

Introduction

Res gestae and *historia rerum gestarum* were beginning to merge,
things done with the account of those things . . .

—Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (chapter 6)

When we want to learn about the past, we turn to artifacts from the past. The problem is that an artifact invariably tells us only part of the truth—and may obscure other parts. More precisely, a given kind of artifact only tells us its own kind of truth, or mistruth. The only way through is to assess the artifact's underlying qualities, understanding the information it conveys in those terms.

It is important to remember that historiography—how historical events were committed to writing—is itself an artifact of history. This is a point of fundamental significance in the study of early medieval China—roughly, the second to seventh centuries of the Common Era—not least because so much of our understanding of this period comes down to us through the lens of histories produced during that time. If we do not grapple directly with the qualities of these sources, we will not use them well. More than that, early medieval China was a great age of historiography, witnessing the compilation of hundreds of historical titles and the establishment of “history” as an independent bibliographical category.¹

1. A modern study demonstrates this development with the following contrast. In the middle of the first century of the Common Era, just eleven historical works, classed under the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, were noted in the bibliography incorporated into the *History of the Han*. Some four hundred years later, more than a thousand historical titles would be listed in the bibliography compiled by Ruan Xiaoxu 阮孝緒 (479–536) and in a special section devoted to history. See Hao Runhua, *Liuchao shiji yu shixue*, 28.

Historiography was a quintessential product of early medieval culture, its qualities very much those of the age itself. Further, and most importantly of all, though we naturally think of historiography as “writing about the past,” a great deal of historical writing in early medieval China was highly contemporary. It was the record of the very recent past—and the real-time creation of the “primary sources” that would soon be taken up into that record. This makes historiography an artifact in the strongest sense: not just an account of what happened in the past, or even a reflection of how the past happened, but a key element in the happening itself.

Received characterizations provide some basic footholds for understanding traditional Chinese historiography. The Chinese historian’s primary interest, many have observed, was to praise and to blame, in pursuit of moral truths that lie beyond a merely factual record. Alternatively, Etienne Balazs (1905–63) found a more pragmatic didacticism in Chinese historiography: it was “written by officials for officials,” to educate its readership in the art of governance.² Considering a different dimension of that same readership, Wolfram Eberhard (1909–89) saw a historiography written by the gentry for the gentry, in representation of their own interests, while Hans Bielenstein (1920–2015) and others have emphasized the flip side of that coin: that historiography was an instrument of the imperial state, wielded to acknowledge the men who served its glory and give just deserts to those who had not.³ Introducing these points of view, Albert E. Dien grants each “some validity,” adding to them a higher-level formulation of his own: that Chinese historiography challenges us because its primary concerns were “permanence” and “continuity,” as opposed to “process” and “change.”⁴ Burton Watson (1925–2017), meanwhile, once offered the opposite view: “the essence of human history, as of the whole natural world, was regarded by the Chinese as the phenomenon of change.”⁵

There is insight in all these perspectives; when they contradict one another, it is because the Chinese historiographical tradition is too broad

2. Etienne Balazs, “History as a Guide to Bureaucratic Practice,” 135.

3. See Wolfram Eberhard, *A History of China*, 104, and Hans Bielenstein, “The Restoration of the Han Dynasty: With Prolegomena on the Historiography of the *Hou Han Shu*,” 38.

4. Albert E. Dien, “Historiography of the Six Dynasties Period (220–581),” 509–11.

5. Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch’ien: Grand Historian of China*, 133.

and varied to be covered by any single characterization. For any given statement or passage in any given history, we may well run through a litany of questions derived from them: Was this written to praise or to blame? What useful knowledge did it convey to its readers? What gentry interests did it serve? How does it reflect on the interests of the state whose history is being told, or those of the successor state under which the history was finalized? Does the narrative serve to illustrate some transcendent moral rule? Does it reveal some aspect of the eternal mutability of human affairs?

What these assessments share in common, however, is that they all tend to take us *away* from the historical text itself. This is to start off on the wrong foot. Before boiling historiography down to the historical conditions that shaped it, we might first evaluate it as a kind of written representation. That is the idea behind this study, using a close examination of the *History of the Liu-Song* (*Song shu* 宋書), compiled in 487–88 and covering the first three-quarters of the fifth century.

The Liu-Song and China in the Southern Dynasties Period

The dynasty known as the “Liu-Song” 劉宋, to distinguish it from the greater Song dynasty that ruled China half a millennium later, was founded in 420 and expired in 479, enduring for exactly one sixty-year Chinese cycle. Conventionally identified as the start of a “Southern Dynasties” period, in fact the Liu-Song’s predecessor, the Eastern Jin (318–420), was entirely a dynasty of the south, and a tradition of dynastic rule in the southeast had been established two centuries earlier by the state of Wu (229–80). Based in the city of Jiankang (modern Nanjing), these southern states ruled primarily over the lower and middle Yangtze regions, with colonial advances into the south and occasional, tenuous conquests of territory in the north and the west. Topography and scale distinguished them from their forebear and model, the Han dynasty (the Western Han, 202 BCE–8 CE, and the Eastern, 25–220 CE): the “fluid” political economy of the river-linked south stood in contrast to the land-oriented empire of the old northern plains and passes, and even at its height—a census from 464 records some five million registered souls—the southern state’s control over its subjects compared neither with the Han, which in the first

century CE had registered a population of nearly sixty million, nor with the population resources of contemporary regimes in the north.⁶

The southern regimes faced two chief problems. First, their sovereignty swelled and diminished in a functional relationship with the vicissitudes of their adversaries in the north. In 383, the Eastern Jin was nearly overrun by the state known to history as the “Former Qin” (350–94), and the Liu-Song would be confronted with the rise of an even more fearsome foe, the Northern Wei (386–534, established as an imperial dynasty in 399). There is nothing like an external threat, and occasional opportunity, to concentrate, or dissipate, the energies of a state, and in the matter of historiography it is likely that such an external audience contributed to the development of a kind of historical writing that cast the state and its actors in a basically positive, “eulogistic” light.⁷ Acute as the external threat may have been, however, the more crucial challenge that was confronted by the dynasties based in the south, and processed in their historiography,

6. The best general introduction to the history and culture of early medieval China is Mark Edward Lewis, *China between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties*; see especially 7–14 for the contrast between the political cultures of the old north and the new south. See also Charles Holcombe, *In the Shadow of the Han: Literati Thought and Society at the Beginning of the Southern Dynasties*, 1–24, for a review of influential mid-twentieth-century approaches to understanding this period.

On the population, see Hans Bielenstein, “Census of China during the Period 2–742 A. D.,” 145 and plates III, IV, V; and Ge Jianxiong, ed., *Zhongguo renkou shi* 1:498, 557. The actual population of the Liu-Song was probably several times the number of registered persons. Recently an argument has been made, relying on the highest conceivable population estimates, that the Liu-Song was “the largest and most populous state in East Asia at the time” and thus an “empire” in the full connotation of that word; see Andrew Chittick, “The Southern Dynasties,” 237, and Chittick, *The Jiankang Empire in Chinese and World History*, appendix 2. The registered population number, however, remains a good index of the scale of the Southern Dynasties state, with the Han, Tang, and the contemporary north the most relevant points of comparison.

