news. Intercepting them yielded valuable information that those who did so could not obtain by reading publicly promulgated Qing decrees. In a letter written on May 5, 1649, Qu Shisi mentioned that one of his family letters had been intercepted by a former Shun general.

> [Pan Zhong] came from my hometown on September 26 and arrived at Baoqing in the eleventh month [of this year]. Then he was captured by Hanyang Marquis Wang Jincai. Wang was going to kill Pan on the grounds that Pan did not have an officially approved travel certificate. Pan had no choice but to take out my family letter from the handle of his umbrella. However, even though Wang had my family letter, Pan Zhong was still kept in custody for three months. It happened that the Military officer Wu Qilei sent a letter to the governor and clearly explained everything, then they reluctantly allowed Pan to return, but Wang still refused to release my family letter. Pan Zhong is from the Chu area. Although he lived in my house for several months, how could he know everything about my family and relatives?
>
> [潘忠]八月二十日自家中來。十一月到寶慶。爲漢陽侯[16]王進才獲住。以身無炤票。[17]幾欲殺之。不得已。乃從傘柄中取出家書示之。而彼既留家書。並羈管潘忠不放。凡三個月。而適有兵科吳其雷遣人送書堵制臺。認識明白。乃勉強放歸。究竟家書仍不肯發。潘忠。楚人也。雖住吾家幾月。而家中一切大小事情。並眷屬人口。彼烏知之。
>
> (“Qu Shisi”, 149)

Wang Jincai withheld this letter and the bearer Pan Zhong in order to find out who Qu’s relatives were, because they were technically Qing subjects, and what had happened in Qu’s hometown when the Qing army occupied it. Because of the strong interaction with the political field, private letters displayed political value, but simultaneously, political value brought different degrees of trouble and danger to these letters, their writers, and their bearers. Letters originally written to transmit personal

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[16] Wang Jincai had already cooperated with the Southern Ming regime in 1649, and he was granted the title of Xiangyang Marquis 襄陽侯 by Emperor Yongli. The “Hanyang Marquis” written in this letter must be a clerical error. Baoqing was a prefecture in Huguang, where Wang was stationed (Huang Weiping, 2010, 331-332).

[17] I did not find any historical record of “*zhaopiao* 炤票”. Based on the contents of this letter, it might be a form of official approval for travel. In the Ming dynasty, anyone who went further than a hundred *li* (50 kilometers) from his or her hometown was required to obtain a government route certificate. “*Zhaopiao*” was probably one of such certificates (*Daming huidian*, 167.2a; Brook, 1998, 619).

information were exchanged not only for private communication. Their roles went far beyond the activities of daily life, showing close involvement in the in-fighting and transfers of power of the early Southern Ming period. This also proves that in such an era of war, the value of private letters, because of the governmental information they conveyed, took on an importance similar to that of official documents or decrees, and was even more valued by both the correspondents and hostile regimes.

Dynamic Interaction at Epistolary Stages

Chen Pingyuan, Wells, and Son all point out that, in special cases, private letters are not written to a single recipient but to a wider audience: more contemporary and future readers (Chen, 1998, 210; Wells, 2015, 621–622; Son, 2015, 896–897). However, as I will demonstrate in this section, while early Southern Ming correspondents also showed a wish to disseminate their letters to a broader readership, the interactions that took place in their epistolary processes were not simply present between the stages of writing and dissemination. Rather than losing interest and confidence in maintaining their epistolary activities, the turbulence in society and the closure of official information made correspondents even more eager to carry out the exchange of letters, even if they suffered some disruption. At the writing stage, correspondents demonstrated an anticipation of the internal and external factors that might hinder their epistolary activities in the subsequent stages. As in the case of Qu Shisi discussed earlier, his choice of using wax to wrap letters to his family which contained information from the Yongli court, as well as his thoughtful selection of bearers and delivery routes, suggests his foreknowledge of the difficulty of getting his letters successfully delivered, because the Qing government would probably intercept his letters. This contributes to the fact that in the early Southern Ming period, the epistolary stages of writing, delivery, reception, preservation, circulation, and dissemination exhibited a dynamic interaction. Although writing serves as the first step in this process, writers' choices of topics and writing techniques are closely related to subsequent stages and change according to different social situations.

Diffusion Information: Interactions between Writing, Transmission, and Circulation

The idea of circulating letters emerged in early China. However, Wells argues that early Chinese letter writers might not have been able to control the range within which their letters were communicated (Wells, 2015, 629). In contrast, Southern Ming correspondents attempted to control to whom, how, and to what extent their letters were disseminated, even if such attempts probably did not always follow the correspondents' intentions in practice. Although most of the awareness of circulation from early China was generated by writers, a nuance showed in the early Southern Ming period: the circulation of their letters was specifically requested by the senders, and simultaneously, some recipients also made it clear that they wanted to circulate the letters they received.

The blocked routes and checkpoints caused difficulties in the letter transmission from one territory to another, which drove Southern Ming correspondents to send fewer letters but to request their recipients to circulate those letters which were delivered to a wider readership. As Qu Shisi said in his letter to his family written in February 1647:

> I should send letters to my relatives and friends, but it is difficult to have them delivered. You can tell them all the matters I have written about in this letter.
>
> 吾于至親至友，理應各寄數行，而爲途中難以攜帶。汝只得將我書中顛委，具以告之。
>
> ("Ji Zhang Er'gong shu" 寄張爾公書, 266 – 268)

In another letter written on November 27, 1648, Qu asked his friend Gu Linsheng 顧麟生 to share this letter with Xiaotong 小童, Jianwu 肩吾, and Junhong 君鴻, who may have been their common friends; he also told Gu to read the letter he sent to his eldest son ("Yu Gu Yushu shouzha sifeng (si)", 277). This wish prompted Qu Shisi to choose a method of writing in which various topics needed to be considered when writing a letter. He wrote extensively on the military deployments and political strategies of the Yongli court, analysing the various situations the court would face. The letter to Gu Linsheng mentioned above contained seven topics:

> (1) Ming military and political affairs after Qu left his hometown and served in the Yongli court;
>
> (2) Qu explained why he thought Guilin was a better place to stay and complained that some officials around Emperor Yongli insisted that Guilin was not good enough, which made the emperor flee to Quanzhou 全州 and then Wugang 武岡;
>
> (3) Qu expressed that he often encountered disasters in Guilin;
>
> (4) Qu complained that he had to fight more bandits and rebels than the Qing army had in the past two years;
>
> (5) The travels of Emperor Yongli;
>
> (6) Qu lamented his hardships after 1644 and believed that these experiences improved his knowledge; and
>
> (7) Qu mentioned correspondence with family and friends and asked his recipients to show them this letter.

All of Qu Shisi's fourteen letters to his family written between 1644 and 1650 include various topics. From military operations to his attitude toward Emperor Yongli, he recorded almost everything he saw, heard, and felt while serving in the Yongli court. Before writing his letters, Qu must have predicted that his family and relatives wanted to be informed of what was happening in the Ming territory. Although his family lived in the Qing territory, most of them were Ming loyalists. Whether they were

people who secretly supported the Ming forces or were worried about Qu, who was their family member and was confronting the Qing army, such situations made them concerned about Ming affairs in the southwest. However, the only way they could obtain relevant news was through family letters. Although Qu only told his recipients to show the content to others in two of his letters, his wish might have prompted the circulation of his other letters among friends, relatives, and even more Ming loyalists in the southeast.