7. Studies that use material from the *Song shu* to explore how the northern and southern states presented themselves to their counterparts include Albert E. Dien, “The Disputation at Pengcheng: Accounts from the *Wei shu* and the *Song shu*,” which translates a dialog between northern and southern statesmen as it was recorded in northern and southern histories; and Lu Kou, “The Epistolary Self and Psychological Warfare: Tuoba Tao’s (408–52, r. 423–52) Letters and His Southern Audience,” which analyzes the rhetorical effects of statements made by northern and southern emperors.

was an internal problem: a viable body politic had to be negotiated between the imperial state and what, for lack of a better word, we may refer to as the “gentry.”⁸

The state-gentry relationship was a problem with a long history. The foundational empires of the Qin (220–206 BCE) and the Han established this relationship to the state’s favor, but the early medieval period was characterized by a tilt toward the gentry. The simple historical reason for this change is that centralized imperial power, having enervated and then imploded over the last century of the Eastern Han, was not easily reconstituted, no matter how much a successor state might desire to do so, the gentry naturally finding greater exercise of self-sovereignty an amenable condition. The power of the gentry only grew with the Western Jin dynasty’s (265–316) loss of the northern heartland and the ensuing flight south, where a feeble imperial court was tethered to a succession of dominant clans. Nevertheless, this retrenchment had its limits: the circumscribed imperial state of the Southern Dynasties remained an imperial state, which the gentry might dominate but would never supplant. In fact, in an apparent paradox, it may be said that the state became more important even as the court languished. For one, state emolument was essential to gentry identity, who relied on office-holding for material and especially symbolic sustenance. Further, the state provided a political venue for the development and integration of a complex gentry society—newly arrived families from the north mixing with those that had established themselves in the south centuries earlier, with various social divisions within and across the two groups and, as the southern economy burgeoned, the incorporation of upwardly mobile men who made their way onto the gentry fringe. Gentry actors leveraged the state’s authority, to their own advantage or to the advantage of the state over other members of the gentry, but the state as an entity could not tip to the gentry as a class, because the gentry depended on it too much.

In sum, the state-gentry relationship was a vital dynamic in Southern Dynasties China, intensified and not vitiated by gentry dominance. Such

8. We need a broad concept to cover the varyingly propertied and privileged class that did business with the state. For this purpose I adopt the term “gentry,” on which see the still insightful survey of the early medieval period in Eberhard, *A History of China*, esp. 69–73, 154–57.

was the background against which Liu Yu 劉裕 (363–422, r. 420–22), known in the history of his dynasty and henceforth in this study as “the Founding Ancestor” (Gaozu 高祖, the “high[est] ancestor” worshipped by a given family), rose to power. Liu Yu is often spoken of in terms of his deficient qualifications vis-à-vis the court elite, but he is better regarded as a legitimate power who emerged from the broad late Jin lower and middle gentry.⁹ The beginnings of the Liu-Song can be traced to the highly factionalized Jin court of the 390s, with strife between a wayward uncle and an even more wayward cousin of the sitting emperor (the “Peaceful” Emperor, Andi, r. 396–419), on the one hand, and high ministers of greater and lesser ability and loyalty on the other. Meanwhile, widespread dissent—“rebellion,” from the perspective of the court and its historiographers—emerged in the thriving but discordant and precarious society that had taken shape in the state’s core lower Yangtze region. Through talent and charisma, fortune and fate, the future Founding Ancestor became one of the few men capable of wielding substantive power, playing a key role in suppressing the rebellion and then, in 404, leading the ouster of an erstwhile establisher of a new dynasty, Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369–404). Slowly picking off his civil and military competitors, by 412 the Founding Ancestor had taken full control of the imperial capital. In 416, he led a (briefly) successful prestige raid on the old northern capitals—his rise to power was greatly facilitated by the relative dormancy of the Northern Wei in this decade—and in 420 he duly received the Mandate of Heaven from the Jin emperor known to history as “the Respectful” (Gongdi, r. 419–20).

The Founding Ancestor died just two years into his reign. Following a brief succession crisis, his third son, Emperor Wen (r. 424–53), would rule for a relatively stable thirty years, before pressure from the Northern

9. See Wan Shengnan, ed., *Chen Yinke Wei Jin Nanbeichao shi jiangyan lu*, 119–22, 179–80, and, with a detailed discussion of the office holdings of the family and in-laws from Liu Yu’s great-grandfather down, Zhu Zongbin, “Liu Yu mendì kao.” Recent scholarship in English has pegged Liu Yu too low: Chittick, “The Southern Dynasties,” views him as a “largely illiterate” outsider (238, with a remarkable mid-life transformation at 241); Lewis, *China between Empires*, 70, refers to him as a “commoner”; and the introduction to Scott Pearce, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey, eds., *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm: 200–600*, directly incorporates the extremely prejudicial, if informative, biography of Liu Yu in the *History of the Northern Wei (Wei shu)*, calling him a “shoe peddler” (25).

Wei and factionalism among his thirty sons and daughters led to his assassination. One of those sons, Emperor Xiaowu (r. 453–64), emerged to rejuvenate the dynasty's fortunes, establishing a vigorous, aggressive imperial court for a decade. That revival ended with enormous bloodshed during the brief reign of his young heir, and in the fifteen years that followed, the Liu-Song dynasty did little more than tread water before the Mandate passed on again.

The Historiography of the Liu-Song

The history of the Founding Ancestor's rise and of the dynasty he established was written as it happened. In the final years of the Jin, works were produced that summed up its years of decline and spoke for the men who, resigned to pointless loyalty, continued to identify themselves as its subjects.¹⁰ If they could not, strictly speaking, foresee the exact end point of their dynasty, through the prism of dynastic historiography they could envision its horizon. Correspondingly, the rise of a new dynasty was as much a historiographical phenomenon as a political one. The process by which the Mandate of Heaven was transferred from one house to another was intrinsically historiographical, documents being created and inserted into the record in order to satisfy the narrative arc of orthodox history. The people involved in the dynastic transition were likewise attentive to their own place in this process. The practical realities of their lives—securing family interests, surviving the violent battles of the political arena—were melded together with acts of self-representation as historiographical subjects, fulfilling historiographical roles in the service of an incoming dynasty.

These historiographical representations accumulated like the sediment of a rock bed over the course of the Liu-Song, culminating in the *History of the Liu-Song* by Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), commissioned eight

10. Xu Guang 徐廣 (352–425) is an example; see *Jin shu* 82.2158–60. By the interpretation of the *Song shu*, Tao Yuanming (365?–427), the great “hermit poet” of the late Jin, is another. Not all Jin subjects were so loyal: see the works of Wang Shaozhi 王韶之 (380–435), as discussed in chapter 5.

years after the dynasty's conclusion.¹¹ Carrying on standard imperial practice, the Liu-Song staffed court offices charged with collecting and processing historical documentation—the Palace Secretary (*mishu jian* 秘書監) and his “gentlemen of composition” (*zhuzuo lang* 著作郎), with their “gentleman assistants” (*zuolang* 佐郎).¹² Occasionally we gain a view into their work, as when, in 433, “the Grand Ancestor (Emperor Wen) had Xiao Sihua (400–455) submit to the court a narrative of his pacification of the Hanzhong region, and passed it down to the officials in charge of historiography” 太祖使思話上平漢中本末，下之史官。¹³ The first step toward a formal dynastic history came in 439, when He Chengtian 何承天 (370–447) was tasked with editing a “state history” (*guoshi* 國史) composed of annals, biographies, and treatises.¹⁴ Shen Yue implies that He Chengtian drafted the biographies of the early Liu-Song and relevant late Jin figures, and he says that one of those charged with continuing his work, a man by the name of Su Baosheng 蘇寶生 (d. 458), composed the biographies of men active in the reign of Emperor Wen.¹⁵ Be that as it may, we do not know to what extent they were stitching together received narratives or how their work was re-edited at the next inflection point in the production of the *History of the Liu-Song*. That was the work of Xu Yuan 徐爰

11. The most important sources for the history of the compilation of the *Song shu* are Shen Yue's own account, in the last scroll of his work, and the synoptic one in Liu Zhiji (661–721), *Shitong tongshi* (“Waipian,” “Gujin zhengshi”) 2.319–21. Of various modern reviews, see especially Tang Changru, “Wei Jin Nanbeichao shiji juyao,” 279–83, and the integral account in Tang Xiejun, *Shijia xingji yu shishu gouzao: yi Wei Jin Nanbeichao yishi wei zhongxin de kaocha*, chapter 5. For a sympathetic portrait of Shen Yue, see Richard B. Mather, *The Poet Shen Yüeh (441–513): The Reticent Marquis*, supplemented with greater political detail, and less sympathy, by Tang Xiejun, *Shijia xingji yu shishu gouzao*, appendix 2.

12. Li Jutian, “*Song shu* zuanxiu shimo kao,” identifies as far as possible all of the men who held these offices in the Liu-Song period. These posts were noted sinecures and stepping stones, but real work still went on in them.

13. *Song shu* 78.2013.

14. See He's biography at *Song shu* 64.1704, which provides the date, and Shen Yue's preface, 100.2467. As Edwin G. Pulleyblank (“The Historiographical Tradition,” 154–55) has emphasized, dynastic histories were written during the life of a dynasty and not only after its demise, as sometimes assumed from the example of the received standard histories, which were in fact finalized after the close of the dynasties they cover.

15. *Song shu* 100.2467. There is a brief biographical note for Su Baosheng at 75.1958.

(394–475), a talented lower official at the vigorous but authoritarian court of Emperor Xiaowu. It is said that although Xu Yuan based his version, completed in 462, on earlier compilations, he gave the material his own distinctive stamp, producing an integral history of the half-century from the Founding Ancestor's restoration of the Jin court in 404 up through Xu's own time. According to Shen Yue, the emperor himself contributed biographies for three prominent villains.¹⁶

One influential characterization of Shen Yue's *History* holds that he was able to complete the bulk of it in a single year because he largely copied from Xu Yuan's work, adding coverage of the dynasty's final two decades.¹⁷ This seems true as far as it goes—but no further. In his memorial to the throne, Shen especially remarks on the biases in the earlier histories, and presumably in Xu Yuan's particularly, and he speaks of his revision in strong terms, saying that “today, your servant has endeavored to establish a different framework, to make a new history” 臣今謹更創立，製成新史。¹⁸ The title line—as preserved in early printings, though no longer in the modern typeset edition—also underscores Shen Yue's authorship, specifying that this is a *History* “newly compiled” (*xin zhuan* 新撰) by his hand. How exactly Shen Yue exercised this authorial agency can only be glimpsed and guessed at—Xu Yuan's work survived into the Tang but is now extant only in fragments. In the annals, at least, he appears to have trimmed the sails of a more heroic narrative. For instance, Xu Yuan's account of the Founding Ancestor's defeat of the “rebel” Sun En 孫恩 (d. 402) reads:

Though he had suffered a rout, [Sun En] still had many supporters to rely on and thus (*sui*) he proceeded directly to attack the capital. *The court, shaken*

16. *Song shu* 100.2467. See also *Song shu* 94.2308–9, which quotes the memorial in which Xu Yuan sets out the principles of his work.

17. See Zhao Yi (1727–1814), *Nianer shi zhaji jiaozheng* 9.179–80; Tang Xiejun, *Shijia xingji yu shishu gouzao*, 105–7, calculates that only 92 out of a total of 238 treatises and biographies in the *Song shu* are limited to events before the year 464. Another of Zhao Yi's criticisms is that Shen Yue's *History* glossed over the true history of how the Song overthrew the Jin and was again too polite in its telling of how the Song fell to the Qi. Yet the whole idea of a dynastic history was to show how the Mandate of Heaven was duly transferred from one legitimate imperial house to another, and then on again at its expiration.

18. *Song shu* 100.2467.

with fright (*zhen ju*), made Liu Yu Establishing Martial General and Prefect of Xiapi. Commanding a naval unit, Liu Yu pursued Sun to Yuzhou, where he again inflicted a great defeat upon him.

雖被摧破，猶恃眾力，遂徑向京師。朝廷震懼，以高祖為建武將軍、下邳太守，帥舟師討恩于鬱洲，復大破之。¹⁹

The parallel passage in Shen Yue's *History* tracks this closely, but with a different tone:

Though he had suffered a rout, [Sun En] still had many supporters to rely on, and he proceeded directly to attack the capital. But headwinds stalled his tall-masted ships, and it took him ten or so days to reach Baishi, and then he found that Liu Laozhi had returned *and that the court was well prepared* (*you bei*). Thus (*sui*) he was forced to flee toward Yuzhou. In the eighth month [of 401], the Founding Ancestor was made Establishing Martial General and Prefect of Xiapi. Leading a river brigade to Yuzhou in pursuit of Sun En, he again inflicted a great defeat on En, who fled south.

雖被摧破，猶恃其眾力，徑向京師。樓船高大，值風不得進，旬日乃至白石。尋知劉牢之已還，朝廷有備，遂走向鬱洲。八月，以高祖為建武將軍、下邳太守，領水軍追討至鬱洲，復大破恩。恩南走。²⁰

Where Xu Yuan had glorified the Founding Ancestor, rescuing the court from a state of shock, Shen Yue reserves due dignity for the Jin court, presented as well prepared. The exigence of the situation is toned down through a displacement of “consequence,” in the shift of “thus” (*sui*) from Sun En’s threat to its abatement.

In prefaces to the treatises, which required much labor and were incorporated into the work some time after the rest was presented to the throne, Shen Yue explains why he chose one topic and not another, and how he made use of his predecessors’ scholarship. But for the biographies, though we may at times perceive certain editorial choices—such as the

19. *Taiping yulan* 128.1b–2a.