The motivation to expand the readership also led to some Southern Ming letters containing important military and political news being circulated after they had been written, delivered, and received. It should be noted that this circulation was conducted by re-delivering the received letters as enclosures with newly written letters. In the summer of 1645, when the Qing army was about to break into Songjiang, Hou Tongzeng wrote to his friend Huang Chunyao, who was participating in anti-Qing actions:

> I send you a letter from Yang Wencong that I just received. The important things are the same as what you said, but I never heard [such things could happen in reality]. … Please return Wencong's letter to me immediately after you read it, as I want to send it to Xia Yunyi.
>
> 適接楊龍友一緘呈覽，要皆彼法中語，然可謂聞所未聞也。……龍友劄覽畢即見還，欲寄與瑗公耳。
>
> ("Yu Huang Taoan jinshi shu" 與黃陶庵進士書, 9.5b)

Yang Wencong 楊文驄 (formal name 龍友, 1596–1646) was a Southern Ming official. Although Hou did not specify exactly what information Yang's letter conveyed, judging from his actions in sending this letter to Huang Chunyao and Xia Yunyi, who were carrying out anti-Qing actions in Suzhou and Songjiang (Qian, 2016, 1628), we can speculate that the topic of this letter was related to the Ming or Qing military affairs at the time. The original recipient of this letter was Hou Tongzeng. However, it was also delivered to two additional recipients. It is worth noting Richter's discovery that, in early medieval China, some correspondents wrote new texts on the stationery of the letters they received and returned them to their senders (Richter, 2013, 33). Although it is difficult to assert that this phenomenon did not exist during the early Southern Ming period, because, as in the case of this letter from Hou Tongzeng, few letters survive in manuscript, according to Hou's description, Yang Wencong's letter might be sent as an enclosure. Hou specifically mentioned sending Yang's letter back, suggesting that it was probably written on another sheet of stationery. Sending this letter as an enclosure instead of making a new copy, was most likely to shorten the time for spreading the news as well and simultaneously to show the authenticity of the letter to a greater extent, as Yang Wencong's friends Huang Chunyao and Xia Yunyi would recognise his handwriting. The peculiar social conditions of the war prompted correspondents to actively circulate the letters they received, which often contained information on secret military operations of the Ming courts. Unlike the case of Qu Shisi, who took the initiative to request that his letters to his family be shown to his friends and more distant relatives, Hou Tongzeng may not have sought Yang's consent when he sent this letter to Huang Chunyao and

Xia Yunyi.[18] Nonetheless, it can be surmised that even if Yang did not have the idea of suggesting about the circulation of this letter as Qu Shisi did, Yang would have been willing to allow his letter to be read by more people who supported the Ming forces, as it would allow the latest military news to be disseminated quickly.

Reader Presupposition: Interactions between Writing, Reception, Preservation, and Dissemination

Owing to the hampered delivery of news and information, it was difficult to distinguish authentic from fake news. In 1644, when the Beijing Ming government was overrun by the Shun army, many Ming subjects who lived there were accused of defecting to the Shun forces. After escaping Beijing, they either heard such rumours about themselves or suffered slander and imprisonment. Motivated by the purpose of justifying themselves, they clarified the truth through letter exchanges. In order to restore their images in situations of reputational damage, correspondents developed expectations about the possible readership and reading experience before and during their writing. They identified specific recipients and readers of their letters, as well as ways of preservation and dissemination. Rather than writing to share personal information, they intended to ensure that the topics contained in their letters and the writing techniques they used would immediately change the attitudes of readers who had perhaps already believed the rumours. These were the strategies that they relied on to help reestablish the recognition among their readers that they had never betrayed the Ming dynasty. This section focuses on letters written by Ming loyalist Fang Yizhi. Fang was captured by the Shun army in 1644 when it invaded Beijing. He soon fled to Nanjing but was reprimanded by Ruan Dacheng 阮大鋮 (1587–1646) for not having chosen martyrdom, and Ruan intended to list him as a rebel (Fang, 2018, 103, 104–107).[19] Subsequently, Fang fled to the southwest and supported the Yongli court, but he never gave up defending himself (Peterson, 1979, 12–13). The rumours and persecution he suffered, and his attempts to use letter-writing skills to justify himself to readers of different identities and periods, make his letters a typical example of the early Southern Ming period.