20. *Song shu* 1.3. Liu Laozhi (d. 402; biography at *Jin shu* 84.2188–91) was the most powerful military commander of the late fourth century. In the turmoil of Huan Xuan’s coup he committed suicide, and the Founding Ancestor, who had served under Liu’s command, emerged to take his place.

pairing of the higher- and lower-born statesmen in the first biography proper (the subject of chapters 1 and 2 in the present study) or the special inclusion of certain documents (as in chapter 4 here)—more frequently we cannot confidently distinguish Shen Yue’s authorial voice from the older biases he left intact in his work. Yet the historian’s hold over a historical work was subtle anyhow. The work Shen Yue crafted was more decorous and courtly than pointed and analytical: the short historical disquisitions appended to each biographical chapter, for instance, read as neat designations of praise and blame in due proportion, together sketching out a simple picture of a dynasty that rose by great deeds and fell through grievous foibles.²¹ The *History* was not primarily an expression of Shen Yue’s own historical interpretation, but a robust and respectful transmission of historical source material—“the splendid canons of an entire era” 一代之盛典 in his own description—stocked with informative detail.²²

Shen Yue surely had his views, but the greater meaning of the *History of the Liu-Song* lies rather in the form of historiography he was working with. There were two major historiographical forms in Shen Yue’s time. Chronological history, a type associated with the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the terse record of antiquity ostensibly edited by Confucius, sought to present the history of a dynasty or period in a relatively concise series of events. This was not the dominant form, however, and a number of well-known chronological histories are in fact abridged reorganizations of the chronicle’s more important counterpart—the history of “annals and biographies” (*ji zhuan* 紀傳).²³ This model was established by the great Sima

21. For an interpretation of the view of Liu-Song history implied in Shen Yue’s *History*, see Kawai Yasushi, *Nanchō kizokusei kenkyū*, chapter 6.

22. *Song shu* 100.2468.

23. The annals and biographies framework includes several other elements, some uncommonly used, the most significant of which were the “tables” (*biao* 表) and the “treatises” (*zhi* 志). Tables condense historical data into an easily surveyed format organized by topic and chronology. This element was abandoned in the early medieval period, but it was used to great effect by Sima Qian and Ban Gu, and its utility was rediscovered after the Tang. For discussions, see Watson, *Ssu-ma Chi’en*, 112–15, and Grant Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian’s Conquest of History*, esp. 29–34. Treatises were something like “monographs” on various subjects relevant to imperial governance in the *Shiji*, but by this period they had become copious repositories of historical records or documentation, edited and introduced by the historian. Jiang Yan 江淹 (444–505), a poet-historian

Qian (145/135–86 BCE) at the teetering height of the Western Han, while Ban Gu (32–92) made it a strictly dynastic model with his *History of the [Western] Han* (*Han shu*), a book that furnished a stately patrimony for the “Eastern” or “Later” Han. Thus established, dynastic historiography became a key feature of the Chinese state all the way up to the twentieth century, even if its relative valence within the wider field of historical sources diminished, first with the move to compilation by committee under the Tang, then with the advent of print culture in the eleventh century. For early medieval China, however, the prevalence of this model again presents an apparent paradox: that a historiographical form that had taken shape as a part of a grand empire thrived under the auspices of southern heirs not a tenth its size. One might have thought that the weakness of the state would have opened the way for other kinds of history. Instead, the court-oriented annals-biography form remained the pole star of early medieval political culture, and even the other types of history that arose in the period, such as local history, maintained its characteristic state-gentry political orientation.

The essence of the annals and biographies history lies in a conceptual relationship between the two elements that constitute its name. Annals were the hoariest kind of formal historiography, associated with the court scribes of the Zhou. Closely shorn court records, they only by exception—for instance, in the long narrative of the Founding Ancestor’s rise in the *History of the Liu-Song*—offered anything resembling an integral historical account. This concision became a key feature in their historical application: in the more manifest form of the term used by Sima Qian, annals are the “basic threads” (*benji* 本紀) upon which all else depends, the word for a strand of silk or cord of gathered strands, *ji* 紀, being cognate with the

contemporary of Shen Yue, is said to have remarked that the compilation of treatises was the art of historiography’s greatest challenge, and they make up a full thirty of the *History of the Liu-Song*’s hundred scrolls, covering the calendrical sciences, imperial ritual, lyrics for court performance, administrative geography, government bureaucracy, and natural omens of varying sorts. See Balazs, “History as a Guide to Bureaucratic Practice,” 134, and B. J. Mansvelt Beck, *The Treatises of Later Han: Their Author, Sources, Contents, and Place in Chinese Historiography*, 55.

word used for “classic,” *jing* 經, literally the “warp” on which cloth, or a text, is woven.²⁴

The idea of a “biography” (*zhuan* 傳, literally, “what has been passed down”) in imperial China took shape against this conception of the annals. These biographies are not “lives” but “commentaries” (also *zhuan*) to an annals/classic. Set out (to again use Sima Qian’s terminology) in an “array” (*lie* 列, cognate with 烈, “shining” or “outstanding”), individuals were put on display in the textual halls of the imperial houses for their accomplishments in the sphere of the imperial state and the culture it sustained. Like the three *zhuan*-commentaries to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, biographies in early medieval China eclipsed their annalistic classics in bulk and in impact but never departed from their weave.²⁵

Instantiating the relationship of state and gentry, the annals-biography form establishes the most important characteristics of early medieval historiography. With the annals supplying the basic chronological framework and the various biographies filling in the historical detail, the form nullifies any expectation that history should be told in a straightforward fashion. This fundamentally open structure does not gather facts relevant to a given event in one place but spreads them across any number of different biographies, important events narrated not once but over and over. This means that readers, up until they have absorbed the entire *History*, must always wonder whether a certain event will be cast in a different light elsewhere, or, complementarily, whether a particular telling within a particular biography might hold some particular interpretative significance. This leads

24. The classic-to-commentary relationship of the annals to the biographies was observed by the Tang historical critic Liu Zhiji (*Shitong tongshi* 2.43, “Liezhuan”); see Twitchett, “Chinese Biographical Writing,” 97–98, and Twitchett, “Problems of Chinese Biography,” 26, 32–33. The point is endorsed and expanded in Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, chapter 7 and 334; also Zhu Dongrun, *Badai zhuanxu wenxue shulun*, 22–23; and Chen Shih-Hsiang, “An Innovation in Chinese Biographical Writing,” 50. It is unclear, however, how certain we should be that Sima Qian explicitly had such a model in mind, and Burton Watson (*Ssu-ma Ch’ien*, 120–27) rejected the association.

25. The two studies by Denis Twitchett cited in the preceding note remain insightful introductions in English to Chinese biography, this historiography’s richest vein. For another useful overview, see Brian Moloughney, “From Biographical History to Historical Biography: A Transformation in Chinese Historical Writing,” 2–13, which cites Pierre Ryckmans for the association of *liezhuan* with “exemplary” lives.

into two somewhat dubious yet culturally significant templates of historical interpretation. One is that the historian, following the laconic lead of Confucius in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, might make use of “subtle words” (*wei yan* 微言)—the selection or absence of specific diction or detail—to convey a historical judgment. It can be hard to positively identify such judgments, and to distinguish the extent to which historians use oblique expression as a technique to convey historical interpretation from their use of it as a crutch, excusing themselves from the precariousness of forthright judgment, or from the embarrassment of having presented an insufficiently complete historical account; but the effect on the readers of a history is functionally the same, imploring them, and us, to discern judgment in what the text says or does not say.