Between 1645 and 1649, Fang Yizhi sent letters to both Qing officials and Southern Ming supporters, telling them what he suffered during his time in Beijing and how he was framed and excluded by Ruan Dacheng. He did not choose his recipients randomly, but rather he chose them carefully and meticulously. His motivation for sending letters to Qing subjects, most of whom were his friends, such as Li Wen 李雯 (1609 – 1647), was to prove his Ming loyalism. These Qing recipients were originally Ming subjects but served the Qing court after 1644. Fang, being politically hostile toward the Qing regime, had no wish to be seen by this regime as someone who had betrayed the Ming dynasty. The purpose of choosing to express grievances to Southern Ming supporters was to demonstrate himself to be a

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[18] This is only possible speculation as we do not have the original copy of this letter from Yang.

[19] Ruan's decision contained a strong partisan motivation. He wanted revenge on men in Fushe 復社 (Restoration Society) or Donglin Party 東林黨 like Fang Yizhi because he was dismissed in the late Ming period for his defeat in the in-fighting against the Donglin Party (Fang Shuwen, 2018, 106).

one of the Ming loyalists. If everyone in this group believed that he had served the Shun government, he would never have been accepted. This also explains why he wrote more letters to Southern Ming supporters than to Qing subjects.[20]

As Richter argues, the dialogicity of letters can help readers enter into an intimate personal relationship so that they are more easily persuaded (Richter, 2019, 32). The same is true of Fang Yizhi's strategy. To justify his reputation, Fang meticulously chose and designed topics, characters, phrases, and metaphors that maximised the recipients' sympathy and understanding.[21] In a letter sent to Zhang Zilie, we can see Fang's strategy of using dialogic writing techniques to defend himself by expressing in detail the hardships he experienced after 1644:

> I would rather have died ten thousand deaths than submit in Beijing, as everyone who has come down from the north knows. At that time, Mi Shoudu, Han Lin, and Wang Zibai were all witnesses that I abandoned my wife and children in order to flee to the south to tell the generals about the conditions of the [Shun] rebels. I reached Nanjing in the fifth month. In the ninth month, Ruan Dacheng took control of the Hongguang court and slandered me, calling a chaste woman a prostitute.[22] What calumny! What calumny! ... Although people were afraid of his arrogance when I was treated unjustly, all of them sighed secretly, thinking this an extraordinary injustice. ... When Wu Bangce was arrested and imprisoned in [Nanjing's] northern prison [by Ruan], [Ruan] tried to force him to perjure himself so as to have me killed. However, Wu still did not stop telling the truth even though both his ankles were broken. ... This is an anomaly for the ages, so I am suffering an anomalous injustice for the ages.
>
> 智萬死不屈於北都，北來之人無不人人知者。當時米吉土、韓雨公、汪子白諸人所親見，決我棄妻子南奔，告諸督鎮以賊狀。五月至南都，九月阮大鋮用事，而節婦詈爲淫婦矣，冤哉冤哉！……然弟被無妄時，人雖畏懾虐焰，然無不暗中太息，以爲奇冤也。……吳邦策逮下北獄，必欲左證殺智，然至兩踝斷，而正論不撓。……此真千古一奇事，故智受千古一奇冤耳。
>
> ("Ji Zhang Er'gong shu" 寄張爾公書, 266–268)

Fang wrote this letter to arouse his readers' sympathy and to shape, through the textualised self, the image of a loyalist who never betrayed the Ming dynasty. He adopted emotional expressions and writing techniques to engage in dialogue with his readers and sought to share his inner feelings with them. The characters and phrases that he chose were full of grief and anger. He wrote the characters "*yuan* 冤 (injustice)" four times and "*ku* 苦 (suffering)" seven times to show the magnitude of his misfortunes,

[20] Fang's Southern Ming recipients include Jin Bao 金堡 (1614-1680), Cheng Yuan 程源, Zhu Tianlin 朱天麟, and Zhang Zilie 張自烈 (1597-1673).

[21] In his study of autobiographical letters in early China, Wells argues that letter writers would use rhetorical strategies to craft self-images at crucial moments in life (Wells, 2015, 622-642).