Related to “subtle words” is the idea of a “theory of mutual illumination” (*hujian fa* 互見法). Identified much later but clearly present in early medieval historiography, this technique relies on the juxtaposition of parallel narratives in a work to produce what one modern scholar has described as “a higher level vision developed through an interplay of perspectives.”²⁶ This manifold historical perspective is best explained by two separate but intertwined factors. Historians, having accepted a “normalized role” for a biographical subject, were wont to place disjunctive, often negative, portrayals elsewhere in a history, “to maintain consistency” and to ensure decorum.²⁷ The main origin of those disjunctive materials, meanwhile, lay not with the historian but in the variously biased sources from which histories were assembled, and though he would prune and select from these sources, the dutiful historian was committed to relaying them in some degree of completion.²⁸

Both “subtle words” and “mutual illumination” suggest to the reader that meaning is somewhere to be found hidden in the historical text, but

26. See Wai-ye Li, “The Idea of Authority in the *Shih chi* (*Records of the Historian*),” 397.

27. Twitchett, “Problems of Chinese Biography,” 32.

28. Grant Hardy argues that Sima Qian’s different and not infrequently contradictory accounts are due to an unwillingness to overturn one source on the basis of another, a motive that applies to the early medieval historian as well; see Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo*, esp. 82–85. To similar effect, Wai-ye Li, “Pre-Qin Annals,” 431–34, connects the rich variation of perspective in the *Zuo zhuan*, the most extensive early historical narrative, to that work’s “complex textual history.”

we should not overlook the significance of what historical texts present to us most directly. Above all, the annals-biography form establishes the idea that the words and deeds of men (and sometimes women) as relayed in a biography had historical import. On the surface, this point may seem banal—for whence does history derive if not, mainly, from human deliberation and action? The distinction lies in the most salient quality of early medieval Chinese historiography: the integration of historical action with historiographical representation. What the gentryman did or said was envisioned and executed with the annals-biography form somewhere in mind.

The biographies, and historical action itself, were constructed of three major elements or modes of representation—the anecdote, the document, and the narration of “officialdom.” Of these, the anecdote has received the most attention.²⁹ Droll or piquant little stories, anecdotes are beyond the realm of truth and falsehood, a status that perpetually confounds studies that seek to make use of dynastic biographies to tell real history. They are miniature allegories, spun up, in some certain proximity to historical fact, to illustrate the character of a biographical subject or to shed light on a historical event or situation. The key issue raised by the anecdote is bias, as various stories about individuals and events compete to portray them in a positive or negative way. This happened in the happening of history itself, as tales were told, and perhaps even staged, to influence the outcome or interpretation of events major and minor. Thus the anecdote is lodged halfway between historical mimesis and historiographical representation, and must be examined for its motivations on both ends of that continuum. It must also be stressed that the historian did not generally

29. The anecdote has been identified as “the basic unit of narrative” (David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography*, 164 and chapter 5 generally) in pre-imperial Chinese historiography, and its use has been the subject of much discussion, including essays in Paul van Els and Sarah A. Queen, eds., *Between History and Philosophy: Anecdotes in Early China*, and, on the medieval period, Jack W. Chen and David Schaberg, eds., *Idle Talk: Gossip and Anecdote in Traditional China*. Note, however, the dissent of Yuri Pines: “The pervasive presence of anecdotes in the historical and quasi-historical lore of the Warring States period has created the wrong impression that they define all early Chinese historical writing.” See Pines, “Zhou History and Historiography: Introducing the Bamboo Manuscript *Xinian*,” 323, and the fuller discussion of the relationship between anecdote and “informative history” in Pines, *Zhou History Unearthed: The Bamboo Manuscript “Xinian” and Early Chinese Historiography*, 73–80.

concoct anecdotes, but inherited them from his sources, guiding if not transforming history's vectors of bias through the arts of selection, omission, and editing—or finding himself guided by them.³⁰

The anecdote may supply much of historiography's "enargia," strongly influencing the reader's impressions of historical actors and events, but it was the historical document that formed the true core of the historiographical tradition. *Shi* 史, the category term for "history," originally meant "scribe," and Confucian lore held that early historical records were in the charge of scribes who sat to their lords' left and right, respectively responsible for documenting his deeds and his words. The most common generic term in the titles of dynastic histories, *shu* 書, means "written document," and those titles can be construed not just as "the History of . . ." but as "the full documentary record of . . ." This documentary lifeblood coursed through the *Shiji* and the *Han shu* and only gained in vigor in the early medieval period, when documentation came to constitute an outsize proportion of the historical narrative; the trend reached an apex with the *Song shu*, where nearly a third of the biographical section is composed of quotations from documents. Later historical critics would savage Shen Yue for the unwieldy bulk of his *History*, but his unparsonious approach is a great boon to the historian, both for its preservation of period detail and perspective and because that very abundance points us toward a better understanding of what "historical writing" really was in early medieval China.

This documentation was no longer the domain of court scribes but a republic in which the lettered men and women of early medieval China performed historical action. Its greatest glory lies in poetry and belletristic prose, produced, to paraphrase the traditional formula, in order to give public voice to the author's state of mind in a given socio-political situation. An analogous framework underpinned the production of a wider range of writing and (recorded) speech, more or less artistic, inherently rhetorical, often practical, but never divorced from the author, representing his ideas in writing and allowing his writing to represent himself, speaking to his

30. The extent to which the speeches and anecdotes recorded in historiography are fictional is examined at length at Bielenstein, "The Restoration of the Han Dynasty," 49–61. Unsurprisingly, Bielenstein finds that a great deal of it is invented, but his inquiry cannot pin down where in the historiographical process this invention occurred.

contemporaries and, as if in soliloquy, to the audience of history. The key implication of this documentary “motive” is that if “history” is essentially retrospective, the historiography we are dealing with here was eminently contemporary, historical actors writing history as they lived or created it. In this respect again, the *History of the Liu-Song* provides a model example: compiled, apparently with a light hand, within a century of the events it relays, it provides a clearer view of the bond between history and historiography than we may obtain from sources with muddier timelines, most notably the *History of the Later Han* and the *History of the Jin*, both re-edited from earlier sources several centuries after the periods they cover.

“Officialdom”—the government of early medieval China and its representation in language—may pale beside the vivacity of the anecdote and the rhetorical richness of the document, but in its ubiquity it was peer to both. Annals and biographies alike brim with zero-degree records of promotion, demotion, and transfer across the official ranks. As a matter of historical realia, this historical element has much to tell us, if in coded form: we see who held power when and where, and better understand historical individuals through the types of offices they held during their careers. But is there not a deeper historiographical significance to officialdom, insofar as it was a central feature of the landscape across which historical actors traveled? Its glistening, lapidary surface seems to be more than just an index to the careers of mortal men.

Approaches

“Through its form,” Burton Watson remarks of Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, “the history passes judgment upon its material.”³¹ This imprint pressed deeper and deeper as the annals-biography form took root in the culture of early medieval China, shaping not just historical narrative but the production of the historical material itself. But here we face a problem of interpretation. An appreciation of the impact of the form is essential to reading early medieval historiography, lest we fall into the “hypercritical” approach to our sources warned of by Herbert Franke (1914–2011), for we cannot expect

31. Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch’ien*, 112.

early medieval biography to be anything more or less than what it was.³² At the same time, what is necessary is not necessarily sufficient: the judgments carried in a historiographical tradition do not fully overlap with the judgments we the readers, knowing better than to take this historiography at “face value,” will wish to make. To put the problem generally: no text is ever read solely on its own terms, but only against some structure of interpretation, mapped out according to some set of ideas. The question, then, is what tools might be employed to pry open the form of early medieval historiography. In this study, I propose and make use of two: a political model and a rhetorical one.

From the production of primary sources to that material’s assembly into completed and imperially ratified works of history, Chinese historiography was embedded in and deeply concerned with political culture. Thus, our interpretation of historiography must be informed by this politics, the logic of which has been aptly articulated in spatial terms by the modern scholar Mark Edward Lewis as an “authority of the inner over the outer,” in which progress toward the interior represents the accrual of political power.³³ This formation began with, or culminated in, the way power in the Han dynasty imperial system gathered around the emperor in the “inner court” of the palace, to the disadvantage of the bureaucratic organs of the “outer court.” At once physical and conceptual, this interior-exterior division marked the organization of power structures as varied as the city, the household, and the tomb.

Thus, a model so conceived starts with two poles: the interior, strong and good, and the exterior, weak and low. These are not fixed points, however, but a relation that existed at any moment for a historical actor, an interior-exterior dynamic that shaped political action, a motive that informed the production of historiographical narrative in real time and in retrospect. To elucidate the operation of this dynamic, we may fill in two further features: the central position of the “threshold” and the key mechanism of the “prompt.” The threshold represents the boundary line

32. Herbert Franke, “Some Remarks on the Interpretation of Chinese Dynastic Histories,” 113.

33. Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China*, 114, with discussion of different spaces so organized at 114–18, and in chapter 2 on the power paradox of gendered space, noted below.

between interiority and exteriority; crossing it meant power or deprivation of power, and control over it—a point of security, safe from the danger and instability of directly held political power, or a staging ground for timely interior advancement—proved one's mastery of the political art of the interior-exterior. And how did one cross the threshold? The deep mover of interior progress might have been the human drive for power—or its complement, the drive to expel others—but that general cause took effect through the human drive to narrative, the “plotting out” of a political career. These plotted points were “prompts,” serving to advance one toward interiority or push others to the outside.

The most interesting thing about the interior-exterior dynamic is that while it is simple in constitution, in operation it was complex and unstable. One reason for this is that interior and exterior space is configured differently in arenas that are different, but overlap. In a discussion of the status of women in early imperial China, for instance, Lewis observes that their physical location in the interior of the household or the palace often gave women authority over family or state affairs from which they were nominally prohibited. In the social sphere of the early medieval period we encounter an analogous power potential paradox, of men from the middle and lower gentry who by their social status were excluded from the rarefied realm of the true gentry elite but for that very reason were able to draw closer to powerful patrons, including the emperor and the imperial kinsmen. Interaction between different configurations of interior and exterior produced a subtle political interplay.

A second factor in the complexity of interior-exterior dynamics is an inherent confusion in the way interior and exterior relate. Truth and power lie in the interior, but when we speak of the interiority of an individual we refer to something—their personality and values—that is inaccessible and inscrutable except through the exterior dimensions of representation and action. By analogy, when facing a building we may affirm that what matters is what happens inside, that that is where the power resides; but how crucial its exterior, as the facade that manifests its eminence or the fortification that ensures its dominance. In this sense, as a representation of the interior, the exterior boasts an interiority of its own. Exteriors, however, can be false facades. That again makes the exterior inferior to the interior essence—but external falsehood also furnishes a new articulation of power. That is the strange power of irony, where exterior holds interior in

check, lest its true nature be revealed, while the exterior persists only as long as it performs that concealing function. This enigmatic insistence of the exterior is crucial to our understanding of early medieval historiography because historiography was an exterior wrapping around the interior historical action it represented, while at the same time this external representation was part of the action. Inevitably, readers will seek a historical reality held within the written form, but it is equally important to recognize the reality of the historiographical surface: it was the public face of that interior world, the dignified visage of its internal organization, sometimes revealing, sometimes concealing, but always constitutive, never displaced by what lies beneath it.

To navigate this exterior surface and the strong currents that run beneath it we turn to the tools of rhetoric, by which is meant not the narrow analysis of diction and style, though consideration of literary tropes is involved, but the global art of persuasion. Speaking on the documentary record, historical actors sought to persuade their audiences to adopt their positions or sympathize with their interests. Anecdotes were shaped and reshaped as stories for or against their protagonist's good repute. Presenting an account of events, the historian implicitly or explicitly formulated a judgment for his audience's consideration. At the deepest level, undergirding all of these local instances of persuasion, lies a rhetoric of historiography—the ways of persuasion that molded the historical events and their representation alike. This is to say that, from action in the world to inscription on the page, history and historiography conspired in a process of argumentation.

The analysis of argument is the province of the rhetorical "topic." The topic, particularly in the study of literature, has come to be associated with what are also known as "specific topics" or "commonplaces"; the image of "a world turned upside down" is a stock example, while for our subject we might point to the commonly invoked "good historian" (*liang shi* 良史), conveyor of a truthful record, no matter the dangers that might entail.³⁴ But the specific topic is a narrower connotation of a broader concept. A mainstay of the rhetorical tradition since Aristotle, topics involve not

34. For an influential introduction to these specific topics, see chapter 5, "Topics," in Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, including 94–98 on "The World Upsidedown."

specific statements but the general logical forms from which arguments may be derived—a typology of arguments to which a given speaker, in a certain culture or context, may profitably refer. Aristotle lists hundreds in his *Topics*. In the *Rhetoric*, he gives a (rather various) list of twenty-eight, these apparently singled out for their utility in the contexts he was concerned with. The later tradition further winnowed and rationalized the scope—Cicero (106–43 BCE) listed sixteen topics, while one modern scholar has found twenty groups in the influential scheme of Boethius (477–524).³⁵ But if the rhetorical topics are to be a practical interpretative tool, they must be reduced further still, and that is what one group of mid-twentieth-century American teachers of rhetoric did, identifying a basic, intuitive set of four topics.³⁶ Slightly modifying their formulation, I will here articulate historiographical argumentation against four *topoi*: definition, consequence, analogy and contrast, and circumstance.

Definition is an account of what a thing or a situation *is*, comprising both definition in the strict sense of the term—a fair account of the thing's

35. Otto Bird, "The Tradition of the Logical Topics: Aristotle to Ockham," 311–12, which also cites numbers for Aristotle. Useful overviews of the topic and its complexities include Richard Graff, "Topics/Topoi"; Christof Rapp, "Aristotle's Rhetoric," which also discusses the enthymeme; and Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, 111–19, which concisely summarizes the shifts in the meaning of the term. A direct inspiration for the approach adopted in the present study is the work of Mary Garrett, a pioneer in the study of Chinese rhetoric who has investigated the use of "topics" in early Chinese persuasive speech; see Sharon Bracci Blinn and Mary Garrett, "Aristotelian *Topoi* as a Cross-Cultural Analytical Tool." For some recent approaches to argument in pre-modern China, but not from this perspective, see Garret P. S. Olberding, ed., *Facing the Monarch: Modes of Advice in the Early Chinese Court*, and Joachim Gentz and Dirk Meyer, eds., *Literary Forms of Argument in Early China*.