[22] Fang Yizhi used a metaphor here, which is explained in detail below.

both physical and mental, because of the injustice he had received and the destruction of family and dynasty that he had suffered. He specifically selected phrases that could gain sympathy and resonance from the recipients, such as "*qixue* 泣血 (weeping blood)", "*wansi* 萬死 (ten thousand deaths)", "*tongxin* 痛心 (grief)", "*hen* 恨 (hate)", "*buxing* 不幸 (unfortunate)", "*fubing* 扶病 (enduring sickness)", and "*gushen* 孤身 (alone)". He compared himself to a "*jiefu* 節婦 (chaste woman)", and Ruan Dacheng's false accusation against him was like a "chaste woman" being regarded as a "prostitute". He even compared his grievances to that of Bigan 比干, who was suspected by the monarch of the Yin dynasty 殷朝 (about 1300 B.C.– about 1046 B.C.) and cut open his chest to show his heart and prove his innocence. In this way, Fang indicated that what he encountered was "an anomalous injustice for the ages". All these approaches can show Fang's hardships in such a way as to obtain what he expected from his readers, the recasting of his image as a Ming loyalist. As the recipient of this letter was Zhang Zilie, a Ming loyalist who may also have suffered from slander after 1644, such descriptions and metaphors would resonate with him especially strongly.

Fang Yizhi's efforts to justify himself were not limited to these approaches. He selected his letters for publication, seeking to rehabilitate his reputation among a future readership. Fang's collected works *Lingwai gao* 嶺外稿 (Drafts from Beyond the Mountain Range), compiled by his three sons and published shortly after his death, includes a total of seventeen letters. Seven of these letters were written to express grievances to different recipients. Judging by his descendants' speed in sorting and publishing these letters, Fang had intentionally copied and preserved them before sending them, and it is possible that he selected these letters and asked his sons to compile them into his collected works. The expectation of publishing letters to obtain the approval of a broader readership undoubtedly influenced Fang's letter writing. This is because, under such circumstances, writers' choice of topics and writing techniques was not merely directed at resonating with a single reader, although the reading experience of contemporary recipients was crucial in the early Southern Ming period; more importantly, they needed to consider stirring emotions among a wider range of readers at different intellectual and emotional levels. The passage quoted above is also included in Fang's collected works. It can be seen that the words and phrases were not obscure, but accessible. The metaphors he chose—chaste woman, prostitute, and Bigan—were straightforward and vernacular enough to be understood, even by those who were illiterate.[23] This increased the readability of his letters among readers of different knowledge backgrounds, eliciting the sympathy and recognition he sought to achieve the goal of justifying his reputation.

The unique manifestations of epistolary activities between 1644 and 1652 project more than just the evolution of Chinese epistolary culture during the late Ming and early Qing period. Epistolary activities suffered the same turbulence and disruption as the wartime in which they occurred. Private letters,

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[23] The story of Bigan originated from the *Shiji* 史記 (The Scribe's Records) written by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145-87 B.C.). During the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, it was written as a mythological story by the literati and spread among ordinary people by storytellers. In the late Ming period, this story was written into the mythological novel *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 (Creation of the Gods). These facts demonstrate that Bigan's story was popular among both literate and illiterate ("Song Weizi shijia" 宋微子世家, 1465; *Fengshen yanyi*, 170-177).

which had originally been more concerned with individual life, were deeply involved in the political and military fields and played an even more crucial role in information exchange than the official postal system. Even after these letters had been successfully delivered and read, their political value might prompt another process of epistolary exchange. To a certain extent, this restored and maintained news updates and contacts between Southern Ming supporters in different territories and regions, but simultaneously it brought varying degrees of political trouble to them, as well as to their writers and bearers. Thus, we conclude that the writing, delivery, reception, preservation, circulation, and dissemination of early Southern Ming letters interacted dynamically. Although the epistolary process began with relatively independent and private letter writing, it was never a simple act, and there were many complexities integrated into the purpose of writing a letter. Correspondents had to consider the possible situations in terms of delivery, reception, preservation, circulation, and dissemination. Their predictions of the difficulties that their letters would experience in wartime delivery and the aim of writing for a wider audience greatly influenced their writing, prompting them to focus on self-representation, select readers with different identities, and even show an expectation of disseminating their letters among specific readers.

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