36. See Manuel Bilsky et al., "Looking for an Argument." Their topics are: genus (i.e., definition), consequence, likeness and difference, and testimony and authority. The scheme is primarily identified with, and was possibly initiated by, Richard M. Weaver (1910–63), a reactionary figure who advocated a "rectification of names" style program. For an early, succinct summary of his philosophy, see Weaver, "To Write the Truth"; for an early, succinct critique, see W. E. B. Du Bois, "Is Man Free?" His work on rhetoric may be read with Sharon Crowley, "When Ideology Motivates Theory: The Case of the Man from Weaverville," and with the copious gathering of political (e.g., 555–58) and rhetorical (e.g., 290–99) essays in Weaver, *In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of Richard M. Weaver, 1929–1963*.

essence—and in the widened sense of the “properties” or qualities that something inherently possesses or instantiates. Definition is the seat of rhetoric, the basis of all persuasion—for who would act on a falsehood?—and its end, insofar as (almost) all human action is undertaken to bring reality into coherence with some perceived truth. The only problems are that definitions are not always correct, their application is not always ethical, and the truths they point to are multivocal. These are critical weaknesses, if not ones generally recognized by those who would hold to a particular definition, or to definition itself as their master trope.

Two important aspects of the topic of definition are the enthymeme and what may be called the “quality of the absolute.” An enthymeme is an argument that assumes a premise that is generally accepted by, or “endoxic” to, all reasonable members of its audience.³⁷ The enthymeme is an essential part of argumentation because much of human communication (fortunately) involves elements that are assumed and passed over in silence. Filling out these enthymemes with their implicit definitions, however, can help us arrive at a deeper understanding of the qualities, motivations, and implications of a given culture of argumentation. The quality of the absolute, meanwhile, reflects the persuader’s confidence in the defining scheme he or she works within. Once put in accord with a definition, an event or action or judgment takes on the air of certainty and finality. The narratives of dynastic historiography exude this quality.

The topic of consequence is a matter of cause and effect, comprising both the prior causes of a given thing and the effects that will later issue from it. Rhetoric itself is a kind of consequence, persuasion causing a change in the audience’s psychological state. In historiography, consequence is a topic of significance because narrative is tasked with organizing events into cause-and-effect relationships. On one hand, the development of consequence works hand in glove with definition, as historical action is narrated with a sense of inevitability, which is to say, with an “absolute” quality. In this respect, dynastic historiography frequently employs what can be called a “pluperfect” mode, in which the earlier and later parts of a historical “event” lock together in a grammatical certainty, and it typically renders historical action with an “immediate” sensibility, binding events

37. See George Kennedy, trans., *Aristotle: On Rhetoric; A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 41–42, 297–98.

together rapidly and indubitably. The certainties of consequence, however, cannot evade some fundamental issues of historical narrative. First, while historical events happened one way and not another, it is always true that they *could* have happened otherwise, and no “good historian” can be entirely unattuned to such contingencies. Second, historical causation, to the extent we can identify it at all, is more complex than simple notions of consequence would allow. The upshot of this is that historiography balances its absolute deployment of consequence with more artful forms. In the historical mimesis, this happens when actors make subjunctive arguments of “contrary consequence” about what would certainly happen *if* a (wrong) course of action were to be pursued, or what would have happened had a correct one been adopted. At the level of historical narration, it is the open annals-biography form itself that leavens the certainty of its exposition, by preserving the possibility that some other causal constellation may be found elsewhere.

Analogy and contrast—the juxtaposition of things similar and dissimilar—informed premodern Chinese historiography in a wide variety of ways, from “correlative thinking” in the early period to a “historical-analogistic attitude” that would later undergird some of the tradition’s most trenchant historical thinking.³⁸ Perhaps most importantly, analogy and contrast accounts for an important aspect of the use of “roles” and “types” in historiographical action and representation—reaching into the past for points of comparison or projecting a present moment into the future. More generally, this topic again communes with something essential to the nature of rhetoric: it summons a meeting of minds. Analogy is the move that calls upon someone to join into a common imagination. Look, it is to say, at this thing we speak of and that thing you know—are they not similar? Contrast asks the complementary question: look—do you not see that they are different? These are the techniques of “association” and “disassociation” that lie at the center of the “new rhetoric” of Chaïm Perelman (1912–84) and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1899–1987), conjuring up an audience that perceives a manifold situation and aggregates

38. Robert M. Hartwell, “Historical Analogism, Public Policy, and Social Science in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century China,” 708.

or disaggregates its parts for comparative judgment.³⁹ In this sense, analogy and contrast is complementary to definition and consequence: not statements or actions alone, but as they are perceived and evaluated in relation to other statements and actions. This process of perception is suggestive and open, always—for better or for worse—leaving way for a new analogy or contrast to be raised.

Starting with definition as the strongest topic, we can perceive a progressive weakening in the unnecessary associations of consequence and the arbitrariness of analogy. To link our political and rhetorical models together, it is a progress from interiority to exteriority, and this progress culminates in our fourth topic, circumstance.⁴⁰ Circumstance refers to the willy-nilly world around us that constitutes the beginning and end of the whole rhetorical process, the cognitive environment for our formulation of the other topics and the ground upon which we act. It is the weakest topical state insofar as, in order to take on meaning, *mere* circumstance must be alchemized into something more than itself. But the import of circumstance is more subtle than that. Stylistically, circumstance populates the “story world” of the historical mimesis with contextual detail, delivering vitality to the arguments proper. Moreover, in argumentation, circumstance supplies a negative capability that is key to the rhetoric of dynastic historiography. For the historical actor and the historian alike, “thresholding”—positioning oneself on the cusp of “interior” power, within reach of it but beyond its inherent dangers—is a self-circumstantialization, demurring when a strong claim to definition might have been made. On the other hand, they were also easily circumstantialized, carried off in the floods of the historiographical rivers in which they swam. This ambivalence plays out on the conceptual level as well. In one sense, historiography’s relationship to underlying reality is circumstantial: it is merely an external surface, a veneer under which very different things certainly occurred on

39. Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, 190–92, and 371–410 on analogies in a more limited sense, including discussion of how analogies tend to be extended and amended.

40. This is a substitution for “authority” in the received framework. As its originators conceded, the topic of authority differs in nature from the preceding three: it is better viewed as a “warrant” within a definition, or part of the “ethos” of the rhetor.

the interior. At the same time, that surface had its own potency—as vehicle for eulogy and veil for irony, the processes on which interior action relied so greatly. More broadly still, while historical writing may be about defining what happened, about determining, often absolutely, who was responsible for what, as a form of representation it untethers itself from the task of definition, circumstantializing the signification of some separate historical reality in favor of its own self-sustenance.

The Arguments of This Book

The first two chapters of this study use the first individual biography in the *History* to explore how the interior-exterior dynamic worked—the push and pull of positive and negative rhetorical acts that made historiographical action and formed the historiography we read today. Chapter 1 reads the biography for its depiction of interiority, as a narrative of the rise, from humble origins to lofty heights, of Liu Muzhi 劉穆之 (360–417), founding minister of the Liu-Song. To the extent that threats of exteriorization lurk in the shadows of this narrative, he faced those challenges down with rhetorical aplomb, retaining his interiority by positioning himself on its threshold. In chapter 2, however, we re-read Liu’s “life” with a focus on his experience of the forces of exteriorization. This alternative narrative is buried deep in the biography, but more manifest elsewhere in the history—most notably in the biography of the man with whom he shares the space of scroll 42 in the history. The exteriorizing perspective sees Liu Muzhi die estranged from the Founding Ancestor, his influence having gradually been supplanted by that of the elite gentry who would guide the actual establishment of the dynasty some four years later. But is the alienation of Liu Muzhi a fall, or is it a sublimation into something with its own circumstantial potency? Just as historical actors temporize in defense of their interiority, thresholding themselves to safer exterior positions, so Liu Muzhi’s loss of agency over his own narrative also brings gain. Sacrificed to the elite gentry, he does the work of a good client, “prompting” his patron’s interior progress. This is the transition from the naively conceived historical actor, or what Kenneth Burke (1897–1993) referred to as the “the symbol-using, symbol-making, and symbol-misusing

animal,” to the actor as a well-used symbol in the enactment of a discourse—the historiographical subject as fully realized through the annals-biography form.⁴¹

The third chapter is an “essay”—an attempt to address something in a new way. “Officialdom” appears to be nothing more than basic historical data, the condensed and bone-dry record of the structure of the government and the identity of its occupants. Its interpretative impenetrability is emblematic of, and partly responsible for, the resistance the dynastic biographies present to the reader who would wish to recover real human personalities from them. With the interior-exterior dynamic in hand, however, we come to see officialdom as a semiotic system brimming with rhetorical energy. This energy begins with its “grammar”—the rhetorical qualities harbored in the standard set of terminology used to narrate progress across the official ranks. That terminology, it is argued here, cleaves along an interior-exterior axis and features “thresholding” points of balance. Out of this grammatical potential develops a “rhetoric,” in the more realized sense of how the official system was put to persuasive use by historical actors—and how they were suspended in its persuasive dispositions. Analysis of this system reveals a portrait of Southern Dynasties political culture: a state-oriented system leveraged by the gentry in their own interests and against the interests of their peers. Threshold positions in the realm of officialdom were key both for individual actors, for whom political interiority was possible but inherently precarious, and for the state itself, which had to exercise due tact in its hold on the gentry. For these purposes, the glossy surface of officialdom, not as system of government but as mode of representation, was a potent resource, if also an unpredictable one, leaving its participants to its whims.

Chapter 4 shows how early medieval historiography’s most important element, the document, operated on multiple levels. A court debate from the 420s, something like a transcript of which is recorded in our *History of the Liu-Song*, offers a window onto the foundational socio-political issue of the time—the mutual dependence of the state and the gentry, and the latter’s distinction, or lack thereof, from the commoners of the realm. It is also a showcase for the art of rhetoric in this period. Narrowly construed,

41. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method*, 4.

this is the rhetoric of court oratory, with each speaker—some better than others—making topically grounded and artfully embellished arguments. Widening our view, we find that the individual speeches of the extended document do not exist independently, but as parts of a whole, as the speakers respond to and draw on those who spoke before them, while setting “prompts” for those yet to speak. When the debate’s convener returns with a long peroration, we perceive the whole as an orchestrated historiographical act, in which the eminent statesman parades his commitment to the formation of a gentry that operates under and for the state. He produced this document for the ears of his contemporaries but also for the historian of the future, who duly takes it up—but in a frame of his own making, one that pointedly leaves Wang Hong’s 王弘 (379–432) self-fashioning efforts unconfirmed, and even ironized.

Having covered the interior-external dynamic and the key elements of officialdom and the document, in chapter 5 I turn to a more synthetic approach, presenting three general arguments about the nature of early medieval historiography. First, I identify historiography as a process, with the document—not the finished book of history—as the basic unit of production. This provides a useful reorientation of an old controversy about the status of Chinese historiography: the extent to which the dynastic histories were just “scissors and paste” compilations of received materials. The culture of historiography in this period was, from the start, a culture of the document. Second, I place historiography in a balance between public and private interests, emphasizing that although historiography was often a private endeavor in this period, its cultural profits accruing to individuals and their families, as a value it constituted a public standard. This offers a different perspective on another common discussion point: the ostensible flourishing of privately compiled histories. Finally, I stress the significance of incompleteness in the process of historiography. While it is easy to regard incompleteness as a condition of our own perspective—from bibliographical records we can see that only a small fraction of the vast number of texts produced and/or circulating in this period has survived—incompleteness is not merely the condition of the modern scholar of the period, for books and documents were appearing and disappearing even then. Incompleteness is an inherent feature of the open process of historiography, and the idea of incompleteness played an important functional role in the historiographical culture, providing “rhetorical exigence” for historical actors.

The conclusion identifies the major “mode of emplotment” of this historiography. As a kind of rhetoric, history was an “epideictic” art: it was less about judging the past or determining future action than displaying and manipulating common values. This is “praise and blame” historiography in a new light. The role of blame, in the form of the good historian’s critical judgment but even more so in historiography’s ironies, acknowledged and unacknowledged, was to temper the praise, couching simple eulogy in the complexity of the interior-exterior dynamic. The epideictic perspective emphasizes historiography’s representational qualities—the interior power of its exterior surface—over its referential content—the historical reality that was, in reality, interwoven with its exterior.



Hegel had the idea that historical writing could be divided into three stages. At the bottom is “original history,” written by people who had lived through the events or were so close to them in experience that the “cultural formation” of historian and event were “one and the same.” From that basis comes the common “reflective history,” which evaluates the past from a later, exterior vantage point. On top of that there ought to emerge the true “philosophical world history”: an account neither relayed in its own terms nor analyzed otherwise, but manifesting the universal “spiritual principle” that is “the guide of individual souls, of actions and of events.”⁴²

Standing Hegel on his head, or shaking him up a little, this triad provides the ingredients for a good definition of the qualities of early medieval Chinese historiography. The dynastic history is not, for the most part, “reflective history”: completed as it was after the fall of a dynasty, in some ways it does present a retrospective assessment, but that point of view is only lightly superimposed upon historical materials that were first compiled during the life of the dynasty—the “annals and biographies [that] took shape very shortly after the event, when passions might still run high.”⁴³ Further back lay the true “primary sources”—the fundamentally

42. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Volume 1: Manuscripts of the Introduction and the Lecture of 1822–23*, 134, 140. For a discussion, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 97–105.

43. Twitchett, “Problems of Chinese Biography,” 30.

biased and historically involved documentary, anecdotal, and archival materials that would supply the marrow of later compilations.

This historiography, then, was at once “original,” in the sense that its historians were one with the age they recorded, and “philosophical,” the unfolding of historical events being driven by a consciousness that the historiography instantiates. Writing documents, confecting anecdotes, tracing out profiles on the canvas of public life—historical actors participated in the realization of what would become the past, working within a philosophical unity—or concert, or confusion—of historical action and historiographical representation.